

'Bojangles' theater

New life to building in Church Hill

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

There is evidence of the greatness of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in Church Hill.

Though faded, there are the heel prints and the signature of the legendary tap dancer and movie star who was born in Jackson Ward.

Those impressions can be found in the sidewalk at 2903 Q St.

The sidewalk is in front of a long neglected building, which used to be the Robinson Theater, a once bustling movie house named for the tap dancer. He helped open it in the mid-1930s by putting those impressions in the wet cement.

Now, decades after Mr. Robinson left his mark, about \$1 million is being invested to turn the building into a community space whose offerings would include dance and drama classes for young people.

Michael J. Thaler and Mitchell A. Bennett are undertaking the investment to create the Robinson Theater Community Arts Center.

The partners expect the work to be completed and the restored building to be open for use early next year.

The goal is to provide space for community events, classes and cultural programs for youths, weddings, private meetings and similar activities, according to Mr. Bennett, full-time missions managing director for the Mechanicsville Christian Center, a 900-member interdenominational church in Hanover County.

Originally built in the art deco style that was popular in the 1920s and '30s, the building will include a large space of about 6,000 square feet and several smaller rooms, Mr. Bennett said.

Mr. Bennett and Mr. Thaler, a financial planner with Equity Concepts of Richmond, bought the old theater in 2006 for about \$175,000 after coming across it in a search for investment opportunities.

Mr. Bennett said they first explored the idea of restoring it as a movie theater. It closed as cinema in the 1950s. Realizing the building was too small,

The new Robinson Theater Community Arts Center takes shape in Church Hill. Betsy Hart, center executive director, stands in front of a plywood wall at 2903 Q St. that blocks the view of the work going on inside the old movie theater that is named for Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

Mr. Bennett said, they came up with the center idea.

"We plan to serve people of all ages, from kids to the elderly," said Betsy R. Hart, who has been hired as executive director.

"This theater used to be a community hub, and we want to bring that back to life," said Ms. Hart, 25, a Mechanicsville native and Virginia Commonwealth University graduate.

While waiting for the work to be finished, Ms. Hart is energetically seeking grants and

organizing events to raise operating money for programs at the building that was last used as a nightspot and pool hall before being boarded up in 1986.

For example, Ms. Hart said the center is teaming up with nTleas, a Virginia-based cell phone company, in a fundraising event for the center — a three-on-three basketball tournament that will be staged at the University of Richmond on Friday, Nov. 28, the day after Thanksgiving.

Ms. Hart said she wants the center's offerings to complement existing programs in the area, such as the Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club and several city recreation centers, including one at the old Armstrong High School.

She also believes the Robinson center will fit in with a proposed teen center that the area's Council representative, Delores L. McQuinn, has spent several years trying to get the city to develop in a vacant building near the theater.

Ms. McQuinn expects the Robinson Center to be a good neighbor for the teen center. She said Church Hill needs all the programs and community facilities it can get, particularly for its youth.

The council has supported Ms. McQuinn's teen center proposal and put \$850,000 into the city's capital budget to pay for construction. However, the Wilder administration has declined to spend the money.

Ms. McQuinn is confident that the city's position will change after the new mayor, Dwight C. Jones, takes office in January.



Sandra Sellers/Richmond Free Press

Richmond's world-famous tap dancer recalled

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, one of America's entertainment greats, is largely remembered in his native city with a statue at Leigh and Adams streets in Jackson Ward.

Installed in 1973, the statue recalls the generosity of the virtuoso tap dancer whose creativity inspired future generations of "hoofers" and whose birthday, May 25, has been designated by Congress as "National Tap Dance Day."

In 1933, on a visit to Richmond, he was appalled as he watched a speeding car nearly strike two black children as they tried to cross the busy street. He took action. He paid for a traffic light the all-white

city government would not provide to be installed at the intersection to improve safety.

Despite rigid segregation, Mr. Robinson was by then a star of movies and Broadway shows and far from his Richmond beginnings.

Born in 1878 into poverty and left in his grandmother's care after his parents died when he was a baby, Mr. Robinson started dancing at age six on the streets and in the beer gardens of Jackson Ward to make a few pennies for his family.

Quickly recognized as a prodigy, he was touring professionally by age 10, and by age 20 had become a sensation in New

York nightclubs and on stages, where he earned up to \$3,500 a week, an enormous sum in an era when many workers earned \$1 a day.

A creative genius, he was the first to tap dance up and down steps. He was able to dance for an hour without repeating a step — his feet just responded the music, he would tell admirers.

A dapper dresser, he cut a flamboyant figure with his colorful bow ties. He was known for eating ice cream by the quart and setting records for running backwards. He starred in 14 films, though often in stereotypical roles such as a butler.

When he died in 1949 at age



Mr. Bojangles

71, his funeral was a huge event. People lined New York streets to bid farewell, and more than 32,000 filled a National Guard armory for the service.