

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock) - "View from Graveyard Hill"

By Kane Webb
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The other day some business took me to Helena. Excuse me, that'd be Helena-West Helena, as it's now officially known with its fancy hyphen and all.

Although the next person I meet from there who says he's from "Helena-West Helena" will be the first. That combo platter sounds like it's for city accounting purposes only. I went to see the latest development in the ever-growing Delta College Prep charter school, which continues to expand, adding grades and producing students who score in the highest percentiles on the Arkansas Benchmark exams. Hmm. Could there be a connection?

But before that look at the future-the Delta Prep kids and the campus-I took an obligatory detour to the past. It's irresistible in those parts.

You can find Helena's past, the South's past, a South's past, along Cherry Street near the levee overlooking the Mississippi River. This is the faintly beating heart of Helena, an old river town that used to be known for more than stray dogs, neighborhood lockdowns, eccentric mayors, more eccentric (and inexplicable) school boards and the blues (although the blues oughta be enough). It used to be known for commerce and wealth and good times all around, a port city that grew like the kudzu that now envelops much of it.

Cherry is one of those streets you'll find in small Southern cities that evoke feelings of both nostalgia and dreamy optimism. That is, if you brush aside some of the present-day melancholy and focus on the bright spots. There are some: the investments that Southern Bancorp has made in the city for one very big one and the openings of the odd coffee shop or small business along Cherry for another. You can look down the street, scrunch your eyes up tight till your vision blurs and envision what was and what could be again: the old hotels in full swing, the bustling stores and businesses, the busy sidewalks.

So much potential, you'll find yourself whispering out loud. Or for a gauzier perspective, you can retreat to the top of Graveyard Hill, where troops had an expansive view of the Mississippi River during the War Between the States. From there, you can see the old town from afar, the rust, the cracked windows, peeling paint and empty storefronts magically Photoshopped away through a distant lens. You can dream from there.

But on this afternoon, you don't have to dream. Or station yourself away from the action. You can actually see progress, hear it, touch it.

I did all that with Scott Shirey, the now 32-year-old founder of Delta College Prep and now director of the Delta KIPP program, which has plans to open 12 KIPP

charter schools across at least four towns in the Arkansas Delta.

(KIPP stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, a charter system that originated out of Brooklyn and emphasizes longer-than-average school days, discipline, a signed commitment from students' parents, transparency-students' test scores are posted on school halls-and the highest of expectations.) Shirey was standing with Larry Hitchcock of Nabholz Construction outside the brick-and-metal frame of a new \$3 million gymnasium. Just a short stroll from Cherry Street, the gym replaces a cluster of abandoned buildings, dilapidated shacks and empty lots that effectively served as open trash bins. It may be the first new construction in downtown Helena since the last new construction from KIPP-the middle school that went up on Cherry almost a decade ago.

There haven't been a lot of grand openings in Helena of late, but, if the weather holds, the gym/school hall is scheduled to open in March.

Too often these days, and the days before these, the headlines out of Helena tend to run the gamut from the sad (like unemployment numbers consistently in double digits) to the ridiculous (like the mayor letting those stray dogs go free). It's nice to hear some good news. And see it. Check it out: We're wearing hard hats. In downtown Helena! May it become the latest fashion all across the city. Or cities. Or whatever.

I've written about the success of Delta College Prep in Helena so much that I've about run out of ink. But there's no denying the school's continued impact on (OK, OK) Helena-West Helena.

Not long after getting the \$2.7 million tour of the gym from Shirey-he notes that "we still need help" to raise money for the balance of the \$3 million project-I accompanied Mister KIPP to the top of said Graveyard Hill. It provided him with an excuse to take his dog for a walk and me with an excuse to survey the city from up yonder. Is there anything more syrupy Southern than looking out over a historic river town from an old Civil War outpost?

With the trees in their skimpy winter wardrobes and the kudzu in seasonal retreat, I scrunched my eyes together and looked toward the river, toward Cherry Street, toward the tops of old manses and church steeples, of courthouses and once-grand hotels.

In the silence, my host seemed to do the same. And we whispered it together: So much potential. Staff columnist Kane Webb also writes feature stories for the Perspective section.

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