

New Orleans -- The 5300 block of St. Charles Avenue is a destination for education.

"The remembrances we have, many of us have was the beautiful campus," says Gilbert Academy Alumni Association President Andrew J. Douglas.

"We had some nice teachers; some teachers that we will never forget," says Treasurer Myrtle Winbush. "They've all gone on, but we are still here."

"Most people may be familiar with mid-twentieth century building that houses part of De La Salle High School, but a small plaque at the corner of St. Charles and Valmont Street tells of a much longer history of educational excellence.

"It was enjoyable just to go to Gilbert, being on St. Charles Avenue, catching the streetcar every morning going to school and coming back," says Winbush. "Walking back or coming back 53 blocks.... can you imagine!"

"We were called the elite of New Orleans, but we just say we were doing what comes naturally," says Douglas. "We were taking advantage of training that we had and we tried to pass it on to others and that's the legacy of Gilbert Academy. The great tradition which has been handed on to us."

With alums like famed musicians Ellis Marseillus and Harold Baptiste.

"We had Lolis, Edward, Eli, a number one civil rights lawyers who fought for equal opportunities here in New Orleans and he represented all those in SCLC and the freedom riders here in New Orleans," says Douglas. "He and Robert Collins."

And the first African American woman to win an Olympic medal Audrey "Mickey" Patterson. The school produced scores of people that excelled in many fields.

"Everybody thinks that Andrew was the only person that succeeded at Gilbert, and that's not true," says Gilbert.

Reverend Andrew Douglas is referring to Ambassador Andrew Young, also a Gilbert alum.

Reverend Douglas is the president of the alumni association.

"We were under the auspices of the Methodist Church and we started really in 1875 and in 1949 it closed," says Douglas.

The campus was originally the site of New Orleans University one of only three institutions of higher learning for African Americans in the state in the late 1800's.

"This was a black educational institution," says Douglas. "One where high school kids were taught anatomy and physiology which was unheard of in a public school for African Americans."

Reverend Douglas met with Myrtle Winbush, the associations treasurer and Wilehemenia Blanchard at Dillard University in preparation for their academy reunion.

"I finished just before school closed in 1949 and it's been 63 years," says Winbush.

Nearly 40 alums converge from across the country. . .most are in their 80s.

"We have about 41 registered now," says Douglass. "We are going to have no less than 39. Now remember we are up there in our 70s. I'll be benevolent about that. I'm in my 80s and my sister in law is in her 80s also."

The physical end of the school did not cut off its influence.

"I was really sad about it and I think that the reason why we having these reunions every two years to bring back the memories and don't let Gilbert Academy die," says Winbush. "We got it living."

"Our principal told us, always taught us you're just as good or maybe better than many people so don't think of others as being superior to you," says Douglas. "You are just as good as they are. We never lost that, we remember that. Just being on that campus, being in that school meant so much to us. You can't know it unless you experienced it. You can't have that feeling."

Reverend Douglas believes Gilbert's legacy should be an inspiration to kids today.

"We need to know that as African American youth, we need to know that if you are trained properly and right you are going to succeed," says Douglas. "It doesn't matter where you come from. I came from Central City so you know where that is Third and Daneel.

Even as an octogenarian he beams with pride for his alma mater.

"I get excited because I know what it did for me," says Douglas. "It was \$2.50 a week, a month to go there, and I had friends who said their parents said to them I can't afford to send you among them rich people and god knows we were not rich, but our parents saw the need to send us to Gilbert Academy and I'm deeply appreciative of that."

An appreciation Douglas and his fellow alums plan to continue to honor through their lives and hopefully beyond.

The Gilbert Academy Alumni Association sponsored the historical plaque on St. Charles

Avenue and have raised money for a scholarship in the academy's memory for a Dillard University student.

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