

The preservation of legacy: The Sandhills Family Heritage Association

by DR. SHANESSA FENNER

Family legacies are passed down from generation to generation and they can be emotional legacies, spiritual legacies or social legacies. Our childhood experiences and family influences have played an integral role in who we have become. It is vital to enjoy and capture those indelible memories because they are the real treasures of life.

"I wanted to establish an organization where we could have everyone tell their stories under that same name," said Ammie Jenkins, founder and executive director of Sandhills Family Heritage Association. "We are talking about counties that are in the Sandhills and we are talking about families and their heritage so that is how I came up with Sandhills Family Heritage Association."

Jenkins tells the profound backstory of how the Sandhills Family Heritage Association was founded in 2001.

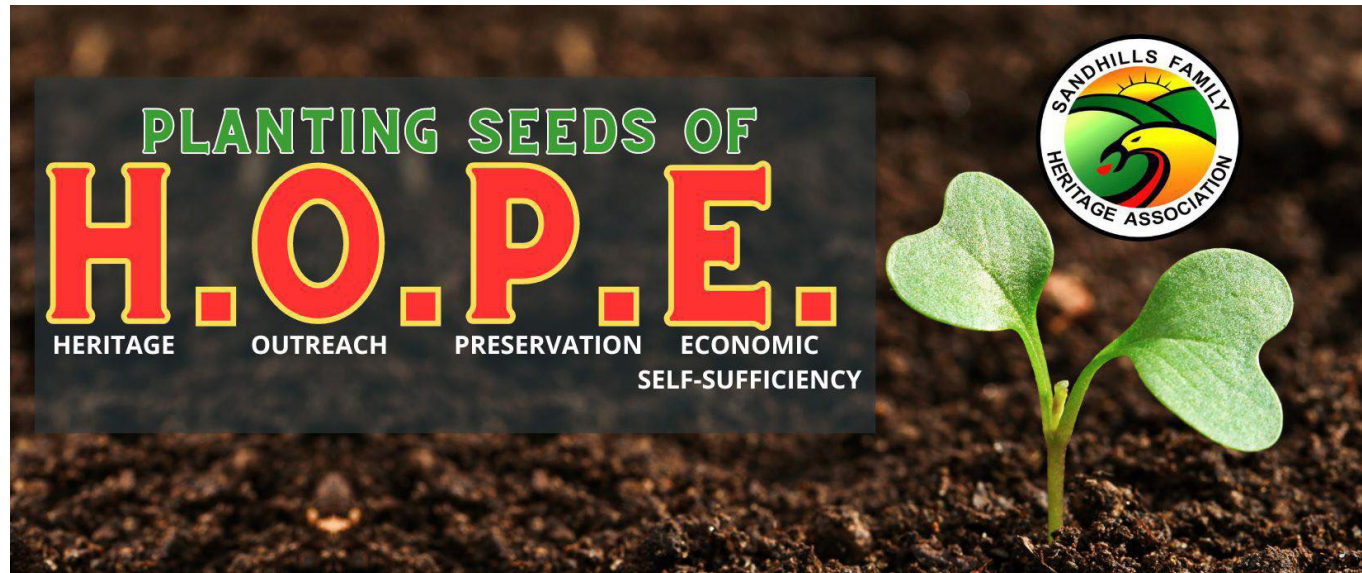
In 1978, Jenkins' mother was diagnosed with cancer. They were living in Spring Lake, but her mother wanted to visit the old homeplace in Overhills in Harnett County. She was too sick to go, so she asked Jenkins and her other daughter if they would go back to the old homeplace and find an old mason jar to bring back to her as an artifact. Jenkin's mother had associated her happy years of living because she was known as a good cook and hostess. Anyone who visited the home left with a jar of something because her mother loved to can foods.

"I wanted to do that for her because it was one of her last wishes and she was getting close to the end," said Jenkins. "So, my sister and I visited the old homeplace to look for a mason jar, but what I found was my calling."

Jenkins shared how her trip to the old homeplace evoked a myriad of emotions.

"When we went back, I really did not want to go because we left the homeplace because of harassment and people who had burned crosses in our yard after my dad died. They knew my mother was way down in the country with seven children by herself," said Jenkins. "Because of her wish, I went back and on that long dirt road I had that same fear that I did 23 years earlier when we left that homeplace."

Jenkins added, "As we got closer to the homeplace, my sister and I started to reminisce about all of the happy times that we had in this place. I could not find an old mason jar, but I did find an old mason lid that I took back to



Mother."

The Sandhills Family Heritage Association is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit located in Spring Lake.

"I came up with programs of HOPE which stands for Heritage, Outreach Education, Preservation of Land and Natural Resources and Economic Self-Sufficiency, and from these programs we have different events," said Jenkins. "We do outreach especially to our elders because they are very important to our community because once they are gone they are taking all of that good history and experience with them."

She added, "We have an oral history collection of these different interviews with them and they share their stories."

Engaging the younger generation is a major priority for the nonprofit.

"We have different kinds of projects for our young people to engage in such as paid internships, volunteer opportunities, Junior Historian Club and Sankofa 4H Club," said Jenkins. "We work with our health professionals, military veterans and other nonprofits in assisting low-income families."

Jenkins added, "We really want to help individuals in the community who are having a hard time by giving them food, supplies, clothing, hygiene products and other things they need. In return, they have to turn around and volunteer to give to other individuals who are also in need."

There are two major projects that the organization is working on and their fundraising goal is \$200,000.

"We have elders who had an old civic center in Spring Lake that they gifted to our organization when they found out our mission was to preserve our community assets," said Jenkins. "We want to narrow the generation gap between



The Spring Lake Civic Center is currently being renovated as a space for the Sandhills Family Heritage Association. Plumbing and handicap access are the projects the group is currently fundraising for. (Photos courtesy of Sandhills Family Heritage Association Facebook page)

the old and the young and that is why we are doing all of these things for future generations."

She added, "The civic center has been under renovation and we are on a fundraising campaign because the building has been restored but the underground plumbing, handicap access and other areas need to be fixed before we can obtain a certificate of occupancy."

"All of these things need to be done so that we can reopen the center, not just as a community center, but a historic tour site," said Jenkins. "The town of Spring Lake has already declared the site as a building of historical significance because of the importance that it played during the civil rights era."

The organization was also gifted a cemetery that was once part of a turpentine plantation.

"Recently a developer gifted us an old abandoned cemetery where our enslaved ancestors were buried," said Jenkins. "We are going to clean it up and set up a memorial for the ancestors

who were buried in the cemetery."

Jenkins believes in giving individuals their flowers while they are living and gives credit to the numerous individuals who have been a blessing to the organization.

"The success and sustainability of Sandhills Family Heritage Association for over 23 years can be attributed to the dedicated leaders and volunteers of the organization, grantors, sponsors, partners, donors and friends," said Jenkins. "I feel obligated to give back because I know what people gave to us and we are just trying to make sure that our young people feel some obligation to give back to those who have helped them make it to where they are today."

Volunteers are needed. For more information visit www.sandhillsfamily-heritage.org or call 910-309-2198.

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