

The Lancaster News

SERVING LANCASTER COUNTY
LANCASTER • HEATH SPRINGS • KERSHAW • VAN WYCK • INDIAN LAND

\$1

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21, 2024

Welcome back to school!



supplied

Lancaster High School student Kasyah Stover walks through the Masons' morning greeting gauntlet on Day 1 of her junior year.

Masons ease students' first-day jitters

BY MANDY CATOE
LANCASTER PROMISE
NEIGHBORHOOD

Nearly two dozen Lancaster District Masons stood at the entrance of Clinton Elementary School before sunrise Aug. 12 to welcome students on the first day of school.

The Masons and Lancaster Promise Neighborhood formed a partnership three years ago to add another layer of support to the children in the attendance zones of Clinton, A.R. Rucker Middle and Lancaster High School.

The men ranged in age from 18-89, with most falling somewhere in the middle. Many had a good bit of gray in their hair, along with the patience and wisdom that come with age. They looked like uncles and grandpas at a family reunion — the perfect welcome for nervous and anxious kids.

Before the children arrived, the men reminisced. Most grew up in the same attendance zone,

like Fred Thomas, a magistrate judge and Mason, who was excited as the first kids arrived.

"This is home for me," Thomas said, as he pointed to a little white house visible from the front door of the elementary school. "That is my great-grandmother's house. I grew up on Clinton Avenue and started to school here 53 years ago."

He said it was good to come back and give back.

Teachers and school staff arrived ahead of the students and enjoyed being greeted by the welcoming committee, too.

At Clinton, a blue carpet to match the school color was rolled out like a big welcome mat at the front door. It offered an air of ceremony and importance at the threshold of another year of school.

As the kids arrived, the men gave them high fives, bumped fists and shook hands. They offered positive slogans, matching them perfectly



Mandy Catoe

Mason Fred Thomas, a magistrate judge, high-fives a student on the first day of school, Aug. 12, at Clinton Elementary School.

ly with the mood of each child. Those appearing shy or anxious received

a softer welcome, while the ones strutting in were
SEE SCHOOL/PAGE A2

SCHOOL

FROM PAGE A1

met with more raucous banter.

“Oh yeah, she’s going to rock this school year!” or “Take my hand, let me walk you to the door.”

Clinton Principal Keisha Witherspoon was eager for the day to begin.

“We are so excited for school to start and can’t wait to welcome our babies back to school,” Witherspoon said as she straightened and secured the blue carpet at the front door.

Teachers and parents got in on the fun, too. Second-grade teacher Robyn Dunham smiled as the Masons welcomed her back.

“I loved the welcome,” she said. “We need more males in these kids’ lives. So this is perfect.”

THE PARTNERSHIP

Lancaster Promise Neighborhood Project Director LaNisha Blair is grateful for the Masons’ presence at the schools.

“Spreading positivity at a time of transition and change is so important,” she said. “A small interaction completely changed the mood of several hesitant students. It was a joy to watch.”

Sharon Novinger, executive director of Lancaster County Partners for Youth, joined the Masons at Clinton.

“This is such a positive, encouraging way for our students and parents to see how the community is behind them,” she said. “From fist bumps to smiles to holding open car doors, the Masons truly showed how they valued this day and the importance of education.”

The Masons view this

as an opportunity to be more visible and active in the community.

“We think and hope it means a lot to the students to see men showing up to greet and encourage them to have a good day and a good school year,” Mark Lathan said.

Terrance Barr said it is about being intentional with their presence.

“As the old folks said, it takes a village to raise a child, so all the brothers believe that we are a part of this village and we want the best for all the children,” he said.

RUCKER MIDDLE AND LANCASTER HIGH

Once the young students were settled in at Clinton, the Masons moved on to A.R. Rucker Middle School and then to Lancaster High.

At Lancaster High, the Masons formed two parallel lines with a half dozen men on each side forming a corridor for the students to walk through like dignitaries. Some students walked through, while others strutted and some even gave a little spin.

Lancaster High junior Kasyah Stover enjoyed the warm celebratory welcome back event and is aiming to make this school year her best ever.

“It felt good,” she said. “Just because you have been here before doesn’t mean you need to settle for less.”

THE MASONS

Nearly two dozen local Masons participated at one or all three schools. They are from the 6th Masonic District of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of South Carolina. The district is made up of pri-

marily Black men. Most are members of Lincoln Lodge, Mount Tabor, Athenian and Alba.

Other Masons who attended included Jerel Darrington Sidney Alexander, Sammy Lathan, Terrell Mingo, David Jenkins, Ricky Stevenson, Al Barnes, Bennie McMurray, Jeremy McMurray, Adam Wilson, Billy Barnes and Mike Ballard. Matthew Barr, 17, the youngest of the group, belongs to the Knights of Pythagoras.

The Masons are known internationally and recognized as the longest running fraternity in the world, with links going back to the Medieval Ages. Their proclaimed goal is to make good men better. They contribute to their community through scholarships, charities and service. For more information, visit www.scmasonicdistrict6.org.

PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD

Lancaster Promise Neighborhood is a federally funded five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, started in September 2021. It is the first Promise Neighborhood program to be funded by the USDOE in South Carolina. Its mission is to “do whatever it takes with the community to ensure every child who lives in the zone has the chance for success.”

The zone is 6.2 square miles of focus in Lancaster and is comprised of the poorest neighborhoods in all of South Carolina. The Lancaster Promise Neighborhood is strategically focused to support Clinton Elementary, A.R. Rucker Middle and Lancaster High School’s parents and students.