

Adams handles shovel as ground is broken for school



Former Tuskegee Airman Paul Adams stands with the shovel he was given after using it to officially break ground Tuesday morning at the site of the new elementary school that will bear his name in southwest Lincoln. Behind Adams are Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Susan Gourley (left) and Elgin Hunt. (Eric Gregory)

By MARGARET REIST / Lincoln Journal Star

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On the windswept edge of town Tuesday, the past and present converged.

Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Susan Gourley pointed it out to the small crowd: how the distinguished past was sitting in front of her and the present was sprawling behind her, moving headlong into the future while they all stood there in the heat.

Before long, that sprawling field of dirt on the southwest edge of Lincoln will be Paul Adams Elementary, the newest Lincoln school built with money from the voter-approved \$250 million bond issue. It is scheduled to open for the 2008-09 school year. First, though, Lt. Col. Paul Adams, whose lifetime of accomplishments in a classroom and in a war prompted the Lincoln Board of Education to name a school after him, needed to be recognized.

And so the dignitaries gave him a flag that once flew over the nation's Capitol, they gave him a gold-plated shovel and they gave him a vial of official Adams Elementary dirt.

Then they gave him the microphone.

"I'm glad to be here with you, and I'll be glad to come back anytime," he said.

Adams, 86, said he was nearly speechless when he found out a school would be named after him.

"It's marvelous," he said.

Alda, his wife of 62 years, who sat next to him and helped him push a ceremonial shovel of dirt, said the message her husband's accomplishments can give to future students is this: "Don't give up. Keep going — and know you're needed now and in the future."

Adams, a native of South Carolina, entered the Tuskegee Air Base in Alabama in 1942.

There, he became the first black pilot from South Carolina, one who went on to Italy, where he flew a P-40 Warhawk on combat missions and helped create the legend of the Tuskegee Airmen, an all-black pursuit squadron.

Members of the famed 332nd Fighter Group flew more than 15,000 missions, destroyed more than 260

enemy aircraft, sank an enemy destroyer and never lost a single Allied bomber they escorted.

They earned the respect of the white airmen they escorted, who called the black pilots “guardian angels.”

When one of those angels retired from the Air Force, he took up another post, as a shop teacher at Lincoln High.

Adams remained there for 19 years, a more challenging post than his years in the air, he said.

What would he say to the students who will wander the halls of Adams Elementary?

“Study hard and be all you can be,” he said.

Sharon Anderson-Towery, who brought her son to watch the groundbreaking, said Adams belonged to her church and taught at Lincoln High when she was a student.

“I couldn’t mess up because he was always there,” she said.

Both Adams and JoAnn Maxey, the first and only black member of the school board after whom Maxey Elementary was named, were her mentors, said Anderson-Towery.

Like Maxey, Adams will be a wonderful namesake who sets an example of excellence, she said.

“With Lt. Col. Paul Adams, the message will be whatever you want to achieve you can achieve, regardless of the circumstances,” Anderson-Towery said.

For Lincoln’s black community, the honor is especially meaningful, she said.

“I remember a time in Lincoln when I never thought that would happen.”