

## Back to the Halls – Rochelle Washington Park 2026

Joshua 4:1-7 and Psalm 78:1-7

Alumni and friends, today we have come back to the halls—not only to a building, not only to a campus, not only to a set of familiar streets and corners—but back to a place where lives were shaped. Back to the rooms where voices learned to speak up. Back to the spaces where minds were stretched, where friendships were created, where tears were wiped, where laughter echoed, where discipline was learned, where dignity was protected, and where hope was kept alive.

And when we say, “Back to the Halls,” we are not simply talking about a reunion. We are talking about a return to memories. A return to meanings. A return to the sacredness of what God carried us through and what God has built in each one of us.

You see, there are places that become holy, not because they are perfect, but because God met people there. There are places that become holy because prayers were whispered there. Because sacrifices were made there. Because someone kept showing up there — teachers, parents, students — when it would have been easier to quit. And when we gather in moments like this, we are standing on ground that has been watered by endurance.

I want to begin with a thread of history that ties this community to a larger story. In March of 1912, Booker T. Washington spoke in this community. Think about that for a moment. A man born into slavery, who became one of the most recognized Black educators and leaders in the nation, stood in this place and spoke. His presence here was not an accident of scheduling; it was a sign of the hunger for learning, the hunger for advancement, the hunger for dignity that lived in this community.

And later, when a school bore his name—before it carried the name of William Rochelle—it was more than a label on a sign. It was a

statement. It was a declaration that education mattered, that excellence mattered, that Black children mattered, that Black futures mattered. It was a community saying, “We will build something that will last.”

The school was built in 1928 as the first Black high school in the city and one of only six in the State of Florida. It was located at the corner of Tenth Street and Dakota Avenue. The school was renamed in 1949 to honor the pioneer Black educator and principal, William Rochelle.

The school still carries the heritage of the past while moving forward into the future. Washington Park – Rochelle High School now stands tall as Rochelle School of the Arts, known for Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math, with a strong focus on academics.

So today, as we gather, we do so with reverence. Not because we are trapped in the past, but because we are grateful for the past. Not because we worship what was, but because we honor what God has done. We are here to remember—and we are here to rejoice.

And to guide us, we have two anchor texts, two strong hands of Scripture holding this moment steady. Scriptures that teach us how to remember and why we must continue to tell our story. We must remember that our stones have a story.

In Joshua chapter 4, we find that the people of God have crossed over the Jordan River. They have come through a defining moment— coming out of one season and into another. And when they arrive on the other side, the Lord does something that might surprise us. He does not say, “Now forget what happened and move on.” He does not say, “Don’t look back.” Instead, the Lord commands them to remember.

Joshua 4 tells us that the Lord instructs him to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, and to take twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan—stones from the place where their feet stood while the waters were held back. And they are to carry those stones to the place where they will camp and set them down as a memorial.

Listen to verses 6 & 7: “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them...” The memorial is not for decoration. It is not to make them wish to repeat the past. The memorial of the stones is for their testimony.

God knows something about us: we forget. We forget who helped us. We forget what it cost. We forget what we survived. We forget what God brought us through. And when we forget, we become vulnerable—vulnerable to despair, to pride, to repeating old mistakes, vulnerable to losing our identity.

So, God gives them stones.

And I want to suggest today that places like this school—these halls we have come back to—can serve as our stones. Not because the building itself saves anyone, but because the building holds stories. The building holds witness. The building holds evidence that there is a race of people who kept moving forward.

Joshua’s stones came from the riverbed, the place of danger, the place of transition, the place where they could not cross by their own strength. And some of our “stones” came from places like that too: from hard seasons, from limited resources, from long walks, from hand-me-down books, from crowded classrooms, from the pressure of having to be twice as good to be considered half as capable. The stones came from the middle of all of that.

And yet, God says, “Pick up the stones. Carry them. And set them where the next generation can see them.”

That is what this reunion is. It is a gathering of stones—living stones. We are the memorial. Our lives are evidence. Our perseverance is proof. Our achievements are testimony. Our continued faith is a witness that the waters did not drown us, that the current did not sweep us away. This reunion is the evidence, as we return Back to the Halls, that God made a way.

And notice this: the next generation will ask us, “What do those stones mean to us?” The next generation needs more than the facts; they need the interpretation. They need those who can say, “Let me tell you what this meant. Let me tell you what it cost. Let me tell you what God did.”

So today, we stand before the memorial. We look at the stones. We do not rush past them. We do not treat them lightly. We honor them, because God told His people to honor what He had done. And from that reverent memory, we now turn to what these halls have taught us.

When we walk back into a place like this, memory tends to come in layers. Some memories are sweet—friends, music, games, teachers who saw something in us before we saw it in ourselves. Some memories are complicated—pressure, loss, the ache of knowing the world could be harsh. Some memories are quiet—the kind we don’t talk about much, but we know that those memories help to shape us.

And if we are honest, these halls taught lessons that were bigger than the curriculum, bigger than we could ever have known.

They taught resilience. Not the kind of resilience that is a slogan, but the kind that is practiced. The kind that shows up on time when we are tired. The kind that keeps studying when we are discouraged. The kind that keeps believing when the future is uncertain.

Resilience is not a personality trait; it is often a community inheritance. Somebody modeled it for us. Somebody demanded it from us. Somebody prayed it into us.

They taught us excellence. Not perfection, but excellence—doing the best with what we had and refusing to let limitations define our destiny.

They taught dignity. Dignity is not something the world grants; it is something God bestows. And in a time when the world tried to suppress Black lives, Black dreams, Black intellect, Black beauty, these halls became a place where dignity was reinforced. Where young people could be told, “You are somebody.” Where they could be corrected without being crushed. Where they could be challenged without being discarded.

They taught community. Because nobody makes it alone. Even the strongest student needed somebody: a teacher who stayed late, a parent who pushed, a neighbor who watched out, a coach who insisted on discipline, a church mother who prayed, a friend who shared notes, an older sibling who blazed a trail.

And they taught faith—sometimes openly, sometimes quietly. Faith in God, faith in the future, faith that our lives mattered. For many, the school day began and ended with the kind of strength that comes from somewhere deeper than willpower. We learned, in one way or another, that we could not carry everything by ourselves. We learned to lean, trust, and depend on God.

And I want to pause and honor our educators. Not just the famous names in history books, but the local saints—teachers who taught with limited supplies but unlimited conviction. Teachers who expected greatness. Teachers who corrected grammar and also corrected character. Teachers who saw education as liberation and responsibility.

Much like Booker T. Washington, they believed in training minds and hands, in forming habits, in building institutions that could outlast a single lifetime. They taught us that learning matters, that discipline matters, that building a future anchored in God matters.

And here is the result of that truth: we are a part of what was built, we are the stones that hold the testimonies of how far God has brought us.

Some of us became educators. Some became business owners. Some became parents and grandparents who raised children with godly standards. Some served in the military. Some served in the church. Some became skilled tradespeople, nurses, administrators, artists, leaders. Some carried the lessons of these halls into places we never imagined we would go.

And even if life did not unfold the way we planned, we are still here. Still standing. Still praising. Still remembering. Still memorials of the past and testimonies of the future.

So yes, we remember. We honor. We tell the stories among ourselves. But Scripture will not let us stop there. We cannot be satisfied with just a celebration of the past. Although Joshua gives us the memorial of stones, we still need a directive for the future: we cannot keep it to ourselves.

That is where Psalm 78 comes into focus. This is a teaching psalm. It is a call to communal memory. It is the people of God speaking to themselves about their responsibility to pass on to the next generations what they themselves have received.

The psalmist says, “We will not hide them from our children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and His might, and the wonders which He has performed”. Then the psalmist continues: God “commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them... so that they

should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments”.

Notice what is at stake: it is hope. The goal is not simply that our children know the history. The goal is that they set their hope in God so that memories become their bridge to faith, and our testimonies becomes their pathway to endurance.

And the psalmist is clear: “We will not hide them.” That means silence is not a choice we can make.

There are stories that must be told—not to glorify the suffering, not to romanticize the struggle, but to reveal God’s faithfulness and the strength He gave His people. There are stories that must be told because the next generation is facing its own rivers, its own pressures, its own confusions, its own temptations to despair.

And let’s face the truth: the younger generation does not need another lecture. What they need is what we had and what we are: They need a living witness. They need to sit with someone who can say, “Let me tell you what it looked like when we had to make a way. Let me tell you how we studied, how we respected our teachers, how we held our heads up. Let me tell you how we prayed. Let me tell you how God brought us through.”

Psalm 78 reminds us that faith is not only taught in sanctuaries; it is taught in households, in conversations, in stories, in the passing down of memories and their meanings. It informs us that we have a holy assignment: to interpret life for those coming behind us. The psalm does not say, “Tell the next generation how great we were.” It says, “Tell the next generation the glorious deeds of the LORD.” The scriptures remind us that the center of the story is always God.

Yes, we worked hard. Yes, we endured. Yes, we achieved. But beneath and within and beyond it all, God sustained us. God opened doors for us. God gave us strength. God provided us a

community. God kept our minds sharp. God kept our families together. God healed us. God restored us. God carried us through. So, when we tell our story, we do not recount our personal triumph. We give our testimony. We say, "Look what the Lord has done."

And so, we must now pass the torch. There is a moment in every relay race when everything depends on the handoff. It is not enough to run well; we must learn to pass the baton well. The handoff is not accidental. It is practiced. It is intentional. And in the life of our community, the torch is passed the same way: intentionally. We must make sure our stones do not remain silent.

Pass the torch through storytelling. Tell the stories while we can. Tell them at the dinner table and at family gatherings. Tell them in church fellowship halls. Tell them to grandchildren who think history began with the internet. Tell them to young adults who are trying to find their way. Tell them to children who need to know that they come from strength and power.

And do not only tell the polished stories. Tell the honest ones. The stories about the mistakes we made and the lessons we learned. Tell about the friend who helped us when we were down, about the times we wanted to quit and didn't. Tell about the prayers that carried us, and about the moments we realized that God had us in His hands.

Pass the torch through mentoring. There are young people who need what we have. They need our wisdom, our perspective, our steadiness. Show up consistently in a young person's life. Check on them. Ask about school, about friends, about life. Teach them how to speak with confidence. Teach them how to handle disappointment. Teach them how to work with integrity. Teach them how to love God. How to call on Him in times of need. How to go to Him in prayer.

And if we think that we do not have anything to offer, we must remember that we are living stones. We have already crossed the rivers. We have already learned the lessons. We have already survived things that would have broken someone else. We have something to offer.

Pass the torch by preserving history. Write things down. Label the photographs. Record the names. Save the programs. Gather the stories of teachers and classmates who are no longer here. Create an archive because if we do not preserve it, it will be lost. Our stones must be our physical memorial. Our oral history projects, school reunions, scholarships, community interviews, written testimonies, recordings must be made available to pass on for others to see.

Pass the torch through investment. We have an established scholarship fund, and we must be the ones to support it. When there are students who need supplies, help them. When there are teachers who need encouragement, give it. When there are community programs that build literacy and leadership, partner with them. Passing the torch is not just in words; it is in resources. It is our time. It is our presence. It is our support.

I call on us, most of all, to pass the torch through prayer. Pray for the next generation. Pray for the schools. Pray for the teachers. Pray for the children, for protection, for focus, for hope. Pray that they would “set their hope in God.” Because here is the truth: the next generation is not only inheriting our stories; they are inheriting our spiritual covering. They need us; they need people who will stand in the gap.

Let’s remember that coming “Back to the Halls” is not only about looking back. It is about recognizing that God is still writing the story. The memorial is not the end; it is the beginning of new opportunities.

With that being said, remember that the halls still echo, and when we walk into this building, we can almost hear it. The echo of footsteps, of bells, of voices, of lessons, of laughter. The echo of a teacher calling your name.

And the halls still echo because what was formed here did not stay here. It went out into homes, into workplaces, into churches, into communities, into the wider world. The echo is in the way we carried ourselves, in the way we faced and overcame adversities, in the way we kept going. The echo is in the way we learned to hope.

Joshua's stones were set up so that future generations would ask questions. And Psalm 78 commands us not to hide the story. So today, we honor the stones, and we accept the assignment.

We remember with gratitude. We celebrate with joy. And we dedicate ourselves with intention.

Because the greatest celebration of the past is not simply applause—it is continuation. It is making sure that what was built does not stop with us. It is ensuring that the next generation not only has opportunities, but also identity. Not only information, but also wisdom. Not only ambition, but also faith.

So, as we close, I want to invite us into a prayer of dedication. Not a prayer that ends the reunion and awards, but a prayer that sends us out with purpose. A prayer that says, "Lord, take what You have done in us, and let it be a blessing to those coming behind us."

Let us pray.

O God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, God of mothers and our fathers, we bless Your holy name. We thank You for

bringing us to this day, for keeping us through seasons seen and unseen, for sustaining us with strength that did not come from ourselves alone.

We thank You for bringing us back to these halls and what they represent: for teachers who labored, for families who sacrificed, for students who persevered, for friendships that carried us, for lessons that shaped us.

We thank You for every stone of remembrance—every moment when You made a way, every time You opened a door, every time You gave courage, every time You provided what we needed.

Lord, we hear Your word that tells us that the memorial is meant to speak to the generations to come. And we hear Your word that we must not hide Your works from them, but tell them of Your mighty deeds, so that they may set their hope in You.

So, we ask You today to dedicate our memories: sanctify them, Lord, and make them a living testimony. Dedicate our voices: give us courage to tell the truth with love and wisdom. Dedicate our time: show us who we are called to mentor, encourage, and guide. Dedicate our resources: teach us to invest in the future with generosity and joy. Dedicate our prayers: make us faithful intercessors for children, for schools, for teachers, for families, and for this community.

We pray for the next generation. Give them focus in a distracted age. Give them hope in a distrustful age. Give them perseverance in a weary age. Give them wisdom beyond their years. Surround them with mentors and protectors. Raise up teachers with calling and compassion. And above all, draw them to You, that they may set their hope in You and not forget Your works.

We thank You for the legacy represented in this room. We thank You that the story is not over. And we ask that the echo of these

halls would become a song of faith in the lives of those who come after us.

We pray that if there is someone here today who does not know You in the pardoning of their sins, who does not know You as their Savior and Lord, that Your Spirit would move on their hearts, and persuade them that now is the time to give their lives to You and You alone.

We pray this, as we return Back to the Halls, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.