

Students restore depot in Mount Sterling, Kentucky

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One day about three years ago, Katie Bowles and her mother were driving through downtown Mount Sterling when Katie took notice of the town's dilapidated train station, once the hub of Montgomery County activity. "It was nasty," she said. "I said that someone ought to do something about that building since the rest of downtown has been renovated and looks beautiful." Her mother, Ronda Bowles, a teacher at the Area Technology Center on the Montgomery County High School campus, where Katie was a sophomore at the time, said: "That would be a good project for you." And so it was.

Katie has since worked with two friends and some teachers to secure some \$200,000 in funding for the renovation, and to get her entire school involved in the effort. For her work spearheading the renovation, Katie was nominated by school guidance counselor Donna Wilson to receive the \$1,000 Prudential Spirit of Community Award, which she picked up during a three-day trip to Washington, D.C. in May. She was one of 102 students honored out of 20,000 applicants.

"Not only has Katie always been a dedicated volunteer on other community service projects, but she has shown a great maturity in lining up support from local and state agencies before seeking grant money for the train depot project," Wilson said. "For years, many adult groups have tried to find funding for renovation of the depot, but Katie and other students were able to succeed where those groups had not been successful."

The renovation, underway for about two years, has become a school-wide community service and hands-on learning project for teachers and students at Montgomery County High, many of whom will work at the depot over the summer months. Math students at MCHS were given geometry assignments dealing with the enterprise, social studies students researched the history of the station, and the English Department began work on a coffee-table book about the depot while accounting students started keeping track of expenditures.

But the main help came from the carpentry and Skills USA students who are doing the actual day-to-day work under the guidance of instructor Jeff McCarty.



C&O westbound freight No. 391 picks up loads of scrap at Mount Sterling, Ky., on April 19, 1985. The depot was not in use at this time. The express building at lower left was last used as the office for the Supervisor of Track (who happened to be my uncle, Carl Copher). (Photo courtesy of Everett Young)

"It's a great hands-on tool for my students," said McCarty, who also leads students in building two Habitat for Humanity houses each year. "We know the value of working outside the classroom."

Each school day, various classes of McCarty's students are bussed the few blocks downtown to work on the depot from 9 a.m. until noon and from 12:30 p.m. until 3 p.m. Most recently they have been working on replacing the roof shingles and breaking up concrete. The Walker Construction Co. has provided heavy equipment to haul away concrete and other debris. Rumpke of Kentucky has provided a dumpster, and the Mount Sterling city and street departments have also provided equipment and support.

McCarty says that the students discovered "a boat load of information when they got inside the building. They were fascinated with the old receipts, train schedules and newspapers we found," he said. "Some of the newspapers go back to 1927. Besides the graffiti left there by people who had broken in over the years, the interior of the depot is in good shape." Several years ago the Montgomery County Historical Society replaced the roof. "If they hadn't done that, everything would have been lost by now," McCarty says. The Kentucky Heritage Council is working closely with the students. Doors and windows must be refurbished and not replaced, whenever possible. There's a lot of history to preserve at the depot, the students have learned.

The Chesapeake and Ohio line was a mainstay for Mount Sterling passengers. At first, trains went only to Lexington, Louisville and Cincinnati, but after the 1880s, the local line was linked to the east coast. Mount Sterling's depot was built around 1910, and it became a major market center for goods from the East and Southeast. Some older residents can remember nostalgic school trips, visits to doctors in larger cities, returning home for the holidays from college and watching the George Washington puff to a stop at the depot in the afternoon. The last passenger train left the station on May 1, 1971, although a steam engine pulled an excursion passenger train for one last trip on July 4, 1979. Freight service ceased on June 30, 1985, ending 115 years of rail service to Mount Sterling.

When the train depot renovation project is complete it will house a railroad museum, a conference center and a third area that so far is uncommitted. The project may take a couple more years. When it is completed, McCarty would like to add another phase. "There is another building beside the depot that was probably part of the freight station," he says. "Rails To Trails (for bicyclists) will come through here, and I would like to turn the freight station into bathrooms, water fountains and a place to rest." Originally the depot had an outdoor overhang that shielded travelers catching trains from the weather. Ronda Bowles says she would like to eventually see that restored. "That would really make the project complete," she says.