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OPINION

# Why Marfa must preserve the Blackwell School and its difficult history of segregation

The school represents a part of U.S. history that modern people should understand.



Downtown Marfa (Alfredo Corchado / The Dallas Morning News)





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I live in Marfa. I love my little town, but we have a problem. Like many communities across the country, Marfa's legacy carries the stain of segregation and discrimination against people of Mexican descent that historically played out in divided neighborhoods and our school system. Mexican American children used to attend a segregated elementary and junior high school called the Blackwell School.

Marfa is a majority Mexican American community, yet as the city has morphed into a world-renowned art and tourist destination, our Hispanic history is being brushed aside. Every magazine article and Instagram post about our art scene challenges our sense of community ownership. Kids in school don't know their grandparents attended a segregated school, even though our community cemetery is still divided between Anglo and Mexican American by a fence topped with barbed wire. Burying our past has not healed our community.

Today, though, Congress is considering the Blackwell School National Historic Site Act, a bipartisan bill led by Reps. Tony Gonzales, R-San Antonio, and Filemon Vela, D-Brownsville, and Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Alex Padilla, D-Calif. If passed, it would designate the Blackwell School as a national park site.

The original 1909 adobe schoolhouse still stands as a space for the collective memory of the segregated school experience not only in Marfa but across the country. The school is an anchoring point for challenging conversations, civic engagement and maybe even healing — in Marfa and far beyond.

Throughout the late 19th century and much of the 20th century, Texas school districts, like those in many other states, established and perpetuated separate elementary schools for children of Mexican descent. Hispanic and Latino people were also regularly excluded from Anglo barbershops, restaurants, funeral homes, theaters, churches and schools. The Blackwell School is a tangible reminder of the so-called separate but equal, era. The school closed in 1965 when Marfa's schools integrated.

In 2006, a group of former students learned that the last remaining building of Blackwell's campus, the original 1909 schoolhouse, was slated for disposal. They met with the local school board and explained the building belonged to the students, the neighborhood and the Marfa community. They offered to dedicate themselves to saving the historic building and its legacy.

Preserving the Blackwell School would elevate untold stories of our heritage. Many students tell of getting hand-me-down sports equipment from the Anglo school. Painful memories linger of humiliating physical punishment and the oftentimes indifferent treatment faced by students only because of the darker complexion of their skin. Some teachers came to Blackwell straight from college on a one- or two-year contract until they could get placed at what they considered better schools.

Other teachers though — like the school’s namesake, Principal Jesse Blackwell — stayed at the school for many years and provided a rigorous education. In 1936 and 1937, Principal Blackwell organized a regional Spanish-speaking branch of the Interscholastic League, believing that Spanish-speaking students should not have to compete with English-speaking students in literary events. But less than two decades later, students were being paddled for speaking Spanish anywhere on the campus.

Some students have terrible memories of their treatment at the Blackwell School; some students are proud of their education and remember school with fondness. Some children made friends easily with Anglo kids through neighborhood sports; some children felt the sting of discrimination trying to navigate the town. Some former students would rather that the Blackwell School just be torn down and forgotten; others have spent years preserving the school to tell these stories.

The intersection of preserving history, elevating untold stories and commemorating progress is not always a comfortable place to be. Yet the complexity found in the mosaic of stories makes the Blackwell School critically important to understanding our history.

Back in the day, there was nothing at all unusual about our school; segregated “Mexican schools” were ubiquitous in the Texas borderlands. Yet, today the Blackwell School is the only one with an original building in good condition and an organization actively preserving it as a historic site.

As for Marfa's more recent appeal to artists, I appreciate the vitality that newcomers and guests bring to our city. But you can go many places to see great art. People fall in love with Marfa and return again and again because intertwined with the art galleries, restaurants and concert venues is an authentic border community with a rich heritage and roots that go back generations.

I'm grateful to members of the Texas congressional delegation and others for their support Blackwell School National Historic Site Act. I look forward to working together to get this bill across the finish line. Designating this park will commemorate a significant chapter of American history in a physical space where the history lived and breathed.

*Gretel Enck is president of The Blackwell School Alliance. She wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*

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