Georgetown University leader meets with descendants of slaves

Georgetown University President John DeGioia, left, shakes hands with Audrey Johnson, right, as DeGioia visits with the descendants of Cornelius ‘Neely’ Hawkins, one of the slaves in the university’s 1838 slave sale, near Hawkins’ gravesite at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Cemetery in Maringouin on June 30.

By Terry L. Jones
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for that injustice become a resource to restore what broken by its involvement in the American slave system.

"This is part of our history," DeGioia said while visiting descendants of those slaves. "How to make amends is the reason I'm here, to speak with you guys and figure out how to do that."

"Well, that means a lot to us," Peggy Dunn responded.

Dunn, the sister of former Baton Rouge television news anchorwoman Maxine Crump, was among those who packed the living room of Crump's home in Maringouin on June 30 to meet with DeGioia.

Crump, now a community activist, recently learned she and her family are descendants of Cornelius Hawkins, a 13-year-old boy who was among the 272 slaves sold in 1838.

The Georgetown slaves ended up in Louisiana, mostly working plantations in Iberville and Ascension parishes.

"I told him, 'Some people think you came here for clo-chon,' "Crump said about her one-on-one conversation with DeGioia. "He said, 'This is beginning for us.' And that's how I see it. This conversation needs to build over time."

DeGioia made his more than 1,100-mile trek to Baton Rouge and Maringouin recently to meet as many of the descendants as he could to make the university's reparations efforts more personal.

"We're trying to wrestle with a set of questions," he said during an interview with The Advocate. "What does it mean to appropriate one's history? How can we be helpful in re-knitting some of the relationships that may have been bro-

ken with the original sale? And most importantly, I think, is how together, in this moment, can we address the enduring legacy of slavery and segregation in America?"

During his visit, DeGioia was ushered by Crump to the former site of West Oaks Plantation, which had purchased about half of the Georgetown slaves. The site is now a spawling sugar cane field along La. 79 in Maringouin.

Crump then took DeGioia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary cemetery in downtown Maringouin. There, he met a small group of other descendants who live in the quaint Iberville Parish town.

His visit that day ended at the Crump family home, where he was served lemonade and jambalaya but not before he was quizzed by her family members and others about the slave sale and what impact it would have on the university's legacy moving forward.

Gravestone of Cornelius 'Neely' Hawkins, one of the slaves sold by Georgetown University in 1838

"How many families have you all been able to connect?" Crump's other sister, Michelle Crump-Harrington, asked.

"I have a long list of families I've met. I've said to Maxine, 'We need a spreadsheet to keep it all clear,' " he joked. Before going to Maringouin, DeGioia revealed he already had met with at least 30 more descendants earlier that day at the hotel he was staying at in Baton Rouge.

Jessica Tilson and several members from her immediate family were among them. The 34-year-old Southern University student, who recently discovered Crump is one of her distant relatives through her own research of her family's connection to the Georgetown slaves, recalls being in a state of shock and excitement during her hourlong meeting with DeGioia.

"He actually listened to us. I'm happy that he just took the initiative to put it out there in the public and say, 'This is what we did, and we're trying to make amends, but we don't know how,' " she said. "How many places admit to actually selling slaves and then actively look for them?"

Tilson urged DeGioia to make a symbolic gesture of granting the slaves involved in the sale their freedom.

There has been talk of granting scholarships to slave descendants. DeGioia didn't say whether that is still an option the university is considering, but he didn't rule it out, either.

But he mentioned other ideas: One is creating a video documentary featuring some of the descendants he has met. Another is weaving the Catholic Church's involvement with slavery into the university's curriculum.

He also spoke of building what he called a "living memoriai" to honor the 272 men, women and children whose lives were upended by the 1838 sale.

The university is creating an online database of documents and historical records from the sale for the public's review in the Georgetown Slavery Archive.

"We're going to do something," he said to Crump's family.

"Hopefully there will be a ceremony we can attend," Crump-Harrington interjected.

"There may be an opportunity to bring some folks to Georgetown University," he replied. "We're going to try and figure out what would be the most appropriate moment to do that.

And then he added with smile, "Someone joked and said it would be the largest family reunion ever."