Exhibition explores schools that changed lives

By Sasha Sweeney
Editor

Photographer and author Andrew Feiler traveled more than 25,000 miles and photographed 105 schools to document a chapter of American history that once stretched across much of the segregated South.

The result, "A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America." is on display through Nov. 1 at the Coastal Discovery Museum at Honey Horn.

The exhibition tells the story of the Rosenwald Schools, an educational initiative that helped fund schools for Black children across the South and border states during segregation.

The program grew from a partnership between Booker T. Washington, educator and founder of the Tuskegee Institute, and Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co. and a Jewish philanthropist. From 1912 to 1937, their collaboration helped establish schools for Black children across the segregated South."

Feiler's exhibition combines photographs of surviving school buildings with the stories of former students, teachers, preservationists and community leaders.



Only about 500 of the original 4,978 school buildings survive, according to the museum.

"This is an opportunity for visitors to learn about a significant but largely unknown chapter that connects American, Black, and Jewish history," Elizabeth Greenberg, the museum's director of exhibitions, said in announcing the exhibition.

The schools produced students who would go on to play prominent roles in American culture, politics and the civil rights movement. Rosenwald School alumni included author Maya Angelou, civil rights activist Medgar Evers and U.S. Rep. John Lewis. A portrait of Lewis is included in the exhibition.

The story also has strong ties to South Carolina.

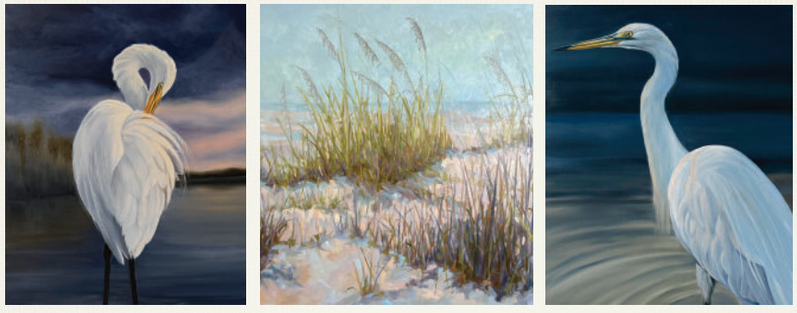
The state had 481 Rosenwald schools, with at least one in every county, according to the museum. Only North Carolina and Mississippi had more. Among South Carolina's schools was the Robert Smalls School in Beaufort.

Feiler, a fifth-generation Georgian who grew up Jewish in Savannah, sees contemporary relevance in their partnership.

"With a shared passion for education and social action, Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald reached across divides of race, religion, and region to make America a better place for all," Feiler said. "Their remarkable accomplishments speak to us today. Individual actions matter."

The museum is also presenting "Bringing Back the Light," a complementary exhibition by Charleston physician and photographer Alan Nussbaum. His photographs document the restoration of the Rosenwald School in St. George.

A Better Life for Their Children" is on view through Nov. 1 at the Coastal Discovery Museum, 70 Honey Horn Drive. Hours are 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free.

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