

For Immediate Release
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Media Release

AMHS student refurbishes sewing machine and donates to SOA

North Charleston, SC – A junior at Academic Magnet High School (AMHS) and his father recently had the opportunity to spend some quality time together working on an unlikely project.

Jeremiah Benton and his father Eugene were gifted a 1926 sewing machine by Mount Pleasant resident Shari Sebuck. The sewing machine belonged to her grandmother, Inez Ethel Arbogast Trent (born February 4, 1909), who was from a coal-mining town in St. Albans, WV. The sewing machine has a storied history.

“My grandmother used that sewing machine to sew anything and everything,” said Sebuck. “She sewed all of the family’s clothing, the bedding, and even the draperies. They were not a wealthy family, so the sewing machine was considered a necessity, not a luxury. It was utilitarian. My mom and her sisters would all switch dresses so people would think they had more clothes, and they did the same with shoes because they got one pair a year.”

Sebuck treasures the machine because it belonged to her grandmother but wanted to pass it on to someone who might use it and extend its useful life.

The Sebucks have known the Bentons for years. Eugene assisted Sebuck in cleaning out a storage unit after her mother’s death, and that is when they discovered the forgotten sewing machine. It occurred to Sebuck that Eugene and Jeremiah might enjoy refurbishing it. The father and son are known to tinker with various projects, so she offered it to them.

Eugene is not only handy with tools but is known to sew as well. As a volunteer parent at all of his children’s schools through the years, made sewing repairs to athletic padding and practice jerseys, among other things.

“I already have a few fancy sewing machines because I like making things,” said Eugene. “I like the art of sewing. I learned from my grandparents, who worked in industrial plants around South Carolina. When I saw that sewing machine in the

storage unit, I immediately knew how old it was. That's not to say it wasn't in good condition. It was in great shape for how old it was."

Eugene got the sewing machine safely home and tucked it away for a future project. That future project presented itself sooner than later. The COVID-19 pandemic hit, and Charleston went into lockdown. To pass the time, Jeremiah started tinkering with his 3D printer, making N95 masks at the Medical University of South Carolina's request. It was a way for Jeremiah to give back to his community while earning community service hours required for graduation.

In the meantime, Eugene decided to pull out the sewing machine. He began taking it apart and looking at what kind of work would be required to restore it properly. This project piqued Jeremiah's interest.

The pair found the owner's manual in a drawer that dated the machine to 1926. Inside another drawer of the 95-year-old machine was a handwritten letter from Sebuck's mother to her mother (Sebuck's grandmother). There was an old Sears & Roebuck catalog, needle and thread, measuring tape, and buttons. The machine also had all of its original parts.

Jeremiah is a product of Laing Middle School, where he excelled in the STEM curriculum. He had the engineering know-how and all of the necessary tools needed to complete the project.

"The sewing machine was very delicate, so we had to be very careful when cleaning it," said Jeremiah. "It had been in storage for so long that we had to lightly wash the old wood and oil the hinges, especially the pedal. It all still worked perfectly."

"It was a slow process because paint and varnish must dry properly before reassembly," Eugene added. "Jeremiah used his Dremel to sand and polish. We matched the proper polyurethane and stain color for the base and paint color so we could refinish the cast iron base."

The pair used lemon juice to deoxidize some of the metal, which he learned in 7th grade.

"It was neat to put that knowledge to use," said Jeremiah.

The sewing machine is unique, according to Jeremiah, because it is operated by pumping a foot pedal which puts in motion a belt system. The belt is a genuine leather strap.

"We took great care to remove the leather strap for fear it would split or splinter," said Jeremiah. "We didn't want to damage it because you can't replace it with an original part. They're not available anywhere."

Eugene likened this project to those of the ones Jeremiah worked on while a student at Laing.

"It was a hands-on project, all about taking it apart and putting it back together as good as new," said Eugene. "Laing was a dream school for Jeremiah, and it prepared him greatly for Academic Magnet."

"It has been a great pleasure witnessing Jeremiah's service to our community through his skillful projects inspired by his interest in STEM," said AMHS Principal Catherine Spencer. "We at Academic Magnet are thrilled to support his passion and look forward to his future path!"

The father and son donated the sewing machine to the costume and fashion design department at Charleston County School of the Arts (SOA), which shares a campus with AMHS.

"We wanted the legacy of Shari's grandmother to live on," said Eugene. "We wanted that legacy to live on through the kids in the fashion design program. We wanted to allow students to see how far technology has come, even with sewing machines. With this old machine, you had to control the needle and thread with your hands. We thought it was a great idea to have students in fashion design see something that was 95-years-old and still in proper working order."

"We are so grateful to receive such a unique piece of history," said Kelly Martin, SOA's costume and fashion design instructor. "It is an amazing way to show students how fashion has evolved and has been impacted by culture, economy, and location. To have something from a local family is an honor. This machine will show my students how past machines worked, how hard one had to work to make garments and how far technology has come."

Martin said part of her curriculum delves into fashion history and understanding the progress the industry has made.

"The first sewing machines made proved to be 40 times faster than what could be done by hand," said Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is interested in sewing himself. He became interested in it almost a year ago as he studied material science in his mechanical engineering courses.

"I spent five hours sewing a pair of leather gloves," said Jeremiah. "I love fine fabrics and materials."

Jeremiah was also impressed with the sewing machine's beauty, made of dark wood during the industrial age, not long after World War I and the Great Depression.

"It was interesting to be part of that history, even if by simply restoring the piece," said Jeremiah. "It's even nicer to donate this sewing machine to the school to see what SOA does with it."

Jeremiah has a bright future ahead. Colleges such as Clemson University, Columbia University, United States Military Academy West Point, Georgia Tech, MIT, Virginia, Ohio State, and the University of Florida have expressed interest in his attendance. In fact, one of the deans in Clemson's Mechanical Engineering Department helped Jeremiah choose his senior classes.

"If I enroll at Clemson, I will be a sophomore in the Mechanical Engineering program and can get my masters within four years," said Jeremiah. "My dream job would be to work at The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency or with Space X until I start my own company."

SOA Principal Shannon Cook is appreciative of the gift.

"We at SOA appreciate the gift of this special sewing machine and the care and effort that resulted in its restoration," said Cook. "It has found a place of honor in our hallway where it can be admired and appreciated."

For more information about this, contact AMHS Principal Catherine Spencer at (843) 746-1300.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.