

Letter of Support
Ord. 2017-233

To: Matthew Ebinger
From: Shirley R. Hawkins
Date: December 2, 2017
Subject: 508 St. James Street – Zarina Fazaldin

One of the greatest experiences of my life has been the 32 years I spent working with the visually impaired at the Virginia Industries for the Blind located at 508 St. James Street. Lives were definitely changed. I watched many who entered the building ready to commit suicide because of the loss of their sight gain self-esteem and confidence way beyond their wildest dreams. These individuals took pride in their job performance. In many cases, they exceeded expectations. Visitors were always amazed at the visually impaired working on government contracts such as pillowcases and surgical caps. What was really mind-boggling was watching them sew on industrial sewing machines. They were also taught mobility training, braille, and etc. in other parts of the building. These individuals went through months of training before a determination was made as to whether they were going to be hired on a full-time basis. Many were able to obtain outside employment.

Imagine how I felt when I met Zarina Fazaldin this summer and she shared her vision for 508 St. James Street. She was definitely interested in the historical background of the building and was asking me one question after another. I was also amazed to learn that she wanted to keep it in its original state as much as possible. This building has been vacant for quite a while however; Zarina saw something that we didn't see. I am convinced that beauty is in the eye of the beholder!

I was so honored when Zarina asked me to be the speaker at her open house at 508 St. James Street. What a delight it was for me to meet Mr. Juan Rivero the great grandson of Dr. William Hughes who practiced medicine at this building for numerous years. Everyone that attended appeared to be as excited as we were. I also attended the meeting of the Jackson Ward Civic Association where the architect shared the blueprint. There was nothing but positive feedback from the members of this organization. They were excited to see the building come alive again. They also realized what an asset this restoration is going to be to the community.

Because of the excitement that is in the air regarding this project, I am presently in the process of writing a book on my many experiences at the Virginia Industries for the Blind. In addition, I am excited in advance to see this project move forward.