

High Profile: Director Jennie Stephens helps preserve heirs' property

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Jennie Stephens, executive director of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, recently visited 96-year-old Ercelle Chillis at her home on James Island. Stephens' organization succeeded in securing a deed for the property, guaranteeing an inheritance for Chillis' two daughters.

The long legal process is completed. The deed is nearly in hand. Ercelle Chillis finally can rest easy in her James Island home.

Four years ago, when Chillis was 92, she got in touch with a Lowcountry nonprofit at the recommendation of a nephew to find out how to secure her family's 7 acres of undeveloped land, much of it wooded and wild.



Photo by Brad Nettles

Jennie Stephens talks with Ercelle Chillis at her home on James Island.

"I wanted everything to be OK for my two daughters," she said.

It took patience and determination -- legal consultations, family conferences, lots of digging through drawers and files to find the necessary documents -- and the expert oversight of Jennie Stephens, executive director of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation. But finally, the modest house on Donnie Lane and the lot upon which it sits are safe.

Heirs' property is land that was purchased or deeded to blacks following the Civil War and passed down through generations without the benefit of a will, resulting in land owned "in

common" among all heirs, regardless of their residency status. With each new generation, the number of owners, and the confusion, can multiply.

An unstable form of landownership, it places

people living on heirs' property at risk because a family member can sell his share to another, who, in turn, can force the sale of the land. This possibility had allowed developers, especially along the valuable coast, to exploit "in common" ownership and buy up heirs' property, against the wishes of many.

In Stephens, people living on heirs' property have perhaps their best ally.

Stephens has found herself traveling a path she says was divinely ordained, a path that enables her to help others, to express her faith through work, and exercise her talents as a successful administrator and missionary.

'It kind of clicked'

Stephens, 44, was born and raised in Walterboro. When she was 5, her father was shot and killed by a friend. Both men had been drinking, she said. She bonded tightly with her mother, Earlene Stephens, and grew up faster than most.

An only child, Stephens was nevertheless surrounded by cousins, aunts and uncles. She was active in church and intellectually curious, she said. She graduated from Walterboro High School a salutatorian.

At the College of Charleston, she signed up for computer science, hated it, did poorly and ultimately failed the subject before switching to business administration with an emphasis on accounting.

After earning her bachelor's degree, she did not want to return to small-town life, but a number of job interviews failed to bear fruit until the Lowcountry Community Action Agency, which battled poverty in Colleton and Hampton counties, invited her to join the staff.

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So it was back to Walterboro, and onto the divinely ordained path -- though Stephens didn't quite recognize it as such at the time.

She worked at the agency from 1989 to 1995, but knew early that she was destined for new commitments. In the summer of 1991, she began her studies for a master's degree in public administration at the College of Charleston, finishing in 1994.

By the numbers

In fiscal year 2010, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation:

--Registered 734 people for its educational seminars and presentations.

--Provided 151 people with advice and counsel.

--Signed up 18 new clients who received legal services (for a total of 60 to date).

--Cleared seven titles.

--Held four free wills clinics.

--Drafted 103 wills.

At the Lowcountry Community Action Agency, she was writing grants, and by the end of her tenure, she landed a big one, an accomplishment that was particularly satisfying and illuminating, Stephens said.

"I didn't realize I was creative," she said. "In hindsight, I understood I was a kind of salesperson. It kind of clicked with me."

Then, as director of sponsored programs at Voorhees College 1995-98, she secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Education worth \$150,000 a year for four years to help low-income first-generation college students become acclimated to the higher-education environment.

"The bug got me," she said.

Another followed, worth \$1.4 million over four years, this time an early Head Start grant from the Department of Health and Human Services.

She was on a roll.

During her last year at Voorhees in 1998, Stephens landed a three-year, \$500,000 grant to fund the launch of a community development corporation at the college.

She had hoped to run the program, but the college administration wanted her to keep the money flowing in.

"My passion is helping people," she said. "Just writing grants doesn't do that."

But her frustration had its purpose, for the choices she made steered her on her journey.

She was called to the Coastal Community Foundation in Charleston.

'A good fit'

Richard Hendry, senior vice president of programs at the Coastal Community Foundation, said work with grass-roots groups throughout the tri-county area during the early 2000s made it clear that the heirs' property issue was an acute problem demanding serious attention.

Too many people already had lost their land and too many more were at risk of forfeiting -- through no fault of their own -- what had been in their families for generations.

As a member of the foundation's staff, Stephens in 2005 took the lead in developing the program. When it was decided in 2008 to spin it off as an independent nonprofit, Stephens was the one to write the job description for the executive director position, and then she was encouraged to apply for it. Stephens thought the director should be a lawyer, but others thought differently.

Nancy Bloodgood, a Charleston attorney and member of the center's board, said it was her nonlegal skills that made her well-suited for the job.

"At the Coastal Community Foundation ... she was very diligent planning for the meetings and organizing. But you could tell she had a real soft spot in her heart for (heirs' property) work," Bloodgood said. "It's a good fit for her."

Bloodgood said she first became familiar with the heirs' property challenge when she was working as deputy counsel for Charleston County.

"After (Hurricane) Hugo (in 1989), we had lots of problems getting homes repaired because there was no deed or title," she said.

What's more, tax payments of heirs' property often were inaccurate and badly managed.

"Sometimes the wrong amount was paid, or taxes were paid twice because owners thought this was a way to keep the property," Bloodgood said. Partitioning the land was complicated and sometimes done at the expense of the owner.

Developers would bid on properties they managed to get on the market, and speculation ensued, but on the bid amount, not the value of the property itself, she said. "Tax sales became very profitable for people who had cash. They could go in and buy up a lot of property very quickly."

Additionally, zoning rules presented a set of problems. A fight sometimes was required to keep rural land rural, and people living on heirs' property often shared electric sources and sewer lines, which could be unreliable and unsafe, Bloodgood said.

"I came to (the heirs' property issue) from a more practical point of view, whereas Jennie came to it with a cultural perspective," she said.

Both were necessary.

She is "the conscience at the table," Hendry said, "overflowing with integrity and moral strength."

'As I'm living'

Stephens is never satisfied sitting still.

So after earning her master's degree, working at the Coastal Community Foundation and setting the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation on its course, she decided to further advance her education -- even as she continues to steer from the center's helm.

In 2005, she signed up with Regent University, a Virginia-based Christian school that offered courses online, to pursue a Ph.D. on the subject of organizational leadership and the religious concept of "calling." All that's left to do is write the dissertation, she said.

Meanwhile, the center continues to counsel landowners, offer clinics on will writing and collaborate with other organizations.

So far, most of the center's \$500,000 annual budget goes to services, Stephens said. But recent partnerships will lead to necessary research, surveying resident populations and generating maps. Data collection is an important part of the center's strategic plan, drawn up in 2008, she said.

And so the missionary who attends Walterboro Church of Christ, who dotes on her 11-year-old godson, who idolizes Harriet Tubman and relishes a good challenge, continues to use her "virtual pulpit" to change the world, one lot at a time.

Ordained a minister in her little Apostolic church, Stephens' unwavering missionary purpose keeps her focused on the world as she finds it, with all its beauty and injustice and opportunity and loss.

"I hope I preach a message as I'm living," she said.

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