

Ushered off the mountain

By David Dadurka
Daily Progress staff writer

March 9, 2004

Keith and Pamela Donnelly have spent nearly a decade living atop Brown's Mountain, once named Montalto by former owner Thomas Jefferson.

"We've had a \$15 million view," Keith Donnelly said. "Everything is downhill from here."

The couple, along with dozens of their mountaintop neighbors, will begin a bittersweet descent this summer as the organization that runs Monticello reclaims a longlost piece of Jefferson's vast Albemarle County landholdings.

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation announced in late January that it agreed to buy the 330-acre tract—rising 400 feet above Monticello—for \$15 million to protect it from future development.

The foundation's president, Daniel P. Jordan, had said that the group planned no immediate changes, but announced two weeks ago to residents through the property's management firm that it would not be renewing their leases.

Its swift decision to oust residents came as a surprise to many who hoped to at least spend one more year preparing for a move.

"A lot of us feel it's the best for the long term," 33-year-old Kevin Vose said of Monticello's goal of preserving the mountaintop.

"When Monticello bought the property, my 6-year-old thought they'd make us part of the tour," Vose said, repairing his mountain bike outside his apartment on Sunday afternoon.

Various lifestyles at top

Brown's Mountain residents are an eclectic group—ranging from graduate students to professionals to artists.

"A lot of musicians live here," said Jason Lappa, 29, as he watched his friends play kickball to the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the city of Charlottesville. "On the lease, it says we are a 'unity community.' If we can unite to stay up here that would be great."

A group of UVa law students have started a petition to rally support for continuing their support for continuing their 40-year tradition of living atop the mountain, according to the Virginia Law Weekly.

Jordan said he had not yet seen the law students' petition, but has spoken with several residents.

"We understand it is a very special place to live and that moving is always inconvenient," he said.

The foundation's mission, he said, is preservation and education.

“We do not wish to be a landlord or in the rental business,” he said, adding that the foundation doesn’t want to assume the “heavy expenses for deferred maintenance and the ongoing liability for a residential village.”

He hopes that the foundation will be able to extend Saunders-Monticello Trail to the top of Brown’s Mountain.

The popular trail is a 2-mile path leading up the mountain to Monticello and Saunders Bridge; it runs parallel to the eastbound side of Route 53. Jefferson’s vision for Montalto was to transform it into a park, according to the foundation. A later owner, J. Nelson Brown, converted old farm buildings into residential residences.

“It’s my hope that we can achieve the twin goals of preservation and public access,” Jordan said, adding that the foundation has not decided whether to keep or raze the residences.

“To the best of our knowledge the current structures, though charming, are not historic,” he said.

The foundation plans to close the multi-million dollar deal April 2.

“The overall reality is that until we close, we are not going to be addressing those issues, such as removing houses,” Jordan said.

Keith Donnelly said the foundation’s decision makes sense to him.

“It makes sense from a risk-management point of view that they would not want to be responsible for residents. I am quite glad they bought the land ... but I am sad to be leaving,” he said.

“I’m not happy about moving,” he said. “We got four months notice and are not looking forward to the scramble for a place to live in June.”

The big mountain move

Residents hope their soon-to-be landlord—albeit a temporary one—will be flexible in letting them exit their leases.

“What I think is sensible is to go month-to-month with residents,” two-year resident Lappa said.

Pamela Donnelly added that she and her husband have looked at several rental properties, but they require immediate occupancy. The couple also fear they may have to pay rent both at Brown’s Mountain and at a new residence.

Jordan said the foundation would be “open-minded” about discussing individual leases but is not in a position to do so until it closes the deal.

Aside from the housing concerns, Pamela Donnelly hopes that traditions such as Kite Day will continue. The private annual event draws dozens of residents and their guests to take advantage of the blustery spring weather on the mountaintop.

“If it’s too much for Monticello to work Kite Day, we would help them do it, rather than see it end,” Pamela Donnelly said.

Jordan said the foundation will work with residents to “assure a successful Kite Day.”

Matthew Willner, a local guitarist with the band Emdub, said he feels “blessed” to have lived in one of the cottages that overlooks Monticello.

“It’s incredibly inspiring to play up here,” he said. “It is a complete gift to live here. If they extend the walking trail and make it a public place, then we can’t complain.”

Still, he considers Monticello’s decision “abrupt.”

“I don’t know if I buy the explanation that they don’t want the risk” of managing a rental property, he said, noting that Management Services Corp. operates and maintains the property for the owner.

Jordan said he understand why residents would ask, “Why not keep it status quo?”

“The status quo works against our mission and would be expensive,” he said.

For Willner, this is the second time his living arrangements have run afoul of Monticello’s plans.

He lived on Secluded Farm, near the corner of Routes 53 and 20. The previous owners of the property donated it to Monticello.

“I feel like if Monticello runs me out of my next place,” he said, “I might consider it a conspiracy.”
