



The Lewis family's Spring House, built in 1954 with a shape reminiscent of a ship, is designed in Frank Lloyd Wright's hemicycle style. KEVIN SCHWEIZER/SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

# Frank Lloyd Wright house gets new life

It's hard to argue there is a more significant home in Tallahassee than the Spring House, which was designed by the most famous architect in American history, Frank Lloyd Wright.



**Gerald Ensley**  
The View From Here

Whether it can be saved is another matter.

But the possibility is exciting.

More than 70 volunteers gathered on Jan. 12 for a work party at the Spring House. Another 100 people attended an evening reception at the house — where owner Clifton Lewis regaled visitors with stories of the house and its architect.

It was a kickoff event by the Spring House Institute, a nonprofit organization started by the Lewis family, which intends to deed the home to the institute. The goal is to raise at least \$500,000 to restore the house and turn it into a cultural center. The aim is to create a facility for conferences on art, architecture and environment, as well as weddings and receptions.

"I would hope the local community will share this challenge with me and the Spring House Institute," said Kevin Schweizer, a board member and New Smyrna architect whose father, Nils Schweizer, was Wright's supervising architect during construction. "If we can figure out a way to get the money, this will be a great community building."

Unless you're a longtime resident of Tallahassee, chances are you've never seen the Spring House. It's on Okeehoopkee Drive, a narrow residential road off North Monroe just north of I-10.

The Spring House was designed by Wright in 1952 for George and Clifton Lewis, scions of Tallahassee pioneer families. It was constructed in 1954 for about \$50,000 on 10 acres of a former pecan grove.

The house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in



A volunteer works around the fireplace in the Spring House during a cleanup of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home on Jan. 12. GERALD ENSLEY/DEMOCRAT

1979. Last year, it was ranked No. 47 in a statewide vote of Florida's Top 100 Buildings — the same year it was placed on the state's "11 Most Endangered Historic Buildings" by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Lewises raised their four children in the home, where Wright fans from around the world regularly showed up on the doorstep. Lewis children continued to occupy it until 2010.

Despite their obvious appreciation for good architecture, the Lewises were not what Southerners used to call "house proud." They never got around to installing air conditioning, and Clifton was famously averse to housework. Abandoned as a residence, the house grew moldy and the grounds overgrown.

Thus last Saturday's flurry of shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows, dust rags, mops and brooms was an uplifting first step.

"The house has never looked this good," said grandson George Lewis III, a member of the Spring House Institute board. "My grandmother is

## SPRING HOUSE

For more information or to contribute to the restoration of the Spring House, visit [www.preservespringhouse.org](http://www.preservespringhouse.org).

## AT TALLAHASSEE.COM

In two videos, Gerald Ensley provides an overview of the Spring House and George Lewis III says his grandparents' home encourages people to think outside the box.

a great woman. But the place was packed with stuff when she lived here."

The Spring House is an example of the "hemicycle" design, a term Wright coined for his design of several houses at the end of his career: The 2,300-square-foot home occupies a semi-circle and looks something like a ship from the outside.

Wright designed about 500 houses in his career, though fewer than 10 in the hemicycle style. More importantly, the Spring House is the only house Wright designed in Florida, where he also designed the campus of Florida Southern College in Lakeland. In 1950, Clifton buttonholed him at a World Federalist Conference at the school and successfully lobbied him to design her home.

"(The Spring House) is important in respect to Wright and his whole cycle of styles," said Mary Jo Spector, a Tallahassee architect and member of the Spring House Institute board. "I think it has a value (to Florida) from a historic and cultural perspective."

No small part of that perspective is George and Clifton Lewis. George was president of his family's Lewis State Bank; Clifton was a May Queen. But the couple early on shed the expectations of their aristocratic status.

In the 1960s, George and Clifton Lewis were among the first white people in Tallahassee to embrace the civil rights movement — and in a big way. They marched in protests, wrote letters to the editor, brought black friends to their all-white

# Ensley

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church and sponsored integrated events. George, who died in 1996, was the first white banker in Tallahassee to approve business loans for blacks. Clifton, 93, was a fixture at city and county commission meetings, where she railed about everything from world peace to support for the arts.

The Spring House was their salon, where they hosted parties for all manner of causes and people.

"You've heard Clifton talk about the soul of this house," Alvis Duncan said at the clean-up. "Every time I'm in this house, I experience something of that soul."

Duncan, an Orlando business owner, has been brought in to drum up financial support. He plans four seasonal fundraisers this year at the house (art show, bike rally, football weekend and holiday party), as well as soliciting individual donations.

"There is a lot of money that needs to be raised, but I absolutely think we can do it," Duncan said. "It's important to me that



**Spring House owner Clifton Lewis, left, and her daughter Byrd Mashburn during the reception at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home. Lewis intends to deed the house to the nonprofit Spring House Institute, which hopes to restore the house and open it for public events.** GERALD

ENSLEY/DEMOCRAT

my state save the only home in the state designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Not only for tourism, which will be a piece of it. But because it's work of art and history we shouldn't lose."

Supporters point to Phoenix, where a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home was recently saved from the wrecking ball by a buyer who purchased it for \$2.4 million and donated it to a nonprofit association as a cultural center like the Spring House Institute envisions.

It may difficult to find someone in Tallahassee to donate \$2.4 million for

the Spring House — whose structure and 10 acres are valued at \$184,000. But Byrd Mashburn, the Lewises' daughter, said turning the house to public use was the dream of her parents — and she's convinced it will happen.

"This house is one of a kind; shouldn't Leon County and Tallahassee want to save this?" Mashburn said. "It's going to be done. It may take a while. But it's going to be done."

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