

Vietnam veteran shares stories about life after war

By Lisa Gillespie
STAFF WRITER

He hobbles out onto the porch with only one leg remaining, his beard speckled white with age. He served the United States government for two years in Vietnam, almost 20 years in the army, has worked as a head chef and has 12 children all over the world.

Today, Earl Gray pushes himself for two hours to the streets of downtown Asheville in his wheelchair and asks for money, the only way he will be able to put food on the table.

One-third of the adult homeless population has served their country in the Armed Services, and about 250,000 veterans live in shelters or on the street. Many veterans are considered at-risk because of living conditions in motels, poverty and lack of support from family, according to the Florida Department of Veteran Affairs.

"I get up and get cleaned. I get in my wheelchair and try to get money for food. Sometimes I get money, sometimes I do not. When I do, I go buy food and go home," Gray said. "You find out where kindness is. They tell you to get a job, and you just look at them and laugh. If they only knew."

Veterans of the Vietnam-era contain more disabled members than any other war, about 24.8 percent, according to the North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services. One of the contributing factors to this is Agent Orange, one of the herbicides sprayed from giant C-123 cargo planes to destroy the forests and fields that gave cover to the Viet Cong fighters.

"Agent Orange has caused a lot of problems," Gray said. "They are not saying it is from that. I have a tumor in the back of my head that they say cannot be removed. I have two knots in my stomach as well. I have not gone back to the doctor to find out what they are because I don't want to know. I just do not want to know."

In 2002 and 2003, an estimated eight percent (two million) of male veterans aged 18 or older were dependent on or abusing alcohol or illicit drugs, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

There is sufficient evidence of an association between Agent Orange and the ailments of chronic leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and suggestive evidence for prostate cancer, type two diabetes, neuropathy, brain tumors, stomach cancer and rectal cancer, according to the National Academies.

Eleven million gallons were poured over South Vietnam from 1961 to 1971, over 10 percent of the country, according to BBC News.

"Pain is something I live with," Gray said. "After a while, you block it out. It is not going anywhere. I wake up, I hurt. I go to bed, I hurt. I am suffering from Agent Orange. They never analyzed what it would do to the human body. I have had 17 operations, three on my stomach, five on my left leg and six on the right, the leg that I lost."

"After I came home, I was promoted to Private First Class," Gray said. "I started to work on detailing cars and then I worked in Charlotte at IBM. Then I went to work at Carolina's Medical Center and the UNC-Charlotte as head

chef. Then I became disabled. I had two heart attacks and a stroke. I used to be on drugs because of the pain of everything. By the time I realized where I was at with it, I was stuck. I messed my life up and I'm trying to get it back together."

The largest category of veterans on the compensation scale is at 10 percent disability (\$108 per month), and depending upon the disability rating of the veteran, monthly allowances for a spouse range from \$39 to \$94, according to the Office of VA Affairs.

"I am trying to go through the VA Hospital to get her (Gray's wife) to take care of me and be compensated for it," Gray said. "I am fighting the VA Board because I have not been compensated for losing my leg. I have to go to Winston-Salem to meet with the VA Board. But I don't have the funds to get the bus fare and stay in a motel. If I reschedule, it will be another six to eight months before they can see me."

Currently, the number of homeless male and female Vietnam veterans is greater than the number of service persons who died during that war, according to the Florida Department of VA Affairs.

"I simply asked him if he could spare some change. He said, 'Boy, I will never feed a n*****. I'm sending my money overseas.' I will never forget it, it hurt. He didn't have to do that," Gray said. "When I came back from Vietnam, we were called baby killers and n*****. What people did not understand was that we were just following orders. We thought we were doing the right thing, serving our country."

Gray's family of sharecroppers moved from Spartanburg to Asheville in 1956 for better job opportunities. He served in Texas, twice in Vietnam, Germany and Alaska.

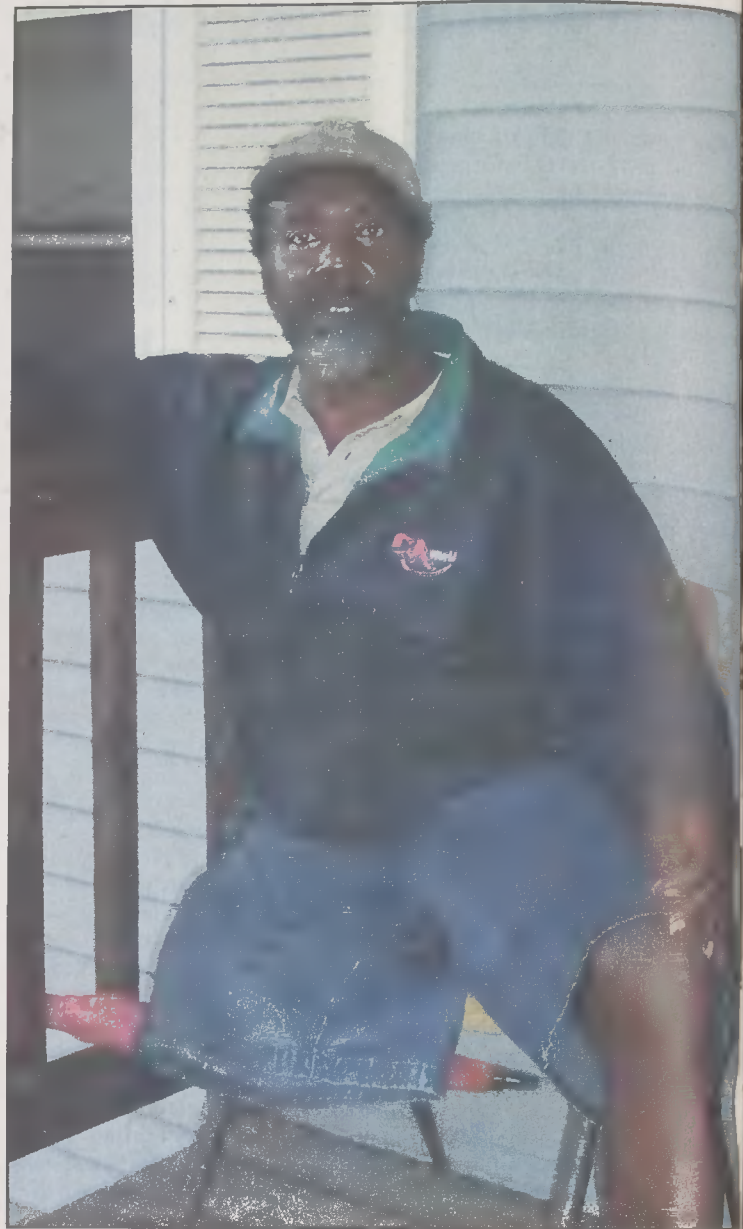
"I clear about \$1,500 a month," he said. "When we lost our home, we lived in motels and that is where most of our money went. I got caught up in the system. We lost our place and our money. They can say whatever they want. I spend my money trying to survive. Right now we do not have anything but each other."

Gray went to Stephens-Lee, Western North Carolina's only secondary school for blacks for many decades. He dropped out six weeks before graduation because of an altercation with a teacher.

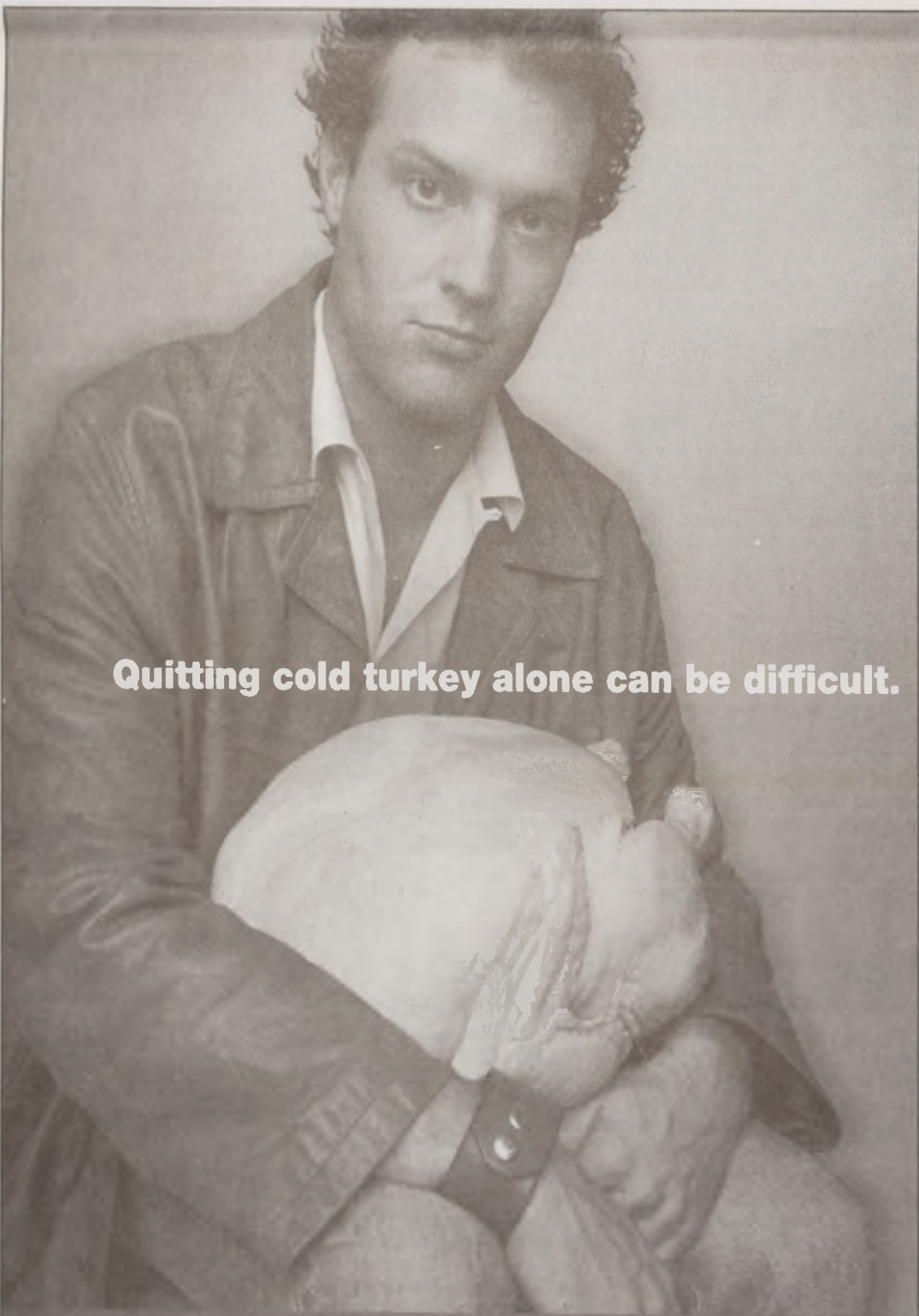
"I knew if I went home, my mother would kill me, we had already bought my cap and gown and it was quite expensive," Gray said. "So I left and joined the army. I have 12 kids all over the world. I have three step-kids and five godchildren. Racism is a lot better than it was years ago. Racism was a real problem. But like everything it changes, but it still exists."

Gray's wife, Cheleste McCeure Chalk, has chloasma, diabetes and arthritis, and is trying to be claimed as Gray's caretaker. They live with Gray's brother and his 16-year-old step-son lives with his mother because of their current situation.

"I have worked at hospitals, but all of a sudden these sicknesses started to happen," Chalk said. "I have always worked, that is what my mother taught me. I am a seeing-aid by trade. Between getting my medicine and medical care, the money goes by quick each month."



Adam Hillberry — Staff Photographer
Earl Gray served two tours in Vietnam during the war. Today he pushes himself around the streets of downtown Asheville in his wheelchair, asking for money in order to put food on his table.



Quitting cold turkey alone can be difficult.

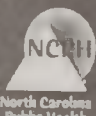


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SOA

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years," Mashburn said.

Coca-Cola, however, represents only a small fraction of the problems in Colombia, according to Mashburn.

"The Colombian military doesn't want to be responsible for human rights abuses, so it releases its trained people to head up the death squads and its paramilitary forces, so officially, those human rights abuses aren't on the record for the military," Mashburn said.

Those trained people were trained by the United States, according to Mashburn.

Since the SOA reopened under the new name of the WHINSEC, it claims to include "human rights" in its curriculum, according to Mashburn.

"Then you learn what those trained people are doing in Colombia, and you realize that the curriculum is really the same," Mashburn said.

The ongoing "War on Drugs" in Colombia is a cover-up for the

United States' multinational economic interests, according to senior Kristin Earhard, who also spoke at the forum along with sophomore Amelia DeFosset.

Earhard attended a workshop on U.S. policy and the situation in Colombia at an Amnesty International conference recently.

Most of the aid to Colombia in the "War on Drugs" is going toward the Colombian military, according to Earhard.

"We're just flying over and spraying these toxic pesticides," Earhard said.

Students from Amnesty International, including sophomore Rob Waskom, coordinated the SOA Forum as part of a series of discussions. They are hosting a forum on the death penalty Tuesday.

"It's a place for people to get informed about specific issues, but also to network students and faculty and people from the community about a huge variety of things," Waskom said.

Diversity

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Still, it is not just the administration that can be blamed for the lack of diversity problem, according to Luttrell.

"Students play an enormous part in this problem by silently complying with the lack of diversity," Luttrell said. "We as students, especially white students, have a responsibility to make noise and publicly question why this situation continues."

Much of the problem may deal with the lack of money distributed by UNCA to those who are not in the upper middle-class category, according to Gibney.

"This university just does not seem to raise much money, and if we do not raise much money then we do not have much money to give," Gibney said. "I do not think this campus is known for its generosity in terms of grants, probably black or white. But the failure is that we have an almost all-white campus and sometimes money talks here."

The lack of diversity negatively affects the whole campus, not only the students, but also the faculty, according to Gibney.

"Classes are hard to teach because you only have the white perspective," Gibney said. "It gives an artificiality to classes that is just not healthy. I think we are doing a disservice to all students, as well as faculty because we learn from students."

The New Student Diversity Task Force is a group of about 15 people who meet regularly in order to correct the lack of diversity between the students and teachers.

"Our primary goal is to get the policies from 'The Blue Book' implemented," Gardner said. "These policies still apply, they are not that old and they are good policies. It is a serious problem and I hope that the administration will be willing to work with us in helping change this. However, I think it is going to take a whole lot of student instructive to get things rolling."

Progress can only happen if people are willing to stand up and make a change, and the university is a good place to start the social movement, according to Gardner.

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