

Experiment In Self-Reliance

After 20 years, compassionate and spunky as ever

By ROBIN ADAMS
Chronicle Assistant Editor

Louise Wilson was slightly irritated by an article she read in Monday morning's newspaper.

The article quoted Charles Murray, a senior research fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, as saying that the War on Poverty has hurt and not helped poor people.

"I'm gonna write him a nice little note and tell him to shove it," said Wilson.

Wilson said she knows better than that because, for the past 19 years, she has been a general on the front lines in the War on Poverty. And although the war continues, said the executive director of Experiment in Self-Reliance Inc., many a battle has been won.

"I like a good fight," said Wilson. "I'm in the War on Poverty. We win some. We lose some. But we are gonna win (in the end). Winston-Salem and Forsyth County cannot afford to lose."

This week, ESR will celebrate its 20th anniversary with a week-long open house that culminates in a banquet on Friday. Because Wilson has been with ESR for almost as long as there has been an ESR, one of the best ways to find out about the organization that Wilson said helps 15,000 to 20,000 people a year, is to ask the person she calls "The Chief Hell-Catcher:" her.

"We (ESR) have been a catalyst and a thorn in some people's sides," said Wilson. "We have made our true number of enemies by pointing out, in the beginning, that certain things should be done by certain agencies. If you are blazing a trail, you're not going to blaze a trail without making some mistakes or making some enemies. It's not possible. Some people -- very conservative and good Christians -- feel that we don't do anything but give to the poor and lazy."

But ESR "serves the needy," Wilson said, "not the greedy."

ESR's services include:

- a weatherization program to help senior citizens insulate their homes at no charge.
- a nutritional program that feeds more than 400 senior citizens a day.
- a senior opportunities program that places homemakers in the homes of other seniors who can't clean their own homes.
- a Service Hot Line that locates



ESR Executive Director Louise Wilson: He who says the War on Poverty has hurt poor people ought to shove it (photo by James Parker).

temporary employment.

- a shelter for people who have been evicted from their homes and don't have anyplace else to go.

- a Learn to Earn Program that helps people get their GED diplomas and teaches them a skill and how to locate a job.

- a Home Improvement Program that renovates housing for senior citizens.

- a Positive Mental Attitude Training program that teaches ESR clients how to feel good about themselves.

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-- Louise Wilson

- and a Problem Center that meets emergency needs and provides counseling, budget information and follow-up services.

ESR has been credited with giving birth to the Gladiators Boxing Club and the local Legal Aid Society, has served as the delegate agency for the local Headstart program and the East Winston Crime Task Force, developed the first TransAid service for the city, administered a work program that later became CETA and is now the Job Part-

nership Training Act, funded the first public service proposal for the police department and helped write the first grant for the Model Cities Program.

Although Wilson will admit that's quite a lot of work, she'll also be the first to say that all that needs to be done hasn't.

"We don't have the money to really do some of the programs we feel are necessary," said Wilson. "But we coordinate with every other agency that provides services for people."

Although ESR has a long list

of proud accomplishments now, it hasn't always been that way. When the center opened in 1964 under the auspices of the North Carolina Fund, an anti-poverty group, it was chastised by local newspapers for "moving too slowly." According to a 1968 article in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, "an evaluation suggested that the Experiment's attack on poverty was uncoordinated and that the agency had no distinct goals and priorities."

The article further said that the

agency failed to understand poverty, failed to involve the poor and practiced racial discrimination. The agency only survived during that bumpy period, said the article, because of "Mrs. Wilson's work."

"When I took over as director," said Wilson, "I called the newspaper and said, 'Tell our good side.' But first, we had to have a good side to tell."

Wilson made that vow almost 18 years ago and today, as she sat at a small table in her office, thumbing through a big scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings about ESR, its programs and the people it has helped, she said she believes the good side is being told.

"If I could, I would do what I've done for the past 19 years the rest of my life," said Wilson. "But I will turn 65 next year and I plan to come out. But I don't plan to stop work."

"I've enjoyed every day I have spent at ESR. We have made people feel that they are somebody."

"This job has given me insight into what it means to be poor, ... and (insight) to create some programs or some type of philosophy that lets people know that somebody cares."

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