

# Coalition trying to reduce preventable accidents among kids

BY MELDE RUTLEDGE  
THE CHRONICLE

Accidental injury is the top killer among children ages 14 and under in the United States.

In North Carolina alone, a child dies every 36 hours from preventable injuries. Nearly 350,000 children will sustain an injury each year.

In response, Forsyth County has recently joined 39 other counties in the state and the N.C. Department of Insurance to develop the N.C. Safe Kids Coalition, part of a national network that focuses on reducing preventable accidents to children. Areas the group concentrates on include pedestrian, motor vehicle and bike accidents; scalds and burns; choking and strangulation; poisoning; and drowning.

They officially announced the coalition last Thursday at the Adam's Mark Hotel.

"We shake our heads and wonder why kids die, but we don't give much thought to how the deaths or serious injuries might have been prevented," said Jim Long, chairman of the N.C. Safe Kids advisory board and the N.C. insurance commissioner.

Safe Kids advocates consist mostly of law enforcement officers, health and medical professionals, educators and business leaders. They don't believe in the expression that

"children are going to have accidents." Instead, they try to develop interventions to keep children from being injured.

"A strong and viable partnership among all of us will be key in making the coalition the voice of childhood injury prevention in Forsyth County," said Jim Broderick, a N.C. Safe Kids advisory board member and president of PARTNERS National Health Plans of N.C. Inc. "We should not accept that injuries are just going to happen. As a community, we can intervene to make a difference in a child's life."

Until Broderick was exposed to the organization, he said that it was hard for him to imagine how something as simple as a container of liquid bleach sitting on a counter or the use of a bicycle helmet could permanently change the life of a child.

Bicycles are associated with more childhood injuries than any other consumer product except the automobile. Head injury is the leading cause of death in bike crashes. A helmet is the best safety device available to reduce head injury from bike



Long

accidents.

As a concerned parent, David Reavis was on hand with his three children, who demonstrated the use of bicycle helmets.

"They've been wearing helmets their whole lives," said Reavis. "It's been a house rule."

Moreover, a statewide law will take effect on Oct. 1 that will require all children to wear bike helmets.

"It's just a shame that our society had to go so far as to have a law passed to tell our kids to have helmets on," said Dr. Robert Letton, a pediatric trauma surgeon for Brenner Children's Hospital, a part of Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center.

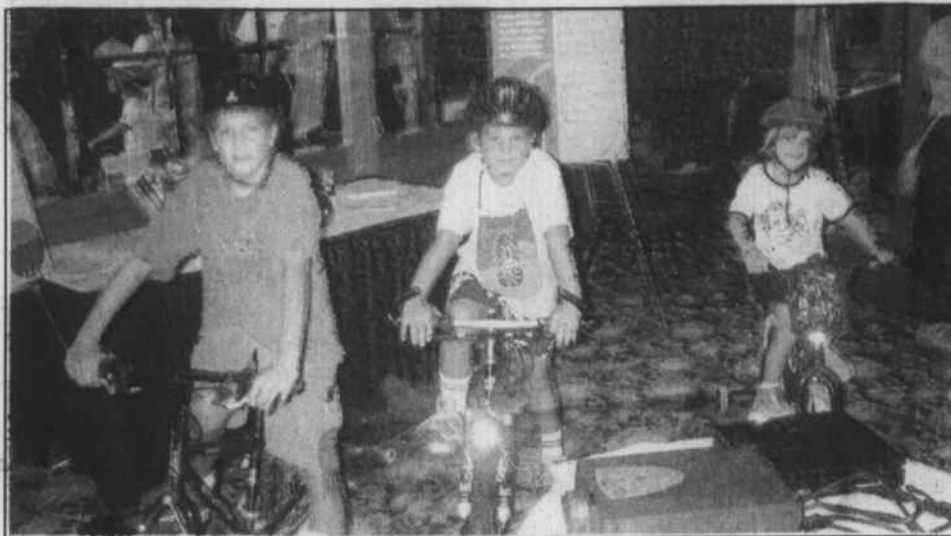
Letton was on hand to show graphic examples on why more child safety precautions should be used. He confronts severely hurt children on a daily basis from accidents that could have easily been prevented.

"We see them ... frequent enough that it just makes you sick," he said.

His biggest peeve is parents who let their young children ride four-wheelers.

"Why don't you just give them a grenade and pull the pin and let them go ride around with it?" he said. "It'll be a lot quicker."

Recently, he treated a 14-year-old boy who came in with a spleen laceration from riding a four-wheeler. The first question the boy asked,



Children pose using proper safety equipment for bicycles.

Photo by Melde Rutledge

when he was able, was when he would be able to ride again. Letton told him that he'll never give him permission to ride again.

Hospital charges for treatment and admissions for children up to age 14 exceed \$160 million a year in North Carolina. Total medical costs of injuries to children exceed \$2 billion annually.

"They keep our hospitals busy," Long said. "They cause our insurance rates to go up."

With the use of more prevention methods, N.C. Safe Kids Coalition expects hospital costs to significantly decline.

In its effort, the group has received financial backing from many N.C. companies, such as

McDonald's, General Motors dealerships, Lowes and the Blue Cross & Blue Shield Foundation of North Carolina.

"This program is really important to follow through, because a lot of kids don't have the kind of rules that we have at home," Reavis said. "Having this kind of program to reinforce that is very helpful."

## Wachovia

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ing to lend or invest at least \$35 billion over the next five years in low-income and moderate-income communities throughout the Southeast.

The release also mentioned the expansion of a program that encourages vendors to contract with women and minority-owned suppliers. The release, however, stopped short of saying more minority firms would, in fact, be hired.

"Neither First Union nor Wachovia has adequately addressed African-American issues. The things we're interested in beyond CRA ratings haven't been brought up," observed Gerry McCants, chairman of the N.C. Black Chamber of Commerce and publisher of the Black Pages USA directory. "I guess all we can do is hope that after the merger the new Wachovia will take a more proactive approach in its dealings with employees, vendors and consumers."

Although McCants said he thinks that a First Union-Wachovia merger "probably would serve the needs of black Carolinians best," other African Americans have flatly opposed it.

"When you look at their records in CRA lending, we feel both banks could have done a lot more for African-American organizations," said John Boyd Jr., president of the National Black Farmers Association. It took the banks nearly two months to meet with black farmers to hear their concerns.

In May, Inner City Press filed a 20-page comment asking the Federal Reserve to block the merger. The New York City advocacy group links both banks to predatory lending practices.

"The most misleading announcement we've yet seen was from First Union and Wachovia," Inner City Press commented in a July 23 statement. "To drum up support for their challenged merger, they announced they were dropping single premium credit insurance. Responding to comments, the Fed asked First Union when, exactly, this would take place. The answer? 2003."

Black farmers are equally as reluctant to endorse a Wachovia merger.

"We're against any merger because we have problems with both SunTrust and First Union," said John Boyd Jr.

In a letter to Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, Boyd asked for public hearings to be scheduled before a merger gains regulatory approval.

In black business circles, entrepreneurs - as well as past and present mid-level managers - share stories about the deals that never materialized, or the African-American employees passed over at Wachovia.

Wachovia's acquisition of Central Fidelity and Jefferson National banks in Virginia provided a clear illustration of white executives' commitment to African-American business relationships. When a grocery store housing a Wachovia branch was sold from white ownership to African-American ownership, Wachovia wasted no time pulling out - drawing the ire of Richmond's African-American community.

For Wachovia's white leadership - there were no African Americans assigned to the group making the decision - the move was "simply a business decision." African Americans in Richmond, though, viewed Wachovia's decision not do

business with Johnny Johnson, owner of the nation's largest black grocery chain, as a slap in the face. Tersely worded editorials urged blacks to do their banking elsewhere.

But Wachovia didn't need to move into a new state to offend African Americans. Right in its own back yard, a successful businessman who banks at Wachovia and provides professional services to the bank says he inquired about a mortgage loan to buy an office downtown. After failing to generate interest by Wachovia's small business bankers, who let weeks pass without even calling on him, the man went to a black-owned bank and got the mortgage and the level of service he needed. His is not the only tale of neglect.

"Litigation is one area of opportunity," Sterling A. Spainhour, a senior vice president of Wachovia, told black lawyers two years ago at the annual meeting of the North and South Carolina associations for black lawyers. At the time, Spainhour had said, "We frequently use outside counsel or complex or time-consuming litigation."

But two years after the panel discussion on diversity, black lawyers from both states who attended the event say no business relationships were fostered as a result of the 1999 gathering in Myrtle Beach. Meanwhile, Spainhour ducks questions and diverts calls to Wachovia's chief diversity officer.

Despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary, Wachovia contends that it increased spending with minorities by 30 percent from 1999 to 2000.

Specific figures were not available.

Statistics for minority procurement were readily available at SunTrust, which spent more than \$17.5 million with minority businesses last year. Procurement figures for the first six months of 2001 exceed \$10.9 million, according to Cindy Turner, vice president of supplier diversity at SunTrust.



Anderson

Like First Union there's no one at Sun Trust willing to speak publicly about the internal climate as far as the inclusion of African Americans is concerned.

At Wachovia, that conversation falls to Hector McEachern. As the bank's chief diversity officer, his attention is focused on slowing the revolving door - which carries African Americans out of Wachovia faster than he can bring them in. Wachovia doesn't like to talk about the attrition rate for African Americans. Nevertheless, the exodus has been so steady that there are some departments at the bank that have no African-American representation at all.

"Diversity is a social imperative, and I would contend that it is a business necessity. If you look at the demographics of our communities, in 10 to 20 years, a company that's not good at diversity won't be a viable organization," McEachern said. "I am committed to making sure the environment at Wachovia supports diversity."

Although he carries the title of executive vice president, internally McEachern is viewed as the glass ceiling incarnate. Despite McEachern's lengthy 20 years of human resources experience at Wachovia, when the director of human resources position became available, it was a white male from outside the organization who was

tapped for the post.

Still, McEachern believes he can be a catalyst for change. Since assuming the role of chief diversity officer roughly six months ago, McEachern has implemented several initiatives - from increasing the amount of management time spent in diversity training, to establishing diversity goals and standards for senior managers. Wachovia also announced new diversity initiatives, including a mentoring program, manager leadership training and the development of tools to measure the effectiveness of diversity programs.

Quarterly reports will let the diversity manager know how much progress has been made. The program is too new to measure right now. But McEachern's policy lacks the power of enforcement. Reprimanding non-compliant managers "was not part of the approach we decided to take," he explained.

Assisting McEachern in the diversification of Wachovia's mostly white management is Rock

Anderson. A former executive for Inroads, a college-level mentoring and internship program for minorities, Anderson is the bank's new diversity recruiting manager.

"I don't see it as a tough sell," Anderson said in reference to the task of attracting blacks to a company with diversity issues. In the four months he was on the job before merger talks surfaced, Anderson submitted applications and credentials of five African Americans for management positions (four of them were at the vice president level). All except one was hired, he said.

"Wachovia historically has not done a great job of putting the message out. Now that's my job. And I see the merger, which will create the fourth largest bank, as a phenomenal opportunity for women and people of color."

But it may take more than a mere merger with First Union to spark change in the Wachovia culture.

"We have a Corporate Diversity

Council that focuses on diversity as it relates to customers, clients, communities, vendors, gays and lesbians," said First Union spokeswoman Shika Raynor in response to questions about the number of African Americans holding management positions at First Union.

Raynor said she was not at liberty to elaborate.

At least Wachovia did acknowledge that of its 6,900 officers, a paltry 13 percent are African American, with the majority of those clustered in the bottom two tiers of banking officer and assistant vice president. First Union, however, declined to discuss the representation of African Americans among its management ranks.

Unlike First Union, SunTrust is willing to speak publicly about the internal climate as far as the inclusion of African Americans is concerned. Although SunTrust has an overall population similar to Wachovia - both around 30 percent - 22 percent of the managers are African American.

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### Quotables:

"No greater injury can be done to any youth than to let him feel that because he belongs to this or that race he will be advanced in life regardless of his own merits or efforts."

- Booker T. Washington

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