

Fight against homelessness continues

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

The rows of bright tents set up on a grassy patch outside of the Experiment in Self-Reliance's Third Street building served as a very visible sign to bring attention to an issue that has become invisible to many people. As part of its 40th anniversary celebrations, ESR staff members and some of the agency's supporters slept outside last Thursday night to bring attention to the plight of the homeless.

ESR is part of a consortium of local agencies that works to address the needs of the homeless. Other member agencies include local shelters and social service groups. The Rev. Ginny Britt, head of the local homeless council, likes to tell those who think negatively of homeless people that the homeless are just like anyone else. She said many have tried to change their situations, but are hampered by a laundry list of problems. Homelessness is also a possibility that many working people may find themselves faced with as the economy fights to regain momentum. According to The Advocacy of the Poor, an organization that Britt also heads, Forsyth County has more than 33,000 households with incomes below the federal poverty level.

While agencies such as ESR, which runs a transitional housing program that helps the working homeless and poor, are doing their part, Britt and others have taken the fight against homelessness to the streets - literally. At least once a month, Britt leads a team that goes into woods and under bridges to deliver blankets, food and toiletries to the homeless. The helpers have



A woman uses her dog to help bring attention to the homeless problem at an event last week.

Photo by Kevin Walker

had their work cut out for them lately. Recently, Light-house Ministries, one of only a handful of shelters in the city, closed its doors, giving those who want shelter one less option.

Stephen Powell braved the outdoors last week to take part in the sleep-in. He works with homeless people every day through his church, First Assembly of God.

"I think (the sleep-in) will make people a lot more sensitive to the homeless problem," he said.

Twana Wellman, the executive director of ESR, said that was ESR's goal when it thought up the event. But she admits that even a tent on hard earth during fairly moderate temperatures was several levels above the conditions that most homeless people face

each day.

"This, what we are doing here, is like a penthouse compared to what it is like for many people," she said.

Members of the City Council dropped by the sleep-in to show their support for the cause. One council member, Fred Terry, took the plunge all the way. He slept out for the night. Terry, who usually wears nicely-pressed

suits, was unrecognizable as he showed up at ESR with a full beard, baseball cap, worn jeans and unlaced boots. He carried a bag in his hand containing a coat and other items. ESR staff members, believing that Terry was a homeless person needing assistance, quickly offered help. Terry said he dressed down to make the point that homelessness could be closer than any of us think.

becoming advocates for low-income people throughout the city.

"I would like to work with every citizen in the community to find suitable and affordable housing," she said. "What that means for us is to be a voice for the voiceless."

Wellman wants ESR to stretch its housing wings by

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Marcus McNeill

ROTC to honor an A&T senior

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

GREENSBORO - Marcus T. McNeill, a senior business marketing major at N.C. Agricultural and Technical State University, will be awarded the George C. Marshall ROTC Award during a four-day ROTC National Security Seminar April 13-16 in Lexington, Va.

McNeill is the Cadet Battalion Commander in the Army ROTC Program at N.C.A&T. The Lillington, N.C., native is a four-year Army ROTC Scholarship recipient. During the summer of 2002, he completed the Army Airborne Qualification Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He has been selected to enter the Military Intelligence Branch and is scheduled to receive his commission as an Army second lieutenant in May.

The George C. Marshall ROTC Award is presented to the most outstanding Army ROTC cadet at each university across the nation offering ROTC. About 250 cadets throughout the country will receive this award. The ROTC Award and Seminar are intended to be reflective of the values Marshall portrayed continuously throughout his lifetime - that of professional excellence, calm leadership, personal integrity and selfless service to the nation. Ultimately, it is these values that earned him the only Nobel Prize for Peace ever presented to a career soldier.

ESR

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are (ESR is) here I will be here. Long as it is something to do with ESR, I will be here to support it because they helped me," said Langley, who is now working with ESR to earn her GED.

ESR Executive Director Twana Wellman is proudest of the many success stories like Langley's that mark the agency's decades of service.

"It is a huge milestone for us," Wellman said. "It is exciting that we have been in business for 40 years of providing services for the working poor in our community."

The agency was founded in November 1964 amid President Johnson's sweeping "War on Poverty" policy. Back then, the agency was heavily concentrated on educating people and helping them obtain job skills. The agency's hands are still in those areas today, but its mission has broadened greatly over the years. ESR runs the city's best known transitional housing program, which provides a roof over the heads of people who find themselves suddenly homeless as a result of economics or natural disasters. The program

has been most beneficial to a group that Wellman calls the "working homeless."

"The greater problem is the working homeless. These may be people who have been evicted; these may be women who have been battered," Wellman said.

ESR's self-sufficiency program, which has helped Langley and many others, offers help with child care, transportation, counseling and budgeting. More than 90 percent of the clients that ESR serves are working. Ninety-four percent of them are no longer on public assistance. The agency also has a popular homeownership program that works with clients to repair their credit, budget their expenses, save money and eventually buy homes.

Perhaps because of its track record of turning former welfare mothers into home owners and putting the pep back into the steps of those who were once homeless, ESR is more popular than ever these days. Last fiscal year, the agency served 650 households. With unemployment high, the agency expects that number to rise this year. As ESR celebrates its past successes, part of its immediate

future is to find ways to continue to pay for what it has done for the past four decades.

"We can't do as much for as many and that hurts us," said Danny Haire, the agency's assistant director. "We have more client requests and less staff to meet those needs for those requests. That is not a good combination."

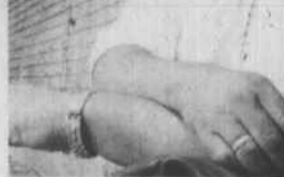
ESR is funded through the United Way, several foundations, grants and moneys from the city and county. The public money has become harder and harder for the agency to obtain, especially the last two years when both the city and county have faced massive deficits. Last year, the county cut its funding significantly to the agency.

Haire said to make ends meet, ESR had to cut two full-time positions to part-time. The agency also could not afford to fill vacancies. ESR is trying to stop the bleeding. The agency is constantly looking for more sources of funding. In fact, the 40th anniversary event was part celebration and part fund-raiser. Wellman has faith that ESR's track-record and important mission will be remembered by elected officials as the city and county enter the tumultuous budgetary season.

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Information Sessions:

Tuesday, March 16 at 6 p.m. and Wednesday, March 17 at 10 a.m.

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