

RED

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disease) and taking residents to the hospital and fixing them food," Johnson told her nearly 25 party guests Saturday.

ACS officials noticed right away that clients immediately bonded with Johnson, a regal woman with a big laugh who prefers hugs and kisses to handshakes. Johnson was asked to serve on one of ACS' boards and has been an active member for years. She has also held several "Red" parties over the years.

The party-throwers have freedom to give any type of event they choose. Some of this spring's ACS Red events will be formal, sit-down dinners; others will be floating receptions at art galleries with live music. Party attendees are asked to make a donation to ACS during the event.

Johnson held a lively affair with goodies like fruit punch, sauce-drenched meatballs, red velvet cake, salsa and chips, strawberry cheesecake and even barbecue pigs' feet to set the color theme.

Her late son was known as Mr. Marvastic for his larger-than-life "Hollywood" personality. Johnson is known as Mama Marvastic or simply "Mama" to those who love and admire her. Larry Leon Hamlin often credited his mother for giving him his star qualities. Johnson showed Saturday that she has plenty of her own as well. She provided the entertainment by improvising several skits, with the help of her unsuspecting dinner guests, that tackled the touchy subject of AIDS. She said she wanted to drive home to her guests that all people need love, regardless of what medical conditions they have.

"You don't get it by touching, hugging, holding hands," Johnson told her guests. "We need to learn to love everybody, no matter what they got or how they got it ... because how they got it, really ain't none of our business anyway."

Sammy Gray was one of Johnson's party guests that especially appreciated her frank words. Gray heads Union Baptist Church's AIDS Ministry, of which Johnson is an active member. Gray says that even in 2008, HIV/AIDS is a difficult subject for most people. He thinks people like Johnson, who have no direct connection to the disease, can help open the eyes of others.

"There is still so much fear," said Gray, who is proud that Union's 15-year-old AIDS Ministry is oldest of any local black church. "If we had more people like her, it would be wonderful."

Johnson can attest to Gray's statement about fear. She recalled that she once tried to get one of her girlfriends to go with her to Holly Haven to bond with the residents there. She said her friend rebuffed the offer by stating that people would think that she or someone in her family had the disease if she were to volunteer at Holly Haven.

"I don't understand that," said Johnson. "I have been blessed that no one in my family has had to deal with it, but we have to help people, regardless because God loves all of us."



Annie Hamlin Johnson performs a skit with Gwendolyn Russell.

Lack of knowledge is also still an issue, as was apparent at Johnson's soiree. Guests used the occasion to clear up questions they had about HIV/AIDS. One woman said that she had heard that the virus could be passed through perspiration. Johnson and Gray quickly shot down that myth, telling the guests that the transfer of blood, semen and/or vaginal fluids is how the disease is spread.

Amy Lindsey, ACS' community relations director, said it is always a win-win when Red events serve as both a fundraiser and an education forum.

"It is always good when we can raise awareness because it is still not something that people are generally talking about," said Lindsey, who attended Johnson's party.

About 45 Red parties are planned this spring. Half of them have already taken place, Lindsay said, and brought in about \$25,000 for ACS.

Johnson says that as long as there is air in her lungs, she will continue to give her time and energy to those in need. Some of those at Holly Haven have been abandoned by their families as a result of their HIV/AIDS status. Sometimes when Johnson transports residents to their doctor's appointments — they ask her to accompany them into the examination room. Sometimes she holds their hands.

"I'll be their mother," Johnson said. "They are not really my child, but they are someone's child."

For more information on AIDS Care Service, go to www.aidscareservice.org or call (336) 777-0116.



Professor Larry Little with some of his students.

Protest held for early voting sites

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

Demonstrators young and old gathered on the sidewalk in front of the Government Center Tuesday afternoon. Some came in wheelchairs or leaned on canes. Others huddled together and shivered in the breeze. Yet their spirits were high.

"This is the '60's again," one protester commented with a giggle. "I'm loving it."

The miscellaneous group gathered in support of an ongoing effort by State Reps. Earline Parmon and Larry Womble. The two legislators are calling for an increase in the number of early voting sites in the county. Womble, who is recovering from hip surgery, led the rally from his wheelchair.

"This is too important not to at least make a statement," he said. "This Board of Elections ... said they were going to have four sites ... for the entire county and didn't have but one site in the African American community."

This isn't the first time the BOE has heard from the group. The board entertained comments from community members on the subject at its March 6 meeting. Several organizations, such as Democracy NC and Triad for Obama, also spoke out in support of adding locations at that time.

Additional sites will provide greater accessibility for disadvantaged citizens and reduce the

lines at precincts on Election Day, supporters say.

"Four sites are not enough," Womble asserted. "Greensboro has 12 ... there's something wrong with that picture."

The Rev. Benjamin Humphrey, of St. James AME Church in Winston-Salem, was among those in attendance.

"Some folks wish something would happen; some folks don't know what in the world is happening; and some folks make things happen," Humphrey declared. "I am about trying, through the grace of God, to make things happen worthwhile."

The rally also piqued the interest of several political science majors at Winston-Salem State. They accompanied their professor, Larry Little, at the event.

"We want to set an example for all of the schools," Little said. "And after we organize the campus, then we've got to deal with (organizing) the community."

The upcoming primary is old hat to the students. Some of them have traveled as far as Ohio to garner support for Barack Obama.

"It was just a great experience," commented sophomore Christopher Taylor, a political science and psychology major. "It's just been wonderful getting involved in something like this after seeing ... other people

doing it for so long."

Many fellow supporters expressed gratitude to the students for their presence. Womble praised them for the work they have already done elsewhere.

"Don't tell me young people are not involved," he bellowed. "They are not only involved, but they are dedicated and engaged."

After the rally, the group moved upstairs to attend the 4 p.m. BOE meeting. BOE officials declined to allow public comment, which distressed Womble and Parmon. The duo distributed a letter outlining their concerns to board and community members instead.

"... We are concerned that today's meeting is not open to the public for comments and input," the letter read in part. "It is important that the citizens of Forsyth County be granted every possible opportunity to take an active role in the electoral process, which includes providing input at meetings such as this."

The board voted two to one to add five additional sites to the early voting roster. Board Member Jerry Jordan, the board's only Republican, remains steadfast in his opposition to adding sites. Because the vote was not unanimous, it is now up to the State Board of Elections to make the determination. The board will reconvene April 1.



Members of the Ladies of Excellence Red Hat Society, of which Johnson is a member, were on hand for the party. They are Geneva Blackburn, from left, Deloris Monsanto, Pearlina Howard, Annie Johnson, Lucille Monroe, Linda Davis and Barbara Donaldson.

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