

The real Erin Brockovich visits WFU

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

Environmental activist Erin Brockovich visited the campus of Wake Forest University Tuesday night to drum up support for Yadkin Riverkeeper.

The organization works "to respect, protect and improve the Yadkin Pee Dee River Basin through education, advocacy and action," according to its Web site. Significant pollution is endangering the river, say Riverkeeper supporters.

"We don't have too many rock stars in the environmental movement, but we've got one of the biggest here tonight: Erin Brockovich," Yadkin Riverkeeper Dean Naujoks told the audience that packed the school's Brendle Recital Hall.

Though she has spent nearly two decades doing consumer advocacy work, Brockovich did not become a household name until 2000, when Julia Roberts played her in a hit film. Roberts would go on to win her first Oscar for the role.

The film, "Erin



Erin Brockovich addresses the crowd at Wake Forest.

Brockovich," highlighted Brockovich's efforts to hold the PG&E Company accountable for dumping hazardous chemicals into the drinking water in Hinkle, Calif.

"Here is a woman who essentially single-handedly takes on a multi-million dollar industry ... and what's amazing is that she won," said Zoe Gamble Hanes, president of the Yadkin

Riverkeepers Board of Directors, in her introduction of Brockovich, whom she called her hero. Hanes, an attorney, said she was inspired to attend law school and study environmental law after seeing the blockbuster movie.

"We're here tonight so that each one of you can be inspired the way that I was a decade ago," Hanes told the audience.

Brockovich talked about the film, its effect on her life and work and the famous resolve that led her to the national spotlight as an activist during her nearly hourlong speech.

"While the movie may be yesterday's news, the issue isn't," cautioned the 50-year-old. "...The topic of environmental injustice continues to live on today and it's more important today than it was 10 years ago."

Brockovich said people often don't believe she is the "real" Erin Brockovich, but from the podium, with her hoop earrings swinging and her self-described "potty mouth" in full effect, the energetic and edgy blonde lived up to the character audiences across the nation fell in love with.

"That character that you see in the movie is real," she declared. "I will forever be somebody who wants to right a wrong, even if I don't look or dress the part."

Since the film, Brockovich has continued her work on environmental issues as well as championing a variety of other con-

sumer-focused causes, from product liability to pharmaceuticals and workers compensation. She said tackling problems that have such far-reaching effects requires a full fledged community effort.

"It took all of us to create the problem and it's going to take all of us, collectively, to fix the problem, but I think we can do it," she said. "...It is up to us to choose whether to take action or not."

Brockovich encouraged audience members to believe in themselves and remain vigilant in their quests for justice.

"I know now, more importantly than anything, that we must stand on our convictions," she declared. "...We've got to look to ourselves. We are the hope, we are the light, and we can be the stepping stones to that change."

For more information about the Yadkin Riverkeeper, visit www.yadkinriverkeeper.org. For more information about Erin Brockovich, visit www.brockovich.com.

Chairty

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Baptist Medical Center. The cost of providing charity care increased from \$32.1 to \$44.3 million. The total does not include the cost of providing care resulting in bad debt for services on which the Medical Center was unable to collect - an additional \$24.4 million.

The Medical Center states that the increase reflected an increased need for charity care due to declining economic conditions, expansion of the charity care definitions to include a broader patient population as well as the increased cost of providing care.

The cost of serving patients with Medicare, Medicaid and other government programs jumped from \$8.7 million in 2008 to \$32.6 million in 2009.

Additional community benefits include community health improvement services such as health education and screenings for the public, donations and sponsorship of community events such as the Komen NC Triad Race for the Cure, unreimbursed costs of providing medical and health education, and the uncovered costs of conducting research.

"As our region's only academic medical center, Wake Forest Baptist contributes uniquely to the health and well-being of Forsyth County and the Piedmont Triad," said Dr. John D. McConnell, Wake Forest Baptist's chief executive officer. "As an academic medical center, we accept our responsibility to provide services above and beyond other health care providers.

Those include extensive community-based programs, a research mission that contributes to providing the best medical care, and training of tomorrow's health care professionals, many of whom will stay to practice in the community."

Union

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Carpenter says the program has already made a difference for him.

"It's helped me a lot," he remarked. "I knew a little bit about shoe shining when I was in ROTC in high school, but it's nothing like shining shoes on people's feet and to see how pleased

they are with my work."

Carpenter and the other shiners have perfected the craft under the careful tutelage of several veteran shoe shiners.

Harold Payne learned to shine shoes as an Army serviceman in the 1960s.

"I knew I knew how to shine shoes and I said at my age, I needed to pass a little bit of this information on," commented the 72 year-old,

who joined Union Baptist when he moved to the city less than a year ago.

Union Baptist member Samuel Richardson has also been working with the shiners. Richardson, an employee at Volvo of the Triad, says he has spent a lot of time around professional shiners over the course of his life and has taught himself the craft.

"I've been shining my

own shoes every week for about 20-25 years, and I just enjoy doing it," he related.

Sixteen year-old Dominique Fleming says he wanted to take part in Soul 2 Sole, "just to keep a little money in my pocket so I don't have to be asking my mom for money all the time."

Dominique, a rising senior at North Forsyth, says his football practice schedule has made it difficult for him to work a part time job, but the hours of Soul 2 Sole don't conflict with his other obligations. Dominique, who plans to join the Marines next year, says he has learned a lot from his participation in

Soul 2 Sole.

"It's been going well," he said.



Dr. Mack

Payne says he is thrilled to see so many career opportunities are open to today's generation of African American men.

"When I got out of school, there were only three things we could be: a school teacher, an undertaker or a preacher," he related. "When I look at how that field has opened up, I am overjoyed."

For more information about Soul 2 Sole, call (336) 724-9305 x222.



Samuel Richardson poses with Harold Payne.

Photo by Layla Farmer

Grant

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Wayne County Reads of Goldsboro (\$6,000) for "A Country, A People," which features an exhibit of photographs taken by U.S. military troops recently deployed in

Afghanistan.

Community Empowerment Fund of Chapel Hill (\$5,000) for "Micro-finance Narratives in Durham, NC," a documentary film telling the personal stories of two micro-entrepreneurs.

Southern Documentary Fund of Durham (\$5,000) for the completion of "Landscapes of the Heart: The Elizabeth Spencer Story," a documentary film about Southern writer and Chapel Hill resident Elizabeth Spencer.

God

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church and state has recently sparked debate in Forsyth County. The Board of County Commissioners is fighting a judge's ruling that prohibits prayer before board meetings. A judge ruled against the use of sectarian prayers, which reference specific religions, in January. Commissioners voted this spring to allow the Alliance Defense Fund, a conservative Christian non-profit organization, to appeal the ruling. More than 900 people attended the meeting, where a divided Board of County Commissioners voted to appeal. The decision garnered state and national attention.

David Plyler, the chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, cast the deciding vote for the appeal. All three Democrats on the Board voted against it. After much consideration, Plyler voted with his fellow Republican commissioners. He said he voted to pursue an appeal only after he was assured that county tax payers would not have to foot the bill for the costly appeal. The N.C. Partnership for Religious Liberty has promised to pay attorney fees and damages if the county loses.

"To have everybody in the county who may not believe in the Christian religion to pay a bill to appeal a fundamentally Christian question just didn't seem right to me, but, having said that, the Christians stepped up to the plate and said 'if that's the case, not a problem,'" said Plyler.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State - which bills itself as a watchdog organization on church

and state issues - and the the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) are behind the lawsuit against the county.

Americans United Chapter President Steve Weston said most of the religious references in the prayers before board meetings have been of a "fundamentalistic Christian nature" with not enough inclusion of other religions.



Plyler

"It marginalizes significant religious minorities and that's just not the American way," said Weston. "We're a tolerant people and we welcome all comers."

Debra Conrad, the vice chair of the Board of County Commissioners, disagrees. She said that asking private citizens to pray before meetings has been a long-standing tradition. Conrad said the Board has had people of different faiths give the prayer over the years and that she had never heard any complaints about it before the current controversy. She believes strongly in the appeal.



Weston

"I will vote in favor of it all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary," she said.

The Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity, which is made up primarily of black religious leaders, took a vote on the issue earlier this year. Conference Second Vice-President Rev. Willard Bass, an assistant pastor at Green Street United Methodist Church, said the majority of members voted to support public prayer, but only when different faiths are equally represented. Bass said Commissioners have not done a good job at inviting non-Christians to give the prayer.



Moury

"We want to make sure that prayer in the public square is, in fact, fair and equally shared and not just Christian-based," said Bass.



Conrad

