

Inside:

for Seniors only!

See Opinion page on A6

See Sports on page B1

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Poverty statistics don't tell all

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

A few weeks ago a report started making its rounds around the Internet indicating that Winston-Salem had one of the highest childhood poverty rates in the country. According to recent numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau, 35 percent of the children in the Twin City are living in poverty, which is the 20th worst in the country.

Other North Carolina cities that made the bureau's list of cities with the worst childhood poverty rates include Fayetteville (29%), Greensboro (27%), Durham (26%), Charlotte (21%), Raleigh (20%). The Twin City also ranks higher on the list than large metropolitan cities like Dallas and Chicago.

While anyone can look at these numbers and come to the conclusion that more needs to be done to lift our community out of this hole, it is equally important that we look at the root causes of these issues and uplift programs and organizations that are already doing the work to change the narrative.

And most importantly, there is a need to point those who need it most in the right direction to receive the assistance.

It's no secret that having a criminal record can have a negative impact on an individual's ability to find legitimate employment, which in turn makes it difficult to provide for one's family. In 2010 the Center for Economic and Policy Research released a study, which found that a felony conviction or imprisonment reduces the ability of ex-offenders to find jobs and it costs the U.S. economy between \$57 and \$65 billion annually in lost economic output.

Since 2014, the city's SOAR Program has helped more than 100 ex-offenders find gainful employment. The program allows individuals to join the City of Winston-Salem's workforce for six months, performing routine labor jobs such as landscaping and maintaining public buildings, and various departments. In addition to work experience and a steady job, participants in the SOAR program are provided life skills training, financial management, GED and post-secondary education, job search techniques and much more.

After the six months, participants are encouraged to apply for full-time positions with the city.

The city also offers a similar program for youth who have dropped out of high school called YouthBuild. Participants learn job skills and leadership development while getting paid and working toward their GED.

Regina Hall, city reintegration & youth development manager, said oftentimes individuals who have a criminal

record or have dropped out of high school feel as if they are limited; so programs like SOAR and YouthBuild are important.

"...These are important because it sends a message that you're not counted out. And that if you're willing to take the first step, there's somebody who is going to be willing to take a chance on you and allow you an opportunity to better yourself," Hall said.

Food insecurity in our community is another contributing factor to the childhood poverty rates. To combat these issues, last summer the City of Winston-Salem Ministry received a grant, totaling \$115,500, from the National League of Cities to fight hunger throughout the community.

According to an article published in The Chronicle on August 23, 2018, the funds from the "Think Orange" campaign will be focused on feeding children and

and 3rd shift, can have somewhere to go after school and be able to get a hot meal," said Hall. "There's also a focus on expanding summer meal programs throughout the city and the county."

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School System is doing their part to fight hunger as well. Last summer the district unveiled a food truck that traveled to various locations throughout the community delivering meals to children in need.

The city has non-profits and other organizations with big hearts doing the work every day to uplift those in need and addressing the root causes of poverty in our community. Crisis Control Ministries, Family Services, The Salvation Army, Samaritan Ministries, Social Heart, the Bethesda Center for the Homeless, HOPE of Winston-Salem, Neighbors For Better Neighborhoods, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Black Philanthropy



Courtesy of Crisis Control Ministry

Last year Crisis Control Ministry provided food for 4,489 adults and children.

expanding participation in the federal SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

While the city partnered with the Winston-Salem Urban League to increase participation in SNAP sometime last year, later this year the city will roll out the initiative to feed more youth and families in low-income communities. Thanks to a partnership with Second Harvest Food Bank and the Recreation & Parks Department, soon children at local recreation centers will be able to receive hot meals, free-of-charge.

"They're actually going to start rolling out hot meal programs at the recreation centers, so some of the youth who go to recreation centers, whose mothers work 2nd

Initiative, the Urban League, are just a few that come to mind.

When discussing poverty in the area with The Chronicle last week, Hall said although it may be hard to look at the statistics on hunger and childhood poverty, the best part about Winston-Salem is that there are a number of opportunities.

"You hate to see poverty in your hometown but it's always good to know there are opportunities. There are opportunities for people, so they don't necessarily have to feel like they're never going to get out. There are pockets of opportunity for people."

Larry Little, WSSU students, join fight to free Ronnie Long

N.C. man has spent 42 years in prison for crime he didn't commit

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

A lot has changed since 1976. Ten different presidents have taken office, the Internet and social media has changed the way we communicate, and thanks to Uber and Lyft, people are more comfortable riding with a stranger than taking public transportation. But for 63-year-old Ronnie Long, not much has changed over the past 42 years.

Long has been in jail since he was 19 years old for a crime he says he didn't commit. And last week students from Winston-Salem State University joined the fight to help Long seek justice.

In 1976 Long was convicted of burglary and rape during an alleged attack of a wealthy white woman in her home in Concord. The victim, the widow of a top-executive at Cannon Mills, a textile mill in Kannapolis, told officers she was in her kitchen on April 25, 1976, around 9:30 p.m. when she felt someone grab her from behind.

According to police reports, the man pressed a knife to the victim's neck and threatened to kill her before he ripped off her clothes and raped her. Initially the victim, who has since died, described her attacker as a black man wearing a beanie and possibly gloves. She also later said her attacker was "yellow-looking" or light-skinned.

On the day of the trial, despite having no evidence connecting him to the crime scene and having an alibi, Long was sentenced to 80 years. Over the past 43 years, Long has maintained his innocence and during that time, more information has come to light to support his claim that he wasn't given a fair trial.

For example, the jurors in the trial were all white and handpicked by officers with the Cabarrus County Sheriff's office. A hair was found on the scene that didn't match the victim or Long and wasn't included in evidence files.

While there are several other red flags in the handling of Long's case, the way Long was identified may be the most alarming. About two weeks after the incident, after she couldn't identify her attacker in a photo line-up, officers took the victim to the district court wearing a disguise and told her that her attacker "may" or "may not" be in the courtroom that day.

Long was in the courtroom that day for a misdemeanor trespassing charge that was dismissed. After waiting for about an hour, the judge called Long to the front. He had no idea he was being watched. As soon as he stood up wearing a long black leather coat, the victim identified Long as her attacker. The officers immediately took the victim back to the police station, showed her a photo line-up of possible suspects with Long's photo included, and she identified him again.

On May 10, 1976, officers showed up to Long's house and told him he needed to come fill out papers for the trespassing charge and that he would be back in a few minutes.

He hasn't been home since. "... They told my mother I would only be gone 10 to 15 minutes; those minutes have now become 43 years," said Long during a phone call last week.

Long said he put his faith in a system that is supposed to seek out the truth and do what's right, but after a few years dealing with the system, it became obvious that he



Submitted photo

Ronnie Long

was dealing with a system that is willing to ignore evidence, logic and common sense.

"... My legal documents are online; I have nothing to hide. I was a young black man charged with sexually assaulting a very wealthy white female. I was tried by a white D.A. before a white judge and convicted by an all-white jury," continued Long. "... They have no physical or biological evidence to connect me to the crime. My case went before a seven-judge panel and came back in a 3-3 tie. The N.C. Supreme Court has seven judges. Why did my case end in a 3-3 decision?"

Long said the handling of his case was nothing more than a "modernized lynching sanctioned by law." He went on to say he's not looking for any special favors or privileges; he only wants a fair trial.

"All that I ask is what the Fourth and the Fifteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution guarantees me. And that's due process and equal protection under the law. I have the right to a fair trial."

See Ronnie on A2

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