



Dr. Yolanda Burwell
Assistant Professor

Legacy Of Self Help Among Blacks Overlooked

By Charles Wheeler
Special To The Post
Greensboro - Black communities have a rich but largely overlooked legacy of self-help that a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is trying to reclaim.

Dr. Yolanda Burwell points out that blacks in North Carolina in the 1920s organized community daycare centers, nursing homes, a home for delinquent girls and a school to train social workers.

"We always hear about the deficiencies of black communities," said Dr. Burwell, an assistant professor in the UNC-G Department of Social Work. "Almost all we're presented with is a picture of victimized black folks on welfare."

"I'm not doing the usual song and dance about the needy. I write and talk about what's right with us."

Dr. Burwell is co-author, with Dr. Iris Carlton-La Ney of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, of the recent study, "Black Leadership: Unsung Heroes and Heroines of Social Change." Its focus is national. The study has been accepted for presentation in February at the annual meeting of the Council on Social Work Education in Washington, D.C.

The standard histories of the social welfare movement in the United States omit the works and deeds of black Americans, Dr. Burwell said.

She calls a conspiracy of absence.

"This conspiracy of absence encourages a scientific silence about the cultural survivalism and enduring aspects of the black community," she said. "It is an insidious form of institutional racism because it presents only one side of the story; the successes, failures and institutions of blacks are not represented."

Knowledge about leaders and self-help activities in black communities would be useful, Dr. Burwell said. "I've found that they organized to deal with some of the same social problems we face today: alcoholism, drug abuse, broken homes, crime, runaways."

There are obstacles to researching black social work, Dr. Burwell said. "Blacks are an oral people - letters and journals, which are the traditional historical sources, are difficult to find. If such material was preserved, there often wasn't the foresight to leave it to libraries. The research net has to be very large."

By accident, Dr. Burwell recently ran across a reference to the Division of Work Among Negroes of the N.C. State Board of Charities and Public Welfare. The division was run by blacks from 1925 to about 1960. "I was astonished," she said. "Here was a wealth of self-help efforts to be researched, and there probably is plenty of material in the state archives."

Dr. Burwell said she also has come across a reference to a black-run school for social workers, the Bishop Tuttle Memorial Training School in Raleigh, which operated in the 1920s. "I don't know much about it yet," she added.

She said that the North Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs opened a home for delinquent girls in the 1920s. Located in Effland in Orange County, the federation bought a building and staffed and operated the home for many years. "I'd like to know how they raised the money for the home each year," Dr. Burwell said. "One year they raised \$30,000."

A member of the UNC-G faculty since 1983, Dr. Burwell received an undergraduate degree from North Carolina A&T State University, a master's degree from Washington University and a Ph.D. degree from Cornell University. She has been a member of the faculty at Cornell and Southern University.

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