N.C. town still in recovery

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recovery. No one in Princeville died from Hurricane Floyd, but 161 caskets were unearthed from their graves. Many residents didn't move back into town until nearly a year later. Some lived in an area called FEMAville, set up to provide temporary housing after the hurricane, and waited three to four years for their homes to be rebuilt.

Former mayor Delia Perkins opposed a federal buyout because she wanted to preserve the town's rich heritage. The board of commissioners voted 3-2 to reject the buyout. Today, about 60 trailers are still around, but they are no longer considered temporary housing because residents have purchased them as their homes. The old town hall is gutted, but a new one has been built, and there are plans to turn the old town hall into a museum.

Mayor Pro Tem Isabelle Baker had a traumatic experience riding out the storm, but she sees hope for the future. Baker said the water had risen to her waist, and the sound of the waters creeping up around her sounded like lions before she was rescued by motorboat. Since that time, she believes the town has made significant progress with many people now living in better conditions than they were before.

Still, some are struggling with the psychological and economic toll of hurricane Floyd's aftermath.

Daisy Staton said she had to take out two loans since the flood: one to pay for the property she lost in the flood, and another one for the new home. She said her experience recovering from the devastation has been heartbreaking, but her religious faith has kept her strong.

Mayor Oates said she sympathizes with those who ended up paying for two loans and are at risk of losing their homes.

"I think those loans should have been forgiven," she said.

Jesse Murphy, 63, had just finished remodeling her home the day before the flood, which washed away just about everything.

"It was rough," she said. "I lost everything in my house. There is nothing left but the roof."

Despite the loss, Murphy is grateful to have gotten out alive.

"I just thank God my family and I got out of harm's way because material things you can replace, people you love you can't," she said.

But the experience still haunts her. "When it rains now, I sort of get uneasy," she said. "I almost feel like I'm panicking or drowning."

Despite widespread rumors that race was an issue in the recovery, Everette-Oates doubts it.

"Princeville is mostly an all black town and help arrived right away. Everyone was rescued, whether it was by boat or helicopter," she said.

But she did acknowledge that politics might have had something to do with the response.

"President Clinton was here the next day, and under his administration FEMA was here to help within 24 hours. We didn't have to wait six days," she said.

Brett Chambers, who covered Hurricane Floyd as a reporter, said the recovery process wasn't slowed because of race.

"There are a lot of reasons Princeville isn't being rebuilt quicker; it's not just based on race or class. And, by the way, we can never separate race from class," he said. "People who live on the beach in $5 million homes have the economic clout to rebuild, even without FEMA."

Dr. John Cooper, who worked with the N.C. Division of Emergency Management for two years, agrees.

"Natural disasters don't discriminate, however you can't discount the legacy of discrimination and the impact it has had on black people," he said. "It's sadly ironic that it happened in New Orleans, the site of Plessy v. Ferguson. Because of a history of racial discrimination, which affected their socio-economic condition, minorities had to live in marginal places where the land was cheap."

At-large race for control, clout

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must affirm an override.

With districts drawn to all but ensure Democrats control five of seven seats, the at-large race determines the council's tenor. Foxx said he'll try to work with Democrats, but understands the success of his campaign also hinges on developing a rapport with voters. Only two African Americans have been elected at-large: Harvey Gantt in the 1980s and Patrick Cannon, who is leaving council in December.

"I think the next phase of the campaign is going to be challenging," Foxx said. "The winners in the general election are the ones who describe in vivid detail what Charlotte needs to do to have a great quality of life for the next few years."

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Enterprise exposes treasures of Alabama's Black Belt

By Bob Johnson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAMDEN, Ala. - It takes John Sheffey at least four weeks to create one of his extraordinarily lifelike owls or ducks, carved meticulously out of Tupelo Gum grown in west Alabama swamps.

Sheffey creates his carvings in his wood shop in the tiny Dallas County community of Minter, in the heart of Alabama's poorest region, known as the Black Belt. It's a community so small that there's a post office in a trailer, but nothing else, no store or traffic light. He says he is so attached to his creations that selling one makes him feel like he's parting with a pet.

A new venture is hoping he says a lot of goodbyes.

Sheffey's carvings, along with pottery, paintings, quilts, porcelain dolls and other creations from more than 150 artisans in 17 mostly west and southwest Alabama counties will be on display Friday, when a new enterprise called Black Belt Treasures opens in a large building that was once a car dealership in Camden.

A joint private and government venture, Black Belt Treasures will give artisans' in the Black Belt a venue for selling their creations, which previously could only be found by determined collectors at craft shows or maybe in front yards on rural back roads.

The goods will be sold from a spacious showroom in the front of the remodeled building about a block off Camden's courthouse square and also over the Internet to customers around the world.

Officials behind the venture say it's a way to show there's more to Alabama's Black Belt than poverty. The mostly rural region is named for the seam of rich black soil that runs through the area, but in recent years it has become known for its mostly black residents, many living below the poverty line.

"There's always been a world of talent in the Black Belt that no one wanted to see. We want to make it a little easier to see it," said Max Joiner, a county commissioner in Marengo County.

The venture is the brainchild of John Clyde Riggs, executive director of the Alabama Tombigbee Commission, one of a number of government entities and businesses that came up with the about $1 million needed to get Black Belt Treasures open.

"There's been so much publicity about the Black Belt, we felt we could take that negative and turn it into a positive and say 'look what the people in this part of the state can do,'" Riggs said.

Delia Brand, director of Black Belt Treasures, said many of the crafts, such as quilts made by elderly black women in rural Wilcox County or sculptures made from scraps of junk, are products of the region's austere past.

"A lot of these craftsmen developed their art out of adversity, from taking items found on their property and turning them into beautiful things," Brand said.

Among the beautiful things are Sheffey's carvings, which previously he has only sold at wood carving competitions.

"It will take my heart and soul every time someone walks out that door with one of them," said Sheffey, a retired Army colonel.

A major topic of conversation as volunteers and workers set up the Black Belt Treasures showroom was the large hand-carved and hand-painted rocking horses created by Larry Knight of Greensboro. Knight started making the brightly painted rocking horses, with decorative manes, after moving to Hale County from Mobile, where he had worked at a chemical plant.

He said each of his rocking horses are different. They are meant to be family heirlooms and handed down from generation to generation, he said, but are also intended to withstand the daily wear and tear of an energetic 4-year-old.

"I weigh 225 pounds and I can rock on them," said Knight, who spends about 40 hours making each horse, longer for the ones painted with zebra stripes.

Riggs emphasizes that Black Belt Treasures is not a souvenir stand or tourist shop where you can buy snow globes or three T-shirts for $10. Many of the crafts are expensive - the rocking horses cost $600 or more.

"We hope our customers will be people who appreciate handmade quality products. You can go to Wal Mart and buy a rocking horse for a lot less, but there's no comparison," Riggs said.

But Brand said customers with less expensive tastes can still get a touch of the Black Belt. Available in the showroom or over the Internet will be various gift baskets featuring a variety of smaller items, including zesty hot sauce made in Clarke County, barbecue sauce from Dallas County, syrup from Georgiana, a cookbook from Selma, a handmade coffee mug from Demopolis and tasty cheddar blossoms that are cooked up in the Valley Grande community in Dallas County.

Riggs said he hopes tourists to Alabama will find their way to Camden, tucked away on state and Wilcox County roads more than 40 miles from the nearest interstate, to visit the showroom and then encourage their friends to visit the Web site. He said brochures for Black Belt Treasures will be on display at welcome centers and other locations around the state.

The drive to Camden will take visitors through lush forests, across some of Alabama's most beautiful landscape and past occasional plantation-style homes, a reminder of the region's past. But there are also plenty of reminders of the region's poverty: long-closed stores and gas stations that are grown over with weeds and vines, and dilapidated houses and trailers up close to the road, some in disrepair from recent hurricanes.

"Any time you invite people to your home, they are going to see the best and the worst," Riggs said. "To not admit that this is a depressed area would be wrong. But there's also tremendous wealth here. I don't mean financial wealth, but the wealth that's in our people."