

N.C. city debates MLK statue

By Margaret Lillard
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ROCKY MOUNT — It started as a laudable idea: build a park and raise a sculpture in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. at the site where he first told an audience "I have a dream."

Only city leaders and two sculptors have been unable to satisfy the community's collective memory of what the civil rights leader looked like, even though King was among the most famous people of the 20th century.

"How you perceive a person, especially a person such as Dr. King, depends on at what point in time and at what era in his life and in what medium you actually met him - if you met him as a minister in a church, if you met him as an activist on the street, or if he was sitting in a restaurant or at your dinner table," city council member Lamont Wiggins said.

A city block-sized memorial park anchored by a sculpture of King was proposed several years ago in Rocky Mount. The city of 56,000 about an hour east of Raleigh has long prided itself on its association with King.

On Nov. 27, 1962, the civil rights leader addressed 2,000 people in the gym of Booker T. Washington High School,

Historic Excelsior Club sold

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and county for black and white candidates, and a meeting place for JCSU boosters. Started in 1944 in a house built in the 1910s, the club took on its present appearance in the early 1950s, according to a historical overview of the club written by William H. Huffman.

During legal segregation in the South, the Excelsior was the place for black Charlotte's elite to see and be seen. Top-flight entertainers, including the likes of soul music legend James Brown played the club into the 1960s.

While people gather at the little white club on Beatties Ford Road to have a good time, the Excelsior has been a place of political power, community service and black Charlotte's playground.

In 1986 the club was declared a historic landmark.

In 1944 Jimmie McKee made his dream of starting the club a reality when he purchased a seven-room, two story house on Beatties Ford Road, which he bought at public sale for \$3,510.

Cunningham said he and Ferguson plan a celebration in the coming weeks to acknowledge the change in ownership.

Offenders seek a second chance

By t. Kevin Walker

THE CHRONICLE (WINSTON-SALEM?)

WINSTON-SALEM — It was called the Restoration Cafe, but it wasn't serving burgers Friday, fries either.

The Faith Seeds Community Re-Entry Coalition themed its morning-long community discussion around a diner concept. The agendas were designed to look like menus, and discussion leaders wore aprons and jotted down notes on paper tablecloths as if they were taking orders.

Despite the lighthearted atmosphere, the topics were

See EX-OFFENDERS/8A

first using the now-famous words he rephrased the following August in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington.

"And so, my friends of Rocky Mount, I have a dream tonight," he said. "That one day, right here in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will meet at the table of brotherhood."

In 2001, the city commissioned Chicago-based artist Erik Blome to create a 9-foot-tall sculpture. The \$55,800 sculpture was set to be dedicated in 2003, but the event was canceled. The pose - arms folded, legs apart - seemed arrogant, some said. Others complained that the face, gazing into the distance, resembled King only vaguely.

"He looked like a white man painted black. He did!" said Helen B. Gay, a former city council member who served when the statue was approved. She also prepared and served dinner to King and his entourage after the high school speech.

Blome was taken aback. The pose was inspired by a well-known photograph of King taken in 1962. A model was displayed at the city's Children's Museum and pictures appeared in the local paper, although neither drew much attention.

Blome says city officials didn't do enough to bring the public into the process, and when the statue first appeared before the dedica-

tion, it was the first time many citizens had seen it.

"It doesn't honor the person you're honoring if you're not garnering community support first," he said. "You don't make something and hope they like it."

Blome, who is white, contended some in the city, which is 56 percent black, thought he was a poor choice because he is white. They city disputes that argument, and the new sculptor also is white.

This time, the city is trying to do a better job of including the public. A clay model of Steven Whyte's attempt was displayed in October at City Hall, a more prominent location. The reviews were mostly negative. "Not much better than the first one," read one of the more charitable.

Whyte agreed to incorporate some suggested changes, including adjusting

the nose, ears and hairline. He also plans to work on the head and shoulders in public view.

The British-born sculptor who lives in Monterey, Calif., said he regularly worked on public art projects as citizens watched in his native country. He is confident he can satisfy his audience here.

"There's no better way of making them happy with it than by taking their direct input," Whyte said.

For now, the pedestal built to hold the statue stands empty. The first try is wrapped in movers' blankets and tucked in a corner of the municipal warehouse near a sign that reads "Returned Merchandise."

"I just hope they can come to some conclusion and end it all," Gay said. "Dr. King's image and what he stood for means more than a lot of controversy over a statue."



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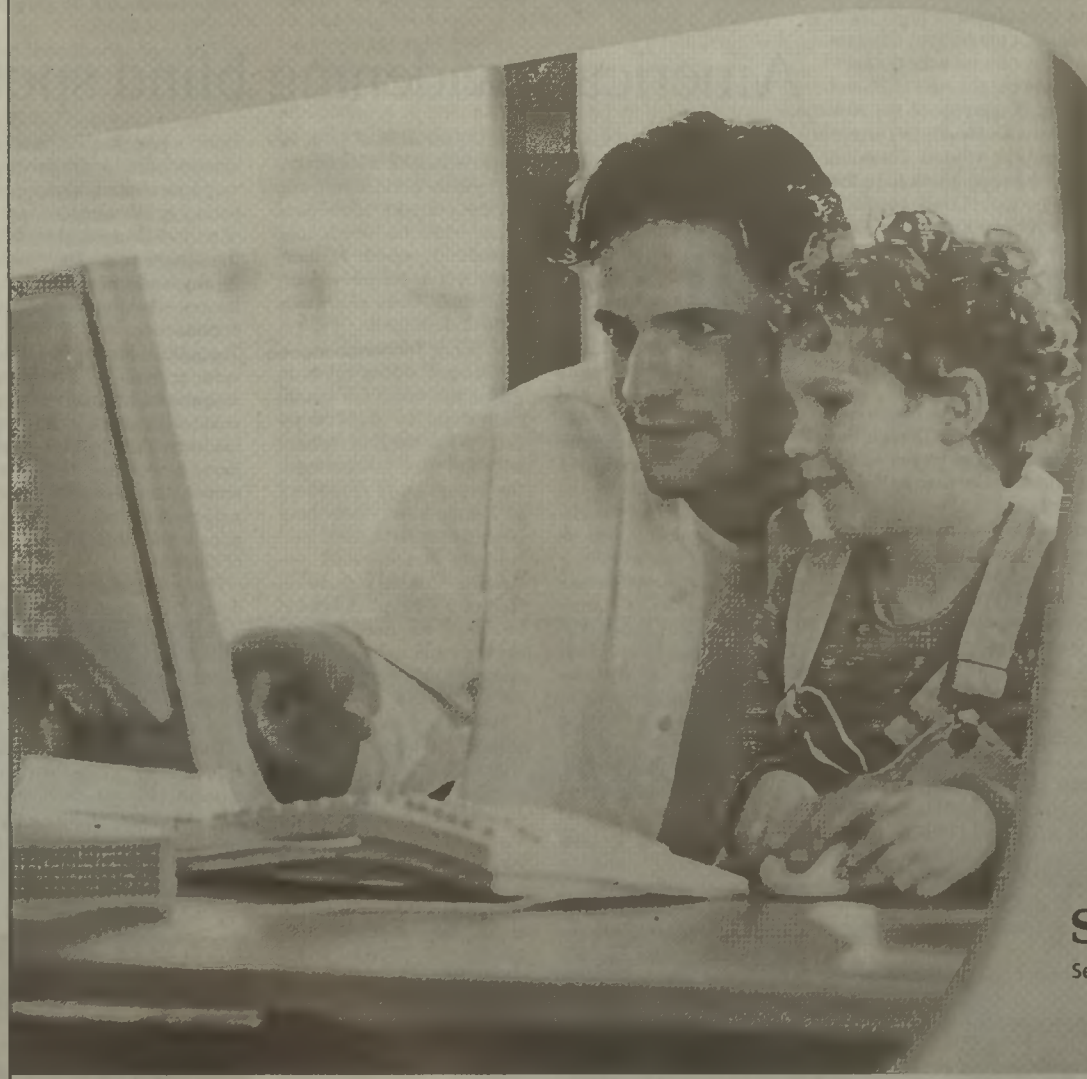
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