

# Robert Coles

Psychiatrist seeks moral base in work as he travels, writes on social change

By KIMBERLY MCGUIRE

Robert Coles has taken the psychiatric profession out of the plush suburbs and into the homes of the rural South.

Child psychiatrist Coles came to Chapel Hill to receive an honorary degree at the graduation ceremony May 13 for his work in and writings on the South. He has worked with children of varied social and economic backgrounds all over the country.

In an interview before the presentation, Coles talked about his motives and his work.

He said he considered himself a religious man and he was looking for a way to enforce his ethics in his practice. He was determined to do something that might make a difference.

"It's a gift to have a profession," Coles said of his training in psychiatry. "But there's also an obligation, the need to look at one's work in some sense as morally important."

## PROPERTY OF THE RICH

He is wary of over-analysis and the entire field of psychology. "For the most part, we are the property of the rich. My profession ought to be working with those who have real problems instead of just those in Beverly Hills who can buy their time," Coles said sharply. "Psychiatrists ought to help the troubled people, those children in need, regardless of the race or creed."

He quickly became enchanted with the people of Mississippi when he was stationed there with the military in 1958. He began to study the black children of the Delta area and their reactions to the racial struggle that was just beginning to mount.

His *Children of Crisis* series, which won the Pulitzer Prize, documents his

experiences during the '60s living with families involved in the civil rights and migrant farm work struggles, in addition to poor families in Appalachia.

Now Coles has written over 25 books, and he serves on advisory boards around the nation as the foremost consultant on children and families and response to social change.



Robert Coles

## PERCY AS A SPIRITUAL COMRADE

It was the influence of Walker Percy, a Southern writer and UNC graduate, that convinced Coles to stay in the South and get to know the region, its families and the workings of its communities.

"I was floundering badly when I started reading some of Walker Percy's essays in the late '50s. I saw the similarities. He is a doctor who's become a writer with the

same kind of religious and philosophical concerns. Of course I don't have his talents," Coles said of Percy, the novelist (*The Moviegoer*, *Love in the Ruins* and two others). "He works in a better medium. Since I can't write fiction, I go and talk to people and they tell me their factual stories."

In different ways, "we are both asking the same questions and trying to figure out what this life is all about," Coles said.

Percy's "novels of ideas" are based on Christian existential philosophy and set in the Deep South. They are stories woven with the notion of fading tradition, racial controversy and the moral fabric of Old South values.

Coles looked for these qualities when he was getting to know the people and especially the children of the region. He wrote: "I have relied upon Dr. Percy's ideas constantly...to the point that I can scarcely imagine how I would have thought about either my own life or the lives of the children, parents, teachers, I have met, were he to have decided long ago, to keep his important and instructive thoughts to himself."

## THE CHANGING SOUTH

Coles chose his words carefully as he talked about the virtues of the South. "The values of a rural region emphasize family life and community. There's a kind of oral tradition of good talk that's very real. And there's a friendliness here, a more manageable kind of existence. I also like the fact that religion is still very important here," Coles said.

After the *Crisis* series, Coles followed in 1972 with *Farewell to the South* in which he predicted "the death of the Old South and its traditions and customs." He saw the New South coming and along with it the loss of the sense of place he so often described. For the purposes of that book, Coles went back and talked with the families he had come to know and write about, and they told him of the changes.

"The New South has brought commerce and jobs, but for a price. I can see the fragmentation and loss of kin through distance. Anything that threatens that community in the name of money is sad,"

Coles said. "It's hard to make sense of it, seeing the pluses and the minuses."

## A VISITOR AND FRIEND TO NORTH CAROLINA

He said he's not sure the original values are lost now, as he predicted in the early '70s, adding, "I may be mistaken, I would like to be mistaken." Instead of a Sunbelt transformation of the region, Coles sees a mixture of new trends and tradition.

"The narcissism that has taken over the country hasn't hit the South yet and that's a virtue of lagging behind. I hope for a mixture of the Old South and the New. There can be jobs for people and also human dignity, and an end to racial discrimination along with the virtues of the Old South religious concerns, a strong family life and emphasis on community," Coles said.

"I'm no stranger to this area," he stated. "I come down four times a year to teach a course at Duke in Ethics and Public Policy." Coles' home now is in Boston where he teaches and does research at Harvard University when not writing. "I consider myself a visitor and friend in the South," he said. In this way he has felt the changes.

## A PROLIFIC WRITER

Coles' research in the South ended years ago, and he has lived and worked in many other cultures since then. He is responsible for more than 500 articles in addition to his books. This work has been made possible through private foundation grants. His most recent book is *Walker Percy: An American Search* and it discusses his writings and "philosophical bearings."

## RESEARCH AND "THE SEARCH"

Coles' book on Percy represents an interpretation of his own ideas, in a sense. It seems he has come full circle, back to Percy and the seed of his own serious commitment to making what he terms a "moral connection" between his life and work.

But Coles continues his search as he plans to visit Belfast, Ireland, this summer to get to know the children there. He will

take along his wife and children, as is his practice, and they will live with a family and get to know the community. Coles calls this an observer-participant approach to documentary.

Amid the turmoil in Northern Ireland, Coles will listen and watch and let a child tell the story. One small hope or fear communicated might touch someone much later through his writings. This is Coles' method. And so the connection—the human emotions and reactions we all share. Robert Coles reminds us of this.



Coles is "hooded" . . . receiving honorary degree at graduation

# Alex Harris

Photographer's vision shows people, cultures in transition

By KIMBERLY MCGUIRE

Alex Harris has been called a pioneer in the field of photography.

His photographic talent was discovered by Robert Coles in 1972 at a Morehead planetarium gallery exhibit here. Harris was showing his first photographs of the people he had met while studying housing in rural North Carolina.

Back then, Georgia native Harris was 22 and fresh out of Yale where he studied photography under Walker Evans.

Now 29, he divides his time between his own photography and teaching the documentary method at Duke and, for the first time this spring, at UNC.

As he reflected on his past, Harris spoke softly and slowly. His eyes told most of the story and it became obvious that he was more of a watcher and listener than a talker.

In his work he made his observations through the camera lens, and in the resulting portraits Harris tried to communicate his vision of community in America.

"I had a one year grant in North Carolina and I was photographing the same kinds of families Coles was writing about in his *Children of Crisis* series," Harris said. "It was this early work in the rural South that was the foundation for my fascination with the people and the culture more than just making pretty images. But I never knew that what I was doing was anything different or valuable really."

After seeing his work, Coles invited Harris to travel with him to New Mexico and Alaska under Ford Foundation grants. As a writer-photographer team, they recorded their impressions of those unusual cultures. It was the first time Coles had ever worked with someone on his visits — he usually worked alone and supplemented his text with pictures taken separately. The co-authors' common sensitivities were revealed in their books, *The Old Ones of New Mexico* and *The Last and First Eskimos*.

"I had the excuse to look and listen and travel," Harris said. "I watched the process of change from the old, more established ways of life to what's going on now."

Harris was more than just a photographer. His method stressed the importance of getting to know the people of a community.

"Part of me wanted to become it — I wanted to put down my camera and go hunting with people. But the frustrating part is that you couldn't and you had to accept that you



Alex Harris and friends in Alaska

would always be an observer. The camera makes that distance," he said.

Coles wrote about how Harris overcame that problem in his introduction to *The Old Ones*: "The photographs represent his own attempt to do justice to and become a friend of the people he has met—a visitor anticipated and welcomed, in spite of all the amusing and puzzling equipment he necessarily has to bring along."

One special aspect of Harris' approach was giving people prints of the pictures he took of them.

"I teach this in my classes," he said. "The students go into a community to photograph and for the first few weeks they might feel like outsiders, even experience some hostility. As they get to know the people and bring back their portraits, their attitudes change." Most of the people in these cultures have never had pictures of themselves and so it was a kind of gift, he added.

Though he has become established on his own, Harris hasn't forgotten the early days. "I owe so much to Coles for giving me the respectability to make this commitment to my work. And looking back, the thing that all this makes me realize is that there's a time in everyone's career, whether you're a writer or an artist or whatever, when you don't have much confidence in yourself. Then there are the people who encourage you or pat you on the back and that makes the difference."

Harris has finished his semester's work at Duke and UNC. He is heading west, back to New Mexico, to spend a year doing a photographic illustration of a rural farming community.

This spring he received a Guggenheim grant, the highest award for which an artist can hope, that will fund his efforts there.



At commencement he's all heart

# Diligence, dedication spell success for Ozark community

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Orr's "project" is two-fold. "First is the physical design of the community," Orr said. "In the housing, we will link up all the individual systems to make them environmentally sound and ensure self-reliance. This means growing food on site, building solar heating into homes and composting refuse from the toilets so we won't use water. We're looking for a windmill expert so we can generate our own electricity."

The other major component of Homestead Village will be the creation of an environmental learning center, according to Orr.

"This will reflect my experience in dealing with environmental issues and my time spent in academia," Orr said. "We will provide a place for conferences, a library area and also an individual internship program where students of all ages can come and work with someone who, for example, builds solar greenhouses."

He described the relationship between the community and the learning center as reciprocal in a proposal titled *Education for a Sustainable Society*.

"The community will provide physical support in terms of labor and food," Orr wrote, "while the center will conduct the learning program, coordinate and plan research and seek out grants and funding. But there will be no hard and fast line between the community and the center, so that everyone will be encouraged to participate in all activities."

Orr said he plans to tap the resources of "the environmental movement, the alternative technology movement and the back-to-the-land movement."

The ultimate size of Homestead Village will be 100 to 120 permanent residents, Orr said, adding, "To start, this summer we will have 13 people for sure." A former UNC graduate student of Orr's will accompany him in addition to Orr's family, his brother and his brother's family. Orr said

Wilson is the one with the practical sense. "He has sold his contracting business in Arizona to join the project. He will head the building and business ends in Arkansas," Orr said. "I'm the one more responsible for the ideas and I'm more knowledgeable about environmental problems. I will also function in drawing people in the field together."

Construction will begin in July and the community "will grow at the rate we make it grow, as people come in and want to stay," Orr said.

Currently Orr has heard from more than 200 people interested in joining the Homestead Village community. He said he envisions three kinds of involvement in the project.

"There will be the core of permanent residents and the residents who aren't permanent, but are involved in some way with the learning center. The third type of person would not be a resident, but would participate in an advisory capacity," Orr said. Ideally, each person should bring a different "tool" to Homestead Village, according to Orr.

The project will be directed by an advisory board which, Orr said, "will consist of who's who in this field from around the country and Europe."

Interest has been high so far, as evidenced by

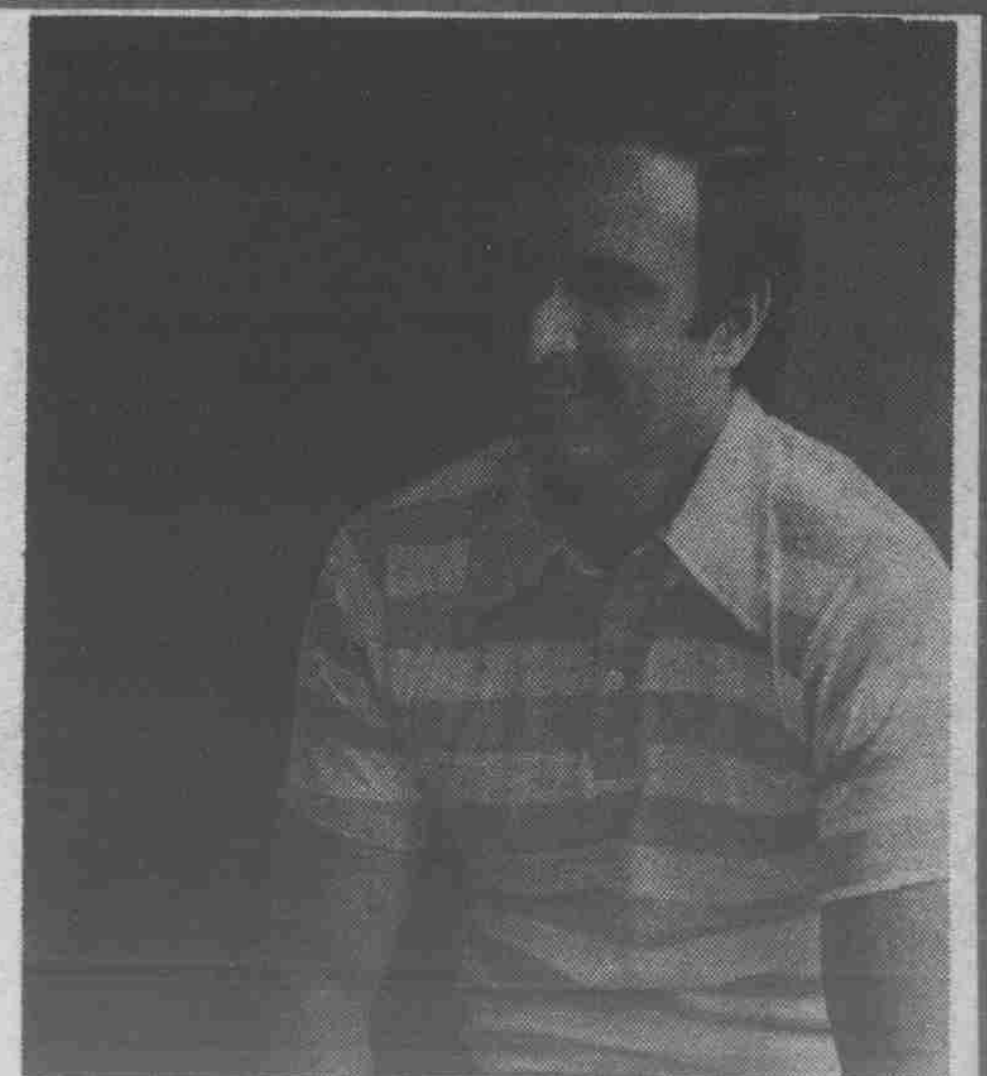
the strong financial base that the Orr brothers established from private contributors and their own assets.

"People are interested in us because we are the first to try to pull all this together. There are small projects that do bits and pieces, but environmental communities in the past haven't made it economical. And too many of those communities are labeled as drop-outs," Orr said. "The last thing I'm going to do is drop out."

Orr's thinking has changed since 1973 when he proposed an "environmental think tank" to work out of Washington and address the critical problems of limited natural resources and energy from within the bureaucracy. After a seminar with U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, Rep. Morris Udall and other officials, Orr said he began to do something on his own.

"It is time to create small demonstration centers to teach ecological concepts and their manifestation," Orr wrote in a brochure defining the purpose of Homestead Village. He believes that it is both irresponsible and futile to wait for present large scale institutions of government, business and academia to resolve the crisis.

"Our idea is to build a small community as a demonstration to see what can be done," Orr said.



David Orr