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## Jesse Helms never changed on civil rights opposition

By Gary D. Robertson  
RALEIGH (AP) - Jesse Helms forever changed North Carolina politics and the conservative movement. The former senator did it without ever changing much about himself.

There is perhaps no better example of Helms' unwavering commitment to his beliefs than on the issue of race. Helms was a staunch opponent of the nation's civil rights movement, where he joined the likes of Alabama Gov. George Wallace and South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond in a fight to keep outsiders from meddling in what he called "the Southern way of life."

But those two giants of Southern politics would come to temper their views on race and civil rights, while Helms never did. He died July 4 at age 86, having never seen any need to apologize or deviate from his views.

"I can't think of many other examples of major opponents of the civil rights movement that didn't modify their view on civil rights," said William Link, a professor at the University of Florida and a Helms biographer. "He was very much a man of the times and his generation ... of North Carolina whites (who) grew up with segregation."

Helms' take-no-prisoners brand of politics, combined with a strict stubbornness on social issues and a fiery desire to defeat Communism, endeared him to conservatives. His defiance of the establishment, combined with a political machine that refined the art of direct-mail fund-raising, helped Helms transform North Carolina into a two-party state and turn the South into a Republican stronghold.

His greatest political accomplishment came in a year when his name didn't even appear on the ballot. Helms' decision to back Ronald Reagan's upstart bid against President Gerald Ford in 1976 led the struggling California governor to an upset win in the North Carolina primary, setting the stage for his eventual White House win four years later.

"In one sense, the role that Jesse played in that one primary 32 years ago was key to electing a president - which was key to Reagan, which was key to America winning the Cold War," said Carter Wrenn, a longtime political operative in the Helms machine.

Throughout his five terms in the Senate, Helms took offense at accusations he was racist. He spoke often of his good relationships with blacks and pointed to the black members on his staff. He insisted he opposed the Civil Rights Act because he didn't want the federal government intervening in state matters. He considered the civil rights movement to be either corrupt or self-serving, Link said.

"I felt that the citizens of my community, my state and my region of the country were being battered by this new form of bigotry," Helms wrote in his 2005 memoir, "Here's Where I Stand." "I simply could not stay silent in the face of this assault - and I didn't."

For years, he was joined in that fight by Thurmond, Wallace and others. They entered politics a little earlier than Helms, but each professed the same commitment to states rights as the Jim Crow-era of segregation slowly succumbed to court decisions, legislation and changing attitudes about race in the South.

But time and political expediency mellowed their views. After an attempted assassin's bullets left him paralyzed, Wallace was elected governor a fourth time in 1982 with the help of black voters as he shifted to a populist message. Thurmond served in the Senate for

48 years, ultimately becoming the first Southern senator to hire a black aide.

Thurmond also voted to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, a decision to which Helms was bitterly opposed. Helms led an unsuccessful filibuster in 1983, arguing the Senate rushed debate and had not reviewed thoroughly King's purported links to communism. "My decision was based on the facts, not on

personality and certainly not on race," Helms wrote in his memoir.

Helms didn't worry much about what others viewed as race-baiting, mostly because every six years he proved he didn't need to change his ways to keep getting elected. He never won more than 55 percent of the vote, but his coalition of Republicans and so-called "Jessecrats" - conservative, white Democrats who voted for the GOP in federal

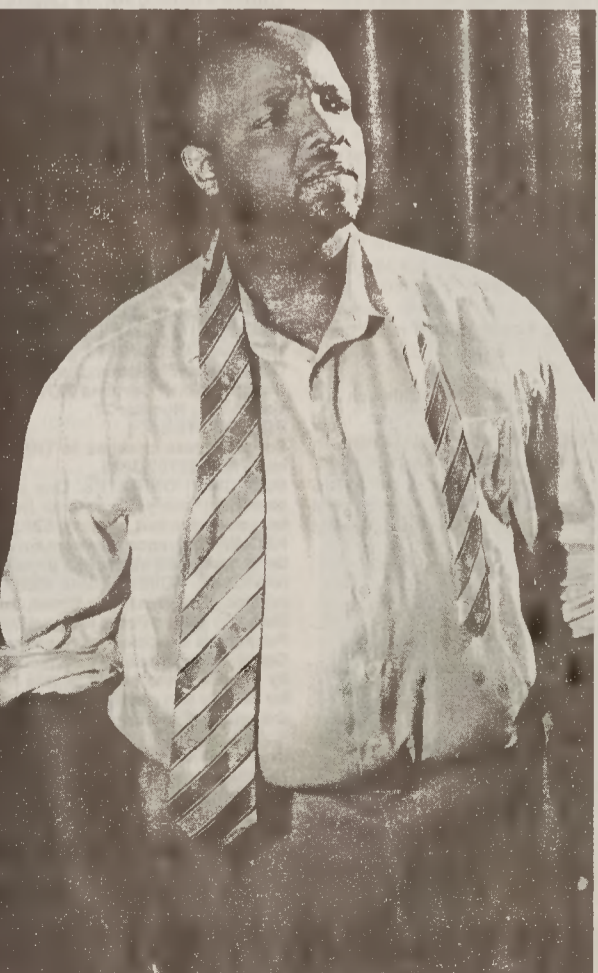
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Emma Jackson, a 10th grader from the Christian Faith Center Academy, is a North Carolina Central University's "Students Making Another Science Success Story" (SMASS). See story on page 13.



Beauty Queens - Former Miss Black USA Kalilah Allen Harris and the new Miss Black USA Elizabeth White pose together to celebrate the passing of the crown. See story on page 4. (Photo By Lafayette Barnes)



Irving W. Truitt plays the lead in NCCU's production of the Howard L. Craft play "A Touch of Sugga" concerning the impact of diabetes on one African-American family.

## 'A Touch of Sugga': Diabetes in the African American Community

North Carolina Central University Department of Theatre is producing another in a series of Howard L. Craft plays on health subjects that are of special interest to the African-American community. "A Touch of Sugga" portrays the struggle for one African-American man and his family to manage diabetes.

"A Touch of Sugga" will be on stage at the University Theatre in the Farrison-Newton Communications Building on the corner of Fayetteville and Lawson Streets. Admission is free and performances are scheduled for July 18 and 19, and July 25 and 26, at 8 p.m. and July 20 and 27, at 2 p.m. Doors and information booths open at 7 and 1 p.m., respectively. For more information, call 530-6761 or 530-7776.

According to the American Diabetes Association, diabetes doubles the risk of dying of heart disease or stroke. Director and NCCU Associate Professor Karen Dacons-Brock says that the play is an entertaining way to get across a deadly serious message.

"It's all about taking personal responsibility for managing your health," says Dacons-Brock. "But Howard always uses humor in his plays to help people hear that message."

LaVerne Reid is NCCU's associate dean of the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences and consults to the largest initiative funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to address diabetes, Project DIRECT.

"Diabetes has reached plague proportions in this country but especially so for African Americans," says Reid. "As many as 2.8 million African-Americans live with diabetes but almost half of them don't even know they have the disease. In North Carolina, the statistics are even worse. We're eating ourselves to death!"

Fortunately, the way forward is clear. Reid points to the critical role of public health education to make the science simple.

Anne H. Skelly, professor of nursing and principal investigator for "Symptom-focused diabetes care for older African-American women," at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has concluded a successful intervention study that resulted in significantly improved blood glucose control for 180 African-American women aged 55 to 85 with type 2 diabetes.

"We should have been doing this years ago," said Skelly. Her low-key, educational strategy eases the pressure to lose weight and exercise, by refocusing on "healthy eating and moderate physical activity for the person with diabetes but also, for the entire family." Home monitoring of blood glucose and medication are also critical components to the regimen but Skelly achieved weight loss and symptom reduction as a consequence of minor behavior changes like "parking the furthest away from the store, counting steps, and monitoring food choices and portion size."

The EXPORT Outreach Research Program of the Julius L. Chambers Biomedical Biotechnology Research Institute and the Department of Theatre at North Carolina Central University have collaborated to present "A Touch of Sugga" to increase awareness of the importance of diabetes management among African-Americans. The production is funded by the EXPORT grant awarded to the Julius L. Chambers Biomedical Biotechnology Research Institute from the National Institutes of Health to address health disparities in the North Carolina Triangle community.