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First lady Michelle Obama visits North Carolina

By Martha Waggoner
RALEIGH (AP) - First lady Michelle Obama met with several military families in North Carolina on March 2, chatting about their children's grades and eating habits before heading off for other duties.
At Raleigh-Durham International Airport, Obama was greeted by Bianca Strzalkowski of Camp Lejeune, who was the 2011 military spouse of the year in Military Spouse magazine. The first lady then walked along a rope and shook hands and chatted with other military families.
"After a decade of war, we need people like her fighting for us," Strzalkowski said of the Joining Forces project that Obama and Jill Biden started to help military families. "We have an entire new generation of young war widows and wounded warriors and as we draw down forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, we need to build up these programs."



FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA

Strzalkowski, was accompanied by her three children and her husband, Gunnery Sgt. Ron Strzalkowski, started a military spouse education initiative to expand educational opportunities for her peers. She said Obama invited her to meet with the first lady at the White House to discuss her project in more detail.
"I think of her as a role model," Strzalkowski said. "She's balancing being a mom, her husband's very demanding job and traveling around getting to know the stories of the entire, diverse military community. She's very relatable to me and all the military spouses in all that she's balancing."
Susan Reynolds, whose husband is an airman stationed at Fort Bragg, was relieved that her 18-month-old son Ian didn't cry while Obama spoke with them and signed her autograph. Her pen didn't work, however, and Obama signaled to an aide to bring another one so she could sign the copy of the U.S. Constitution that Reynolds always carries with her.
"My pen got stage fright," she said.
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Judge removes Durham County prosecutor from office

By Michael Biesecker and Emery P. Dalesio
RALEIGH (AP) - Durham County's top prosecutor was stripped of her job March 2 for job performance that raised public doubts about a fair justice system, making her the second district attorney in state history to lose her job for that reason.
Superior Court Judge Robert H. Hobgood ordered that Durham District Attorney Tracey E. Cline, 48, be permanently removed because her public statements criticizing Durham Senior Resident Judge Orlando F. Hudson Jr. undermined public confidence in the judicial system.
"By recklessly making blatantly false allegations against Judge Hudson in the public records, totally lacking in factual support, attacking his morality, honesty and asserting that he is corrupt, Tracey E. Cline has crossed the line of protected free speech under the First Amendment," Hobgood, who is from nearby Franklin County, said March 2 as he read his 14-page order into the record.
From the bench, Hobgood terminated Cline's state salary, effective immediately.
Cline briefly thanked the judge for his attention to the case and left the courtroom without speaking, shaking her head "no" when a reporter asked if she wanted to comment. Her lawyer quickly filed notice of appeal.
Cline launched an acrimonious effort last year to remove Hudson from overseeing criminal cases involving her office after the judge determined the Durham DA's office had withheld or destroyed evidence that could have helped defendants accused of child rape and murder. Hudson ordered the charges dismissed.
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A young lady views some of the Black History Month displays on exhibit at West Durham Baptist Church See story and photos on page 4. (Photo by Norvell Brown)

North Carolina legislator's remarks about poverty draw ire

By Martha Waggoner
RALEIGH (AP) - Jack Roberts, a 28-year-old who tries to patch together a living with odd jobs such as car detailing and mowing grass, is baffled about why a North Carolina legislator thinks no one in the state lives in extreme poverty, which the lawmaker defined as earning just six quarters a day.
"I'm kind of confused now," said Roberts, who daily knocks on doors in Scotland Neck, hoping a friendly homeowner will need his services. "Why would he believe that? If there are no jobs, how can people survive? ... It's tough out here with no job and no money."
Roberts, a high school graduate who lives with his wife of 10 years in a trailer in Oak City, was reacting to comments made March 1 by Rep. George Cleveland, R-Onslow, at a legislative meeting about the state's pre-kindergarten program.
Cleveland said he was skeptical about a House committee report that read "there are an increasing number of children living in extreme poverty." Government keeps redefining poverty "to make sure that we have a poverty class," he said.
"We have no one in the state of North Carolina living in extreme poverty. We might governmentally say they are, but they're not," Cleveland said, pointing to developing countries where he said extreme poverty really exists. "Extreme poverty is that you're out there living on a dollar and a half day. I don't think we have anybody in North Carolina doing that."
Roberts estimates he makes about \$200 a week with his odd jobs so he makes far more than Cleveland's stingy description of "extreme poverty." Still, he decides each week which bills to pay. He recently moved to Oak City because he couldn't find safe housing in Scotland Neck he could afford.
He hopes to finish his last semester at community college, where he's going for a two-year degree in auto body repair. He's missing this semester because the application for financial aid arrived too late for him to apply.
"With no job, you feel like you don't have a life," said Roberts, who said his unemployment has run out after he was laid off last year from Perdue Farms in Lewiston.
Cleveland's comments came the day before the state chapter of the NAACP begins the second part of its tour of poverty-stricken areas. The tour is going to southeastern North Carolina but doesn't include anywhere in

Cleveland's home county of Onslow, which is in that section of the state.
Although the remarks are "sad and absurd," it's important not to dismiss them, said the Rev. William Barber, head of the

state NAACP. "They point to the very problem we have been talking about - the attention violence and social brutality that we continue to commit against the poor when we ignore the facts that
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The NAACP Disagrees with Rep. George Cleveland on Poverty in North Carolina
The NC NAACP deeply disagrees with Rep. George Cleveland who was quoted as saying, "We have no one in the state of North Carolina living in extreme poverty." "The facts on poverty and the faces of poverty in North Carolina and the nation not only disprove his erroneous contention but remind us why we must address the issue of structural and systemic poverty in our state rather than engage in attention-violence and disdain for the poor. Rep. Cleveland, and anyone else who proclaims poverty is not a real and serious issue, should join us in telling the truth and developing hopeful and progressive policies that will uplift and transform the lives of those who are yet burdened with the despair of poverty," said Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, NC NAACP president.

NC school board OKs fall open for 9 new charters

By Emery P. Dalesio
RALEIGH (AP) - Nine new charter schools are headed for August openings, the first since North Carolina lawmakers removed a 100-school statewide limit last year.
The State Board of Education approved the schools March 1 despite concerns that not enough was known about the impact the new charters could have on racial diversity and the ability of school districts to repay money borrowed for construction.
"There's just a lot of financial issues," school board member and state Treasurer Janet Cowell. She is responsible for protecting the state's good credit rating and heads a commission examining the ability of other public bodies to repay borrowed money.
Charter schools are tuition-free public schools that get their funding from taxpayers but operate with fewer of the regulations facing traditional public schools.
The Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Martin, Durham, and Chapel Hill-Carrboro school districts complained that the schools planning to open in their districts would draw away funding and alter the racial balance of existing schools.
While the schools were almost unanimously approved, the discussion again framed the differences over charter schools. Advocates say charters create education options for parents while critics say they set back public education by siphoning off funding and students with the most engaged parents.
"I'm not sure how long we can continue to fund two separate public school systems," said school board member Jean Woolard of Plymouth. "It looks like we're going down that slippery slope."
Board Chairman Bill Harrison noted that the public school establishment and charter school advocates have often seen themselves as adversaries, but with the number of charters likely to multiply it's time for that to end.
"We're in a new day, and charter schools are part of the public school landscape. I don't want us to forget charter schools are public schools," Harrison said. "The end result will be better opportunities for all kids."
One group advocating for charter schools said even if the future brings hundreds of applications, the state school board will decide which to approve under a process already in place.
"Yes, there will be considerably more potential public charter school leaders applying in the future, and that is a good thing. However, it is important to note that we have a system in place that is designed to help ensure quality," said Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina.
The nine charter schools approved March 1 include three in rural areas that haven't had any in the past. They are Bear Grass Charter
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Justice Dept wants trial on Florida voting changes

By Pete Yost
WASHINGTON (AP) - The Justice Department is opposing changes in Florida voting procedures and says it wants a trial in the dispute, a move that could impact the state's August primary elections.

In court papers filed late March 2, Florida officials say they strongly oppose having a trial and noted that the federal court hearing the case in the District of Columbia wants sufficient time to issue a decision before the August primaries. The state is seeking court approval for changes that shorten the time for voter registration groups turning in registration forms to 48 hours and that narrow the time frame for early voting to 10 days before election day.

Florida says the court in Washington can decide the case on the basis of information already submitted in the lawsuit.

The state sued the federal government last August, seeking a ruling that the changes in state law comply with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Five Florida counties are covered by the Voting Rights Act.

Section 5 of the act requires all or parts of 16 states to be cleared by the Justice Department's civil rights division or a federal court before carrying out changes in elections. The states are mostly in the South and all have a history of discriminating against blacks, American Indians, Asian-Americans, Alaska Natives or Hispanics.

The Florida counties covered by Section 5 are Collier, Hardee, Hendry, Hillsborough and Monroe.

"As to the third-party voter registration and early voting changes ... the United States' position is that the state has not met its burden ... that the two sets of proposed voting changes are entitled to preclearance under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act," the Justice Department said in its court filing.

In the joint court filing with the federal government, the state said it "strongly opposes the United States' attempt to extend this action well into the summer. The court was quite clear that it wanted to have this case fully submitted for its review by early May, because this would allow the court sufficient time to issue a decision before the August primaries."

In a separate case in federal court in Tallahassee, Fla., civic groups say Florida's new Republican-backed election law unconstitutionally restricts
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