

the magazine section

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The Newcomers

Georgian learning city fast, with a little help from friends

By ROBIN ADAMS
Staff Writer

Although he's been in our fair city for only a short while, Alvin Atkinson, a personal banker for Wachovia Bank and Trust Co., says he knows the community well -- in fact, he adds, perhaps better than some natives.

A product of Brunswick, Ga., and graduate of Davidson College, Atkinson moved to Winston-Salem a little more than a year ago and became involved in the community right away.

"When I graduated from high school, I made the commitment to keep God first in my life. I'm not a holier-than-thou person, but God deserves the credit for the good things that happen."

-- Alvin Atkinson

"I participate in several different activities in the area," he says. "I am very active with the Patterson Avenue YMCA, playing basketball and weightlifting, and I have done volunteer work for the Salvation Army."

"I feel I know more about Winston than a lot of black people who were brought up here."

Atkinson credits that knowledge to a long-time city resident who took him under her wing.

"I came to Winston-Salem with no family and Myrtle Hairston Stepp and her family took me in," he says.

"They opened my eyes to Winston-Salem and all the black traditions. The Stepp family just sort of adopted me."

Atkinson explains that, when he was recruited by Wachovia and sent to Winston-Salem, he had recently undergone knee surgery. So he needed a place to live where somebody could "sort of look after" him. The Wachovia Twin City branch manager, Lois Turner, recommended that he stay with her aunt on Cameron Avenue.

"The Stepps and my involvement with Mt. Zion Baptist Church are the two things that have made me enjoy Winston a lot," he says.

Elaborating on his regard for the church, Atkinson adds: "When I graduated from high school, I made the commitment to keep God first in my life. I am not a holier-than-thou person, but God deserves the credit for the good things that happen."

Atkinson says he also made a pact with God to help his family in any way that he could.

"I was given life in order to bring happiness to my parents," Atkinson, the oldest of three sons, says.

"When I was in school, I was always good in

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A Brunswick, Ga., native and a personal banker for Wachovia Bank and Trust Co., Alvin Atkinson says he knows East Winston as well as some of the residents (photo by James Parker).

Chronicle Camera

Residents react to 'squeal rule'

By ROBIN ADAMS
Staff Writer

Is a "squeal rule," which would require health departments -- and other clinics that receive federal funds -- to notify parents if their teen-age daughters request birth control devices, a good idea?

The Chronicle recently polled downtown shoppers to gauge their opinions.

Mary King, unemployed: "Yes, I think parents should be notified. If they (young girls) are getting birth control methods, it could affect the girls in some way. And parents should know in case something happens to the child and the health department is not responsible."

Johnny O'Neal, security company employee:

"Sure, they should know. When I worked for Family Planning, a lot of parents didn't know that their teen-age daughters were sexually active. If they want birth control methods, then they should tell the parents. But sometimes parents are not open enough for their children to talk to."

Sharp Pitts, student: "Yeah, I feel the parents should know, but I'm not sure why. They should just know."

Angelia Brown, hospital employee: "Well no, I don't think they should know. The kids may not want their parents to know. It would increase sex without protection."

Karen Finney, unemployed: "Yes, the parents should be told. It would be nice if the teen-agers told

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(photos by Robin Adams)
Angelia Brown

Sharp Pitts

Ruby Epps

Kenneth Wright

Ervin advocates more awareness among blacks

By EDWARD HILL JR.
Staff Writer

Lester Ervin is a man of firsts.

He was one of the first black firefighters hired by the city's fire department. He later was one of the first black officers in the department.

Now he holds the distinction of being the city's first black fire chief.

Ervin sees his role in as a pioneer in the department as a matter of simply being in the right place at the right time.

"Kenneth R. Williams, the first black alderman in the city, was pushing to get some black firefighters in 1950," says Ervin, a native of Winston-Salem. "I was working as an insurance salesman with North Carolina Mutual at that time and I wasn't particularly interested in becoming a firefighter."

"But a friend of mine encouraged me to apply, so I did. It was one of the best moves I ever made."

Ervin was among eight of 120 black applicants who were hired and assigned to the old fire station on Third Street and Dunleith Avenue.

"It was a very challenging experience," says Ervin. "There was a need in the black community for black firefighters who were concerned about fire safety."

He was promoted to the rank of sergeant in 1954

and then to lieutenant the following year. Steadily moving his way up in the ranks, Ervin was named deputy chief in 1978 and finally chief in 1980.

Ervin, who is in charge of 195 employees, says that the department has made some significant changes since he's taken over.

"We have changed our philosophy in the department," he says, rearing back in the chair in his office.

"Most of the fire hazards result from carelessness and a lack of education as to what to do. Things like smoking in bed, faulty electrical wiring and allowing trash to mount up are the main causes of fires in the black community."

Ervin says he has implemented are fire education and stricter code enforcement. He says that the department also recently devised a program designed to monitor trends or patterns in area fires.

Ervin feels there is a special need for fire education

programs in the black community.

"Most of the fire hazards result from carelessness and a lack of education as to what to do," says Ervin. "Things like smoking in bed, faulty electrical wiring and allowing trash to mount up are the main causes of fires in the black community. People need to be educated about the dangers of these things. Thousands of dollars in property could be saved if the community took the necessary precautions. We want to make them aware of those precautions."

Ervin says he has seen much tragedy during his 32 years with the department, adding that 90 percent of fire-related deaths occur as a result of smoke inhalation.

As part of its Fire Education Awareness Week (April 3-9) activities, Ervin says, his department will make a strong effort to educate the community on fire safety and prevention.

"We will come out to any school, church or community or civic group to educate them on fire safety and fire prevention," says Ervin. "We will be talking to them about such things as home fire drills, how to get your house inspected free of charge, what number to call in an emergency and other things, like keeping wood stoves, fire places and other heating equipment clean. We hope it will make the community more aware of fire prevention."



Winston-Salem Fire Chief Lester Ervin hopes that his fire education program will help decrease fire hazards in Winston-Salem (photo by James Parker).

Restitution program offers offender an alternative to jail

At 72, Mary became a first offender.

Her Social Security check was late. Her arthritis was acting up, and she didn't have the money to pay for the medicine that gave her relief.

She shoplifted them and was caught.

Luckily for Mary, her offense occurred in a community that has a Community Service Restitution program. She didn't go to jail and her prosecution was deferred while the Community Service Restitution program worked out an appropriate punishment program for her.

Mary was assigned to help the local Council on Aging. Her task was to call a woman her age daily to make sure the woman was all right. Mary could even make the calls from home.

At the end of a year in which Mary fulfilled the terms of her tasks and had no further troubles with the law, her case was dismissed. She has no criminal

record. Plus, Mary found a new friend in the woman she called.

According to Heman R. Clark, secretary of the state Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, North Carolina needs to look more and more to community service restitution programs to deal with first offenders and nonviolent criminals.

"Right now," he said, "there are about 17,000 inmates in our prison system. It was designed to hold only 14,800. About 74 percent of the new-entry inmates every year are there for nonviolent crimes. It costs the citizens of this state about \$8,000 a year to house an inmate in prison. It is neither economically, morally nor socially acceptable to continue to put nonviolent, first offenders in prison."

"The Community Service Restitution program offers this state a positive, constructive way to deal with first offenders to redirect them from lives of

crime to that of productive, taxpaying citizens.

"The members of the General Assembly have recognized this, and in the last session appropriated \$500,000 to expand the community service restitution program currently operating in the state. There were eight then; there now are 16, and we should have 25 by July of this year," Clark said.

Ms. Alma Nesbitt, community service specialist for the Governor's Crime Commission that oversees the funding of the programs, said, "Mary's case is not typical of the cases our programs deal with, but it is a good illustration of how they work."

"These programs deal mostly with first offenders between the ages of 16 and 20. We're trying to get the youngsters who have made their first mistake, had their first scrape with the law and give them a second chance; a chance to prove to themselves and to society that they can be productive, responsible citizens."

"We're talking about nonviolent offenders, too. We don't take murderers, rapists, muggers and other violent criminals," Ms. Nesbitt said. "They are people who commit crimes such as shoplifting, writing bad checks, vandalism. They are crimes which people are sent to prison for, but for which we feel there are more appropriate punishments."

Some programs in the state, such as Volunteers to the Court in Greensboro, have been in operation for a number of years.

"These older programs have been so successful with young, first offenders," Ms. Nesbitt said, "that we are now beginning to see second and even third-time offenders being brought into the program. They are, of course, very carefully screened."

Another positive aspect of the Community Service Restitution program is that clients pay their victims

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