

# Law: ESR's impact makes it all worthwhile

By CHERYL WILLIAMS  
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■ This article is the first in a series on United Way-funded programs that particularly affect the black community.

Homelessness, joblessness and hunger don't discriminate, says the director of the 22-year-old Experiment in Self-Reliance Inc., a community-action agency formed during President Johnson's "War on Poverty."

"When people talk about poverty, they're not just talking about one age group," said Robert B. Law, executive director of ESR. "There are children who are born into poverty. We also run into older people who have no pensions or Social Security. There's a group in the middle, too, at an age where they can be employable but do not have skills."

While helping others survive, ESR must fight to stay alive itself.

Because of continuing funding cuts, Law said, he spends much of his time making sure enough money comes in.

"Since Reagan became president, our budget has been cut by 40 percent, and we lost 20 people on our staff," he said. "Ronald Reagan is ideologically opposed to programs for the poor."

Established in 1964 with a grant from the N.C. Fund, ESR was designated by the county as a community-action agency in 1965.

Its main office is located at 1621 E. Third St.

Law said ESR has a threefold purpose: to mobilize resources at the community and state levels, to be an advocate for poor people and to be an agent of institutional changes.

ESR seeks to break the cycle of poverty through the many programs and services that it offers.

Several of those programs are aimed at helping the elderly. They include:

- Dietitian-approved lunches for thousands of elderly citizens five days a week at seven locations in the city and county.



Calvin McDaniel Jr. caulks around the window of a Patterson Avenue home (photo by James Parker).

- The Congregate Housing Services Program, a five-year research project that seeks to keep as many of the elderly as possible in their own homes rather than in nursing homes.

The project is composed of 96 housing units for the elderly located in the rear of the ESR building, Law said.

- A Weatherization Program that serves not only the elderly but handicapped and low-income residents.

programs that are employment-oriented. The Learn-to-Earn program helps dropouts get their GED certificates, while Employment Services, started in July, helps match jobs with people.

The program also offers information to job seekers on the kind of attitude they need to have in order to keep jobs.

Since its beginning, the program has served 78 people, Law said. Twenty-five have found jobs, he said.

other emergency assistance programs in the area.

Another crisis-intervention program, ESR's emergency shelter on Burton Street, temporarily houses people who may have lost their homes to fire, eviction or other misfortunes.

ESR also operates a community center at 1318 N. Jackson Ave., where workshops and programs are offered to the community.

Eighty percent of the people ESR serves are black, although 45 percent of the county's poor are white, Law said.

Thus, ESR is better-known in the black community, he said.

Law, who has been ESR's executive director since January, replaced Louise G. Wilson, who retired.

ESR has a 36-member board of directors and employs 44 staff members, he said.

Despite continued cuts in funding, Law is determined to keep ESR going because he feels the agency does change people's lives.

"You impact on people's lives," he said. "Sometimes you don't realize you do it, but it makes it worthwhile. ..."

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— Robert B. Law

The service helps residents cut fuel costs, Law said, and it includes weather stripping, caulking, replacement of broken windows, glazing, overhead insulation and underpinning.

- Social and educational activities that are sponsored for the elderly through Senior Opportunities and Services. Workshops are held in areas such as health, nutrition and money management.

In addition, ESR operates two

ESR also supplies short-term emergency help through two of its programs.

Its Problem Center helps pay the cost of rents, utilities, food, medicine and other expenses during crises. In addition, its staff members provide financial counseling, helping clients work out budgets when necessary.

"We try to help people help themselves," Law said.

The Problem Center makes referrals as well. The staff at the center works in conjunction with

## 'Roots' creator

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speaking as a spokesman for all of Black America, but he said he feels there are a variety of reasons for the problems confronting the black family.

"First, before I speak to the issue, I must say that I don't see black people as a collective," Haley said. "It always bemuses me when people come up to me and say, 'What are black people thinking?' There are so many black people in this country. I don't know what they're all thinking. However, what I see is that the black family is in a state of flux for different reasons."

In discussing reasons for the change in the traditional black family, Haley noted that there is a range of blacks who are "doing far better than whites" and "a large number of black people living in terrible urban situations."

Educational differences between black men and women, Haley said, are also altering the status of the black family by producing a larger number of single black women who feel they are unable to find a compatible black husband.

However, Haley said many of the problems facing blacks are self-inflicted and must be solved by blacks themselves.

"At the risk of being criticized by black people, I feel that many problems that beset black people are our own fault," Haley said. "We have too much tendency to want other people to solve our problems for us. Many things that we permit to happen, we could prevent if we chose to. If we wish to improve -- and we do wish to improve -- we need to take steps on our own to do so."

Illustrating his point, Haley told the group that drug sellers today are successful because they are allowed to be. He said that he remembers a time when someone selling drugs in his community would be chased out of the area.

Haley said there is a lack of concern for real issues in today's black communities.

"The tour Michael Jackson and his brothers made a few years ago raised multimillions of dollars, and people somehow got that \$30 together to go see the show," said Haley. "You couldn't raise a fifth of that with a tour of the NAACP or anything else which has a direct meaning to the black family. We just don't feel pressed to improve as much as we could."

Turning the focus to the phenomenal success of

his "Roots" saga, Haley said that, contrary to common belief, the book did not result from "a sudden burst of enthusiasm or inspiration." The book, he said, was not a matter of spontaneity but a matter of one little thing attaching itself to another little thing.

"I grew up listening to my grandmother and her sisters talking about when they were little girls," Haley said. "They talked about Chicken George and Miss Kizzy, and I got curious about the stories I had heard."

His curiosity led him to spend two years compiling birth and death records and other information until he had compiled something he said "looked like it should be a book."

For Haley, the success of "Roots" pointed out how little white people know about black people. The discovery, he said, was surprising because blacks seem to know so much about white people.

"I think 'Roots' provided insight for people into what is called the black experience," Haley said. "Oftentimes it is as if we all live under the same roof of a big house, but in terms of ethnics and culture we live in different rooms. Every now and then we scoot out to meet one another and then scoot back."

"I find it bemusing how white people know so very little about black people and, conversely, black people know a lot about white people. The reason is because black people were domestics in the white homes, and every weekend the domestics would get together and compare notes after church, and consequently they knew everything about who was sick and who was sneaking around with whom and whose child had done what in the white families. It was a Southern phenomenon!"

Haley, who also wrote "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," is working on his next book, "Henning." The book, which he said he is within a month of finishing, will be the story of his childhood in the town that, "like a thousand more Southern towns, was bypassed by the main roads."

Haley appeared most excited, however, about the book which will follow "Henning." That book, he said, will tell the story of Madame C.J. Walker, a black millionairess who made a fortune selling hair straightener to black women.

"It's as about as exciting a subject as you can Please see page A14

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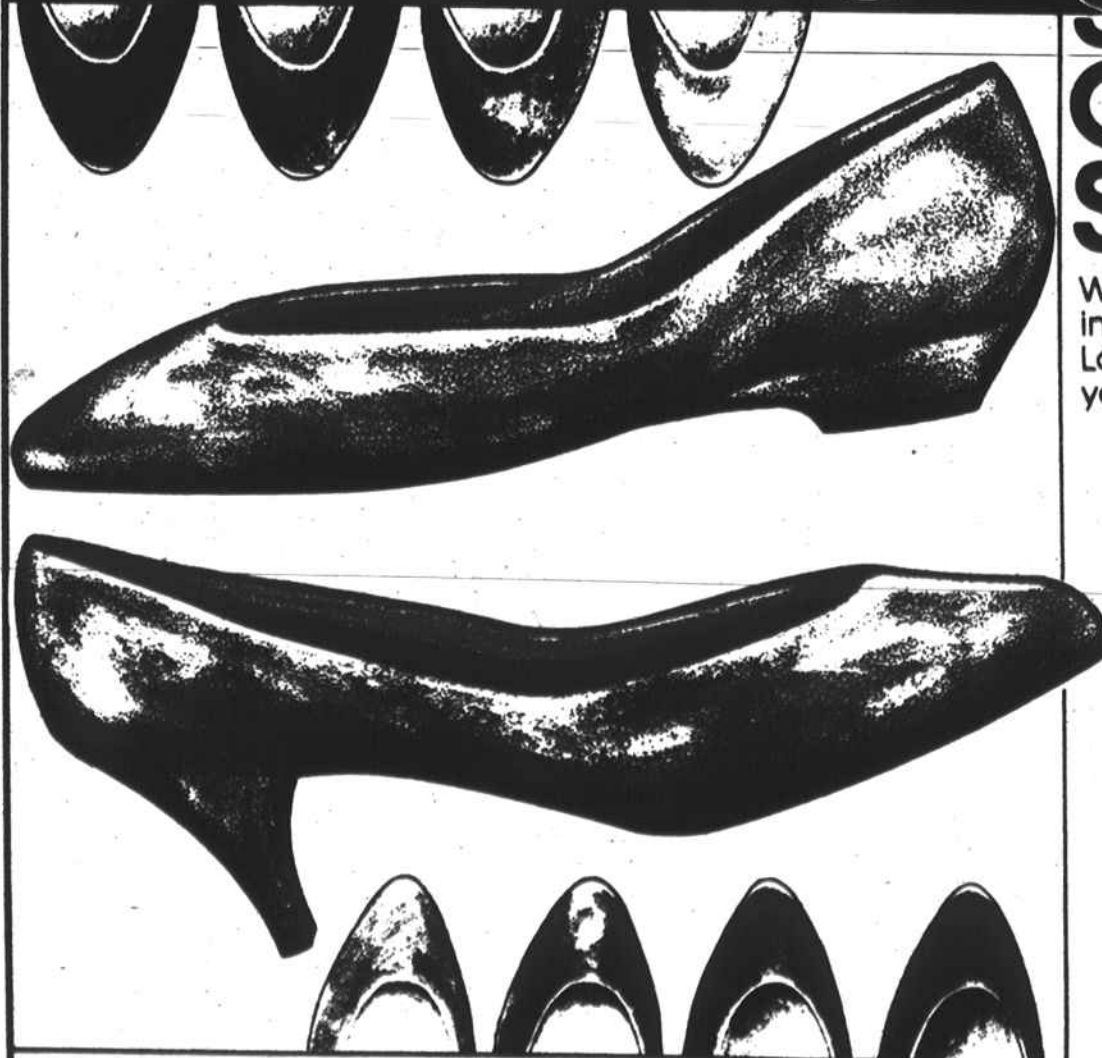
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