

Three honored for courageous, grassroots work against the odds

A courageous minister who led a small Southern town through turbulent times to better race relations, a Catholic nun who has been compared to Mother Teresa since she started a nursery for severely disabled children 42 years ago, and a persevering black woman who has devoted her life to improving the lives of low-resource people in northeastern North Carolina have received the 1997 Nancy Susan Reynolds Awards.

The Nancy Susan Reynolds Awards, sometimes called "North Carolina's Nobel prizes," are awarded annually to three unsung heroes by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. Each award carries a prize of \$25,000. The awards were presented Saturday in New Bern at ceremonies attended by 400 people from across North Carolina.

Receiving the awards were the Rev. Harrison T. Simons, rector of two Episcopal churches in Oxford; Mother Mary Benignus Hoban, founder and president of Holy Angels, a nursery for severely disabled children in Belmont; and Chenay Costen, of Sunbury, the founder of several social service and educational programs in northeastern North Carolina.

Costen returned to her home place in Gates County after college two decades ago to help her father

try to save the family farm. Against great odds, she saved the farm. But during the last 20 years, Costen in many ways has saved a generation or two of her fellow citizens in one of the poorest and most isolated parts of North Carolina.

For her tireless work, she received the award for advocacy on behalf of poor, rural people in five counties: Camden, Chowan, Gates, Pasquotank, and Perquimans.

Costen, 42, had to battle deep-seated poverty where there was virtually no economic opportunity, illiteracy where dropping out of school was a way of life, and apathy where the status quo had essentially kept people, and black people, as second-class citizens. She advocated relentlessly for the rights of those people and for the opportunity for them to improve their lives.

She founded United Family Support Services, which operates through Learning Resource Centers in several counties and provides a wide range of services: adult basic education and GED classes, day care for children, meal services, home ownership programs for first-time home buyers, preschool programs, crime prevention, transportation, job creation,

job training (especially for day care workers), and a social justice awareness program to train people in how the justice system works. She recently founded a community development corporation.

Born in Ireland, Mother Mary Benignus Hoban came to America 71 years ago and has spent most of that time in North Carolina, where she has been a teacher and administrator of a college and hospital.

Now 91, Mother Benignus received the award for personal service as a result of her work with Holy Angels, a nursery in Belmont that has been home to profoundly disabled children who had no other place to go. The nun founded Holy Angels in 1955, after a severely handicapped and medically fragile infant was taken by her desperate mother, a young uneducated mill worker overwhelmed by her daughter's condition, to a day care center operated by the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order.

No one expected the infant to live very long, but Mother Benignus and the other nuns bathed her in love and affection. They obtained what medical care was available at the time. In fact, the infant, named Maria Merrow, survived, and in the constant care of Mother Benignus, thrived.



The Rev. Harrison T. Simons



Mother Mary Benignus Hoban



Chenay Costen

Today, at 42, Merrow leads a happy, productive life and is employed at Holy Angels.

Holy Angels began because of Maria, but it has become what it is today because Mother Benignus cared for it, just as she cared for the children. Over the past 42 years, thousands of children, mostly from North Carolina but also from other states and some foreign countries, have been able to live, learn, and love at Holy Angels.

The Rev. Harrison T. Simons, 63, was called to be rector of St. Stephens, an all-white Episcopal church in Oxford, in 1970 during a period of tense racial strife. In his patient manner, he helped defuse tense racial confrontations in Oxford, including one in which the National Guard occupied the town after a white store owner was acquitted of killing a black man. At times, he received death threats.

A year after he arrived, he was asked to serve the black Episcopal

church, St. Cyprian's, as well. Father Simons brought his two congregations together in a spirit of worship and social ministry, drawing on the strengths of both. It was an example that spilled out into all of Granville County, a predominantly rural county on the Virginia border north of Durham. In many ways, he has become, the "conscience of the community."

He and his churches have led in virtually every step toward better race relations. He was instrumental in establishing affordable housing for the poor. He led the formation of the Human Relations Board and was the driving force behind the Area Congregations in Ministry, a food and clothing closet. He took the lead in a series of diversity workshops and has brought various groups together to discuss better economic opportunities for black citizens.

Stephen L. Neal, a former congressman who is president of the

Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, said at the awards ceremony, "We do not have to search for saints or heroes in distant lands, in the slums of Calcutta, mine fields of Bosnia and Africa, or hospitals for incurables in England. Look and we will find them in North Carolina."

"The Nancy Susan Reynolds Awards recipients this year are extraordinary examples of how individuals — a Catholic nun, an Episcopal priest, and a dynamic young African-American woman — saw needs crying to be met, and said simply, 'If not me, then who?'"

"Saints? It never would occur to them to consider themselves anything but ordinary human beings who have seen needs and determined to meet them — regardless of the odds. They have proved that even with limited resources, one can change lives and move people by the powerful force of love," Neal said.

Positive Images seeks new models

A fashion event took place Sunday, Nov. 23, at the Anderson Center on the campus of Winston-Salem State University. Models of all shapes and sizes flaunted their wearables as Positive Images and More presented "Magic in the Middle," a fall and winter preview of fashions to look for during the cooler seasons.



Florine Miller

Fashion consultant Florine Miller is the artist behind these special events, which take place seasonally in the Winston-Salem area. Models are those who participate in her Positive Images program, designed to help young people develop a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem.

"Low self-esteem has no boundaries," says Miller. "It affects people of all races, all ages and all shapes and sizes. To me it is one of the most serious diseases known to man, for it can mentally, physically and spiritually destroy a human being. I see the effect it has on young people. My goal is to heal as many young people as possible from

this dreadful disease."

The next fashion event will be held at Carver High School auditorium in Winston-Salem Dec. 6 at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$10 at the door for adults and \$5 for students. Those interested in modeling should attend the event.

Fashions by local designers Belinda Allah and "Fanie Lee" will be featured. A designer fashion will be given away to a lucky ticket holder. For more information, call 650-1560.

NAACP releases results of second hotel survey

BY TONY JONES
Special to the NNPA
from The Tri-State Defender

NAACP president and chief executive officer Kweisi Mfume has announced the second phase of the civil rights organization's plan to study how the hospitality industry treats African Americans. African-American organizations are being urged to contact the NAACP to receive a survey form to gauge the industry's cooperation. Additionally, a hotline has been set up to disseminate information to interested parties.

This is being made available to assist consumers and groups in making informed choices about where to spend their lodging industry dollars. Conventioneers, meeting planners, fraternity and sorority travel planners are urged to call and to respond to the survey. To date, more than 42 national organizations are co-sponsors of the effort.

The first NAACP Economic Reciprocity Hotel Initiative Report Card, released in late spring, was the result of a year-long survey that reviewed the economic relationship between major hotel chains and the African-American community with the intention of establishing business links for firms owned by African Americans.

The Economic Reciprocity Initiative was launched by the NAACP in February of this year. The hotel and lodging industry was the first target of the initiative, and the top 15 chains were graded and ranked on their records in five key areas: employment, equity and franchise ownership, vendor relationships/procurement, advertising and marketing and philanthropy.

The results of the second sur-

vey were recently revealed in a press conference in New York City. To date, only the Best Western chain has refused to cooperate. The historic Holiday Inn in Memphis, Tenn., has received a "C" in the survey, an upgrade from its position of failure because it did not respond the first time the survey was taken. Memphis-based Promus Hotels (Embassy Suites, Hampton Inn and Homewood Suites) received a grade of "D."

Black consumers spend \$4 billion annually in the travel and lodging industry. Currently, the hotel industry is considered one of the top 10 industries for new job creation, growing twice as fast as other industries. Mfume feels that business opportunities are enormous as franchising, construction and vendor programs largely ignore black businesses.

"Survey results indicate that the hotel industry has given very little return on the African-American consumer's investment dollar," the organization's report card states. "Don't support hotels that don't support you."

"Protecting our economic future is extremely important in an environment where there is an aggressive assault on affirmative action and economic opportunity," NAACP president and CEO Kweisi Mfume said after the release of the first report. "Economic empowerment is the necessary extension of the civil rights movement. I have said all along that as consumers who add significantly to the bottom line of corporate America, we should leverage our clout to reward our friends and punish our enemies," Mfume continued.

For a copy of the NAACP Economic Reciprocity Hotel Initiative Report Card and the survey, please call the NAACP national office at (410) 358-8900.

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