

# Atkins CDC hopes to bring residents to historic community

By T. KEVIN WALKER  
THE CHRONICLE

Simon Green Atkins had a dream.

When he founded Slater Industrial Academy — a small trade school for blacks — he envisioned that the school and the surrounding community would evolve together — physically, socially and economically.

More than a hundred years later, Atkins' dream has been only partially realized. Slater has become Winston-Salem State University, a school of over 2,500 students with a sprawling campus and state-of-the-art facilities.

The neighborhood around it, though, is proliferated with vacant lots, condemned houses, scattered trash and other telltale signs of urban squalor.

But officials at WSSU say they are firm believers in the old adage that dreams never die.

WSSU's S.G. Atkins Community Development Corporation held a ground breaking ceremony Monday morning on Excelsior Street.

Located across the street from the university in a historical area — which was once known as Columbian Heights — Excelsior has close ties to the school.

"This means a great deal to the CDC and our institution," said WSSU Chancellor Alvin Schexnider. "We view these not just as buildings and construction projects, (but as a) gateway to the university."

The S.G. Atkins CDC was formed last fall with a \$377,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The grant was part of a nationwide HUD program that provides historically black colleges and universities with funds to help revitalize the communities around them.

The CDC will use the HUD money, as well as a \$275,000 loan from the Winston-Salem Housing & Neighborhood Development Department, to renovate houses on Excelsior.

CDC officials announced plans to assist low income families with purchasing the revamped properties through the HomeSTART Grants Program.

The CDC will provide a \$5,000 grant to assist potential homeowners with down payments and closing costs. Those who qualify will also receive assistance from Tandem Rehabilitation, a city-run program which helps potential homeowners with financing.

The CDC also plans to construct new homes on the street and put them on the market as well. In all, the group's goal is to qualify at least 11 families for either new or renovated homes on the street.

CDC officials say the project will give low income people a chance to own impressive homes in an often ignored, but historically-significant part of the city.

"There are a lot of pluses to

Excelsior Street," said Preddy Ray, the interim executive director of the CDC. "This is a community of pride. There are people who have remained in this community all of their lives."

But the many vacant lots and houses on the short, narrow street, indicate that those people are the exception, not the norm.

Once upon a time, when WSSU was in its infancy, Excelsior and nearby Cromartie and Atkins streets were home to many of the faculty at the school.

The old Davis Garage building that sits at the top of Excelsior, used to be a depot for Southern Railways. The old, rusty train tracks can still be seen from the back doors by those who live on one side of the street.

Atkins' own home — an immense structure at the corner of Atkins and Cromartie streets — has been added to the National Register of Historic Places. But the property hasn't been a stranger to the neighborhood's dilapidation. The house is literally falling apart, from its peeling white paint to its broken windows.

The CDC has future plans to move the building — known as Atkins House — to one of the vacant lots on Excelsior. The building will then serve as the administrative building for the CDC, officials say.

"Winston-Salem State University expanded, but the community diminished," Ray said. "We hope to save the last vestige of that community."

The fight to save the historic area began at 1207 Excelsior Street, with a band of warriors armed with hammers and hard hats. The four bedroom, two bath house is the first to get a facelift, and a local family could move in as early as June.

Although the house next door still has boarded-up windows and doors, 25-year-old Karen Young can't wait to call it home. As the first person to qualify for the Excelsior HomeSTART program, Young donned a shovel and a hardhat Monday as she joined Schexnider, East Ward Alderwoman Joycelyn Johnson and other city officials in breaking ground on the project.

Young said when she heard about the program, she thought that it was perfect for her and her two children. "I want to give my children a little bit more," she said. "I really think a lot of people can benefit from this program."

Young's three bedroom, two bath house, is the next property scheduled for renovation. If all goes as plans, Young and her family could move in by August.

"Yes! I can't wait to turn the key," Young said.

Carol Jones, a community builder for HUD, said her department is making a serious effort to form alliances with local governments and CDCs in order to make the dream of

people did not call black people 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.' in those days. Do you understand that? We just didn't do it. And we didn't shake hands with them. We just didn't do it."

Carol King says Bootle's comments speak volumes.

"That's the whole issue: 'At that time,'" says the retired teacher and school administrator. "Would they prosecute a runaway slave if they found him at this time? ... He's still suffering the consequences, and they wish he would die and blow away. Because, quite frankly, he's an embarrassment to this country."

Mrs. King traveled to Washington in early February to meet with members of Attorney General Janet Reno's staff.

Oona King says she is heartened by her discussions with U.S. officials.

"It's astonishing that we have the civil rights movement, and 40 years down the line we still have people who are still suffering the consequences," says Ms. King.

She has a U.S. passport and says she will continue, as long as she needs to, to serve as her father's surrogate at funerals and other family gatherings back in Georgia.

owning a home a reality for low-income people.

"This is exactly what HUD is looking for (in terms of) programs and projects," Jones said. "HUD is looking all across America for these types of partnerships."

Although the task that lies ahead for the CDC seems daunting, Johnson said that she is confident that the effort will succeed.

"Finally, we are coming together as a city to be supportive," Johnson said. "We are all going to pull this together... We are all going to make it work."

Just as the ground breaking ceremony was wrapping up — Marie Clyburn made the short trek from her house to the edge of the street.

Although she is 88-years-old and uses a walker to get around, Clyburn stood like a guard — carefully watching all of those who had made their way onto her street for the ceremony.

Justifiably, Clyburn is protective of Excelsior Street. It has been her home for nearly 53 years. Over the years, she has watched neighbors vanish and seen houses demolished.

She remembers when the street ran straight into the 25th Street area. She remembers when the street's length was greatly abbreviated when Highway 52 and Interstate 40 were constructed. And without missing a beat, she remembers who lived where and when, even though many of the houses don't exist anymore.

Clyburn says Excelsior has changed in many ways over the years, but not always for the good.

"It's better in a lot of ways, but in a lot of ways it's worse," Clyburn said.

She says the paved street is a definite improvement. Once, it was a dirt road where a rain storm would cause complete havoc.

But she says the beer cans, paper bags and other trash that have been thrown onto the street, are surely signs-of-the-times.

"People didn't do that back then. (Parents) knew how to make their children mind," she



Marie Clyburn and Karen Young share few words after Monday's ground breaking ceremony. Clyburn has called Excelsior Street home for 53 years and Young hopes to move onto the street by August.

said. Although Clyburn would like the CDC to get more input from the few residents that already call Excelsior Street home, she said she is pleased that someone is finally doing something to salvage the community.

"It needs to be taken care of. It has needed to be taken care for a long time," she said.

As many of those involved in the ground breaking ceremony made a beeline to a reception on the university's campus, Clyburn was engaged in a lively conversation with Young, the woman who wants to be her new neighbor.

In between laughs, Clyburn told Young a little bit about her street, and Young told Clyburn a little bit about her house.

When Young is finally settled in her new home, it is a conversation that the two women will undoubtedly have many, many times in the future.

For more information on the S.G. Atkins CDC or its HomeSTART Program call 750-2088.

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## Scholar

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er University, where he is a professor of political science. "I was doing them a favor, and they turned it down."

So while he has taught and lectured in Africa, Europe, Australia and even as close as Canada, King may not appear at the college in his hometown.

Up the road in Macon, the gleaming white-marble courthouse where King's file now resides was named last year in honor of William A. Bootle, the judge who presided over King's case. At 96, Bootle's mind is still sharp, and he stands by the verdict and sentence.

"He was a draft dodger," the white-haired jurist says in a patrician Georgia drawl. "He had to be convicted."

But while Bootle now concedes that the board might have been discriminatory, in its correspondence with King, he says it merely reflected the times.

"You see, that was a part of our culture and custom, and this draft board was made up of white people in Albany, Ga.," he says. "And the truth is that we white

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