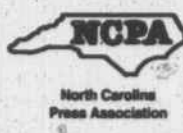


OPINION

Letters to the Editor

THE CHRONICLE

ERNEST H. PITT Publisher/Co-Founder
NDUBISI EGEMONYE Co-Founder
ELAINE PITT Business Manager
FANNIE HENDERSON Advertising Manager
JERI YOUNG Managing Editor
STEVEN MOORE Production Manager
KAREN J. OLSON Circulation Manager



Where have all the black businesses gone?

Part IV: Chains draining life out of black funeral homes

The funerary tradition is an integral part of black culture. "I was making money and she had a beautiful funeral," entertainer Louis Armstrong said of his wife's funeral. "Thank God for that. Didn't have to put the saucer on her. I've seen that happen to many of 'em, didn't have no insurance or belong to no club. While you way laying out there was the wake, they put a saucer on your chest and everybody who comes in, drops a nickel or dime or a quarter to try to make up for the undertaker," Armstrong explained in his autobiography.

No matter how poor, grieving black families sacrificed to give their loved ones decent funerals. In the black community, funerals are an expression of self-worth. That pride shows in the hauntingly beautiful mortuary portraits created in the 1920s by Harlem photographer James VanDerZee, whose works were recently displayed at the James Diggs Gallery. Those photographs attest to the artistry of black funeral directors.

Prior to integration, the black community had nowhere to turn but to black funeral homes to take care of their dead. In 1900, African Americans had more than \$500,000 invested in funeral homes. Today, there are an estimated 400 black-owned funeral homes across the nation. In the United States, the funeral and cemetery business generates from \$7 million to \$9 million annually.

The death industry is changing, however. Huge chains are gobbling up independent, locally-owned funeral homes - black and white. Three major corporations - Loewen Group, Service Corp International and Stewart - handle 20 percent of the funerals and own 15 percent of the nation's 23,000 funeral homes. Amid the rise of these conglomerates, funeral prices have tripled. Chain mortuaries mark up prices of caskets, hearse rental, floral arrangements and death notices anywhere from 300 to 800 percent. Grief-stricken families rarely compare shop.

One major chain, the Canadian-based Loewen Group, forged an avaricious alliance with Henry Lyons, then president of the National Baptist Convention (USA). The deal paid Lyons \$100,000 and the convention \$200,000 for allowing Loewen to contact its 8.5 million members. In addition, two members of each NBC church were to be trained as Loewen funeral counselors to sell funeral packages on commission. Five percent of sales were to go to several Baptist-run educational institutions. Ironically, evidence in Lyons' recent corruption trial revealed that he scammed the Loewen Group just like he did the donors who gave money to rebuild burned churches, and just like he did the convention itself.

Black funeral homes acquired by major chains usually retain African American managers and keep the home's family name to give the impression of local black ownership. These deceptive tactics mislead consumers. The industry is state-regulated, though. Consumers can call the North Carolina Board of Mortuary Science in Raleigh to resolve questions of ownership.

For centuries, black funeral directors have provided compassionate care. Now the funeral homes themselves are struggling to survive. We can't afford to give them their last rites.

To the editor:

As you may know, the State Board of Education has adopted new student accountability standards for all public school students. The standards raise achievement levels and are expected to more quickly identify students who need help to reach their grade level and to provide intervention for these students so they are prepared for their next grade. The ultimate goal is to have every student in North Carolina achieving at or above his or her grade level.

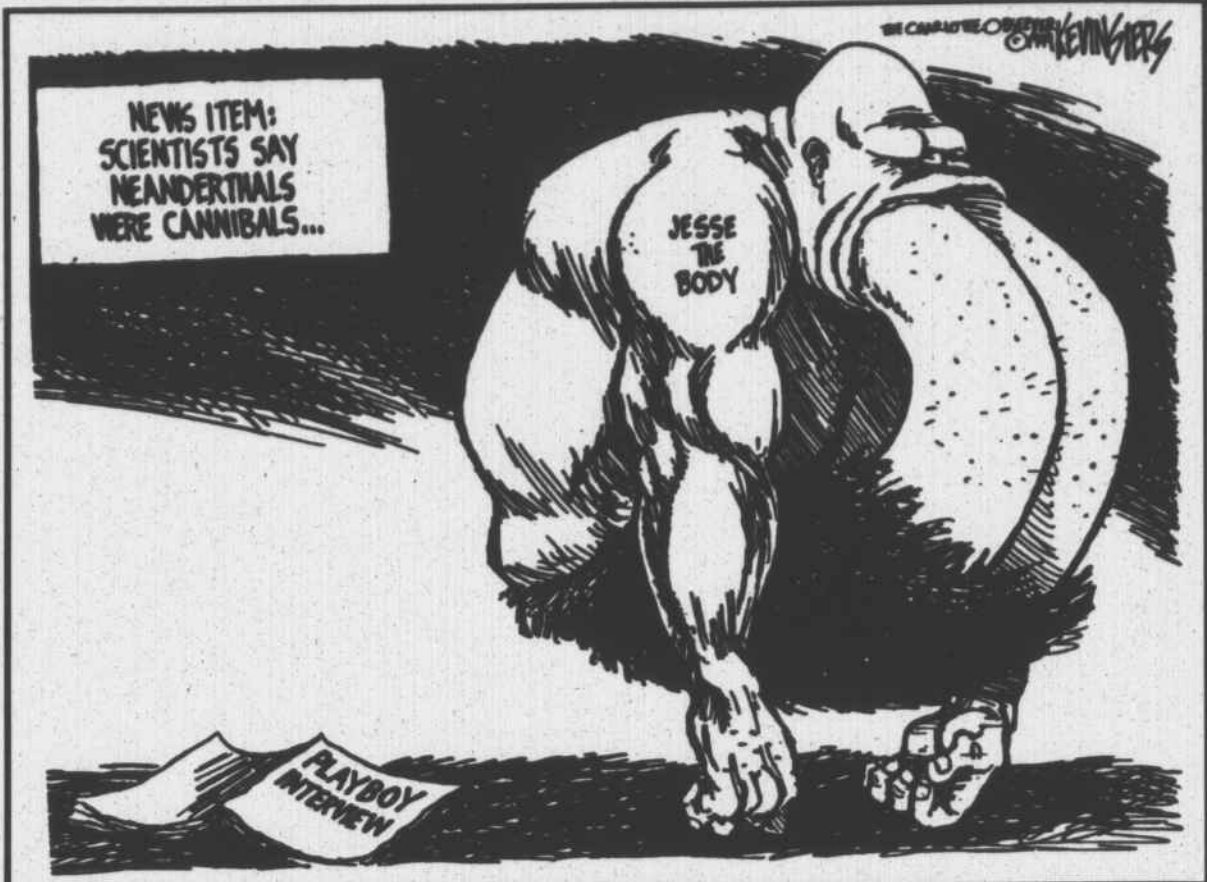
Communicating the new standards and expectation is a huge challenge, but I am delighted and excited that The Chronicle is working on an important Newspapers in Education project to do just that. Additionally, The Chronicle will be publishing a special publication titled "Y2K and You," a Y2K youth education program affiliated with the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion.

As director of marketing and communications for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, I want to let you know that these publications have our support and that we will be working with The Chronicle on these projects.

Doug Hinson
 Director, Marketing and Communications
 Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools

To the Editor:

I was visiting the campus of Winston-Salem State University on Tuesday, Oct. 12, and to my surprise, I was talking to a few stu-



dents about the university since there has been much publicity concerning the administration. I asked one young lady was any of the publicity true as it relates to the university? Her response was, "I'm sure most of it is true. The chancellor has been on campus four years and he walked up to me while I was standing on the 'Plot' one day and asked me directions to Moore Hall." I did not believe the young lady

until I heard Dr. Alvin Schexnider on Tom Joyner's radio show on Friday morning, Oct. 15. Tom Joyner asked him to name some distinguished alumni and he began to ramble. Mr. Joyner seemed to sense that. Dr. Schexnider needed help in his thoughts so Mr. Joyner said "Earl. Moproc" and Dr. Schexnider responded by simply saying, "Oh, yes, Earl The Pearl," and that was it. You would have thought this would have brought

to his memory the names of Timmy Newsome, Donald Evans, Ted Blunt, Elias Gilbert, Cleo Hill, Richard Huntly and Yancy Thigpin, to name a few

Dr. Schexnider should have someone to brief him on some aspects of WSSU or he should keep silent. The alumni should be outraged about such ignorance on the part of the chancellor.

William D. Johnson

Kiddy hi-jinks rule at Board of Aldermen



Jeri Young
 As I See It

Mayor Jack Cavanagh and Pro Tem Vivian Burke must at times feel like rookie first-grade teachers left alone in a room filled with the most unruly 6-year-olds in elementary school history.

That's probably how Burke felt Monday night as she listened to Alderman Bob Northington threaten to make Alderman Vernon Robinson's life "as miserable as possible."

It's the sort of thing that makes grade school teachers - and mayoral folk - cringe and students snicker.

The Robinson/Northington debate has been brewing for months - a testosterone-driven contest to see who can get the most - and most vicious - sound bytes.

It seemed to reach its peak during the great "sex, lies and tales of the videotape scandal" last year when Robinson threatened to topple CAT-TV, the city's public access cable channel, during tense budget negotiations.

His reason - he felt threatened. During an edition of the

CAT-TV staple "Truth to Youth," someone made a thinly veiled promise to somehow put a crutch in Robinson where - to put it delicately - the proverbial sun didn't shine.

The cat fight escalated earlier this year with Robinson's relatively random attacks on selected leaders of nonprofit organizations during budget talks.

Robinson refused to play by the rules and managed - despite repeated pleas from other board members to just hush - to question leaders during a session where no questions were supposed to be asked.

His blatant refusal to follow the rules raised Northington's hackles, prompting an outburst from the senior alderman that included the statement, "Do you have a problem with English?"

Robinson responded with a polite "no" and a nicely timed exit from the meeting chamber.

The scorecard then read Robinson 1, Northington 0.

On Monday night, the animosity between the two was so thick it would have to be cut with Guinsu knife.

At issue - a bond-package vote worth a relatively measly - by city standards at least - \$6.9 million.

"I and people I've talked to are sick and damn tired of Mr. Robinson," an angry Northington exclaimed, after Robinson had gone through his usual shenanigans to stall the vote. "As long as I'm on this board, his life is going to be as miserable as possible."

Ohhh. That's a real zinger and Robinson is sure to be quaking in his boots. Robinson gets chest-pounding rights, though. Despite Northington's tough talk, the vote was still tabled.

Robinson 2, Northington 0.

The people most taken aback were the youths watching the meeting, including one bright 13-year-old, who caught the meeting with his dad.

"I didn't know you could talk like that on TV," he said, as he snickered into his hand. "When they took the vote, I thought they were voting on whether the board could make that guy's life miserable. I didn't know there was anything else going on."

Neither did the vast majority of people who witnessed the meeting.

Lost in the debate was exactly what happened - aside from the Laurel and Hardy hi-jinks of Northington and Robinson.

Here's a piece of advice to

Alderman Northington.

• Ignore Vernon Robinson. The two of you can't be separated - Robinson would scream at the top of his rather substantial lungs that his rights were violated.

• Don't let Vernon Robinson make you lose your cool. Robinson is that kid in sixth grade who gave you "wet willies," tossed spit balls at you and then whined to the teacher about the fact that someone didn't like him. He's relatively harmless. The only reason he does it is to see how much of a rise he can get out of the victim of his unorthodox tantrums.

One piece of advice to Robinson: Follow at least a few of the rules and realize that board meetings are not your own personal platform to spew forth Vernon Robinsonisms.

If Robinson and Northington were in first grade they would be sitting in the corner sporting dunce caps - even though years ago the powers-that-be decided that dunce caps destroyed children's sense of self-worth.

Of course, in the case of Northington and Robinson, the dunce caps would do nothing more than make inflated egos just a tad more palatable.

Jeri Young is the managing editor of The Chronicle.

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY...

The unemployment rate here and around the nation is lower than it has been in more than a decade. We asked local students if they fear finding employment after graduation, even though the job market is seemingly wide open.



Jeff Barnes

"I am not afraid about finding a job because my major is education and I know there is always a need for teachers."



Shanique Nero

"I am still concerned about finding a job because a lot of people tell me that even though you have a degree you are not going to make it. So even with a degree, I could still end up on the street and unemployed."



Erik Warren

"I am not really worried. I am doing things now in school to ensure that I will not have any problems getting a job once I get out. I think I'll be able to find one."



Toia Mitchell-el

"I'm going straight to grad school, so right now I am not worried about finding a job. I am very much worried about grad school competition."



Yalonda Parker

"I am concerned; I'm a psychology major and they tell me already that it is hard to find a job without a master's; the B.S. is not enough."