

Conference tackles black suicides

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

The National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) will hold its Annual Conference in Durham Feb. 1-2 at the Durham Marriott Civic Center. Local NOPCAS members will partner with a network of N.C. Agencies to host this year's conference, which has a theme of "Breaking the Silence: Speaking Out on Depression and Suicide." The conference will focus on youths and community crisis response to suicide. Keynote speaker Dr. David Litts, special assistant to the U.S. surgeon general, will speak on the national strategy.

This year's conference will be especially relevant. Suicide among communities of color is rapidly increasing, especially among young people ages 10-24 years. The surgeon general recently called the trend a national health crisis, drawing major attention to this portion of the population that is succumbing as a result of mental illnesses that are treatable and, more important, preventable.

North Carolina leads the nation in the rate of increase of suicides among young men of color. Nayo Watkins, NOPCAS conference chair, says the escalating number of minority suicides was chosen as the conference's topic this year in order to draw attention to this astounding epidemic that is hitting close to home.

"It all needs particular attention to communities of color but everybody can get some info on and share to build local strategies at the conference," said Watkins, who says silence about depression and the stigma often associated with mental illness are major contributors to suicide.

"In most communities of color because there's such a drive to 'make it' exists, these issues live in much more secrecy and much more of a stigma becomes attached to people suffering with depression."

Although depression and suicide are problems for all kinds of people, the stigma is so great in some communities that many people of color don't want to face or admit it is a problem in their lives. "In society, we tend to stay away from mental health issues and hush it down. But it's a national public health crisis, it's nondiscriminatory and it hits everybody," Watkins said.

Watkins feels that black people almost feel obligated to a degree to "get through" their problems, especially because many share a history of such tremen-



Experts say there are a number of reasons why the number of blacks committing suicide is up. Some of those reasons will be discussed at an upcoming conference in Durham.

dous hardships such as slavery and the struggle for civil rights. As a result, many feel no problem should be so great as to cause mental illness, Watkins said.

"Today with the upwardly mobile trend since the 1960s for people of color, we now have two people working with good jobs. Many have come from humble beginnings and worked very hard; they don't want anybody telling them something is wrong and they don't want to recognize it," Watkins said.

The suicide rate among African-American teens more than doubled between 1980 and 1998, with young black males as the fastest growing of all suicide groups. Rates for Native Americans and Alaskan Natives also is rising - 50 percent higher than the national rate.

Watkins also attributes the unfortunate battle with the glass ceiling that today's younger generation must still grapple with despite the struggles of their parents' generations and even their ancestors before, for the rise in depression and suicide in the youth population.

"During the 1960s black people and other so-called minorities had great hopes for first-class citizenship and for their children who were born into this integrated world with expectations of being successful. Still they run into the glass ceiling. That is a hindrance," Watkins said. "Hope is damaged, expectations becomes watered down and hopelessness sets in."

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youths 10-24 years of age. According to a report released last September by

the Injury and Violence Prevention Unit of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, historically within the young male population, white males have had a higher suicide mortality rate than their black male counterparts. But black male suicide has risen very sharply over the past 15 years (more than 100 percent).

The report also states that comparing North Carolina's youths to the nation's youths illustrates that suicides by firearms are more frequent within North Carolina than in the rest of the United States across age groups.

The Centers for Disease Control reports a 105 percent national increase in the suicide rate between 1980 and 1996 in black males between 15 and 19 years of age. This has narrowed the margin that exists between the suicide mortality rates of white and black males.

Stokes County has one of the highest mortality rates in the state, and Dr. Julia Simmons, Ph.D., L.P.C., program director of Stokes County Suicide Prevention Alliance, says the group has spent the past 15 months trying to determine the reason why. Simmons cites cultural shifts, natural geographic isolation, changing culture, reduced agricultural income and focus as well as shifts in available community supports as factors that contribute to suicide rates in Stokes County.

"This may be a community with problems but it's a community that is really reaching out and trying to do something to solve the problems," Simmons said.

Jane Miller, chair of the N.C. Youth Prevention Task Force, says

that while these suicide statistics are troubling when you compare them regionally and nationally, it is important to dispel any myths or misconceptions about whom suicide affects. Miller says task forces such as the one she chairs use the data to guide program development for those at risk and the professional community.

"I don't think the public is informed about the issue enough. Because of the stigma about mental health and treatment, people are reluctant to come in for services," Miller said. "They have to address their belief system about getting help to make progress in overcoming depression and suicide."

Miller added that the general misperception regarding suicide is that girls die of suicide and not boys. Although girls attempt suicides more often, Miller says, males complete suicides more frequently.

If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, call the national hot line number, 800-SUICIDE, or call CenterPoint Human Services at 725-7777. For more information on NOPCAS and the conference in February, contact Nayo Watkins at (919) 956-7672.

WSSU receives \$826,000 grant for biomedical research

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The promising progress of Winston-Salem State University's biomedical research program has prompted an



Martin

extension of a five-year National Institutes of Health grant for an additional one-year

\$826,000 grant for the enhancement of WSSU's biomedical research infrastructure and biomedical research capability.

WSSU received the 2001-2002 Research Infrastructure in Minority Institution (RIMI) grant from the National Center for Research and Resources, National Institutes of Health.

WSSU Chancellor Harold L. Martin Sr. is the principal investigator for the RIMI grant, and Dr. Kim Tan, director of WSSU's Project Strengthen biomedical research program, is the program director.

"The receipt of this grant will help significantly enhance the university's biomedical research and research training capabilities," Martin said. "This is a step forward in our goal of building an even more outstanding research program at WSSU."

The grant provides support in three categories of activities: a biomedical research component in WSSU's Office of Sponsored Programs for research grant administrative support; enhancing the research laboratory facility to make major equipment items accessible to

students for exercises in biochemistry, biotechnological techniques, cell biology, genetics instrument analysis, molecular biology, as well as the needs of researchers; and for the continuation of three collaborative biomedical research projects with WSSU scientists as principal investigators. Those projects are being conducted by Dr. Azeem Aileru, assistant professor of neurophysiology in the department of life sciences; Dr. Richard Bennett Jr., professor of biochemistry in the department of life sciences; and Tan.

Aileru's research centers on the development of a one-time cure for high blood pressure through a new approach focusing on the nerves that



Aileru

control high blood pressure and how factors such as stress and physical activity contribute to a sustained hypertension. The research of Bennett is focused on the development of a breast cancer early warning detection method, which will allow breast cancer victims an opportunity to seek medical treatment earlier. The focus of Tan's research is to establish an experimental tissue model of methylmercury intoxication to examine the effects methylmercury on the brain to develop a therapeutic cure.

Aileru and Tan are collaborating with researchers at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. Bennett is collaborating with researchers at the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Grant funds to help black organ donations

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

DURHAM - Carolina Donor Services, the federally-designed organ procurement organization serving 5.8 million people in North Carolina, recently received a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services to fund and study the effect of awareness campaigns designed to increase organ and tissue donations among African-American college students.

The \$1.2 million grant will fund both research and education over the next three years on the campuses of four historically black colleges and universities: N.C. A&T University, N.C. Central University, Saint Augustine's College and Fayetteville State University.

"We have worked hard the

past few years to make sure people know that North Carolina is serious about saving lives by increasing the number of organ and tissue donors," said N.C. Sen. Howard N. Lee. The senator sponsored the Organ, Eye and Tissue Donor Registry bill signed into law by Gov. Michael Easley on Dec. 6, 2001.

Carolina Donor Services will be working alongside the HBCU Health Alliance, an organization made up of education, nursing and health education faculty stationed at the four campuses.

"Our goal is to enhance the quality of life in our communities," said Dr. Lorna H. Harris, N.C. A&T School of Nursing professor and principal investigator for the alliance. "Awareness and education about organ and tissue donation on our respective

campuses will undoubtedly save and enhance lives and continues with our mission of educating our students about life-changing decisions. We look forward to helping build a model that gets positive results."

Many more organ donations are needed to help the more than 78,000 people on the national transplant waiting list. Nearly 5,500 patients awaiting transplants die each year because of the shortage of organ donors.

The recent grantees join 22 ongoing HHS-funded projects studying ways to increase consent by families for donations, motivate individuals to declare their intent to donate and share their decisions with family members. Those projects have received grants totaling about \$23 million.

Welcome to ...

St. Peter's Heritage Place

Do you want to chase away those mid-winter blues?
Let us help you! Announcing a new apartment complex for
SENIOR CITIZENS

Apply Now for Residency at St. Peter's Heritage Place (located off Old Lexington Road) Winston-Salem, NC. NEW APARTMENT COMPLEX FOR SENIOR CITIZENS, AGE 62 AND OLDER. One bedroom, one bath apartments feature Carpeting, Electric Heat and Air Conditioning, Range and Refrigerator. Handicap Accessible Units are available. Rent based on income. Additional features at St. Peter's include Day Room, Tenant Storage, Multipurpose Room, Craft Room, Courtyard, On-Site Laundry Facilities, Public transportation within walking distance.

For application or information
Call: 336-765-0424
Hearing Impaired: 1-800-735-2962

or write:
St. Peter's Heritage Place
Community Management Corporation
P. O. Box 25168
Winston-Salem, NC 27114-5168

Equal Housing Opportunity

super model*

* just add art

Photo credit: William Wegman, David LaChapelle, Peter Lindbergh, Gordon Parks, etc.

Photo + Video + Drawing = William Wegman
Picture Show: James Casebere
Nikki Blair: After the Instrument

January 26 - April 14, 2002
Opening Reception Friday, January 25 from 7-9 pm FREE

> art > film > theater > photography

secca.

southeastern center for contemporary art

750 marguerite drive winston-salem, nc 27106 (336) 725-1904 www.secca.org

SECCA is supported by The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County and by the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency funded by the State of North Carolina and the National Endowment for the Arts.