

Children's book by local author takes look at weighty issue of homelessness

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

Jerrilyn Johnson has been working with homeless children for the last eight years. As program director for Project HOPE, a program that assists homeless students in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, she knows all too well the plight of children who have no home to go to after school.

Johnson has penned a children's book, "Mommy, Are We Homeless?," about one girl's transition into homelessness once her parents lose their jobs. Molly, the main character, manages to still make friends while her family adapts to their temporary living situation.

"I'm hoping that it will provide advocacy (for homeless children). So many people have told me we don't have homeless children in Winston-Salem. People need to know some of the issues involved with homeless children going to school," said Johnson.

Project HOPE serves hundreds of children and their families every year by offering after-school and in-school tutoring, transportation, school supplies and free and reduced lunches.

Homeless children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. By law, any child without a regular residence is considered to be homeless. Families and children make up 40 percent of people who are homeless.

Johnson said she was inspired to write the book after dreaming about it several times. After the third dream, she woke up and began writing down ideas for the story.

"I was dreaming about a

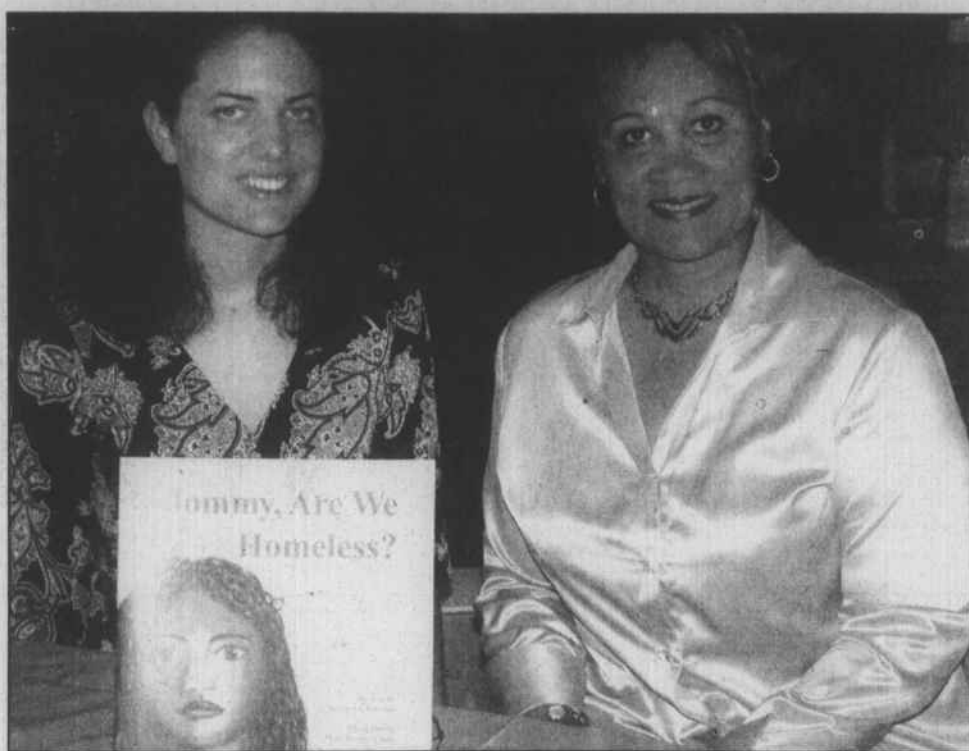


Photo by Courtney Gaillard

Jerrilyn Johnson who has worked on homeless projects for many years hopes the book creates a better understanding of the issue. Here, Johnson (right) poses with Mary Bentley Clark, who illustrated the book.

book that I was writing, and I woke up and thought, 'Oh no, that's a lot of work.'" Johnson said. "But I realized this was something I needed to do."

"Mommy, Are We Homeless?" is not about one particular child she has worked with, says Johnson. But she hopes the book will give young readers a glimpse into how some of their peers may be coping with life when the bus stops at a shelter instead of a neighborhood.

"I have a general feel for what (homeless) children go

through. I see it every day. I know that many people are not knowledgeable about a child living in a shelter or a hotel," Johnson said. "It's a very sensitive issue. People have to remember it's not the child's fault (that they're homeless). We have to educate children so we can stop the cycle that the family is in."

Salem College alumna Mary Bentley Clark illustrated the book's bold and vibrant images.

Both she and Johnson wanted the images to jump off the page and leave an impact on readers.

"It was a real neat project for me. The issue of homelessness and trying to create awareness of that problem for children was a really nice outlet for me to use my art in terms of a social problem we need to be more aware of," said Clark. "For a child reading the book, this could be someone sitting right next to them who is actually homeless."

Johnson hopes that "Mommy, Are We Homeless?" will make its way into classrooms next year since there may be a student whose real life mirrors Molly's life in the book.

"I need to do it if it's going to help the world. All of us are here to help each other and provide enlightenment," said Johnson.

More than 1 million children experience homelessness in a year. For many of them, school is a major source of stability, security and safety. School enrollment can help children develop skills to escape poverty.

Copies of "Mommy, Are We Homeless?" can be purchased at The Master's Loft, 50 Miller Street, and through Southland Consultants at 774-0607.

Troopers are looking for DWI offenders this weekend

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The N.C. Highway Patrol will be participating in several traffic enforcement operations throughout the state during the July 4 holiday week, the department said this week.

There will be an increased presence of troopers and motor carrier enforcement officers on the interstates and major four-lane highways.



Holden

"I have requested that our troopers place special emphasis on removing drunk drivers from the highways," said Col. Richard W. Holden, commander of the State Highway Patrol. During the July 4 holiday, the Patrol will be conducting sobriety checkpoints throughout the state in conjunction with the state's "Booze It and Loose It" anti-drunk driving campaign. "Our overall goal is to reduce the number of crashes on our highways," said Holden.

Troopers will be participating in the Combined Accident Reduction Effort (CARE) as well. CARE is a nationwide program in which highway patrol and state police agencies across the nation increase their visibility during the holiday period in an effort to prevent crashes.

The July 4 holiday weekend officially begins at 6 p.m. on Friday, July 2, and ends at midnight, Sunday, July 4. Statewide last year, there were 1,471 crashes, 1,040 injuries, and 10 fatalities during the official holiday period.

Moratorium

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exonerated of crimes of which they were convicted.

Sunday, during the two-hour forum held at Cleveland Avenue Christian Church, Darryl Hunt and Alan Gell showed how powerful firsthand accounts of those affected by capital punishment can be. Hunt and Gell were both convicted of murder and both were eventually exonerated after serving years in prison. For Gell, his time behind bars was spent on death row. Gell was convicted in Bertie County in 1998 of murdering Allen Ray Jenkins nearly three years earlier. Prosecutors convicted him largely on the testimony of two of Gell's friends who fingered Gell for the crime. Gell was sentenced to die for the crime.

Gell's case is a textbook example of what moratorium supporters say is wrong with the capital punishment system. Gell's right to a speedy trial was trampled upon because a series of court-appointed attorneys abandoned Gell's case for greener pastures. He spent almost three years in jail before he went to trial. When Gell finally got a lawyer who stuck around, the attorney had only two months to prepare for Gell's case, as opposed to the 18 months that most lawyers need to ready themselves for capital cases.

Gell was given a new trial and was acquitted earlier this year after it was discovered that prosecutors withheld evidence that could have proven Gell's innocence, evidence that included a wiretapped conversation in which Gell's two accusers are heard cooking up a story to tell authorities to link Gell to the crime.

Gell admits that his story and the many like his have diminished his faith in the legal system.

"The fact that (I was) innocent didn't matter to the justice system," Gell told a crowd of about three dozen.

Hunt said prosecutors who hide evidence and toy with the truth need to be dealt with, especially when their actions lead to innocent people going to jail.

"There is no accountability for prosecutors," Hunt said. "With no accountability, people will continue to do what has been done to me and what has been done to Mr. Gell and what has been done to other people."

Hunt, an African-American, was convicted after a



Larry Womble and Earline Parmon lead a moratorium protest in Winston-Salem last year.

racially-charged trial in 1985 of the murder of white newspaper copy editor Deborah Sykes. During Hunt's first trial for the crime, his jury contained only one African-American.

The rest of the members of the jury were white. Moratorium supporters say racial balance in capital case juries is another issue that must be addressed.

It took two decades and a DNA test before Hunt was released from jail and exonerated of the crime. Hunt just barely missed being sentenced to death. He was given a life sentence instead. But Hunt said the issues that would be examined as part of a moratorium would have a "trickle down" effect and make the criminal justice system fairer for everyone who stands trial.

Former Superior Court Judge Tom Ross, the current head of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, pointed out that the state is already working to make the criminal justice system fairer. He pointed to the Actual Innocence Commission started by the chief justice of the N.C. Supreme Court. The commission has already pushed through new eyewitness identification policies that have been adopted by the state's largest police departments. As a judge, Ross could not take a position on the death penalty one way or the other.

Sunday, he did not say if he was a death penalty supporter or opponent, but he strongly believes that a moratorium is needed to ensure that innocent people are not falling through the cracks.

"Mistakes happen in every kind of case. When it comes to the death penalty, we can't afford to take that risk," Ross

said. Ross also talked about his own connection to another controversial death penalty case. In 1999, Ross, then a judge, vacated the sentence of Charles Munsey, who was waiting on death row in Wilkes County for murder. Munsey's sentence was vacated after it was discovered that prosecutors sat on evidence that could have exonerated him.

Unfortunately, Munsey died of natural causes before he could taste freedom.

"I believe to this day that we have the best system of justice in this world," Ross said. "But I also believe we don't have a perfect system."

Womble - who along with fellow Forsyth County House member Earline Parmon have been two of the state's most vocal moratorium supporters - cited a number of reasons why he thinks Morgan is stalling the moratorium bill. One of the primary reasons, Womble said, is that the co-speakers have a gentlemen's agreement to avoid controversy if at all possible. Womble said there are also concerns that debate on the bill would take up too much time in an election year. But Womble said each day the bill is stalled, people move closer and closer to being put to death.

"It is sad that people are still dying even as we speak," he said.

Audience members were urged to call, write or e-mail elected officials to push for the a moratorium vote. Moratorium supporters vow to stay vigilant even if this session passes without a vote.

For more information on the moratorium, log onto www.ncmoratoriumnow.org.

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STUDENT ENROLLMENT INFORMATION

(Please Type or Print Clearly. Complete Form Fully)

Personal Data:

Student Name: _____
Last First Middle

(Nickname): _____ Grade Entering: _____

Student Address: _____

Telephone Number: (____) _____ Age: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Place of Birth: _____
(Month) (Day) (Year) (City) (State)

Social Security Number _____ Email Address: _____

Student Demographic Data: Sex: ___ Female ___ Male

Race/Ethnicity: ___ Black ___ White

___ Native American

___ Hispanic/Latino (Specify: _____)

___ Multi Racial

School Previously Attended:

List, if any, the school you have attended [Including Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools]

Grade Level	Name of School	Address & Zip Code	Date(s)/Year Attended