

Students say they notice subtle racism at their schools

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

A group of high school students from across the county spoke candidly about race and race relations Tuesday evening during a forum at West Forsyth High School.

Each year during Race Equality Week, the city's Human Relations Commission gives students a chance to sound off on the topics.

"We want them to reflect on the past, examine the present and plan for the future," said Dr. Ernie Wade, chair of Student Relations for the Human Relations Commission. "We've asked them to be as candid as they can."

The students fielded questions from Wanda Allen-Abraham, director of the Department of Human Relations, and Moderator Maynard "Busta" Brown, of 97.1 WQMG, on a wide range of race-related subjects.

If the experiences of most of the 12 student panelists are any indication, overt racism may be a thing of the past.

"My friends at school don't really view race as a fac-



Local students discuss race on Tuesday evening.

Photos by Layla Farmer

tor," said North Forsyth student April Ellis. "It just hasn't been a big deal — or any kind of deal — in my life."

The majority of the students agreed that race wasn't a major concern among their friends, and many said they have a racially eclectic group of friends. Still, many of them were able to cite instances where they say they believed

they were mistreated by peers and even teachers because of their race.

Arthur Balwah, a senior at Parkland IB Magnet High School, recounted a story from his freshman year when he went out for the basketball team. The coach, Balwah said, kept calling him "Paki," a derogatory term used for people from Pakistan. Balwah,

who is Trinidadian, believes the coach's prejudices led him to unnecessarily cut him from the team.

"I was one of the better people out there," Balwah related. "I really thought I should have made it, but I didn't."

Isaiah Fletcher, a student at East Forsyth, says teachers' standards for African



Moderator Brown

American students are often lower than that of their Caucasian peers.

"At East Forsyth, if you're black and you pronounce your words well, you enunciate, if you know common English, all of a sudden everybody thinks you're so smart," he related.

Reynolds student Lauren Howard says she has encountered a subtler kind of discrimination at her school. Her theater teacher, for example, has an affinity for plays that

revolve around largely white characters, so rarely, she said, are minority students selected for roles.

"Even though it's not said, even though it's not mentioned, it's still there," she remarked, "and all the minorities — we know that we're at a disadvantage."

Louis Williams, who represented the Career Center but is a student at Atkins, said race is an issue among his peers at his home school.

"At Atkins, it's a big problem," Williams related. "...No African American student really conversates with white students; it's a no-no."

Several of the panelists attended Downtown Elementary School, and said that the close-knit nature of the small student body there left little room for prejudices.

Race Equality Week will continue tonight (Sept. 24) at 6 p.m., with the Human Relations Commission's Ninth Annual "Beyond Soul and Salsa," a forum on African American and Hispanic issues, at the Gateway YWCA, 1300 S. Main Street. For more information, call 336-727-8000.

Homeless

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Williams has written about the experience and talks about it freely because she says too often the public believes that the homeless population is filled with those with no ambition, education or drive. She is proof that that is not always the case.

"Even though I have walked with the homeless, fed them and supported them, I was not prepared for all of the emotions that I am experiencing now that I find myself facing the same dire circumstances," Williams wrote in an essay about her experiences.

Williams has always been a giver. She walked 18 miles in the dead of winter in Wisconsin to raise money to create a scholarship for single

mothers at her alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She also volunteered monthly with the homeless outreach ministry at her church here — Greater Tabernacle Worship Center. When she studied abroad, Williams donated clothes and food to children in need in the countries she visited. Williams says becoming the beneficiary of the generosity of others has been a tough pill for her to swallow.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be on the receiving end," she related. "I was always the giver."

For the time being, Williams has a roof over her head, thanks to the generosity of a WFU benefactor, but soon, she'll again have to pay rent — a monumental challenge for someone who has

not received a paycheck in six months.

The substitute work has become less steady, Williams reports. She estimates that she has applied for at least 200 jobs in every sector, from fast food to teaching positions at community colleges, but to no avail.

"It's been nerve racking, to say the least, and stressful, because you realize that you have a family to support and you have zero income coming in," related the single mom. "...I really try to relax myself before each interview because I don't want to come off desperate because I've found with employers, that's really a turnoff."

In the face of so many challenges, Williams says she has relied heavily on her faith to get her through.

"My spirituality keeps me

grounded and keeps me going, as well as my children, because it's not just me — I have to support them — I want to see them become successful," she related. "...I'm still applying for everything imaginable, and praying for divine intervention, that I will not end up in the same position (next month)."

While Williams may seem like an unlikely homeless person, Andrea Kurtz says that her story really isn't that odd in these tough economic times.

"The biggest thing that we're seeing in our shelters is an increase in the number of intact (two parent) families ... and the increase in the number of people who, prior to the economic crisis, were living fairly middle-class lives," said Kurtz, the implementation director of the city's Ten Year Plan to End Chronic

Homelessness.

The economic nosedive has changed the face of homelessness in our country, says Kurtz, as more and more people like Williams find themselves out of work. Although over the last three years, the city program claims to have reduced chronic homelessness by 48 percent, the problem could get even worse down the road. Kurtz said she and others who work in the homeless system are bracing themselves for a new wave of clients, as thousands in the Forsyth County area are expected to run out of unemployment over the course of the next 180 days.

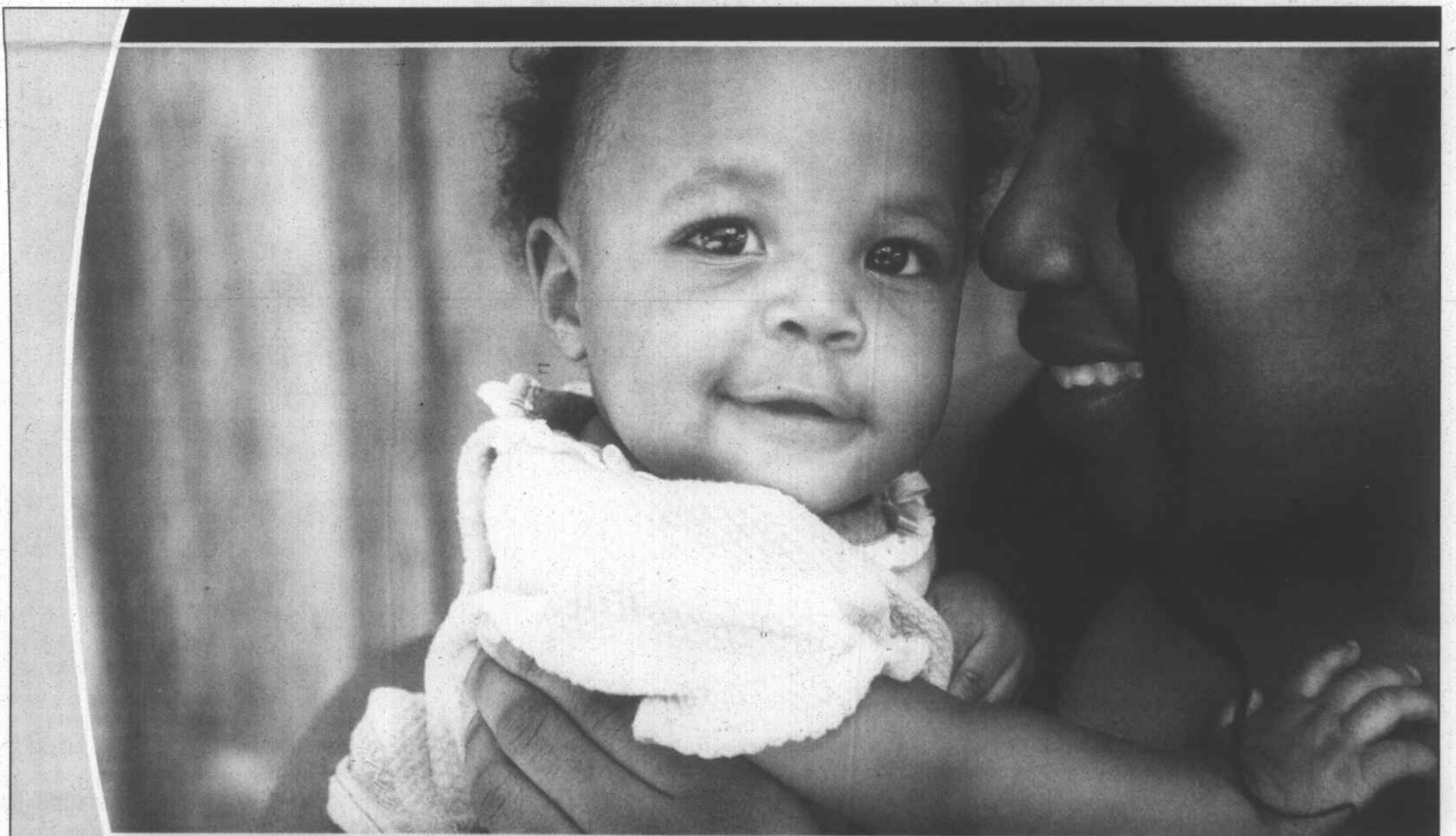
"We are looking at massive numbers of people losing their unemployment, and I don't know that we're prepared for that," she admitted.

Nevertheless, Kurtz says all hope is not lost.

"Things are changing slowly," she commented. "...we're not living in a community where there is nothing; there are employers who are still hiring. You just have to put your best face forward."

Williams says despite her down moments, she is still upbeat and faithful.

"The one thing that I desire, is to shine a spotlight on the increasing number of displaced/homeless people in North Carolina. In some places, it is considered taboo to discuss homelessness," she writes. "What does homelessness look like? It is definitely not just our old perception of the older man or woman with the tattered coat and worn out shoes pushing a shopping cart filled with aluminum cans. Who can become homeless? Any one of us."



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