



People of Faith Against the Death Penalty Director Stephen Dear takes to the podium to praise State Reps. Larry Womble and Earline Parmon.

RJA

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legislation" that will reduce racial bias in the justice system.

"No matter how you feel about the death penalty in practice, it's a wasteland of bias and errors," said Dear. "The need for the Racial Justice Act has been stark and starkly evident."

Darryl Hunt was on hand to praise the law and its sponsors. His Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice works to exonerate the wrongfully-convicted and helps those reentering society after incarceration. Hunt spent 19 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit and was one vote away from getting the death penalty at his trial. Hunt is African-American and the woman he was convicted of killing was white. His case was heard by an all-white jury. He was convicted on circumstantial evidence and exonerated only after DNA tests were conducted. Many see Hunt's case as a prime example of why the Racial Justice Act is needed.

"There are so many people in North Carolina and around this country who are



The crowd toasts the representatives.

imprisoned for something they did not do, and if it was not for great leaders like Representative Womble and Mrs. Parmon and the folks in this room, they'd be condemned to die in prison," Hunt told attendees. Hunt's connections to both representatives go back decades. Womble was among the first group who visited Hunt after his arrest in 1984. Parmon became like a mother to him in prison, Hunt said.

Both representatives said that the fight for the RJA was long and hard. Parmon said they both received threatening phone calls over the bill and their opponents often falsely accused them of trying to ban the death penalty and set murderers free.

"This bill was all about just punishment and not anything else, not whether the defendants were guilty or innocent, but whether they received a fair trial without race playing an issue," said Parmon.

Womble said it took "persistence, dedication, hard work and tenacity" from a lot of people to get the bill passed. Though Kentucky has a similar Racial Justice Act, Womble says the one for this state is stronger and, unlike Kentucky's, is retroactive. Even during the trying times, Womble said he had no doubts about the RJA.

"Everyone says the bills we sponsor are controversial bills. I don't think they're controversial, I think they're the right bills," said Womble.

Womble said he's heard that prosecutors are holding back on seeking the death penalty until they see how the RJA plays out.

A spokesperson with The Center for Death Penalty Litigation, which represents indigent defendants accused or convicted of a capital crime, said its lawyers plan to use the RJA on behalf of its clients, but are waiting on the results of a comprehensive state death penalty study that is due out in August. The non-profit law firm represents about a third of those on the state's death row.

Womble attended the reception a day before leaving for Kenya, Africa to give a commencement speech at Great Lakes University of Kisumu. Womble has visited Africa annually for more than a decade. He initiated a program in this country that resulted in thousands of books being sent to Kenya and other African countries to be used by students and in libraries and schools.

The Great Lakes University graduation ceremony included a special guest - President Barack Obama's grandmother, Sarah Obama, who received an honorary degree.

Locals earn volunteer awards

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

HandsOn Northwest North Carolina, in partnership with the United Way of Forsyth County, presented 2010 Governor's Awards for Outstanding Volunteer Service to seven Forsyth County residents.

HandsOn, which works to increase volunteerism and build the capacity of local nonprofits, presented the awards at a breakfast on Thursday, April 29 at Salem Towne. Winners were selected by a volunteer committee from 40 diverse nominees in seven categories.

This year's local winners are: Jess Zimmerman (Adult Volunteer); Peggy Roberts (Senior Volunteer); Pete's Family Restaurant (Corporate Volunteers); Rev. Dr. Sir Walter Lee Mack Jr. (Special Events Volunteer); Cy Fogleman (Youth Volunteer); John and Dinah Reece (Family Volunteers); and Triad Apartment Association (Group or Team Volunteers).

The Governor's Awards for Outstanding Volunteer Service were first awarded by the Governor's Office and its Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service in 1979.



Dr. Sir Walter Lee Mack Jr.

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