

Pastor leading David v. Goliath fight wins award

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

The North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN) has awarded its 2010 Florenza Moore Grant Community Environmental Justice Award to a prominent pastor in tiny New Hill, N.C. who has been leading fight to prevent a sewage plant from settling in the community.

The Rev. James Clanton, pastor of the First Baptist Church of New Hill, has rallied his congregation and town residents to fight a proposed \$327 million wastewater treatment plant. The fight has David versus Goliath and racial elements. The historic, unincorporated community of New Hill is mostly black. Its larger, more affluent neighbors —



Rev. Clanton

the towns of Cary, Apex and Morrisville — are mostly white. The three towns formed the Western Wake Partnership, which is pushing the wastewater plant.

"I am honored by this prestigious award, and view it as an indication of the justness of our community's fight against the sewage plant," said Clanton.

The New Hill Community Association recently scored a victory when the town of Holly Springs recently withdrew from the Western Wake Partners. Also recently, the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, on behalf of the New Hill Community Association, filed a Petition for Contested Case

Hearing in the state Office of Administrative Hearings to challenge the Western Wake Partners' proposed placement of a sewage treatment plant in the center of the New Hill community.

The North Carolina Environmental Justice Network says that factors like race, ethnicity and income often put North Carolinians at risk of living in unsafe and unhealthy environments. The group works to "promote health and environmental equality for all people of North Carolina."

In bestowing the award to Rev. Clanton, NCEJN's Gary Grant said, "You have been chosen based on your faithful work to protect the citizens, community and environment of New Hill. Your history of support and pastoral leadership in the struggle for environmental

justice over the last five years is exemplary and a beacon for pastors who realize that the salvation of mankind lies in protecting the whole of Mother Earth and her inhabitants. We further note how you have made your church more than

available to accommodate the struggle in the community."

The award given to Clanton is named after the late Florenza Moore Grant, who along with her husband, Matthew, were the first black farmers to take a stand

against racism by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Grants, who lived in Tillery, N.C., opened the doors for the landmark 15,000-member class action civil rights suit, *Pigford v. Glickman* and the US Department of Agriculture.

Atkinses

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With his college football career behind him, Atkins said he needed a new motivation to keep his body in peak condition. He began to compete in body building, and he has seen a fair amount of success.

"When you have a clear goal in mind, you kind of aim for that goal and it becomes a much better challenge," he said. "I'm looking to keep getting better and making a run at getting in the professional (body building) circuit."

Until he struck out on his own, Atkins had worked as a personal trainer in a major fitness facility. But his philosophy of "always being the best person that you can be" has driven him to never be satisfied with his station in life; he seeks to impart that same fervor in his clients.

"I have a strong faith system," he said. "I believe that one of the reasons why (God) put me on Earth is to help give back all of the things I've learned."

Being on his own as the sole owner of the facility has been a bit of a change for the Salisbury native.

"I think it's been a blessing in disguise. In sports, you learn to work together in a team environment to be successful, but in owning my own business, it's a chance to do things on your own and really have no ceilings (or limitations)," he related. "I just wanted to venture out and multiply myself."

Launching a business in this precarious economy has been no easy task, but Leonard says he takes things one day at a time. The facility has allowed him to spend more time with his family as well, a huge perk in his book.

"It's great. It allows us to spend more time with each other," he commented. "All of us, as a family, get to spend more time together."

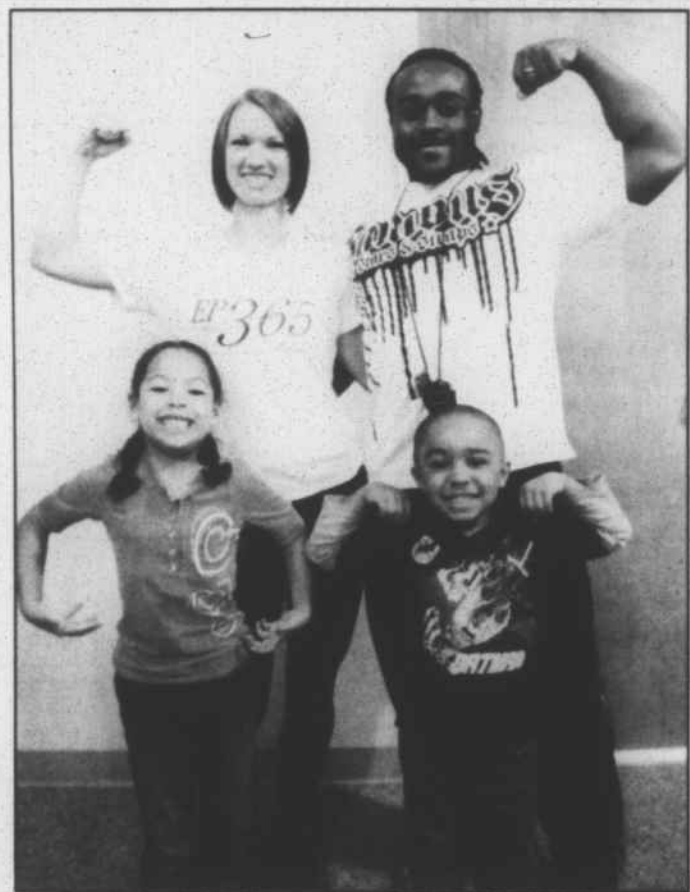
Though Atkins, who graduated from Winston-Salem State University in 2006 with a degree in exercise science, has helped many clients reach their personal fitness goals, his biggest success story is his wife and former client, Elizabeth Atkins.

The two met in 2008 at a gym where Leonard worked as a personal trainer and wed the following year. For Elizabeth Atkins, who has struggled with weight problems most of her life, her husband represented a missing piece in both her health and personal life.

Elizabeth Atkins said she had started her own exercise program, but had reached a plateau in her weight loss before she began working with Leonard. She knew from their first joint workout that the two had a connection.

"I was excited because I could feel it that first session," related the Andrews, Tex.-native.

Since that time, Elizabeth, a key account sales rep at PepsiCo, has



Elizabeth and Leonard Atkins pose with their children: her daughter, Teirney, 5, and his son, Laithan, 4.



Before and after photos of Elizabeth Atkins.



Leonard Atkins has won several bodybuilding events.

shed more than 100 pounds. She recently competed in her first body building contest and took home the third prize. As a woman who spent years being self-conscious about her body, Elizabeth, a UNC-Greensboro alumna, said being on stage showing off all her hard work was like a dream come true.

"When I got out there, it was a feeling that I cannot describe," related the 28 year-old. "It was so amazing because I've battled with weight my whole life. It really helped my self image and the way I feel about myself."

Elizabeth Atkins has studied personal training and has even begun training her own clients at Elite Physique. She says her personal struggle gives her a unique insight into the challenges that many of her clients face, and she serves as a living example of what is possible through sheer determination.

"Nobody believes me — I have to carry around pictures," she said of her former stature. "...It really puts things into perspective because I'm able to tell my clients where I came from and not to give up."

Elizabeth hopes to someday be able to join her husband in the business full time. She would also like to become a motivational speaker and to write a book based on her journey to fitness. She says she has learned the hard way that nothing is impossible.

"You are the only person that can hold yourself back," she related. "Everybody has good and bad days, but it's what you do after that that makes the difference. If I can do it, anybody can; it's all mental. If you decide you can do it, then you're good to go."

For more information about Elite Physique 365, visit www.elitephysiques365.com, call (336) 829-6228 or email pleonardatkins@yahoo.com.

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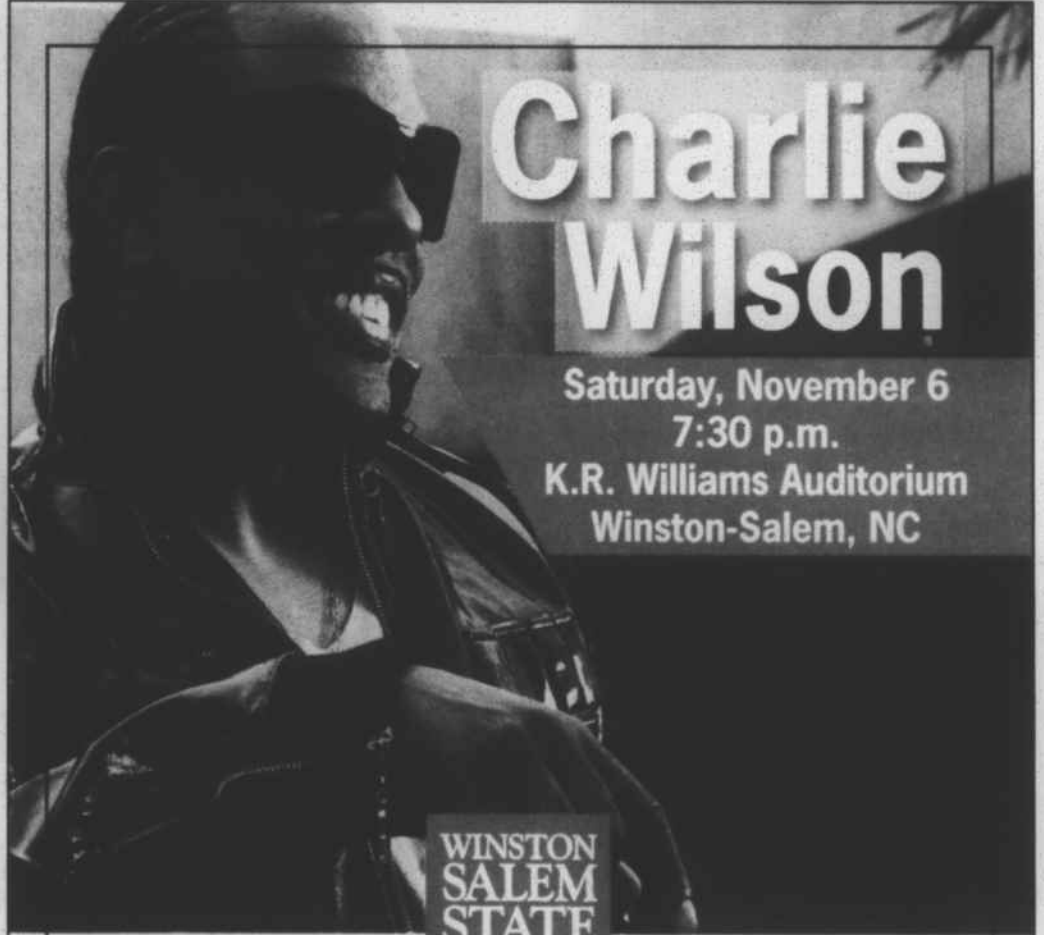
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