

Womble vows to continue to push for eugenics compensation

BY LAYLA GARDS
THE CHRONICLE

To say that State Rep. Larry Womble is disappointed with his colleagues in the General Assembly is quite an understatement.

The Republican-heavy legislature recently voted to axe a budget item that would have compensated those who were sterilized under the state's now-defunct eugenics program.

The budget approved by the House included \$10.3 million – or \$50,000 for each living victim – the amount that was recommended by the Eugenics Task Force following years of hearings and research. Gov. Bev Perdue vetoed the budget, asking legislators to reconsider their stance on the issue, but her veto was overridden.

"What the state did is worse than an abortion," said Womble, who was the first lawmaker who took action in 2003 to right the wrongs done by the N.C. Eugenics Board. "What they did was destroy them forever so they could never have any children, and that's wrong."

Womble's work on behalf of eugenics victims, many of whom were sterilized without their consent, has been featured in national publications and network television programs.

State Rep Earline Parmon, who is heavily favored in November in the race for the largely-Democratic N.C. Senate District 32 seat, said she

was blindsided by the 11th hour rejection of the compensation funds.

"I was absolutely surprised that the Senate did not put it in the budget," Parmon said. "We've been dealing with this since 2003 ... it's something that's been studied and vetted. It had the full support of the Republican leadership in the House. We just knew it was going to pass."

Though the largely-Republican base that rejected the funding cited budgetary concerns among their chief reasons for striking it down, neither Womble nor Parmon are buying the claim.

"The elected representatives of this state failed to have the political and moral will to do right by the people who were violated by this state," Parmon said. "It was totally unnecessary not to pass the compensation. The money was in the budget."

High Point resident Karen Beck's grandmother and great aunt – both Winston-Salem natives – were sterilized in the 1930s. Her grandmother, Flossie Bates, a rape victim, was sterilized at age 15 after delivering Beck's mother. Beck said she was also surprised and disappointed by the General Assembly's decision not to compensate people like her grandmother, who died in 2010.

"It's really deplorable to put budget concerns ahead of people," Beck said. "I just cannot fathom the thinking behind that."

Beck has been fighting to keep the horrific tales at the forefront of people's minds for close to 10 years. For Beck, who is now a grandmoth-



State Rep. Womble speaks at a 2007 eugenics awareness event.

er herself, it's the only defense she can wield in the face of the atrocities that cloud her family history.

"We went down to the Task Force. We wanted to share our grandmother's story," Beck said. "We thought it was important for other people to understand what had happened to her, and at that time, there weren't too many victims who had come forward."

Beck believes that compensation is the least the state could do to make amends with the thousands of families that were "fractured," as she puts it, by eugenics.

State Rep. Dale Folwell, a Republican who represents Forsyth County's 74th District, said the difference in opinions about how to properly address the eugenics situation does not mean there isn't compassion for the victims.

"I have never heard a Republican who has

not been affected by the stories of these victims, but there is obviously disagreement about how to deal with it," said Folwell.

Folwell said the issue could have been settled sometime ago, when Democrats held the power in the General Assembly.

"No one can blame the Republicans for this not happening when they (Democrats) had control of every chamber and the checkbook," he said.

Womble, who was sidelined when he was critically wounded in a car accident late last year and is not seeking reelection as a result, vowed to continue fighting for eugenics victims.

"I'm not going to give up," he said. "I'm going to continue to work on behalf of these victims to make the state do the right thing."

Though the victims won't get compensation this year, Womble is pleased with past successes. In 2002, then-Gov. Mike Easley issued an official apology to the victims, and students are now being taught about eugenics as part of the state's history curriculum.

"I don't like to say it was futile because we did accomplish some things," Womble remarked. "At least we got it into the public (eye). At least people know what was done."

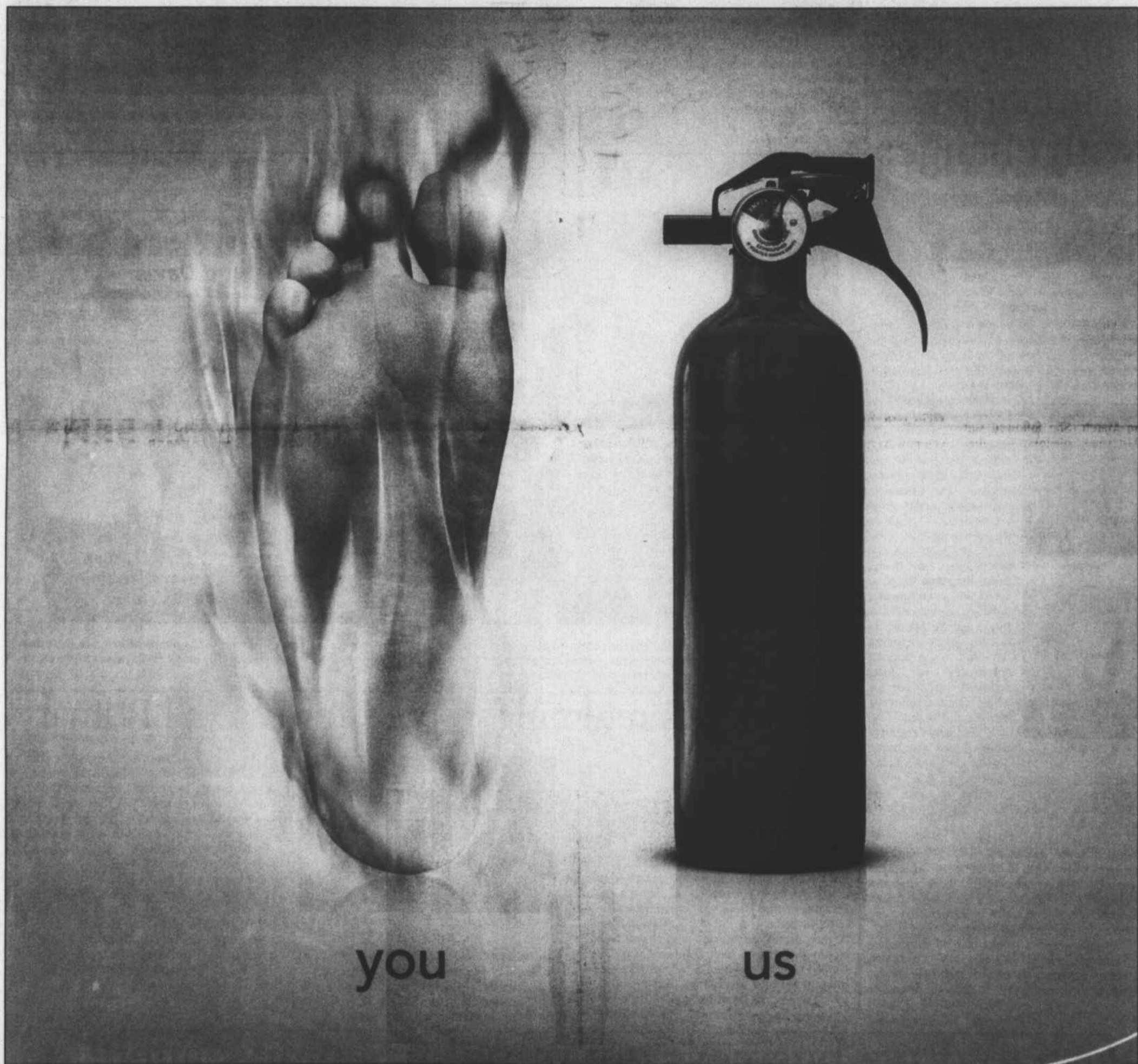
Both Womble and Parmon are also saddened that their colleagues severely crippled the Racial Justice Act (RJA). The two lawmakers designed the Act to give death row inmates an opportunity to prove in court that racial bias played a role in their convictions. In April, in the first test of the RJA, a Cumberland County Superior Court judge found that Marcus Robinson was convicted, in part, because prosecutors intentionally excluded blacks from the jury.



Beck



Folwell



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