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Community leader dies after fall

The Daily Reflector

Monday, February 23, 2009

Former Greenville mayor and community leader Les Garner died at Pitt County Memorial Hospital on Monday after suffering a fall Saturday night. He was 89.

Garner fell on some brick steps at the home of a friend after attending the annual Service League Charity Ball on Saturday night and an East Carolina University baseball game earlier in the day, according to friends. He suffered a head injury in the fall.

Garner was well known in Greenville for his support of charitable causes, his devotion to Kiwanis and for backing ECU and its sports teams. He sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at many ECU baseball games and did so again on Saturday. His voice was missed during Sunday's game.

Garner served as mayor of Greenville in 1986-87. He was honored by the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce as its Citizen of the Year in 1976 and just last month as its second Legends Award recipient. Known as "Mr. Kiwanis," he helped organize more than 50 clubs and served as governor of the Carolinas District. He was a member of University City Kiwanis, which he founded in 1972, and was an honorary member of several local clubs.

Garner, a native of Newport who moved to Greenville with his family in 1931, graduated from Greenville High School in 1937. He was a World War II veteran, honored for distinguished service as a radio operator and nose gunner on B-24s. He flew 51 missions over Europe and was awarded four air medals and two presidential unit citations.

Garner married the former Evelyn Griffin of Williamston and raised five children, including two foster children.

He was a founding partner in a successful wholesale business, Garner Wynne Manning, from which he retired in 1990.

Garner was inducted into Kiwanis in 1968 and was named "Kiwanian of the Year" in 1971 by the Greenville Kiwanis Club. He served as lieutenant governor of the Carolinas District in 1974-75 and later as governor of the Carolinas District, chartering 26 clubs while serving in those roles. In all, he had a hand in organizing more than 50 Kiwanis clubs, including the first Golden K Club (1975) and the first all-female club (1987) in Kiwanis International.

Garner also was a former president of the ECU Pirate Club, a charter member of St. James United Methodist Church and chairman of its advisory board, chairman of the Salvation Army advisory board, master of the local Masonic Lodge and grand master of Grand Lodge of North Carolina. He was a 33rd degree mason and an honorary member of 10 lodges in North Carolina.

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UNC chancellor speaks to J.H. Rose students

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Monday, February 23, 2009

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp told a group of J.H. Rose High School students that the world needs them to go to college and address its difficult challenges.

Thorp spoke Monday to about 75 Rose students who are interested in attending UNC-CH.

"The world needs you right now," he said. "We are facing an energy crisis, and an economic crisis and you are going to go and straighten all that out."

Thorp told the students that they would be studying with some of the brightest and most accomplished students and faculty in the world if they choose UNC-CH.

"This is a great place for us," he said.

"We get a lot of wonderful students from your school and from your town. We have been watching people go to college and go out and do wonderful things for 215 years."

Thorp, 44, took over as chancellor at UNC-CH in July 2008. He brings a youthful perspective to the school that has produced more Rhodes Scholars than any other public university in the country and ranks seventh among all schools.

North Carolina is not necessarily looking for well-rounded students, he said. The school is not looking for someone who is a member of every club and spreads themselves too thin.

Bill Gates, Tiger Woods and Ty Lawson "are not well-rounded," he said.

"If you are really passionate about something and you can show that to us, you will be much better off," Thorp said. "People who are really successful are obsessed with one thing."

He also advised students to take the most challenging courses available at the school.

"We want people who are willing to take on challenges, so the fact that you are willing to take challenging courses is what we are looking for," he said.

About 50 percent of students in North Carolina who apply to UNC-CH are accepted. That number is about 65 percent for J.H. Rose, he said.

Thorp advised the students who get into North Carolina to engage with the faculty, study abroad for a semester and get involved in the community.

"We believe — and we know because we have seen it — that you are going to change the future," Thorp said.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9565.
Heading to when A is average

By STUART ROISTACZER

STANFORD, Calif.

I collect data on college grades. It's a hobby of mine. Others collect cars, commemorative plates and whatnot. That's not my thing. I'd rather collect data. And given that I'm a retired college professor from Duke, it would make sense that I'd be interested in grading.

Over a million students total are represented in my database, which can be found at www.gradeinflation.com. The average GPA nationwide is now between 3.0 and 3.1. Grading is easy in America, and grades have been rising nationwide for over 20 years.

But you don't need to look at data from all over the country to know this. All you have to do is examine college grading in one state, North Carolina. I've collected extensive grading histories from six North Carolina schools.

Everything you need to know about grading in colleges across America can be found in those six schools, one private and elite, Duke; one private and modestly selective, Elon; and four public, including an engineering school, N.C. State University, and a flagship liberal arts school, UNC-Chapel Hill.

First off, it's worth noting that, at all six schools, grades keep going up to the tune of 0.1 to 0.3 change in GPA per decade. Just like everywhere else in the country, schools in North Carolina are grading easier than ever.

But it's also interesting to look at the actual GPAs of these schools. At the top of the heap grade-wise, you have Duke, which has for at least 40 years graded about 0.2 higher than UNC-Chapel Hill. The gap widens and narrows slightly over those 40 years, but it's persistent. Right now it's narrowing and Duke's GPA is 3.4, while UNC's is in comparison a meek 3.2. Those are typical numbers for elite schools and flagship state schools, respectively, across the country.

Below UNC-Chapel Hill, historically you have North Carolina schools with harsher grading. N.C. State tends to draw the techie/engineering types and, like most tech schools, GPAs are low.

N.C. State's grading, about an average 2.9 GPA, is actually very similar to other state tech schools like Purdue and Georgia Tech. Nerds apparently don't cry with they get B's.

Then you have satellite schools and nonselective private schools with less competitive students and lower grades historically as well. That mirrors the nation. Less competitive schools historically have had lower GPAs.

But something is changing in these grading patterns. Two of these historically low grading schools are showing rapid increases in grades, UNC-Asheville and Elon University. They are approaching the average GPA at Chapel Hill, even though their students, on average, aren't as competitive.

What's happening at these schools is similar to what is happening across the country. Liberal arts colleges like Elon have seen dramatic rises in GPAs over the last 20 years. Then there are state schools, like UNC-Asheville, that were once sleepy little regional things in attractive settings that suddenly became attractive to out-of-staters. These, too, can be expected to have significant rises in GPA, far faster than the national average.

Administrators will tell you that grades are rising for myriad reasons that reflect well on their institutions. Students are getting better. Teachers are getting better. Methods of teaching are better.

That may all be true at some colleges, but that's not the real driver. It never has been what has driven rising grades. Grade inflation leads to worse education, but it does make for happier students with brighter prospects for job and post-graduate school placement. That's why we inflate grades. It's true in North Carolina. It's true everywhere.

In a nutshell, grading in North Carolina and the rest of the colleges in America has turned into a kind of horse race. Everyone is racing to get to the point where the average student is an A student. In about 30 years, if current trends hold, Duke, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Asheville and Elon will all get there. The average GPA at all of those places will be between 3.6 and 4.0. The same can be said for hundreds of colleges and universities — both prominent and obscure — across the country.

What will it mean if in 2040, A is average in many of America's colleges? It certainly means that grades will be meaningless. It also undoubtedly means that we will have severely discounted the value of higher education. Grade inflation represents the greatest collective failure in education in America over the last 20 years.

Stuart Roistacher is a former professor of geophysics from Duke University. He is the author of a book, "Gone for Good: Tales of University Life After the Golden Age," and many articles on higher education and grading. Christopher Healy was instrumental in finding data for this article.
Eve’s brother a believer

If you’re anything like me, you wouldn’t even think about riding cross country in an RV with 11 other dudes.

Of course, if you are anything like me, you wouldn’t think that you could change the world, either.

Yet, that’s what Andrew Carson and his pals are trying to do. With the fervor, belief and lack of cynicism to be found only in the young, Carson and his college and camp buddies set out in an RV and a van from Chapel Hill in September to change the world.

(Psst. Don’t dare tell ’em they can’t do that.)

Carson, the brother of slain UNC-Chapel Hill Student Body President Eve Carson, and his friends are on a mission to call attention to the deadly affliction Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy.

What?

Precisely.

Carson and his friends hope to raise awareness and about $17 million by selling DVDs of “Darius Goes West,” a documentary film they made in 2007. It is about the students’ effort to show teenager Darius Weems the country and trick out his wheelchair before he succumbs to Duchenne, as his brother Mario did.

“Darius had never left Athens (Ga.),” Carson said. “We wanted him to see the world and get on MTV and teach a generation about the disease and about caring.”

The idea for the documentary, which has won 28 awards in film festivals, came while Logan Smalley, the documentary’s director, Carson and others were doing what we parents fear college kids do all the time anyway — watching television. Specifically, MTV’s “Pimp My Ride,” in which clunker cars get customized.

“Mario asked Logan to look after Darius,” Carson said. “We all got to know Darius at camp. ... We were watching ‘Pimp My Ride’ and decided we wanted to make the wheelchair cool.

“MTV has 70 million viewers and many of them are the age of the children who live and die from Duchenne,” Carson said.

Darius is 19, the same age his brother was when he died.

When I called Carson on Sunday afternoon, he was in Portland, Ore., showing the documentary (www.dariusgoestwest.org) to yet another captivated crowd at Portland State University. By the time he called back seven hours later, the crew and he were in Seattle, doing the same thing and, he said, receiving the same enthusiastic reception at the University of Washington.

“It’s a fun trip,” he said. “The reception everywhere has been great. Chapel Hill was a great kickoff for the tour.

Carson said crew members share all roles “but right now, I’m the caretaker for Darius.”

I noted that his sister, Eve, who was killed March 5, 2008, was also involved in community service work.

“It comes from my parents,” he said. “They wanted to instill that sense of caring and giving in us.”

Carson took the year off from Davidson College, where he majors in economics and Chinese, so he could travel the country raising awareness of Duchenne and money.

Perhaps by doing so, his friends and he can help people like Darius. People who don’t have a year to take off. People who, as they near 20, may not even have a year.
School diversity policy
discussion Thursday

FROM STAFF REPORTS

RALEIGH — Supporters and critics of the Wake County school system will meet Thursday to discuss the impact of the district's student diversity policy.

Topics will include the 1976 merger of the Raleigh City and Wake County schools, diversity in student assignment, neighborhood schools and school resegregation. State Sen. Vernon Malone, who was chairman of the merged school board, and Dudley Flood, who helped oversee integration efforts in the state's public schools, will be the speakers.

The forum, which is open to the public, will run from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at Martin Street Baptist Church's Johnson Building, 1001 E. Martin St. in Raleigh. For more information, contact Calla Wright at 231-9057.
Ex-Raleigh resident arrested in bank fraud

FROM STAFF REPORTS

RALEIGH — A former Raleigh resident was arrested Friday in Georgia in connection with a multimillion-dollar bank fraud conspiracy.

Pastanin Devar Whitaker, 34, was arrested at a home outside Atlanta by U.S. marshals.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service began investigating Whitaker and others after postal inspectors uncovered a scheme to defraud several banks of more than $1.2 million. Whitaker learned he was wanted and fled the Raleigh area, according to the U.S. Marshals Service.

After postal inspectors asked for help finding Whitaker, members of the U.S. Marshals Violent Fugitive Task Force in Raleigh traveled to Atlanta to arrest him.

In a search of the house, U.S. marshals found approximately 48 marijuana plants in one bedroom, with an estimated street value of $96,000.

In addition to the outstanding federal warrant for bank fraud, Whitaker was charged by Georgia authorities with felony manufacturing/maintaining a marijuana grow house.
Don’t put off ECU’s dental school

If you think North Carolina has done a good job of providing dental health care to its citizens, take a trip east of Interstate 95. Way down east. The gap between North Carolina’s affluent regions and rural areas is as plain as the smile on your face. Or, in too many unfortunate cases, the lack thereof.

The economic struggles of Eastern North Carolina are no secret, and the recession has made a bad situation worse. Poor dental health goes hand-in-hand with low income, high unemployment and few prospects. Our classical images of poverty almost invariably include misaligned or missing teeth.

But poor dental health isn’t just a cosmetic problem. It is a key factor in poor overall health. Having a mouth of broken, painful teeth leads to bad eating habits (resulting in obesity, diabetes, heart disease and a host of other disorders). Perhaps even more importantly, it leads to low self-esteem, which cripples its victims’ dreams and aspirations.

Improving dental health is an important, and underappreciated, part of breaking the cycle of poverty in rural North Carolina, and it is time to help our neighbors who’ve been left behind by the systems in place. As a news story earlier this month noted, more than half of North Carolina’s counties have fewer than three dentists for every 10,000 people. Poor counties have no dentists.

In 2006, plans were approved to build a new dental school at East Carolina University. Today, the school is preparing for its first class in the fall of 2011. Pending appropriate state funding, the school will graduate 50 dentists in the middle of the next decade.

In the meantime, the school will set up clinical service learning centers around the state — in the rural east and the rural west — to train aspiring dentists and provide care to the state’s neediest.

Admission policies will emphasize recruiting and accepting students from these same underserved areas, which increases the likelihood of graduates’ returning to those areas to practice.

If that strategy sounds familiar, it should. It’s the same critical mission that the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina has been fulfilling for more than 30 years. It’s the same mission East Carolina University has been fulfilling in the region for a century.

My late father, a professor of pediatrics at the medical school, believed deeply in that mission, because he saw firsthand how it changed lives. In the early 1980s, every couple of weeks, Dad rode with his colleagues, sometimes 90 minutes each way from Greenville, to staff clinics in places like Swan Quarter and Columbia, among other rural areas. They saw countless examples of the unfathomable disparity in the quality and availability of medical care between the state’s population centers and its rural regions. In many cases, Dad was the first doctor those children had ever seen.

That critical work continues today and has expanded significantly. The new dental school is the next step.

In November, Dr. James Hupp left his job as dean of the University of Mississippi School of Dentistry to become founding dean at the East Carolina dental school. Hupp has significant experience in developing comprehensive programs and curricula to meet the needs of rural communities, and he is excited about the prospect of building a dental school from the ground up.

Unfortunately, in the midst of the recession, the funding needed to recruit faculty and pursue accreditation is at risk, posing a dramatic quandary: The new dental school cannot recruit students until it is accredited. It cannot get accredited if it can’t get sufficient funding this year and next to hire faculty and develop its innovative curriculum.

Hupp and other university officials are working to ensure that this message gets across to the General Assembly, the UNC Board of Governors and anyone else who will listen.

Eastern North Carolina stands on the brink of something big — a basic building block to a better, healthier tomorrow for thousands of people in underserved and underserved areas. Addressing the region’s dental health needs has been a long time coming, and further delay for lack of funding would only perpetuate the disservice that the region has suffered for decades.

Mike Hughes of Raleigh is a member of the ECU Board of Visitors.

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