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ECU students part of 'Extreme' experience

By Christine Neff
ECU News Services

Tuesday, March 10, 2009

JAMESVILLE — They are giving up spring break for an experience that could only be described as extreme.

East Carolina University students are volunteering for ABC’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,” building a home for a Jamesville family this week, the university’s spring break. The house will be unveiled to the family on Friday.

Students in ECU’s construction management program make up most of the university’s volunteers. Seventy-five to 80 students from the department are volunteering at the site.

Six students in the program served as project team leaders. Construction management teaching instructor Bryan Wheeler and graduate West Overman are serving as project managers.

They are joining Edenton Builders and more than 1,000 volunteers from the region to work 12-hour shifts and 24-hour days building a home for the family of Jeff Cooper, a decorated and disabled Gulf War veteran.

“The most impressive part of this is the magnitude of it,” said Jerry Langston, a senior ECU student in construction management. “It’s not the fact that we’re building a huge house. It’s the fact that there is a coordinated effort of people who are volunteering their time and doing what should be a 16 to 24-week project in 106 hours or less.”

Facing that time crunch, the army of volunteers is rarely resting. By Monday afternoon, they began securing the first walls of the new home on Cooper Lane. ECU students could be spotted in the crowd by the Pirate mascot stickers on their white hard hats.

Langston said he kept in mind the family they’re helping.

“It’s great to do this for a family that has the needs they have. We know at the end of the week, this family will come into a brand new house that is handicapped accessible,” he said.

Jeff Cooper, his wife Clara, and their children Windy and Aaron faced many challenges in their old home. Both Jeff and his son are disabled. Jeff, who suffers from Gulf War Syndrome, immune disorders and multiple sclerosis, is confined to a wheelchair. Aaron lost most of his right arm when he was run over by a garbage truck two years ago.

The double-wide trailer where they had been living had faulty wiring, a sinking roof and a rotting wheelchair ramp, according to a news release from “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.”

The new home will be a tremendous improvement.

“This is truly about service. That’s why we’re here,” Wheeler said.

The Jamesville episode of “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” is scheduled to air on ABC in May.

WATCH ONLINE

To monitor the progress of the house this week, visit www.extremeebheroes.com. More information also is available at http://www.extremeebheroes.com/meet-the-family.php.

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One UNC hate crime policy likely

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - A UNC system task force will recommend that all public universities follow a single policy related to hate crimes.

But the task force, formed following the discovery of racist threats to Barack Obama inside N.C. State's Free Expression Tunnel, stopped short of recommending mandatory diversity training for new public university students. The racist threats were found the day after Obama's election.

The group was asked to consider both a systemwide hate crimes policy and the need for mandatory diversity training. It is recommending the systemwide policy to UNC President Erskine Bowles but wants a new task force to continue exploring the need for diversity training.

A systemwide policy detailing unacceptable behavior would both force campuses to standardize their codes of conduct and send a message to students about what is acceptable behavior, said Harold Martin, a UNC system vice president who led the task force. The more detailed the policy is, the more power a campus has to punish bad behavior, Martin said.

"It heightens the level of visibility and importance of student codes of conduct," Martin said. "It will force the campuses to be clearer about codes of conduct and allow them to punish students who violate it."

Several UNC system campuses offer diversity training during freshman orientation, but none mandate it.

The task force was asked simply to consider whether students should receive such training. Its members concluded that a new commission should look at the issue more broadly, taking faculty and staff into account as well.

"It can't just center on students; it must also focus on employees," said Tracy Wright, a task force member and administrator at Appalachian State University. "You can't just attack one piece of the puzzle and think everything will be all right."

The task force's final report is due to Bowles' office March 31.

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Orthopedic surgeon Denis Marcellin-Little, left, gives Cassidy a new limb of carbon fiber and titanium at NCSU as the dog licks his owner, Steve Posovsky. Veterinarians and engineers worked together to devise the leg.

Staff Photos by Shawn Rocco

Bone and muscle have grown into a device surgically attached to the leg.

**Medicine, engineering put dog on four legs**

**Former stray is first to get custom artificial limb fused directly to leg bone**

**JAY PRICE, Staff Writer**

Comment on this story

RALEIGH - Even the guys whose scalpels and engineering wizardry had turned a three-legged dog into a four-legged one had to stare.

Cassidy, a German shepherd mix and former stray, took a few tentative steps on his new carbon fiber and titanium limb Tuesday, then made a break for it. He wandered down a hall at the N.C. State University College of Veterinary Medicine with his buddy Della, a lumbering Rhodesian ridgeback.

"I'm actually a little bit shocked," said orthopedic surgeon Denis Marcellin-Little as he and Ola Harrysson, an associate engineering professor, studied Cassidy's gait and newly level pelvis. "We're 10 minutes into it, and he's moving really well."
Cassidy is a celebrity wherever he goes, even to people who don't know that he's the first dog in the country to get a custom artificial limb fused directly to the leg bone. NCSU has performed similar operations on a pair of cats and has two more dogs scheduled in coming weeks. Researchers hope to use what they're learning to help human amputees.

His owners, Steve and Susan Posovsky of Florida, have no idea how Cassidy lost his leg; it was gone when they adopted him. He also is in remission from cancer and still sports several shaved patches from his continuing chemotherapy.

Marcellin-Little attached a custom-made titanium socket to Cassidy's right rear tibia last summer, and by this week X-rays showed the bone was growing firmly into the honeycombed metal. Cassidy had been stumping along since fall on a simple, pogo-stick-like metal "training leg" but was ready for the final, space-age version to be screwed into the socket.

The prosthetic legs and the fitting on the bone were made in a lab at NCSU's department of industrial and systems engineering, where Harrysson works.

After Cassidy was fitted with the final design Tuesday at the vet school, he, Della and the Posovskys hopped into their truck to visit the engineering lab where Tim Horn, a Ph.D. candidate who made the carbon leg, could make some adjustments.

It was a proper victory lap, since Cassidy's success story depends on both places.

Harrysson and some of his students have been feeding CT scans from the vet school into a computer program. Then an array of machines uses the data to craft replicas of patients' bones in hard plastic. They also make metal patches and fittings that conform perfectly to the outside of the bones, like Cassidy's fitting.

The veterinarians can use the plastic bones to study how to perform a tricky operation, and then actually practice it by cutting and drilling the plastic, settling on just the right techniques and tools before mistakes get serious.

**Troops might benefit**

The collaboration started in 2002, when Marcellin-Little called Harrysson. Marcellin-Little had a patient, a German shepherd, with such severely deformed hind legs that it couldn't walk. Marcellin-Little wondered whether Harrysson would make models of the bones so that he could figure out how to fix them. After the operation, the dog was able to run and jump again and lived five years more, Harrysson said.

Since then, the lab has turned out bone replicas for 30 to 40 animals -- including some of Cassidy's leg bone for practice -- and several plates and fittings.

"Sometimes we come up with an engineering solution that the veterinarians haven't thought of, and sometimes we come up with things and they say no, that's not going to happen," Harrysson said. "But we're learning from them, and they're learning from us."

The NCSU researchers in both schools hope to transfer some of what they've learned to human patients in a few years. Marcellin-Little said that the Department of Defense is interested because of the applications for troops injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

About 150 humans have undergone a basic form of the operation in Sweden, Harrysson said. But he and Marcellin-Little hope to take the idea a step further by making custom fittings, and by having the bone attach itself, which could reduce failures at the attachment point. They also hope to parlay their expertise into a new center that focuses on this crossroads between medicine and engineering.

**Everybody notices**

The Posovskys, meanwhile, are just looking forward to a few more years with their
mild-mannered dog, even though it means dealing with constant attention.

"You can't walk down the street anywhere without people stopping and saying, 'What's this,' 'How did it happen,' and 'Can I take a picture of him?' " Steve Posovsky said.

The Posovskys have invested several thousand dollars and a lot of time in Cassidy's health, including six weeks it took them to teach him how to use the practice leg. As they left the engineering lab Tuesday, Cassidy, wearing the old leg, headed for a set of steps.

"Can he handle that?" Horn said.

"Oh, yeah," Posovsky said, as Cassidy hopped carefully from one to the next.

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- Photo gallery: Cassidy gets a new leg

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