THE DAILY CLIPS

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Benevolence Corps provides health information, entertainment during its annual ceremony

The Daily Reflector

The Benevolence Corps held its annual Senior Citizens Appreciation Ceremony for about 100 participants Thursday at C.M. Eppes Recreational Center on Nash Street. Dr. John Morrow, director of the Pitt County Health Department, spoke on health and wellness, discussing the importance of flu vaccinations and providing an update on the swine flu.

Health department representatives also presented information on viruses and flu vaccinations, stroke awareness and hypertension.

The program also included information on preventing falls and medication safety and management, in addition to hospice care and coping with the death of a loved one. Roses and carnations were given to participants during the program, which also included songs, prayer and food.
Bowles wants NCSU chairman out

UNC system head is 'very disappointed' in Campbell's role in the hiring of Mary Easley.

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff writer

The president of the University of North Carolina system has asked McQueen Campbell,
chairman of the N.C. State University board, to resign immediately after learning this week that Campbell played a role in hiring former first lady Mary Easley.

Erskine Bowles told The News & Observer on Thursday that Campbell phoned him earlier this week and "went through a whole mea culpa," then recounted telling Chancellor James Oblinger that Easley was looking to change jobs before N.C. State hired her in 2005.

"He said, 'I did tell Jim Oblinger in passing that Mary Easley was going to change jobs and he may not even remember that.'" Bowles said. "And I said, 'What?' That was about the end of the conversation. I was surprised."

Campbell was prominently featured in a two-part series last weekend in The N&O, which recounted his friendship and influence with Mike and Mary Easley. Campbell flew the governor often in his planes, sometimes for free, and bragged of his influence in getting key development permits. The governor twice appointed him to the N.C. State Board of Trustees, where he rose to chairman.

Campbell had insisted that he played no role in Mary Easley's job at N.C. State. He denied having even a single conversation with university officials or Mary Easley before she got a three-year contract at $80,000 a year in 2005, or when she received a five-year, $850,000 contract that touched off controversy.

That story changed with his call to Bowles. Bowles then phoned Oblinger, who said in an interview Thursday that he did not recall being told by Campbell that Mary Easley would be available. Oblinger said he does not deny it might have happened.

"I'm embarrassed," Oblinger said. "If I was told by McQueen, I have forgotten it. And that's the embarrassing part."

Campbell could not be reached Thursday. The Easleys have refused all interview requests.

Oblinger said he often gets job suggestions and his practice would have been to pass that information to Provost Larry Nielsen, the university's chief academic officer. Nielsen resigned Thursday over questions about his role in hiring Mary Easley.

"I could have said something to Larry," Oblinger said. "But I don't recall that."

He said Nielsen does not recall where he heard about Mary Easley's availability.

Bowles said the conversation with Campbell this week was jolting. He immediately suggested that Campbell step down to protect the reputation of N.C. State.

"I'm very disappointed with this whole matter," Bowles said.

Bowles added that he still does not believe anything "nefarious" took place. He said the job suggestion would have been similar to recommendations for hiring that he and other top leaders often get.

Bowles was asked whether Mary Easley should step aside. He noted that she has a contract, but he said her job duties as coordinator of a speaker's series and creator of a public safety center would "all be reviewed in the appropriate manner especially as we look at where we're going to place our budget going forward."

Campbell, who has six weeks remaining in his term, said he would consider Bowles' request, Bowles said. Chancellors in the UNC system report to Bowles, but he does not have authority to remove a trustee.

Campbell, 38, is a real-estate broker, entrepreneur and private pilot originally from Bladen County whose relatives are longtime Easley supporters. He graduated from N.C. State in 1993 and has been close to the governor for years.
Contacts were made

It is clear from records that Nielsen, Campbell and the Easleys were in contact around the time Mary Easley was hired.

Nielsen and Campbell met for an hour on April 20, 2005, according to Nielsen's calendar. A phone call was placed from the Easley home to Campbell's cell phone on April 24. Mary Easley faxed her résumé to Nielsen on May 2, 2005. Nielsen interviewed Easley on May 17. And Nielsen then waived a job search, created a position to run a speaker's series and hired Mary Easley for it May 26.

At the time, Nielsen was about to lose his position as interim provost. Four candidates were appearing on campus and Nielsen wasn't one of the finalists. On June 3, after the provost interviews had been completed, Oblinger cited a groundswell of support for Nielsen and added him to the pool. Nielsen got the permanent position three weeks later.

Also that month, the Easley administration's Division of Motor Vehicles ended an investigation of a state inspection station owned by Campbell. Campbell then filed an appeal on a separate probe of his station a few days later, the final action taken in that case before the DMV commissioner ended it.

Campbell also was involved in a land deal at the time at a Carteret County development called Cannonsgate, where the Easleys would later purchase a lot at a favorable price. The major permit for a wastewater treatment plant was pending in the Easley administration that May; it was granted in two months. Campbell later claimed in a separate land deal that his and a business associate's political presence and government contacts had secured that permit in half the normal time.

Oblinger and Nielsen said in statements Thursday that any implication that Nielsen was hired as provost because of the Mary Easley hire is false.

"The two decisions were completely independent," Nielsen wrote in a letter to the NCSU community.

Nielsen has refused interview requests since March 31. He had previously said that the speaker's series was his idea, one he had been considering for some time.

But Oblinger said Thursday that the speaker's series was a task he charged Nielsen with creating and that it arose out of mutual discussions.

Oblinger said he still supports Mary Easley and believes that her work, especially on the speaker's series, has brought nationally known figures to campus, raising the 33,000-student university's profile.

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**In their own words**

James Oblinger, Thursday

N&O: How did it take place?

Oblinger: I'm going to tell you something I learned yesterday from my president. McQueen called our president. ... Erskine said that McQueen had told him that McQueen had mentioned to me that Mary Easley was available.
I said, Erskine, I don’t have any recollection of that. ...

My practice from the time as associate dean ... and certainly my chancellorship is when I hear about that. I look at it and say who should see this?, and send it off. I have done that many times. They go to the chief academic officer who is the lead hirer of academic personnel.

McQueen Campbell, March 11

N&O: In 2005, what were the discussions about bringing her on at N.C. State?
Campbell: None.

N&O: You didn't talk to anybody about it?
Campbell: Nope.

N&O: Why not?
Campbell: Because the trustees aren't involved in hiring.

N&O: Did Mary Easley ever say anything to you?
Campbell: Never.

N&O: There wasn't any discussion?
Campbell: No. I never lobbied for her. Never.

N&O: The question wasn't about lobbying. There were no conversations?
Campbell: There were none.

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NCSU provost Nielsen resigns

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

Larry Nielsen, the provost at N.C. State University, resigned abruptly Thursday amid questions and criticism of his role in the hiring of former first lady Mary Easley.

"I have chosen to resign because of the intense public attention and criticism from my hiring of Mrs. Mary Easley and now because of questions surrounding the way I was hired as provost," Nielsen said in a letter to the university community.

His resignation as provost takes effect May 22. He will join the faculty in the College of Natural Resources.

A report in Sunday’s News & Observer showed that Nielsen hired Mary Easley in May 2005. The same day that Mary Easley faxed her résumé to Nielsen, the campus conducted an open forum with the first of four candidates for the provost job. Nielsen was not a candidate.

Shortly after, Nielsen moved to create the position filled by Mary Easley. He waived a job search, created the position and hired her to oversee a campus speaker series.

A week after Nielsen hired Easley, Chancellor James Oblinger announced him as a fifth candidate for the provost position. Oblinger hired him for the permanent post three weeks after that.

Nielsen said Thursday that any implication that he was awarded the provost's position in connection with his hiring of Easley is false. Oblinger also said there was no connection.

"This implication is preposterous," Nielsen wrote.
"The personal stress associated with this situation has simply become unbearable," Nielsen said in his letter. "I am dismayed that many people outside the university, and some within it, have attributed motives to my hiring of Mrs. Easley that are absolutely false and groundless."

He wrote that he hopes his resignation as provost "will prove to be the solution to these problems."

Oblinger accepted the resignation and called it a sad day for the university.

"It is not in his character to do anything that would willfully harm N.C. State University," Oblinger said at an afternoon news conference.

Nielsen has refused all requests for interviews since March 31. He has said in past statements that he conceived the speaker's series idea and position and chose Easley for it. Easley started at $80,000 a year on a three-year contract.

Several of the candidates for the provost position at the time said in interviews that they were unaware that a speaker's series was being created and funded in the office they would have overseen. One of them, Steve Angle, now provost at Wright State University in Ohio, said in an interview he was told "nothing whatsoever" about it.

Last summer, Nielsen awarded Mary Easley a five-year, $850,000 contract that touched off months of controversy.

The N&O report on Sunday focused on the period in May 2005 when Mary Easley's job was created and she was hired.

At the time, a longtime Easley friend, N.C. State trustee McQueen Campbell, was chairman of the personnel committee and worked closely with Nielsen. Phone records show calls from the Easley home or the Easley security detail to Campbell in the time frame that the job was created.

Oblinger said he did not believe that Mary Easley's job was the result of any pressure.

"This situation is not political patronage," Oblinger said. "There was no influence exhibited by anyone on anyone."

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No improper influence in Mary Easley's hiring

I am writing to express my concerns about the way the story of N.C. State University's hiring of Mary Easley has been reported. This was first a media issue last summer, and we went to great lengths from July to September to explain the circumstances, including responding to requests for documentation and participating in interviews.

This latest round of reporting seems to have been carried out as if none of our efforts from the summer ever happened. Further, you have reached back to the provost search of 2005 to cast aspersions on the integrity of the provost's hiring then used them to claim quid pro quo in Mary Easley's subsequent contract.

The N&O's own May 12 editorial says "there's no proof of improper influence." The reason there is no proof is because there was no improper influence. So, allow me to set the record straight.

The provost search was a very open and transparent process. It is correct that Larry Nielsen was initially not a candidate for the post. However, there was considerable sentiment from many faculty, staff and students who attended the open forums and submitted their comments that Larry should be considered as a candidate for the position. I also discussed the matter with our deans, who were supportive of including Larry as a finalist. This procedural change was announced in a news release and statement to the campus. Larry participated in interviews and forums that were open to the entire campus -- the same process that was in place for all finalists. Again, it was a very open and transparent process.

One of the tasks I had charged the provost with was creating a speaker series that featured nationally and internationally known speakers. That charge evolved into the Millennium Series, for which he hired Mary Easley. The very successful series has since included speakers such as President Bill Clinton, Charlie Rose, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and others.

Last summer, the provost negotiated a new contract with Easley, expanding her duties, including leading the creation of a new academic center for law enforcement and first responders. Historically, N.C. State had interpreted Board of Governors policy to mean that salary increases associated with fixed-term appointments such as the one offered to Easley do not require approval by the N.C. State Board of Trustees and the UNC Board of Governors. UNC General Administration officials advised us that our interpretation of board policy differed from theirs.

With this new interpretation, we then reviewed several hundred contracts dating back to 2002, including Easley's, to ensure they were handled properly. We found that about 30 needed to go forward for Board of Trustees and Board of Governors approval, again including Easley's. All of those contracts were approved at the BOG's September meeting.

When Larry Nielsen assures me that no board member -- or anyone else -- influenced his decision to hire Mary Easley and negotiate a new contract after the initial contract expired, I know it to be the truth. This was a case in which a university administrator made a hiring decision based on qualifications, experience and the vision for creating first a nationally renowned speaker series, and then a new center. The provost chose a person he believed was
well-qualified and capable of the tasks.

We have been and will continue to be forthcoming about our actions. Let me also say that in all of our actions, we will preserve the university's independence and integrity.

James L. Oblinger
Chancellor
N.C. State University
Raleigh

The length limit on letters was waived to permit a fuller response.

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Practice leads to Hall of Fame

Burden, Hatchell, Odom in class

BY EDWARD G. ROBINSON III, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - As a youngster, Willie Burden spent many afternoons dodging would-be tacklers on the field at Thompson Elementary School near his New Bern Avenue home.

Pretending to be his hero Jim Brown, Burden stiff-armed burly defenders and juked others out of their socks and shoes. Nothing but air.

"They never tackled me," said Burden, who played pick-up football by himself most days and had a vivid imagination as a fourth-grader.

Burden, who went on to become an Enloe High and N.C. State star running back, returned to his hometown on Thursday, not far from that old practice field, to accept an induction to the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame.

He joined five others - Sylvia Hatchell, Jerry Moore, Roger Watson, Dave Odom and John Swofford -- as new members of the Hall.

The induction banquet for the inductees was scheduled to be held Thursday night at Hilton North Raleigh. Thursday afternoon, the inductees toured the Hall of Fame at the N.C. Museum of History and spoke at a news conference about the honor.

"The walls certainly talk," said Burden, who played for the Wolfpack from 1970 to 1973, becoming the ACC's player of the year as a senior.

This year's class brings the number of members to 266. The first class was inducted in 1963.

"It's humbling," said Swofford, the ACC's commissioner and a Wilkes Central High alum. "How in the heck did I end up in the same Hall of Fame as Arnold Palmer?"

Each inductee talked about how much he or she respected the accomplishments of the others in their class, as well as those already inducted.
Hatchell, a Gastonia native, is the women's basketball coach at North Carolina. Her team won a national championship in 1994. She also will be inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame on Monday.

"I feel like the most blessed woman in the world," she said.

Watson, who is from High Point, played on the PGA Tour after graduating from High Point University.

Jerry Moore, who was born in Texas, is the football coach at Appalachian State, where he has completed 20 seasons. His teams have won three NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision national titles.

Odom, a Goldsboro native, was the men's basketball coach at Wake Forest from 1992 to 1997. His first collegiate head coaching job was at East Carolina. He also coached basketball and football at Durham High School.

Odom said all of the honorees talked about the importance of the relationships they built over the years that helped them achieve success. No one discussed championships or accomplishments.

"It's not about what we've done," Odom said. "It's about who we've done it with."

Odom ended his talk with a piece of advice he picked up years ago. He applied it to Burden, a player he coached against while at Durham High.

"You will be what you practice every day," Odom said. "Willie started practicing not getting tackled when he was in the fourth grade. He learned the ... lesson well. We never tackled the guy."

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N.C. gets ready to nip swine flu

Officials brace for 2nd wave in fall

BY SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer

With 12 cases of swine flu confirmed in North Carolina, state health leaders are hopeful that a larger outbreak has been averted.

Unknown, however, is whether the new virus could roar back this fall during the traditional flu season, making thousands sick and leading to far more deaths.

As a result, health officials are gleaning lessons from the outbreak this spring, stockpiling medicines and strengthening containment strategies to handle a potentially bigger crisis.

"Pandemic flu could infect 2 billion people -- one-third of the population" worldwide, said Dr. Jeffrey Engel, state health director. "That's the scenario we want to be prepared for."

Engel said lessons from the spring epidemic of the new H1N1 strain have been valuable, particularly as the high alert quickly identified the virus in North Carolina and helped establish how and where the bug spread.

A cluster of cases centered in Onslow and Craven counties have accounted for nine of the state's infections, and a case in Rutherford County was confirmed this week. More are expected, because the new flu bug appears to spread easily between people.

Nationwide, about 4,300 people have been infected, and three have died. World health leaders have yet to declare the outbreak a pandemic, which is based on how widely infections have spread.

Meanwhile, many questions remain, foremost among them whether the new flu strain will reemerge in the fall and how lethal it might be if it does. Scientists worry about a repeat of the 1918 pandemic, in which a mild wave of flu hit in the spring, followed by a larger, more deadly strike that fall.

That pandemic claimed an estimated 50 million lives worldwide. Subsequent pandemics in 1957 and 1968 were less lethal but also hit in waves.

Whatever happens, public health leaders say they are more prepared for an influenza pandemic than ever before. Five years ago, amid fears that a deadly avian flu strain would mutate and cause widespread infections, state, national and international health agencies began setting up pandemic flu plans.

In North Carolina, Engel said the state has procedures in place to maintain key public services, including emergency responses and utilities, if a third of the workforce were hit.

The state has enough anti-viral medications on hand to treat 1 million people, and officials would consider buying more if the federal government offered the drugs at reduced rates.

Engel said the supply of anti-virals, including Tamiflu and Relenza, remains adequate for
people to buy with prescriptions in pharmacies. He said a stockpile of unknown size has been amassed by private companies concerned about keeping their employees at work and operations running.

GSK cranks out the meds

As demand for the drugs has increased, GlaxoSmithKline, which has one of its U.S. headquarters in Research Triangle Park, is ramping up production of its anti-viral drug Relenza. The company will produce 5 million treatment packs a month at its plant in Zebulon and another in France.

In addition, the company is working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization on a vaccine against the new H1N1 strain. GSK spokeswoman Sarah Alspach said development of a separate H1N1 flu shot depends on decisions made by national authorities, but the company has not yet received the necessary ingredients to initiate production on a new vaccine.

Alspach said it usually takes four to six months to produce flu vaccine once the process is initiated.

Currently, GSK and other manufacturers are producing vaccines for next fall’s seasonal flu -- a shot that targets three strains that are commonly circulating. That shot would offer no protection against the new virus.

Engel said inoculations against the H1N1 strain would likely require an initial shot, then a booster. As a result, he said, flu shots next fall could involve three jabs: the seasonal flu shot, plus the two necessary for H1N1 protection.

Abundance of caution

But even gearing up for such a response would be expensive -- and highly speculative.

"It is impossible to plan," said James Thomas, an epidemiologist at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Thomas said that impossibility creates a problem for public health officials, who must respond to a potential threat without unduly stoking panic.

"There was concern, understandably, that we fired things up too much," Thomas said. "But I can guarantee that if the situation was reversed and this virus was more serious and we were less prepared, voices would have been much louder."

Thomas said health officials operate under a precautionary principle: "When there is a high likelihood of harm and something can be done, even in the absence of full information, public health should react in a way to prevent the harm." That, he said, is what occurred, and will again.

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Swine flu

Cases in North Carolina: 12

Cases in the U.S.: 4,298

Cases in the world: 6,497
Deaths: 65
Countries reporting cases: 33
Sources: CDC, WHO

Related Content

- To ease flu fears in Mexico, officials pig out on pork
- Read our 2006 report on the state's preparation for a flu pandemic
- Go to the CDC's information page on swine flu

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