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Group gives support to local cardiac patients

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, December 17, 2008

Dave Martin walked into a patient room at Pitt County Memorial Hospital on Wednesday with a packet of information about the local Mended Hearts chapter.

In the room, Ronald Sutton sat in bed, surrounded by his family. The 57-year-old La Grange man was recovering in the cardiac surgical intermediate unit at the hospital.

As Martin talked to Sutton and his family, he told them about his own bypass surgeries and the lessons he learned from his experience. He asked Sutton about his appetite and exercise before telling him to stay positive and to feel better.

Martin spends most of his Wednesdays at PCMH, visiting heart patients and spreading information about Mended Hearts — an affiliate of the American Heart Association that offers encouragement to patients and their caregivers. The Mended Hearts chapter, which originally formed during the 1980s and was re-activated in 1994, has about 40 local members and 10 accredited volunteers who visit the hospital.

"Most cases, when I tell them that I have been in their position, that opens the conversation up," said Martin, visiting officer for Mended Hearts. "When I walk in there, I can tell how they feel. You have to feel out how they are doing and if they want to talk."

Martin said the majority of the patients he visits are not from Pitt County. Although most do come from the eastern North Carolina region, he said, others come from out of state.

“Our main purpose is doing what I just did,” Martin said, referring to his time with Sutton. “Visit patients. This takes a lot of time; but I enjoy doing it. I like to know how they are being treated and how they feel.”

Bob Dough, president of the local Mended Hearts chapter, said the group visits more than 500 heart surgery patients at PCMH each year and holds monthly meetings to provide support for former patients.

In his President's Report, Dough states the chapter plans to make major efforts to expand membership next year, help Goldsboro re-establish a Mended Hearts chapter and increase its role at the hospital and in the community. He also listed a number of past programs directed by pediatric nurses, pharmacologists and professors from East Carolina University.

Looking at the months ahead, Martin said he is excited about the opening of the East Carolina Heart Institute, which includes a patient bed tower at the hospital. The tower is scheduled to open in January.

"The new building is magnificent, but I'll enjoy it more when it's in operation."

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• AT A GLANCE: The Mended Hearts chapter, based in Greenville, is a patient support organization that provides compassion and encouragement to heart patients, their families and caregivers. It is an affiliate of the American Heart Association, running on a primary objective of visiting heart patients and their families at Pitt County Memorial Hospital.
New: UNC system stalls Charlotte med school

Thursday, December 18, 2008

CHARLOTTE — A proposed regional medical school campus in North Carolina’s largest city has been put on hold because of expected declines in state revenues.

The Charlotte Observer reported Thursday that University of North Carolina system officials won’t seek money for the medical school expansion in its two-year budget request for 2009.

University system official Alan Made says the request was delayed because of the economy.

Under the original proposal, Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte would have gotten its first medical students in 2011 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The plan was slowed down this summer when the Legislature didn’t approve funding.

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COX
NC. has plan to keep jobless payments

State officials said they will borrow from a federal backup fund to pay jobless claims if the state benefit fund runs dry, a Greensboro newspaper reported.

The Associated Press

GREENSBORO — The state of North Carolina could run out of money to pay unemployment benefits next year as layoffs increase, but officials say they plan to borrow if necessary to keep the money flowing rather than raise business taxes.

State officials said they will borrow from a federal backup fund to pay jobless claims if the state benefit fund runs dry, The News & Record of Greensboro reported Wednesday.

Borrowing the money would prevent businesses from having to pay higher taxes for unemployment insurance and a similar plan worked in 2002, said Andy James, spokesman for the Employment Security Commission of North Carolina.

“If our fund goes to zero, we do have a plan that has been tried-and-true and proven,” James said. “I’m hoping we don’t get there, but if we do it will still be several months down the road.”

North Carolina’s unemployment rate is at 7 percent and monthly unemployment payments are between $115 million and $130 million a month. The state currently has $282 million in reserve for jobless benefits, but expects to collect between $500 million and $700 million in the first half of 2009.

If the economy worsens and unemployment payments rise to $150 million a month, the reserve would be wiped out by the middle of 2009, James said.

If North Carolina borrows to keep benefits moving, the state can avoid interest by repaying the money by Sept. 30, James said. If the money can’t be repaid, the state would issue “tax anticipation notes” at lower rates, James said.

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JOBLESS

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In the meantime, state unemployment offices are trying to speed the application process and handle everything in one visit so people don’t have to return.

Ben Barnwell, manager of the office in Greensboro, said the legislature appropriated money to allow hiring of more employees.

The state’s toll-free application line also could keep people from having to stand in line, he said.
Proposal stalls for Charlotte med school

BY KAREN GARLOCH, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHARLOTTE - Charlotte's proposed regional medical school campus is on hold for now because of a projected decline in state revenues.

Carolinas Medical Center had expected to get its first students from UNC Chapel Hill medical school in 2011. But that plan, approved by the UNC Board of Governors in March, got delayed this summer when the General Assembly failed to approve funding for the project.

Now, the UNC system has agreed not to even ask for expansion money in its two-year spending request for 2009.

"It's just not the time to push a major project," said Dr. James McDeavitt, senior vice president for education and research at CMC. "I still think it will happen, it's just the timing's not good right now."

Alan Mabe, vice president for academic planning and university school programs for UNC, said the Board of Governors scaled back its request "to recognize the economic realities."

Medical school expansion is "such a big ticket item," Mabe said. "There were other things in the queue that had priority. The state just has to be in better shape before we would expect them to make even a down payment on this."

The UNC system "stands behind the plan" to expand medical education with two regional campuses in Charlotte and Asheville, Mabe said. But the economic downturn means "all those things are probably going to be pushed ahead one, if not two years."

Karen McCall, spokeswoman for the Chapel Hill medical school, said Dr. Bill Roper, the school's dean, is continuing to work with the UNC president's office on the 2009 legislative agenda. "It has not been finalized," she said.

The $450 million plan called for UNC Chapel Hill to expand its first-year medical school enrollment from 160 to 230, starting in 2009. Also, the medical school at East Carolina University in Greenville would expand its first-year class from 73 to 120.

Fifty of the new UNC students would move to CMC for their third and fourth years, when the focus is on practical experience in the hospital instead of the classroom. Twenty would train in Asheville.

Students would be added gradually, building to a full complement of 100 in two classes in Charlotte, said McDeavitt.

Most of the expansion cost would be for construction or renovation of buildings, including a $62 million, 110,000 square-foot building in Charlotte. It would house a medical library, classrooms, an auditorium and simulation lab. The location has not been chosen, McDeavitt said.

Proposed medical school branches are UNC's response to a recent call by the Association of American Medical Colleges for a 30 percent increase in U.S. medical school enrollment by 2015. That would add about 5,000 students to the 16,000 U.S. medical students enrolled annually and would address an expected doctor shortage.
Other U.S. medical schools have opened branch campuses, and some have evolved into four-year schools. Charlotte is one of the largest U.S. cities without a medical school.

North Carolina has four medical schools - at Chapel Hill, ECU, Duke University in Durham and Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. Despite the lack of a medical school in Charlotte, CMC, a not-for-profit public hospital, has been training future doctors since the 1940s, when it began a freestanding residency program. The center trains 207 residents in 15 specialties.


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Fake IDs' quality impressed officials

Equipment used was stolen from DMV

LEAH FRIEDMAN, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

RALEIGH - The fake driver's licenses that Robert Wayne Bullock is accused of making and selling were so good that state law enforcement officers weren't sure at first they were even fakes.

The IDs looked real in part, authorities say, because Bullock was using a printer and laminating machine stolen from the Division of Motor Vehicles. Bullock, 23, was arrested Tuesday at his home outside Hillsborough and charged with selling fake IDs.

The case began several months ago, when Wake County Alcoholic Beverage Control law enforcement officials started noticing that hundreds of college students in Raleigh were getting caught with more sophisticated fake IDs than they'd ever seen before. The IDs were being confiscated by ABC law enforcement and bar employees mostly on Hillsborough Street near N.C. State University.

Fake IDs, of course, are nothing new in college towns. But usually, it's obvious someone has altered the date of birth to make the card holder appear to be at least 21.

But these new IDs were made with unaltered dates of birth and the security holograms found on official state driver's licenses, said Lew Nuckles, chief of Wake County Alcoholic Beverage Control's law enforcement. Officers didn't know the IDs were fake until they checked the driver's license numbers and learned they belonged to other people, Nuckles said.

Nuckles' team started an investigation, talking to dozens of people caught with the fake IDs as well as other informants, looking for the person at the "top of the food chain," he said.

That investigation led to Bullock, Nuckles said. During an undercover operation over Thanksgiving, law enforcement officers bought some fake IDs from Bullock, he said.

Bullock's fake IDs sold for $150 to $170 each, Nuckles said. He would put in students' real names and addresses, then make up driver's license numbers, said Joey Gardner, assistant director of DMV's licensing and theft bureau, which also was involved in the investigation.
Gardner said they quickly suspected that Bullock was using official DMV equipment because the IDs had the state's security holograms on them.

When Nuckles, Gardner, Orange County Sheriff's deputies and officials from the State Bureau of Investigation went to Bullock's home to arrest him, they found a printer and a laminating machine that had been stolen from the DMV office in Louisburg in fall 2006, Gardner said. Two computers and another printer taken during that same burglary have not been recovered, Gardner said.

In addition, officers found 1,000 blank card stocks, rolls of color printing ribbon and full rolls of DMV security laminating paper with holograms, Nuckles said. Bullock also had a special cleaning kit needed to keep the computer operating, Nuckles said.

Bullock was taken to Wake County jail and was released Tuesday afternoon on a $5,000 bond.

Bullock is a 2007 graduate of NCSU with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. A woman who picked up his home phone said he was not available and hung up without comment.

**More charges possible**

Nuckles said the fake ID operation was one of the largest and most sophisticated he has seen in the area in quite some time.

He said he expects to bring additional charges against Bullock, including manufacturing fake IDs. Investigators seized five computers from Bullock's home, which they hope will tell them how many IDs he sold and to whom, Nuckles said.

Nuckles said he also expects more arrests in the case.

"Our goal was to get to the top of the food chain," he said. "We left a lot of crumbs behind us, and now we need to go back and get the crumbs."

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UNC panel begins a policy stew

When does free expression become a hate crime? First Amendment gets study

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - The 11 members of a task force considering a hate crimes policy for the UNC system began their work Wednesday with a crash course in the First Amendment.

Among the lessons: The four N.C. State University students whose bigoted messages related to President-elect Barack Obama spurred the UNC system’s introspection at least got the venue right for their invective.

"The free expression tunnel at N.C. State is the quintessential example of a designated public forum," First Amendment lawyer Hugh Stevens told the group Wednesday. "Whatever else they did, the students who posted these sentiments at least put them in the right place. If they had put them on some building on campus, they probably would have been charged with vandalism."

The creation of the task force -- formally titled the UNC Study Commission to Review Student Codes of Conduct as They Relate to Hate Crimes -- followed the discovery in early November of the racist and threatening messages. The messages threatened Obama, prompting a U.S. Secret Service investigation and cries by the state leaders of the NAACP to punish the four students who admitted creating the graffiti.

On Wednesday, task force chairman Harold Martin tried to steer conversation away from the racist graffiti, repeatedly referring to it only as "the unfortunate incident at N.C. State."

But Stevens, a Raleigh lawyer who has represented The News & Observer in First Amendment cases and attended Wednesday's meeting as an adviser, brought it up in a conversation of free speech zones.

Some campuses have designated areas where free speech and expression is encouraged and expected. NCSU's tunnel is one; The Pit at UNC Chapel Hill, a frequent site of demonstrations and protests, is another, and Stevens said more campuses ought to have such areas.

While the public university campuses each have conduct codes that touch on hate crimes, the university system doesn't have minimum standards to apply to all its campuses.

If it does create one, it will have to do a delicate dance through the First Amendment minefield. Much of what someone might find offensive is protected by the Constitution, said Laura Luger, the UNC system's general counsel. But not all expression is protected, she said. Fighting words, criminal threats, unlawful acts and extreme harassment are not protected, nor are some types of disruptive conduct. It depends on the facts of each situation, Luger said.

After the discovery of the racial graffiti at NCSU, the NAACP demanded that NCSU institute mandatory diversity training for freshmen. The task force also is considering that proposal as a systemwide initiative.

NCSU has not identified the four students. University police said federal agents had decided that the four students posed no threat to Obama and that the Wake County District Attorney's Office had said there didn't appear to be a state crime, in part because the words had been painted in a tunnel where graffiti is encouraged.

NAACP officials revealed that the words painted on the tunnel were more explicit than a university spokesman had first indicated. They showed a photo of one part of the graffiti that used a racial epithet, and they said there also was the slogan "Hang Obama by a Noose" and references to the Ku Klux Klan.

The task force is expected to hold at least one public forum in the coming months to gather citizen input on this issue. In addition, comments can be sent by e-mail to study_commission@northcarolina.edu.

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Home loans to the poor good policy, UNC says

DAVID RANII, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

Home ownership has social benefits in addition to economic ones, according to a study by researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Low-income and minority homeowners are, for example, roughly twice as likely as renters to vote in local elections. They're also significantly more likely to vote in national elections and are more likely to be involved in their children's schools, according to the university's Center for Community Capital.

All this rubs off on homeowners' offspring.

"Their children are more likely to be involved in organized activities" such as dance, karate lessons or Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, said Michal Grinstein-Weiss, a research fellow at the center and an assistant professor in UNC School of Social Work.

The bottom line: Encouraging home-ownership is sound public policy.

The ongoing study compares 4,000 low-income and minority homeowners across the country with a comparable group of renters. The homeowners obtained loans from lenders working with the Center for Community Self-Help, a nonprofit in Durham led by Roberto G. Quercia. Self-Help's program -- which involves a partnership with mortgage lender Fannie Mae and is funded by a $50 million grant from the Ford Foundation -- also helps lenders meet their obligations to low-income borrowers under the Community Reinvestment Act.

Self-Help borrowers have a much better track record for staying current on their payments than those who got subprime loans.

Borrowers who obtained subprime mortgages in 2004 were nearly four times more likely to be delinquent on their loans 24 months later than a similar borrower who participated in Self-Help's program, the study shows.

"If done right, lending to low-income and minority families ... is good business," said Quercia, the center's director.

The research was presented Wednesday at a briefing in Washington that included Sheila Bair, chairman of the
Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.

Bair said critics who contend the Community Reinvestment Act is at the root of the housing crisis are off-base.

Nothing in the CRA, said Bair, requires lenders to provide mortgages to people who can't afford to make their payments.

She argued that a key to ending the housing crisis is lowering monthly payments.

She said that, despite the current problems, homeowners are a good credit risk. The delinquency rate among all homeowners is 3.6 percent.

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