

‘TO RIGHT These Wrongs’

BY KIM WEAVER SPURR '88

UNC-Duke project addresses N.C. poverty

Nearly 17 percent of North Carolinians live in poverty. In the winter of 2009, more than 10,000 homes in the state had no heat and almost twice that number had no indoor plumbing.

Undergraduates at UNC and Duke University had absorbed those sobering facts on paper in their new two-semester, joint-campus course on poverty and inequality. But it wasn't until they took class field trips in the fall to different regions of the state that those numbers became *real*.

Eddie Wu, a junior philosophy major from Duke, and a classmate visited the department of social services in Halifax County. The students were ushered through a crowded waiting room to the director's office for an interview.

“As we walked out, I could not make eye contact with the people sitting outside who were still waiting to be seen,” Wu wrote in an essay for *Encompass*, Duke's ethics magazine. “That spoke to me as powerfully as any statistic. ... We as college students take for granted our privilege of access.”

The Moral Challenges of Poverty and Inequality project is the brainchild of two UNC history alums who were in graduate school together and now



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Billy E. Barnes



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A grandmother near Boone makes homemade knitted goods for sale and a Lumbee child in Robeson County plays on a tenant farm in these two black-and-white photos from the N.C. Fund. • Students in Jim Leلودis' and Robert Korstad's class listen to and present projects on poverty and inequality in North Carolina.

teach in both Blue Devil and Tar Heel country. James Leلودis (B.A. '77, Ph.D. '89) is professor of history and associate dean for honors in UNC's College of Arts and Sciences. Robert Korstad (B.A. '71, Ph.D. '88) is Kevin D. Gorter Professor of Public Policy and History at Duke.

Korstad and Leلودis had teamed up to write a book on the groundbreaking North Carolina Fund, a philanthropic effort created



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by former N.C. Gov. Terry Sanford to address the state's poverty. *To Right These Wrongs*, with photographs by Billy E. Barnes, was published in 2010.

The N.C. Fund came up short in the battle against poverty, but the story continues to be a source of inspiration. And the co-authors wanted the book to do more than just sit on a library shelf and gather dust.

"We wanted to see this book do some work in the world," Leloudis said.

With help from Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics and UNC School of Law's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, Leloudis and Korstad launched their honors course in the fall. UNC undergraduate students have been taking the free Robertson Scholars bus to Duke for the class. The students have been meeting in weekly "labs" — maps, computers, books and a whiteboard spread around them — where they've been doing intense analyses of poverty in diverse regions of the state. The labs are directed by graduate students and overseen by Rachel Seidman at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy.

This spring, students are developing individual projects, including research, documentary film and public service efforts.

Lily Roberts, a UNC junior with a double major in peace, war and defense and English, said one of the hardest things about the class has been trying to "dispel our collective understanding of what the face of poverty looks like."

"Even as we read statistics that indicated otherwise, we kept going back to stereotypical images of welfare mothers and drug-addicted homeless people," she said.



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Korstad agreed that one of the challenges was in getting students to understand the historical roots of poverty, and that it's not an "individual problem."

"They've begun to understand that it's a complicated story," he said. "Their previous interaction with people they consider poor was often at the homeless shelter or soup kitchen. They've learned that the people cleaning their dorm rooms may not make enough money to [rise] above the poverty line."

As part of the project, a yearlong faculty colloquium, made up of scholars from Duke and UNC across different disciplines, also has been meeting to discuss poverty.

This semester, the project will finalize plans for a new online magazine called *At The Table*. It will be a forum for translating research into social action, and for philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, poverty organizations and others to share best practices, grant opportunities, problems and solutions.

Leloudis and Korstad hope to expand the poverty conversation to campuses and communities around the state.

"We are at a crossroads," Leloudis said. "How do we build a prosperous future for all North Carolinians? This demands as much intellectual creativity as we can bring to it." •

ONLINE EXTRAS: Learn more at www.torightthesewrongs.com. Read a book chapter at lcm.lib.unc.edu/voice/works.



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TOP LEFT:

Students discuss what they've learned at a dinner at Robert Korstad's house. **TOP RIGHT:** UNC students take the free Robertson Bus to Duke for the poverty class. **BOTTOM:** Robert Korstad (left) and James Leloudis want to see their book on the N.C. Fund's war on poverty 'do some work in the world.'