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## One Community at a Time

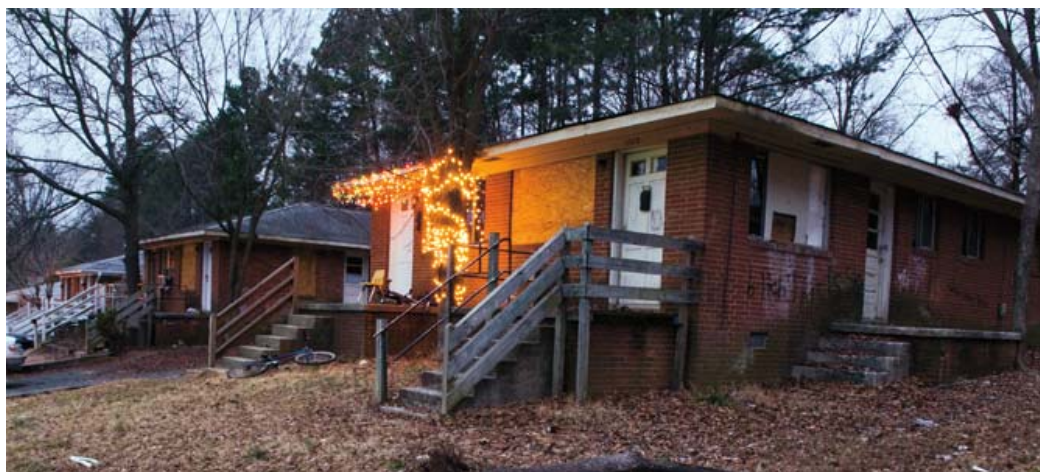
by Taylor Sisk

From the magazine issue dated March-April 2011



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Nearly a half century after its launch by Governor Terry Sanford, the North Carolina Fund, an ambitious antipoverty initiative, still provides a template for fighting economic inequities.



**Poverty persists:** On Ivy Street in East Durham, immigrant families live in poorly maintained duplexes, some of which are only partly habitable.

Bill Bamberger

Scott Cooper remembers walking into the West Baltimore home, seeing mattresses, four of them, stacked against the living-room wall, and asking the woman if she was moving. It was one of his first house visits as a community organizer for a national nonprofit, and his host was a woman in her early sixties who worked two jobs, one as a janitor for the city schools; he doesn't recall the other. "No," she told him, the mattresses were for three of her children and four of her grandchildren.

"Each night, the living room was converted into their bedroom," Cooper says. "Her children were working, but couldn't afford to live on their own. She had hoped to retire soon, but now that her children were being forced to move back in with her, she had lost all hope." Someone, something, had failed her, Cooper says. "I continue to encounter various versions of that scenario throughout the South."

The U.S. Census Bureau measures poverty based on family size and how many members of the family are younger than eighteen. For 2010, a family of four with two children under eighteen was considered to be living in poverty if the household income was less than \$22,162 a year, or \$426 a week. The South—which the Census Bureau defines as being bordered by Maryland to the north, Florida to the south, and Texas and Oklahoma to the west—has the highest poverty rate in the country. Take North Carolina as an example. According to Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics, 50,000 families in the state went hungry at some point during 2009, and "during the winter of 2010, more than 10,000 homes in North Carolina had no heat, and almost twice that number had no indoor plumbing."

Cooper '94, who grew up in West Tennessee as the son of a Methodist minister, is well aware of such daunting facts and figures. He's not only a product of the South but also a student of its movements. While at Duke, he studied the history of organizing and social-justice work in the South, and it was here that he learned about the North Carolina Fund, an antipoverty initiative launched in 1963 by then-Governor, and future Duke president, Terry Sanford that became a model for Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. The history of the North Carolina Fund runs deep through the Duke community, and Cooper is among those carrying its legacy forward. He works in Robinsonville, Mississippi, as an organizer for UNITE HERE, which represents workers in the gaming, hotel, and food and beverage industries.

Despite popular perceptions of genteel conservatism, the twentieth century in the South saw its share of antipoverty activism, some of it radical in scope. The legacy of that era is alive in the minds of those who think about poverty in the region today. In 1932, Myles Horton, a union organizer, founded the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, where labor rights workers, civil rights advocates, and other assorted activists still gather to draw strength for struggles to come. And the North



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Professor Robert Korstad talks about his book chronicling the history of the North Carolina Fund in the latest installment of our Documenting Duke series.

Carolina Fund's early commitment to alleviating poverty was one of the first efforts of its kind in the U.S.




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## One Community at a Time

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As most students of North Carolina history will acknowledge, Terry Sanford was a visionary, and the North Carolina Fund was among his greatest ambitions. The fund, based in Durham, was conceived as an intermediary that would funnel money to organizations in poor communities throughout the state. Directed by George Esser, whom Sanford recruited from the University of North Carolina's Institute of Government, it was supported by the Ford Foundation with help from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations.

At the time, poverty was a defining characteristic of North Carolina. In 1960, the national poverty threshold for a family of four was just over \$3,500 a year. While fewer than one in four Americans lived below that threshold, more than a third of all North Carolinians were living on less than \$3,000 in family income. Nearly three-quarters of all North Carolina families earned \$6,000 or less. One in four adults was functionally illiterate. Sanford believed that a systemic attack on poverty in the state was long overdue.

The initial objectives of the North Carolina Fund were ambitious but certainly not revolutionary. The idea was "to push for institutional change through demonstration programs," says Nathan Garrett, a Duke trustee emeritus who was the fund's finance director. Community-action organizations were mobilized as advocates for better housing and roads, greater access to public services, and vocational training—but not to actually put money into the hands of the poor or to incorporate them into the decision-making process.

"The strategy was evolution," Garrett says. "Let's make changes in what city councils do and city managers and departments do. Let's make these changes slowly by demonstrating that there's a better way."

But with time and experience, the fund became something else. "Because of the impact of denying equality of opportunity and also the insults arising from segregation," Garrett says, "it became clear that the evolutionary approach was not going to be sufficient." Black communities in particular were demanding more profound and immediate change, and Garrett and a few others within the fund urged that more voices from low-income communities be heard. The concept of "poor power" was taking hold, and the fund helped the disenfranchised organize—most effectively in nonprofits founded in the predominantly black counties in the northeast; in the rural Western North Carolina counties of Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey; and in Durham. All of these nonprofits are still in operation today.



**Meeting people where they are:** LBJ and Terry Sanford visit the tenant-farming Marlow family in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, to bring attention to the North Carolina Fund in 1964.

Courtesy Terry Sanford Papers, University Archives



**Grassroots activism:** Student workers from Neighborhood Youth Corps lay a water line in North Carolina's Blevins Creek community in the mid-1960s.

Billy E. Barnes

"Our purpose is the same as it originally was, to eliminate poverty," says Ben Watts, economic development director for the Duke-affiliated Community Action Opportunities (CAO), a nonprofit agency serving Buncombe and Madison counties in Western

North Carolina and one of those original programs funded by the North Carolina Fund. "The way that plays out is one family at a time and very much community driven."

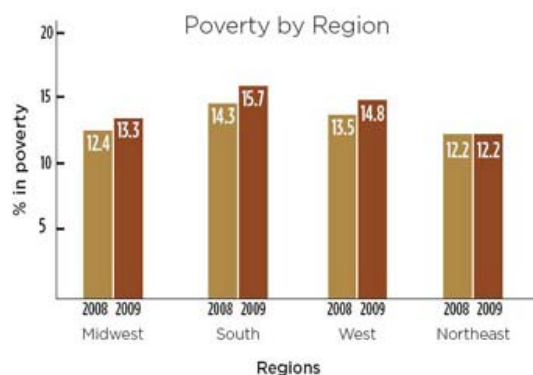
Community by community, the fund set about to eradicate poverty by sundering it from its roots, educating, and organizing. It was "this moment of experimentation," says Robert Korstad, a Duke professor of public policy and history. He is coauthor with Jim Leloudis, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, of a book about the fund, *To Right These Wrongs*.

At the core of the North Carolina Fund was the belief that in order to confront poverty effectively, "you had to take democracy seriously," says Leloudis, "that it mattered whether poor people were at the table when social provisions were divided up. They weren't there, and much of the fund's work was about trying to redress that."

The capacity of the individual, or of a single community, to effect true change was, and is, considerable, says Howard Fuller, one of the architects of the North Carolina Fund and, along with Garrett, one of the few blacks in a leadership role. What was lacking, and remains so, says Fuller, was the collective will to change. He served as organizer, educator, and, many have said—both derisively and in praise, in approximately equal numbers—agitator. After five years, this experiment was, as planned, brought to a close.

The North Carolina Fund (and the War on Poverty) did little toward eliminating poverty in the South. The lack of improvement is particularly frustrating, advocates say, given that the South has led the nation in its commitment to antipoverty initiatives for more than forty years.

"For much of its history, endemic poverty, one-party politics, dependency on natural resources, lack of education, and racial discrimination embedded in the law left the South a region set apart from the rest of America," according to a report titled "The State of the South 2010," by MDC, a community-development and research nonprofit based in Chapel Hill. (It was originally called Manpower Development Corporation.)



Variation in U.S. poverty rates by region illustrate the South's enduring economic problems.

There was much to overcome. The current recession, the report says, "has exposed structural weaknesses in the South—for all the progress the region made over the past thirty years, issues obscured during the pursuit of economic growth have reemerged." The decline of the textile and furniture industries, and manufacturing in general, during the past few decades was exacerbated by the recession, and unemployment has recently risen dramatically throughout the South: Florida's rate climbed from 4.7 percent in December 2007 to 11.2 in October 2009; North Carolina's from 4.9 percent to 10.7 percent in that same period. And while small towns and rural communities have continued on a path of general economic debilitation, the South is also seeing a significant increase in urban poverty.

The MDC report notes that while poverty in the South declined between 1980 and 2000 at a rate that outpaced that of the nation (it has since trended upward, in both the South and the nation), its poverty rate remains nearly a percentage point higher than any other area of the country. Children are especially hard

hit: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nine of the ten states with the highest percentage of children living in poverty in 2009 were in the South.

Korstad says he thinks Esser, the North Carolina Fund head, truly believed the fund could go a long way toward eradicating poverty in the South, but, "I don't know that he realized, even at that point, just what he was up against. I think he thought that, presented with the realities of poverty and the needs and the expression of poor people themselves, people would change, and the power structure would be more conciliatory, and there would be a greater sharing of resources and a distribution of power."

What Esser and his colleagues were up against was a post-Civil War history deeply rooted in "racial hatred and resentment, debilitating poverty, absent or inferior education, backward-looking leadership, restricted opportunity, and an insularity from the rest of the nation that kept change and progress at a creeping pace," says Sam Scott, a longtime program director at MDC, now retired. Beginning with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, "antipoverty work in the South demanded that some semblance of social justice be established," Scott says, "and that demanded overturning a social caste and economic system whose roots and emotions trace back to the very beginning of the South."

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**Appearances matter:** Howard Fuller, left, and Ben Ruffin, standing in truck, helped Durham residents clean their communities in the mid-1960s by persuading city officials to loan them garbage trucks on weekends.

Billy E. Barnes

Once while engaged in a coal miners' strike in Wilder, Tennessee, Myles Horton, the twentieth-century union organizer and civil rights activist, was arrested for what authorities described as "coming here and getting information and going back and teaching it," of which he was guilty. Those, essentially, were likewise the charges leveled at the North Carolina Fund by its critics.

"The stuff we were doing was radical for that time," says Howard Fuller. "A young African American talking about black power, talking about organizing people to fight the power structure? That wasn't necessarily welcomed across North Carolina. And the kind of in-your-face organizing we were doing created controversy."

Fuller had a radical notion: "to end poverty," he says with a short chuckle, awing even himself with the audacity of it. "I mean, seriously, I actually thought the idea of a poverty program was to end poverty. But at a level down from that was the idea that the only way poor people were going to be able to do that was to be empowered. And the only way to be empowered was to organize."

The obstacles were substantial and many. But Fuller has no doubt of the fund's successes—the people's organizations that were created, the work that fund staffers went on to do, and those who've subsequently been "radicalized" by example. MDC was established by the North Carolina Fund in 1967 to "identify and help remove barriers to progress in the South." MDC has many Duke connections: The late George Autry '58, J.D. '61, who received a posthumous doctor of laws degree in 1999, was its founder; the late Juanita Kreps A.M. '44, Ph.D. '48, Hon. '93, former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, dean of the Woman's College, and assistant provost at Duke, was a chair of the MDC board; and James A. Joseph, former ambassador to South Africa and now executive director of the United States-South Africa Center for Leadership and Public Values at Duke, is the current MDC chair. As MDC communications director Richard Hart puts it, "The fund is very much in our DNA."

"The mere fact that MDC still exists, that it has expanded its work far beyond its original research and programs, is solid evidence of the fund's legacy," Scott says. "Despite all the changes for the good that have taken place, the fund's principal mission and strategy was very similar to that of today's MDC: to bring about greater opportunity and equity to people left behind."

"We work in places, like Mississippi, where people say, 'The nonprofit structure in North Carolina is incredible. What's the deal?'" says Noah Raper '07, a program associate at MDC who, like Cooper, studied social justice under Korstadt at Duke. "And the more I read, it's like, the fund is behind a lot of that—these organizations that we know are doing good work and promoting equity and fairness in a whole range of areas: in housing, in fair—fair everything, basically. And the fact that the fund spun those off and gave them life even as it ended is a testament to the way that it was conceived and to the fact that it didn't really end when it ended."

As for eradicating poverty one community at a time, "one strand of MDC's work is place-based work—work with a single community that takes into account culture, history, and unique

situations," Raper says. "The South and the nation are in deep need of real examples of communities that can reduce disparities and expand opportunity."

In demonstrating what is possible through integrated action in a single community, Raper believes others will be inspired to do likewise.

Scott Cooper agrees, and that's why he's organizing for UNITE HERE in Robinsonville, Mississippi. "It's one thing to read about stuff. It's another when you get out into the communities and begin to understand the complexities of why people are poor," he says. "It's inevitable that you're going to begin to ask some bigger questions about why these neighborhoods are in the shape they're in and why these families are struggling the way they are."

Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer based in Montgomery, Alabama, has suggested a major reason—one that resonates with Cooper. "I believe the opposite of poverty is not wealth," Stevenson has said. "I believe the opposite of poverty is justice." Cooper's staff comprises workers he enlisted into the union. He calls this "activating your citizenship," an actualization of the North Carolina Fund principle of taking democracy at its word. "I think it goes a long way. We've got a lot more work to do, but I think we've gotten off to a good start."

MDC's "The State of the South 2010" report states that "a layer of cultural conservatism hangs more heavily over the South than other regions. As it becomes a more metropolitan and less rural region," the report says, "and as it becomes more multicultural with the immigration of Latinos, the South is becoming a stage where some of the most vexing issues of American life will play out in the near future."

Meanwhile, the South is growing rapidly, and race will continue to be a critical consideration: More than 40 percent of the country's blacks live in the South, and of the ten states with the fastest-growing Latino populations, nine are in the South. Confronting the challenges, Raper says, will require "a lot of work and a lot of thought by people wanting to change their communities.

There are no shortcuts." Reiterating that core North Carolina Fund principle of the importance of participation in the democratic process, Korstad says: "I think one of the things the fund did a good job of was understanding that poverty isn't just about physical deprivation; it's about exclusion from a basic participation of citizenship. And in the end, that's where they were making their most dramatic and long-lasting impact—in mobilizing communities, getting them to town council meetings, getting them on boards of the poverty organizations, getting them to vote, getting them to think that they had a right and a responsibility to participate, just like the middle class did—they had as much right to have their say as the guys in the junior chamber of commerce."

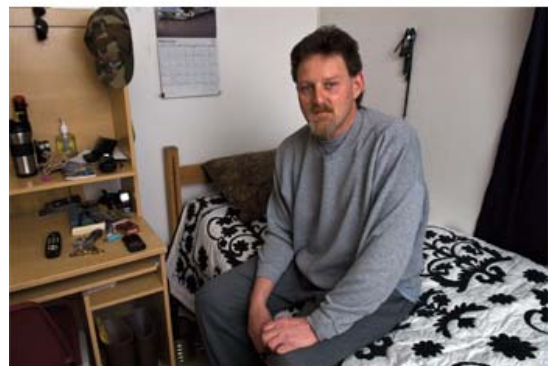
"People ask me am I optimistic," Howard Fuller says. "No, I'm not optimistic. I'm just not willing to give in. I get up and fight every day. I don't know any other way to live."

There's a Myles Horton maxim that Cooper is fond of quoting: "We make the road by walking."

"I think the Horton quote is about being both creative and patient," Cooper says. Change is possible—with a considerable amount of both.

*Sisk is a North Carolina-based writer and editor.*

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**Improvements past due:** (from top to bottom) Floyd Harwell, left, and Montel Williams in front of boarded-up apartments slated for redevelopment on Durham's traditionally African-American south side; Alice Capps in front of her family home in rural Marshall, North Carolina —although she still heats her home exclusively with firewood, a Community Action Opportunities grant in 2009 provided better insulation and more efficient windows; Formerly homeless, Donesha Pitts and her daughter Diamond, play Chutes and Ladders at Durham's Urban Ministries shelter a few weeks before moving into their own home; Raymond "Country" Troxler in a transitional residence that provides safe accommodations for recovering alcoholics and addicts.

Bill Bamberger

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### Considering the Consequences of Poverty

Robert Korstad wanted to talk about democracy—and class, race, and politics. His book *To Right These Wrongs*, coauthored with Jim Leloudis, is an account of the North Carolina Fund, then-Governor Terry Sanford's 1963 antipoverty initiative, and it offered Korstad the opportunity to probe all of the above.

But what Korstad, the Kevin D. Gorter Professor of public policy and history at Duke's Terry Sanford School of Public Policy, particularly wanted was an ongoing dialogue on the causalities and consequences of poverty and how to combat them. He says that a prime objective in writing the book was to present the sort of moral questions the fund raised about poverty that he believes are seldom discussed anymore. "We didn't want to just go back and rediscover this moment in history without having some way of having the past be in conversation with the challenges we face today."

So, in conjunction with the release of the book last year, the authors launched a three-year initiative, "The Moral Challenges of Poverty and Inequality," that Leloudis, a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hopes will "stimulate broad conversation about the moral challenges of poverty and inequality." Cosponsored by Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics and UNC's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, the initiative will offer classes, a speaker series, and community-based work to twenty-four students, half from Duke and half from UNC.

—Taylor Sisk

[Learn more about the book and read an excerpt online.](#)

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