

MLK speakers warn of division

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - Senate candidate Elaine Marshall avoided election politicking, using the pulpit at First Baptist Church to urge citizens to divert \$3 from their state income taxes to judicial campaigns.

Duke historian and author Tim Tyson, though, took on the new Republican leadership of the Wake County School Board in a wide-ranging keynote speech on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

"Neighborhood schools sound good," Tyson said. "Who can be against it? Are you against neighborhoods? Or are you against schools? ... [But] what they want is private schools paid for by tax money."

Tyson said many Northern cities have de facto segregated schools because upper-class families send their children to private schools. North Carolina, he said, is one state that has managed to build some authentic public school systems.

"The South has been the place where desegregation happened," he said.

Tyson said Wake County's schools had seen a vast improvement in black student achievement under its system of busing students throughout the county in order to balance the socioeconomics in each school.

"It has been held up as a national model, and [opponents] need to squish it flat," he said. "We've got to stand with Wake County on this."

He accused Republicans of using resegregation to court middle-class voters.



Ebony Hedgepeth of Apex keeps her sister Allison, 5, warm in front of the old Chapel Hill post office Monday as they listen to speakers before the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day march down Franklin Street. HARRY LYNCH - harry.lynch@nando.com

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"They are playing electoral politics with our children," he said. "This 'neighborhood schools' thing is a way to get well-meaning suburban people into their party."

Tyson also brought the matter home to Chapel Hill, where he said laborers can't afford to live.

"Any person with a PhD from Princeton is fine," he said. "But there's going to be stuff that's going to have to be done here, and people are going to have to ride the bus in and do it, but they're not going to be able to live in their own community."

Other speakers also mourned class divisions in Chapel Hill. The Rev. Robert Campbell, the leading spokesman for the Rogers Road community in its battles against the landfill and waste transfer station, spoke of Chapel Hill's homeless during his own speech in front of the post office earlier Monday.

"The first thing they hear is not hello but they hear the clicking lock on your car door," Campbell said. "Don't turn a deaf ear to those who are crying out for assistance today."

"Homelessness is not acceptable in the Southern Part of Heaven," NAACP president Michelle Cotton Laws later added.

Marshall, N.C. Secretary of State, urged a crowd of 250 gathered at the church to support "The People's Agenda" put forth by the NAACP and other statewide civic organizations for the fourth annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street scheduled for Feb. 13.

Specifically, Marshall endorsed diverse schools, livable wages, universal health care, expansion of public election financing and redress of both the 1898 Wilmington Riot and forced sterilizations of poor black women from 1947 to 1977.

Marshall said she had attended three MLK Day events and found they were "the most refreshing, invigorating, spirit-lifting activities that I know in this state." She thanked Chapel Hill "for the conscience that you bring to all of the state of North Carolina."

Tyson, though, cautioned against attributing too much leadership to Chapel Hill - or any one person or institution - in the pursuit of equality and civil rights. He said not even King was absolutely necessary to the movement.

"There still would have been an African American freedom movement in the South after World War II," he said. "It was a movement that was built over decades. ... None of those high moments would have been possible without all those local people organizing faithfully in their own communities."

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The same is true in Chapel Hill, he said, acknowledging the activist families represented in the audience.

The town and university may take credit for being more open-minded, he suggested, but it was the hard work of grassroots volunteers who created a place that fosters equality.

"This self-congratulatory tone that Chapel Hill adopts with regard to itself has nothing to do with the actual history," Tyson said. "Freedom has never been a gift from on high in Chapel Hill."

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