Goin’ Fishin’
by Kathy Norcross Watts

“Although our friendship began because of her story, it has moved beyond the memory of the little girl who brought us together.”
The North Carolina Humanities Council’s goal is to help people engage their world so they will come together with other North Carolinians to explore the state's history, identity and culture. Watching a documentary film … learning the history of another culture … being mesmerized by a story … communicating with a stranger … just a few of the ways people live out the humanities without even realizing it.

The Humanities Council is the 35-year-old nonprofit foundation dedicated to the humanities and is a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Last year, the Humanities Council sponsored 287 programs in 76 of the state's 100 counties.

The Humanities Council’s programs include:

· grants to community groups and nonprofits to provide free programs that bring people together to explore the history, traditions, and stories of North Carolina.
· “Let’s Talk About It” which brings people together in libraries across the state to discuss books, film, and poetry with a humanities scholar guiding the discussions.
· “North Carolina Humanities Forum,” the Humanities Council speakers’ bureau, gives non-profit organizations the opportunity to offer engaging, free public humanities programs to local audiences.
· “Teachers’ Institute Program,” a series of institutes, seminars, and workshops that provide professional development and intellectual stimulation for teachers.
· “John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities,” awarded annually to an individual whose life and work strengthens the educational, cultural, and civic life of North Carolina.

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This story is true, and I believe some greater force guided me to it. But it is not the story I started out to write.

I’d felt compelled to call Master Potter Sid Oakley in December, 2002, to ask him if I could write his biography. During our talks in front of his brick fireplace, Sid had told me, “It’s Mildred who the story’s really about.” I’d nod my head and say, “Right,” but I thought he was just being modest. Sid knew it then, but I’m just starting to understand the power of what he told me.

While I kept writing Sid’s biography, I also started a memoir of my search for Mildred. Along the way I gained a friend named Hoover, who introduced me to the history of his community through memories of his own family. In the end, too many doors remained closed for me to write her story as non-fiction, however, so I’ve revised it to a fictional version of what happened and why.

“Goin’ Fishin’” had been the final chapter in my memoir. My research led me to friendships I’d never have had with folks who taught me history lessons I’d never have learned. This journey provided me blessings that I cannot count and a truth that is inescapable: every single person matters.
Hoover moves as if he suffered a stroke, but he says that’s not what happened. For whatever the reason, he lives in a top-notch nursing home that smells of urine. The floors shine from frequent mopping, and a few folks chat in the cafeteria, fresh flowers on their tables. A dark dignified man sits straight, rolling down the hallway, missing both his legs beneath his knees. A woman sunken into her chair follows, repeating loudly, “I want to go, Nina.” I hope she’s not mistaken me for someone, so I look down and keep walking, turning left, then right, then on to the end of the hall, the last room on the right. Two of Hoover’s physical therapists are heaving him into his wheelchair the first time I visit.

His khaki-colored fishing hat balances on the silver rims of his glasses. Wiry white bristles curl from his black cheeks and jaw line, rimming his face as he licks his bottom lip and settles in the chair.
“Hi Hoover!” We hug, and when the therapists look surprised, I explain, “Hoover’s helping me with a book I’m writing.”

They look at him, and they look impressed, so I add, “He and my husband worked together when he served on Stovall’s Town Council.”

Hoover smiles as he tells me where he’s put aside a few old photos. His grandfather is sitting on a wagon pulled by three big-boned mules in one. Hoover’s dressed in his U.S. Army uniform in another, white teeth gleaming in the old brown and white photo. There’s a class picture.

“Which one are you?” I try to recognize his easy smile.

“The best I can figure is I’m the one in front without shoes.”

His sister PeeWee lives just thirty miles away, but she can’t visit him because she’s bedridden with sickle cell anemia. She’s dark as a mahogany end table, so skinny. Her legs shook with pain when we talked, and she rubbed them vigorously, “Never you mind, this just happens sometimes. You keep talking.” PeeWee’s a published poet, so I’ve taken her a journal to write in; she, in turn, has given me gifts of memories. Whenever I’m with either Hoover or PeeWee and a family member stops in, whoever it is glances at me with distrust. They seem to suspect me of something. Maybe stealing secrets from a past that was supposed to be forgotten.

I’d met Hoover while I was looking for Mildred. I’d started writing a biography of my potter friend, Sid Oakley, but he had steered me to her story instead of his. He remembered the child from her first day of school sixty years before. Mildred wore a bright yellow dress, her hair in pig tails, smiling in anticipation of a chance to learn to read and write. Sid knew that she had been sent home from school that day. The rumor was that she was black, even though the family into which she was born was white. He never saw her again. For months, I’d tried to find her for Sid, and no one seemed to know what had happened, or they remembered enough to know not to tell.

Someone had known someone who had told me, “You might try calling Hoover,” and I had.

“Do you know anything about a little girl named Mildred who looked like she was white, but was adopted by a family in your town because she was black?”

“Let me call you back,” was all he had said. I’d only waited about fifteen minutes when the phone rang. I could almost hear him smile as he had announced, “I found your girl.”

I see Hoover’s hands curling shut, and sometimes I can’t understand him when he announces, “I’m doin’ fine.” Once I walked in and his head was bowed, and I wasn’t sure if he was asleep or if he was crying. Maybe dying.

I’ve begun visiting him more frequently. I’m not sure if it’s because I have some deep desire to hear stories or if I need to feel needed. I don’t analyze my motivation, but I do try to drive to the nursing home at least every other week. I took him a Beta fish, just as I’d taken one to Sid. Hoover loved to fish, and he had loved his pet cat that I’d seen when I’d gone to his home before he moved here. I promised to change the water, left an extra jug in the corner and told him to only feed the fish once a week.

Hoover liked taking care of his pet, so when the nurses told him, “Your fish is hungry,” he gave the lacy blue creature a pinch every day, his slow hands somehow grasping the nearly invisible flakes. The water grew cloudy, and a nurse changed it.

“I’ve got some bad news,” Hoover called unexpectedly one afternoon. “My fish died.”

He wanted me to know, and then I knew that fish had mattered.

We talk about his grandfather, about fishing and growing tobacco and school. He wants to go home; he wants to see his sister. I decide to try to take him there. It’s going to be somewhat difficult, and that’s why his family hasn’t done it often. He cannot walk, and he’s too big for me to help into a wheelchair, so we make a plan to simply drive around Stovall for a morning. He won’t even get out of the car at all. I make sure that PeeWee will be home so that we can stop by to visit her in Oxford, too. He hasn’t seen her in a year and a half. We’ll be gone about three hours, I figure, and I ask his nurse about any special issues he might face. “What if he needs to use the bathroom?”
“Hand him his urinal.” As simple as that.

The air is chilly the morning that Hoover’s physical therapist eases him into my Explorer; we hook his seat belt, and we’re on our way. The Eno River seems covered in a mist of diamond dust as we cross its bridge, and we follow roads that twist and turn on our way back to Stovall. We drive right through Stem, and I stop myself from saying, “This is where Mildred was born.” Although our friendship began because of her story, it has moved beyond the memory of the little girl who brought us together.

Because of Hoover, Sid did meet Mildred, but he was unable to do the thing he wished most: to reunite a family. When he’d called Mildred’s half-sister who still lived in his hometown, she’d said, “Mildred who?” So Sid had taken Mildred back to her home himself, pointing to where her house would have stood had it not been for the new trailer park blocking our view, stopping at the end of the long dirt road where the bus driver had left the tiny child clutching a new speller in her cream-colored hands. The dirt road marked the end of her white life and the beginning of her black one, and it’s the only detail Mildred recalled from that day.

In front of Stovall Town Hall, the Mayor hurries out grinning to hug Hoover through the window. “I love you, Hoover.”

Hoover looks as if he’s about to cry, but he glances away and says with just a hint of attitude, “I’ll be back. I’m gettin’ better.”

At the stop sign, a fellow town commissioner peeks in the window and jokes, “Why aren’t you driving yourself around?”

“Why would I do that when I have a chauffeur?”

We pass by Mildred’s old home place, and the new owner has covered it in shale-colored siding. The trees are trimmed, the bushes neat.

“That tree had the best pecans,” Hoover notes. I can’t help but glance in the rear view mirror as we pass by the front porch where, for much of her childhood, Mildred stood watching neighbors play across the street. Sid died just five months after he met Mildred, and now she sits at home linked to an oxygen tank, suffering from the emphysema that killed him. I call her every few months to check in, and before we hang up she always adds, “You call back any time, baby.” Her grace amazed me from the first time I phoned her.

Next Hoover and I drive to his older sister’s home, and she limps to the front porch with her cane.

“Stay on up there,” Hoover yells from the car. “Don’t walk down those steps.” I wish to be invisible during this time with his sister, but I’m driving the car, and there’s nowhere for me to go.

“Who’s that in the car?” she asks. “Do she have a name?”

I step out and shout my introduction across the yard. Then an assortment of Hoover’s nieces and nephews and cousins amble over to where he sits. One woman has straight gray hair and skin as light as mine, another is dark as a cherry jewelry box. “You look good, Hoover,” they say, and he answers, “I’m doin’ all right. I’m gettin’ better.”

At his home, he tells me to beep the horn and wake his daughter. We look at the yard full of tumbled chairs and dog droppings, the porch dipping in disrepair.

“I can’t just beep the horn. I’ll go knock on the door.”

“Just beep the horn.”

“I can’t, Hoover.” I walk up the steps, and bang on the glass.

“Who is it?”

“Hoover’s here,” I say.

“He is not.”

“Yes, he is,” I’m angry now. “He’s sitting in my car out front.”

I watch my steps as I walk back through the yard, and she follows a few minutes later.

They have little to say to each other, and it’s so awkward. White me driving into the middle of a black family struggling with what to do when the patriarch can no longer care for himself and his home. As we drive away, I worry that I’ve created more anguish for my friend.

I should have learned by now that stepping into someone else’s family to give a person something the family cannot is not my job, is not possible and can have completely unintended results.

“Drive back to that house over there.” This time I beep out front like he tells me to. No one opens the door, but as we stop at the corner down the street, another cousin hurries out with a bag. Some homemade goody for Hoover that I think is cookies or brownies. He tells me the treat is pigs’ feet.
I cannot believe I have a paper sack of pigs’ feet in my back seat.

PeeWee has been waiting just inside her kitchen. Wrapped in an afghan, she rolls her fancy wheelchair onto the porch when she sees her brother, and I drive as close as I can to the ramp. It’s still chilly, cooler than it ought to be for her to be outside.

“Hold your hand out here,” she commands, and Hoover abides.

It’s difficult for him to stretch his bent arm, and their fingers touch across the gap. They don’t say anything, and I step out of the car to give them privacy, but again, there’s nowhere for me to go. I stand in the kitchen and hear PeeWee say she needs to get back inside. Tears stream down her cheeks.

Hoover stares ahead, his eyes damp.

“You did for me what my own family wouldn’t do. Thank you.”

“Sometimes it’s easier for someone who isn’t family to do these things,” I explain. “I come to see you just because I want to.”

I don’t tell him that because I’m a friend, I carry no sense of familial obligation that becomes heavy over time. I don’t tell him that because I didn’t grow up in his house, I don’t carry unspoken hurts that I cannot move beyond. I don’t tell him that I understand why for his daughter, the guilt she may feel from needing to send him to such a place might be the very thing that prevents her from visiting him.

“Some day I’m goin’ to repay you,” he declares.

“Hoover, you found Mildred for me. I’m indebted to you.”

“All right, then.” He smiles. “But I really do appreciate what you did.”
We begin planning our next trip. “So do you think you could cast from inside this car?”

I’m going to look for some sort of water where I could pull up close to it, and Hoover could sit in the car and fish for a while.

“People do it all the time on Highway 50, but I think it’s illegal.”

Hoover chuckles, not taking me seriously. What he doesn’t know is that I don’t like to fish. I’ve tried to keep my squeamishness from my children, but they’ve all learned my mantra to “Free the fish!” when they pull one of our plentiful pan fish from our backyard pond. My husband, determined to prove that he could provide for our family if we became stranded in the wilderness, will fillet a dozen for dinner. Jack and Daniel will usually try a few to appease him. Michael, who’s becoming a vegetarian, won’t eat a bite. Kate typically announces, “This is delicious!”

I don’t stop my husband from teaching my children to fish, but I don’t often join in the baiting, waiting, untangling, unhooking, tossing and more waiting that fishing seems to require. I’m thankful that if there’s a lesson to teach from fishing, my husband is happy to do it.

Then I realize that it will likely be just Hoover and me on our little fishing trip.

“What kind of bait do you use?”

I worry I’ll be responsible for sticking the worms or grasshoppers on the hooks, for causing the suffering that will lead to the greater good of giving Hoover part of his life back. If only for a few minutes on a warm afternoon, from the side of a car on the bank of a river he’s never fished before.
epilogue

I didn’t know his first name was James, and that’s why I couldn’t find his phone number at first. I’d been told he could help me with research for my book. The big black man I knew as Hoover grew up in Stovall, one of eight children that his mother Willie Mae raised by herself. She taught her children to speak to others, and they did, and she taught them to respect others, and they did. He didn’t often have money to spend, but he enjoyed occasional shows at Orpheum Theater, even though he knew he’d have to sit upstairs. He sat behind the sheet on the buses, or he stood if the whites filled up the seats. When we first met, Hoover was a WalMart greeter, and he recognizes the irony.

“You know, used to be a time you wouldn’t see a black person at a cash register; now that’s the most they got,” he says as his cat climbs up on the table between us. “Giddown,” he shoves it gently out of the way.

He recalls a day at an Oxford Fair when he rode to town in his friend’s shiny 1957 black Chevrolet. When the two men returned to the car, they found a note on its windshield: “You have been visited by the Knights of the KKK.”

“And they wanted us to join because they thought we was white,” Hoover chuckles. “I forgot where they said to meet them at.”

“People change,” he says. “It ain’t all gone, and it ain’t all the white men. The blacks they’ve got now, they’re just as prejudiced. Some of them blame the children for what their white folks did.”

Hoover was the first black man to serve in his town’s fire department and the first to serve on his town’s council. Whites and blacks worked well together there, he says. His tenure lasted 19 years, and during that time the town built a sewage treatment plant. He’s proud of that.

This is the first of many times that I’ll sit with him. I ask him to think back to what his house smelled like and where he went to fish. I ask him about hot days picking tobacco and where he sat in his one-room school house. I ask him about Mildred, and Hoover tells me all he can.
The following website and books will help you further explore some of the themes touched on in “Goin’ Fishin’.”

**Aging**
North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services  
[www.dhhs.state.nc.us/aging/service.htm](http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/aging/service.htm)  
(919)733-3983  
This state agency helps with services such as adult day care, family caregiver support, health promotion, and individual and family adjustment services.

**How to Care for Aging Parents**  
by Virginia Morris  
Called “indispensable” by the AARP, this book covers all the emotional, legal, financial, medical, and logistical issues in caring for the elderly. It also includes a 100-page “Yellow Pages” guide to resources and services of the elder care industry.

**Navigating the Journey of Aging Parents: What Care Receivers Want**  
by Cheryl Kuba  
This book considers the topic of caring for aging parents from the parents’ perspective. It discusses common caregiver mistakes and misinterpretations such as what a caregiver can expect when an aging parent moves in and how to care for an aging parent from afar.

**Family Relationships**
*I Only Say This Because I Love You: How the Way We Talk Can Make or Break Family Relationships Throughout Our Lives*  
by Deborah Tannen  
Using real conversations, this book shows how important it is to learn to separate word meanings from heart meanings, the unstated but powerful meanings that come from the history of our relationships and the way things are said.

**20 Communication Tips for Families: A 30-Minute Guide to a Better Family Relationship**  
by Eric Maisel  
This book lays out in simple terms commonsense ideas that can apply to any family: be direct but kind; don’t let your stress do the talking; the first duty of love is to listen; and more. A short explanation follows each tip, expanding on it and giving concrete examples of how to implement it.

**Race Relations**
*The Color of Love: A Mother’s Choice in the Jim Crow South*  
by Gene Cheek  
Cheek recalls the horrendous choices forced on his mother after she separated from his abusive father and began a relationship with a black man and gave birth to a brown-skinned baby.

*The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*  
by Osha Gray Davidson  
Davidson traces the course of the remarkable friendship that evolved between Ann Atwater, an outspoken black activist, and “C.P.” Ellis, a Ku Klux Klanneman, as they served on a school desegregation committee in Durham.

**Southern History**
*Black, White and Southern: Race Relations in Southern Culture, 1940-Present*  
by David R. Goldfield  
Goldfield analyzes the etiquette that formerly governed race relations in the South and kept whites and blacks virtual strangers and argues that the long-held myth of white supremacy poisoned the region.

**The American South: Portrait of a Culture**  
Louis Rubin, ed.  
This collection of essays offer a panorama of the culture and literature that is unique to the South, covering such topics as regional development, politics, religion, and black life.
Kathy grew up in Gastonia and currently lives just outside of Winston-Salem. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She worked as a newspaper reporter for three years before returning to UNC for a Masters in Regional Planning. Kathy is married to the Forsyth County manager and is the stay-at-home mother of four children. After the birth of her fourth child, she began writing again. Her work focuses on human interest stories that show how regular people matter, how they survive struggles, and how they make a difference with their lives.

She has been published in the News and Observer, The Interpreter, Self, The Herald-Sun, and NC Boating Lifestyle. Watts also writes a twice monthly parenting column for The Daily Dispatch and The Butner-Creedmoor News. Watts serves as a board member of the Carolina Wren Press and is a member of the North Carolina Writers’ Network. Her honors include a NC Press Association Award for feature reporting and the Linda A. Ironside Fund for the Arts Award from the Triangle Community Foundation.

Watts’ biography, A Simple Life: A Story of Sid Oakley, will be available in November in Creedmoor at the Cedar Creek Gallery; in Oxford at Chase the Muse Studio, Scribbles, and the Education/Liturgy Resources Bookstore; in New Bern at ART Gallery, Ltd.; or by contacting winterberrybooks@bellsouth.net.
The Linda Flowers Prize

The “Linda Flowers Prize” is named in honor of the late Humanities Council member Linda Flowers (1944-2000). She taught English at North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount and wrote the respected book *Thrown Away: Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, which chronicles the impact on farm families as they made the transition to working agribusiness, factory, and textile mill jobs in eastern North Carolina.

By establishing this annual writing competition, the Humanities Council celebrates Flowers’ many contributions to the humanities and draws attention to people like her who not only identify with the state but who also explore the promises, problems, and meanings in lives shaped by North Carolina and its many cultures.

The 2007 Linda Flowers Prize guidelines

Writers of all ages are eligible. Applicants need not be native to North Carolina or live in the state. The committee will review original works of between 2000-2500 words, typed and double-spaced. Each submission should include a cover letter and ten copies of the work. Please do not include the author’s name on the work itself. Entries must be postmarked by July 2, 2007 for the 2007 prize. The annual prize will be announced by November 1.

The winner of the “Linda Flowers Prize” receives $500. The original work will be published in a North Carolina Humanities Council publication. The writer will maintain copyright of the literary work with the understanding that the North Carolina Humanities Council may publish or re-publish it at a later date.

All entries should be sent to:
North Carolina Humanities Council
attn: Linda Flowers Prize 2007
122 N. Elm St., Suite 601
Greensboro, North Carolina, 27401

past winners

2005 • Kermit Turner
“Tongue-Tied”
A short fictional story about a racially motivated murder that raises the darker questions of American race relations.

2004 • Barbara Presnell
“Sherry’s Prayer”
A collection of poems written from the viewpoint of fictional textile workers who voice the tensions and traumas real workers face throughout North Carolina.

2003 • Heather Ross Miller
“Miss Jessie Dukes and Kid Heavy”
A short story featuring fictional characters in the real company town of Badin in the 1940s.

2002 • Joseph Bathanti
“Land of Amnesia”
A suite of poems touching on such themes as the quest for redemption, the memory of slavery and lynching, and the anxiety of parenthood.

2001 • Karen Gilchrist
“The Cure”
A short fictional story about a boy’s coming of age and decisions that finally prompt him to leave his family’s tobacco farm in the eastern part of the state.
The North Carolina Humanities Council offers programs such as NC CROSSROADS through the support of contributions from people like you who value the role of the humanities in our state. If you enjoyed this issue, and would like to help in our efforts, you can donate online at nchumanities.org or send your tax-deductible contribution to NCHC, 122 N. Elm St., Suite 601, Greensboro, NC 27401.