

Betrayals, support, victory in the compensation fight

RALEIGH — At the state House the other day, Democratic legislators told me they liked the budget's groundbreaking compensation for the living victims of the North Carolina's forced sterilization program. But they said they could not vote for the state budget, written by the GOP majority, because of its hard cuts to public education.

I don't like the education cuts either, or a lot of what this legislature did, so I could see their point. Politicians have had to make such hard decisions since budgets were invented.

But the current budget aside, I should have posed one question to the Democrats: Why hadn't they supported compensation several years before, when their party ruled the state?

I've been wondering about similar questions ever since I entered the compensation fight in 2002 as a member of the Journal team that produced the investigative series *Against Their Will*. It ran in December 2002, setting in motion the events that led, the other day, to North Carolina becoming the first state in the nation to offer compensation to sterilization victims.

When I first went to work on the project, I couldn't believe my state had even had such a program. Terry Sanford, who'd been the Democratic governor in the early 1960s as the sterilization program honed in on black girls and women on welfare, led the South in peaceful integration. He was also a friend of my father's.

In 2002, as summer surrendered to fall, our investigative team holed up in an old section of the Journal building, a section where reporters a couple of generations before us had written glowingly of the sterilization program. The team, in addition



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Larry Womble never gave up the compensation cause, despite a 2011 car wreck that almost killed him.

to me, was Washington correspondent Kevin Begos (who initiated the project), medical reporter Danielle Deaver, editor Scott Sexton and photographer Ted Richardson. I had the fun part: frequent forays out of our bunker, traveling across my native coastal plain and parts beyond, tracking down victims and recording their stories. I connected viscerally to the victims, with their courage and, in spite of all, humor.

But it was also troubling: seeing my state in a whole new darkness.

Back at the office, we team members would compare notes. I think they were as incredulous about some of my discoveries as I was about theirs, including that Winston-Salem and some of its most prominent families and doctors were a bedrock of the sterilization program, which ran from 1929 through 1974 and was one of the most brutal sterilization programs in America. To "better society" and trim the welfare rolls, it declared more than 7,600 people, mostly of modest means, physically or mentally unfit to reproduce.

Soon after our series ran, Democratic state Rep. Larry Womble of Winston-Salem began pushing for compensation. As the Journal's local editorial writer, then as the edito-



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rial page editor, I urged him on. In doing so, I kept in mind that men sitting in my seat back in the day had supported the sterilization program.

Womble was diligent. But Democratic leaders in the House basically gave him lip service. So did Gov. Mike Easley. Gov. Bev Perdue worked a lot harder through her passionate advocate for compensation, Charmaine Fuller Cooper. But as a Democratic governor with both chambers of the legislature in Democratic control, Perdue wasted precious political capital by not pressing the issue. Womble was betrayed. So were victims like Elaine Riddick and Nial Ramirez and their families, who bravely but in vain told their stories to numerous state committees.

Republicans took the legislature in 2010, and the governor's mansion in 2012. House Speaker Thom Tillis and Gov. Pat McCrory both expressed commitment to compensation. Some of their fellow Republicans balked, wondering why they should be making amends for a program created by Democrats, one for which Democrats failed to make amends.

Several people joined the victims, Womble and me in the fight, including William C. Crawford, a Winston-Salem advocate, and Edwin Black, the bestselling author of the eugenics classic "War Against the Weak." At Forsyth Technical Community College, Jim Fortuna and Guy Blynn, who teach a class on the Holocaust, invited me, repeatedly, to talk to the class about compensation, and I gladly accepted. Documentary

filmmakers, including Jessica Pic and Sana Haq of Wake Forest University and Dawn Sinclair Shapiro, a national filmmaker, helped keep up the pressure.

Winston-Salem State University held events from early on that helped the cause. Readers wrote letters and sent me emails in support of compensation, although others wrote against it. Many North Carolina newspapers, including the News & Record of Greensboro, The High Point Enterprise and The Charlotte Observer, joined us in backing the compensation cause. Established writers such as Belle Boggs of North Carolina are honoring the victims through their work.

Tillis and the governor held firm for compensation. McCrory signed a budget on July 26 that includes \$10 million in compensation for the victims.

That action has engendered an old debate: Should we correct past wrongs or address current ones?

We should do both.

As it is, the \$10 million for victims, while it certainly would have helped with education needs, was but a drop in the bucket in the \$20.6 billion budget. And the Republicans would have made their education cuts anyway.

To achieve compensation was a step forward this state sorely needed to make.

Gov. Sanford's work for peaceful integration will stand for the ages. But he failed to see the abuses of the sterilization program. His Democratic successors failed to correct them.

And while we should celebrate the fact that the Republicans finally achieved compensation, we should also remind them to consider how other actions they take today will be viewed in the future.