

Citizens light a candle for abused and neglected children

By Dot Coble

Life Times Editor

On a chilly, rainy night Thursday, about 20 people turned out to light a candle in remembrance of children who are and have been abused and neglected.

The candlelight ceremony at the Nettie Hammond Building of the First United Methodist Church was held in conjunction with National Child Abuse Awareness Month sponsored by the Children's Services of the Scotland County Department of Social Services.

A highlight of the evening was the presentation of an engraved appreciation plaque to Guardian Ad Litem volunteer Nelson Wilcox, a resident of Scotia Village. During his four years with the Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program in Scotland County, Wilcox has served 21 children, some of whom he is continuing to serve.

"Mr. Wilcox goes above and beyond for the children he is involved with and vests a personal interest in them," said Charlotte Gibson, co-chair with David Inman for the Blue Ribbon Campaign for abused and neglected children. "He doesn't hesitate to take on the many challenging issues with families. He has traveled many miles, even traveling to Charleston, S.C., to do a home study. And he also helps recruit new GAL volunteers."

Wilcox expressed appreciation for the honor and commended the Children Services for their dedication to Scotland County children. "They work so many more hours than volunteers, protecting the rights of children and serving their needs," Wilcox said.

Jean Miller, GAL program director, accepted a framed certificate in recognition of the services provided to the children of the community through the Guardian Ad Litem program.

Gibson conducted the candlelight ceremony. "April has been designated as Child Abuse Prevention Month, but on a day-to-day basis we are reminded of why we are here tonight," she said. "On any given day you can turn on the television news and you will hear stories of child abuse and neglect that just don't affect our state, but are nationwide. Those stories are the ones that are the most disturbing.

"If you've ever been around children," Gibson added, "you realize just how vulnerable and dependent these beautiful little people are."

Gibson also provided some disturbing statistics. Every five minutes, a child is abused or neglected in the state of North Carolina, and 107,218 children were reported as abused

and neglected during the 2001-02 state fiscal year. Gibson said that 32,883 of these children were confirmed as victims and 24 children died from child abuse during the 2001 calendar year.

Scotland County's numbers were even more distressing. Last year, 421 reports of abuse and neglect were received, involving 992 children. Eight hundred twenty four of the 992 children were unsubstantiated and 168 were substantiated.

“On average, in about half of the cases, these children understand abuse before they learn to read,” Gibson pointed out. “Parents who were abused as children are six times more likely to abuse their own kids. And child abuse cuts across all socioeconomic groups, races and religions.”

Most people who abuse or neglect their children are ordinary people whose stressors overwhelm their coping skills, according to Gibson. She pointed out, too, that children who are abused are at a higher risk of becoming involved in crime, substance abuse, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant as a teenager and many other social ills.

Inman presented the story of how the Blue Ribbon for Kids Campaign was started in 1989 by Bonnie Finney of Norfolk, Va.

This grandmother took a stand against child abuse by tying a blue ribbon to the antenna of her van, signaling her personal commitment. She was devoted to involving as many people as possible in her battle against child abuse following the death of her grandson at the hand of his mother ... Finney's daughter. Finney turned her grief into a campaign to promote public awareness concerning child abuse.

The ceremony included a solo by Pam Wood, “Let There Be Peace on Earth” by Miller and Jackson. The entire Children's Services staff presented “A Prayer For Children.” Participating were: Ina J. Hughs, Jennifer Goff, April Snead, Christa Marcano, Pam Wood, Charlotte Gibson, Wendy Stanton and David Inman.