

# INDEPENDENT WEEKLY

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**HAL CROWTHER:  
FEAR AND  
FULFILLMENT  
AT THE  
U.S. OPEN**  
PAGE 6

**MUSIC:  
WUNC'S  
NEW FACE  
ATLANTA'S  
JODY GRIND**  
PAGE 22-23

**JEAN PAGE:  
THE DANCE  
OF POLITICS**  
PAGE 24

**FOOD**  
PAGE 25-26

**JEANNE CHESSON:**  
"I would vote for the candidate who would do the most to help our schools."  
Candidate of choice:  
Undecided



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**STELLA NOLLEY:**  
On Jesse Holms: "He's a little old-fashioned. Sometimes [politicians] get too set in their ways."  
Candidate of choice:  
Undecided

# HARVEY & JESSE GO A-COURTIN'

The voters who will swing the nation's hottest Senate race speak out. page 8

**ROSE EGGERLING:**  
On abortion: "The government should not tell us what we should do with our bodies."  
Candidate of choice:  
Undecided



PHOTO BY M.J. SHARP

**SHIRLEY MABE:**  
On taxes: "The middle class is really supporting the nation."  
Candidate of choice:  
Undecided



PHOTO BY BARRY TESHMAN



PHOTO BY M.J. SHARP

**MARGARET SAUNDERS:**  
"Holms speaks out like he thinks, but Gantt seems to be more friendly."  
Candidate of choice:  
Undecided

# 100,000 Voices

With the elections less than two months away, Harvey Gantt's message is not reaching voters

BY BARRY YEOMAN

PHOTOS BY M.J. SHARP



Margaret Saunders planned to vote for Gantt until she watched his opponent's military-spending ad. Now, she says, "I'm sort of confused."

If Harvey Gantt were to invent the type of voter he needs to tip him over victory's edge this November, he might come up with someone just like Stella Nolley. Thirty-nine, Republican and living in Cary, she considers Jesse Helms "a little old-fashioned" and says she is willing to cancel out her husband's vote for the Republican senator.

Ask Nolley what matters to her, and she'll tell you about her son, a third grader at A.V. Baumon Elementary School in Apex. "Last year, at the end of the school year, his school did not have supplies," she says. "They were asking parents to send scrap pieces of computer paper to the teachers." This year, the only teaching aide in her son's classroom works part time.

That's why Nolley, the district manager for a women's clothing retailer, plans to vote for the U.S. Senate candidate who will support more education funding.

So who is Nolley's candidate of choice? She doesn't know. "[Helms] says [education] is a priority—but we're not seeing a great deal of results here," she says. Yet Nolley hasn't closely followed the Senate race, and she doesn't know much about the Helms' voting record on education.

For anyone who has followed the U.S. Senate race since last spring's contentious Democratic primary, it may be hard to imagine that some voters have not decided between Helms and Gantt. Nowhere in the United States are such polar opposites competing for a major political office—and getting such national attention. But as I traveled across the Piedmont earlier this month, interviewing dozens of North Carolinians, it became clear that Nolley is not unusual.

Recent polls indicate that more than 100,000 likely voters don't know which candidate they will support this year. Helms and Gantt will be courting them hard—because they could swing this year's election. To learn what's on the minds of these voters, I visited the places where polls show a high level of undecideds.

I hung out at the Miller brewery parking lot in Eden, stopped by an Episcopal church in Reidsville, and talked to people on the streets

workers in Stokes County, because the polls show the highest undecided vote in the non-urban counties around Greensboro. I loitered at shopping centers in Cary and North Raleigh, because some Democrats believe the abortion issue might convince GOP women along I-85 to cross party lines. I walked the streets of Oxford, where Gantt has tried to woo voters by stating his opposition to a proposed hazardous-waste incinerator.

All in all, I interviewed 72 people. Most were women—since the polls show that women are more undecided than men this year. All were white, because blacks are lining up firmly behind Gantt. I asked them not only whom they planned to vote for, but also what issues they had on their minds. I tried to figure out how successful Helms and Gantt have been in getting their messages out. In some cases, I gently probed their feelings about voting for a black candidate.

I came back with an unscientific but revealing snapshot of North Carolina's swing voters. From all the interviews, I drew five major conclusions. Some of these conclusions should give Helms comfort; some should give Gantt wisdom as his campaign proceeds toward November.

## 1 Helms has set the agenda for this campaign.

The menu at the Three Way Restaurant in Oxford declares, "Courtesy is our custom, good food is our business." Located on a two-lane highway across from an abandoned diner, it fills up quickly at noontime, dishing out plate lunches to truck drivers and lawyers alike. A

meat and two vegetables come to \$2.65, and if all the tables are full, you can always sit at the counter and talk to 70-year-old Margaret Saunders.

When Saunders is not serving up lunches, she is likely to be mowing her lawn—not reading the newspapers or watching TV. You won't find her spending too much time studying up on the Senate race this year. "I've been working out in the yard a whole lot, and I haven't paid much attention," she said. "I'm sort of confused."

What has filtered down to her is a Helms commercial criticizing Gantt for being too soft on defense during the current Persian Gulf crisis. "Should we cut defense \$300 billion?" the announcer asks. "...Harvey Gantt says yes." In a recent News and Observer article, UNC-Chapel Hill advertising professor Robert Lauterborn called the ad "a cheap shot" and noted that Helms took the remarks "out of context."

Whether or not the commercial is fair, it has worked its magic on Saunders, a Democrat. "I was all for Gantt until several things I heard. One day I think I'm going to vote for [Gantt, and then] I hear some advertising on TV."

That's why, when I interviewed her, she didn't know who she would vote for. "I think the world is more complex than it used to be," she said. "No simple answers."

Earlier in the campaign, Gantt announced that he would not let his opponent set the agenda for this year's Senate race. The campaign, he said, would be about the issues most important to the daily lives of North Carolinians: education, jobs, health care, child care and the environment.

But when I spoke to voters—particularly rural ones—about the issues that mattered to them during this campaign, many of them

repeated the hot-button themes they have heard on Helms' television commercials: the death penalty, third-trimester abortions, tax hikes and military spending.

"Really, I don't know much [about Gantt] other than what I've seen on commercials," said Shirley Mabe, a 38-year-old accounting clerk for the Stokes County Mental Health Department. "I've heard a lot of negative things about when he was mayor of Charlotte and raising taxes. He doesn't believe in capital punishment."

Many voters get their political information from television, not separating news reporting from advertising. All their TV viewing goes into one mental compartment, and they remember the most dramatic, visceral moments. TV news is often bland; so are many Gantt commercials. But Helms' television spots, with their dramatic style and good vs. evil messages, rise above the pabulum and stick with viewers for a long time.

They are designed to give voters the "simple answers" they're looking for.

Ironically, many of the voters I interviewed deeply care about the issues Gantt has focused on, but the Democrat's message hasn't gotten through. "The environment's on my mind," said Edward Frazier, a 29-year-old truck driver from Henderson. "With the incinerator coming, you need to start taking interest in the environment. Who's going to look out for North Carolina's interest?"

Frazier, a Republican, splits his ticket when he finds a Democrat who shares his values. But when we talked at the Three Way Restaurant, he said he knew nothing about Helms' environmental voting record. When I mentioned that Helms opposed both the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, he seemed surprised.

He wasn't the first voter who was unaware of Helms' record. Eating lunch at Boondini's Subs in North Raleigh, 23-year-old portrait photographer Elke Breckling told me she wasn't certain about whom to vote for in the Senate race. A registered Democrat, she leans toward the GOP in the ballot box, because "for some reason, Republicans just seem stronger."

But when she learned that Helms opposed the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, she said she couldn't vote for the senator. "Forget it No-



way!" she said.

"I haven't seen any commercials," Breckling added. "If [Gantt] came on at prime hours and had a simple message, a simple brown background and said, 'Here's the things I'm for. I'm for the Clean Water Act,' he'd get elected."

## 2 Voters care passionately about education.

From the malls of North Raleigh to the mountains of rural Danbury, one fact stuck in minds of dozens of people I interviewed—one statistic that has firmly entrenched itself into North Carolina's collective memory: our 49th-place ranking in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. Like never before, voters care about education—and want the federal government to spend more on schools.

Forty-eight-year-old Jeanne Chesson was finishing lunch at the Cary Village Mall food court when I came up and asked her views on the Senate race. She said she was a registered Republican and usually votes the GOP line. But this year, if she votes, her decision will be based on the candidate who would do the most to help our school system," she said. "We have next to the last rating in the country: They can slack off on other things—but not schools. Chesson knows firsthand how important education funding is; she works as a part-time office clerk at Farmington Woods Elementary, where she said several fourth- and fifth-grade teachers lack classroom aides.

Chesson said she would "absolutely" vote against a candidate who opposed education funding—but she doesn't know whom she will support this year. She had not heard, for instance, that Helms was among only eight senators who voted against President Bush's 1990 Excellence in Education Act, which provides cash grants to schools that improve their test scores; establishes a national board for professional teaching standards; and expands the Drug-Free Schools Program. Helms has also consistently voted against funding for the Head Start program, which provides early education for poor children.

"I notice a lot of people have decided to vote against him," she said of Helms. "I'm not quite sure why."

Gantt did air a commercial attacking Helms' voting record on education. To some degree it worked; some voters view the Democrat as the education candidate. But the advertisement didn't carry the punch of many Helms ads.

## 3 Gantt has ceded the tax issue to Helms.

Naida White's tiny grocery store in rural Forsyth County is cluttered with canned goods, fishing supplies and cigarettes. Country music fills the dimly lit store, and if you like the music, there is an assortment of eight-track tapes for sale in a dusty cabinet. White and her husband have owned this store for 20 years, and they know the people of the Bowers Creek community well.

White sits behind the counter chatting with customers and ringing up their purchases. She loves the work, but she hates the taxes, and she trusts Jesse Helms to fight against additional tax hikes. "The small business people are taxed to death," she told me, her every word bellowing. "They try to make a living. We can deal with it, but they keep on wanting to raise,



Rose Eggerling (left) and Kim Johnson work at The Eyewear House in Cary. Both support abortion rights and education funding—but Johnson will vote for Helms and Eggerling remains undecided. Says Johnson: "I never once picked up the phone and called [Helms] where he didn't return my call."



"I would vote for the candidate who would do the most to help our school system," says Jeanne Chesson. "They can slack off on other things—but not schools."



Suburban Republican women like Stella Nolley could hold the key to this year's Senate race.

the taxes. They should learn to live with what money they have."

When I probed White's feelings a little deeper, they became more complex. "I don't mind paying my fair share, but you've got big ones who pay not as much taxes as the little people," she said. Like several voters I interviewed, her feelings about taxes are really about tax equity—the fact that only a small share of the nation's tax burden falls on the wealthy.

"I think the middle class is really supporting the nation," said Shirley Mabe, the Stokes County accounting clerk. "Cigarettes and gas—it takes more of the middle class and poor class' wages."

Gantt has never picked up on this theme. Helms has been successful in portraying himself as the candidate who opposes taxes, while accurately depicting his opponent as someone who wants to raise taxes. In fact, during the primary, Gantt endorsed a Democratic tax package that critics said placed the greatest burden on the middle class.

Some voters might support Gantt in spite of his call for higher taxes. Debbie Fowlkes, a furniture store vice president from Yanceyville, isn't sure who she plans to vote for, but she considers decent schools the top priority. "I don't mind increased taxes," said Fowlkes, a Democrat. "But if I had someone running who showed me ways he would improve education—and did it—it wouldn't hurt so bad."

But Gantt can do better than simply rallying support for higher taxes. He can reframe the issue, focusing on Helms' support for tax breaks for the wealthy, which put more of the tax burden on the middle class and poor.

For instance, Helms supported the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, a tax-relief bill that gave one-third of its benefits to the wealthiest 3 percent of Americans, according to Congressional Budget Office figures cited by the Gantt campaign. The bill also saved oil and gas companies \$60 billion during the 1980s by speeding up tax write-offs. Helms has also voted to preserve tax deductions for luxury items, such as first-class airline travel and foreign conventions.

## 4 This election is not about political parties.

I came into this election assuming that Helms can write off all black Democrats and Gantt can forget about Republican men.

Then I met 70-year-old Lape Smith, on his way to Sunday dinner at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Reidsville, a lovely old brick building in the center of the tobacco-manufacturing town. "I'm a Republican," he said, and after a dramatic pause: "I will not vote for Jesse Helms. I do not like the way he runs his campaigns. While I am conservative, he is far too conservative for me."

Smith, a salesman who co-owns a business in Pennsylvania, has lived in North Carolina for 27 years. He has watched Helms since the senator's days as an editorialist for WRAL-TV, and has never agreed with his fellow Republican. "I don't like his stand on abortion. I am for women's rights, ERA. His attitude toward blacks is not what I like to see. I think Gantt is more my type of senator."

If that sounds surprising coming from a Republican man of Helms' generation, consider this: North Carolina's political landscape

**VOICES**

*continued from previous page*

has changed dramatically since Helms last ran for office six years ago. Much of that change has happened within the GOP.

Lt. Gov. Jim Gardner, a staunch conservative, has come out against the proposed hazardous-waste incinerator. Gov. Jim Martin, once an opponent of the Basic Education Plan, now calls himself a strong education booster.

**One statistic has entrenched itself into North Carolina's collective memory: our 49th-place ranking in SAT scores.**

Suburbs across the state have bulged with Yankee Republicans, accustomed to voting for moderates. Fully half of Jesse Helms' supporters call themselves pro-choice, according to a poll by the National Abortion Rights Action League.

Russ Buxton IV is a Democrat, but his voting patterns have been distinctly Republican. The 24-year-old Toyota salesman from Cary has volunteered for Martin and Gardner, and he voted for George Bush in 1988. But this year, he's a soldier for Gantt—putting up yard signs, making phone calls and helping compile mailing lists.

"Helms' views are too radical for what I feel is good for North Carolina and the United States," Buxton said, finishing up a chili dog at Cary Village Mall. Buxton said he wants a senator who will work prudently to balance the budget, solve the Middle East crisis—and protect the free-speech and abortion rights of American citizens. "Harvey Gantt may not be the best candidate ever, but I think he is far above Jesse Helms."

**5 There are some voters whom Gantt should just write off.**

During my afternoon in Oxford, I walked to the Decorator Fabric Outlet, a homey storefront just outside downtown. Like most of the shops in Oxford, this one displayed a poster depicting a gaseous skull rising from a barrel. "NO WASTE IN GRANVILLE COUNTY," it said, referring to the proposed hazardous-waste incinerator.

Inside, three women—a nurse, a real-estate broker and a fabric saleswoman—sat on comfortable chairs talking, while a television with its sound turned off played the soap operas. Exposed brick covered one wall; rolls of upholstery fabric covered another. The space was cluttered and intimate, conducive to an afternoon chat.

Even though all three women supported abortion rights, the two Democrats definitely planned to vote for Helms. The Republican—the fabric seller—was also leaning in Helms' direction.

"Conservative is the word," explained the

nurse, and there were nods all around. When I asked what that word meant to her, she thought for a while. "Capital punishment, taxes...his color." The room filled with sympathetic laughter. "That's from the true prejudiced South," she said.

Without prompting, the discussion twice came back to race. The women joked that the toxic waste bound for Granville County should instead be sent with Jesse Jackson to Saudi Arabia. One later said that blacks "have already burned the town down twice," and she didn't want them to do it again.

Yet when I brought the racial issue up, all three said they would vote for a black candidate under the right circumstance. "If [Joint Chiefs of Staff leader] Colin Powell runs for something, I'd certainly be the first to vote for him," said real-estate broker Linda Parham, the only one who would allow her name to be used.

But Parham made clear that this year she would vote for Helms. True, she supported abortion rights, because "a group of men aren't going to sit somewhere and tell me what to do with my body. [But] that one issue would never keep me from voting for Jesse Helms. If you have enough money, you can get an abortion, no matter what law they pass."

One reason 43-year-old Parham supports Helms is the senator's opposition to homosexuality. "I'm tired of them marching down the street carrying down their little placards, and I don't want to see my tax money going to AIDS research," she said. The nurse agreed, suggesting that people with AIDS be quarantined. "We can put them out there with the incinerator," she said.

Just as Helms has written off certain voters,

Gantt can assume that none of the women at the Decorator Fabric Outlet—even the saleswoman who claimed she was undecided—will vote Democratic this fall.

This month's swing through North Carolina was the third time I interviewed voters statewide about a coming election. The first time was right before the 1986 U.S. Senate primaries that ultimately elected Terry Sanford; the other was during the 1988 presidential race.

On the previous trips, a common theme emerged: North Carolinians were desperately looking for someone who would address their

**"I think the middle class is really supporting the nation. Cigarettes and gas—it takes more of the middle class and poor class' wages."**

difficulties finding well-paying jobs, or affording child care, or staying on their farms. They were tired of toiling for just above minimum wage while prospering businesses paid next-to-nothing in taxes. Many of their concerns were economic, and none of the candidates, they felt, really addressed those needs.

Certainly, during this trip I heard some of those sentiments. But this time around I heard something else too: a collective sense that education and the environment have reached a crisis point, and that North Carolina needs

leaders who will deal boldly with these issues. It was a sentiment that cut across lines of sex, geography and political party—a resounding cry that we need leadership in these areas.

In six years of covering North Carolina politics, I have never before seen a major candidate whose campaign was completely in sync with the issues that voters were talking about at the moment. But Harvey Gantt has been talking about education and the environment from the first day of his campaign. If he gets his message across, Gantt can win the support of a broad cross-section of the state's citizens.

At the same time, I have rarely seen a candidate who experienced such difficulty getting his message out to the voters. A handful of people I interviewed had never even heard of Gantt; many more knew nothing about him except that he was black and from Charlotte. Even the people who saw Gantt's commercials couldn't remember much about the man.

I was reminded during this trip about how much television determines what information people receive. I was also reminded how masterfully Helms controls the airwaves.

Can a charismatic candidate like Gantt, whose platform coincides with the values of so many citizens, still lose the election? Certainly—especially if the voters never learn about that platform.

If Gantt wants to win this election, he needs to be aggressive in painting Helms as the extremist he is: a senator who voted against the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, who voted against critical school programs, who supported tax breaks for oil companies and the rich. He needs to get on TV and show *specific* ways that Helms has voted against North

Carolina's interests, giving viewers easy-to-remember examples of Helms' most egregious actions in the Senate.

Of course, the Gantt campaign has had trouble raising funds, especially compared to the Jesse Helms money machine. Once Gantt did begin to collect funds, he had to introduce himself with feel-good commercials trumpeting the values of hard work and education. Now it's time to give people substantive reasons to vote *against* Helms.

As *The Independent* went to press, the newest Gantt ads were sharply attacking Helms for his ties to big oil companies. His campaign staff also promised two or three ads in coming weeks

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**The Oxford nurse suggested that people with AIDS be quarantined. "We can put them out there with the incinerator," she said.**

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on the Republican's environmental record. The Gantt campaign may be moving in the right direction—but it must move fast.

After all, it's now September. The election is less than two months away. There may be 100,000 undecided voters now, but history shows that the number will drop quickly as Helms' TV commercials become faster and more furious. Unless Gantt begins to tell voters about his opponent's record, the swing voters are going to start swinging—toward Jesse Helms. ■