



Today: Afternoon
thunderstorms
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Low: 42
Details: B2

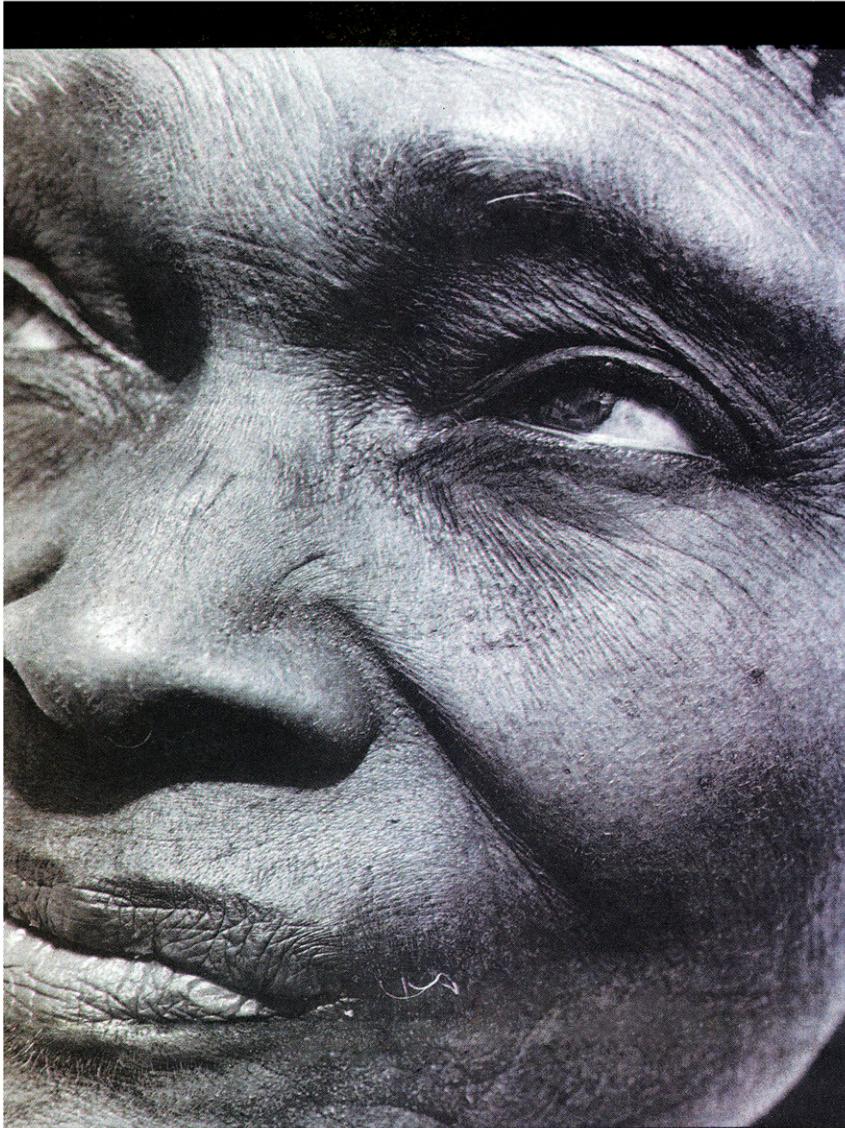
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Sunday NEWS SENTINEL

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"Eley Otelia Demiel" by Kendall Messick is part of the exhibit of photos from Corapeake, N.C., currently at the UT Downtown Gallery.

Timeless TALES

Author-photographer chronicles stories from North Carolina town

BY CHANDRA HARRIS-MCCRAY
harrisc@knews.com

With creases in her forehead and fine lines under her eyes and along her lips, Eley Otelia Demiel peers up to the clear, blue skies.

"I feel like he's calling me home," the then-101-year-old said. She lived another seven years before God called her to heaven.

Engaged by her story, New Yorker Kendall Messick spent seven years capturing the Eleys of Corapeake, N.C.

A treasure trove of stories are told through black-and-white photographs, journal entries, collected mementos and a documentary film — all at the UT Downtown Gallery through March 29.

On his first visit in the fall of 1995 to his friend's blink-and-you'll-miss-it crossroads hometown on the edge of the Great Dismal Swamp, Messick knew that whoever hung the laundry blowing in the wind on the clothesline had a story that needed to be preserved.

He knew his camera alone wouldn't be enough to capture the colorful, oral history of the elderly, black community of Corapeake. Their recollections reminded him of his grandfather's stories of growing up in rural North Carolina — stories lost when his grandfather died.

Every few months Messick journeyed back with best friend Brenda Parker Hunt, who spent the first eight years of her life in the small town just south of the Virginia border.

It was Hunt's idea initially for Messick to come with her and visit the town and her aging family. She told him to bring a camera.

They might have wondered, at first, who this white guy was and why he wanted to take their picture, but "once they saw that my heart was in the right place," fried chicken and biscuits welcomed Messick every time.

"Every lesson, every bit of wisdom, from childhood to death's passage, I was trying to capture and record," said Messick. "When you look their faces or hear their stories, I want you to feel an emotion."

"The elderly are often tossed to the side, but they are incredibly vibrant with so much to share."

Handwritten quotes in the exhibit and the voices in the film reveal townspeople's memories. Glenda Boone tells of crawling underneath the local juke joint's slatted floor to collect coins that had fallen from dancer's pockets. James Lee Knight shares stories about the days he skipped school and hung out with friends in a stack of pine needles. Others share stories of finely dressed men on a Saturday night, of tobacco worms and harvesting cotton.

Many have died, but Messick said their stories continue to live. And he continues to visit Corapeake at least once a year.

"It's (Corapeake) where I found my passion. There I found the beauty and magic in storytelling, from people who never had a chance to tell their story. It became not just about preserving, but sharing their stories."

Chandra Harris-McCrory may be reached at 865-342-6425.