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Education works: Houston is living proof

From poverty to steak with president

By KRISTIN PITTS
Staff Writer

Johnny Houston hasn't always been this way. Right now, he's surrounded by plaques, honors and the tangible fruits of nearly 40 years of work. Inside Elizabeth City State University's Lane Hall, tables have been pushed together to showcase photos of Houston with heads of state, President George W. Bush, and awards that reflect his work as an educator and researcher.

Today, after 26 years at ECSU, Houston will retire, and receive yet another honor — professor emeritus.

But years ago, when Houston was growing up in government housing prior to the civil rights movement, the success he is enjoying today seemed nearly unimaginable. Without an education, Houston says, rising above

the obstacles that have faced him would be impossible.

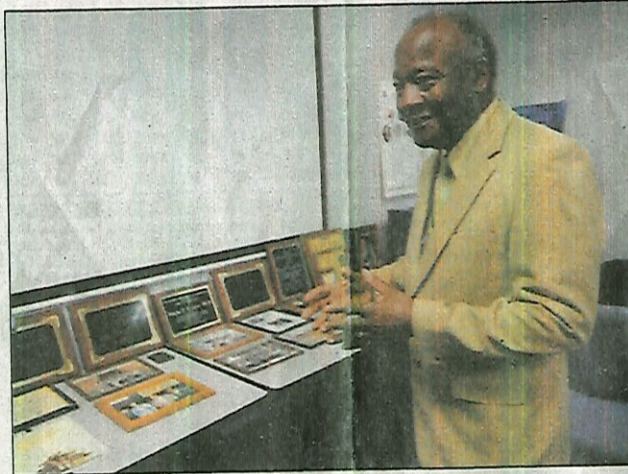
"Education is the foundation of all progress and all forward movement," Houston said. "It is the only commodity that can transcend culture, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, what have you."

Houston is living proof that an education can make a difference.

When Houston attended Morehouse College in 1964, he was the first in his family to attend college. Ten years later, Houston had earned his Ph.D., and had helped form the National Association of Mathematicians, Inc.

"The thing that (education) did was it permitted me to come from some of the more poverty-stricken conditions ... to go all the way to the White House to have a steak dinner with the president of the United States. And that's quite a distance," Houston said.

Clutching a photograph of



STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT A. CLARK

Johnny Houston talks about his upcoming retirement from Elizabeth City State University, Thursday.

himself at the White House, Houston smiled.

"It has eradicated barriers that would have existed and usually exist for everybody. It has changed my world and helped me to change the world," Houston said.

In his time at ECSU, Houston has held a number of different roles. When he was hired 26 years ago, Hous-

ton worked as the vice chancellor for academic affairs. But it wasn't long before he began seeking a role inside the classroom. His desire to work more closely with students and faculty led him to other positions, including senior research professor of mathematics and computer science, the director of the computational science and

scientific visualization center, co-founder and director of the Global Leadership Academy, and more recently, the program director of the Senegal Textbooks and Learning Materials Program. Houston has garnered more than \$15 million in grants, and received the UNC Board of Governors Annual Award for Excellence in Teaching and the National Association of Mathematicians' (NAM) Lifetime Achievement Award, among other things. But as Houston reflects back on his career, most of what he calls his greatest accomplishments aren't on plaques — they're anecdotes.

Coming to a close of a long career, Houston says it feels great to be retiring. He hopes to have the time to do all of the things he wished he'd been able to do when his schedule was too packed to permit extra speaking engagements or additional projects.

Even though his career

is coming to a close, Houston can't help but recall the days before it all began. He remembers when he was attending college in Atlanta, Ga. It was during the era of segregation, and he and several others had decided to protest against a store that refused to hire or serve African Americans.

As he was protesting, Houston said he overheard a conversation between two white women that impacted him deeply.

He heard one woman say to the other, "You know, I hope they stay out here and march all day and night. That way we won't ever have to worry about them because they won't get an education and we won't have to be bothered."

As he reflected on the memory, Thursday, Houston paused.

"I said in my mind, I'm going to go and get an education, and also go in the door and make the changes," Houston said.