

WITH HONORS

Six outstanding Tar Heels garner our state's highest accolades — the N.C. Award — for a lifetime of exemplary achievements.

BY MIRIAM SAULS



COURTESY OF THE N.C. STATE ARCHIVES

Lisbeth C. Evans (second from left), Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, and Gov. Michael Easley and Mary Easley (center), beam with pride for 2003's N.C. Award winners (from left): James Baxter Hunt Jr., Etta Baker, Frank Hanes, Jaki Shelton Green, Mary Ann Scherr, and William Thornton.

Instituted in 1961 by the General Assembly, the N.C. Award — the highest civilian honor given by the state for a lifetime of achievement in the fields of public service, fine arts, science, and literature — has been presented annually since 1964. In 2003, we saluted six outstanding North Carolinians — a musician, writer, philanthropist, public servant, artist, and doctor — who were recognized and honored in December for their contributions to the well-being of our state.

Etta Baker MUSICMAKER

Etta Baker's father sat her down beside a guitar when she was three years old, and she found her place in the world. "I could tell from the smile he had on his face that I was in the right place," says Baker, recalling that day nearly 90 years ago.

She spent her first 60 years honing her distinctive finger-picking style now widely emulated by other musicians, but like many traditional artists, she only played for personal satisfaction and the pleasure of friends and family. After her nine children were reared, she started playing professionally in what would be an average person's retirement years.

Baker plays the six- and 12-string guitar and the banjo (which she started teaching herself at age 83). At nearly 80 years old, she released her first CD, *One-Dime Blues*, in 1991 to great reviews and came out with a second one, *Railroad Bill*, in 1999.

She has performed at venues throughout the United States and Europe, including the National Folk Festival at Wolf Trap Park in Virginia and the 1984 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. She received the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award in 1989, and in 1991 she received the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Baker lives in Morganton where she enjoys having five generations around her, but she still travels away from home to perform for adoring audiences. She shares her secret of vigor and longevity: "It's like a good dose of medicine to tune up. You set your mind on that, and you study more about the happy sounds than

your aches and pains," she says.

For the music she makes and the traditions she keeps alive, Etta Baker received the 2003 North Carolina Award for Fine Arts. "I'm so thankful to get this award for my music that I so dearly love," she says.

Jaki Shelton Green WORDSMITH

Iwas a little busybody, a restless child," says Efland native Jaki Shelton Green. "So in church my grandmother would engage me with a paper and pencil, and I would write." She wrote poems — hundreds of them on church fans and hymnals.

She was first published in a college literary journal at the age of 12, and since then, her works have appeared in textbooks, journals, anthologies, and collections of poetry. Her widely acclaimed books include *Dead on Arrival*, *Masks*, *Swiss Times*, and *Conjure Blues*.

Her works have been choreographed by Chuck Davis' African American Dance Ensemble, Miami City Ballet, and the Naropa Dance Institute of Colorado, among others. She produced a play, *Blue Opal*, and contributed a chapter for the collaborative book, *Pete and Shirley: The Great Tar Heel Novel*. Her creative writing workshops and readings have been held throughout the nation and abroad.

Not only did Green turn out to be a highly regarded writer, but she is admired for the way she uses her immense talent in serving others. She is a fierce activist for marginalized

populations — abused women, the elderly, the incarcerated, and especially children, and she teaches them the power of words. "Sometimes we have to write through the pain to get to the level where the joy lives," she says.

She has been a powerful influence on a lengthy list of boards and committees, including the North Carolina Humanities Council, the Paul Green Foundation, the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, the North Carolina Writers' Network, and the North Carolina Arts Advocacy Commission. She also serves as co-chair of the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project.

For the countless lives she touches by word and deed, Jaki Shelton Green received the 2003 North Carolina Award for Literature. "It's wonderful to receive public acknowledgement for your work," says Green. "I share this award with all the writers I work with because their stories feed the writer in me."

Frank Borden Hanes BENEFACTOR

Frank Hanes once summed up his life this way: “Went to war on a destroyer, wrote some books, won some awards, caught a big trout.” Hanes could have added, among many other things, “supported a lot of causes.”

Born in Winston-Salem, Hanes carries on a tradition of philanthropy long held by the Hanes family. A 1942 graduate of the University of North Carolina, Hanes has an abiding love for his alma mater and has enriched the campus in many ways. He has

endowed numerous professorships and has served on many boards and foundations within the university. He was founding chairman of the Arts and Sciences Foundation, the private support arm of the College of Arts and Sciences, and he established the Thomas Wolfe Scholarship in Creative Writing. He helped make the UNC library first in the Southeast and one of only 20 in North America to reach the five million-volume milestone.

Hanes has been a great benefactor of the arts in North Carolina, supporting arts organizations and regional and statewide museums. In 2002, he was recipient of the North Caroliniana Society Award for extraordinary contributions to the

state’s historical and cultural heritage.

He refers to his writing, but doesn’t mention that he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for *The Fleet Rabble*; for that work he won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction in 1961. He won the inaugural Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry in 1953 for *Abel Anders*.

For his consistent, magnanimous support of the fine arts, his body of work as a writer, and his volunteer service to arts and educational organizations, Frank Borden Hanes received the 2003 North Carolina Award for Public Service. “I don’t feel worthy,” says Frank Hanes, “but it is a wonderful award, and I am very glad to be a part of it.”

James Baxter Hunt Jr. GOVERNOR

Jim Hunt recalls the day Governor Kerr Scott, as he puts it, “got us out of the mud. I saw that paving machine come down the road, paving my dirt road, and all of a sudden it occurred to me if you work through politics, you can help people — you can do things that really improve their lives.”

He never forgot the childhood lesson he learned in Wilson County and was elected governor of North Carolina in 1976 at the age of 39. By the time he stepped down from office in 2001, he had served an extraordinary 16 years as the state’s chief executive officer, plus four as its lieutenant governor.

Anyone observing Hunt in his early days could have predicted a great future. In high school he was president of his junior and senior classes, yearbook editor, valedictorian,

and state president of the Junior Grange and Future Farmers of America. He played quarterback, and at halftime, still in helmet and pads, he joined the marching band and played the trumpet.

A 1959 graduate of N.C. State University, he was twice elected student body president. After earning a master’s degree in agricultural economics from State and a law degree from the University of North Carolina School of Law at Chapel Hill, he and his wife Carolyn and their children moved to Nepal, where he worked as a Ford Foundation economic adviser. It was the experience gained in Nepal, he says, that prepared him to govern North Carolina.

Hunt led the state through some of the most dramatic growth and change in its history. He pioneered education reforms, including Smart Start, a preschool program that has been a model for the nation. During his watch, North Carolina became one of the fastest-growing states in the country. His work has been recognized with many national awards, particularly in the field of education. He is still an active public servant on numerous boards.

For his deep, consistent record of service over the longest period of time of any governor in the country, James Baxter Hunt Jr. was awarded the 2003 North Carolina Award for Public Service.

Mary Ann Scherr ARTISAN

Although Mary Ann Scherr is petite in physical stature, she is known as a giant in the sphere of creative endeavor. An internationally recognized designer, educator, and metalsmith, she pioneered the use of nontraditional materials in jewelry and art.

Born in Akron, Ohio, Scherr knew by the age of five that she wanted to be an artist. Every weekend, she used her three-penny allowance to buy paper from a local bakery for her drawings. By the time she entered the Cleveland Institute of Art, she wanted to be a sculptor, painter, and designer.

Scherr and her husband Sam opened their own design shop in Akron, where

she began experimenting with metals and designed stainless steel jewelry for U.S. Steel Corporation. She also developed a series of electronic human health alerts, encased in jewelry and known as “Body-Monitors,” for which she earned patents and an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree, and she developed and copyrighted a unique process for etching metal.

In 1979, she became director of the Product Design Department at Parsons School of Design in New York, and along the way, produced one-of-a-kind jewelry for such clients as the Duke of Windsor. Her work has been in exhibitions around the world, and she has been featured on major television shows and in more than 120 publications. Her honors include Fellow of the American Craft Council

and Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

In 1989, the Scherrs moved to Raleigh, and she began teaching at Duke University, North Carolina State University, and Meredith College. She also continued her association with the Penland School of Crafts in Mitchell County, where she has been a beloved teacher for more than 30 years.

For her devotion to her craft and her influence in the world of art, Mary Ann Scherr received the 2003 North Carolina Award for Fine Arts. “It is such a nice honor to get an award for doing all the things I have wanted and loved to do,” says Scherr. “I am a metalsmith and not a wordsmith, but I can tell you my feelings of gratitude are deep and true.”

William E. Thornton GOOD MEDICINE

William Thornton has a different perspective from most of us. He describes his hometown of Faison as a small dot on a large green plain, and he can do that because he has seen it from space. Growing up in Faison, he taught himself electronics and other skills crucial to his later careers as physicist, physician, educator, pilot, writer, and the first astronaut from North Carolina.

Thornton received a B.S. Degree in Physics from UNC and during his Air Force tour in the Korean War developed the first successful target and scoring system for air-to-air missiles, which was subsequently used worldwide. For this, he was awarded patents (he now holds more than 50) and the Legion of Merit.

He returned to

Chapel Hill to attend medical school and there designed systems now routinely used in the field, such as the first electronically monitored operating suites and the first automatic analyzer of electrocardiograms. Back in the U.S. Air Force, he developed instruments for space flight while on assignment to the Air Force’s space program.

NASA also needed such items, so Thornton became one of its principal investigators for Skylab. Then, in 1967, he was selected as a NASA scientist astronaut. In 1983, on the space shuttle *Challenger*, he became the first and only physician to build his own laboratory and conduct his own experiments in space. He flew again on *Challenger* in 1985 and logged almost 3,000 hours of pilot

time in NASA jets.

Thornton went on to become a clinical professor of medicine in cardiology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and there developed a computer-based self-teaching system that is now in extensive use. Thornton and Jennifer, his wife of 45 years, live in Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

Thornton has dedicated himself to the betterment of medicine — on earth and in space. For his enormous contributions to science and space, William E. Thornton received the 2003 North Carolina Award for Science. “When recognition like this comes from people and places where one grew up, it becomes doubly significant,” says Dr. Thornton. “For me personally, it is as great an accolade as I have received.”

*Miriam Sauls lives
in Raleigh.*