

Counting Durham

By Christina Nifong Staff Writer
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DURHAM -- Sometime over the past three months, you may have noticed the car. The one that inched from house to house in your neighborhood. Driver squinting at addresses, turning around in cul-de-sacs, heading up one side of the street then down the other.

You may have wondered why it returned night after night. Riding by a home at 2 or 3 mph, scanning for signs of life. Was it lost or casing the place? The answer is: a little of both.

I know, because for four weeks in May and June, I was driving that car. Armed with a black satchel and a list of addresses, I wandered through a half-dozen neighborhoods, searching out specific homes, watching the travel patterns of the people supposedly staying inside.

I didn't know the names of those I was tracking, only where they lived. And I would do anything to find out about them: ring doorbells, talk to neighbors, question the mail carrier, look up phone numbers by address, find and call grown children. Once, I traced a man to his workplace because he never answered his door at home.

Along the way, I encountered rats, slamming doors, snarling dogs. Three generations of a family shoehorned into two ramshackle bedrooms. Sixty-year-old men living in a sagging group home.

For a month, I was part detective, part social scientist, part delivery woman. I was exhausted from working two jobs. I was frustrated by the bureaucracy. But mostly, I was moved by the people I met and the quiet dignity with which they lived their often difficult lives.

That car skulking through your neighborhood? It was one tiny piece of a huge operation that cranked up this spring and summer to count everyone in America. The car was an agent of the 2000 census. And, for a brief time, I was a census enumerator.

Joining the ranks

The Constitution directs Congress to make a count of the population every 10 years; numbers emerging from this effort will determine how voting districts are drawn and

how \$185 billion is spent. Yet North Carolina had one of the worst census response rates in the country, and Durham was the slowest office in the state to turn in its forms.

In the months leading up to this year's census, we heard a lot about political wrangling over how to count people, complaints about the invasiveness of the questions, ads telling us how important it was to fill out our forms. But almost nothing about what it's like to try to collect this information.

Because of census bureau concerns about privacy, that's hard to come by. No reporters can accompany enumerators on their routes. Only local office managers can talk to the press. The only way to find out how census taking looks at the ground level is to take a job doing it.

So - after conversations with my editors about potential ethical conflicts - that's what I did. Because the census jobs are all part-time, short-term work, my moonlighting was no different from the minister's wife looking for extra cash, the N.C. Central University student employed by Kmart as well as the census, the car mechanic who walks out of one job at 5 p.m. and starts the other an hour later. We would all be working for the money (\$13 an hour). And for the experience.

To be fair, I disclosed to Durham's census officials that I was a reporter with The News & Observer and would likely write a story from my experiences.

"It's a free country," field operation supervisor Jeff Taylor said. "As long as what you write is true, I have no problem with that."

It was late January when I made my first phone call, to a number I had scribbled down at the post office. The voice on the line told me I would have to take a test, then I would be placed on a list of potential employees. All I could do after that was wait for the phone to ring.

The call I wanted came four months later.

Learning the ropes

On May 18, I began 24 hours of training, over three days, in the fellowship hall of Peace Missionary Baptist Church, off N.C. 55 in Durham. Around a ring of tables sat 11 anxious would-be census workers: An injured football player-turned electrician. A woman home-schooling her eight children. A Nigerian-born man who worked at IBM. A pregnant mother taking classes at Durham Tech. Six others. And me.

We started (as every step of the census did) with forms. Tax forms. Employment forms. Waiver forms. Payroll forms. We turned in 17 pages before the morning was through.

Then came the most ceremonial moment of my stint with the census: We all stood, raised our right hands and repeated aloud an oath not to disclose any information we obtained while working as census employees.

That made us official. We were issued badges. For we were now full-fledged members of the census team.

Over the next three days, we memorized dozens of acronyms, codes and procedures. We learned that we were NRFUENUMs (that's Nonresponse Follow-up Enumerators). That our LCO (Local Census Office) was 2819. That D-31s were "privacy act notices" or small pieces of white paper explaining in English and Spanish that all answers given to an enumerator were confidential.

We were told to write in all capital letters. To use pencil (except when filling out pay forms or "Info-Comms"; then use pen). To draw X's, not check marks. The rules went on for hundreds of pages: If babies are not yet a year old, write "0" for their age. If a house is vacant, get confirmation from a "knowledgeable source" (real estate agents, neighbors and mail carriers count). If a respondent cannot answer a question, pencil "DK" in the margins for "Don't Know."

As we wrapped up, the idea that we would soon be doing census work and not just talking about it was thrilling.

"I am so excited," said Tanessa Atwater, the woman from Durham Tech. She would be shaking up her routine for the summer. And, for the first time in six months, she would be pulling down a paycheck.

Hitting the streets

Real census work turned out to be not at all like it was portrayed in the classroom. In my first hours of hunting down respondents, not a single case complied with the methods we had been taught: Drive to a residence in our address book (each had 30 to 40 listings). Find the census form with the corresponding address on its label. Take that to the house (short and long forms were distributed randomly and could not be switched). Fill out the form by interviewing the people best able to answer its questions. Turn in the completed form to our crew leader.

This was what happened: The first address was an abandoned mattress store with two apartments upstairs that housed a dozen people. No one spoke a word of English. I got a phone number and a name and explained that a fluent Spanish-speaker would return to conduct the interviews.

At the next address, an elderly woman had her form, completed by her and her son. But her boarder refused to answer the questions. She had been fretting for weeks. I took the form and told her I would try to phone her boarder to collect his information.

The next two houses were occupied by women frantically minding their children. Both asked me to return later. I got names, phone numbers and more convenient times. These two didn't fit into the categories given me at all. At each house, I was to write that I had interviewed or been refused or had no contact with residents. What did I write here? I hadn't interviewed them, but I had made contact. I was refused, but not completely. I left the blanks unanswered and moved on.

At the next house, I was screamed at. At the next few no one came to the door.

At the final house of the day, I knocked and a man answered. As I began asking questions, it became clear he did not live alone. In fact six men in their 50s and 60s were staying there.

Few of them could read. One struggled to spell his name for me. This was a group home for the mentally ill or formerly addicted. I later learned that I needed to delete the listing from my address book and alert the "special places" team (who counted college students and rest home residents and those living in Army bases), who would add it to their books.

After just a few hours I could see that, in this job, the exception would be the rule. But something else was clear, as well. My work as an enumerator would take me into whole new worlds, many just miles from my house.

My classmate, Tonya Benjamin, put it this way: "You really get to see how people live, doing this," she said. "It's kind of sad, isn't it?"

Door to door

Over the next two weeks, I visited 50 homes, all in North Durham, all within 3 miles of Roxboro Road, some in the lower-middle class range, others just a step above poverty.

At each address, I began, "Hi, My name is Christina. I'm with the U.S. Census and I'm trying to fill out a form for" Then I named whatever address I was seeking.

Sometimes, I got lucky. People were there. They made time for me even if they were busy. They invited me in and answered my questions. Most were very kind.

I stopped one woman as she took in her groceries. She had been assigned the long form and we stood, outside on the curb by her beat-up truck, for 40 minutes as she answered questions about how she heated her home, what kind of work she did, where she and each of her children were born, her marital status, her ethnic origin, her son's last year of education, if anyone in her family had any of a number of listed disabilities, how much money she made last year.

The entire time, her daughter lingered, asking her own questions (Have you seen the new Backstreet Boys video? Did we get ice cream at the store?). The mother answered

them by repeatedly asking the girl to go into the house and start dinner. They began to argue, yet the mother kept answering the questions I shot at her. In the end, her daughter was beet red with anger. And the woman thanked me for stopping by.

I encountered one man as he jumped out of his car, idling in the driveway, and headed back into his house. A single father, he was on his way to pick up his daughter but had come in for some change so he could get a Coke while he was out.

He stopped everything when I explained who I was. Left his car going in the driveway and sat down at the kitchen table to help me fill out the form. It was a short form, so we finished in fewer than 10 minutes. As I left, he apologized repeatedly for not sending the form in the first place. He had begun to fill it out, and then, in the craziness of being a single working parent, had lost it. He'd been waiting for weeks, he said, for someone to come by.

Plenty were not so nice. One man was sitting on his front porch with his toddler. I walked up, explained I was from the Census Bureau and launched into my questions.

"I'm not interested," he said. Not interested? He must not have understood what the census was, I thought. He must think I'm trying to sell him something. So I began explaining how being counted was important, for political reapportionment, for aid money, all the things I'd been coached to say.

Again, he responded, "I said, I'm not interested." The more I tried to make him understand, the angrier he got. Finally, he told me I was on private property and he could have me removed. I decided it was time to get off the porch. The irony was, we could have filled out the form in the time it took to argue about it.

Then there was the mother who had asked me to come back on my first day. When I returned, no one came to the door. I stopped by another time and then again. Sometimes, a person would answer the door and tell me to come back on Thursday, say, at 8 a.m. I would, but she was never there.

She had given me a phone number during that first encounter. So I called and left messages. After 10 visits and calls, I got her on the phone. "This is my place of business and I don't have time for this," she yelled and slammed down the phone. I wrote "Refused" on my form and handed it in.

I never did get used to slamming doors and banging phones. I hated refusals. I felt that I had failed.

I wasn't very good at reasoning with those hostile toward me. In training we were told to size up antagonistic people and, in the roughly two seconds before they shut us down, craft arguments for how the census could help them. For the elderly, we were to talk about Medicare. For mothers, day-care funding.

In desperation, as the door was closing in my face, I usually resorted to telling people that if they didn't talk to me, they would have to deal with someone else coming out later. (That was true; more experienced enumerators followed up on all refusals.) Wouldn't they rather get it over now, I would beg.

Sometimes that worked, but often it didn't.

And I would walk to my car with a blank form in my hand and a terrible feeling in my gut.

Lingering at the library

At the end of each long day, I would drive 5 miles up Roxboro Road to the North Durham library. There, among the worn books, the tired carpet and the crabby librarians, was the heartbeat of the census operation in my corner of the world.

This is where my crew leader, George Harger, a gravelly voiced, distracted man, would sit from 5 to 9 p.m., every Monday through Thursday and from 2 to 6 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. This was his "office," and he waited in it to take in completed forms and give out blank ones.

He was busiest between 8 and 9 p.m., when enumerators would return from going door to door. We would sidle up to round, wooden tables, make sure our forms were complete and then present them to Harger, along with our daily pay form. He and his two assistants checked our work, handing back those that were wrong, talking to us about refusals, always asking, could we take on more listings, more forms.

The enumerators and the crew leaders basically took over this tiny library. Throughout the evening (till the place shut down at 9 p.m.) we beat a path from our cars into the strip mall branch library like ants bringing food back to a hill. Here, we traded war stories. And here, we gleaned inklings of what was going on in the bigger census picture.

North Carolina had dismal return rates throughout this census season. By early June, the state had completed 84 percent of its workload while most states had finished 93 percent. The Durham office (responsible for eight counties) was further behind than any other, having completed just 73.6 percent of its work.

So Durham officials were always trying to make up lost ground. And the rules were always changing. At first, enumerators were to make three visits in person to a listed address and then three phone calls before seeking information from neighbors. That dropped to three visits and/or phone calls total as the weeks wore on.

There was intense pressure on crew leaders to make sure the forms they turned in were complete and would not be returned to them by their superiors. That pressure took its toll on accuracy.

Once, I turned in a form that left this question blank: "What time did you usually leave home to go to work last week?" When the assistant crew leader asked about it, I said the respondent did not have a regular schedule. She went to work at 10 a.m. some days, at noon others and at 5 p.m. on yet others. The assistant penciled in 8 a.m. She said that was "a better way" to fill out the form.

Falling into a routine

By week three, all the houses and apartments were becoming a blur. The place with ducks in a cage in the front yard. The two families living across the street from each other, both from Micronesia. The vacant house with a For Sale sign that didn't belong to it in its yard (the real estate agent said she had no listing at that address).

I came to hate apartment complexes and houses without doorbells. I loved senior citizens. I had developed a new fear of dogs.

Once an unleashed Saint Bernard bounded toward me. Another time, a vicious-looking mutt sped around a corner, teeth bared. Should I run? Should I throw my bag of books and forms at him? Why didn't they go over this in training?

By then, I had developed a routine. I'd come home from my N&O job about 4 p.m., change into tennis shoes, gather census materials and crank up the trusty Mustang. I'd drive by the places I was stalking at 5 p.m., then at 7 and maybe again at 8. I looked for clues: cars in the driveways, mail in the box, lights on. It occurred to me that this must be what private detectives do. Private eyes - and thieves.

A new listings book always meant a few easy days. Going to 36 or 37 houses, catching some at home and leaving my number for those not there was much less labor intensive than trying to track the last five or six addresses where no one ever seemed to be around.

Those, the dregs, were the ones that really taxed my sleuthing powers.

After two unsuccessful visits, I would look up addresses in the Durham City Directory and get a phone number. I would call and speak to whoever answered or leave a message. I talked to neighbors, family members, landlords. Eventually, pieces began falling into place.

I had driven by one white cottage on a well-groomed street a dozen times. No signs of anyone there, day or night. I found a phone number but no one ever answered or returned my calls. I had no leads. Until I found one, by accident.

I had left my listings book at home but remembered the name the City Directory had provided, so I looked it up in the phone book. Just below the name I was looking for was an identical name, with two beautiful letters printed after it: JR. This had to be his

son. When I called, the man's daughter-in-law confirmed the man I was looking for had died and the house was vacant April 1. One more form out of my hands.

The hardest nut to crack was the brick house on Roxboro Road. I passed it several times a day but there was never a car in the driveway. I couldn't get a phone number. I asked neighbors what they knew. All anyone could tell me was that the man who lived there worked at the Wal-Mart up the road.

So I drove to Wal-Mart. "I'm with the Census Bureau and I'm looking for a man who lives on Roxboro Road and works here," I told a manager. "That's all I know." He half-heartedly rummaged through some files, then said no one had that address. "Nobody?" I asked. I gave him the address again.

He paused, then led me back to a man on the other side of the store. Where do you live, he called out and the man repeated the numbers written on my form.

I pulled him aside and interviewed him for 40 minutes in the paint aisle.

The call to close

Then, as suddenly as it had all begun, my job was over.

I came home about midnight Friday, June 16, and on the answering machine was a message from Harger. "Christina, it's 9:30 now, if you get home, give me a call." Census officials wanted every binder taken into the local office by 10 a.m., he said.

I was shocked. Yes, Harger had stopped giving out new binders earlier in the week. Yes, he had said census officials were trying to rein in all forms to get a precise count of the work left to do. But when I started, I was told July 7 was the end date and if anything, that would be extended.

Now, the job was finished. Turns out, enough forms had been handed in that it was time for the census office to reorder how they were doing business. A few enumerators continued on the final forms until June 22, when the operation was officially shut down.

I must admit I was relieved to be free from the pressures of juggling two jobs. But I also knew I would miss my walks around North Durham, discovering people I had no other occasion to see, entering all kinds of homes and all kinds of lives.

In my month as a census taker I had encountered dozens of families working hard to make ends meet and, for the most part, succeeding. Seeing them made me grateful for things I had long taken for granted. They made me proud of the roots in the city I have recently chosen as my home.

And that, I think, was the most valuable part of my weeks with the census. Not seeing behind this big bureaucracy. Not knowing better the challenges that await anyone trying to count everyone. Not taking part in this once-a-decade event.

But having the opportunity to meet, in a broader sense, my neighbors.

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Durham's census by the numbers:

Number of counties overseen by Durham's office: 8

Number of housing units listed in those counties: 100,000

Number of units census officials think

have been added since the lists were made: 20,000

Number of enumerators counting housing units: 1,200

Wages paid to the enumerators: \$13 an hour

Number of other census employees in the Durham office: 300

Percent of workload completed by Durham office June 9: 73.6

Percent of workload completed by Durham office on June 22: 100