

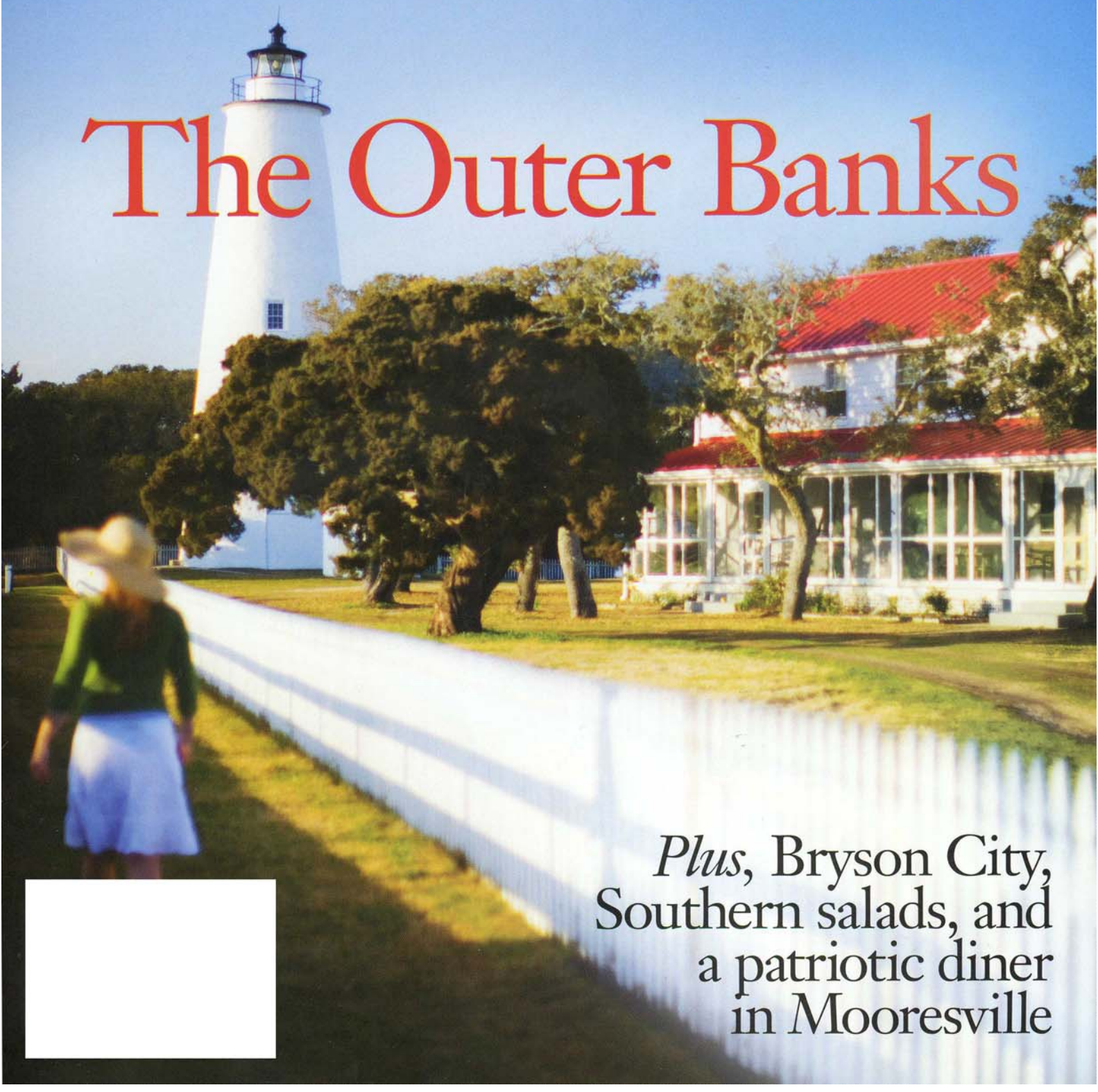
# Our State<sup>®</sup>

DOWN  
HOME  
IN

NORTH CAROLINA

MAY 2009 \$4.95

## The Outer Banks



*Plus, Bryson City,  
Southern salads, and  
a patriotic diner  
in Mooresville*



Full of expression, Mike Wiley captivates audiences in his one-man show, "One Noble Journey."

# A Stand-Up Guy

Actor and playwright Mike Wiley of Apex recounts black history through his courageous one-man plays about equally daring characters.

By Chris Gigley

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISSA GOTWALS

**For about an hour, actor Mike Wiley contorts himself into more than 20 characters** in his one-man show “One Noble Journey” for the eighth grade class at Centennial Campus Middle School in Raleigh. Usually, this is a pretty tough crowd. Brimming with energy and easily distracted, the group rarely sits still.

But they do for Wiley. Mary LaSalla Davis has been teaching for 30 years and understands the significance of the moment. Wiley is captivating them with a history lesson. “One Noble Journey” follows the exploits of Henry “Box” Brown, a slave who had himself sealed in a wooden box and shipped to freedom in Philadelphia.

The children hang on every word. When the play ends and Wiley fields questions from the audience as he always does, the kids don’t hold back. Again, Davis is impressed.

“That’s when I really knew he made an impact because their questions were not only, ‘How did you do this or that?’” she says. “They asked about the subject matter, too. They tapped into what he tried to teach them.”

Wiley’s lesson about the injustice of slavery dovetails with the Civil War studies Davis will soon be leading her class through. It also covers a topic either glossed over or missed entirely in many textbooks, which is why Wiley developed this and other plays in the first place.

Wiley, a Roanoke, Virginia, native, first moved to North Carolina to get an education. He earned a

bachelor’s degree in communications from Catawba College in 1995 but pursued his true calling in the theater. He performed in a few college stage productions to continue an interest he traces all the way back to the sixth grade.

Sixth grade was an otherwise difficult time for him. His family had just moved into a different school zone, and Wiley had trouble fitting in with his new classmates. He found his niche when a teacher asked him to play Abraham Lincoln in a school production about our 16th president’s life. He still remembers his lines and the applause he received after the performance.

## The untold story

After he graduated from Catawba College, Wiley got as much exposure and experience on the stage as he could. He went back to Virginia in 1996 to act with the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, then he served as an editor’s apprentice at New Millennium Studios in Petersburg, Virginia, from 1997 to 1998. He returned to North Carolina in 2001 to earn a Master of Fine Arts in Acting at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Around that time, Wiley noticed that black history in America was going mostly untold in schools. So as he worked on his master’s degree, he started a production company specifically to shine light on those buried stories. He started with “One Noble Journey,” a play he also wrote.

Wiley has since added several others. “Dar He: The

# “People ask why I incorporate humor in my plays, and I say because we have to have hope.”

Lynching of Emmett Till” chronicles the final days of a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. “Blood Done Sign My Name” (based on the book of

the same name by Timothy Tyson) follows the case of Henry “Dickie” Marrow, a 23-year-old Army veteran who was beaten and shot to death in the streets of Oxford for allegedly making a remark to a white woman.

“A Game Apart” glimpses Jackie Robinson’s life.

All are weighty subjects, and Wiley’s plays could be made more grim because of their bleak facts. Thanks to tasteful and well-placed humor, however, they’re not.

“People ask why I incorporate humor in my plays, and I say because we have to have hope,” says Wiley. “We have to have something to look forward to. It’s incredibly hard for people to hear the history of slavery without having any hope.”

## Truth in characters

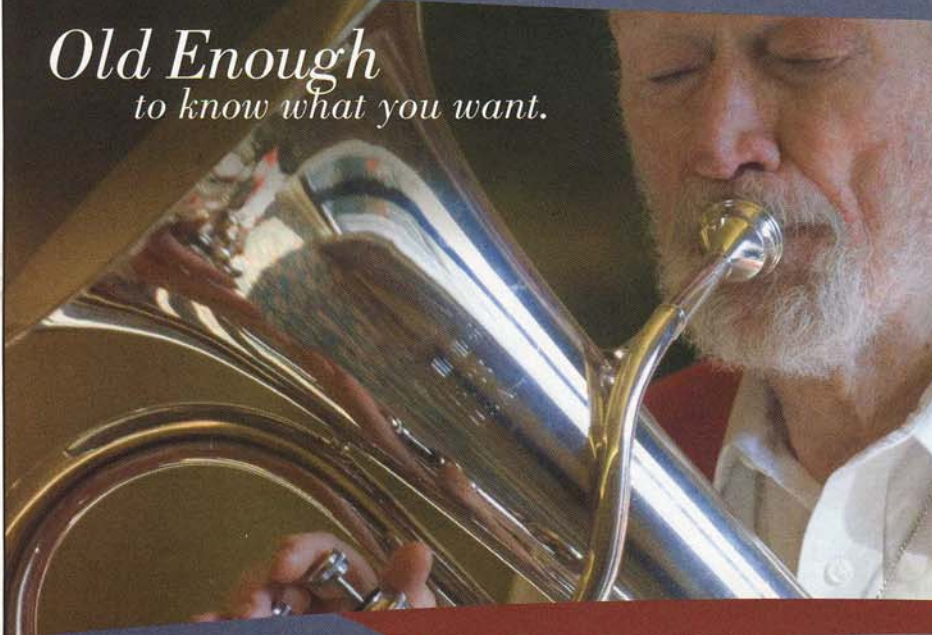
It’s also hard for audiences to realize they’re watching just one man play many people — men and women. Wiley changes posture, voice, and facial expressions to morph from one character to the next.

Each portrayal is the culmination of hours of research. The actor and playwright devours film and audio of his subjects, if available. If not, he sifts through documented material to get a good sense of the person. It’s not always easy, particularly when he researches a contemporary figure.

Thad Stem Jr., who passed away in 1980, is a perfect example. The North Carolina poet, author, and newspaper columnist who received the North Carolina Award for Literature in 1974 is a character in Wiley’s version of “Blood Done Sign My Name.”

Harold Hilburn, Musician

*Old Enough  
to know what you want.*



*Young Enough  
to make it happen.*

*Escape to simplicity. Enjoy new friendships.*

It’s time to do what you want to do, when you want to do it. Here is a community founded on the idea that senior living should be comfortable and secure, absolutely, but also much more. How about purposeful and vibrant? *Life in all its shining brilliance* — that’s retirement at Arbor Acres.



Purposeful Retirement  
*in Comfort and Security*

1240 Arbor Rd. Winston-Salem, NC 27104 336-724-7921 [www.arboracres.org](http://www.arboracres.org)

“There are no audio or video recordings of him,” says Wiley. “I was really nervous about playing him, but I did as much research as I could and asked people who knew him to compare him to someone else I could find an audio recording of.”

Like a private detective, Wiley tracked down clues to gain insight into Stem’s mannerisms. When Stem’s friends and relatives saw the play, Wiley braced for their critique afterward. They said he captured the writer perfectly.

“I thought, ‘Wow, what a load off my mind,’ because it’s not that I want to imitate folks,” says Wiley. “I just want to capture the truth within those people. I could be way off on how they sounded or what their physical nuances were, but, if I find the truth within those people, that’s what I’m going for.”

**‘Ultimate domino effect’**

This is a special year for Wiley. In January, he sat with his six-month-old son, Jordan, and watched the inauguration of our nation’s first black president.

“What [President Barack] Obama did by taking office was give me hope that my son can truly help this country in a way that before now didn’t seem possible,” says Wiley. “If [Obama] doesn’t get it done, my son can rise up behind him and get it done.”

He sensed a change in his audiences long before Obama took office. Throughout the presidential campaign, he noticed people grasping the idea that then-Senator Obama served as a bookend to the stories Wiley told.

“It’s the ultimate domino effect,” says Wiley. “When I tell the story of Emmett Till, I can say Emmett inspired many individuals to step forward and tell their stories. He made people want to fight back and reach higher ground.”

Wiley says audiences are increasingly open to the material and eager to talk during question-and-answer periods. He’s closer now than he’d ever been before to shedding the light on black history in America.

The future is indeed bright for Wiley. In January of next year, he’ll begin a year-long stint as visiting professor in the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, where he’ll

**Picture Perfect!**

TO VIRGINIA

1-95 exits 168-173  
Weldon  
www.visitthelifax.com

1-95 exits 116-121  
Wilson  
www.wilson-nc.com

1-95 exits 79-107  
Four Oaks  
www.johnstoncountync.org

1-95 exits 72-73  
Dunn  
www.visitdunnnc.com

1-95 exits 40-58  
Fayetteville  
www.visitfayetteville-nc.com

**Recreation and fun along the I-95 corridor...  
...it's a Destination!**

- Roanoke River rapids Weldon, Exit 173
- North Carolina Baseball Museum – Wilson, Exit 121
- Howell Woods Environmental Learning Center – Four Oaks, Exit 90
- Dunn-Erwin Trail – Dunn, Exit 73
- Cape Fear River Trail Fayetteville, Exit 58

**To receive a FREE I-95 Corridor Trail Guide, call 1-800-441-7829**

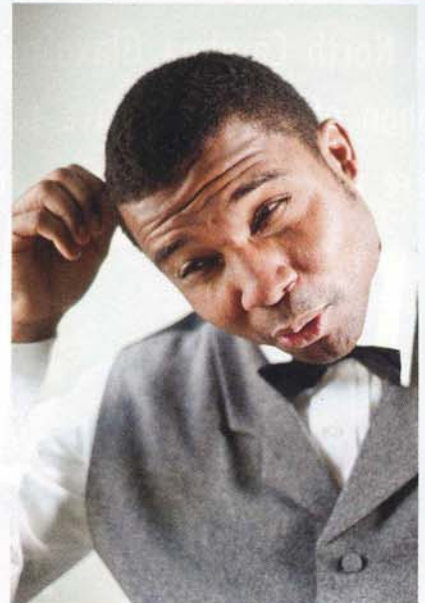
**I-95 CORRIDOR DESTINATIONS**

**America's MAIN STREET**

www.AmericasMainStreetNC.com

tar heel people |

“I think people have to realize that American history is everyone’s history and not just what is in the textbooks.”

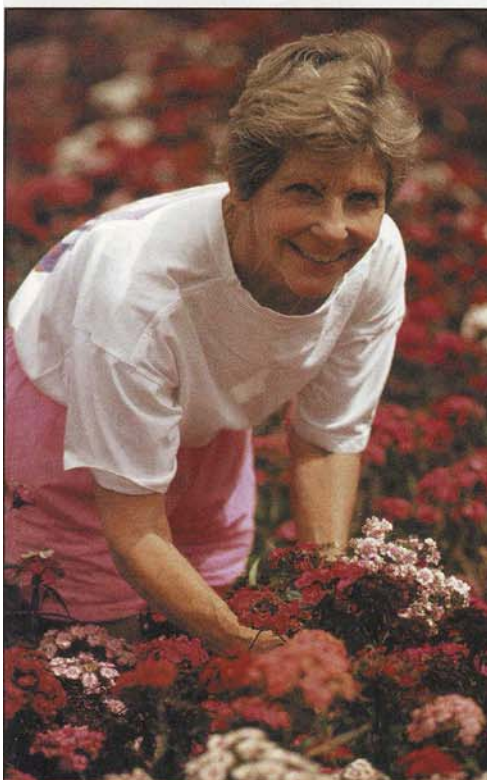


In a single show, Mike Wiley contorts himself into 20 characters from black history, aiming to express their struggles and their significance in our lives today.

teach students how to research and ultimately produce their own documentary theater works. And he’ll continue performing. He’s determined to use his dynamic plays to sustain the dialogue about black history in America.

“I think people have to realize that American history is everyone’s history and not just what is in the textbooks,” he says. “We are walking arm in arm together in this. Some people reluctantly, some people wholeheartedly. But we’re all bound together.”

*Chris Gigley lives in Greensboro.*



care•free

adj. Free of worries and responsibilities.

See also: *The Forest at Duke*

Giving up housework and chores... eating gourmet meals cooked by someone else...taking courses with no grades...actually enjoying exercise classes...making sure my retirement years are truly fabulous!

The  FOREST  
at DUKE

A Premiere Lifecare Community Since 1992



2701 Pickett Road, Durham, NC 27705  
919.490.8000 • 800.474.0258

[www.forestduke.org](http://www.forestduke.org)



## to know more

To contact Mike Wiley about his performances, call (919) 619-0096. For a link to his website, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on “This Month’s Issue.”