

## Troxler, Allan: Shirley's Garden <sup>[1]</sup>

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### Allan Troxler: Shirley's Garden

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 10/11/1998. Copyrighted.  
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I talked with Allan Troxler in the garden behind the Blevins House, a group residence in Durham for people with HIV/AIDS. A 51-year-old Greensboro native, Troxler started this bountiful garden eight years ago to provide produce and cut flowers for the residents and their caregivers. We walked down dense rows of sunflowers and okra, beneath 7-foot-high trellises of tomatoes and cucumber, alongside lush patches of watermelon and cantaloupe. Troxler has been a volunteer at Blevins House since it was founded 10 years ago by a group of his friends, organized as the AIDS Community Residence Association. Many of his closest friends have died during the AIDS epidemic, including his own long-time partner, Carl Wittman, in 1986. Like so many other Tar Heel volunteers and families, he has responded to the AIDS epidemic by quietly taking care of the small things that one person can do for another to make life more bearable, more decent. He nurses the ill, makes endearing keepsakes - and tends this garden.

He began by telling me the story of the person who inspired him to start the garden.

In Allan Troxler's words:



Allan Troxler. Photo by Chris Seward, 1998. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

Shirley was an old mountain woman. I think she might have gotten HIV from prostitution. When she came to the house, which is a very pleasant, middle-class ranch home, she just sat on the edge of the sofa for about a month. Like she was just dead. Shirley was real deadpan. When she was joking, you couldn't tell because she wouldn't smile, but then you'd see that her eyes were flashing. Didn't have many teeth. She dipped snuff and had a snuff can. Most all of her hair was gone. I had heard she probably came here through the HIV/AIDS clinic at Duke. They refer most of the residents to the house. At that point - 1989 - there probably weren't adequate services up there in the mountains for her. The clinics at Duke and Carolina both were new. Shirley took great pride in the garden. By fall, we had all kinds of beautiful things in bloom. In October, we planned an excursion to the State Fair with Shirley and other folks from the house. It was the first time she had ever been to anything like that. So we've been there maybe 10 minutes. We're right in front of the turkey shoot on the midway. The rifles all go off. Straightaway, Shirley goes into a grand mal seizure, which I had never dealt with at all. It was terrifying. She went white and rigid. We wheeled Shirley over to the Red Cross booth. It ended up I had to bring her back out here. As she was coming to, about when we were back to Durham, she said: "Where are we? How come we're not at the State Fair?" And I said: "Shirley, the next morning, I came out to the garden, and there were these cockscombs, which are great big flowers - deep, deep pink and red - that look like rooster's combs. They'd been off in a corner and once or twice I had dumped Miracle Gro on them. A couple days later, a friend and I went by the flower show, and there were the cockscombs covered with ribbons. First prize! Best of show! These huge, apricot-colored ribbons with three or four tiers of ruffles. It was perfect. So I bought Shirley a pair. Shirley, Ken, now Roosevelt - those are the three faces that the garden has most assumed for me. Ken loved the garden. He had grown up at an orphanage at Chalybeate Springs. They made the kids do field work - I think it was a strawberry field. Last fall, Roosevelt started coming out and puttering around, chopping weeds, clearing beds. Now he's gaunt and doesn't have much energy. He's on oxygen 24 hours a day, but he has a portable tank so he can come reside. I tell him he's a good boy. Especially in those early years, I think the benefits of volunteerism were at least as much for the volunteers as for the people who lived here. We all needed reassurance. We all needed some sense of, well, there is something I can do. Every day. And maybe to have a vase of zinnias or a sack of okra matters in a small way.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) <sup>[3]</sup>" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) <sup>[4]</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[Audio Recording](#) <sup>[5]</sup>: Interview with Allan Troxler by David S. Cecelski, 17-18 August 1998, K-0255, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/15132> <sup>[6]</sup>

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