

PROFILE

Allen Edwards

FULL NAME: Carl Allen Edwards
OCCUPATION: High School Principal
BIRTHPLACE: Wayne County, N.C.
AGE: 44
FAMILY: Wife, Brenda
 Son, Carl
 Daughter, Dayna
EDUCATION: B.S. In Physical Ed.
 And M.A. In Ed. From East Carolina
 University, Post Grad. Work At Duke
 University And UNC Chapel-Hill
HOBBIES: Work

By TERRY COLLINS
 News Staff Writer

Lunch time at North Surry High School. The paths leading to the cafeteria were teeming with teen-agers. The sight was chaos to an outsider; the usual routine for students and faculty.

Allen Edwards, North Surry's principal, stepped out into the main hall from the glassed-in enclosure of the school offices and waved. A ruddy-faced man with close-cropped graying hair and a sharp and peering gaze, Edwards retreated inside the enclosure where the clamor of excited voices and eager footsteps could be temporarily muted.

Edwards closed the two doors adjoining his office and gave a deep sigh as he sat in his chair. He doesn't spend much time in this air-conditioned sanctuary during the day. Usually he is out on the school grounds attending to business requiring his personal attention. If needed, he can be instantly summoned on the walkie-talkie he carries clipped to his belt.

If one wants to see Allen Edwards, there are two places he can always be located: at home or at school. Recently, a late-night call found him answering the telephone at North Surry.

For a man who can say with a straight face that his hobby is work, this isn't surprising.

"I am a workaholic. My wife has accused me of being one and my colleagues have accused me of being one," Edwards said in his distinctive raspy voice. He grinned. "I average 16 to 18 hours a day. I enjoy doing it and it's the work ethic I have had for years.

"Thank goodness I have an understanding family that tolerates and understands," he added.

But this work ethic was not always there for Edwards when it came to his schoolwork. Born and raised in rural Wayne County, Edwards says he "had a good time" but also "had a difficult time with studies in high school."

"I went to a small high school (Brogden High) where everyone knew everyone and everyone's business. I had some good caring teachers — since there were only a few students, we had an opportunity to do a lot of things," the principal said.

"There were 21 students in my senior class and I was the only athlete. ... I played varsity basketball and baseball — the only two sports offered at that school — so I ended up being most athletic, most popular and best all-around."

There was a pause in Edwards' story. With the timing of a master showman he let his last sentence stand for a second and followed it with "Note you didn't see most academic in there."

So how, after a high school career of study that was less than promising, did Edwards turn around and graduate from East Carolina University 29th out of a class of 3,500 and earn a four-year degree in three years?

Edwards said he owes his success in college to two important people. First, there was his mother, who gave up nagging him and instead talked to her son as an adult and put the responsibility for his future on his own shoulders, and second was a college professor by the name of Mr. Carlton.

"Mr. Carlton took the time and interest in me to require me to go to his home and meet with him in his office to catch up because I did not have a comprehensive high school education," Edwards stated. "Later, in my own career, I patterned my teaching methodology on what I had learned from Mr. Carlton."

The future high school principal knew he wanted to coach, and directed his studies toward that goal. After graduating, he joined the faculty at Grifton High School as a math and P.E. teacher.

He even managed to find time to get married. Edwards had been dating his future wife Brenda (who also attended East Carolina and has a degree in education) throughout college and they married in 1967 six months after Edwards left school.

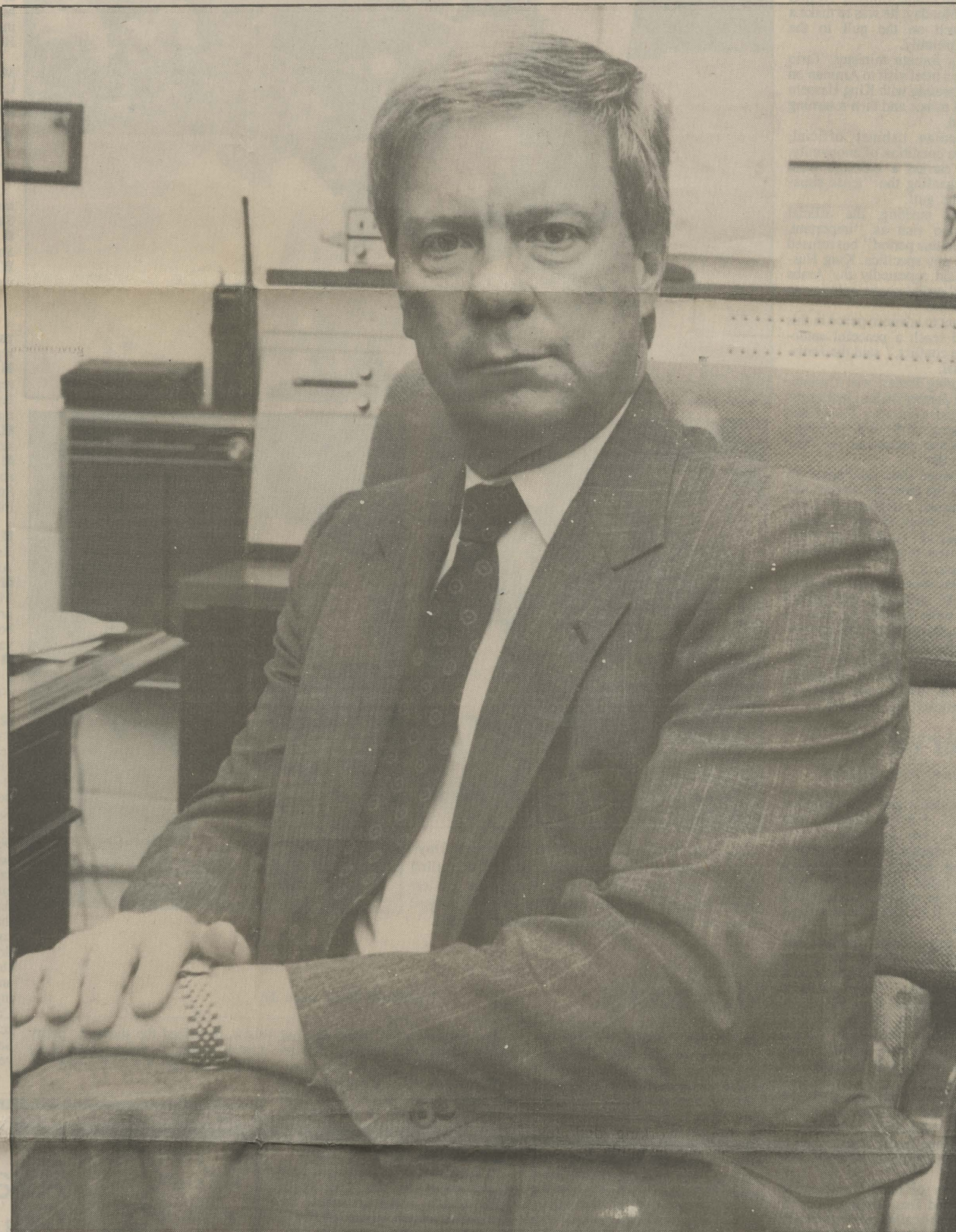
The workaholic in Allen Edwards drove him fast. Soon he was an assistant principal and by 1971 he had attained a goal of becoming a school principal. The athlete had gone from coaching a team to coaching an entire student body. Before arriving in Surry County in 1988, his last tour of duty was at Upchurch Junior High School for 11 years.

The question had to be asked — why come to North Surry? "I chose North Surry High School because of the potential I had been advised was here. ... I visited Surry County one day and talked to students who were skipping school and talked to customers at the country store — I talked to people in restaurants in Mount Airy and left with the impression that there was a good fit between my background and Mount Airy's."

Edwards clasped both of his hands together and held them up. "We meshed."

"I felt it was a good fit. My family felt it was a good fit. We believed that we could get a whole lot from the county and the students here and all of us could learn from each other. ... I had been offered North Surry and another high school of equal size. I went with North Surry."

Edwards believes in the credo that if his work is his hobby, then his work has to be fun. He entered North Surry aware of some of the



Staff photo by Judy Dickerson

same problems he had observed at other schools, but he wasn't worried. Edwards was eager to see what he could do to help improve things within.

"The school business is like any other business. I could sit behind this desk and not be controversial — not make any changes," Edwards said while spreading his arms open wide. "I'll admit that I've not made people happy sometimes."

"This school has been a challenge. That's what ultimately enticed me to come here," he continued. "One of my basic school tenets is you've got to give everybody a piece of the work. We have collaborative decision-making processes here with faculty chairs ... decisions include the students and the community. ... I like to think that what was initially perceived as an Allen Edwards program is now a North Surry program."

Edwards grew serious for a moment. "Both success and areas where we need improvement is our responsibility. We have had some problems."

A tricky puzzle to unknot is to separate where Allen Edwards begins and the work ends. In fact, this is an impossible puzzle to solve. The two are inseparable. Edwards spends day and night concerned with his school and doesn't turn his job off when he goes home.

"Sometimes it's real difficult for me to be objective about myself and about my school. But I try to surround myself at school and at home with people who will pull me back down to earth and say 'Allen, you're wrong,'" he said.

"I have a vision for North Surry High School and at the present time, we are significantly ahead of where I thought we would be in 30 months. This faculty and student body has been extremely open to change ... society and culture demands that we teach kids differently today from how we did 20 years ago. Teachers here are making significant changes to address the new generation."

Edwards described school as an organization having the same

internal and external forces as big business. There are things going on at home or in students' lives a teacher can only hope to try and see and understand, he thinks.

"There are social ills that are not being addressed in public schools, but our mission is to teach every kid," Edwards said simply. "You've got to let them know that you care about each and every student ... if you're fake, they will cut you, but if you are sincere and believe in what you are doing..."

Edwards took a breath. "If you have the basic knowledge and are willing to ask for help and state the good things about your organization and the bad things, and never forget why you are an educator in the first place, then you'll have the opportunity to make the changes that are needed."

It's not that Allen Edwards wants to make sweeping changes overnight. One can change the color of the walls or the length of a school assembly, but the relationship between teacher and student is paramount to having a successful learning environment.

"We're trying to change the perception of the school within," Edwards said. "Four hundred parents came out for Open House the other night and had supper with us. I was ecstatic. Freshman teachers had the idea to invite the parents in and it went wonderfully."

Edwards stood. The lunch hour was over and an afternoon of meetings and discussion beckoned. After a firm handshake and an invite to return later, he returned to his duties. For some, the day was nearly over, but for Allen Edwards, the day had just begun.

Favorite Book:

Favorite Food:

Favorite Movie:

Favorite Song:

"In Search of Excellence"

Wife's Beef Stroganoff

"Ghandi"

"I Made it Through the Rain,"

by Barry Manilow