

# NAN HOLBROOK

The debutante from Statesville followed her heart and found her niche in getting food for the hungry

By Linda Brinson

JOURNAL REPORTER

**"I** guess I surprised you," Nan Holbrook often jokingly tells her father, Dr. J. Sam Holbrook of Statesville.

The surprise is that Miss Holbrook is not, at age 40, what her father would have predicted when she was growing up in the '50s and '60s.

The expected script was clear to both father and daughter: Nan, the only daughter of the chief of staff of Statesville's Davis Hospital, would go to Salem College, her mother's alma mater, where she would major in home economics. Then she would make a good marriage.

Midlife would find her securely wed to a well-to-do man, preferably a doctor, living in a large, well-appointed house, keeping busy with social obligations and ferrying her several children in a roomy station wagon to and from their many activities. The late 1980s version might have transformed the station wagon into a minivan, but the idea is the same.

But those things never came to pass. "I wrote my own script," Miss Holbrook said recently. Trucks rumbled by on the expressway outside her executive director's office in a drafty warehouse off Liberty Street that is the headquarters for the Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina Inc.

Her B.A. is in sociology from Wake Forest University, where she also has done everything toward a master's degree in counseling but write the thesis. She was engaged once long ago, but she gave the ring back, and she has never married. "It's not that I wouldn't like to be married and have a family. I guess it's just that I haven't worked as hard at that as I have at other things," she said.

After years of living frugally in rented older houses, she recently leased a condominium, and she is still struggling with feelings of guilt for living in such comparative luxury — the place

## RESUMÉ

### FULL NAME:

Nancy Cox Holbrook.

### AGE: 40.

### JOB OR PROFESSION:

Executive director, Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina Inc.

### BIRTHPLACE:

Statesville.

### EDUCATION:

Attended Mitchell College in Statesville; B.A. in sociology from Wake Forest University; completed course work for master's in counseling at Wake Forest.

### FAMILY:

Single; father, stepmother, one brother, one stepbrother and two stepsisters.

even has a pool and a washer-dryer. She doesn't have a lot of time to worry about her living arrangements, though, because more often than not, when she's not at work at the Food Bank, she's out giving a speech or doing volunteer work. A modest sedan suffices instead of the station wagon.

She never joined the Junior League, but she is one of the pioneering women members of the Winston-Salem Kiwanis Club. "And you know," she said, "I really enjoy that. It gets me out of the office for lunch once a week. It's a

nice break."

Time off the job is a rare commodity for Miss Holbrook, who has labored long and hard at the Food Bank since its creation in 1982. Her business may be non-profit, but it is a business nonetheless, and Miss Holbrook is as busy as any CEO.

In the beginning, it was Miss Holbrook and a board of 12 directors, an 1,800-square-foot rented building on Polo Road and an idea that had proved successful in several other cities: that a non-profit food bank could collect unmarketable and surplus food from various sources and channel it to agencies that feed the needy. This is food that is past its expiration date, or slightly damaged, or surplus for one reason or another — perfectly edible food that was being thrown away. The agencies would pay a small fee to help with the handling costs, but their expenses would be much lower than if they had to buy the food.

Today, Miss Holbrook heads a staff of seven full-time and four part-time employees and about 150 volunteers. Since 1982, the Food Bank has distribut-



JOURNAL ILLUSTRATION BY RICK PENDER FROM PHOTO BY COOKIE SNYDER

ed about 9 million pounds of food, which Miss Holbrook estimates would have been worth about \$17 million on the retail market. The Food Bank operates out of two warehouses, one with about 9,700 square feet and the other with 8,400. Last year, the Food Bank distributed about 1.5 million meals to the needy in 18 counties of Northwest North Carolina, through 280 agencies.

The Food Bank's operations would have grown even larger and more rapidly had it not been for space limitations — to Miss Holbrook's distress, the Food Bank sometimes has to turn down

food. That is why she is now leading the Food Bank in a major fund-raising campaign to try to get \$1 million to build a 25,000-square-foot building with much more freezer space. The larger building would not only provide more space, but also cut the Food Bank's handling costs by increasing efficiency.

So even though Miss Holbrook didn't major in home-ec, she has had to learn a lot about food and its storage and preparation. She also has had to learn a lot about running a business, about handling employees and raising money. Not to mention trucks and

forklifts and how to deal with officials of food processing, distribution, marketing and transportation companies all up and down the East Coast.

"I have had to grow a lot in this job," Miss Holbrook said. "I think of it as a journey, and it has been a long journey. You learn from experience, from your mistakes."

Those who deal with Miss Holbrook say that the reasons for her success in the Food Bank job are clear: her strong Christian faith, her compas-

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sion for people, her organizational and leadership skills, and a tenacity that can make her a formidable opponent when she is fighting for something that she believes in. Beyond her work with the Food Bank, Miss Holbrook is one of those people who takes on the role of the community's conscience when it comes to dealing with the poor.

Elizabeth L. Fenwick, the director of the Downtown Church Center, was Miss Holbrook's boss when she was the assistant director and volunteer coordinator for the center before she left to start the Food Bank. Miss Fenwick recalled how Miss Holbrook was a leader in persuading downtown churches in the early 1980s to open their buildings to the homeless during the winter.

"Nan, along with (the Rev.) Ginny Britt from Crisis Control, was very instrumental in that. She was our main contact with the ministers of the downtown churches, and some of those ministers took a risk in making that decision," Miss Fenwick said.

"I see Nan as somebody with a commitment, a concern for others, and who wants to follow through with her commitment. She's not somebody who just talks about things. She puts it into action," Miss Fenwick said.

Although starting and heading an agency was something of a departure for Miss Holbrook, Miss Fenwick said that being an administrator is "kind of second nature to Nan. That fits what she is designed to do. She likes to look at things from the organizational standpoint, and that is something of a challenge for her. She is handling a lot of people and a lot of money, and I find that kind of awe-inspiring. She has gone a long way since she left here."

Miss Holbrook is the daughter of a Baptist father, was raised in the Presbyterian Church, and as an adult has become an active member of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. She is one of three women on the vestry there and has been active in many church programs. Miss Fenwick and others who know her say that, though she is deeply involved in the church, she does not confine her religious activities to that institution.

"A lot of what Nan does grows out of her spiritual commitment. I think she sees everything she does as a part of her ministry, and I know she looks at the Food Bank that way, even though it's a secular organization," Miss Fenwick said.

Mrs. Britt, the executive director of Crisis Control Ministry, is one of Miss Holbrook's customers at the Food Bank and has also worked with her in programs for the homeless and in other endeavors. "Nan is a people person, and she cares about people. She has spent her entire life reflecting that care in her vocational choices. Those choices grow out of a deep understanding and commitment to the teachings of Christ," Mrs. Britt said.

Acknowledging that Miss Holbrook sometimes rubs a few people the wrong way, Mrs. Britt praised her for her determination. "I guess Nan is like me. We both can be bulls in china shops, but the reality is that we're going to keep pushing until we get what we perceive the clients need," Mrs. Britt said. "That turns some people off, and, for



JOURNAL PHOTO BY COOKIE SNYDER

**The staff and volunteers who work with Nan Holbrook have no doubts about her conviction.**

tors would want to put a book on our head and say, 'Stop growing.'

"Nan was the one who really knew what was going on from day to day, and it was a challenge for her to educate the board so they could make good decisions. Often, she had to stick to her guns, even at the risk of her own job. She was pretty courageous. That sometimes gets her in a little hot water, but it could be that, without that courage, the Food Bank wouldn't be as far along as it is today. I know a good bit of that courage comes from her strong Christian beliefs and her real genuine concern for what she's doing."

The staff and volunteers who work with Miss Holbrook have no doubts about her conviction. Kay Barnett, who has worked as a volunteer bookkeeper for about five years, said that Miss Holbrook is "so dedicated to the Food Bank that it just flows throughout the whole office."

As busy as she is, Miss Holbrook tries to see beyond the day-to-day demands of the Food Bank to both the broader and the smaller pictures.

In broader terms, she is concerned about correcting the underlying causes of poverty. "My father is a holistic doctor," she said, "and I always try to look at the total picture of a person or a situation. In my work now, I'm struggling with the issue of poverty and the fine line you walk in trying to raise money for an organization that is very needed but is really a sort of Band-Aid. My dream is that we could shut the Food Bank down because it would no longer be needed. But how do you change systems?"

**ONE WAY** Miss Holbrook is trying to change systems is by working with the N.C. Poverty Project.

In more particular terms, Miss Holbrook tries never to lose sight of the individual. One cold, snowy morning earlier this month, she answered her office telephone to be greeted — as she often is — with a plea for food, even though the Food

Maybe she did not follow the most-traditional path for a well-to-do young woman who grew up when she did, he said, but what she is doing is clearly a natural outgrowth of her background.

As a matter of fact, Miss Holbrook did make the things she was "supposed" to do. She made her debut in Raleigh at the appropriate time in the cover of a magazine published by the Shriners' Oasis Temple in 1968 featured her in long gown and hair swept up and sprayed on the arm of her father, the Shriners' potter. She was never much of a rebel in late-1960s times and even now she calls herself a "traditionalist" rather than a feminist, though she says that she is grateful for what the feminists accomplished.

Her concerns and her career, Joe Holbrook said, are her way of following in her parents' footsteps as surely as going to Salem and marrying a doctor would have been.

"Nan is very much like our mother. Mom was president of the state Junior League; she was society editor of *The Raleigh Times* at a very young age; she was always involved in this and lead that, at least before the three of us came along. And she was compassionate. I can remember many times going with her to the jail to take food for Christmas and that sort of thing," he said. "I was picked up on that."

Their father was not only the chief of staff at Davis Hospital but also a revered institution in the Statesville area and the kind of old-fashioned doctor who made house calls and was often paid in chickens or garden vegetables. Miss Holbrook remembers spending Sunday afternoons riding in the car in some of the same western North Carolina counties she now serves with the Food Bank. The family tagged along while Dr. Holbrook checked on his patients.

Having delayed their family until after World War II, the Holbrooks were older than the parents of most of their children's friends. After the war, Joe, Nan and Robert were born quite close together.

**"MAYBE IT WAS** because my parents were older, maybe it because my father had grown up an orphan, but I was not allowed to be a child who was growing up," Miss Holbrook said. "Our family was very serious. We talked about the news, the world and important concerns, and a sense of compassion was instilled in us. We invited poor children in the neighborhood to our birthday parties, and I can remember as a child wanting to give my things away."

Though her childhood was privileged, it was not idyllic. Her mother was ill for several years before she died in a fall from a third-floor window when Nan was 14. Among the major effects of her death were Miss Holbrook's taking on the role of mother in her family and Holbrook's becoming the bemused single parent of a teen-age girl. Though she was a normal, active girl — playing on the school basketball team, going to parties and dances with her brothers and friends — he was worried.

"He didn't know what to do with me," she said. "I remember once, when I was about 16 or 17, he sent me to see Dr. Olin Binkley at Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest. My father thought I should be making major decisions about my life. Dr. Binkley said to me, 'Get an education.'"

praised her for her determination. "I guess Nan is like me. We both can be bulls in china shops, but the reality is that we're going to keep pushing until we get what we perceive the clients need," Mrs. Britt said. "That turns some people off, and, for that, I'm sorry. But I certainly identify with Nan. You must perhaps walk softly and carry a big stick in the helping business, and, once in a while, you just have to hit somebody with that stick to get their attention."

**BERT GRISARD**, THE executive director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Forsyth County, has worked with Miss Holbrook on various projects, including her stint on his organization's board of directors. He laughs when he says that his earliest and most enduring memories of Miss Holbrook are the shouting matches he had with her nearly 20 years ago.

That was when Miss Holbrook, fresh out of Wake Forest, was at her first job, as a juvenile-court counselor in Winston-Salem. Grisard was working with foster children at Social Services, and from time to time the two dealt with some of the same youngsters. "My best recollection of Nan is that we tended to disagree a lot about certain decisions, and we yelled at each other a lot. Once, I yelled so loudly at her that my supervisor came from three doors away to see what was going on."

"Nan is pretty headstrong, and when she believes in something, she goes ahead and pursues it," Grisard said. "That doesn't mean she won't listen to reason. That's why the Food Bank has been so successful. She fights for things for the right reasons, and she doesn't get all involved in the politics. She has all the social graces, which helps her in winning support for the Food Bank, but she's no pushover. She's a very strong person."

"One thing I admire about Nan is that she isn't interested in Nan, in her own image. Some people are more interested in how something looks and whom they impress and what they get out of it. Nan is interested in helping people," he said.

Bill Orr has known Miss Holbrook since he was a teen-ager and she, in her early 20s, was an adviser for the youth group at St. Paul's. He recalled that she used vacation time from her court counselor's job to take him and his friends to the Episcopal youth summer camp at Kanuga, near Hendersonville. Years later, when he had moved back to Winston-Salem in connection with his work, he heard her speak at his Kiwanis Club and soon found himself on the Food Bank's board of directors.

"While I was on the board, the Food Bank moved twice, and each time was kind of traumatic," said Orr, who left the board when he began graduate school in addition to his job at Gay & Taylor. "We were growing real fast, but each time we had to take chances about whether or not we could get the resources we needed to pay increased rent, electricity and so on, more staff. . . . Change was happening so fast that it put a strain on a lot of things. Nan described it one time as being like a growing kid, and periodically the board of direc-

In more particular terms, Miss Holbrook tries never to lose sight of the individual. One cold, snowy morning earlier this month, she answered her office telephone to be greeted — as she often is — with a plea for food, even though the Food Bank deals only with agencies. Her morning's busy schedule was put on hold while Miss Holbrook made sure that this needy woman, in a cold apartment with two young children and not a scrap of food, was put in touch with someone who would take care of her right away.

Her motto in the office is "Feeding hungry people is serious business, but nobody said we can't have a good time while we're doing it." When she first started to work with the Food Bank, she gained 20 pounds, because she was tempted by the snacks she kept available for volunteers.

Ms. Barnett, the volunteer bookkeeper, said that Miss Holbrook is always interested in the employees and volunteers and tries to help them if they have personal problems. The main gripe that Food Bank workers have about their boss, she said, is that she can be a little too maternal and protective, a little too hesitant to let anybody else "try their wings," even in such simple things as filing or cleaning up the office.

"But everybody loves her and admires her a great deal," she said.

Miss Holbrook tries hard to make sure that the press of work doesn't make her lose sight of the individuals in her personal life. The Rev. Ronald Rice, who founded the Downtown Church Center and Crisis Control Ministry, said, "Along with her hard work and persistence, she makes a special effort to keep her friendships and her relationships with people going."

Miss Holbrook has a number of close friends, Rice among them. She takes seriously her responsibilities to her nieces and nephews and to her several grandchildren.

She also is close to the other members of her family — her father, who is 85; her stepmother, Frances Holbrook ("She is very special to me"); her brother, Joe Holbrook, an industrial recruiter for the N.C. Department of Economic and Community Development in Winston-Salem; and her two stepbrothers and stepsister ("I didn't have a sister until I was 20, so she's a very special person in my life"). When her younger brother, Robert, developed cancer, Miss Holbrook was by his side as much as possible, relieving her sister-in-law, spending long hours with him at the hospital. She was with him when he died about a year ago.

"As far as I'm concerned," Miss Holbrook said, "relationships are the most important thing. Maybe because I had nice things when I was growing up, I know that material things are not all there is. You come into this world alone, and you leave it alone, and, in between, relationships are what it's all about."

The truth, said Joe Holbrook, Miss Holbrook's older brother and perhaps the person who knows her best, is that what she is doing, what she had made of her life, is really no surprise at all.

"I remember once, when I was about 16 or 17, sent me to see Dr. Olin Binkley at Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest. My father thought I should be making major decisions about my life. Dr. Binkley said to me, 'Get an education.' That was very important to me. He didn't say 'I'm a homemaker,' which is what my father expected."

Having practically grown up following her father around the hospital, Miss Holbrook decided that she wanted to be a nurse. She worked as a volunteer nurse's aide. She was told, however, she could not handle the science involved in a nursing degree. So, after high school, she began her studies at Mitchell College in Statesville, North Carolina, that she could live at home.

Eventually, Miss Holbrook joined both her brothers at Wake Forest, where her grandfather and father had graduated and where her father was a lifetime trustee. Her undergraduate years there were not particularly happy. "I thought I was smart enough to be there," she said.

Her father was still worried about her, she said, during her eight years as a court counselor and four years working with runaway children through Youth Opportunity Homes. Social work did not seem to him to be a real job.

It was her summer work while she was pursuing her master's degree in counseling that was the turning point in Miss Holbrook's professional life. Her four years as the director of the summer enrichment program for inner-city children at Paul's were her first taste of being an executive. She decided that she would rather work for a non-profit agency than for the state.

When the Food Bank job was offered to her, Miss Holbrook had some serious doubts about her leadership skills and her ability to handle the headaches and responsibilities of a non-profit organization. But, after reviewing her résumé and talking with friends, she decided to give it a try.

She said that she hasn't regretted the decision.

One of the highlights of her tenure was a meeting with Bruce Springsteen in 1985 when he raised money for the Food Bank and made a major donation himself.

Miss Holbrook took him some Moravian stollen cake when she visited him in his hotel suite backstage at the Greensboro Coliseum. "I didn't quite know how big he was until he came out and started singing," she said.

She has to work at making sure that her life is not all work. She has two cats. She likes to dance, although she rarely does. She loves to dance, particularly the shag to beach music such as "Minute Man," which brings back memories of teen-age house parties in the Myrtle Beach area. She means to take up a hobby. She means to take better care of herself; her friends often tell her that she is the one person she too often forgets.

She wonders, she said, about what she might do after the Food Bank, although she has no plans to leave. It's just that her ministry might take her in some other direction some time. The one thing she is sure of, she said, is that it will be in the direction of helping people.