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DIVERSITY WORKS

APRIL 2024 VOLUME 14 ISSUE 2

"For All of Us"



COVER STORY: PG. 44
SPHERION STAFFING & RECRUITING
DORIS AND NATHANIEL LOCKHART



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1951 Pisgah Rd., Suite 111 • Florence, SC 29502
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MISSION AND VISION

OUR MISSION

Diversity Works© is a magazine for the socially conscious and responsible worker at any level. The magazine has a commitment to be a showcase for organizations and their employees that represent best practices in workforce diversity and supplier choices. We feature articles on those displaying inclusionary vision in and for the marketplace and who encourage and provide role models for others.

Through editorial content and other signature promotions, Diversity Works© is a vessel to inform the readership on appreciating and accepting the physical, social, cultural and other differences in one another and to promote better outcomes through interacting with those unlike ourselves. Our mission is to promote the concept of 'community,' in the workplace, to stimulate literacy and save the planet via recycling printed material.

This platform serves our present age with a focus on the Pee Dee region of South Carolina which includes the counties of Chesterfield, Clarendon, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Lee, Marion, Marlboro, Sumter and Williamsburg. The magazine targets the general public and is rapidly expanding statewide and globally. Our chief demographic consists of 54 percent male and 46 percent females, middle to top-level management, professorship and fellowship positions.

OUR VISION

To create a more collaborative world where balanced diversity is practiced, to encourage a return to reading and to protect the environment by recycling the ink and paper products our materials are printed with.

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FROM THE EDITOR'S HEART



Glacia Brown Mason
Editor

Happy Spring! Diversity Works Readers! As we head full steam into, the second quarter of the year, the Diversity Works staff thanks you for your continued readership and support of diversity, equity and inclusion in the Pee Dee. Our hope is that you continue to be informed and find useful information, keeping in mind that, when practiced appropriately, Diversity Works for ALL of Us!

This quarter, you'll find new and beneficial content in our special sections, featuring our cover story on Spherion Staffing & Recruiting, a proven, results-driven local staffing and recruiting agency. You'll also find feature articles on Alcohol

and Autism Awareness, Child Abuse, Home Ownership, Mental Health Awareness, Volunteerism and World Earth Day, which is April 22.

With the new minimum wage hike making its way across the country, employers are having to discover innovative ways of retaining and acquiring skilled workers in the U.S. Read Spherion's story and learn how this local franchise, owned by Nathaniel and Doris Lockhart, with two locations in Florence and Conway, SC, can assist employers and employees with winning staffing solutions.

Among the many articles in our business section, learn how businesses can modernize without having a big budget. With the number of scams and cybercrimes continuing to increase in the U.S., read the BBB's article and learn how to protect yourselves as the BBB serving Eastern Carolina lists the riskiest scams reported for 2023. Next, read what Coach Temple Robinson, shares about leaders applying the Green Lens to develop productive work environments. Also, don't miss the smart steps to economic empowerment to include improving your financial literacy.

Diversity Works is never short on congratulating local professional leaders on their successes! Join us as we congratulate Lake City Mayor Yamekia Robinson on the appointment to the National League of Cities! Get the details on Marlboro Development Team's purchase of the I-20 Industrial Park in Darlington, SC. Congratulations are also in order to the Lake City Water Department for winning the Meter System Award. Read about their outstanding achievements to improve the water quality in Lake City. The City of Florence cheers the appointment of the new interim City Manager, Scotty Davis. Read about Davis' experience as we hold a good thought as he moves toward excellence in ensuring continuity for the city. The Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments named a new Executive Director Joette Dukes. Congratulations to all on your elevations and achievements!

Diversity Works financial section announces Anderson Brothers Bank's Jessica Buttles as she assumes the role on the South Carolina Young Bankers Association board as well as their new 2024 executive committee leadership. Good financial literacy is important and should start with our youngest citizens. Read how Palmetto First Federal Credit Union encourages kids to develop healthy financial habits. You'll also find Contributor Kionne Epps sharing her personal financial story and offering tips for financial literacy. Read, pay attention and take notes, if necessary, as you read what Julie Cord and her team at the NY Life Insurance Company advises on estate planning for you and your family.

Our education section always assures great news in pedagogy! Whether congratulating educators, schools or students, this section has something for everyone. Read and learn something you possibly didn't know about education in the Pee Dee. We ring the proverbial bell loudly to congratulate a local teen youth, Mr. Dre' Shon Jackson who is excelling at Wilson High School with a grade point average of 4.968, (yes, you read that correctly), and has been accepted at the world's oldest Ivy League school in the country, Harvard University! It's not every day we can say someone from our community has been accepted among the many who

applied! Join Diversity Works Magazine in congratulating Jackson on his achievements and best wishes for his future endeavors!

The education section also features more congratulatory stories that include collaborative partnerships with GSSM and the South Carolina Technical College System, HGTC and Atlantic Collegiate Academy and FDTC and Lander University. Read further to learn more about their collaborations and how it may benefit you or those you know. Also find, stories of educators taking new posts at FMU, Claflin and FDTC. It's all included here. Additionally, we congratulate educators in FSD1 who are headed to new schools as principals in the coming school year. Find this story on page 32. There's always more to know in education, those stories and so much more are included. Keep reading!

Health is wealth, right? I've often heard that, "the more you know," well, our health section is primed for reading the most up-to-date content to keep you health-informed; today, tomorrow and into the future. If you're on the search for a new provider, you might start by reading articles about the new providers announced by HopeHealth, McLeod, MUSC and Carolina Pines. Female readers may also be happy to read of the return of Maureen Byrd, the first breast health specialist for McLeod Health. Female readers, take special notice to the FOR WOMEN ONLY article you'll find on page 86, where Dr. Mitchel Chere urges us to not miss the 2024 well-woman visit to the gynecologist. It's thorough and informative. With so many more health-related articles from the new 15K + sq. ft. medical facility in Cheraw, to the CareSouth Carolina impact report and the new collaboration of MUSC and Yale University on clinical trials and the AA community. You'll have to read on to get up to date! Lastly, we congratulate health care systems and workers for their excellence. Find celebratory articles about CareSouth Carolina for community service and health innovation awards, HopeHealth's Dr. Behling on receiving the Llewelyn Memorial Award and, Nicole Echols for being honored with the Cooke Advocacy MVP Award.

It's graduation season all across the Pee Dee, which means that it's also prom season. Erica Buffkin from Circle Park Behavioral Health Services penned the article on page 54, "Don't Let Underage Drinking Ruin Your Prom." Parents, legal guardians and young people of driving age, the minimum legal drinking age is 21. Word to the wise, arm yourselves with knowledge of the constructive possession statue and stay safe this prom season!

The idea of home ownership in America is supported by the Homestead Act of 1862, and the history of early settlers owning land to secure a better future. In our special section on home ownership, learn how first-time homebuyers are gaining valuable assets and investing in the future. As you continue reading, be informed about the City of Florence's Neighborhood Action Plan and the success and implementation of its home buying program. As a next step, once you have a home, educate yourselves as local Entrepreneur, Starlee Alexander, State Farm Insurance Agency tells us to review our homeowner's insurance and/or renter's insurance policies annually.

As always, Diversity Works has more to share in our quarterly editions. We hope you continue to read the informative and thought-provoking articles found throughout and in other special sections on Autism Awareness, Child Abuse, Earth Day, Sexual Assault and Volunteerism. Having read and enjoyed them all, I'm assured you will too!

Finally, don't put Diversity Works Magazine down until you've checked out our Lifestyle Section. There, find the latest information as Downtown Florence and Dillon supply what's happening in their cities. Mark your calendars and be sure to register for, Le Diner En Blanc, returning to Florence in its fourth year!

There's so much more information you can use. Check out the table of contents for all articles in every section of the magazine. I promise it will keep you informed, captivated and knowledgeable about Pee Dee area happenings. Until next quarter, happy reading!

Glacia Brown Mason
Editor



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REFLECTIONS ON DEI TRENDS IN THE PAST AND PREDICTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Submitted by Dr. Nika White, president and CEO, Nika White Consulting, and author of "Inclusion Uncomplicated: A Transformative Guide to Simplify DEI, published by Forbes Books."



Dr. Nika White
(Stacey Gardin Portraits)

GREEVILLE-In 2023, we witnessed various DEI trends that challenged and reshaped how organizations approach diversity, equity and inclusion. Companies that should have prioritized diversity and inclusion faced significant challenges, such as public backlash, loss of talent and damage to their reputation.

Predicted 2024 DEI Trends

In 2024, several exciting developments and challenges in creating inclusive environments exist. These predicted trends highlight the continued

importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in organizations and the need to adapt and evolve strategies to create truly inclusive workplaces.

1. The Next Generation of Disability Inclusion: In 2024, there will be a heightened focus on environmental inclusion for individuals with disabilities. Organizations will prioritize creating physical spaces that are accessible and accommodating, implementing ramps, elevators and sensory-friendly areas.

2. Focus on Flexibility: The concept of flexibility in the workplace will continue to gain traction. This may include adopting four-day work weeks, as seen in some European countries. Companies must develop new performance and project management approaches to navigate team dynamics, collaboration and scheduling effectively. Providing employees with flexible holidays and benefits, such as unlimited vacation days or remote work options, will also be emphasized.

3. Hyper-Intersectionality: Intersectionality will become an even bigger focus in 2024. Organizations will prioritize creating multipurpose rooms instead of gender-specific bathrooms to accommodate individuals with diverse gender identities. Learning from models in other countries, organizations will explore more inclusive practices, such as providing closed captioning on videos to help non-English speakers access information or offering short-term and long-term caregiving support. Recognition of the intersectionality of identities, including marital status, will also be essential.

4. More Political Hype: Increased political discourse and controversies will require organizations to provide correct information and counteract misinformation. Companies will be expected to actively engage in conversations about societal issues and take a stance on diversity, equity and inclusion matters. This could involve initiatives such as fact-checking resources and sharing accurate information to combat misinformation.

5. ESG Unlimited: Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors will be at the forefront of corporate decision-making. Organizations will prioritize sustainable practices, social responsibility and ethical governance. For example, a manufacturing company may invest in renewable energy sources to reduce its carbon footprint and implement supply chain transparency to ensure fair wages and working conditions.

6. Broader AI Adoption: Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be widely adopted to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. AI-powered tools can help remove biased language in job descriptions, anonymize applicant information during hiring processes and provide real-time accessibility features. If utilized correctly, this technology can aid in better decision-making and create equitable opportunities for all.

7. A Complete DEI Reset: In 2024, organizations will undergo a complete DEI reset, reevaluating their current diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, policies, and initiatives. This includes reassessing goals, implementing new programs and fostering a culture of inclusivity at all levels of the organization. Companies will actively seek employee feedback, develop accountability measures and ensure that DEI efforts

are integrated into all aspects of the business.

Ways Organizations Can Continue to Uplift DEI

Based on previous DEI trends and the predicted trends for 2024, Nika White Consulting suggests several proactive steps organizations can take to uplift diversity, equity and inclusion:

1. Commitment from Leadership: Organizations must have buy-in and commitment from leadership to prioritize DEI. Leaders should demonstrate their dedication to fostering an inclusive and diverse workplace culture through their actions, statements and resource allocation.

2. Strategic Planning: Develop a comprehensive DEI strategy that aligns with business goals and addresses the predicted DEI trends for 2024. This plan should include specific actions and initiatives aimed at attracting, retaining and promoting diverse talent and creating an inclusive work environment.

3. Transparent and Inclusive Hiring Practices: Ensure that hiring practices are fair, inclusive and free from bias. Implement blind resume screening, diverse interview panels and mandatory diversity training for recruiters and hiring managers. Build partnerships with diverse talent pipelines and expand recruitment efforts to attract underrepresented candidates.

4. Employee Education and Training: Invest in DEI education and training programs for all employees. Focus on raising awareness about unconscious bias, promoting cultural competency and creating a more inclusive workplace. Provide ongoing training and development opportunities to help employees understand the importance of DEI and their role in fostering an inclusive environment.

5. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs): Encourage the formation and support of ERGs for various underrepresented groups within the organization. ERGs provide a platform for employees to connect, share experiences and advocate for inclusion. Provide resources and opportunities for ERGs to collaborate and contribute to the broader DEI strategy.

6. Regular Diversity Metrics and Reporting: Track and report on diversity data regularly. Measure progress and identify improvement areas by collecting data on employee demographics, representation at different levels, pay equity and employee satisfaction. This data-driven approach helps organizations stay accountable and make data-informed decisions.

7. Partnerships and Outreach: Collaborate with external organizations, community groups, and educational institutions to foster diversity and inclusion. Building relationships with these entities can provide access to diverse talent pools, enhance community engagement and support local initiatives.

In conclusion, organizations should proactively embrace DEI by having leadership commitment, implementing strategic plans, practicing inclusive hiring, providing employee education, supporting ERGs, tracking diversity metrics, fostering partnerships, and continually evaluating and adjusting their DEI efforts. By following these practices and keeping the predicted DEI trends for 2024 in mind, organizations can create more inclusive, equitable and thriving workplaces.

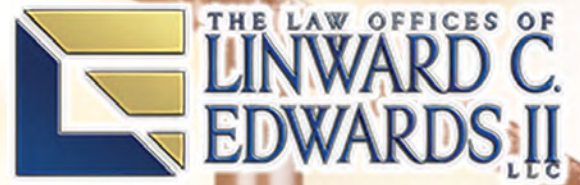
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- McKinsey. (2023, January 13). 2023 DEI initiatives report: Inside the lighthouses.
- The Society for Diversity webinar on "End of the Year: DEI 2024 Trends & Checklist" by Leah Smiley



Reflections on
DEI Trends
in the Past and
Predictions for
the Future

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3 Steps To Define Your Personal Brand Identity

BY CHANDRA L. PINTO MARTINEZ

A key hot topic today is “Personal Brand Identity,” but what is it and why is it important? A personal brand identity is simply the process of defining how others see you both personally and professionally. It also defines how people judge your character, whether you are credible, reliable or trustworthy.

By creating and implementing your personal brand, you set the stage and determine the scene of what people think and feel when they interact with you. Building and nurturing a strong personal brand can offer several advantages.

- It can elevate your visibility to your target audience, particularly among key stakeholders and individuals who can help you reach your goals.
- Can help you present or rather, “sell,” yourself as the ideal person others are looking for, be it for a job interview, promotion, potential client or even meeting your future in-laws for the first time.
- Will enable you to expand your network and attract potential opportunities on a larger scale.
- Will facilitate the recognition, demonstration and dissemination of your unique skills and abilities to your network.

There are three key concepts to follow when crafting your personal brand identity, create, compel and connect.

Create

Webster’s Dictionary defines the word create as, “bring into existence.” Does your boss see you as a reliable and capable employee? Does the client you met with see you as a trustworthy source to fulfill their business needs? How do others see you and how do you want them to see you? By creating your identity, you control the narrative and overall outlook of what others see. This is a compilation of your online and offline personality. What you do in person should reflect what you do online.

- Establish and define clear and specific targets or objectives you want to reach.
- Audit your online presence to ensure the message(s) you want to convey is replicated on every platform including:
 - Any social media account you may have.
 - Job boards, personal blogs, portfolio sites, etc.
- What do you value? Answering these questions will help you define your personal goals, outline the concept, and implement the structure of your personal brand identity. Determine and define:
 - Who you are?
 - What do you believe in?
 - Where do you want to go?
 - What do you want to achieve?
 - Who do you want to be connected to?
- Establish a routine. If you are a blogger, be consistent on when and how often you post content to your channels. If you are an aspiring model, look for ways to create captivating posts on your platforms showcasing your styling capabilities. If you are a business owner, create regular posts showcasing your product and service offerings. Whatever the goal, creating a calendar will help you become consistent and be seen as reliable.
- To get the part you must dress the part. Professional headshots and photographs are a must-have. You can hire a freelance or student photographer to capture you in your working environment. Dress the part of the job you are trying to obtain. If you are trying to become the “Next Top Model, you want a portfolio showcasing various looks and styles. If you have a small business, you want images showcasing your work and you do the work. If you are an office worker, you want images of you in professional dress attire. Use the images on your online platforms to relay confidence in your ability to get the job done.

Compel

The word compel is, according to Webster, defined as having a powerful and irresistible effect. You want to compel others to see and recognize your personal brand identity as positive, professional and personable. Your personal brand should relay character, confidence, consistency, creativity and conciseness. To do this you begin with writing out your position statement. On your resume, this would be listed as your “profile or objective” statement. In your business, this would be your mission, vision and purpose statements. On your blog, social media accounts, etc., this would be listed in your “about” section. A good way to craft a purpose statement is by defining and determining your reason why. Why do you do what you do, what sets you apart, why should someone choose you over someone else? A great example of this can be seen from Daymond John when he states, “his mission was to celebrate and elevate his community and the culture of hip hop.” His statement reflected his passion for the industry and the community as well as his love for the culture and how he wanted to enhance it. It was direct, concise and compelling.

Cultivate

After you have created your personal brand identity in the most compelling light, it’s time to cultivate, which is defined, according to Webster as, “to prepare and use.” Cultivating, or implementing your personal brand identity is to utilize all the steps in a strategic way to successfully market directly to your network. The key is to be authentic, original and competent in your abilities, passion and desire to excel. To cultivate also means to nurture and grow, which is exactly what you will do over time with your personal brand identity. As you mature and grow you will evolve and change. Take time to refine, restructure and even redefine your personal brand as these changes and developments occur. You want to make sure that your personal brand is always relatable, reliable and relevant to your current goals, objectives and your personal network.

Conclusion

Your personal brand identity can curate the characteristics you possess and elevate them to a higher level, recognizable by your network in the most beneficial way possible. The three core benefits of creating a unique and compelling personal brand identity are:

- Relatability. It showcases your ability to be relevant, reliable and responsible to your target audience, giving a lasting impression, and having the ability to put you in front of key stakeholders that can elevate you to the next level.
- Resourcefulness. It showcases your capabilities to be resourceful in your field. Be it education, experience, intelligence, ingenuity, intuition or a combination of all these traits, your target audience will see you shine through your personal brand, and this will undoubtedly draw them to you.
- Respectability. Gaining the respect and admiration of your peers is also something you can achieve through your personal brand identity. It will reflect who you are at your core, what you believe, what you stand for, what you are passionate about, and how you will excel in meeting the needs and demands of your industry. This is highlighted in your purpose statement and emphasized in the imagery utilized in your personal brand identity.

It is also important to note that not everyone will be able to relate to your personal brand identity, but this should not be seen as a negative but a positive, because you only want to connect with those who are impacted by and approachable to your brand. Remember, you are your brand! Be true to yourself. Be authentic. Be creative. And be great!

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ADP: MOVING TO THE NEXT LEVEL By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Antonio Pearson

ADP is a global provider of cloud-based human capital management solutions, including tax credits, payroll, HR and other related services. The company offers a wide range of solutions to help businesses of all sizes manage their workforce more effectively, streamline processes and stay compliant with regulations. ADP serves millions of clients worldwide and is known for its innovative technology, commitment to service excellence and extensive industry expertise.

Twenty-three-year-old, Manning, SC native Antonio Pearson is a first-generation graduate from Francis Marion University with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Finance. He is currently account manager assistant of Client Service Tax Credits. Pearson helps teams manage Work Opportunity Tax Credits services by providing routine data entry tasks as well as complex data analysis. He partners with multiple business units and teams for troubleshooting and delivering a seamless client experience. Pearson continues to upgrade his knowledge and skills on tax credits, including federal and state compliance, standard operating procedures, administrative practices, other products and desktop support tools to develop and maintain his ability to support clients.

Before he became an account assistant manager at ADP, he worked as a bank teller at Bank of Clarendon. Pearson said, "This role qualified me because it helped me with my customer service skills which are essential in interacting with clients and providing them with excellent support and assistance. It also provided me with experience of financial transactions and managing sensitive data and attention to detail, which are valuable qualities for ADP. He also learned:

- **Communication skills** – The ability to effectively communicate with clients and colleagues both verbally and in writing, is essential for building strong relationships and ensuring clear and accurate information exchange.
 - **Organizational Skills** – Managing multiple tasks and priorities is a key aspect of the role. The ability to stay organized, prioritize effectively and meet deadlines.
 - **Analytical Skills** – Analyzing client data, identifying trends and preparing reports. Having this skill helps interpret the information to support decision making.
 - **Adaptability** – Being able to adapt effectively to constant changes in priorities, client needs, legal/policy changes and evolving processes are important in a dynamic environment like ADP.
- Pearson chose to work at ADP because he was drawn to their forward-thinking approach to technology and their focus on empowering

businesses and individuals through their innovative solutions. Additionally, he was attracted to ADP's strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion, as well as their track record of supporting employee advancement and career growth. Pearson celebrated his first anniversary at ADP on March 13, 2024.

He has been assigned to multiple projects by account managers and consistently supported account managers in delivering high quality service to clients. This collaborative effort has not only strengthened client relationships but also contributed to the overall success and growth of the accounts in which he has been involved. Pearson said, "My goal while being here at ADP is taking on increasing levels of responsibility and becoming a subject matter expert in my field. I aspire to consistently exceed performance targets, gaining strong client relationships and actively participating in initiatives that drive innovation and improvement within the organization. I aim to make a positive impact both professionally and personally while at ADP."



Left to right: Beverly James, Hillary Beckett, Mary Cooper, Antonio Pearson and Scott Ham



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GOING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

What got us here, won't get us there.

THE EMOTIONAL TAX

Submitted by Reginal G. Lyerly, vice president- Cybersecurity, Training Sales and Government Contracting DNA Diversity Executive Search



Reginal G. Lyerly

When we think about taxation, we often think of our state's Department of Revenue or the Internal Revenue Service. Diversity is a part of our workplaces. For Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), this can be particularly challenging while navigating within the daily framework of things. Let's look at the "emotional tax" and the way it affects people in the workplace.

The "emotional tax," is defined as, "the heightened experience of being treated differently from peers due to gender, race or ethnicity, triggering adverse effects on health and feelings of isolation making difficult to succeed or excel in the workplace." If inclusion is the behavior that is intended to welcome and support diversity, then why does such a tax still exist?

When people of marginalized groups experience discrimination, bias, slights and micro aggressions in their work environments, the effects can be both financial and emotional. In order to survive in some environments, some may feel they must deny certain characteristics that is natural to who they are and the culture they truly represent. To a degree, we all as people, assimilate in some way in order to abide to the rules society says we should live by. In our world, it is very easy to lose who we really are in the process of becoming what is considered, "accepted," "approved" or "one of the good ones," just to be seen as worthwhile.

Think about this: What if you were told that you could not be who you really are? What if you were told the name and surname could be the reason for not making it past the first interview or not getting a position

that you're aptly qualified for? What about getting asked a question and being expected to speak on behalf of all people for that race, gender or ethnicity? What if certain speech and mannerisms were acceptable for some but not acceptable for everyone?

Institutional and intersectional pressures often play a huge part in the way BIPOC navigate in professional situations. There is always going to be an "emotional tax" when honest assertion could be construed as aggression, when people believe it is acceptable to walk up and touch someone's hair, when speaking up for oneself could be seen as anger and when telling a BIPOC how articulate they are, is still seen as a "compliment."

We must be mindful that greater "emotional taxes" were paid by those who preceded us. If they hadn't paid such costs with determination, resolve and dignity, BIPOC would not have the opportunities of today. This doesn't make the "emotional tax" any less expensive; however, the tax is paid in different ways. It is up to us to determine the amount of "emotional tax" that our future generations will be responsible for paying. No price is steep for everyone to have an equal chance to operate, navigate, succeed and thrive in today's professional world.



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DOING GOOD WHILE MAKING GREAT FOOD Submitted by Ruiz Foods



Ruiz Foods team member volunteers at Wreaths Across America

The Ruiz Foods Florence team greets each day with two steadfast commitments to what matters most. First, to produce great Mexican food products. Second, and equally important, is to make a difference in the communities where team members live and work.

Ruiz Foods, the largest frozen Mexican Foods manufacturer in the United States, marks its 60th anniversary in 2024. A decade ago, the company announced it would build a manufacturing facility in Florence, and the new plant opened in 2016. Today the Ruiz Foods Florence team is more than 1,000 strong. And, like other Ruiz Foods teams, they've made a name for themselves as generous givers of their time, talents and resources to important community needs.

"Giving back in our communities is at the core of who we are," says Kimberli Carroll, Ruiz Foods president and CEO, who joined the company more than two decades ago and recently became its leader. "Not only is it the right thing to do for the people of our communities, but it's also very meaningful to our team members who live and work in Florence and our other locations."

Father and son team Louis and Fred Ruiz

started Ruiz Foods in 1964 in a small rural community in California's Central Valley. From the beginning, the two believed that giving back where you live, and work was a priority.

Today Ruiz Foods and its Florence team members support a full menu of community organizations with a primary focus on children and education. The Ruiz Foods Florence Community Relations program provides nearly 20 local agencies with financial contributions, while the Ruiz 4 Kids programs provides mini grants to local teachers. In 2023, the programs awarded \$11,861 in mini grants to 20 teachers, along with scholarships to 68 seniors from 14 area high schools.

Since 2015, Ruiz 4 Kids has awarded \$438,000 dollars in scholarships to 428 local students.

172 area teachers have received \$132,000 in Ruiz 4 Kids mini grants, which are funded 100 percent by team members through payroll deductions.

And contributions of \$160,000 to McLeod Hospital Foundation to benefit children and breast cancer programs.

In addition, Ruiz Foods team members are busy year-round volunteers in programs

like Habitat for Humanity's Cinco de Mayo festival, the annual Florence Area Literacy Council Great Grown-Up Spelling Bee, Christmas wreath placement at the area's National Cemetery through the Wreaths Across America program and collecting pet supplies for the local animal shelter through a "Christmas for Critters" drive.

Carroll notes that in a hiring environment that makes it challenging to attract and retain a team, a commitment to community involvement is a plus. Giving back helps team members feel positive about their employer, builds a strong and inclusive culture and creates opportunities to strengthen team member relationships.

Recent research by the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship found 91 percent of companies who surveyed their employees found a positive link between volunteering and company engagement.

Ruiz Foods Florence Plant Director of Operations John Schearer adds that community awareness is also a benefit.

"The frozen Mexican foods products we make here under the El Monterey® and Tornados® brands are sold to retailers and foodservice companies, and reach consumers through retail, convenience stores and other outlets," Schearer says. "While our neighbors may or may not know our products, we want them – and prospective team members – to respect and value the Ruiz Foods name and presence here."

"We're proud that not only are we a great on-the-job team at our Florence plant, we're also a strong community team that's always ready to step up."

"As Ruiz Foods enters its seventh decade, we're so grateful to our team members in Florence and our other locations who live our values of making good food and being good neighbors every day," Carroll said.



Lake City High School Ruiz 4 Kids Scholarship Recipients

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PEE DEE COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS NAMES NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Submitted by Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments



Joette Dukes

The Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments (COG) Board of Directors has named Joette Dukes to serve as its executive director.

Dukes succeeds Mr. Johnny B. Brown, who served as the COG's executive director since 1982. Brown announced his retirement last spring and passed away suddenly thereafter. Dukes was named interim director and served in that capacity until the board's official appointment in December 2023.

Prior to her role as interim executive director and over the past

three decades, Dukes has served in numerous capacities at Pee Dee COG, including, most recently, the role of workforce development director. During her 12 years serving as the leader of workforce activities in the Pee Dee Region, she has forged strong local partnerships with education, workforce, economic development, and industry. These partnerships have supported the Pee Dee community through natural disasters, mass layoffs and plant closure events. She and her team have brought hope to the community by advocating for public transportation, connecting individuals to jobs and community resources and supporting industries in their efforts to hire and maintain a strong workforce. Her work with the local workforce board has been recognized, locally, statewide and nationally.

In her new position, Dukes will facilitate the strategic vision of the COG and oversee all services provided by the agency. "I am honored to be chosen to lead the organization that I have faithfully



served for the past 31 years," said Dukes. "I am looking forward to working with our dynamic team of professionals to continue fulfilling the Pee Dee COG's mission of assisting

local governments with addressing their workforce, economic and community development needs. Our former Executive Director, Mr. Brown, has left a remarkable legacy that we plan to build upon in this next chapter of the organization."

Dukes holds a B.S. in Business Administration from the University of South Carolina's College of Business Administration and the credentials of Certified Government Finance Officer (CGFO) and Society for Human Resources Certified Professional (SHRM-CP). She resides in Florence with her husband and pastor, Elder Stevie Dukes. They have three sons.



GROWTH FROM WITHIN: GET TO KNOW YOUR NEW INTERIM CITY MANAGER

Submitted by the City of Florence



Scotty Davis, Florence interim city manager

The City of Florence measures its success through the satisfaction of its citizens. A key strategy in achieving citizen satisfaction is through employee satisfaction by fostering a fulfilling work environment. This commitment includes providing opportunities for growth and development and encouraging individuals to progress into future leadership roles within the organization. By nurturing such an environment, the city aims to enhance dedication and focus on its mission of providing timely, effective and fiscally responsible municipal services to elevate the quality of life in the city and region.



City Building

Encouraging growth from within the city, whether through internal transfer opportunities or training experiences, is integral to the city's success. On December 11th, 2023, City Council appointed Scotty Davis, who has been with the city for 26 years, as the new interim city manager. This appointment highlights the city's dedication to cultivating leadership from within and sustaining its momentum towards continued progress and prosperity, while also marking a historic milestone with the first Black city manager.

Davis received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science with a minor in Criminal Justice from the University of North Carolina - Charlotte in 1993. In 1994, he attended Campbell University's School of Law in Buies Creek, North Carolina. He also attended UNC - Charlotte to pursue a master's degree in public administration from 1995-1997. During those years, Davis worked as

an outpatient therapist for Charter Pines Hospital and as a director of a group home for Lutheran Family Services. He later attended the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2014, to complete their Community Development Academy.

Davis married his kindergarten sweetheart, the former Kimberly Turner, in 1997. They are the proud parents of two children - Justin Scott Davis (West Florence Fire Department) and Evan Rashad Davis (Senior, West Florence High School), and one grandson - Jackson Scott Davis. Davis is an avid San Francisco 49ers fan and a car enthusiast.

Davis has held various significant positions within the City of Florence spanning over nearly three decades. Beginning in 1997 with his move to Florence, he served as the infrastructure department manager overseeing the city's Engineering, Housing and Planning Departments. Following this role, from 2000 to 2012, he assumed the position of community services director, demonstrating his commitment to enhancing community welfare and engagement. Transitioning to the role of general services director from 2012 to 2019, Davis played a pivotal role in managing the city's operational functions efficiently. From 2019 to 2024, he served as the deputy city manager, contributing extensively to the strategic direction and management of city affairs. Since February, Davis has taken on the role of interim city manager, showcasing his leadership capabilities in overseeing the city's day-to-day operations. Throughout his tenure, Davis has exhibited dedication, expertise and a steadfast commitment to the progress and well-being of Florence.

Some of Davis's other accomplishments include being named one of the 30 most influential African Americans in the Pee Dee region by The Community Times newspaper on several occasions. In 2003, the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce named Davis its Chamber Champ of The Year for his volunteerism to the organization. He is also a member of the Chi Iota Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., which named him, 'Man of the Year,' in 2005. Davis is a former



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member of the Board of Directors with the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce, Fannie Mae, Pee Dee Visions Foundation, the United Way of Florence, Florence-Darlington Tech Educational Foundation and the South Carolina Association of Community and Economic Development. Davis is also a member of the SC City County Management Association.

Davis hit the ground running in his new role with a budget work session with City Council to ensure the operational needs of the city are continuing to be met. Davis will maintain his work in overseeing Florence's neighborhood revitalization and community development programs, while also ensuring the progress of numerous current development projects and introducing new initiatives based on the needs of the community. Ongoing projects include the city's Stormwater Master Plan, downtown revitalization efforts like the "Urban Square" project that will bring more housing, office space, retail space and parking to downtown, and the Carolina Theatre stabilization. Additional ongoing efforts include extending the Rail Trail to the Soccer Complex, adding four new multipurpose fields and expanding our Surface Water and Wastewater Treatment plants to enhance the city's infrastructure and water quality. Davis said, "As a leader, it falls upon the city manager to inspire and ensure accountability, driving the realization of the city's mission to its fullest potential."

Embracing this new transition wholeheartedly, the city remains dedicated to sustaining the organization's success by continuing to elevate the quality of life in our city and surrounding region. Full Life. Full Forward.





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MARLBORO DEVELOPMENT TEAM CLOSES ON DARLINGTON COUNTY I-20 INDUSTRIAL PARK

Submitted by MPD Staff



Darlington I-20-Aerial

DARLINGTON- Marlboro Development Team, Inc. (MDT), a South Carolina based real estate developer focused on single tenant build-to-suits, value-add acquisitions and strategic investments throughout the U.S., is pleased to announce the purchase of the I-20 Industrial Park, a 163-acre certified Class A Industrial Park in Darlington County, South Carolina.

Located on Interstate 20 at Highway 340 (Exit 137), just five miles from Interstate 95, the industrial park's proximity to two of the country's largest interstates is certain to attract significant attention. The I-20 Industrial Park is also just 35 miles from the South Carolina Inland Port at Dillon, where MDT has another 3,000+ acres of available industrial land and is just 15 miles from the very successful Pee Dee Commerce City in Florence, South Carolina, also owned and operated by MDT.

"We are excited about the economic development possibilities for this shovel ready industrial park," said William Fleming, president

and CEO of Marlboro Development Team and parent company MPD Electric Cooperative (MPD). "Our hope is that the I-20 park will continue the momentum for new industrial growth, jobs and capital investment."

Developing industrial parks and standing at the forefront of industrial recruitment in the southeastern United States, especially the Pee Dee Region, is a core value of MDT, a subsidiary of MPD Electric Cooperative, the nation's largest industrial electric cooperative. The parks in this region ultimately create multiple layers of added value, not only because of the additional jobs and tax base new investment brings, but also the additional power sales that enable MPD to remain the lowest cost power supplier in the state.

"Economic development is directly tied to increased per capita income for the citizens of our community," said South Carolina Senator Gerald Malloy. "I am pleased to have been part of this process with MDT and look forward to the opportunities it brings to the region."

"Darlington County supports Marlboro Development Team and MPD Electric Cooperative's acquisition and continued development of the I-20 industrial park," said Charles Stewart, Darlington County administrator. "We are looking forward to the positive impacts their expertise will bring for this site in future economic development for Darlington County."

About Marlboro Development Team, Inc.

Marlboro Development Team is a South Carolina based real estate developer focused on single tenant build-to-suits, value-add acquisitions and strategic investments throughout the United States. The senior management of MDT has a proven track record of 100+ years of development experience with successful delivery of over 13 million square feet across a broad spectrum of development projects including industrial, retail and commercial.

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COMMUNITY FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES 2024 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Submitted by Executive Director Belle Zeigler



Thomas Kennedy
Chair
Florence SC

Carolina Toniolo
Vice Chair
Florence SC

Conrad Seastrunk
Treasurer
Florence SC

Tamara Kirven
Secretary
Darlington SC

On November 14, 2023, Eastern Carolina Community Foundation (ECCF) elected its new board of trustees. The 16-member, all volunteer board is made up of dedicated, community minded individuals from the seven counties served by the foundation: Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg.

The executive committee leadership is (L-R in photo) Chair, Thomas Kennedy of Florence, and wealth advisor at Signature Wealth Strategies; Vice-Chair, Caroline Toniolo of Florence, and financial advisor at Ensemble Wealth Planning; Treasurer, Conrad Seastrunk of Florence, and founder/lead advisor of Seastrunk Financial; and Secretary, Tamara Kirven of Darlington, and owner of WilGrow, LLC. In addition to the executive board, two new members of the board were elected: Luke Powers of Bennettsville, and Carrington Wingard of Florence, who will be serving as president of the Foundation's Giving Circle Fund, Women in Philanthropy. The first meeting of the board of trustees in 2024 will be held February 20.

Former Board Chair Mike Miller offered his support of the new executive committee, saying, "I look forward to continuing my service on the board as immediate past chair and I know that Thomas Kennedy,

the entire board and Belle Zeigler, our executive director, will move ECCF forward in its efforts to improve the quality of life through philanthropy and innovative community programming for the seven counties we serve."

Belle Zeigler, executive director shared, "The foundation is fortunate to have committed leaders who serve to make a positive impact in our communities. The board is dedicated to stewardship and community leadership. Connecting donors with charitable causes for the greater good of the Pee Dee region and beyond is critical to our success. Our board is focused on doing just that especially as we move forward!"

The foundation received contributions totaling over \$5.1 million and awarded grants of over \$1.9 million in 2023. In addition, donors established many new component funds bringing the total number of funds to 150. The foundation currently has over \$21 million in assets under management.

Eastern Carolina Community Foundation, a 501C3 designated organization, is the community foundation in South Carolina serving the Pee Dee region. For a full list of board members and much more information about the foundation, visit www.easterncarolinacf.org or contact Executive Director, Belle Zeigler at 843-667-1131 or belle@easterncarolinacf.org.



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WAYS SMALL BUSINESSES CAN INNOVATE WITHOUT A BIG BUDGET



(BPT) -In today's fast-paced business landscape, it's important for small business owners to adopt a mindset for innovation. However, the misconception that innovation requires vast resources and significant time investment can often deter entrepreneurs and business builders from pursuing new

ideas and strategies. But with the right approach and perspective, small businesses can foster a culture within the company to make innovation more of an ongoing tenet of a successful business.

As small businesses look at their goals this year, with some businesses also thinking about how to do more with the same, consider these practical tips to innovate without breaking the bank or spending too many resources. Nurture an innovative mindset with your team!

Innovation starts with your team. Cultivating an innovation mindset among your team members is the first step toward achieving small wins that lead to breakthroughs. As someone who has led product development teams for over 20 years, I know that the ability and willingness to analyze the environment, listen to feedback and adapt to change are key disciplines to delivering products that delight customers.

Embrace diverse perspectives: Different backgrounds and experiences bring unique viewpoints that can spark creativity and improve collaboration within your organization. Where you can, build diversity into your hiring strategy.

Foster a culture of openness: Create an atmosphere where employees feel safe to share their ideas and insights freely. Make them feel that their

opinions matter and that they have a stake in the company's success. You can do this with monthly brainstorming sessions to get the whole team thinking about different challenges faced by the business.

By nurturing an innovation mindset within your team, you can tap into their collective creativity, which can lead to cost-effective innovations that drive your business forward.

Listen to your customers and innovate for them!

Research has shown that improving the client experience can increase sales revenues by two to seven percent. However, one common pitfall in innovation is over-engineering solutions that don't align with your customers' needs.

Provide multi-channel support: For customers who still need help after navigating your educational resources, offer support across the platforms that matter to them - such as email, social media, SMS, in-app support and more. Leverage tech-enabled tools, such as finance software that offers free phone and chat support with live agents. This meets your customers where they are, letting them reach you in a way they find comfortable and convenient.

Cascade the outside, inside: Often customer feedback does not go beyond the customer support team. To help drive more organic innovation, regular touch points between team members who face customers and team members who are on the front lines of innovation.

By keeping your customers' needs at the forefront of your innovation efforts, you can ensure your new ideas are well-targeted.

Innovation isn't solely reserved for large corporations with deep pockets. Small businesses can thrive in today's competitive landscape by adopting an innovative mindset, listening to customers, harnessing technology to optimize and adapt to market shifts, and being unafraid to experiment and learn from failures. With the right strategies and a commitment to cost-effective innovation, your small business can stay ahead of the curve.



Lake City Mayor Yamekia Robinson, right, presents Gloria Graham-Boyd with the Key to the City. Graham-Boyd served as principal of Dr. Ronald E. McNair Middle School for 10 years in the 1990s and was recently honored at The Continuum in Lake City.

LAKE CITY— Students of Ronald E. McNair Junior High School in the 1990s may remember the name Gloria Graham-Boyd. She served as its principal throughout the decade, retiring from the school in May 2001. More than 20 years later, one of her former students, Mayor Yamekia Robinson recognized her contributions to Lake City.

“Today was an incredible day for me as a woman and Mayor of Lake City. I had the privilege to present a well-deserved award, the Key to the City, to my former principal of Ronald E McNair Junior High

School, Mrs. Gloria Boyd,” said Robinson. “As one of her first students in 1991, presenting this award to her was a huge honor. She paved the way for me. I saw someone who looked like me that gave me hope to be a better me.”

During her tenure at the junior high school, she orchestrated a dozen service projects with the students and community, including



Gloria Graham-Boyd stands in front of Dr. Ronald E. McNair Middle School. Graham-Boyd served as principal of the school for 10 years in the 1990s and was recently presented with the Key to Lake City by Mayor Yamekia Robinson.

the first Habitat for Humanity House built in Lake City. She was recognized for her accomplishments and service to the community at a special event February 10.

Boyd, a past-president and recently elected president of Delta House Inc. for 2024-2025, now resides in Columbia. She has continued to serve her community throughout her life on numerous educational-focused committees and organizations, as well as within her church.

The Key to the City is an honor recognizing civic service and duty. Unlike during the medieval period when such a key would literally unlock the city gates, today’s keys are symbolic and presented to those held in the highest esteem.

LAKE CITY WATER DEPARTMENT WINS METER SYSTEM AWARD



Garrett Brown, left, senior meter technician, and Nekeycha Izzard, utility billings manager, with the South Carolina Meter System of the Year Award.

LAKE CITY— Imagine this: You’re all set for a week-long getaway. You’ve double-checked everything – the stove is off, the lights are out, the doors are locked, and even your water-leak detection device is securely in place. Confident that your home is in good hands, away you go, ready to unwind and relax.

Two-days later, a pipe in the wall develops a leak.

It’s not gushing – but its steady drip inside the wall won’t trip your device. Your meter’s usage ticks with every second that passes, recording every lost drop of water. You could be coming home to a surprisingly large water bill. You might not even notice the leak until that bill arrives.

Instead, your water meter sends an alert to the Lake City Water Department noting the unusual spike in usage. City staff reach out but can’t contact you and temporarily turn off water services as a precaution. Instead of coming home to a hefty water bill, you’re greeted with a notice from the Lake City Water Department. It explains the situation and the steps taken to prevent a potential financial burden.

The efforts of the Lake City Water Department’s to fully implement these and other capabilities of the water meter system were recently recognized by Ferguson Waterworks. Nekeycha Izzard, utility billings manager, and Garrett Brown, senior meter technician was presented the South Carolina Meter System of the Year Award on behalf of the Lake City Water Department during the recent Ferguson Waterworks and Sensus Utilities Solution Expo in Myrtle Beach.

The award acknowledges the department’s outstanding achievement in implementing a system that:

- enables remote monitoring of water usage data.
- significantly reduce the city’s costs associated with manual meter reading.
- enhances efficiency.
- improves customer service.

“The \$2.5 million system had been installed in 2016, to start automating our system but hadn’t been used to its full potential,” said Izzard. “In 2021, we were challenged with connecting the system to our billing program and improving the efficiency of our services.” That was easier said than done.

The first task meant manual reviewing every entry in the water department’s 4,000-plus customer database. This included correcting duplicate entries, determining actual account ownership and verifying data. Second, was making sure the meter system communicated accurately with the billing system.

To date, the city has installed 289 meters that can be remotely controlled from the water department, and 240 Ipearl meters that communicate with the system but are physically controlled.

“We’ve now gone from manually reading 800 plus meters, to just around 150 which saves the city and taxpayers a lot of overhead,” said William A. Hall, city administrator. “Ferguson is now presenting Lake City as a model to the rest of the region, including South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia, on how to fully use the system.”

The system now provides the Lake City Water Department the ability to:

- remotely monitor water usage data
- reduce the need for manual meter readings.
- detect potential water leaks promptly.
- provide insights into consumption patterns.
- print out detailed usage reports for a customer.
- combat water theft

Another benefit to customers is the ability to receive their water bill by email on the day it is processed. To sign up to receive your water bill electronically, complete the Email My Bill form on LakeCitySC.org today.

LAKE CITY MAYOR YAMEKIA ROBINSON APPOINTED TO THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

Submitted by Public Information Officer Donna Tracy



Mayor Yamekia Robinson

LAKE CITY— Mayor Yamekia Robinson of Lake City, SC, has been appointed to the National League of Cities (NLC) 2024 Council on Youth, Education and Families (YEF Council). Robinson was elected to a one-year term to develop and guide programs among local elected officials from similar communities. The appointment was announced by the NLC President Mayor-elect David Sander of Rancho Cordova, CA.

“I am extremely excited and honored to be appointed to the NLC’s 2024 Council on Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Council). Being a member of this council will strengthen my voice and leadership skills in advocating for the youth and families of our hometown, Lake City, South Carolina,” said Robinson. “Not only for our hometown, but to also be that voice for all our cities, towns and villages across

the United States of America,” Robinson states.

As a member of NLC’s 2024 Council on Youth, Education and Families, Robinson will play a key role among a diverse group of local leaders to encourage collaboration, networking and the development of resources and programs beneficial to communities that share demographics, size or location that can be replicated across the country.

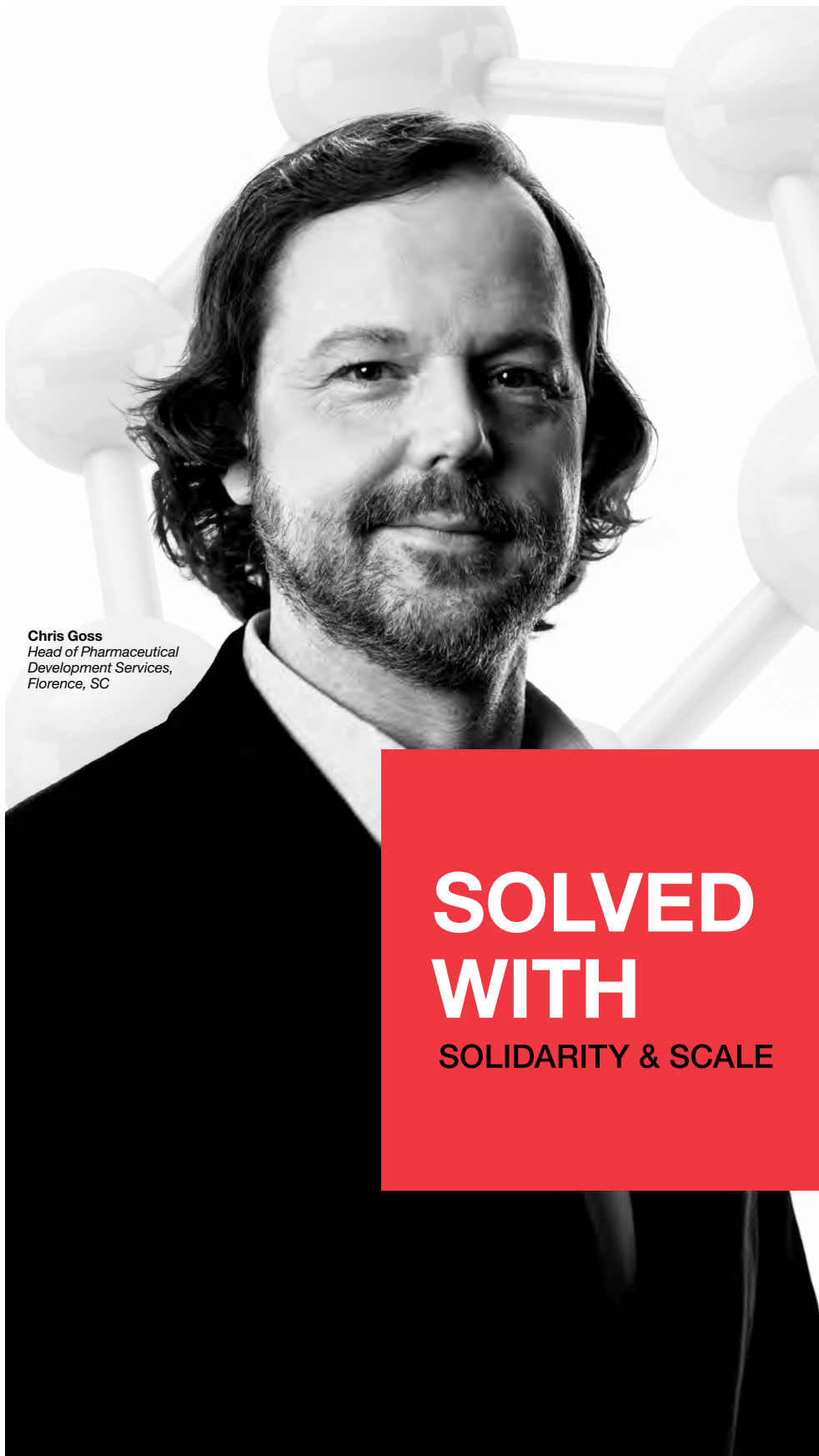
“Our member councils play an integral role in NLC’s work, bringing local leaders together to share ideas and inform NLC policy about the issues and challenges facing every kind of community in America,” said Sander. “I’m excited to have Mayor Robinson serve on NLC’s 2024 Council on Youth, Education and Families (YEF Council). The council will ensure that all our cities, towns and villages have access to ideas and resources they can use to thrive.”

The leadership of this year’s council will consist of Chair Jessica Harrison, mayor pro tem, Zebulon, NC; Vice Chair Lawanna Owens-Twaites, councilmember, Union City, GA; Vice Chair Stephanie Moon Reynolds, councilmember, Roanoke, VA and Vice Chair Fabiola Stuyvesant, commissioner, Sunny Isles Beach, FL.

For more information on NLC’s member councils, visit: <https://www.nlc.org/current-initiatives/member-councils-2/>.



A large promotional graphic for Lake City, SC. The left side is white with an orange curved shape at the top and a green curved shape at the bottom. It contains the text "LAKE CITY SC" in blue, a stylized city skyline icon, and the slogan "Live • Work • Play • Visit". Below that, in large blue letters, is "WORKING FOR YOU!" and the website "LakeCitySC.gov". The right side of the graphic is a photograph of two men in blue work clothes and hoods, smiling and giving a thumbs up while standing in a construction site with dirt and a white truck in the background. There are decorative dotted lines in red and orange.



Chris Goss
Head of Pharmaceutical
Development Services,
Florence, SC

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**HOW A SMALL NON-PROFIT
TEAMED UP WITH A GLOBAL
MANUFACTURER TO BRING THEIR
ALS DRUG TO CLINICAL TRIALS**

Before she lost her own battle to ALS in 2003, Jenifer Estes started Project ALS, raising over \$17 million dollars for the non-profit in hopes of a breakthrough in the fight against Lou Gehrig's disease. As her family continued the quest, in 2019, they got a hit with a new compound that seemed to stop or even reverse motor nerve damage. The promising new drug would need to begin trials immediately, but as a non-profit, all they had was a half gram of material and a journal article, and the deadline was approaching quickly. That's when Chris and his team at Thermo Fisher Scientific sprang into action. They worked around the clock to come up with an ingenious solution to scale a half gram of material into a kilo of purified product suitable for clinical trials. Now, with more than enough material in clinical trials to potentially treat or cure one of humanity's most pernicious diseases, there's hope for ALS patients.

Learn why new and emerging companies put their trust in Thermo Fisher Scientific at thermofisher.com/patheon



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- CLINICAL TRIAL SOLUTIONS
- LOGISTICS SERVICES
- COMMERCIAL MANUFACTURING

SAVING TIPS



Do not use all of your high-use appliances at the same time (water heater, HVAC, and clothes dryer) during the peak hours. Or, use them before or after the peak hours.



Manually adjust your thermostat so your HVAC runs less during peak hours. Pre-cooling or pre-heating your home before the peak hours (when energy is 6.5 cents/kWh) will help. A programmable/smart thermostat can do this for you.



Limit hot water use during the peak hours. Consider placing a timer switch on your water heater that helps shift your energy usage off-peak hours when energy costs less (6.5 cents/kWh). That way, you can still use hot water during the peak, but the water heater is not running.

SUMMER PEAK HOURS

April 1 – October 31
4 p.m. – 7 p.m.

WINTER PEAK HOURS

November 1– March 31
6 a.m. – 9 a.m.

www.santee.org/rate-structure

SMART STEPS TO ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

(BPT) - Despite today's challenging economic climate, most Americans feel economically empowered and continue to strive for their professional goals, but there are generational differences, with Gen Z and millennials feeling more confident than Gen X and baby boomers.

According to a survey commissioned by Herbalife, 55 percent of Americans are currently taking steps to feel more economically empowered. In fact, 73 percent of respondents said that starting their own business or partaking in freelance work feels like the only way to become economically empowered.

The study, which surveyed 2,000 Americans and 5,000 international respondents from 6 different countries, defined economic empowerment as providing people with the education, training and skills that they need to find a job, earn an income and become self-supporting.

Economic realities

According to survey findings, 78 percent of Americans are more aware of their economic situation in the past five years, with almost half (47 percent) attributing it to the pandemic.

In recent years, Americans have faced several barriers to achieving economic empowerment such as inflation, business closures and unfair lending processes. Providing more opportunities for economic empowerment is

essential for all.

Nevertheless, Americans are hopeful. In fact, 67 percent believe that they will be economically empowered in the future. Finding economic opportunities

This year is the ideal time to embrace economic empowerment and set goals. Of those Americans taking steps to become more empowered, 40 percent are educating themselves about personal finance, budgeting, investing and managing debt.

The survey also revealed generational differences. For example, Gen Z and millennials are the most likely to currently feel economically empowered (66 percent and 70 percent, respectively) compared to 51 percent of Gen X and 52 percent of American baby boomers.

Interestingly, over half of both Gen Z and millennials have a side hustle compared to 35 percent of Gen X and only seven percent of baby boomers.

There are many opportunities available for people looking to achieve economic empowerment by starting their own business. For example, network marketing allows you to start a business at a manageable cost, plus receive ongoing training, resources and support.

Here are a few tips to help people take steps toward economic empowerment:

Improve your financial literacy: Learn more about effectively managing, saving and

investing your money. This can include budgeting, eliminating debt, buying insurance, exploring investments and creating retirement savings plans.

Set clear financial goals: Goals should be specific, measurable and achievable for your short-term and long-term future, including saving money regularly and paying off debts. Creating goals can help you turn vision into reality.

Invest in education and skill development: By attending continued education like on-the-job training, online and certification courses, you are investing in yourself and your future. This demonstrates your commitment to your personal and professional growth, which can lead to better career prospects and financial rewards.

Start your own business or side hustle: Today, almost half of Americans have a side hustle outside of their day job to generate additional income. Consider your interests and options to set yourself up for success.

Work to build strong personal and professional networks: Having strong connections in your personal and professional life offers many benefits. You have access to support, mentors, opportunities and so much more.

Now is the ideal time to set yourself up for professional success and take steps toward economic empowerment. To learn more about starting a new business and earning some extra income, visit Herbalife.com.

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TRUST BEGINS AT THE TOP Submitted by Coach Temple Robinson



Coach Temple Robinson

How essential is trust in an organization? According to neuroscientist Dr. Paul Zak's study, people in high-trust companies experience more engagement, higher productivity, more satisfaction, less stress, fewer sick days and less burnout. In addition, it creates an environment where people feel safe in being vulnerable and are open to diversity of thought to accomplish organizational goals. Most leaders agree that they want trust within their teams, yet they often struggle with developing it. How frequently have

you heard colleagues mention that they do not trust their leadership but may have difficulty explaining their reasons? It describes a situation where leaders must meet unspoken expectations to appear reliable. So, as a leader, what do you do to create trust within your working relationships?

Webster defines trust as one in which confidence is placed. Leaders who earn their team's trust can recall their actions to gain it. However, others may replicate the same actions and fail to succeed. This disconnect occurs because earning trust is more profound than a leader's actions. As much as leaders want to secure trust or confidence, it is accomplished when they consistently show that they trust their team. Therefore, to earn trust, you must be willing to give it.

Leaders can genuinely demonstrate trust by simply changing their thoughts when interacting with others. Through applying the Green

Lens, leaders have excelled in developing trusting relationships and workplace climates. This tool is a set of conclusions that, when utilized correctly, leaders bring out the best in themselves and others. These conclusions include the following:

1. This person is a hero, whole and complete.
2. This person has goals and dreams and a desire to make a difference.
3. This person has their own answers.
4. This person is contributing to me right now.
5. This person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

When leaders choose to believe these conclusions about each person they interact with, their energy begins to change. They "show up" differently. Leaders start to authentically exhibit confidence, compassion and open-mindedness to become their desired ideal leader. The individuals they interact with become more open and willing because they know that their leader is entirely present with them and sees them for all the benefits they contribute. As a result, it is normal that the interaction's outcome is better than what either of the parties initially thought. In addition, the final product accurately reflects the creativity of all involved, and everyone is more energized and motivated to accomplish more. Everyone leaves respected, and everybody in the workplace wants respect.

When leaders consistently apply the Green Lens, organizations soar in developing a productive working environment where everyone is valued. People are more engaged and excited about how they can support the organization in moving forward. Learning how to effectively and consistently apply the Green Lens is an art that requires practice. To learn more about implementing this simple yet highly effective tool, contact Transformational Leadership Coach Temple Robinson at coachtemple@templerobinson.com or visit www.templerobinson.com.



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JUST THREE IN 10 AMERICANS SAY THEY ASPIRE TO THE C-SUITE



(BPT) - Who wants to be the boss? Just three in 10 Americans say they aspire to hold a C-suite role, according to new research from Empower, a leader in financial planning, investing, and advice. Out of all generations, millennials show the highest interest in becoming a top executive (39 percent), though nearly a third of people don't want their job description to change - even if it means sacrificing a promotion or raise.

The study reveals that the number one driver of job satisfaction is money (67 percent), which Americans say trumps being rewarded for loyalty and longevity at a company (40 percent), recognition for the job performed (34 percent) and being an inspiring leader or leading by example (32 percent).

The paycheck paradox

For some, there may be a paycheck paradox - a chicken or the egg dilemma: 38 percent (and 55 percent of Gen Z) believe they don't get paid enough to go above and beyond their current job description. At the same time, nearly one in four people say they're not working at full capacity, and nothing will motivate them to work harder (23 percent overall, 37 percent Gen Z).

More Americans plan to increase their contributions to their retirement savings in 2024 (34 percent) than ask for a promotion (23 percent) or quit to find a higher paying job (14 percent). Of all generations, Gen Z is looking to make more money by "job switching" (16 percent).

So, if people are placing less focus on rising through the ranks, what do people value at work? Let's take a closer look.

What's on the Workplace Wishlist?

Respondents point to greater access to financial advice and benefits as topping the list; over two in five Americans (44 percent) wish their employer offered more one-on-one financial help.

*** Advice advantage:** 39 percent say their employer doesn't offer enough financial planning support. Half (48 percent) say financial coaching is a major must-have and 52 percent wish their job would provide more financial literacy opportunities.

*** Retirement roll:** 71 percent of Americans say retirement plan matching is an important employee benefit and over half (54 percent) wish their job automatically enrolled them into a 401(k) plan.

*** Betting on a bonus:** Bonuses are important to 75 percent of Americans, though nearly one in five respondents (17 percent) say their employer doesn't offer one. One in 4 put their annual bonus toward essential items (24 percent), savings (44 percent), and retirement (28 percent), though 32 percent plan to spend it on a vacation.

*** The big flex:** 48 percent say they'd be willing to go back to the office if their employer offered a four-day work week - just 6 percent would be willing to take a pay cut to go remote. On the flip side, one in four Americans (26 percent) say if their employer asks them to go back to the office more this year, they'll quit.

*** Paycheck principles:** When it comes to salary/compensation goals in 2024, Americans are focused on making enough money to pay their bills on time (45 percent) and to retire when they want to (39 percent). Over one in four want to make enough to avoid working multiple jobs.

Top money goals for the year ahead

Inflation and cost of living continue to be top concerns for Americans, as six in 10 say their income isn't keeping up with rising

prices. These economic concerns far outweigh worries about the job market (7 percent) or career growth (4 percent).

Despite these challenges, just a third (31 percent) plan on asking for a raise this year, and the trend of "quiet quitting" seems to be waning: 9 percent plan to employ this strategy in the year ahead. Some 44 percent feel they make enough money to live comfortably, and overall, Americans feel optimistic, with 58 percent of respondents believing they will continue to make more money in the future.

Access the full report on The Currency™.

Methodology: This study is based on online survey responses from 1,117 Americans ages 18+ commissioned by Empower and fielded by Morning Consult from January 3-4, 2024.

An advertisement for American Sign Language Studio. A woman with dark hair, wearing a pink jacket and blue jeans, is sitting on a concrete ledge in front of a sign. The sign reads "AMERICAN Sign Language STUDIO" and "ASK ABOUT OUR SERVICES 843-669-5471". There are several text boxes overlaid on the image:

- CONTACT:** Jazzmyne Piplins, Studio: 843.669.5471, Mobile: 843.616.0540, aslstudio174@gmail.com
- SIGN CLASS PRICING:** Adults: \$35/hr, Children: \$25/hr
- NEED A BOOKKEEPER? QUICKBOOK services Also Available**
- CLASSES WE OFFER:** Private and Group, In person or virtual, Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced
- By Appointment ONLY**
- SIGN UP TO SIGN** (with a hand sign icon)
- Located DOWNTOWN FLORENCE 174 West Evans**
- Ask about our interpreter services**

BBB REPORT LISTS THE RISKIEST SCAMS REPORTED IN 2023

Submitted by Mallory Wojciechowski, CEO/president, BBB serving Eastern Carolinas



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH - Better Business Bureau Serving Eastern Carolinas (BBB) is sharing the latest findings from the newly released 2023 BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report.

In 2023, BBB Scam Tracker published more than 67,000 reported scams. Using data from those reports, BBB publishes its list of 10 riskiest scam types. There were some significant shifts in position on the list for 2023.

1. Investment/cryptocurrency scams
Cryptocurrency scams, most of which involve some sort of investment

opportunity, are now the riskiest scam type. More than 80 percent of people who were targeted by this scam type reported losing money to BBB Scam Tracker. It also had the second highest median dollar loss at \$3,800. Investment scams take many forms, including pressure to purchase, trade or store digital assets (cryptocurrency) with fraudulent exchanges.

2. Employment scams

Employment scams remained the second riskiest scam type in 2023. Reports increased 54.2 percent from the year before. Employment scams had a median dollar loss of \$1,995, significantly higher than the overall median dollar loss of \$100 reported for all scam types.

3. Online purchase scams

Online purchase (shopping) scams dropped from the riskiest scam type for the first time since 2019, landing at number three on the list. This year, 41.9 percent of scams submitted to BBB Scam Tracker were online purchase scams, and more than 80 percent reported losing money.

How different age groups are impacted by scams.

Investment/cryptocurrency scams were No. 1 riskiest for ages 45 and older, while employment scams were No. 1 riskiest for ages 18-44.

It's worth noting that for the second year in a row, people ages 18-24 reported the highest median dollar loss of all age groups at \$155. All consumers should always beware of opportunities that sound too good to be true.

Other key findings of the report include:

- Scams perpetrated online continued to grow, making up 68.4 percent of all reports. More concerning, online scams were more likely to result in a reported monetary loss than scams perpetrated in person or via phone.

- The percentage of people who reported engaging with a scammer via social media rose 63.8 percent from 2022 to 2023.

- Credit cards remained the most reported payment method with a monetary loss, followed by bank account debit and online payment systems.

- The U.S. Postal Service was the organization reported to be the most often impersonated by scammers in 2023. Scammers generally targeted people by claiming their packages couldn't be delivered and requiring them to provide information or pay delivery/redelivery fees. A list of the top 20 most impersonated organizations is provided in the report.

Resources for consumers

For more highlights from the 2023 BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report, visit BBBMarketplaceTrust.org/RiskReport. Go to BBB.org/ScamTracker to report a scam.

About BBB serving Eastern Carolinas

Better Business Bureau serving Eastern Carolinas is a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit corporation serving 48 counties in North and South

Carolina. The organization is funded primarily by BBB Accredited Business fees from over 5,200 local businesses and professional firms. BBB promotes integrity, consumer confidence and business ethics through business self-regulation in the local marketplace. Services provided by BBB include reports on companies and charitable organizations, general monitoring of advertising in the marketplace, consumer/business education programs and dispute resolution services. All services are provided at no cost to the public, with the occasional exception of mediation and arbitration. Visit BBB.org.

General tips for avoiding scams

1 Never send money to someone you have not met face-to-face.

Beware of online friends who ask for money or offer investment opportunities, including scenarios involving cryptocurrency.

2 Don't click on links or open attachments in unsolicited email or text messages

If the person claims to be somebody you know or a well-known organization, contact the person directly or go directly to your account to confirm the details.

3 Avoid making quick purchases while browsing social media.

Research the website before paying for a product/service.

4 Don't believe everything you see or read.

Scammers are great at mimicking official seals, fonts, websites, and other details.

5 Beware of offers that seem too good to be true.

Be cautious of perfect job offers, highly reduced prices on products/services, or investment opportunities that claim to be "risk free."

6 Be extremely cautious when dealing with anyone you've met online.

Never share personally identifiable information with someone who has contacted you unsolicited.

7 Don't be pressured to act immediately.

Instead, take the time to do more research or reach out to a third party to discuss the situation.

8 Use secure, traceable transactions when making payments for goods, services, taxes, and debts.

Prepaid/gift cards are intended to be used as gifts, not as payment.

9 Whenever possible, work with businesses that have proper identification, licensing, and insurance.

Research the company first at BBB.org.

10 Be cautious about what you share on social media.

Read the full report:
BBBMarketplaceTrust.org/RiskReport

Report a scam: BBB.org/ScamTracker
Boost your scam knowledge: BBB.org/ScamPrevention
Get help if you've experienced a scam: BBB.org/ScamSurvivalKit



PART 1: DO YOU EXPECT ENOUGH FROM JESUS? *By Robin Lewis*



Robin Lewis



Spirit-led Coach, Encourager, Author,
Retreat Leader, Daughter of the King

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HEMINGWAY – “Jesus did not come to start a powerless version of Christianity.” I was driving and listening to an audio teaching on the gifts of the spirit by Arthur Burk and heard him utter those words. He was describing the beauty and power of the gifts of God that each person receives as part of their purpose.

My first thought was, “Well, of course, he didn’t come to start a powerless version. Why would he? And... Why have I not thought of that, in that way before?” I was raised to know my Bible, and yet I wondered about my life and my family. It seemed like what I’d been taught had holes in it. For years, I felt I was waiting on something I needed. Like I was sitting

in a waiting room, but not sure why I was there, hoping someone would come and give me answers. My faith, even though growing, felt like everything was left up to God. Why weren’t my prayers answered so many times? Surely it wasn’t his will for people to simply survive.

What was missing was fully understanding my position and authority in Jesus. In Luke 9, Jesus sends out his 12 apostles. He gives them “authority over every demon and the power to heal every disease.” He tells them to proclaim the good news of God’s Kingdom and heal the sick. Verse 6 reads, “The apostles departed and went into the villages with the wonderful news of God’s Kingdom,

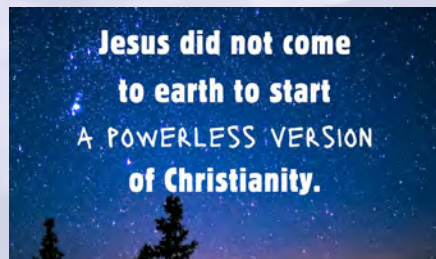
and they healed diseases wherever they went.” This was certainly not powerless, but powerful! They had learned from Jesus and acted on their faith with the power of God flowing through them.

So, why aren’t we seeing these things in the Western Church today? Do we not know the power we have been given? The answer is, no, we generally do not. Most of the Church has not been taught how to use their faith, even though Jesus said his followers would do mighty acts. We must learn what God’s Word actually says and be surrendered to his spirit. After all, it’s his life flowing through us.

God’s desire to partner with our purpose is supported several places in scripture. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s masterpiece, created a new in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world, shining like a city on a hill that can’t and shouldn’t be hidden. He doesn’t want us floundering along without sure hope in him. He wants us to be empowered by him, bringing his love and healing into the world around us. The light we then shine gives glory to God! Too many believers are waiting on God to change things, hoping he will, while he may be waiting on us to step out and believe.

PART 2: WHAT KIND OF LIFE DOES GOD WANT YOU TO HAVE?



The day Jesus fed 5,000 families on the hillside, Peter had said to send them all away to get food. Jesus looked at Peter and said, “You give them something to eat.” He then showed them what faith can do by giving thanks and multiplying a small lunch that fed everyone with 12 basketsfull left over, one for each disciple to carry home. Physical evidence of faith acted on. He later followed that up with the Great Commission where he, again, delegated authority to take the good news to everyone, leaving no one out. That makes us “the delegated” today.

About 12 years ago, I learned a little Greek word that made a very big difference. That word is sozo and is usually translated saved or healed, but means far more. Sozo means to save, heal,

restore, make whole, so that individuals live their fullest life, receiving all the blessings of God, and fulfill their purpose. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “The enemy comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but I have come to give life abundant until it overflows.” Sounds like the opposite of powerless living.

We’re not here to be shaped by earthly culture, but by Heaven’s atmosphere. This means our minds need to be renewed to line up with God’s truth. This will reshape our scared prayers into prayers of faith. There is always more to discover in God. Ephesians 3:20 states it so beautifully. “Never doubt God’s mighty power to work in you and accomplish all this. He will achieve infinitely more than your greatest request, your most unbelievable dream, and exceed your wildest imagination! He will outdo them all for his mighty power constantly energizes you.”

What is missing for you? The gospel Jesus intended is not to end with His disciples. We are part of that story! I believe that in 2024 we will begin seeing a mighty shift of faith. To be part of this shift and start stepping into that sozo life,

sit with God daily, open your Bible, and look for the miracles. Ask him to speak to you. Listen to teaching that grows your faith. God wants to stretch your faith to believe for more so he can do mighty works through you. A.W. Tozer said, “You may be in your day what the heroes of faith were in their day. Only remember, at the time, they didn’t know they were heroes.”

Personally, I am pressing in like never before. I am growing and believing for more, but it’s not without conflict. The enemy is threatened by what he knows God can do in your life, and he will do his best to plant fear where faith should be. Refuse it! Stand strong in faith! All of Heaven is cheering you on!



GSSM, SC TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM PARTNER TO HOST SUMMER CAMPS

Submitted by Hunter Thomas, marketing and communication manager



GSSM Summer Camp

HARTSVILLE - The South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) and the South Carolina Technical College System (SCTCS) are partnering to offer summer day camps across the state for rising sixth through eighth graders.

Throughout the summer of 2024, GSSM will offer its summer camp, GoSciTech, in three formats: day, residential and virtual. In June and July, GSSM will partner with ten technical colleges, which will serve as sites for the STEM-centered GoSciTech Day. During this four-day camp, rising sixth through eighth grade students develop their problem-solving and teamwork skills while exploring engineering, technology and the life sciences. The SCTCS partnership supports GSSM's mission to bring world-class STEM education to students across the Palmetto State.

"Partnering with the South Carolina Technical College System exemplifies how two public educational institutions can collaborate to provide students a continuum of exceptional education and impact students of all ages," GSSM President Danny Dorsel said. "Together, we will educate the workforce of the future."

Participating technical colleges serving as host locations for GSSM GoSciTech Day camp include:

- Central Carolina Technical College (June 17-20)
- Denmark Technical College (June 24-27)
- Florence-Darlington Technical College (June 24-27)
- Greenville Technical College (June 17-20)
- Horry-Georgetown Technical College (July 8-11)
- Midlands Technical College (June 17-20)
- Northeastern Technical College (June 10-13)

Spartanburg Community College (June 10-13)
Technical College of the Lowcountry (July 8-11)
York Technical College (June 10-13)

"Our colleges across the state play a crucial role in their communities, providing affordable, accessible and relevant education," said SC Technical College System President Dr. Tim Hardee. "Teaming up with the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics enhances our impact, allowing us to offer outstanding educational opportunities for the community and shape South Carolina's future workforce."

Each GoSciTech Day camp is designed by the GSSM Outreach Center team, which partners with talented local teachers and other professionals to deliver a transforming world-class education to students. GSSM GoSciTech Day camps provide a fun and collaborative environment where hands-on STEM learning is celebrated. Students choose from a variety of topics, empowering them to interact with peers as they grow as scientists and engineers.

"Our goal each summer is to deliver STEM learning experiences that provide young learners with opportunities to apply what they learn in their daily lives and encourage them to explore careers and post-secondary majors in the STEM fields," GSSM Sr. Vice President for Outreach & Global Initiatives Randy LaCross said. "Delivering our 2024 GoSciTech Day camps in partnership with South Carolina's technical colleges helps us accomplish this goal."

In addition to GoSciTech Day, GSSM offers GoSciTech Residential and GoSciTech Virtual to provide a variety of STEM education options to families across the state this summer.

GoSciTech Residential is a six-day camp on GSSM's Hartsville campus for rising eighth through tenth grade students. Students choose from more than 20 unique STEM courses that are taught by GSSM instructors, college professors or industry experts. Students will experience the Govie life while they live in GSSM residence halls, conduct experiments in labs and eat in the dining hall.

GoSciTech Virtual is a five-day camp where rising sixth through tenth grade

students learn virtually through the internet. Instructors lead live daily sessions, and students collaborate with their peers while exploring STEM through at-home projects.

Need-based financial aid for GSSM summer camps is available. The deadline for financial aid and early-bird registration is Monday, April 15.

The application deadline to apply for all summer camps is Wednesday, May 15.

For more information on GSSM's summer camps, visit scgssm.org/camps, email camps@scgssm.org, or call 843-383-3958HGTC Receives Grant from BlueCross BlueShield.

About the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics

One of the few specialized public residential high schools of its kind, the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM), exists to push motivated young learners beyond their perceived levels of academic ability. Founded in 1988 under the leadership of the late Governor Carroll Campbell, GSSM has consistently raised the bar for STEM education in the Palmetto State. GSSM's two-year residential high school program—as well as its virtual high school program, summer camps and outreach programs—all invite young people to explore the subjects they love in a diverse, inclusive and uncommonly supportive academic environment. Here, challenge is viewed as a gateway to opportunity. GSSM students embrace the school's rigorous approach to education and, in so doing, begin to realize their full potential. Learn more by visiting www.scgssm.org.

About the SC Technical College System

Comprised of 16 colleges located strategically across the state and two internationally renowned statewide programs, readySC™ and Apprenticeship Carolina™, the SC Technical College System is dedicated to furthering economic and workforce development in South Carolina. The system offers affordable, accessible and relevant workforce education and training programs that are innovative, technologically advanced and life-changing for current and future generations. Learn more about the system by visiting www.sctechsystem.edu.





From left Dr. Sarah Hunt-Barron, dean - College of Education; Dr. James Colbert, interim provost & executive vice president for Academic Affairs; Dr. Richard Consentino, president, Lander University; Dr. Jermaine Ford, president, Florence-Darlington Technical College; Elizabeth Crow, program director – Early Care & Education; Dr. Lougina Mounfield, vice president for academic affairs sign a transfer agreement that will allow FDTC students to easily transfer to Lander University to continue their higher education journey in the teaching profession.

GREENWOOD--In recognition of the state's high demand for more qualified K-12 teachers, Lander University and Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) have formed a partnership to enhance the transfer of students from FDTC to Lander. An agreement signed by both institutions will allow early childhood education students at FDTC to easily transfer their credits to Lander's College of Education, providing a path towards a four-year degree and teacher certification.

"Lander University and our technical college partners share a common mission to prepare our students to meet the needs of South Carolina's workforce," said Dr. Jim Colbert, provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at Lander. "This partnership with Florence-Darlington Technical College demonstrates the commitment of both institutions to producing more highly qualified educators for our state's classrooms." Students who meet the requirements of the agreement will be guaranteed admission to Lander and will receive priority acceptance. Prior to transferring to Lander, students will complete their A.A.S. in Early Care and Education at FDTC. At Lander, they will complete their BS in Early Childhood Education, which will lead to teacher certification in pre-kindergarten through third grade. Lander's B.S. in Early Childhood Education program is available in person and online.

"This transfer agreement comes at a critical time for our state, as South Carolina faces an ongoing teacher shortage," said Dr. Sarah Hunt-Barron, dean of the College of Education at Lander University. "We are pleased to give students pursuing an A.A.S. in Early Care and Education a definitive path to becoming certified classroom teachers and uphold our commitment to preparing educators for our state." FDTC President Dr. Jermaine Ford said there is a need for more teachers within South Carolina and that, "we are pleased students are pursuing an A.A.S. in Early Care and Education because it is a direct pathway to becoming a certified teacher."

"With this agreement, we continue to provide our students post-graduate success leading to a family-sustaining wage," said Ford. "Partnerships like this allow us to provide students with vitally important pathways to continue their career advancement. We couldn't be happier to partner with Lander University and provide more opportunities for our students to succeed."

"Our focus is opening the door to possibilities for students by developing caring teachers who love South Carolina and the Pee Dee region," said FDTC Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Luegina Mounfield. "Teachers who want to build our communities extends the work of Florence-Darlington Technical College to the next generation. Teachers who want to live and work in their home communities are role models for the future. We appreciate the partnership with Lander University."

This transfer partnership is only the latest in a series of partnerships between Lander University and South Carolina's technical colleges.

To learn more about transferring to Lander or to apply now, please visit www.lander.edu/transfer.

This transfer partnership is the second early childhood agreement that FDTC has signed since November 2023.

Students can begin taking advantage of this opportunity immediately. Anyone who is interested in beginning their career journeys in one of these programs should contact FDTC's Admissions office at: Phone: 843-661-8289 Text: 843-351-1940 or Email: admissions@fdtc.edu.

ABOUT FLORENCE-DARLINGTON TECHNICAL COLLEGE:

Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) has provided affordable technical education to many thousands of Pee Dee-area students since 1963. The college strives for student success and workforce development while providing its students with a high-quality education that leads to post-graduate success and little to no debt. FDTC currently enrolls more than 3,000 curriculum students and nearly 3,500 noncredit students annually through the college's Corporate and Workforce Development division. Additionally, the college is home to the Southeastern Institute of Manufacturing and Technology (SiMT). For more information, visit www.fdtc.edu.

ABOUT LANDER UNIVERSITY:

Founded in 1872, Lander University is a co-educational, state-assisted, four-year university serving over 4,300 students and offering more than 90 areas of study in the liberal arts and sciences. Located in Uptown Greenwood, the university has a long-standing tradition of providing a challenging, enriching education that prepares graduates to lead lives of meaningful activity, of personal satisfaction and of service to others. Learn more at www.lander.edu, or call toll free 1-800-4-LANDER. Facebook: facebook.com/followlander | Twitter: follow_lander Instagram: @landeruniversity

FDTC NAMES CHEEK AS NEW VP OF FINANCE & ADMINISTRATION



Dr. Debbie Cheek

Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) has appointed Dr. Debbie Cheek as the college's new vice president of Finance and Administration.

"It's an exciting time at Florence-Darlington Technical College and I am thrilled to be selected as part of this administration with a new vision for the college," Cheek said. "I look forward to continuing our work as a team and creating an environment that drives student success and workforce development opportunities."

Cheek has served in this role as the interim vice president of Business Affairs for the past two years and has worked at the

college as its associate vice president for finance for the past five years.

"Dr. Cheek is a valued colleague, committed to the vision of student success and workforce development, and driven to fulfill our mission as a comprehensive technical college," FDTC President Dr. Jermaine Ford said. "We have been walking this journey at Florence-Darlington Technical College together since my start, and her work directly has impacted us, turning the college around from financially unstable to financially stable. It is a new day at Florence-Darlington Technical College, and we are moving forward."

Cheek has worked in higher education since 2003. After more than five years working in the private sector, she took over as vice president for Business and Finance at Northeastern Technical College. She served in that role until 2019, when she joined FDTC.

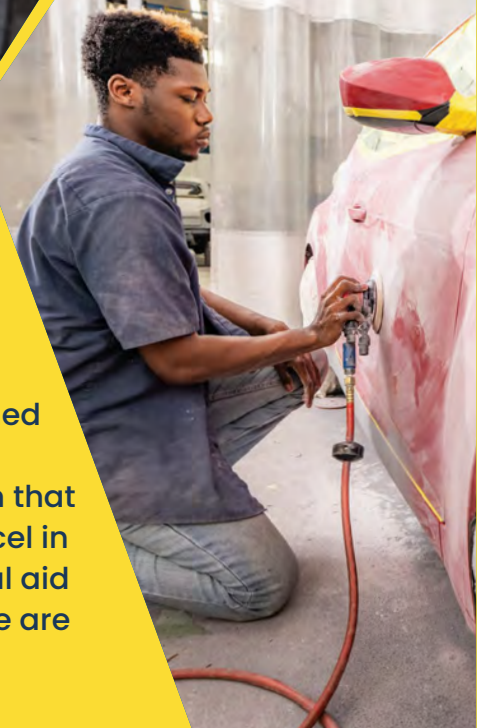
She received her bachelor's degree in business administration at Coker College, a master's degree in business administration at Francis Marion University, and her doctorate in Higher Education Leadership at Northcentral University.

Cheek officially moved into this position on February 1.



Consider... what's next? We'll help you get there.

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HOW TO MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION WORK FOR YOU



(BPT) - Between work, family, and other obligations, the idea of going back to college can seem challenging. Fortunately, there are several ways you can make today's technology, your life experience, your employer, and flexible educational opportunities work for you.

To help you get started, here are some ways to maximize your time, energy, and financial investment so that you can reach your educational goals and cross that resolution off your list.

Set your own pace and schedule.

These days, there are more available options than ever before to access highly flexible educational opportunities. Many higher education institutions offer online/remote or hybrid classes that make it easier to fit them into your busy schedule.

When researching opportunities, ask about specifics of different learning modalities, such as whether remote/online classes are synchronous (you attend remotely but at set times, making it easier to engage in real-time interaction) or asynchronous (you can engage with class materials on your own timetable), or how often hybrid classes expect you to participate in person, and where.

Consider a school that offers competency-based education (CBE) as an effective way to meet your educational needs more efficiently. Through this flexible learning model, you earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment. Look for a program that is also

designed to develop and measure high-demand skills. This will help you demonstrate your capabilities to employers.

Get credit for previous experience!

Just because you have been out of school for a while does not mean you have stopped learning. Many schools today acknowledge the value of adult learners' experience by offering credit for prior learning (CPL) or experiential learning opportunities, which grant college credit for skills and knowledge you have gained outside of school, such as during military service.

It is always worth asking a higher learning institution what their CPL policies are and what kind of assessment is required to be granted college credit. Assessments could include (but are not limited to) examinations, certifications, licenses or a review of a portfolio of your work. CPL is one effective way to help you save time, money, and effort when you are working toward a degree program.

Seek flexible, affordable online general education courses!

On the road to earning an undergraduate degree, virtually every college or university requires certain general education courses. These classes are typically the necessary prerequisites for taking more advanced courses in any field of study as you work toward a degree. They include introductory classes in a variety of subjects, including English, composition, math, science, history, and more.

If you still need to complete some of these crucial classes, there are affordable options that allow you to do so at your own pace.

This option provides an affordable alternative pathway to completing general education requirements, offering an integrated experience for students. This means your Sophia subscription includes all your course materials and learning coaches. Visit [Sophia.org](https://www.sophia.org) to learn more about flexible options for completing general education courses.

Using these tips, you can start exploring the possibilities for achieving your educational goals, no matter where you are in your educational journey.



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FOUR NEW PRINCIPALS ANNOUNCED FOR FLORENCE 1 SCHOOLS FOR THE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR

Florence 1 Schools has announced the appointment of four new principals for the upcoming school year. The four vacancies were created when three long-time principals announced their retirement, all effective at the end of the current school year.

"I cannot overstate the impact these principals have had in this district," said Superintendent Richard O'Malley. "They have led with excellence and that has been reflected in their schools and the communities they serve. We thank them for their service and wish them all well in their retirement."

Debbie Cribb is retiring after 40 years in Florence 1. For the 2023-2024 school year, she served as principal of McLaurin Elementary

School and Lester Elementary School, which together house the district's 3K-fifth grade Montessori Program.

Elizabeth Jackson is retiring as principal of Timrod Elementary School, where she has served in a variety of positions for more than 30 years.

After a decade of leading the bulldogs, Tara Newton will be retiring from Briggs Elementary School.

For the 2024-2025 school year, three current assistant principals will become lead principals while one new principal will join the district from neighboring Darlington County.

Amy Williams worked at McLaurin in a variety of positions since 1999 before becoming the assistant principal for Lester's Montessori program in the 2023-2024 school year. She will return to McLaurin next school year as principal. Williams has a Bachelor's degree in Special Education from Presbyterian College as well as a Master's Degree in Education - Curriculum and Instruction from Lesley University and an Educational Leadership Degree from Coastal Carolina. She is trained in both Primary and Lower Elementary Montessori.



"I'm honored, excited, and looking forward to serving as the principal of McLaurin next year," Williams said. "I believe in the importance of early childhood education and look forward to continuing the legacy we have built at McLaurin."

The new leader of the bulldog pack at Briggs will be **Kathryn Abbott**, currently the principal of Carolina Elementary School in Darlington County. Abbott has vast educational experience having served as an elementary school teacher, assistant administrator of Curriculum, Literacy Coach and principal. She has a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from the University of South Carolina as well as a Master's of Education in Language and Literacy, and a Master's of Education in Educational Leadership and Policies.



"I am honored to be named the principal at Briggs Elementary School and to join its outstanding school community," Abbott said. "I look forward to working with all stakeholders to continue the tradition of excellence at Briggs. Go Bulldogs!"

Talia Dukes will be at the helm at Lester Elementary School for the 2024-2025 school year as they enter their second year as the district's third-fifth grade Montessori school. She has served as an assistant principal since 2015, most recently at Sneed Middle School. Dukes has a bachelor's degree in Biology from Francis Marion University as well as a master's degree in Education -Curriculum and Instruction from University of Phoenix and a master's degree in Education Administration from Grand Canyon University.



"I am thankful and proud to become a part of the Lester family," Dukes said. "I look forward to continuing the legacy of being PAWSITIVELY the best!"

Timrod's new principal, **Jill Fitzkee**, has served at several schools in Florence 1 since joining the district in 1998. She was most recently serving as assistant principal at Savannah Grove Elementary School. Fitzkee has a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and a master's of Education in Leadership and Human Development from George Mason University.



"I am humbled and honored to be chosen to be a part of the Timrod Elementary School community," Fitzkee said. "I look forward to building lasting relationships with staff, students, and community members."

Michelle Wynn, Florence 1's assistant superintendent of Elementary Education, said that she is excited for the 2024-2025 school year and the changes it will bring.

"We have a strong team of principals in our elementary schools," Wynn said. "I look forward to working with our four new principals as they build upon the educational foundation at these schools and implement the new ideas they have to grow and create new opportunities for our students."


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MCSO RECEIVES \$500,000 FROM MARION COUNTY HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION

Submitted by Dr. Kandace Bethea, superintendent



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION- The Marion County School District is excited to announce the recent achievement of securing a grant from the Marion County Healthcare Foundation, which marked a significant milestone in advancing student education quality for Marion County students. The foundation’s mission is to develop partnerships and fund innovative projects that will increase the health and prosperity for residents of Marion County. They do this by focusing on funding in the areas of access to quality healthcare, public education, and workforce and economic development.

Marion County School District will receive a generous allocation of \$500,000 over the next four years. This grant presents a golden opportunity to make a substantial positive impact. The funding opens doors for educators, administrators, and staff to explore and implement innovative teaching methodologies aligned with the district’s Strategic Plan. Beyond financial support, the grant empowers educators to turn their creative visions into reality, fostering a culture of innovation and excellence within the district.

Marion County School District Superintendent Dr. Kandace Bethea’s enthusiasm reflects the widespread excitement within the district. “This grant acts more of an opportunity for our teachers to be able to expand some of those innovative opportunities in their classrooms. Teachers that wanted to do things, but didn’t necessarily have the funds to do them,” shares Dr. Bethea. With the grant funds, teachers will now have the means to breathe life into initiatives that were once confined to paper, promising a bright future for education in Marion County. Marion County Healthcare



The executive director of the Marion County Healthcare Foundation, Pete Mazzaroni, and board members present a \$500,000 check to the Marion County School District Board of Trustees and superintendent, Dr. Kandace Bethea.

Foundation’s commitment to education will undoubtedly leave a lasting imprint on teachers, students, and the community. This collaboration between educational institutions and community foundations underscores a shared dedication to enhancing learning experiences.

The competitive nature of the grant process, with over 15 submissions, speaks volumes about the district’s appetite for innovation. The anticipation of grant awards around the beginning of April signifies tangible progress toward realizing innovative ideas. The Marion County School District’s receipt of this grant highlights the collective commitment to providing exceptional education. Thanks to the support of the Marion County Healthcare Foundation, Marion County’s youth will benefit from a dynamic and innovative learning environment.



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CLAFLIN RECEIVES \$1.8M GRANT

Articles submitted by J. Craig Cotton, director of public relations Office of Communications and Marketing



ORANGEBURG—Clafin University received a \$1.8 million grant for its CU-DEEP Wellness Initiative, which focuses on specific areas of health and wellness that are often areas of concern in rural, minority communities. The university was among the first selected to participate in the South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare’s recent celebration of the virtual launch of the South Carolina Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Health Discovery Program.

The CU-DEEP Wellness Initiative has four pillars of health and wellness: dietary health, economic health, emotional health and physical health. These pillars include three signature programs and four secondary activities that focus on each pillar of health and wellness. Each pillar is a health and wellness priority for each of the programs and activities in this initiative. Each participating university will promote and reduce health disparities while giving students real-world experience.

SC HBCU Health Discovery Program is designed to utilize the talent and perspectives of (HBCUs) to promote health and reduce health disparities. The program is a collaboration that acknowledges the uniqueness of HBCUs to improve health outcomes in South Carolina.

“As an alumna of an HBCU, I understood the prominence of these institutions in their communities and their impact on their students,” said CRPH Program Manager and HBCU Health Discovery Program Lead Andrea Mitchell. “It is important to have a program that uses these features in a way that could directly address the health needs of their students and the surrounding communities in a way that brings innovation that only HBCUs can.”

Founded in 1869, Clafin University is the oldest HBCU in South Carolina and the state’s first university to admit all students regardless of ethnic origin, gender, race or religion. Clafin has been ranked a Top 10 Best HBCU by U.S. News and World Report for 13 consecutive years.

“Clafin’s leadership in seeking solutions to health disparities is consistent with our commitment to promoting social, economic and political empowerment throughout the campus community, Orangeburg County and other rural areas within our region,” said Clafin President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack. “Inequities in these intrinsic values contribute to health disparities in marginalized communities.

A distinctive feature of the CU-DEEP Wellness Initiative will be the Therapeutic Adventure Recreation Program (TARP), which was developed to support the principles of the initiative that uses human-powered activities in the wilderness to facilitate individual and group growth and development. Participants in this program will develop technical and higher-level personal skills in leadership, facilitation, reflection and group dynamics that will bolster each component of CU-DEEP.

“The program has tremendous potential for bridging the ‘nature gap’ and attracting more diversity in participation and leadership in the outdoor recreation industry,” Warmack said.

The HBCU Health Discovery initiative will have collaborative leadership guided by a steering committee comprised of student ambassadors, rural health experts, representatives from the partnering universities and legislative representatives. This program will underscore the pivotal role HBCUs play in shaping the health landscape for their communities.

“What is most exciting about the SC HBCU Health Discovery program is that it is developed and designed by the HBCU community with student engagement,” said CRPH Associate Director Michele Stanek. “The communities are designing programs that positively impact health, not only for their campus community, but for the larger community in which they reside. At the same time, it is developing and training student ambassadors to lead efforts to reduce health inequities and disparities for all of South Carolina.”

The program’s commitment to preparing and inspiring the next generation of healthcare leaders is particularly significant for rural healthcare.

CLAFLIN PANTHERS REPEAT AS CIAA CHAMPIONS



Men’s-indoor-track-and-field-champions-2024-CIAA

WINSTON-SALEM, NC - For the second straight season, the Clafin Panthers claimed the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Men’s Indoor Track & Field Championship. The Panthers totaled 131 points to pull away for their second consecutive conference championship.

The Panthers dominated long sprints and middle-distance to power their way to the championship. The team scored 19 points in the men’s 800m run where senior Zion Murry took the win with a 1:55.29, while sophomore Jakarriez Sanders added a fourth-place finish with 1:57.70, and fellow sophomore Reginald Gore added a 1:58.26. The team also totaled 17 points in the men’s 400m run where senior Chandar Anderson took first place with a 48.92, while freshman Marcus Thomason added a fifth-place finish with a 50.78, and Murry added a fifth-place finish with a 59.21. The sophomore duo Jonathan Flemister and Dezmond McDonald added 14 points in the men’s 200m dash. Flemister took first place in the event with a 21.73, and McDonald placed fifth with a 22.61. The Panthers also picked up 14 points in the men’s mile run with Sanders placing second with a 4:35.96 while Gore added a third-place finish at a close 4:35.97. The Panthers’ 4x400m relay also had a great showing with a second-place finish at 3:19.32.

The Panthers also had some great performances in the field events. Clafin junior Jacolbi Morgan took a pair of first- place finishes at the meet. He won the men’s high jump with a (2.03m) jump and he also won the men’s triple jump with a (14.93m) jump.

The win gives the Panthers their second straight CIAA men’s indoor track and field championship. The team will turn their attentions to the national stage where Murry and the Panthers’ 4x400m relay team will seek to improve their standings as NCAA Division II provisional qualifiers.

After leading the Panthers to the conference championship, Clafin men’s track & field head coach Malcolm Watts was named the 2023-24 Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Men’s Indoor Track and Field Coach of the Year. The honors did not stop there as the Panthers also won the Dr. Freddie Vaughn’s Highest Team Academic Award.

For more information on Panther’s track and field, contact the Clafin University Office of Athletics Media Relations at (803) 535-5548 or visit www.athletics.clafin.edu.

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY WELCOMES CHAPPELL



Mrs. Barbara Chappell, acting vice president of the Clafin University Division of Institutional Advancement

ORANGEBURG—Mrs. Barbara Chappell has been appointed to serve as acting vice president of the Clafin University Division of Institutional Advancement. Previous to this appointment, she served as vice president of Development at Butler Academy, a K-12 charter school in Hartsville, SC. Chappell’s 25-year career in higher education has included leadership roles in advancement and communication at four institutions including Clafin University, Coker University, Allegheny College and the University of North Dakota. Now a member of Clafin University President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack’s cabinet, Chappell has also served as a cabinet member at Allegheny College and Coker University. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from the University of North Dakota and an Master of Science in Management and Leadership from Coker University. A national search for a permanent vice president of Institutional Advancement is underway.

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY RECEIVES MORE THAN \$1.4 MILLION

Submitted by J. Craig Cotton, director of public relations



Dr. Alison Gise Johnson

ORANGEBURG-The Mellon Foundation announced today that Claflin University was awarded \$1,489,000 to establish a Humanities Hub that will focus on place-based collaborations, embedding social justice content in the general education curriculum, and community-participatory research. Claflin's Humanities Hub will promote race/gender equity, environmental justice, and community well-being. The approach centers on recruiting and nurturing students in the humanities as scholar-activists committed to cultural preservation, solutions-oriented

research, and visionary leadership.

Claflin was one of 10 liberal arts colleges/universities that received grants totaling more than \$14 million as part of Humanities for All Times, a Mellon Foundation humanities-based education initiative supporting newly developed curricula that both instruct future visionaries and the next generation of social justice leaders in methods of humanities practice and demonstrate those methods' relevance to broader social justice pursuits. The Mellon Foundation is the nation's largest funder of the arts, culture, and humanities.

"Historically and contemporarily, communities and society have benefited from college-age students who have served at the forefront of movements for social justice and systemic change. These students convened, collaborated, organized, and implemented student-led teach-ins and social justice actions despite local political pushback and threats of violence. "The Claflin University Humanities Hub (The CU Hub) is our investment in this legacy," said Dr. Alison Gise Johnson, associate professor of philosophy in the Department of Humanities at Claflin University. Johnson and Dr. Isaiah McGee, associate professor of music and dean of Claflin's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, are the project's co-principal investigators.

Founded in 1869, Claflin is the oldest Historically Black College in South Carolina. It was the first college/university in South Carolina to admit all students regardless of gender, ethnic origin, race, or religion. U.S. News and World Report has ranked Claflin as a Top 10 Best HBCU for 13 consecutive years.

"The objective of Humanities for All Times is two-fold," says Phillip Brian Harper, program director for Higher Learning at the Mellon Foundation. "On the one hand, it is meant to make students aware of the concrete, practical skills they can develop through humanities study. On the other, it aims to help students recognize that imagination, one of the primary foci of humanities inquiry, is essential to effective social justice work."

Initially launched in 2021 as a \$16 million initiative, Humanities for All Times awarded grants to its first cohort of twelve liberal arts colleges across the US that same year. The initiative aims to demonstrate the power of the humanities in addressing societal challenges and to ensure that students acquire the skills to diagnose the cultural conditions hindering the achievement of a fully just and equitable society while also identifying the steps necessary for change.

Of the fifty liberal arts colleges/universities invited to submit proposals for this second cohort ten institutions were selected to receive a grant of up to \$1.5 million to be used over a three-year period to support the envisioned curricular projects and help students see and experience the applicability of humanities in their real-world social justice objectives.



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STAFF MEMBERS SHINE AT EMPLOYEE APPRECIATION AND WELLNESS EVENT

Submitted by Shawnta McKenzie, Lee County School District Office of Human Resources



BISHOPVILLE-Employee appreciation is critical in creating a culture of loyalty, community and positive workplace relations. Employee recognition also has a significant impact on increasing employee retention, engagement and productivity. Lee County school district's Superintendent, Mr. Bernard McDaniel, Sr., recognized his staff's hard work, commitment and loyalty to the district during the first district-wide employee appreciation and wellness event on Friday, March 22, 2024. The event occurred at Lee Central High School and included vendors, food trucks, games and line dancing.

Middle School, Ms. Emily Nevels, second grade teacher at Lower Lee Elementary School, Ms. Quatashia Witherspoon, kindergarten teacher at West Lee Elementary School, and Ms. Jamaria Epps, first grade teacher at Lower Lee Elementary School. Ms. Jalisa Williams was recognized by WLTX-19 as the Teacher of the Week on January 24, 2024. Nevels was honored as the Lee County Chamber of Commerce Educator of the Year on March 14, 2024. Witherspoon was featured in Newsweek for her singing math lesson that went viral on TikTok. Epps completed all the requirements of the CarolinaCAP alternative certification program.

"I am intentional about making employee appreciation an integral part of our workplace culture," said McDaniel, "This event provides an opportunity to share accomplishments of our staff members that otherwise might not be known within our district community and beyond."

The event began with remarks from McDaniel followed by special presentations. The staff members visited vendor stations, ate lunch and participated in games including corn hole, hula hoop, jump rope, badminton and line dancing. At the conclusion of the event, a myriad of prizes were awarded to staff members from each school/location via drawings.

Special presentations were given to Ms. Jalisa Williams, sixth grade English teacher at Lee Central



Employee Appreciation Day, Christina Ellerbe, Olecia Barnes, Lacy Miller-Scott, 03.22.2024



Employee Appreciation - West Lee Elementary School's Staff



Employee Appreciation Day Manetswa Masuka, Helen Faulknor-Pugh



Employee Appreciation Day - N'Dejah Wright, Jamika Knox, Kenyetta Heyward



Employee Appreciation Day, Samantha Slater-Bagley, Terrijuna Graham, Alice Pugh, Rosa McPhail



Employee Appreciation Day Andrew Moses



Employee Appreciation



Employee Appreciation Witherspoon and Bradley



Employee Appreciation Day Sheryl Donnelly



Employee Appreciation Day Wanda Scarborough



Employee Appreciation Day Devon Long



Employee Appreciation Day Beverly Toney



Lee County School District Superintendent Bernard McDaniel

LIFE2 IN SOUTH CAROLINA OFFERS PROMISING PRACTICES FOR EDUCATORS

Submitted by Janice Cohen



COLUMBIA-As South Carolina's education system faces challenges related to equity, funding and teacher shortages. Strategic investments in early education, technology and community engagement can pave the way for positive change. Leveraging Innovation for Educator Excellence

(LIFE2) is a three-year, federally funded TSL grant awarded in 2021. The grant was awarded to the Midlands Community Development Corporation (MCDC), a nonprofit organization in Columbia, South Carolina, to address many of these educational challenges found in Calhoun and Orangeburg County school districts. The grant intends to improve the quality of education, elevate educator effectiveness and diversity, raise student achievement, and increase equity in learning. The grant offers credentialing and micro-credentialing through Voorhees University and is a model for new-age methodologies in reshaping South Carolina's educational system.

Dr. Lorraine Peeples, program director of the LIFE2 grant, works closely with a team of experts to provide services in the targeted areas to educators from the school district levels to principals and teachers. Mr. Darrell Jackson, Jr., executive director of the Midlands Community Development Corporation, and his team provide a support system for the direct service staff.

LIFE2 offers a multipronged approach, including funding through signing bonuses of up to \$5,000 per certified teacher in specific focus areas, training and incentive bonuses for educators who embrace technological integration such as SWIVL and SIBME, learning sessions for the faith-based community, peer review teams, civic engagement, recruitment, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) sessions and more. Ms. Jacqueline Jamison, professional learning specialist with the LIFE2 grant, hosted a DEI session on March 4, 2024, with field expert Dr. Dell N. Brabham on "Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy Training."



Call Me MiSTER Cohorts attend LIFE2 Symposium, 2023

According to the grant, one of the most significant challenges facing the American education system is recruiting and retaining qualified educators in the classroom. With a combination of recruitment strategies, retention plans and professional and personal development opportunities, the goal is to attract, retain and grow educators.

One pathway to address these challenges is the Call Me MiSTER® program. "MiSTER" is the acronym for Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models. This program is available at 65 colleges and universities in 28 states in America. In South Carolina, LIFE2 supports Call Me MiSTER at South Carolina State University (SCSU) and Morris College. Student participants are primarily selected from under-served, socio-economically disadvantaged and educationally at-risk communities. According to SCSU, since 2004, nearly 400 MiSTERS have graduated, fully certified, and entered the classroom, resulting in a 90 percent increase in Black male elementary school teachers in South Carolina! LIFE2 has supported Call Me Mister cohorts through grants, PRAXIS preparation tests, retreats and more. Mr. Roderick Cummings, program coordinator for the LIFE2 grant,



Dr. Lorraine Peeples and Ms. Jacqueline Jamison attend Voorhees College Career Fair

works closely with "The MiSTERS," saying, "LIFE2 has provided opportunities for growth, professional development, and recruitment to Call Me MiSTER cohorts; opportunities that they would not have received had it not been for the LIFE2 grant."

As LIFE2 nears the end of its third-year cycle, a promising practices summit will be held in Columbia, South Carolina for educators across the state of South Carolina, August 26-28, 2024. This summit, LIFE2: Impact and Possibilities, is being organized to share the tenets of the grant that can be a model for other counties.

For more information on the LIFE@ grant, go to LIFE2SC.org or Midlandscdc.org

THE FRIENDS OF TIMMONSVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY HONORS TOP EDUCATORS

Submitted by the Friends of Timmonsville Public Library



Pictured left to right: Denise Matthews (Greenwood); Lenora Rivers-Davis (Wilson); Sonya Graves, (Lucy T. Davis); Sophia Frierson, (Greenwood); Claire Smith (South Florence); Dr. James Sinkler (West Florence) and Josey Little (Carver). Pictured on the second row are Dr. Adrian Wilkins (South Florence), Patrick McKnight (Brockington) and Sean Armstrong (South Florence). Not pictured are Shaquia Johnson (Moore), Wanda Parrott (Brockington,) and Jackie Weaver (Williams).

On March 2, 2024, The Friends of the Timmonsville Public Library held its second Annual African American Educator Awards, in which 13 outstanding educators and administrators were selected from the Florence 1 School District. This program serves to recognize the vital role African American educators play in shaping the lives and futures of children in the Florence County area. It also serves to celebrate educators and administrators who are making a difference by encouraging, mentoring, uplifting, empowering and being a positive influence in the lives of students of color.

Hosted by Pam "The Voice" Little-McDaniel with Elizabeth Rhue, vice president of Global Environmental, Sustainability & Technical Services for Sonoco, serving as the keynote speaker, this inaugural event was held at the Baker Memorial Library in Timmonsville, SC, and sponsored by Sonoco, RedSilk Media Group, At You Socials, Food Lion, Panera Bread and Lula's Coffee Co.

Congratulations to the 2024-2025 Honorees for the second Annual African American Educator Awards. Your tremendous dedication to the educational future of our students has not gone unnoticed. Your contributions to simplifying complex concepts, making abstract concepts accessible and exposing students to bold and bright ideas have been truly remarkable. Your dedication to our students and the community is highly appreciated.

HGTC NAMES SCTEA EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS 2024

Articles submitted by HGTC



Ann Daniels



Erin Ivey



Bobbi Jo Oxendine

CONWAY-Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) is pleased to announce three of its employees have been selected as the South Carolina Technical Education Association's (SCTEA) "Educators of the Year."

The three will be recognized along with their colleagues from other South Carolina technical colleges at SCTEA's annual conference on February 15-17, 2024, where they will receive a certificate and a cash award.

The purpose of the association's Educator of the Year Awards is to provide annual recognition for outstanding service and achievement in the categories of administrator/manager, faculty/teaching and staff in the South Carolina Technical College System.

HGTC's Educator of the Year Award winners recognized at the SCTEA Conference include:

- Ann Daniels, assistant vice president, Academic Affairs & Dean, Nursing & Health Sciences, in the administrator/manager category,
- Erin Ivey, assistant chair and professor – Surgical Technology, in the faculty/teaching category, and
- Bobbi Jo Oxendine, assistant director for human resources, in the staff category.

The award recipients were nominated by their peers for superior leadership in their departments, quality work ethic and community involvement.

"HGTC is proud of the outstanding service and achievements of these special individuals. Their dedication to our college is reflected in the unique vote of confidence of their peers," said HGTC President Marilyn Murphy Fore. "We are extremely blessed to have employees whose professionalism is second to none in higher education. Our faculty and staff are working harder than ever to serve our students and this community."

HGTC RECEIVES GRANT FROM THE BLUECROSS® BLUESHIELD® SOUTH CAROLINA



HGTC Community Dental Clinic

CONWAY— Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) is thrilled to announce it has been awarded a grant from the BlueCross® BlueShield® of South Carolina Foundation to upgrade the Dental Sciences

program's lab equipment. The grant, titled, "Dental Sciences Lab Equipment," will enhance learning outcomes and skill development for dental assisting and dental hygiene students, ultimately addressing the oral health needs of the region.

The grant, awarded by the foundation, will fund the upgrade of dental science labs at HGTC. The project, slated to begin in January 2024, and conclude on December 31, 2024, aims to alleviate chronic barriers to oral health for vulnerable residents.

Horry and Georgetown counties face significant challenges in oral health, with a dental workforce shortage further exacerbating the issue. As the region's primary provider of postsecondary health and dental sciences training, HGTC plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges. The upgrade of dental labs will enhance student learning outcomes, promote retention, and produce highly trained graduates to fill the regional dental workforce shortage.

The grant will be used to upgrade dental science labs, focusing on digital radiography and clinical care preparation. Digital sensors and a dental manikin simulator will be added to provide students with hands-on experience and clinical competency. These enhancements will strengthen clinical skill sets, promote student retention, and better prepare graduates for the workforce.

The grant will directly benefit dental sciences students, of whom 54 percent are low-income, 38 percent are minorities, and 35 percent are first-generation college students. These upgrades align with the foundation's oral health priorities and will contribute to the quality dental workforce needed to improve care outcomes in the region.

For more information about the Associate in Applied Science Degree in Dental Sciences, contact Professor Michelle Meeker at michelle.meeker@hgtc.edu or 843-839-1091.

For more information about applying, enrolling and registering at HGTC, call 843-347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu.

The BlueCross® BlueShield® of South Carolina Foundation is an independent licensee of the BlueCross® BlueShield® Association.

HGTC AND ATLANTIC COLLEGIATE ACADEMY FORM PARTNERSHIP



(left to right) Mr. Michael Lorenz, Atlantic Collegiate Academy principal Dr. Candace Howell, HGTC assistant vice president & Dean - School of Arts & Science

CONWAY – Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) and Atlantic Collegiate Academy (ACA) have formalized a partnership aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for high school students through dual enrollment programs. The memorandum of agreement signed between HGTC and ACA marks a significant milestone in fostering academic growth and

success for students in Horry and Georgetown counties.

Dual enrollment offers high school students the unique opportunity to enroll in college-level courses while simultaneously earning both high school and college credits. Under this agreement, qualifying students from ACA will have access to HGTC's diverse range of courses, which can be completed through online delivery, in-person classes at HGTC campuses or on the ACA campus itself.

"At HGTC, we are committed to providing accessible and high-quality education to our community," stated Dr. Candace Howell, HGTC assistant vice president & dean - School of Arts & Science. "This partnership with

ACA aligns perfectly with our mission, enabling students to jumpstart their college education while still in high school."

"We are thrilled to partner with HGTC in providing our students with expanded educational opportunities," said Michael Lorenz, principal at ACA. "This collaboration empowers our students to excel academically and prepares them for success beyond high school."

Dual enrollment not only enriches students' academic experiences but also strengthens their pathways to higher education and future career endeavors. By fostering collaboration between secondary and post-secondary institutions, HGTC and ACA are paving the way for a brighter future for the youth of Horry and Georgetown counties.

Provisions for the agreement include adhering to HGTC's rigorous academic standards, ensuring that students receive instruction of the highest quality. ACA has committed to a collaboration with HGTC's Dual Enrollment staff to identify eligible students, who must meet HGTC's admissions requirements. The agreement will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure its continued effectiveness.

For more information about dual enrollment opportunities at HGTC, please contact Hope Wofford, HGTC Dual Enrollment director, at hope.wofford@hgtc.edu, 843-477-2097, or visit www.hgtc.edu.

For more information about applying, enrolling, and registering at HGTC, call 843-347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu.

BANK OF AMERICA GRANT BOOSTS HGTC FUNDRAISING GOAL Submitted by HGTC



Pictured left to right: Kelly Tyler, president, Bank of America Myrtle Beach; Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, HGTC president; Shannon Detzler, HGTC Foundation president & CEO; Dr. Jennifer Wilbanks, HGTC executive vice president for Academic and Workforce Development; Cecilia Evans, market Executive, Bank of America Myrtle Beach

MYRTLE BEACH—Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) takes a significant step forward in realizing its vision for a new, world-class Nursing and Health Sciences Institute with the help of a \$250,000 grant from Bank of America. This generous contribution marks a pivotal moment in HGTC’s ongoing capital campaign, to raise \$2 million to support the construction and expansion of the institute, which is part of a larger \$15 million project. The grant from Bank of America will accelerate progress toward expanding physical facilities and attracting new students to its Nursing and Health Sciences programs, preparing students for success in the rapidly evolving health care sector.

The project scope encompasses the renovation of 14,122 square feet of existing space and the addition of 10,000 square feet through the construction of a second floor inside the existing structure. With Bank of America’s support, HGTC aims to double its enrollment in health science programs, bolster the health care workforce pipeline, provide students with invaluable clinical rotations and internships, introduce new

health care science programs and offer professional development opportunities for our health care partners.

“We are immensely grateful to Bank of America for their generous grant, which is instrumental in advancing our mission to provide opportunities in the health care sector,” said Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, president, Horry-Georgetown Technical College. “This partnership exemplifies the transformative impact that strategic collaborations can have on our community, and we are excited to continue working together to empower our students and build a stronger, healthier future.”

The grant is part of Bank of America’s longstanding commitment to strengthen coastal South Carolina communities by addressing key issues fundamental to economic opportunity and social progress. This announcement is the latest in a series of investments that Bank of America has made in HGTC in recent years, including support of HGTC’s Career Training programs and Emergency Scholarship Fund.

“We support Horry-Georgetown Technical College’s mission to provide an accessible, affordable, high-quality, collegiate education and workforce development, which is why we directed this strategic philanthropic investment to help build stronger communities,” said Kelly Tyler, president, Bank of America Myrtle Beach. “This grant is an acknowledgement of the impact HGTC has on our community and exemplifies Bank of America’s efforts to partner and invest in organizations that support community development and share our commitment to creating economic opportunity for the people of Horry and surrounding counties.”

HGTC has established itself as the higher education center of innovation and economic progress in the region. As the community identifies needs, HGTC and its partners find solutions. Similarly, Bank of America looks to address local initiatives through its commitment to nonprofit partners, as well as investments to help finance small businesses, affordable housing and other economic revitalization projects benefiting communities throughout the Horry County region.



JOIN OUR TEAM.

As Gators, we believe we’re at our strongest when we support and celebrate our similarities as well as our differences. That’s why diversity and inclusion are more than buzzwords at HGTC. It’s about communities and individuals—students, staff, and professors who combine their own unique identities and views by working together.

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LOWRY NAMED DEAN OF FMU'S SCHOOL OF EDUCATION Articles submitted by FMU



Dr. Erik Lowry

Francis Marion University (FMU) has named Dr. Erik Lowry, a highly respected educator, as the dean of its School of Education.

Lowry has been a faculty member at FMU since 2012. He began his career as an elementary school teacher before serving as an assistant principal and principal at schools throughout the region. He was also assistant superintendent for human resources in Florence School District One for six years.

Lowry received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Francis Marion and a Master of Education in Educational

Administration, as well as a specialist and doctor of philosophy degree in educational leadership and policy from the University of South Carolina. Dr. Fred Carter, president of Francis Marion, says the School of Education will benefit from Lowry's leadership.

"Erik has been a dedicated member of the faculty of FMU for over a decade," says Carter. "He is an exceptional educator and an adept administrator, who is widely known and respected throughout the state's education community. He will do a fine job leading our School of Education for years to come. We are appreciative of the search committee's efforts in recommending someone of Erik's caliber."

Dr. Alissa Wartens, provost, echoed Carter's remarks.

"Erik has been an integral part of the faculty of the School of Education since he began his tenure here in 2012," said Wartens. "In addition to teaching, he has served on numerous committees and in the faculty senate, been co-director of FMU's Teaching Fellows Program, mentor for the Center of Excellence for Teacher Retention and Induction in the Pee Dee and provided staff development in schools throughout the region."

"I am very excited to continue working with my colleagues as dean of the School of Education," says Lowry. "We have so many exciting things happening, from our newest program in Autism Studies to the opening of our building this fall. Our mission in the School of Education is to prepare caring and competent teachers, and I look forward to continuing that tradition."

PUBLIC TRAILS AND FISHING AREA OPENS AT THE FMU FRESHWATER ECOLOGY COMPLEX



New trails and a fishing area at the Francis Marion University (FMU) Freshwater Ecology Complex are open to the public. The public trails and fishing access area will be open every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from sunrise to sunset, except on university holidays. They are closed Monday through Thursday for educational and research purposes.

There are three trails at the complex: the Overlook Trail, the Forest Trail and the Fishing Trail. The Overlook Trail is a short, crushed gravel trail that winds through a mixed-hardwood forest of oak, hickory and pines. The trail ends at an observation deck that provides views of the drop-off into Backswamp. The Forest Loop Trail is a .41-mile traditional dirt trail that goes through the woods before coming back to the main entrance road. The Fishing Trail is also a traditional dirt trail that leads to a cleared shoreline that provides the public with fishing access at the lake.

Fishing is open to the public at the designated public access fishing area on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from sunrise to sunset. To fish on the lake, anglers must have a valid SC freshwater fishing license and complete the FMU fishing registration. Registration cards are available online as well as onsite at the trailhead kiosk.

Anglers must also complete a creel survey card after fishing. Creel survey cards are also available online and at the trailhead kiosk. Francis Marion students use the lake as a living laboratory. The creel survey cards are used by students studying fisheries management as they conduct periodic stock assessments.

The Freshwater Ecology Complex is located at 3742 N. Williston Road. Note that pets are not permitted, except for service animals. Hunting, swimming and boating are not allowed on the premises.

FMU AFRICAN AMERICAN FACULTY AND STAFF COALITION CELEBRATES 23RD ANNUAL GALA



Dr. Christopher Barton, pictured right

Dr. Christopher Barton, associate professor of archaeology at Francis Marion University (FMU), received the FMU African American Faculty and Staff Coalition's Diversity Award at the organization's 23rd annual scholarship reception held at the FMU Performing Arts Center Thursday night.

Barton joined the faculty of Francis Marion in 2017. He is a historical archaeologist who specializes in the archaeology of class, gender and race. His work

is focused on developing collaborative projects in which the public and students work together to uncover the past. Barton has authored and co-authored a host of peer-reviewed works, including his book, *Historical Radicalized Toys in the United States* (Routledge, 2016).

The AAFSC Diversity Award is given annually by the Coalition to highlight the work of individuals who are dedicated to celebrating diversity and inclusiveness at FMU and beyond.

Mayor Teresa Myers Ervin served as the keynote speaker for the evening. She also received the Coalition's "Together We Can" award

in recognition of her civic involvement. Ervin, a native of Florence, earned an associate degree in nursing from Florence-Darlington Technical College and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Francis Marion University. She also received an Honorary Doctorate of Humanities degree from FMU. She is currently employed at McLeod as a registered nurse and holds a specialty certification in the Neonatal Resuscitation Program. In November 2020, she made history, becoming the first female and African American elected mayor of Florence. As mayor, she works to procure funding for Florence's downtown and community development, expanding green city initiatives and developing new job sources to produce opportunities for business and employment.

In his remarks, FMU President Fred Carter praised the Coalition's stellar work in raising scholarship money for deserving students over the past two decades. He also announced that an additional scholarship will be funded for the YGB Student Choir as well as a new endowed scholarship named in honor of Vashon Brown, a longtime employee of the university and a leader in the Coalition. Brown currently serves as director of network operations and systems at FMU.

The AAFSC was founded at FMU in 1995 to enhance and stimulate cultural awareness and to promote professional development and welfare among faculty, staff and students.

Dr. Todd Couch, assistant professor of sociology, is the current president of the AAFSC.

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FMU HONORS NOTWORTHY ALUMNI AT AWARDS CEREMONY Submitted by FMU



Pictured left to right: Tyler Pate ('14) - Benjamin Wall Ingram III Young Alumnus Award (Tyler's brother Jay accepted the award on his behalf), Dr. Philip Fulmer ('89) - Professional Industry Award in Natural & Behavioral Sciences, John Odorisio ('83) - Professional Industry Award in Business & Industry, Dr. Harrell Docherty ('89) - Professional Industry Award in Medical & Health Sciences, Dr. Shirley Bausmith ('91, '94) - 2024 Outstanding Alumnus Award

Francis Marion University (FMU) honored five distinguished alumni at its annual Alumni Awards Ceremony on Thursday, March 7, at the FMU Performing Arts Center.

Dr. Shirley Bausmith ('91, '94) was recognized as the university's 2024 Outstanding Alumnus. Bausmith received her undergraduate degree in elementary education from FMU in 1991 and a master's of education with an add-on certification in learning disabilities in 1994. In December 2000, she received her Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of South Carolina. She joined the faculty of Francis Marion in 2003 as an assistant professor in the School of Education. During her tenure at the university, she served as coordinator of the Learning Disabilities Program, Center Director for Project CREATE, and dean of the School of Education. She retired as dean in 2017. Bausmith is actively involved on the FMU Alumni Advisory Board and the past president's Alumni Board.

Tyler Pate ('14) received the Benjamin Wall Ingram III Young Alumnus Award. Pate's artistic talents flourished at Francis Marion University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in visual communication with a minor in art history. Today, he resides in Los Angeles, California, where he works

as a full-time art director, developing and creating consumer product applications for beloved Nickelodeon properties such as SpongeBob SquarePants, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Avatar: The Last Airbender and Garfield.

Dr. Philip Fulmer ('89) was awarded the Professional Industry Award in Natural & Behavioral Sciences. Fulmer completed an undergraduate degree in health physics from Francis Marion before continuing to Texas A&M University on a full fellowship. After many years working for a consulting firm, Fulmer and his wife returned to the Pee Dee region to pastor a church in Marion. Fulmer began teaching part-time for FMU in 2002, and eventually became a full-time professor of physics.

John Odorisio ('83) received the Professional Industry Award in Business & Industry. Odorisio graduated from FMU with a degree in business administration and went on to earn his master's in business administration with a minor in international business from Chicago's St. Xavier University in 1999. In 2021, he concluded a 37-year career with Manheim Automobile Auctions, a subsidiary of Cox Enterprises Inc., Atlanta, GA. Odorisio served the industry over the years in various committees and had the distinctive honor of being named president of both the Midwest and Eastern Zones for the National Automobile Auction Association.

Dr. Harrell Docherty ('89) was awarded the Professional Industry Award in Medical & Health Sciences. Docherty graduated from FMU with a degree in biology. He later went on to graduate from the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston with a doctor of medicine degree. Docherty completed his residency in internal medicine and fellowship in rheumatology at the University of Tennessee - Memphis. Since 2016, the Docherty's have been involved with Kidz Konekt 4 Jesus ministry in Belize, participating in medical missions. Every three months, the couple travels to help provide medicine, medical care and ministry to the people in the Stann Creek district of Belize.

DCSD CELEBRATES GROUNDBREAKING

Articles submitted by Christopher McKagen, communication manager



The Darlington County School District held a ceremonial groundbreaking, at the site of the district's new Darlington-area elementary school. Pictured (from left to right) are: Cecilia Nilsson, Architect with Jumper Carter Sease; Bart Sease, project manager with EdCon Inc.; Kimberly Mason, principal of Rosenwald Elementary School; Kathryn Atkinson, principal of St. John's Elementary School; Lucas Reed, Darlington County Board of Education member; Audrey Gore, Darlington County Board of Education member; Charles Govan, Darlington County Board of Education member and Secretary; Wanda Hassler, Darlington County Board of Education member and Chair; Leigh Anne Kelley, Darlington County Board of Education member and Vice Chair; Dr. Tim Newman, DCSD superintendent.

DARLINGTON—The Darlington County School District celebrated a groundbreaking for its new Darlington-area elementary school Thursday morning during a ceremony held at the site of the new school.

Joined by the Darlington County Board of Education, district administrators, principals, project leaders and community members, Superintendent Dr. Tim Newman explained the bright vision for the new school.

"We are thrilled to begin construction on this world-class elementary school that will provide our Darlington-area children with safe, higher-quality learning spaces and opportunities," he said. "This marks a bright day in Darlington County. This will be the fourth new school we have been able to bring to our community in nearly as many years, replacing old buildings that long served their purposes."

Darlington County Board of Education Chair Wanda Hassler also spoke during the ceremony.

"Due to the outstanding fiscal management of the Darlington County Board of Education, we will fund the entire construction of this new school without raising any taxes in the district," Hassler said. "This is an incredible accomplishment for Darlington County and the future of our students."

The new school, which has not yet been named, will consolidate the student populations of Rosenwald Elementary School and St. John's Elementary School. Located at a site between North Governor Williams Highway and Leavensworth Road in Darlington, the school is expected to serve approximately 630 students with an expansion capacity of up to 800. It will open for the 2025-26 school year.

DCSD STUDENTS SIGN WITH KEY TO CAREER PAID INTERNSHIP PROGRAM



2024 Spring Intern Signing Day 1 - Several students from multiple high schools pose with school administrators during the recent Intern Signing Day held at Mayo High School for Math, Science and Technology.

The Darlington County School District (DCSD) is again celebrating its Key to Career program after 85 students recently signed up with 52 local business partners to complete paid internships this spring.

These students, who come from across the county and all the district's high schools and senior-level special programs, will spend six weeks each at their respective businesses. During the internships, students not only learn critical skills necessary to enter the workforce after high school but

also, they get a firsthand look into each industry to determine if it's a fit for them later in life.

The Key to Career program, launched in 2018, under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Tim Newman, strengthens the school district's relationship with Darlington County businesses and industries. It also shines a light on all the available workforce opportunities to keep Darlington County's students in Darlington County after graduation.

Shannon Flowers, DCSD's business engagement coordinator, leads the Key to Career program. She held the Intern Signing Day Ceremony at Mayo High School for Math, Science and Technology in February and thanked everyone involved.

"Darlington County is at the forefront of career development initiatives in the Pee Dee, and we could not be successful without dedicated industry professionals that are willing to mentor our students," she said. "From our faithful partners like Sonoco Products Company, Darlington County Sheriff's Office, and SL Barno Funeral Directors to our new partnerships with McLeod Health, MUSC Carolina's Hospital and Luxe Beauty, there are community members as dedicated to the success of our students as we are."

School career specialists and school counselors recommend the student interns, who underwent professional skills training and interviewed for available positions. The internships will take place at the employers' campuses and will help prepare the students for life after high school. This semester, Key to Career has even placed DCSD students in registered apprenticeships at McLeod Health and North Industrial Machine. The 85 students participating this semester, along with the dozens who participated last semester, brings the number of DCSD students completing internships this school year to nearly 140. That figure is up from 95 in 2022-23.

"Students in the Key to Career Internship Program come from all of our county high schools and represent myriad goals," Flowers said. "We have high-quality students that are interning in fields that require college degrees and talented students interning in career and technical fields. All of these students spend four weeks developing soft skills before they even begin interviews. We are fortunate to have students looking toward a better life for themselves and our community."

Initiatives like Key to Career highlight why DCSD is ranked number eight in South Carolina school districts for graduates who are career or college ready.

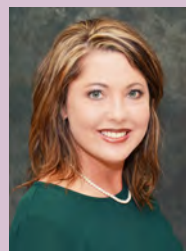
DCSD PRINCIPALS' JONES AND FRASER TO RETIRE



Nicole Jones

Nicole Jones, principal of Spaulding Middle School, and Shannon Fraser, principal of Pate Elementary School, both announced their plans to retire at the end of this school year, according to the Darlington County School District (DCSD). Both educators dedicated 30 years to the people and students of South Carolina.

Jones spent most of the past 30 years in DCSD. She spent a total of seven years with the S.C. Department of Juvenile Justice and the S.C. Department of Mental Health. She served the remaining 23 years in DCSD schools. Jones served as a school guidance counselor at Darlington High School and Spaulding Middle School before joining Darlington High School as assistant principal. In 2015, Jones became principal of Spaulding Middle School.



Shannon Fraser

Fraser joined DCSD in 1995 as a fourth-grade teacher at West Hartsville Elementary School. She continued serving for the next 20 years as an elementary classroom teacher, a small-group math teacher, a curriculum coordinator and a master teacher. In 2015, she moved to Hartsville Middle School as assistant principal. In 2018, she became principal of Pate Elementary School.

We thank Jones and Fraser for their years of dedicated service to our students and to Darlington County, and we wish them the best in the next chapters of their lives

TIPS TO HELP YOUR STUDENT THRIVE THIS YEAR



(BPT) - Do you remember how challenging school could be? As a parent, it's easy to forget that studying and homework aren't always easy. Your child needs your support and guidance to help stay on task with studies and achieve at the highest level.

Don't know where to start? Check out these top five tips to help support your student's educational journey so they can thrive academically this year.

1. Get organized

Messy and cluttered school supplies are a recipe for frustration. Encourage your students to keep notes and handouts organized to locate quickly and easily what is needed for any assignment. Encourage your student to pick out notebooks, folders and binders in favorite colors and designs. Let your student label or decorate front covers and assign a subject to each.

2. Create a consistent study routine

It may sound simple, but establishing a consistent study routine can go a long way to help your student succeed in school. Creating a routine develops time management and prioritization skills for tasks and projects.

Guide your student to set a time each day for homework and studying, for example right after school, before or after dinner or extracurriculars. If a certain time isn't working, suggest a change to

find a time and rhythm that works best.

No matter what time of day they choose, consistency is the most important aspect of a study routine. After a couple of weeks, the study routine will become a habit that provides consistency and stability so your child can focus on tasks with minimal distractions.

3. Set realistic goals

A large project or study packet can be overwhelming and discouraging for anyone, let alone a young scholar. Expecting to finish a large assignment or study for a big test in one sitting can seem daunting and cause undue anxiety.

Help your child avoid panic and stress by helping set realistic and achievable study goals. Demonstrate how to break down big assignments into smaller tasks and even create a task list to check off as each one is completed.

4. Encourage handwritten notes

Typing notes may be more convenient, but handwritten notes can give your child an academic edge. Many research studies suggest that writing on paper improves recall and allows notetakers to better understand complicated concepts.

5. Take regular breaks

Nonstop studying can quickly lead to burnout and less productivity. During study sessions, invite your child to take a break. Take a walk together, do some quick stretches, or simply ask them to step away from the study area and go outside to get some fresh air. When returning to study, your student will feel refreshed and ready to tackle the remaining assignments.

Every child is different, so collaborate with your students to find the best strategies that fit their learning style. However your child decides to study, your support is the most important tool in their arsenal. Using these five tips and fostering a positive attitude toward learning, you can help set up your child for academic success in 2024.



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SPHERION: A LOCAL STAFFING AGENCY TO MEET YOUR NEEDS By Glaciera Brown Mason



Doris & Nathaniel Lockhart, Owners

Are you a business entrepreneur, state agency or perhaps a rising star in the work world? Have you noticed a significant shift in the availability, caliber or qualifications of applicants? Are you finding it a challenge to find employees or the company with the right fit for you?

[Whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov) reports that despite the disruption in the labor force due to the nationwide pandemic, the labor market has rebounded to pre-pandemic forecasted levels. Perhaps yours is the successful business that's been able to sustain itself through all of the challenges faced today but needs human resources staff adept in DEI hiring practices, OSHA laws and the ability to ensure proper on-boarding procedures. Spherion Staffing & Recruiting can help you achieve that happy medium and create winning solutions for all your staffing needs.

Spherion Staffing & Recruiting, a local Pee Dee area staffing agency offers many advantages. Spherion promotes a professional and diverse environment, where equity, inclusion and belonging are core values. As a locally based franchise with an award-winning national reputation that offers temporary talent, temporary to hire talent and direct hire talent to companies in the area, partnering with Spherion alleviates the gap in human relations staffing for businesses. Spherion prequalifies potential applicants to meet the needs of its business clients. Likewise, they ensure the employee fix, based on the job for the client, to maximize the best symbiotic employer/employee relationships possible.

With two local franchises located in Florence and Conway, SC, Owners, Nathaniel and Doris Lockhart hold the vision and commitment to meet the needs of the community. Their mission is to be resourceful, engaged, insightful, invested and LOCAL. Registered as a small and minority business, they offer the utmost in professionalism and great customer service. "Our vision is to drive careers, grow businesses and better the community we call home," shared Co-Owner Doris Lockhart.

The Lockharts are natives of Florence, SC and active members of the Wilson High School Alumni. With a dedicated staff, Doris Lockhart manages the overall business and sales, and Co-Owner Nathaniel Lockhart manages operations. The franchise locations are 519 W. Evans Street, Florence, SC and

702-A Main Street, Conway, SC. The two have been in the staffing and recruitment business for more than 37 years. They were longtime owners of AccuStaff of Florence and Conway, SC. Their business success has evolved to today as Spherion, which is a subsidiary, Randstad. The couple shared, "the most challenging aspect of owning and operating a business is, being committed to being successful no matter the circumstances and situations that come your way." The Lockharts have demonstrated fortitude, temperament, determination and patience to overcome obstacles as servants of the community.

With advanced degrees, a background and experience in business and human resources management and proven longevity of a successful small business in two locations, the Lockharts are well versed in the needs of the business owner and potential talent hires. Personifying the skill of building relationships, Spherion is grateful for the business clients they have the pleasure to work with. Their



confidence and trust inspire Spherion staff to embrace the motto, "Let's Get To Work."

The staff enjoys the interaction with clients and potential new hires to create the perfect employer/employee match. As America's most awarded staffing and recruiting brand, Spherion is ranked as a top franchise for veterans and has the distinction of being named Forbes 2023 best professional recruiting firm and best temporary staffing firm.

The Spherion team is skilled at pre-qualifying new talent for potential employment, building relationships and staying abreast of the latest human resource regulations and trends. In addition, as part of the hiring process, Spherion administers cognitive testing of all new talent as well as conducts work site evaluations once on-boarding is completed.

Competition in business is important, healthy and welcomed, however, the benefits of partnering with Spherion are:

1. Experienced leaders in human resources and business management.
2. Proven track record in client-centered customer service.
3. Knowledgeable in HR regulations, latest trends and practices.
4. Inclusive and friendly staff.
5. Community and civic minded.

To remain relevant on a national scale,

Owners Nathaniel and Doris Lockhart participate in Spherion Annual Meetings where they network with fellow franchise owners from around the U.S., to participate in knowledge transfer and share best practices to enhance the company brand and promote business practices.

Spherion remains immersed in innovative business technology, allowing them to connect teams and support its customers. Spherion is excited about the acquisition of its latest technology, a business communications productivity software tool, Dialpad, which will enhance their ability to serve their clients and talent better.

In addition to the Lockhart's business acumen, they are civically and community minded. Their civic engagement contributes to the fabric of the community, demonstrated in present and past participation as members of local area board of directors, religious organizations, members of giving circles, masonic and Greek organizations, to name a few. This engagement builds relationships and provides exposure to the community at large.

As a part of Spherion's mission and vision, they enthusiastically support the community through the Spherion Community Giveback program, where they financially support local Florence and Conway, nonprofits, to further their missions. To date, Spherion Florence and Conway, combined have donated over \$10k on, 'Giving Tuesday,' an annual event held the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Spherion's 2023 awardees and past recipients include: My Brother's Keeper, a local shelter which collects and distributes clothes, food and care packages for seniors, men, woman and children.

The Conway nonprofit recipient, 'A Father's Place,' inspires responsible fatherhood for children and families, providing coaching in parenting skills, job preparation and other father-family support. Past awardees included, Resurrection Restoration Center for the Homeless and Help 4 KIDS.

If your business needs human resource professionals committed to employment services or if you are a potential future talent hire, searching for employment, look no further. The qualified and friendly staff at Spherion Florence and Conway are ready to assist you with all your staffing needs. Contact the Florence office at 843-664-0050, [spherion.com/Florence](https://www.spherion.com/Florence) or the Conway office at 843-438-8337, [spherion.com/Conway](https://www.spherion.com/Conway). "Let's Get to Work!"





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Za'HEIRE'S STORY By Cynthia Ford



Photos of Za'heire' and Mother Kameisha

The National Autism Association defines autism as a bio-neurological development that impacts the brain in areas of social interaction, communication and cognitive function. Even though there is no noted cure, there have evolved several types of intervention and treatment services to help individuals diagnosed with autism have productive lives with the help of their caregivers. Autism Awareness Day, celebrated annually on April 2, highlights the importance of increasing understanding and creating more inclusive environments. Community events such as Light it Up Blue serve as a kickoff to autism awareness. Light It Up Blue is a global campaign that occurs on Autism Awareness Day, encouraging everyone to wear something blue in honor of autism awareness.

Parents with children who have a diagnosis of autism are often forced to overcome barriers and seek out resources to accommodate their child's needs. Adjusting to the challenges can be difficult. However, parents serve as the first step in successful care for children with autism. Kameisha Jones, mother of three-year-old Za'heire', knows first-hand the victories and challenges of supporting a child diagnosed with autism.

Jones noticed around age one that Za'heire' would not walk flat on his feet. After researching children who tend to walk on their tiptoes, Jones noticed that autism was one of the possible reasons. At that time, she thought he was too young for the diagnosis. At age two, Za'heire' would not say words as most children his age; however, he would make cooing sounds. Jones followed up with Za'heire's doctor and was referred to a medical facility in Columbia for an evaluation. On the day of the evaluation, Jones received Za'heire's diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Jones was initially in denial about the diagnosis. She was afraid of how people would look at Za'heire' and became overprotective. His behavior and communication became more severe, and tasks became overwhelming. Jones juggled being a single mother, attending school and working. Jones notes that the struggle made her feel like a superwoman, and she eventually got back on track with her academics. A recent recognition of making the dean's list was a huge accomplishment for Jones.

Jones recalls crying and being an emotional wreck as she dealt with the initial diagnosis. She reached out to a friend who assured her that she was not alone on this journey. Jones and Za'heire' have the support of family, friends and his medical specialist. Jones received resources to read and suggestions for purchasing games that proved beneficial for Za'heire'.

Za'heire' has a monthly routine follow-up with an occupational and speech therapist. Za'heire's therapist played a huge part in connecting Jones with other resources. Jones is also actively working to enroll Za'heire' in applied behavioral analysis therapy. Jones is pleased with Za'heire's progress. He has transitioned from not wanting to attend school to now, not wanting his mother to carry him in. He is walking, singing, dancing and even doing some sign language. He can now perform tasks that were previously challenging, such as using a cup.

Jones suggests that the community unite to raise more awareness of autism and consistently support the cause financially through fundraisers. Jones believes many parents have children who have

autism but are unaware of the symptoms. "This is not a handicap, and you can live normal lives like everyone else," stated Jones.

Jones hopes to dispel myths associated with autism and expressed concern that some parents may not receive the help they need to assist their child with autism. Jones also expressed that it is hard for caregivers to maintain a job if they do not have help. "Public housing often has a waiting list. You have to juggle dealing with schools and specialists and possibly missing days from work," Jones stated. These challenges, expressed Jones, "make it difficult to put you and your child in a better position."

"I want Za'heire' to be proud of himself, believe that he can do anything in the world he puts his mind to, know that I am with him to support him with anything he needs and to strive to have a good life," stated Jones.

Jones wants the world to know that Za'heire' loves to dance, loves music and has a smile that means everything to her. "My advice for parents who have received a diagnosis of autism for their child is that it is okay to be sad, the diagnosis is not the end of the world, consistently support your child, and it is okay not to be okay some days," stated Jones.

KYLE FOUNDATION AWARDS GRANT TO PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP

Submitted by Jessica Brown, executive director THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP of All 4 Autism



Jessica Brown and Bobby Russell with the Kyle Foundation

The Kyle Foundation awarded a \$20,000 grant to THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP of All 4 Autism that will help with the refurbishment of their new building, which will serve as the headquarters for services, support and resources for those with disabilities, and their families.

THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP has started the first phase of refurbishments, which will include a new accessible parking lot and administrative office. Phase two will include the addition of a resource center that will serve as a facility for their collaborative efforts, training and various support and outreach programs. A main focus of this new initiative is to provide a central location for partner agencies to share resources and increase community impact.

The property is the former home of Bertie Permenter, who was a trustee with the Kyle Foundation until her death, this year. Her son, Bobby Russell, is now a member of the Kyle Foundation and presented the check to Jessica Brown, the executive director of THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP.

"It is an honor to present this check from the Kyle Foundation to jumpstart the renovations for THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP Building Campaign. My grandparents built this house, where my mother grew up, so there is a very strong connection for my family and the opportunity to award this grant." Bobby Russell, Board of Trustee for the Kyle Foundation

The Kyle Foundation is a private foundation which was formed in 1984 with funds donated by Herbert M. Kyle and his wife, Pearl Kyle. The Kyles wished to support religious, educational and charitable purposes, primarily in the Pee Dee Region of South Carolina and the Cape Fear Region of North Carolina. Over the years, the Foundation has made grants to Francis Marion University, White Oak Baptist Church, Mercy

KYLE FOUNDATION CONT'D

Medicine, Salvation Army of Florence, Cape Fear Regional Theatre, Child Advocacy Center of Fayetteville, SNAC, Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Assault, Lighthouse Ministries, as well as many others. The Foundation has a history of giving to worthwhile projects which benefit the communities of our area.

"The Kyle Foundation has been a constant support to our organization, and a pillar of stewardship for those in need. We are humbled by their generosity and belief in our mission, which has had an incredible impact on our growth and outreach efforts," said Jessica Brown, executive director of THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP.

The office will be closed during construction, with the grand opening scheduled for summer 2024, where the board room will be named in honor of The Kyle Foundation. For more information contact us THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP of All 4 Autism, PO BOX 3961, FLORENCE, SC 29502, Telephone: 843-472-5215

Website: www.palmettopartnership.org or email: info@palmettopartnership.org.

ALL 4 AUTISM ANNOUNCES NEW PROGRAM

Submitted by Executive Director Jessica Brown



All 4 Autism is excited to announce their new program, THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP of All 4 Autism. While they will continue to provide services to those affected by autism, this new initiative will allow the organization to expand their reach and provide support and resources for all individuals with disabilities, and their families.

"The decision to change the name and expand the focus of All 4 Autism came after several years of assessing the needs of our community, and the desire to do more for the underserved. We want our ASD families to know that this new program won't decrease our focus on autism but will increase our ability to grow as an organization and make a greater impact on our mission to promote inclusion, awareness and help improve the quality of life for ALL individuals with disabilities." Jessica Brown, executive director

An important component of this program is the focus on increasing collaborations with local and state agencies that provide disability and transitional services. THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP will serve as a central headquarters for service providers to meet and share resources and information.

"When we were discussing the possibility of expanding our mission, and what we wanted to call the new program, the word 'PARTNERSHIP' kept coming up. While services and resources are available in our area, navigating the various options, and what you need to qualify for those services, can be very difficult for our families. We felt strongly about including collaborative efforts in our new mission and purpose." Jarrod Tippins, president of the board of directors.

THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP has acquired a building and started the first phase of refurbishments, which will include a new accessible parking lot and administrative office. Phase two will include the addition of a resource center that will serve as a facility for their collaborative efforts, trainings and various support and outreach program. The office will be closed during construction, with the grand opening scheduled for this fall. The public is encouraged to visit their website and social media pages for upcoming events and information. For more information, contact THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP of All 4 Autism, P.O. BOX 3961 FLORENCE, SC 29502, Telephone: 843-472-5215 -Website: www.palmettopartnership.org or by email: info@palmettopartnership.org.

BREAKING THE MOLD *Submitted by Sam Harrington*



Pictured left to right: Sam (18), Max (11) and Jack (20).

Although "Middle Child Syndrome" isn't recognized as an official medical diagnosis, research on the topic is so abundant, it has made birth order and how it affects personality and development a hot topic. I am a middle child. Studies suggest that my spot within my family puts me at a huge disadvantage, since the first-born is typically the overachiever

and the last born gets to enjoy the role of being the "baby." According to the typical stereotype of the middle child, I was destined to be insecure, rebellious and lacking ambition. Well, my story is not typical, and my unique journey has influenced my own approach to exceeding expectations and breaking the "middle child" mold.

Growing up alongside my older brother has profoundly shaped my perspective on how success is measured, and how each member of a family contributes in his own unique way. Jack was diagnosed with autism at age three, when I was just eighteen months old. His life has been marked by the challenges that come with a developmental disability, and I had a front row seat to his trials and triumphs. Having a sibling with a disability often meant adapting to his needs, even though I was younger. I have witnessed Jack's remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. He didn't allow his deficits to define him; instead, he harnessed them as steppingstones toward growth. This deeply impacted me, and motivated me to push beyond my comfort zone, tackle difficulties head-on and transform them into opportunities for personal development.

Advocating for my brother has naturally thrust me into the role of a leader within our family dynamic. Effectively communicating with teachers, family and friends to help him transition into social settings has enhanced my ability to mediate, listen and empathize with others. Navigating his challenges taught me the importance of flexibility and creative problem-solving skills. Creating partnerships and fostering inclusivity are important tools in leadership. From an early age, I had to learn to adjust to our family's unique circumstances, which were always changing and required the ability to adapt, as needed. These experiences taught me patience and seeing beyond my own, immediate needs.

In a world where birth order stereotypes attempt to predict our paths, my personal journey as a middle child stands as a testament to the uniqueness of everyone's experience. By embracing the lessons learned alongside my brother, I've uncovered a wellspring of resilience and leadership within myself. Watching him defy expectations has propelled me to initiate change in my personal life and community.

I am resolute in my belief that our roles within families do not define us, but rather, they shape and mold us. However, that mold has to be broken in order to grow. I am thankful for my brother, and the role he played in my growth.

Sam Harrington is a senior at South Florence High School. He has been accepted into the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina, where he plans to pursue a degree in International Business Law.



Jack and Sam 2023

STAND UP. DON'T STAND BY!*Submitted by Danyell Rogers volunteer coordinator/community educator, Pee Dee Coalition**Danyell Rogers*

MARION-Sexual assault is not only a personal issue, but also a community issue. When a person has experienced this type of assault, or any type of assault this begins to affect their daily lives consciously or subconsciously. It also diminishes the safety and security in which their home, neighborhood, workplace or place of worship once provided them. One way we can come together in our communities to

address sexual assault is to educate ourselves more on the issue. Once you educate yourself on what sexual assault and its components are, our communities can begin to bridge the gap to both helping victims and retaining its safety and security.

There are many different components to sexual assault, it is not just rape. The term sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim. Some forms of sexual assault include attempted rape, fondling or unwanted sexual touching or forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex or penetrating the victim's body. It can happen to anyone regardless of gender, race, age or culture. Although, sexual assault can take many different forms and can happen to anyone, one thing remains the same: it's never the victim's fault.

If healing for the victim-survivor begins by telling or sharing their experience, we must make it safe for them to feel as though they can do so. One of the ways to make them feel as such is by listening without interruption or judgement. The way you react and speak to survivors telling you their story could make the difference in rather they shut down or get help. Speak positivity in them by highlighting the strength and courage it took to share their experience. Encourage positive steps forward by assuring them that you will support them in getting help and by following through. Help them focus on the strengths that helped them persevere during and after what they've experienced. These aspects can be crucial in the healing process. It also helps to reframe some of the beliefs that they may have about themselves because of what has happened to them. It is hard for some to tell, especially if they have experienced or have in their mind that asking for help is considered a weakness. Sexual assault untreated can have devastating effects. Research shows that hiding or not telling this truth can cause chronic illness, devastating psychological and emotional effects. If survivors can't speak their truth, the pain is going to be released in other ways through find coping mechanisms such as drugs, rebellion and engaging in risky behavior, which will traumatize them even more.

Many survivors suffer in silence because of the stigma, shame and guilt attached to the trauma. Others keep quiet because of the conscious and unconscious victim blame that many receive when sharing their experience. Those who opt to speak out often find themselves feeling rejected and ostracized by family and social circles, which leaves them without support to articulate the trauma. Sometimes, when survivors share, people don't know what to say, or may say things unintentionally that may make the conversation awkward. They may say things such as, "Poor baby, well just don't let your past define you," or "You need to stop talking so much about it. Let it go." These things may be well intended, but they can make someone feel unworthy of support, or contribute to their shame. Also asking questions

like "Why didn't you stop them?" or "Why didn't you tell?" implies that the victim is responsible for stopping these assaults. Victims do not choose to be a victim and are revictimized when they sense the placement of blame is on themselves. This also may intimidate them out of sharing any further. Think about it- are there any unspoken secrets living in you? If you're told to let it go or get over it, would that be what you need to hear or want to hear for that matter? So, again, we as a community must make sharing experiences safe for the victim. These conversations about sexual assault may be uncomfortable, but they must take place. The more the community is educated on sexual assault we may see more advocates, and active bystanders. Being an active bystander simply means, "Stand up. Don't stand by!" By speaking up and offering support to those who need it and communicating to others that those behaviors are not ok challenges stigmas around sexual assault and victims sharing their experiences.

There are many resources available to victim survivors of sexual assault. You can support them by contacting law enforcement. The reduction of sexual assault is one of the issues in which Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Assault is dedicated to by providing services such as: A confidential 24-hour crisis line which is available anytime victim survivors need to talk about their situations and explore available options: The number is 1-800-273-1820 or local (843)669-4600. Advocates that provide medical, legal and criminal justice advocacy and court accompaniment. Individual support counseling is offered free to allow victims one-on-one time with a counselor to talk about feelings, sort out options and plan for a violence-free life. Support groups provide an opportunity to share with others who have had the same type or similar experiences. Information and Referrals are available when the individual's needs exceed what Pee Dee Coalition can offer. We will work in conjunction with other service providers to ensure that they find their way to help and remain safe. Emergency Safe Shelter is available in the Pee Dee area when it is no longer safe to stay at home. There is also a Transitional Shelter to abused women who are no longer in crisis but who remain homeless because of domestic or sexual violence. Pee Dee Coalition also provides a Rape Aggression Defense (RAD) class. R.A.D. is a program of realistic self-defense tactics and techniques for women. It is a comprehensive, women-only course of instruction that begins with awareness, prevention, risk, and risk avoidance. It then progresses to teaching hands-on self-defense training, but it is not a martial arts program. There is also the National Sexual Assault Hotline, a service or the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) is 1-800-656-HOPE(4673).

I am the volunteer and community education coordinator for the Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Assault Marion County Satellite Crisis Center in Marion, SC. Pee Dee



STAND UP CONT'D

Coalition (PDC) is a non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to the reduction of sexual assault, family violence, child abuse and to the needs of victims. My job is to spread awareness and education to the issues in which PDC is dedicated to focusing on in our communities. Many times, when out in the community speaking with others about Pee Dee Coalition and its free services, people begin to tell me their stories and experiences. Sometimes, these people speak about it for the first time. It is both an honor and a privilege for me to be able to support them by listening without judgement and leading them in the right direction for assistance if they want it. It is great letting them know that we have a lot of services that are free to them, including free counseling. I consider it an honor expressing to them that no matter how long ago the assault happened, going untreated or being held in, can still affect their daily lives. They may not even see how it is affecting them until they begin to talk about it and evaluate their issues with some assistance. I have talked with some that have stated that they have experienced sexual assault and didn't even know that it was assault, until later. Consent is a major topic that should be both taught and practiced in our communities.

April is National Sexual Assault Awareness Month. PDC has eight centers in seven counties that we serve, and they will host different events to bring awareness to this issue. Please show up for your communities by coming out to support the awareness events. We have high hopes that by attending these events, our communities' members will walk away saying, "From now on, I will stand up. I will not stand."

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND THERAPY

Submitted by Joyce Ford, executive director Naomi Project



Joyce Ford

When most survivors think or talk about sexual assault, they just want it to go away. They want to continue on the path of being normal. What does being normal mean? Why doesn't my normal work every day? What can I do to stay on this normal path? Women are over half of the victims of sexual assault in this country. Approximately 30 percent of the victims have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of sexual assault. It is very common for sexual abuse to be carried out by a survivor's romantic partners, family members or neighbors. This

assault can last longer than you wanted if it is not worked through. What is working through? THERAPY.

Therapy can be life changing. Finding a trauma-informed therapist, you can process your trauma and grow from it and improve your overall mental health. Finding a therapist that is trauma trained takes time. You might go through several therapists, but make sure that you are comfortable. One of the evidence-based treatments of PTSD is overcoming the trauma by sharing your story. Telling your story is different than being forced to tell it in public. Just know that it is your choice, and no one can make it for you (with help)!

A story on what it looks like and how it can work for you. A call came through from Trudy. She wanted to talk. An appointment was set up for her to come in. The very first session we had was crying. She mumbled something, but tears were the session. She wanted to come back the next day, but she was persuaded to wait a few days. She was given some tools to practice. When she came back the next week, she said she tried the tools, but they didn't work. She was asked to go through them. She did not understand the tools, so we had to go through them together. She got it! So, she went on her way to use the tools she had. When she came back a week later, she said that at first, she didn't want to practice the tools, but she tried one and she felt a little better. She tried another tool, and she got excited about feeling a little more better. She did not try any more of the tools that week because she wanted to come and talk about the tools, how they made her feel and what would the other tools do for her. She did not come back for three weeks, but she kept trying those two tools. When she came for her session, she cried the first half of the session. When we started talking about the tools that she had practiced, she calmed down and explained that the feeling she got from practicing the tools made her feel strange. We practiced those two tools for one solid year.

During that year, her story came out. She was raped by her two brothers and when she told her parents they blamed her. She carried that guilt through high school and college. When she went to college, she never lived at home again. She became a teacher and moved to the Upstate. She married and just retired from teaching. We kept in touch and one day she asked me about the other tools I had. I explained that she got what she needed to be the successful person she is.

The Naomi Project provides victims and their children with long-term housing that is safe and void of verbal, physical, psychological and sexual abuse. For more information, please contact us at (843) 615-1548 or visit our website <http://www.naomiproject.com>



SEXUAL TRAUMA



Sexual Trauma is an effect from experiencing unwanted sexual contact or behavior committed by a person, whether a stranger or someone close to you.



1 in 5 women & 1 in 71 men will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lives

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES



Relational issues because of difficulty trusting again



Easily distressed



Loses enjoyment and intimacy in sex



Have multiple sexual partners



Develops substance addiction problems



Failure to maintain employment



Avoids any conversation about sexual assault



Feelings of shame, fear, guilt, and anxiety all the time



Are you struggling with sexual trauma?

Let's talk.



TEAL ALERT

for sexual assault
awareness

Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic and
Sexual Assault is calling on people to:

Stand Up, Don't Stand By!

We don't just fight for the known victim-survivors,
we fight for the potential victim-survivors. Listen
to the people around and watch for inappropriate
behavior towards those that could potentially be
victimized. It's on all of us to stop sexual assault!

See something? Hear something?



Say something and stop it.



Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Assault

24-Hour Hotline

843-669-4600 or 1-800-273-1820



SCAN ME

STANDING UP FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

Submitted by Devonte Bennett Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Assault



Devonte Bennett

Have you ever walked by a spill in the grocery store and said, “Eh, someone else will say something about it?” Or have you ever been walking around your local department store and saw some merchandise toppled over and said to yourself “I’m sure one of the workers will clean that up soon.”? I am willing to bet that you have, and I am also willing to bet that you did not think anything of it after walking past those spills or toppled over merchandise. This mentality is the same mentality that most people choose when they find themselves being a witness to a sexual assault incident.

Here at the Pee Dee Coalition, we are a non-profit organization that focuses on the reduction of sexual assault and domestic violence in all of the communities that we have centers. We do this in a number of ways. A few of those are by offering victim advocacy, crisis counseling, hospital and court accompaniment and community education through our prevention program and other programs, just to name a few. Every year the organization participates in Sexual Assault Awareness Month by showcasing a number of different events and also participating in partner agency events to show solidarity in the stance against sexual assault.

Each year a theme is selected for all events to mirror each other throughout the counties. This year’s theme is “Stand up, don’t stand by.” It is clear to see in this theme that we are urging bystanders to do something in the event where they find themselves being witnesses to a sexual assault. According to an article by the National Library of Medicine, experimental and survey-based research indicates approximately 72-75 percent of bystanders do not engage in sexual violence intervention. When readers refer to the opening paragraph, they can see that most bystanders do, in fact, choose the “Eh, someone else will say something about it.” mentality when they are faced with sexual assault incidents where they could have intervened.

In my role as the sexual assault prevention coordinator here at the Pee Dee Coalition, I have the privilege of meeting with youth in various settings and having those tough conversations with them regarding a number of different topics. One of those key topics is bystander intervention. Bystander intervention is seemingly the elephant in the room when we speak with youth, especially when they have to consider intervening when their friends are the perpetrators. A lot of teens say that they mainly choose not to intervene because they do not necessarily know what to do and how to intervene in these situations. In the following paragraphs I’ll be identifying a few of the things that not only teenagers can do in these situations, but also adults who find

themselves as bystanders in these situations as well.

One tactic to use when in a situation where one may be able to intervene in the event of a sexual assault incident is creating a distraction. Creating a distraction is one of the more subtle ways that a bystander can intervene. Most people use the creating of a distraction to interrupt the incident before it fully develops into an incident resulting in sexual assault. Some ways that bystanders employ the distraction method are by cutting off the harmful conversation with a diversion, and also by starting an activity that includes everyone, including the people they are concerned about, such as games, group conversation and refreshments.

Another intervention that we implore individuals to use is asking directly. Asking directly requires the bystander that is intervening to ask the individual that they are concerned about very direct questions. Those questions can be as direct as, “Are you okay?” or “Do you need help?” A bystander using this method is cautioned to ask these questions when the individual is away from the aggressor to ensure that the situation is not escalated due to the aggressor becoming agitated with the questioning. If the individual responds, “Yes” to any of the questions, the bystander is then urged to contact local law enforcement or someone who can get the individual to safety.

One final method we cover is getting a group together to approach the situation. This method further shows how the “strength in numbers” saying actually proves to be true. With this intervention, the bystander chooses to include one other person or chooses to bring a group of people with them when preparing to intervene in one of these situations. In most situations, it helps when bystanders involve other friends of the person they are concerned about. If on a college campus, the bystander can involve campus police or resident assistants in the intervention if possible. The main goal is to involve other individuals who are going to be supportive and helpful when assisting the individual with separating themselves from these types of situations.

These intervention methods make it easier for bystanders to know what to do in the event that they find themselves in a situation where they can intervene and potentially save someone’s life. As a society, we must continue to make a conscious effort to address the issues that continue to plague us all in different ways. Here at the Pee Dee Coalition, we will continue to make those strives through all of our efforts, be it through victim services or community and prevention education. One of our main focuses is building relationships across the communities that we have centers in to better assist the victims that we see on a daily basis. We welcome any partner agencies that would be interested in collaborating and planning any necessary training that would help us continue to strengthen our community’s stance against domestic violence and sexual assault. These partnerships will allow all of us to continue to follow our Sexual Assault Awareness Month theme, “Stand up, don’t standby.”

**I WILL STEP IN AND STAND UP
AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE.**

WILL YOU?

A CHAMPION FOR CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Investigator Farrah Turner

The Farrah Turner Foundation (FTF) is impacting the community just as the champion for which it was named. The mission of the FTF is to protect and serve children who are victims of sexual abuse and assault. Many children are being abused in various ways and there are still people who are not aware of the social travesties that plague communities. Law enforcement, social services and child advocate programs work to educate families about child abuse but there is much to learn. Statistics and information

about child abuse are updated daily and agencies continue to find ways to create unlimited resources that will protect families and prevent child abuse. Chief Executive Officer Katie Godwin stated, "There is so much to learn to prevent child abuse, but people are not willing to listen. Though it is an uncomfortable topic, we must not be afraid to talk about it." The board of directors and other volunteers work to stay current on trends and information about sexual abuse to share the information with as many people as they can. They also work to maintain the work of prevention as the namesake of the organization, Investigator Farrah Turner, who worked for the Florence County Sheriff's Department investigating crimes against children.

Established in 2019, the foundation was created to raise awareness and award scholarships for high school students throughout Florence County, SC. In 2023, one student from Wilson High School, two students from Lake City High School and three from Hannah Pamplico High School were awarded with \$1000 scholarships, renewable for the next three years, if they meet the requirements. There are many students who dream of going to college but cannot financially afford it. The foundation considers students who lack what they need and assists them with living their dreams. Along with the



Farrah Turner at a child abuse prevention fundraiser



Farrah Turner with her mother Katie Godwin and niece, Alaina

scholarships, recipients are given school supplies.

Turner worked in various schools as a resource officer and encouraged students to live out their dreams. She helped them to see their value even when they didn't see the value in themselves. Turner worked with child advocate centers and other agencies to ensure there was protection for victims of abuse. She participated in awareness events and even assisted organizations in raising funds to fight abuse.

Godwin is the mother of Farrah Turner. "Farrah Turner believed in serving and helping people," said Godwin. "From an early age, she helped others," Godwin exclaimed. As a victim of bullying, Turner worked to help others not be victims by protecting them on the playground. As an adult she became an officer with the Florence County Sheriff's Office to protect her beloved Florence County. She worked in various departments with the FCSO but wanted to work on the streets, especially against child crimes. "Investigator Turner provided comfort and care as a supporter with many of her case victims," Godwin stated. The night Turner was shot during the line of duty, October 3, 2018, she was on her way to protect child victims of abuse. Sadly, she died October 21, 2018. She was fearless and a champion for those who were not able to protect themselves. Her legacy of empowerment continues to inspire many people.

Currently the Farrah Turner Foundation shares information about child abuse in schools, churches and organizations. They also gave \$5000 to Farrah's Fund at the Care House of the Pee Dee to help cover client's deductibles. Godwin says they are working on a new program called Farrah's Closet that provides clothing to students in schools that need them. The first school they will service is Rush Academy. Their annual fundraising events are the Blue Rose Gala, which is held October 21, annually and the 5K Run held in April which is Child Abuse Prevention Month. From students to her law enforcement colleagues, to community leaders and her family, Turner was a hero without a cape, but still is protecting and serving through those she served.



IT'S UP TO US

Submitted by Deborah Timmons, peeps parent coordinator Pee Dee Coalition



Deborah Timmons

I have worked in many capacities during my professional career; I've served a countless number of victims along the way.

I have encountered families both personally and professionally who have experienced child abuse and neglect almost every day.

As we approach Child Abuse prevention month, I wonder, is there more that we can do? Who has the answers to this question? I believe the answer is Me AND You.

To Individuals -What do we do if/when we witness child abuse firsthand? Do we turn and look away? Do we bury our heads in the sand? Do we take the time to have a discussion or to lend a listening ear? Or do we pass judgment and walk away out of apprehension or fear?

To the Agencies and Businesses – What part do each of you play? Do you value your employees? Are you really concerned about how they live each day? Does your organization/business support the organizations that serve and prevent? Or are you more concerned with making dollars rather than making sense?

To the Faith Based Community- What messages are being communicated in the faith-based community? Do your sermons support corporal

punishment and/or handling discipline physically? Church leaders, ministers and clergy, what messages do you spread? Perhaps the messages should guide parishioners to alternative discipline methods instead.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Examine yourselves -Be a nurturing parent; Show your children that you care. Help a friend, neighbor, employee, colleague or relative who may need support. They could be in despair.

Get involved with your church or your local community. Help to foster and create a healthy family.

Promote programs in school that focus on preventive strategies for teachers, children, parents; Promote keeping our children safe. Volunteer your time, energy or resources. Whatever the time; Wherever the place.

Monitor what your children are watching via television, video and the internet. Report suspected instances of child abuse or neglect.

Transform – re-interpret and challenge religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence against children. Let's all embrace a brand-new start.

EVERY CHILD DESERVES A SAFE CHILDHOOD. LET'S VOW TO DO OUR PART!



THE POWER TO PREVENT ABUSE: A STORY OF HOPE

Submitted by Alice Curry Gallego development & community relations director



According to national data, nearly 700,000 children are abused each year, and close to 2,000 lose their lives as a result. Even after abuse stops, these adverse childhood experiences can have lasting negative impacts on health, well-being and other opportunities – but child abuse is preventable.

For the CARE House of the Pee Dee, these

realities are all too familiar. As a Children's Advocacy Center, the CARE House promotes help, hope and healing to child abuse victims and their families through quality investigative, therapeutic and advocacy services. Serving over 800 children last year throughout Florence, Marion, Clarendon and Dillon Counties, the CARE House is a safe place where families can go following allegations of abuse to receive quality evidence-based services as they heal from the trauma of abuse.

For close to 20 years, the CARE House has responded to child abuse and neglect by helping thousands of victims of child maltreatment heal. However, in 2023, the organization broadened its scope to invest in preventing child abuse before it occurs.

"We believe that every child deserves to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment, free from the horrors of abuse," says Alice Curry Gallego, development & community relations director with the CARE House. "For years, we've been empowering parents, caregivers and communities to recognize the signs of abuse and take action. Now, through evidence-informed prevention programming, we are equipping

our community to stop abuse before it happens."

The first step was hiring Jeriesha Epps, the prevention education coordinator to spearhead the new initiative. Since coming onboard, Epps has grown the organization's offerings to include curricula for adults and children 4K through 12th grade. A favorite of Epps' is called ROAR, in which Rex the Lion teaches children that their bodies are their own while empowering them to stand up against abuse.

Since launching the new program, the CARE House has trained over 400 children and nearly 100 adults at local schools, churches, businesses and other community groups, and is working to recruit volunteer facilitators to increase the program's reach even further. Organizations interested in scheduling a training can do so by visiting the CARE House website or contact Epps directly.

"Our vision is to break the cycle of abuse and build a community where every child can thrive," says Gallego. "Through quality education, collaboration and commitment, every child's future can be one of the hope and promise."

For more information about the CARE House of the Pee Dee or the Prevention Education Program, visit www.thecarehouse.com/education-training-prevention. Contact Jeriesha Epps, Prevention Education Coordinator with questions or to schedule training by email at jepps@thecarehouse.com or by phone (843) 629-0236.



DON'T LET UNDERAGE DRINKING RUIN YOUR PROM

Submitted by Erica Buffkin, community prevention specialist, Circle Park Behavioral Health Services



Erica Buffkin

Spring is in the air and, with that, comes many special high school traditions and events. Few are as eagerly anticipated as Prom Night and Spring Break and their associated rituals. Unfortunately, many teens and parents feel that including alcohol with these events is an acceptable rite of passage. While risky behaviors such as marijuana use, vaping and misuse and abuse of prescription drugs garner most of the media headlines, alcohol continues to

be the most common risky behavior challenging youth today. Current research provided by the CDC shows that nearly 50 percent of high school students will consume alcohol at some point during their high school years.

Even though a lower percentage of youth are drinking today than in years past, those that are consuming alcohol are doing so at an alarming rate. In fact, the latest research shows that many young people are participating in the growing epidemic of binge drinking, which is defined as consuming four to five drinks during one event causing the BAC (blood alcohol content) level to rise to dangerous levels. Those that participate in this activity are more likely to be involved in risky behaviors including acts of violence, reduced sexual inhibitions and they're also more likely to drive a vehicle and be involved in a crash. Surprisingly to many, females participate in binge drinking at a higher rate than their male counterparts, leaving them particularly vulnerable. In recent years, according to, "The Journal of Adolescent Health," an increasing number of parents are allowing their children and friends to drink, particularly in their homes, which is a most troubling trend.

To minimize the potential dangers and consequences involved with underage drinking during the prom season, Circle Park Behavioral Health Services and the Florence County Coalition for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention, along with local law enforcement agencies have joined forces to support the, "Don't Let Underage Drinking Ruin Your Prom," campaign. This campaign emphasizes the illegality of persons under the age of 21 purchasing, possessing or consuming alcoholic beverages as well as the legal responsibility of parents.

Prom night parties and Spring Break activities tend to provide an opportunity for many high school students to participate in underage and binge drinking. In an effort to address and minimize these potential incidences in our community, the 12th Judicial Circuit Alcohol Enforcement Team (AET), a multi-jurisdictional team of various agencies throughout Florence and Marion Counties, will be utilizing a series of enforcement activities during prom nights that may include:

- Source Investigations – AET members will be utilizing their resources to identify

the source of alcohol that is being possessed or consumed by underage youth at prom activities. Those found to be providing alcohol to minors will be charged and prosecuted.

- Party Patrols – AET members will be patrolling neighborhoods, rural areas, bonfire sites, etc. where before and after prom parties may be taking place.
- Parking Lot Patrols – AET members will patrol parking lots of local establishments and locations where prom activities may be occurring to ensure that underage alcohol possession and consumption is not taking place.
- Restaurant Walk-Throughs – AET members will be visible making walk throughs at local restaurants popular with prom goers and interacting with them to ensure that they understand the importance of having an alcohol-free prom night.
- Compliance Checks – AET members will be checking local establishments to ensure that alcohol is not making it into the hands of underage consumers.

Underage youth also need to be aware of the constructive possession statute in which anyone under the age of 21 can receive a citation or be arrested for possessing alcohol products, having them in their car or being at a party or event where underage drinking is taking place, EVEN if they are not drinking themselves. Youth should be particularly vigilant as to if alcohol is in a car they may be riding in or at a location that they may be at because they can be held responsible for the alcohol that is there even if it isn't open.

We hope all youth and parents participating in this year's prom events will work together to make smart, legal and healthy choices to ensure that this year's prom events in our community are fun and safe.

While risky behaviors such as my use, vaping and misuse of other drugs, alcohol continues to be the most common risky behavior challenging youth today. While overall alcohol use has been declining in recent years it still remains a significant threat to the health and safety of today's teens.

THINK TEEN DRINKING TEACHES MODERATION?

FACT: Those who drink before 15 are 6.7 times as likely to develop alcohol use disorder.

TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF UNDERAGE DRINKING... THE SOONER, THE BETTER



**DON'T LET
UNDERAGE DRINKING**



RUIN YOUR PROM



843-665-9349
www.circlepark.com

VOLUNTEER EMPOWERMENT

Submitted by United Way of Florence County Staff



Deb Mantone and Stan Wilk tax preparers with a client of United Way VITA program

In a world where communities face numerous challenges, there are organizations dedicated to making a difference. United Way of Florence County channels efforts and resources towards creating lasting, positive change in our local area. However, it can't be accomplished alone.

Volunteers play an essential role in bringing about change, and in Florence County, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, run by United Way, helps support those in need of tax assistance.

Each tax season, United Way of Florence County mobilizes a team of dedicated volunteers to provide free tax assistance to low-to-moderate-income individuals and families. This initiative not only helps alleviate the burden of tax preparation costs but also ensures that valuable tax credits and refunds reach those who need them most.

For many, tax season can be a source of anxiety and confusion, especially for those navigating complex tax codes and forms. By offering expertise and guidance, United Way of Florence County not only assists individuals in fulfilling their tax obligations but also empowers them with financial knowledge that can impact other areas of their lives.

Moreover, the VITA program plays a crucial role in promoting financial stability within our community. By maximizing tax refunds and credits, United Way of Florence County helps individuals and families keep more of their hard-earned money. These funds often

go towards essential expenses such as housing, education and health care, thereby contributing to overall economic resilience. Last year, United Way of Florence County volunteers prepared over 100 tax returns for a total economic impact over \$100,000. Additionally, by providing free tax assistance, United Way ensures that financial barriers do not prevent anyone from accessing vital services and resources.

Beyond the positive impact on clients, volunteering through the VITA program fosters a sense of camaraderie and collaboration among volunteers. VITA volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, ranging from finance professionals and retirees to college professors eager to give back. Yet, they are united by a shared commitment to service and a belief in the power of community. Through training sessions and client interactions, volunteers forge bonds that extend beyond tax season.

Volunteering with VITA challenges volunteers to step outside their comfort zones, to confront uncertainty with confidence and to approach every client interaction with compassion and understanding. In doing so, volunteers not only serve as tax preparers but as advocates for social justice and economic equality.

In conclusion, volunteering with the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program through the United Way of Florence County is more than just a commitment of time; it's a commitment to building a stronger, more inclusive community. It's about empowering individuals with the tools and resources they need to thrive financially. And ultimately, it's about embodying the spirit of service and making a meaningful difference, one return at a time. So, if you're looking for a way to give back and make a real impact in your community, consider joining United Way of Florence County on this journey of service and solidarity. Together, we can unlock the power of volunteering and create a brighter future for all.

To learn more about United Way of Florence County's VITA program, visit <https://www.uwflorence.org/vita-tax-program>.

YACoubIAN NAMED VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

Submitted by McLeod Health



Jennifer Yacoubian pictured with Elizabeth Jones, executive director of the McLeod Foundation, and Davis Sawyer, Children's Hospital fund manager.

Each year, the McLeod Foundation honors special individuals whose consistent leadership has contributed significantly to the work of the organization. Volunteers are instrumental in helping the foundation raise funds needed to support the programs and services of McLeod Health. These volunteers serve in championing the need for enhanced patient services in one of the seven

hospitals of McLeod Health or planning special events. Many improvements in patient care would otherwise not be possible.

Recently during the Founders' Society Garden Party, the McLeod Foundation recognized Jennifer Yacoubian as the Volunteer of the Year.

Davis Sawyer, Children's Hospital fund manager for the foundation, presented the award to Yacoubian. In her remarks, she said, "The McLeod Foundation has been blessed throughout our 40-year history with a long line of volunteers who have provided not only their gifts but also their time and talents. As the foundation staff began looking at new ways to develop young leadership, one person quickly shined in the crowd and stepped up to help develop our Circle

of Excellence. This highly successful group of next generation donors is having a tremendous impact on our future leadership.

"Jennifer has a special heart for the McLeod Children's Hospital. She has given of her time for the Chef & Child event and the Children's Hospital Radiothon. It was only natural for her to become the first chair of the newly established HERO Fund benefiting children and families in need at the Children's Hospital. Inspired by her daughter's experience at Pediatric Rehabilitation along with her families' generous history of support, she leads through both her words and her actions."

"Over the holidays, the Children's Hospital staff were having a very difficult time and struggling. Jennifer quickly decided to join me in pushing a cart loaded with hot chocolate and cookies around the floor. It was important for her to make sure that the staff knew she cared about them and appreciated all they do for the children and their families."

Sawyer added that Yacoubian has become a valued member of the McLeod Foundation Board of Trustees and brings a fresh perspective to this important leadership role.

Yacoubian grew up in Florence and is no stranger to healthcare as her father is Dr. Daniel Hyler. Yacoubian chaired the 2019 Chef & Child Dinner and Auction. She currently serves on the Circle of Excellence Executive Committee and is chair of the McLeod Children's Hospital HERO Fund Advisory Committee. Yacoubian and her husband, Dikran, are charter members of the Circle of Excellence Young Giving Society. She is also a graduate of the 2022 McLeod Fellows program. Yacoubian was named a member of the McLeod Foundation's Board of Trustees in 2021 and currently serves as secretary for the board.

DONNA BELLIDO HONORED AS VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR AT MCLEOD

Submitted by McLeod Health



Donna Bellido

McLeod Regional Medical Center named Donna Bellido as the Volunteer of the Year for 2023 during the Annual Volunteer Luncheon held at the Hellenic Center on January 25, 2024.

Bellido is the 36th recipient of the McLeod Volunteer of the Year award. She began volunteering for McLeod at the end of March 2023. Bellido volunteers for the McLeod Center for Cancer Treatment and Research, the McLeod Health Foundation, the McLeod Gift Shop and McLeod Home Health. She has also given of her time to support McLeod Physician Associates, the Recovery Unit and the Patient Representatives.

In presenting the award to Bellido, Linda Boone, director of Volunteer Services for McLeod, shared, “Sometimes you meet a person that just shines. Their smile, their willingness to help others and their lack of fear to approach new adventures. All this and more describes our 2023 Volunteer of the Year. The departments she volunteers in always tell me what a joy she is to work with and how dependable she is. Rarely does she ever turn us down when we ask her to help someone out or take on a new job no one else really wants to do.”

“This year, she has completed nearly 400 hours in less than a year

of volunteering for us. Her smile, energy and compassion make her our 2023 Volunteer of the Year for McLeod Regional Medical Center,” added Boone.

In addition to the Volunteer of the Year announcement, Patricia Rush was recognized with the Most Clinical Hours* in 2023, with 407 and Linda Lacy received the Most Crafting Hours with more than 2,869 hours.

During the luncheon, the volunteers voted on three new members of the Volunteer Auxiliary Board: Steve Camlin, Bruce Mallick and Rita Briggs. Outgoing board members, Linda Mallick and Bill Early, were recognized for their nearly 20 years combined service on the board.

More than 200 volunteers who contribute outstanding service to McLeod Regional Medical Center were honored for their service during 2023. These dedicated individuals contributed more than 41,800 volunteer hours to the hospital over the past year.

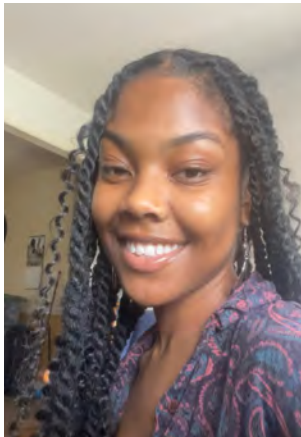
McLeod Regional Medical Center honors its volunteers annually by presenting service awards to recognize their special efforts and outstanding contributions.

* Most Clinical Hours are representative of an individual who volunteers in the hospital with direct patient care.

McLeod Health

The Choice for Medical Excellence

FREE TIME: A VOLUNTEER'S EXPERIENCE



Kayla Johnson

Most people don't see volunteering as a sacrifice of time. Some see it as restrictive and obligatory. Some see it as caring and sharing available resources. Volunteering is simply serving those who may not be able to serve themselves without financial compensation. Volunteering is especially important because of today's economic climate. Many organizations are not receiving and sustaining the same amount of funding that was once received pre-pandemic. Therefore, paid employees are not working for the same wages. People who are willing to volunteer for not-for-profit businesses and nonprofit businesses

are filling in the gaps until they can hire employees.

Kayla Johnson recently volunteered with a local organization and said the experience caused her to have a more positive outlook. “Before I volunteered with the Naomi Project, I had never volunteered before. But once I worked with the program for some time, I learned how rewarding it was.” Kayla's expectations did not match what she saw on her first day of volunteering. “My first day I help with moving mattresses and other items. I thought it would be more administrative work,” she chuckled.

Johnson first volunteered because it was a part of the curriculum requirements while she was a student at Florence Darlington Technical College. Once she started, she began to see the impact of her being there. She worked with clients during onboarding. That process taught her how to, “meet people where they are.” Johnson said abuse clients were exposing their lives and that was overwhelming. Volunteering is not just giving your time and expecting positivity through the process. Mostly it's about interaction with those who you are serving

and sometimes it is not always what is expected. Serving those who are in underserved or rural areas means working in circumstances that may not seem safe or encouraging. It does have an impact because it means someone cares.

When people decide to volunteer, they must also come without judgement. People who are underserved or unserved face circumstances that some may believe are self imposed. It may seem that the way out of their situations many be simple, but that is often not the result many receive. Johnson said seeing people in those situations through volunteering taught her to not perceive people negatively. You must leave preconceived notions out of the volunteer roll, no matter who you are working for or with.

At the end of her work with the Naomi Project, she said she left with a feeling of contributing. Johnson shared, “People should practice everyday kindness.” She also said it was rewarding to see the change on their client's journeys. It was great to see the results.

Johnson has since volunteered at other organizations and plans to do more. Her outlook has definitely changed to be more positive and less judgmental. Volunteering is a skill builder and gives opportunities for people to learned social interaction, regardless of socioeconomic status. It teaches how to serve ALL people. Applause to Johnson for her selflessness and giving back to her community.



CELEBRATING HOPEHEALTH VOLUNTEERS ANN MOORE AND SYLVIA JACKSON

Submitted by Sheridan K. Murray HopeHealth



Ann Moore

HopeHealth volunteer Ann Moore began volunteering with the Community Relations Department last year. In 2023, Moore put in over 80 hours with the department, writing thank you cards, updating a mailing list and completing other projects as needed.

On being a HopeHealth volunteer, Moore shared, “After retirement, it is important to stay active and maintain relationships with caring people. Volunteering at HopeHealth provides the opportunity to contribute to my community and

feel valued as an individual. Focusing on the needs of others, rather than on myself, not only helps others, but promotes my own sense of well-being.”



Sylvia Jackson

Another HopeHealth volunteer, Sylvia Jackson, took time to reflect on her time with HopeHealth as she celebrates two years of service. Jackson shared the below statement.

“In 2019, my husband and I retired and moved to the city of Florence. We were gearing up to enjoy our long-awaited retirement and get to know the community. COVID brought that to a screeching halt. Fast forward to 2022, I started seeking volunteer opportunities to learn about the community and to get to know people. It was

recommended I seek a volunteer position at HopeHealth. I applied and was selected to join the staff at the Medical Plaza location.

Volunteering at HopeHealth over the past two years has given me the opportunity to work alongside wonderful staff and meet many people in the community. I initially assisted at the main reception area, and currently assist patients with checking in for lab work. During my time as a volunteer, I have worked on many special projects like a partnership with My Brother’s Keeper. I have also had the chance to attend community events like AIDS Walk and events for National Health Center Week.

Cindy Averitt, manager of volunteer programs, is an awesome individual and I have really enjoyed working with her. The past two years have been wonderful, and I would definitely recommend HopeHealth as a place to volunteer your time and gain valuable knowledge.”

Thank you, Ann and Sylvia, for giving your effort and time to help our organization succeed!

Join HopeHealth Volunteers and assist our guests in navigating their health care experience while also growing your skills, forming new friendships, and improving your mental and overall health. By volunteering at HopeHealth, you help us provide services to those who often encounter social and financial roadblocks to receiving health care. Volunteer opportunities include greeting and guiding guests, serving special patient populations, providing social support to patients, outreach, and more.

To learn about how to become a volunteer with HopeHealth, or to encourage others to give their time, visit hope-health.org/volunteer or contact Cindy Averitt, manager of volunteer programs, at (843) 432-2942 or volunteer@hope-health.org.

THE SUPERHEROES AMONG US: CARE HOUSE VOLUNTEERS

Submitted by Development & Community Relations Director, Alice Curry Gallego



Fathers, students, retired administrators, IT professionals, former counselors, mothers, teachers and artists – to the untrained eye, these folks may appear to be average people, not unlike yourself. They have families and interests, friends and to do lists, a desire to connect with others, to have an impact in their

communities and to live in safe neighborhoods. But these folks are far from ordinary. In fact, to the staff and clients at the CARE House of the Pee Dee, they are nothing short of superheroes. They are CARE House volunteers.

Whether they are greeting clients as they arrive, filing charts and drafting reports, facilitating prevention programming in classrooms across the Pee Dee or assisting with community events, volunteers are invaluable to this organization in the fight against child abuse.

The CARE House of the Pee Dee is a non-profit Children’s Advocacy Center with a mission to promote help, hope and healing to child abuse victims and their families through quality services and prevention. Serving children and families throughout Florence, Marion, Clarendon and Dillon counties, the CARE House is a safe place where families can go following allegations of abuse to receive investigative services, evidence-based counseling, advocacy and support as they heal from the trauma of abuse.

Nio is one such superhero. A local student and music aficionado, Nio started volunteering at the CARE House in August of 2023 after coming across an opportunity on VolunteerMatch. After receiving hands-on training with the CARE House volunteer coordinator, Nio began providing administrative support once a week at the organization’s Florence office.

“I enjoy volunteering at the CARE House,” says Nio. “It is a welcoming environment that has given me a chance to help others. It has also allowed me to gain experience which has helped me to grow at work and in my daily life.”

As a nonprofit, the CARE House relies on grants and other funding to serve close to 800 children each year and volunteers, graduate and undergraduate interns have a significant impact in helping funding to go much further in supporting child victims of abuse.

Volunteers play a hands-on role in many of the services offered at the CARE House. From calling families to remind them of upcoming therapy appointments to supporting advocates in preparing for county-wide staffings, educating children and adults within the community to planning enjoyable community events, volunteers have their fingerprints all over the organization.

“Volunteering at the CARE House is a meaningful way to have a positive impact on the lives of children in our community who have experienced abuse and neglect,” shares Allana Hilley, the organization’s volunteer coordinator. “If you’re looking for a rewarding volunteer opportunity that truly makes a difference, join us as a volunteer. Become a part of something extraordinary and ignite the hero within you!”

To learn more about the CARE House and becoming a volunteer, visit www.thecarehouse.com/volunteer for more information or for a volunteer application. Contact Volunteer Coordinator, Allana Hilley at ahilley@thecarehouse.com with questions.

MAKING LIFE BY WHAT YOU GIVE *By Ronette Genwright*



Delilah Dixon, MUSC Health Florence Medical Center Volunteer

Giving your free time or supporting a service to nonprofit organizations is a part of volunteerism. People may have busy schedules, but some still have free time to help others. Born and raised in Philadelphia, PA, Mrs. Delilah Dixon is affectionately known as Miss Dee by family, friends and MUSC co-workers. She is married with three sons, three daughters-in-law and nine grandchildren. She retired from the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office juvenile unit after 41 years as a legal services clerk. After retiring in 2012, she and her husband, Lucius Dixon (Lou), decided they wanted a change to a milder climate.

While traveling to South Carolina to visit her grandmother in Salters, SC, and friend Jeri in Florence, during the spring, she helped the Dixons decide to relocate here. After the Dixons relocated their friend Jeri convinced her and Lou to volunteer at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center. "We looked at the gesture as an opportunity to network and get to know people in and around the community," said Dixon. She believes volunteering gives her a willingness to give back to her community. It is said that the more you volunteer, the more benefits you'll experience.

Dixon said volunteering keeps her physically and mentally healthy. When you volunteer, it's not a long-term commitment and doesn't take a lot of time out of your day. Dixon volunteers three times a week in different

departments. On Mondays, she works in the mailroom with supervisor Lottie Profit, sorting, stamping and delivering mail to various departments. On Tuesdays, she works in case management assisting the administrative assistant Stephanie Hunter with scanning, copying material, making new manuals for new employees and other clerical tasks.

On Wednesdays, she works with Wendy Davis, joint coordinator, greeting the patients coming into the hospital to have knee, hip, shoulder and ankle replacements. She escorts patients to each station from registration, lab, EKG and X-ray, all the way to the doctor who will clear the patient for surgery. This keeps the patient from getting lost or misdirected to the wrong place. After the patient receives their medical clearance, she then escorts them to the class where they are given lunch and information on what to expect during and after surgery. The patients are so grateful for the service along with the conversation that is given to help them feel at ease.

Dixon recommends volunteering to everyone saying, "As you grow older you discover that you have two hands one for helping yourself, the other for helping others, it humbles you." Dixon believes volunteering is good for socialization, mental & physical health along with making new friends. One of the highlights Dixon enjoys is networking with diverse backgrounds and skills. According to Dixon, volunteering separates us from our self-centered lives and helps others and their needs. Dixon advises as a volunteer, "You make a life by what you give; time."

If you would like to volunteer at MUSC Health Florence, Marion or Black River Medical Centers, please call Hiba Zebian, volunteer services manager, at 843-674-2975.

ASSURANT VOLUNTEERS GIVE BACK TO OUR COMMUNITY *Submitted by Assurant*



Giving back to our communities reflects our values and core to our culture at Assurant.

Through volunteering, both in-person and virtually, our employees help to strengthen the communities where we live and work. In 2023, in partnership with our Assurant Foundation, many Florence, South Carolina employees teamed with multiple organizations and charitable partners to give back to our local community. Our continued growth in volunteer support is a testament to our employees' dedication to showing up and making a difference.

Below are some volunteer highlights from our South Carolina team in 2023:



Habitat 2023

- **Habitat for Humanity** - We partnered to help prepare a home for a local family.
- **Harvest Hope Food Bank** - We helped pack almost 300 food boxes to help feed our neighbors in

need.

- **Help4Kids** - On two occasions, we packed food bags to help reduce food insecurity for local children.
- **Hope Health** - We provided nine new bicycles to Hope Health's Children of Hope program.
- **Make-a-Wish South Carolina** - We partnered to celebrate a Disney wish granted for a special child and helped celebrate the holidays together at the 2023. Make-a-Wish holiday party.
- **Meals on Wheels** - We partnered to bring meals and 'Thinking of You' cards to vulnerable seniors
- **NASCAR Foundation** - We helped prepare bikes, helmets and more than 90 goody bags for local children.
- **Relay for Life** - We walked in the fight against cancer to support cancer research and those affected by the disease.
- **Special Needs Rodeo** - We helped pack over 1,000 lunches for kids from across the state attending the rodeo show.
- **United Way** - We participated in the 32nd Annual Day of Caring to help local agencies with several improvement projects.

A Strong Start to 2024

Our employees are proud to continue keeping the spirit of engagement and community involvement alive in and around Florence. With our outstanding 2023 accomplishments behind us, we're maintaining the momentum in 2024 with more volunteer opportunities in the works. #AssurantCares #AssurantProud



Make A Wish 2023



Help4Kids 2024

DHEC OBSERVES WORLD EARTH DAY By Glaciera Brown Mason



FLORENCE - World Earth Day is observed annually on April 22. It demonstrates support for protecting the environment by conserving natural resources and when possible, repairing damage to the earth and reversing trends by the practice of preventive methods. The 2024 global theme of World Earth Day is, “Planet vs. Plastics.” This theme unites students, parents, businesses, governments, churches, unions, individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in a commitment to call for the end of plastics for the sake of human and planetary health. The call demands a 60 percent reduction in the production of plastics by 2040, and a goal of building a plastic-free future for generations to come by achieving **EARTHDAY.ORG’s goals:**

- (1) promoting widespread public awareness of the damage done by plastic to human, animal and all biodiversity’s health, and demanding more research be conducted on its health implications, including the release of any and all information regarding its effects to the public.
- (2) rapidly phasing out all single use plastics by 2030 and achieving this phase out commitment in the United Nations Treaty on Plastic Pollution in 2024.
- (3) demanding policies ending the scourge of fast fashion and the vast amount of plastic it produces and uses; and
- (4) investing in innovative technologies and materials to build a plastic-free world. The “Planet vs. Plastics” campaign is a call to arms, a demand that we act now to end the scourge of plastics and safeguard the health of every living being on our planet.

From the planet, we get our natural resources, air, water, minerals, soil, plants and animals. Therefore, how we care for the planet we inhabit, has become increasingly important. As Americans who enjoy many freedoms and modern conveniences, the switch from paper to plastic bags in 1979, for example, skyrocketed in use around the globe. Our everyday use, and lack of proper disposal of plastics from shopping bags, to bottled water to fast food cutlery and all things in between, has caused our environment to suffer. Our misuse of, and proper plastic disposal has contributed to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is water debris, litter, in the North Pacific Ocean situated about 100 miles north of Hawaii.

For more than 30 years, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) has supported recycling programs in the state. DHEC has a long history of promoting recycling throughout South Carolina, and the agency provides many tools and resources for residents, businesses, organizations and schools to properly recycle.

DHEC’s Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling was created by the S.C. Solid Waste Policy and Management Act of 1991. The Act was the beginning of a comprehensive focus on the safe and efficient management of solid waste, waste reduction, recycling and composting in South Carolina. DHEC’s Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling promotes recycling by providing technical assistance, grant funding and outreach/education programs to local governments and other clients.

South Carolina’s overall recycling efforts have resulted in one of the best state recycling initiatives in the Southeast. There are about 90 recycling programs including nearly 70 curbside, and more than 530 drop-off sites in South Carolina. Since 2000, South Carolinians have recycled more than 28 million tons of material.

For detailed information about recycling programs within Florence County, as well as drop-off locations, visit: [Florence County Recycling Locations | SCDHEC](#).

It is important for Florence County residents and all South Carolinians to recycle to help conserve our state’s natural resources. Doing so, saves energy, provides raw material for manufacturers to make new products, creates jobs, prevents litter, keeps recyclables out of landfills and much more. “We want all South Carolinians to make proper recycling a routine part of their everyday lives so that our communities and state as a whole can reap the benefits of a clean, green, healthy state,” said Richard Chelsey, manager of DHEC’s Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling.

Locally, residents, businesses and various types of community groups and organizations in Florence County all participate in recycling. “DHEC is a proud supporter of Earth Day and uses the day as a great reminder to South Carolinians about how important it is to celebrate and protect our state’s irreplaceable natural resources,” Chelsey shared.

DHEC encourages residents to make daily small changes that benefit our shared natural resources. Changes to create a healthier environment include:

- Recycling
 - Carpooling, biking, walking and riding the bus to reduce car emissions
 - Keeping storm drains free of run-off pollution
 - Conserving water
- Additional World Earth Day facts, DHEC wants you to know:
- Food waste is the number one item disposed of in landfills. One of the biggest things residents can do is to prevent food waste through better practices at home and donation.
 - Rechargeable batteries can pose a human health and environmental risk. It’s important for people to learn how to safely use, store and recycle household batteries. DHEC helped launch the Take Charge: Be Battery Smart public education campaign in November 2023.
 - Recycle right. Putting the wrong thing in the recycling bin is called, “contamination.” If a load of recyclables has too much contamination, it gets thrown away instead of being recycled. Recycle Right SC is an outreach campaign created in partnership with PalmettoPride and provides information on the how, what, where and, the why of recycling.
 - Know what is recyclable. What you can recycle at work may be different from what you can recycle at home, or what you can recycle if you’re visiting someone in a different county. Take a minute to learn what’s accepted for recycling wherever you are by visiting scdhec.gov/RecycleHereSC.

Chelsey has been with DHEC since 1989, and with the Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling since 1991. He is a native of Pennsylvania and studied history as an undergrad and journalism in graduate school.

To learn more about recycling in your community visit: scdhec.gov/recycling. The website provides information about recycling in all 46 counties, plus recycling ‘do’s and don’ts,’ recycling reminders and annual statewide recycling reports and much more.



HORRY SWA PUSHES PROTECTING EARTH EVERY DAY By Dawn "D.A." Goodwin



Esther M. Murphy

CONWAY-Esther M. Murphy is the director of Recycling and Corporate Affairs for the Horry County Solid Waste Authority, Inc. (SWA), where she has been employed since 1993. As director of Recycling and Corporate Affairs, Murphy oversees the operation of the county's 25 recycling convenience centers, directs both the Public Information and Public Education departments, supervises the county's recycling coordinators and acts as corporate records manager and the liaison to the SWA Board of Directors. Although

the Earth Day celebration is only one day, in her role as director, Murphy promotes the SWA's mission of, "Protecting Tomorrow's Environment Today," and every day.

Originally from Newark, New Jersey, Murphy attended Kean College and Roberts-Walsh Business School. She is a certified South Carolina Recycling professional through SC DHEC and a certified collection system manager. Some of her career accomplishments at the SWA include the continual expansion of the county's recycling and waste reduction programs, the development of several award-winning recycling programs and the construction of the county's 48,000 square foot LEED Certified Material Recovery Facility.

The SWA promotes and encourages reduction, reuse and recycling of plastics in order to prevent these materials from being landfilled. "Plastic and the use of plastics has become ingrained in our everyday lives. Even though the use of plastics has become second nature, we have become more aware of the environmental harm done to our planet and global community from these plastics," said Murphy. "However, we are also a huge proponent of prevention whenever possible. To that end, the SWA encourages all residents and businesses to first look to prevent the creation of waste, to include plastic waste. As a part of our public education program, the SWA routinely encourages citizens to reduce the amount of plastics they utilize on a daily basis. The decision to utilize a reusable bag, say no to plastic utensils and straws, use a reusable cup instead of a single use bottle, will significantly reduce the amount of plastic and microplastic negatively affecting our environment and population. Through presentations, tours, community meetings, etc. SWA staff constantly educates the public on the importance of recycling plastics and reducing and/or eliminating the amount of plastic they utilize."

According to Murphy, one of the established goals of the SWA is, "to provide educational programs to the public on responsible waste management, with an emphasis on source reduction, reuse, recycling and environmental protection." "This is a daily, ongoing task at the SWA," she said. "However, Earth Day gives the SWA the opportunity

to educate and promote the importance of protecting and sustaining our Earth with others across the globe. On Earth Day we accomplish this task by thanking and recognizing residents for their recycling and environmental protection efforts, informing them on how and why their efforts have made a difference and educating citizens on what more can be done to create positive change that will be of benefit to the sustainability of our Earth. Most often we accomplish this through community and school events, social media, print/television advertising and on our website, www.SolidWasteAuthority.org."

Murphy pointed out how Earth Day gives us the opportunity to recognize and celebrate the Earth and all the wonders it offers. "We often say we only have one Earth, and we should do all we can to promote its sustainability. Earth Day gives us a specific date to take part in various environmental efforts to promote the protection of our Earth. Just as we celebrate other holidays, Earth Day should be celebrated, but with an emphasis on making a change that will positively affect our environment," she said.

This year on Earth Day, April 22, Horry's SWA will be partnering with Santee Cooper, the Myrtle Beach SkyWheel and several other local groups/agencies on an Earth Day community event to be held at the skywheel. The public is invited to come out and learn more about how they can make a positive difference to our environment. Citizens are encouraged to celebrate Earth Day with their own act of kindness to the earth. Murphy described several ways in which the community can help: "Whether planting a tree, composting food waste, creating an all-natural garden, performing a cleanup in your neighborhood or community or simply purchasing a reusable bag instead of using a single-use plastic bag, you would be a part of the solution to improve our Earth."

"In addition, each July, the SWA participates in, 'Plastic Free July,' a global campaign encouraging citizens to be a part of the solution to plastic pollution by eliminating or significantly reducing the amount of plastic used during the month of July and hopefully beyond," said Murphy.

Visit www.SolidWasteAuthority.org for more information on all SWA services and programs.

Murphy is a member of several professional associations, including the Solid Waste Association of North America, the Carolina Recycling Association and the South Carolina Public Records Association. She was appointed and served several years on the SC Recycling Market Development Advisory Council and has served on several local committees and councils. In addition, she attends Come As You Are Bible Fellowship.

Esther Murphy is married to Kendall Murphy, and they have two daughters. She enjoys spending time with her family, reading and watching TV. She and her family reside in the Coolspring community of Horry County.

Earth Day

should encourage us to reflect on what we are doing to make our planet more sustainable and livable place.





Dr. Dionne Hoskins-Brown

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, Senator Gaylord Nelson initiated World Earth Day in the spring of 1970 to create a safer and cleaner earth by tackling environmental concerns. Since that time, several environmental practices have been implemented as safeguards. For 2024, Earth Day is dedicated to reducing plastic production 60 percent by 2040. According to Dr. Dionne Hoskins-Brown, chair of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and a research fishery biologist, she believes that Earth Day's plan is an ambitious goal understanding the use of plastics by everyone to include the

it in Alaska, Americans think it is awesome and cool. If someone does it on a barrier island and happens to be Gullah Geechee then they want to call it poverty, I do not receive that."

Today, Gullah Geechee people are being much more attentive to the governance processes that counties are developing for their long-range plans. She feels what is not a good thing, but what we see is true, is that Gullah Geechee communities are in the center of areas that coastal counties want to protect and preserve, and Gullah Geechee voices are not always at the table. When resilience plans are being developed by planning commission, county planners and some of the elected and municipal bodies say, 'hey this is what we need to do to make sure that our county is resilient to the inevitable changes that are coming,' Gullah Geechee voices have not been at the table before, but they are there now. They are now reading county documents to be able to offer strategies that would not only preserve the land, but ownership as well.

Hoskins-Brown gives the example of documents that might say that retreat is a good strategy, is not a strategy Gullah Geechee people are looking at seriously. "There are some places in coastal Georgia that some of the ideas about how to deal with sea level rise have been strategic retreat. Strategic retreat means that you are not going to live there anymore. That is not an answer, so other options are being researched. Maybe the strategy may be to elevate. If one were to drive through one of the Gullah Geechee communities, one may think this is not an option because of the small home, and say it is not cost effective. That is not true because indeed Gullah Geechee people are looking at this very thing and can afford it."

What does Hoskins-Brown believe the environmental future of resilience, sustainability and preservation look like? She says it is going to be a challenge. She believes the voices of Gullah Geechee people, communities, residents and coastal areas are going to start to get louder and amplified. The Gullah Geechee people will be more respected as the decision makers figure out, they are not going to be able to ensure resilient coastal environments without everybody signing on and agreeing to what resilience is going to be like for them including the Gullah Geechee community. The decision makers are going to learn Gullah Geechee people are well-read voices that have generations of local ecological knowledge to help with environmental protections and conservation strategies. She feels when they finally listen, they are going to be surprised with what they hear from Gullah Geechee communities. The community value that has something to offer for future forward strategies.

Lastly, next there will be an inevitable incorporation of economic strategies to be resilient. Resilience and advocacy in areas that people do not think are green or earth related, really are.

Gullah Geechee people will need to be looked at as a whole.

"Gullah Geechee communities are just like other communities. We, Americans, like our microfiber, and fleece, we like it because it is warm. We also like our jeans with the stretch because they fit better. It will be very, very hard for us to move away from our use of plastics," said Hoskins-Brown. "All of those things contain plastic, as microplastics don't just come from drink bottles. Every time we wash that fleece it is in the water system, and everyone is drinking it. You can count in vegan leather shoes. So, it is going to be very, very hard for us to get away from convenience and addition of plastics."

While In South Carolina, Gullah Geechee people have always been good stewards of heritage culture and ultimately the land in terms of conservation, resilience and preservation. The purpose of The Corridor is to preserve, share and interpret the history, traditional cultural practices, heritage sites and natural resources associated with Gullah Geechee people of coastal North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

In relation to Earth Day and environmental resilience, the early commissioners of the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor anticipated natural resources and environmental challenges that were going to face Gullah Geechee communities. Much like regular society, they did not know what the challenges were going to be to make sure The Corridor was intact and to make sure its communities would be okay. Today, Gullah Geechee communities get together to talk about what they are experiencing up and down The Corridor, to learn best practices that are adaptable to save the earth.

"There is great work to be done by communities, for communities, about communities to help with infrastructure and resilience of The Corridor," Hoskins-Brown said.

She explains that traditional local ecological knowledge is recognized as having a strong role in how Gullah Geechee communities are being resilient. Traditional local ecological knowledge in many communities such as traditional native American communities and first nations climate change is a slow modification over time that will need to be responded to in modern ways. Gullah Geechee people are using the same value system and ethos of paying attention to what is happening in the natural environment and responding to it. That is the basis of environmental sustainability that has not been acknowledged by the decision makers because it has not been recognized as true stewardship.

"Decision makers have looked at Gullah Geechee communities that are verdant and green, modest and not overly built to be believe that it is just an indication of lack of wealth and no intentionality towards sustainable living. If someone builds a cabin; makes it off grid; modest and only what they need; calls it a tiny house, and puts



The Corridor Shore Line



Sandra Gamble

Life opportunities are often interrupted by responses to past events that affect the future. Adverse childhood experiences can alter what adults endure in their lives. Many children are abused, neglected or witness violence and parents or guardians do not make positive development their priority. In order to prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), parents must be educated about those factors. Children learn from the behaviors they witness in their closest environments, such as their homes, schools or other outside places. Childhood experiences become

adverse because safety and stability are undermined. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 64 percent of children experienced ACEs before their 18th birthday.

It is necessary to educate parents and communities about prevention of ACEs to change outcomes. Without prevention education, abused children become adults who face various health conditions from depression, substance abuse and physical and mental illnesses. Unfortunately, without acknowledging the challenges of the past, they will continue to plague our community and the consequences will be detrimental to our society. If unaddressed, adults will have negative health effects and toxic stress. When adult survivors are educated about their adverse experiences they will have better healing journeys.

Sandra Gamble is a survivor of her own adverse childhood experience. Instead of allowing victimhood to rule her life, she turned her trauma into

strength. Gamble began to want to understand her father's problems with bipolar disorder. That scary moment in her life led her to explore mental problems and the effects on families. In search of answers, Gamble obtained her BS degree in Psychology and a master's degree in counseling with an emphasis on mental health in 2006. She was determined to make the pain pay! She worked as a mental health counselor for 11 years in adult services.

In 2021, Gamble became the founder and CEO of Hope Dealer Wounded Healer LLC, where she focuses on assisting people, especially women, to acknowledge their childhood trauma and or abuse and provide them with tools and strategies to help them reach their best selves. She also offers coffee shop talk as a safe space for people to receive counseling in a nontraditional setting. She meets people at a coffee shop for confidential counseling and conversations. She is passionate about helping people heal their emotions. She has written three self-help books to assist people with personal growth and development. The first book, "To Hell and Back, The Power of Forgiveness and Redemption," chronicles her life, her abuse, removing the stigma from mental illness and the power in forgiveness. Her second book, "Good Grief," addresses the five stages of grief and how to effectively navigate through the five stages. Gamble's third book, "Give Up To Glow," discusses the six things that we need to give up in order to glow/win in life.

All books are available through her website Dealinghopenotdope.com and also available on Amazon.com. Her life motto is by Dr. Maya Angelo, "When you learn, teach, when you get, give."

Understanding family dynamics helps members to know how to better process issues and grow through healing. Some family relationships can be very tumultuous, but receiving help from counselors, especially those who are familiar with family dysfunction may bring understanding so they can heal.

JOURNEY TO BEING MADE WHOLE *By Cynthia Ford*



Martina Rush

The stigma of mental health services has been a barrier for individuals in need of treatment. The negative connotation leads to generational cycles of unaddressed mental health needs. It takes patience and a special type of professional to provide adequate mental health services to clients. Martina Rush, a future licensed mental health counselor, has been an advocate and a listening ear to individuals and families for many years.

Rush recently retired after thirty years of service in education. Over the years, she served in various roles, including elementary and middle school teacher,

middle school assistant principal, elementary school principal and director of student services. Rush earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Master of Science in Educational Leadership. She is completing her master's in clinical mental health counseling at Webster University.

Rush has observed the continuous negative stigma regarding mental health services and the total perception of mental health. She currently advocates for more access to services in rural counties. Rush believes there is a level of awareness of the need for mental health services, but there should be a more significant push towards acknowledging that it is okay to seek assistance.

Before retirement, Rush advocated for mental health services on a community level and helped facilitate mental health services at the alternative school for students. She urges that there should also be stronger awareness and action at the church level, and people should believe it is okay to seek professional counseling. "Some believe if you love the Lord, it is enough. However, we love the Lord and still seek physical help when needed from doctors," Rush said. "We have things we need to unpack, and if you do not, it will keep piling up," Rush said.

Many community members have connected with Rush through her roles at schools, church or in ministry. Rush would love to continue to participate in community events to be the voice families are connected with and the face they are familiar with seeing. This connection serves as the bridge that will help bring down stigma.

As a child, Rush desired to be a teacher. She has completed her aspirations in the educational setting. Her desire to provide mental health counseling services evolved over time. "It was a part of my healing and destiny," stated Rush. Rush aspires to operate a private practice, integrating a spiritual model without imposing any religion over others. Rush's life experiences and events have made her whole so that she can help others become whole.

Rush recalls meeting families who had children with generational mental health concerns, and the parents did not recognize the urgency for treatment services. Rush believes the COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase in the need for mental health services. This led to an increase in the demand for telemental health therapy. Rush will offer telehealth services throughout the state and beyond state lines while maintaining compliance with counseling compacts and individual state requirements.

Rush dived deeper into the field of mental health services by gaining knowledge to complete her upcoming counseling certifications and participating as a client. This move allowed her to unpack internally and to serve as an advocate more significantly.

"Everyone needs a safe place where they can release things that are bound inside," shared Rush.

She continues to learn in educational settings and through professional networks. Rush notes that talk therapy is important; however, it is important to understand that some start with talk, and others require a different approach based on their needs.

Rush's treatment technique involves getting to know the client to establish a deeper rapport. Her ultimate goal is to guide them to a place where they will be made whole without judgment. "If they seek services, they want help," Rush said. She believes in having an understanding heart and wise lips to help clients transition from dark places to being mentally healthy, stable and whole.

PEE DEE MENTAL HEALTH CENTER OFFERS SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

By Susan Carter



Sharolyn Howard

MARION-School Mental Health is a vital part of Pee Dee Mental Health's (PDMH) services. Master's level clinicians provide year-round individual, group, and family services to students in Marion, Florence, and Darlington counties. Clinicians provide services to students at their assigned schools when school is in session. This out-stationed setting allows easier access to mental health services and removes the stigma youth may feel about visiting a mental health clinic. During the holidays and summer breaks, PDMHC counselors offer group

skill-building sessions in the community and continued individual and family therapy. Sharolyn Howard and Eugene Crosser are PDMH counselors serving Marion County students.

Sharolyn Howard usually sees four to five students daily, ranging from ages eight to 13, including elementary and middle school students. She serves Marion Intermediate School in Marion as well as McCormick Elementary School and Palmetto Middle School, both in Mullins. Howard divides her time between Marion Intermediate School on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday and McCormick Elementary and Palmetto Middle on Wednesday (a half day at each).

Howard reports that regardless of their age, the common issues students work on in counseling are anger, decision-making, and focusing in class. She notes, however, that some middle school students she serves "tend to have issues with depression and self-esteem." Howard uses cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and trauma-focused CBT to help students with these concerns.

The most challenging part of her job is working successfully with the student's caregivers, as many parents and guardians are overwhelmed with their own work and personal lives and find it challenging to be fully present and willing or able to participate in family therapy. Howard is concerned about how students struggle to cope with issues and how they become angry so easily and quickly; impulses are also a concern. Another concern is suicidal thoughts and how students tend to disclose that they want to "tap out" versus dealing with their issues. She believes the avoidance behavior is due to the student's struggle to understand how to express their feelings or deal with issues without causing harm to themselves or others. She says, "I think getting students to talk about their feelings without being judged can help knowing that they are not the only ones who are dealing with life issues."

Howard likes her job because she enjoys helping others. "It is a joy to see students persevere while dealing with issues," Howard said. "I feel great when kids know they can count on me when they need help. I also like the autonomy and trust I receive from the school officials and teachers. Of course, seeing the direct results of my efforts makes it so rewarding."

School mental health counselors see students of various ages at different schools. Crosser typically counsels between three and six students each day, depending on if the student is present for school. Crosser works with students in fifth grade up to high school. He covers students at Mullins Intermediate School, Mullins High School, the Success Academy (Mullins), Palmetto Middle, Marion High, Hartsville Middle & High School, and Darlington Alternative and Middle School. Crosser conducts the



Eugene Crosser

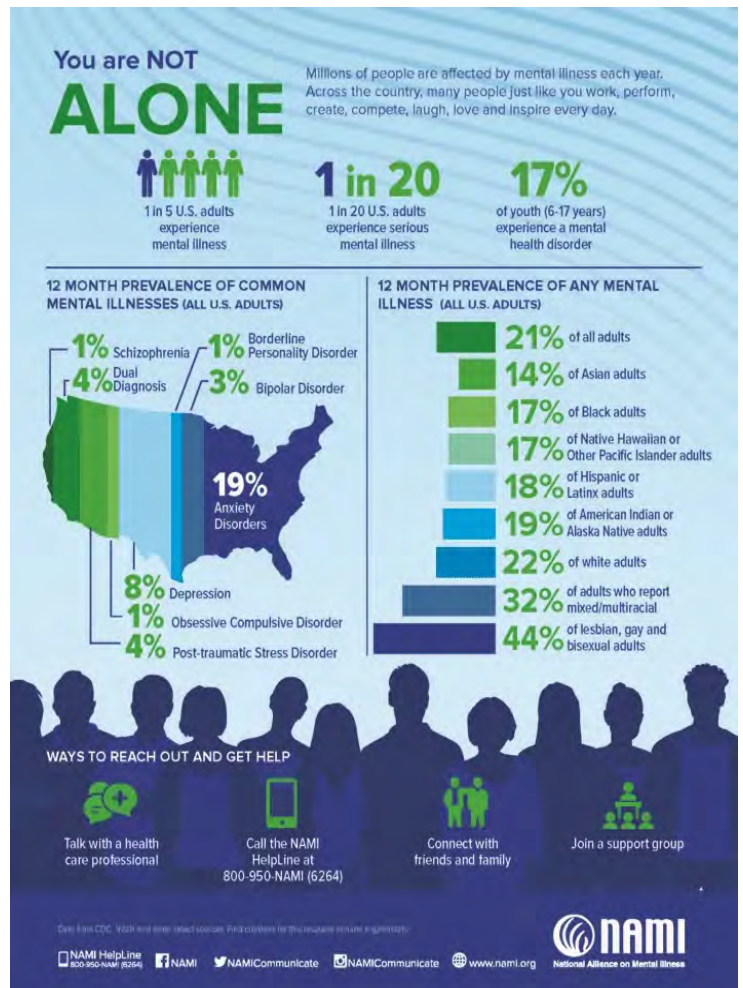
appointments in the student's residence and Pee Dee Mental Health Center's offices, depending on the student's school status.

The purpose for student referrals varies based on the student's age. Crosser has observed that middle school students have issues with fitting in, being picked on, trouble focusing, respecting themselves and authority, and depression. High school students are often referred due to not respecting others, depression, anxiety, bullying, difficulty focusing, and considering the meaning of their lives, which can be related to depression/anxiety."

Crosser uses play therapy, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), skills system skills, multi-disciplinary family therapy (MDFT), distress tolerance, and conflict resolution techniques. "I don't stick to one treatment method because circumstances change, and one does not always reach every youth," Crosser explains.

When asked about his challenges in helping young people resolve their problems and behaviors, Eugene responded, "Some of the challenges I face are parents not being involved on a regular basis and young people acting like they have it all under control." Crosser believes social media is another barrier that prevents students from being authentic because they are surrounded by so much social media and pressured to compare themselves to their peers. "From an early age, they need to see their value in themselves and how wonderfully they have been created, and they have value no matter what," stated Crosser.

The benefits of counseling youth in a school setting outweigh the challenges Crosser experiences. Crosser enjoys seeing young people develop into someone they admire and transform into someone who can grow and manage difficulties using skills and personal strengths as they mature mentally.



MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE BRIGHTER DAYS By Susan Carter



Susan Carter

Brighter Days Conference: Community Education and Conversation on Suicide Awareness and Prevention for First Responders, Health Care Providers and Educators on May 16, at the Florence Conference Center.

Lynn Bullock, DBA and president of The Jonathan Foundation, has planned the upcoming Brighter Days Conference as the culmination of the foundation's work on three key campaigns that support American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's (AFSP) Project 2025. Project 2025 aims to reduce suicide by 20 percent by 2025.

AFSP has identified key opportunity areas or gaps within our community that, if addressed with evidenced-based practices, could have more impact on reducing suicide.

The Jonathan Foundation's first campaign, The Will George Project, focuses on health care and counseling. The research has shown that 45 percent of individuals who complete suicide was seen by their primary care providers in the month preceding their death and 38 percent were seen in an emergency department in the year preceding their death. Training provided at the conference will help primary care, emergency departments and counseling offices by providing training on implementing standardized risk assessment screening, the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS). Primary care and emergency room physicians, nurses, counselors and all who screen patients will be given the tool and training to identify those who may be at risk.

The Jonathan Foundation's second campaign, The Robert Duffee Project, focuses on education. Research clearly shows the growing epidemic of mental health issues among students. As of last July 2023, we now have counselors in all schools. To increase their effectiveness and ability to identify youth at risk of suicide, the Brighter Days Conference is providing training on the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale to all educators and asking that all schools- public and private- implement standardized risk assessment screening.

The third campaign, the Jonathan Smith Project, focuses on increasing awareness of first responders- EMS and law enforcement on how to recognize and respond to individuals showing signs of a mental health condition. The research is clear that de-escalation and proper crisis intervention training is critical when engaging individuals in a mental health crisis. The Jonathan Foundation seeks to provide all EMS and law enforcement with effective crisis intervention training

at the Brighter Days Conference.

The inaugural Brighter Days Conference is a culmination of this work and will be held at the Florence Center on May 16. The Jonathan Foundation has set many goals and asks of the community to improve suicide awareness and prevention and now, will provide the training, as well as open a community conversation across sectors on the issue of suicide.

The target audience is health care administrators, behavioral health administrators, emergency department administrators, primary care providers, counselors, nurses and other health care providers, school and college administrators, school nurses, behavioral health therapists and teachers, law enforcement and EMS providers.

The conference is underwritten by the Bruce-Lee Foundation, Nemec-Abbott Foundation, with co-collaboration by DHEC and PDMH, with MUSC Health as presenting and McLeod Health as Gold sponsors. Jean Leatherman will provide opening remarks.

An opening session by Rob Durant, senior administrative officer for MUSC Charleston will present an overview of the Leatherman Behavioral Health Hospital projects and plans for Behavioral Health within the Pee Dee.

Breakout session training for the three audiences—health care, educators and first responders-will be led by speakers from the Departments of Mental Health and the Department of Health and Environmental Control.

The conference will provide a virtual keynote with Dr. Daniel Amen of the Amen Clinics and a private VIP event for executive leadership and legislators in mental health, health care, education, law enforcement and EMS to dialogue with Amen and ask questions related to the developments in mental health in our community including the new hospital and the new SCDMH transitions grant. In addition, the DHEC Data Walk team will present suicide incidence data for our region.

Bullock is looking forward to extending the community impact of The Jonathan Foundation's work in suicide awareness and prevention, "We are excited about the learning that will occur May 16, but equally important, we are excited about the community conversation this conference will open. Participants will have the opportunity to sign up for post-conference workgroups that will come together to address the issue of suicide within our community."

To register or sponsor, please visit the Brighter Days Conference Eventbrite page by scanning the QR code or clicking on the following link: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/brighter-days-conference-tickets-815392078657>

SUPPORTING OUR SUPERHEROES

By Susan Carter



Lewis Holland, Pee Dee Mental Health Counselor

Pee Dee Mental Health Center Counselor Lewis Holland, MS, LPC-A, provides mental health services to first responders in the Pee Dee region, including Darlington, Florence, Marion and Horry counties. He has received advanced training in several evidence-based practices, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) and trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy, allowing him to assist traumatized law enforcement officers and emergency services providers without becoming overwhelmed by the experiences these first responders

report. Most general counselors do not treat first responders enough to become familiar with and resilient to every day "war stories" that first responders accumulate while protecting and assisting their communities. First responders who sought help in the past from non-trauma specialists report that their counselors became traumatized themselves by listening to their stories of lives lost by fire, accident or crime. The sessions resulted in the responder dropping out of therapy to avoid causing their "helper" further stress and discomfort. South Carolina Department of Mental Health's (SCDMH) program, in contrast, provides counselors with up-to-date training and experience working with first responders so that they understand their work procedures and meet them off-site at a church or other neutral location to avoid any discomfort they may experience receiving services at a mental health center where they may be accustomed to bringing inmates for services in their professional capacity.

In addition to witnessing a traumatic event, Holland explains that

SUPPORTING OUR SUPERHEROES CONT'D

some first responders, such as dispatchers, are traumatized by what they do following their initial encounter with the caller. “The dispatcher takes the 911 call and stays on the line, hearing the distress of the caller and perhaps gunshots or screams, but does not know what is happening to responders and victims.” In some cases, Holland stated, “there may have been a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but “the dispatcher does not know that and may continue to be traumatized by what they heard.” Dispatchers may “feel like they don’t matter” because they don’t receive updates on what happened after the 911 call. Dispatchers, front-line responders, and family members of all first responders are offered counseling through SCDMH’s First Responder Program, including individual and family therapy.

Holland enjoys collaborating with the first responder peer support teams to share resources and training. The Firefighters Assistance Support Team (FAST) and the SC Law Enforcement Assistance Program (SC LEAP) create support teams for their peers who have experienced work-related trauma. Together, Holland, our region’s SC LEAP and FAST teams attend trainings to develop skills to use when

they perform critical incident de-briefings in the Pee Dee. Counselors and specially trained peers join to conduct debriefings of critical incidents, such as when an officer is hurt or killed on duty, a prison inmate dies by suicide, or a car accident results in multiple lost lives in a community.

During the critical incident debriefings, Holland provides the peer support group with insight into potential stress and other aftereffects of critical incidents. There are also state-wide post-critical incident seminars held several times each year in Columbia in which EMDR therapists like Holland can receive advanced training to boost their skills and ensure they stay up to date on the latest trends in this effective trauma treatment.

Holland enjoys working with First Responders and appreciates the opportunity to show his appreciation to law enforcers, “This community has been demonized and only bad ones are publicized. They are essentially superheroes and deserve our support for keeping our community safe. They are human; if I can help them, they can be more effective at keeping us safe.”

GROWING THROUGH COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS *By Susan Carter*



Lee Fletcher

South Carolina Department of Mental Health (SCDMH) School Mental Health (SMH) Program Director Lee Fletcher coordinates statewide initiatives, develops, expands and promotes the SMH program and coordinates with the Department’s community mental health centers to ensure service quality. This school year, more than 330 clinicians are serving over 600 schools, and SCDMH is working to expand SMH services to support Governor Henry McMaster’s desire to see a school-based mental health counselor in every school in

South Carolina.

Fletcher’s passion for SMH is due to his belief in the value of the program: “School mental health is more than just clinicians providing therapy in schools. SCDMH SMH clinicians work hard to become a part of their school communities so that they are more accessible to students, faculty and staff. They provide additional support by participating in multi-tiered systems of support teams, being available for crisis situations, offering presentations on mental health to the faculty, and providing other services that contribute to the well-being of the children in the schools.”

Partnerships are an important part of SCDMH SMH, so the program partners with the University of South Carolina (USC) to improve counselors’ skills in multiple ways. Primarily, SCDMH is a long-term sponsor of the annual Southeastern School Behavioral Health Conference. The conference, which offers clinicians the opportunity to deepen their understanding of school mental health and make connections with other professionals in the field, will host approximately 60 SCDMH clinicians and administrators in person and more than 125 who will participate virtually.

Additionally, the USC School Behavioral Health Team helps the department manage the John H. Magill Mental Health Certificate Program for graduate students in their final year of study in a relevant health or human services degree. “The interns receive 30+ hours of SMH-specific professional development and are asked to complete 600 internship hours within the SCDMH SMH program at a local center. They often receive over 150 hours of clinical experience in schools, observing and providing individual, family and group therapy under a provisional license. More than 40 students have participated

in the program since it began in 2018, and more than 80 percent of graduates have gone on to become full-time SCDMH SMH clinicians,” said Fletcher. Fletcher added that SCDMH representatives serve on the USC School Behavioral Health Academy advisory board, which offers input into the previous and current learning modules and advises on other aspects of the program.

The USC School of Medicine provides courses required for professional licensure at no cost to the SCDMH mental health professionals taking the courses. The USC College of Nursing provides a psychiatric nurse practitioner to work with SCDMH clinicians located in Kershaw County, as well.

“We are also partnering with USC School of Medicine to provide a wellness program to improve the wellbeing of school mental health clinicians. It is an eight-week program with two live, online sessions per week (training and practice sessions). Each week focuses on a different topic (e.g., meditation, holistic healing, self-compassion, and emotional intelligence) that we hope will not only improve the well-being of the clinicians who participate but also teach them techniques they can use in their practice with their patients,” Fletcher said.

Fletcher believes that the future of SMH in our state is bright. “As schools, private providers and telehealth providers continue to join SCDMH in the provision of SMH services, opportunities for students to be seen by mental health counselors will continue to grow,” he said. “SCDMH will continue to seek out new master’s level mental health professionals and bachelor’s level counselors to meet the needs of our patients.”





Behavioral Health

Behavioral Health

Our trained behavioral health team specializes in creating an environment that is comfortable and welcoming for all. We strive to help our patients achieve their goals and to maintain an optimal quality of life. Our Genesis Healthcare promise is to offer compassionate, high-quality care that you can depend on.

If you have been experiencing any of the following, ask your primary care provider about scheduling a behavioral health appointment:

- Worry, anxiety or paranoia
- Feeling isolated or lonely
- Inability to focus on daily tasks
- Difficulty sleeping
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- A lack in energy, motivation or interest in activities you normally enjoy
- Problems overeating or neglecting eating
- Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships

At Genesis Health Care, we believe your mental health is just as important as your physical health. That's why we offer a range of treatment options and assessments to help our patients flourish. Your mental well-being is essential to an overall quality of life. We offer a safe space for patients to seek help, guidance and treatment in their mental health journey.

Our behavioral health counselors, social workers, therapists and psychiatrists provide the following services:

- Behavioral Health Screening and Assessments
- Mental Health Treatment
- Individual, Family and Group Counseling
- Pediatric Psychiatry Services
- Medication Counseling/Management

Behavioral health services are currently offered at the following locations:

Genesis Healthcare Darlington

115 A Exchange Street
Darlington, SC 29532
843-393-9421

Olanta Family Care

211 S. Jones Road
Olanta, SC 29114
843-396-9730

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THE CITY OF FLORENCE: MAKING A HOUSE YOUR HOME

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Retha Brown

Florence, South Carolina is a growing city, and its revitalization continues to capture state and national attention. The community's successful transformation has established a market for private investment, aided in the creation of jobs, and generated opportunities for future development providing residents and visitors desired amenities and entertainment options which are conducive to a selling point for becoming a resident. City officials plan to revitalize different areas in

Florence and improve community relations. "Issues like vacant and abandoned properties, neglectful property maintenance and illegal activity must be improved in order for these areas to prosper. Therefore, in an effort to establish a revitalization plan that addresses these issues, the Neighborhood Action Plan was completed in January 2013. The plan is a compilation of residents' concerns, and areas that have been identified as impediments to neighborhood vitality."

The City of Florence implemented a home buying program which qualifies, in most cases, people with various financial backgrounds. Participants are given credit information; mortgage lender lists and housing floor plans for the homes built by the city of Florence.

City staff meets with individual clients and creates a plan to determine their financial status and creditworthiness. The city contributes \$30,000 in down payment assistance for participants in the program. Retha Brown, community relations manager, who has worked for the City of Florence for eighteen years, said the program increases the likelihood of potential homebuyers owning their homes. The home buying process begins with information about the program

and expectations from prospective buyers to encourage success. "They are presented a checklist of sorts that shows what home buyers will need to accompany applications. It helps them keep track of all necessary documents and plan for what they will need at closing." Potential buyers receive an eligibility letter after they meet the criteria for the program. The next step is pre-approval from the selected lender. Buyers must frequently review and maintain their credit status after eligibility is determined. They are required to follow up with credit changes and pay outstanding debts. After buyers are pre-approved, the search for the house they want to purchase begins. The City of Florence built and sold seventeen homes in the Northpointe Subdivision. The floor plans for the houses include three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a garage. Revitalization is occurring on Vista, Howard and Pine Streets. The program staff are very attentive to buyers who are unfamiliar with the process and assist when needed. Staff are available to answer questions and support buyers in any areas that will encourage them to move forward. "Buyers are consistently motivated by staff," Brown stated. Questions from buyers are welcome because we are here to serve the people." Because the process requires a great amount of work for some buyers, the process can be overwhelming," said Brown. "If you are determined to do something it will happen. You have to want it more."

This nearly ten-year-old program has been a great success in the Florence community. The original home buyers remain in their homes today. Brown said the program is known beyond Florence, SC. They receive multiple inquiries from interested buyers, and some have relocated from another community to Florence. Currently, Brown said, they continue to reach people by sharing information throughout the city. Homeownership Workshops are held monthly at the City Center. She said with a smile, "working with buyers is so rewarding! I love what I do!"

Home Ownership Month

City of Florence Neighborhood Revitalization

Are You Interested In Becoming A Homeowner?

SCAN ME!

Neighborhood Revitalization for Florence

For More Information, Contact the City's Community Services Department at (843) 665-3175 or rbrown@cityofflorence.com



Tytica Small and LaKeisha Shannon real estate agent

There are several definitions for first-time homebuyer. One definition is any person who has not owned a home in three years before the buying of a residence (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Let FHA Loans Help You.” Tytica Small is a single female, employed by South Carolina Department of Disability and Special Needs. She loves children but does not have any of her own. Small always wanted to purchase a home of her own for herself. She stated that at the age of twenty-five, it stayed on

her mind more and more.

Small stated, “her mom died in 2021.” That took her mind off purchasing a home for a while. One day she was driving, and her dad called her to tell her he was dying. She said jokingly, “dad this is your second death, you already died once.” Her dad was calling her to tell her to go ahead and purchase her a home of her own. Little did she know that her dad died a short time afterwards. She kept contemplating about a house on and off, until she finally decided she did want to purchase one.

Small remembered one day she was at her aunt’s house, and she didn’t have her cellphone with her, it was in another room of the house. She went to retrieve her phone and when she did there was a picture of a house on her cellphone. She said it kind of startled her, because she had not thought about a house since September of 2023. She

started back inquiring about purchasing a house in December but started hesitating again. Tytica said the house that was on her cellphone resembled the house she grew up in and she wanted that house.

After living in an apartment for twenty years, she was now ready to purchase her home. The house was listed by a person in North Carolina for two hours, so Small contacted Lakesha Shannon a real estate agent with Blueprint Real Estate. Shannon started the process for the purchasing of the house. Small said it was a smooth process, but it became hectic at times because she had transactions on her credit report that needed to be disposed of. Once those transactions were disposed of, she was referred to a finance advisor who handled that part of the process.

Small’s house closing was completed February 13, 2024, she was one happy first-time homeowner. The advice she would give to anyone that wants to be a first-time homebuyer is to make sure your credit report is clean with no hangups. Also, to look at different houses before making your final decision. Talk to a financial advisor so that you know where you stand with your finances. Finally, never give up if one stumbling block is placed in your way let that be your motivation to continue the process.

Small highly recommends Shannon, she is a realtor that is willing to help you through each step of the process of purchasing a home.



FIRST-TIME HOMEBUYERS GAINING VALUABLE ASSETS



The Augustyniak Family

The American dream is becoming a first-time homebuyer. Purchasing a home is a valuable asset that will grow in the future. Purchasing a home for the first time can be very challenging. It requires many tasks and requirements that can become overwhelming, especially if the purchaser thinks they are making a costly mistake. There are more advantages available now for first-time homebuyers that gives them some encouragement. Purchasing a home is a big investment that has to be thought about carefully.

First-time home buyers need support and guidance to making decisions towards the purchase of their new home. Mr. and Mrs. Augustyniak have purchased their second home; their first home was a starter home. Mr. Augustyniak said, “he and his wife already knew they wanted a bigger home and needed more space for their family. Also, the area in which they found their new home was more accommodating for the family as well. Mr. Augustyniak conveyed, “his daughter and his realtor’s daughter basically grew up together.”

So basically, he was already familiar with his realtor Rوبرiccو “Rob” Porter (Coldwell Banker McMillan and Associates). He had a good working relationship with him when it came to purchasing their home. He felt very confident using Porter as his agent, he was very demystified in the process. Mr. and Mrs. Augustyniak were already prepared for the questions that he and his wife were going to ask about

the purchasing of a new home. The Augustyniak acknowledged that Porter did a wonderful job on the coaching aspects of the purchasing of their new home.

Before searching for a home be mindful about your finances, don’t choose the first house you see and fall in love with it, ask plenty of questions and make sure you choose a realtor that knows the ins and out about purchasing a home, someone that is truthful with you. This process included finding the property, acquiring the finances, making an offer, getting home inspection and the closing. Mr. Augustyniak said, “the process was completed in a timely manner and not overwhelming for him and his wife.”

Mr. Augustyniak stated he has recommended Porter to others who are in the process of purchasing a home. Porter is very experienced in the area he services, he goes over and beyond for his customers. Whether it is an investment or forever home, he makes sure both sides are satisfied.



REAL ESTATE AGENTS AS CLIENTS Articles by Ronette Genwright



The Porter Family

Robricco “Rob” Porter is a realtor with Coldwell Banker McMillan & Associates. Rob has sold plenty of houses and real estate properties. He and his wife Samantha have purchased several homes. Rob has always been great with money management in every aspect of their lives. He always thinks about how things will affect his family’s future. When house hunting Samantha states that her husband will always find exactly what she wants, but it’s going to be at the most reasonable price.

The Porters acknowledge that just because they are approved for a loan or have a certain amount of money to spend, “does not” mean that’s what he’s going to do. Rob is always looking at the best options for the cheapest price while still meeting all the wants and needs. What Rob applies to his everyday life; he applies to his clients as well. He is not looking to spend all of his client’s money, he wants to do the exact opposite actually, which Samantha feels is a very hard characteristic to find these days, especially in the housing market.

Rob truly looks at the purchase of real estate as a future investment for his family. The question is asked when purchasing properties, will this property be a good investment that can help build their book of business; or is it going to become costly when it is time to repair things? Another question Rob and Samantha asked themselves is, “Will this home be the one they can grow their family, or will they actually outgrow it? Rob thinks about the bigger picture that Samantha thinks she and a lot of other home buyers forget, while just looking at the physical and materialistic features.

Buying a house is not always a smooth process. Samantha mentions “that sometimes it’s inevitable that there maybe some hurdles like inspections or things that may be out of

their control that may arise.” Rob will try his best to handle them himself as much as possible before it gets to the client, especially, if it is based on the other party’s problems. If Rob sees that it is something you really want to go through with, he will try his hardest to make it as smooth as possible. Samantha said, “Rob has always been an out of the box thinker when it comes to problem solving.”

Rob is thought of as a good realtor; he listens to his clients and have their best interests at heart. He goes above and beyond to satisfy his clients and not letting them get into financial trouble that they can’t afford. Rob wants his clients to invest in the future not just in any house. Homeownership is supposed to be an affordable, part of the American dream and considered a big accomplishment in today’s society.



WHY SHOULD YOU REVIEW YOUR HOME INSURANCE ANNUALLY?

The next time you need to renew your insurance policies, consider taking these steps to make sure you understand what your coverages are.

Most often, people purchase a homeowners insurance or renters insurance policy when they first move out and into their new home. Many people pay little attention to the policies after that. Over time, as they make renovations, purchase new items or replace existing appliances, they don't perform home insurance reviews to ensure they are properly covered. This, unfortunately, can lead to a gap in their coverage.

Tips for a successful home insurance review

The next time you need to renew your insurance policies, consider taking these steps to help you get the most out of them.

- **Create a home inventory** - A home inventory is a listing of the property in your home, the date you bought it and what you purchased it for. This list can be used to discuss your needs with your agent as you choose the right coverage.
- **Meet with your agent** - Your insurance needs change over time. Conducting a home insurance review with your agent at least once each year can help you determine if your policies still make sense for your current situation. During this meeting:
 - **Ask about discounts** - Before you renew your policy, speak with your agent about discounts that may be available. You may qualify for discounts for alarm systems, multiline or higher deductibles.
 - **Ask to review your auto policy** - If you combine your home or renters insurance with auto insurance to get a discount, consider reviewing your auto coverage as well. Ask them about any safe driving discounts you might be eligible for.
 - **Review home renovations** - If you have added to your home or updated any rooms in the house, be sure to talk about them with your agent to make sure your coverage reflects the changes.
 - **Talk about any landscaping changes** - Any new sprinkler systems, sheds, pool or even a new riding mower may require changes in your policy.
 - **Share any changes in the appliances** - Like home renovations, updating your furnace or air conditioner can increase the value of your home.
 - **Confirm your home is insured for the estimated cost to rebuild** - State Farm® suggests you select a policy amount equal to at least 100 percent of the estimated replacement cost of your home, but the choice is yours. You should also make sure any replacement cost estimate reflects the actual characteristics of your home. Insuring your home for at least 100 percent of its estimated replacement cost — not the current market value — could give you the means to replace your home entirely in the event of a loss.

Insurance review reminders

Make sure you remember to:

- **Share any significant life changes.** Getting married, having a baby, starting a new home business or even getting divorced may trigger changes to your property that are worth a conversation to address the correct coverage with new needs. Your agent can make you aware of extra coverage available for jewelry and fire arms or additional coverage for business property.
- **Ask questions about current coverage, limitations and exclusions.** You can get the best out of meeting with your agent by asking about your current coverages and understanding any limitations and exclusions to the homeowners policy. You can be better prepared for a loss when you are aware of what is covered and what is not.

For more information about a home insurance review and your policies, contact your State Farm Agent Starlee Alexander (843) 665-7373 or visit www.starleealexander.com.

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We shouldn't have to make financial mistakes to learn about money.

April is a month dedicated to sharing financial literacy in hopes of helping people make better financial decisions. We shouldn't have to make financial mistakes to learn about money, but unfortunately, financial literacy is an essential life skill that has been neglected in our education system. This problem has kept many in poverty and has widened the racial wealth gap. This article will explore the work of a local financial education company, The Responsible Homegirl, and how they are spreading the message of financial literacy.



Students in the HYPE (Helping Students Pursue Education) Program at Carvers Bay High School learning about budgeting and building credit.



**KIONNIE
EPPS**
CONTRIBUTOR

From pain to purpose

Founded in 2020 Kionnie Epps, created The Responsible Homegirl after discovering the world of personal finance and realizing she wasn't the only 20-something struggling with money management. Like many other adults, she arrived at this realization after experiencing a financial mistake that would change the course of her life. In 2016, Kionnie entered the College of Charleston (CofC) as an excited freshman with no student loans! She attended CofC with so many academic scholarships that each semester she received refund checks between five and seven thousand dollars. During her senior year of college, she moved off campus and four months after moving into her brand new apartment, she blew through her seven thousand dollar refund check, was working two jobs with no savings,

and found herself facing eviction. The irresponsible financial decisions had caught up to her, but it wasn't the end of her story.

After cleaning up her financial mess and delving into the world of personal finance, she created The Responsible Homegirl to help her peers learn about money. Since founding the company, she has helped young and older adults learn to budget, save money, increase their credit scores and begin their wealth-building journey. In 2024 alone, she has helped a group of women save \$11,714 in January and \$17,011 in February, and the ladies are on track to collectively saving six figures in six months!

Closing the racial wealth gap

The Responsible Homegirl is on a mission to develop millionaire mindsets through financial education and equip young adults to live lives of freedom, abundance and purpose so that we can ultimately close the racial wealth gap.

When we think about the wealth gap in this country, it traces back to two major systemic events: one, slavery, and two, redlining.

The aftermath of these practices still impacts Black wealth today, which is why we must move with a sense of urgency to learn about money, take action and use the time to our advantage to see substantial growth.

Financial tips for Financial Literacy Month

Many people say, "You can't budget and save your way to wealth," and this statement is true, but building wealth begins with budgeting. Below are three budgeting tips to help you start your wealth-building journey, and if you want more, visit The Responsible Homegirl's blog post: The Best Budgeting Tips (Part 1).

1. Go through your bank statements and identify your spending patterns.
2. Budget every time you get paid.
3. Use pen and paper (check out The Responsible Homegirl Budgeting Planner)

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Every April, National Credit Union Youth Month serves to encourage kids to develop healthy saving habits by making saving fun and exciting. This campaign gives us the opportunity to engage with young members and show them that our credit union is there to help them throughout their financial journey.

A firm financial future starts with saving money for a rainy day. You don't have to save much, but it never hurts to have some cash set aside for life's little unexpected emergencies. Whether you've already started a savings account, need help planning for retirement or just choosing the right checking account, Palmetto First has what you need.

Dollar Dog (0-12 yrs)



Teach your kids how to save, spend and earn from a young age. Basic financial education isn't something typically being taught in schools, so we're giving our Palmetto First parents the resources to teach your kids the basics of money. You can open a Dollar Dog Kids Club Savings Account for each child in your family.

There will be special events and contests at the credit union, and Dollar Dog's Clubhouse is always open for learning, fun and games. A child must

join the credit union to become a member of the Dollar Dog Kids Club. All accounts for members under age 18 must have a parent or guardian co-owner. Dollar Dog is for kids up to age 12.

MyLife Checking (13-18 yrs)



You're gaining more independence. You have more freedom and more responsibility. You're ready to start taking care of some things on your own...why not your money?

MyLife Checking is for teens like you who are ready to take their freedom to the next level. Save and spend your money when you want, for the things you want. You can plan big—your first car, college, your own iPad—or small, having your own debit card when things come up. Either way, you decide.

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Teaching kids about money and finances is **DOG-GONE** important!





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PATHWAY TO ACHIEVEMENT: JESSICA BUTTLES Submitted by Anderson Brothers Bank



Jessica Buttles

MULLINS—Anderson Brothers Bank is thrilled to announce and congratulate Jessica Buttles on her recent election to the South Carolina Young Bankers Association (SCYBA) board. Buttles' leadership skills, dedication and commitment to the banking industry has earned her this incredible position.

The board members of the SCYBA are involved in representing the interests of young bankers in South Carolina, hosting events for professional development, advocating for the banking industry and participating in community activities such as financial education programs or volunteer work. They push to support young banking professionals and contribute as much as possible to the community. She will proudly be allowed to contribute her unique insights and perspectives toward shaping the future of banking in South Carolina. Anderson Brothers Bank has promised to offer all we can to support Buttles as she takes on this exciting journey, confident in her ability to make a meaningful impact within the association and the banking community.

Anderson Brothers Bank takes pride in Buttles' achievement, recognizing her appointment as a reflection of her and the bank's commitment to nurturing talent and growth within the industry.

For more information about Anderson Brothers Bank and its dedication to its community, please visit www.abbank.com.

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An estate plan is not just for high-net-worth individuals, it's for everyone who is single, has a spouse, has a partner, has dependents, owns a business, has investments, has retirement funds, owns

property, or has material possessions of value such as a car. An estate plan may reduce estate taxes and shield your beneficiaries from having to go through probate. It means your last wishes will be heard. You can name a guardian for any young children and can even direct how you wish a beloved pet to be cared for after you are gone. Having an estate plan can also prevent a mess by bringing clarity to your beneficiaries, and it can protect assets from unforeseen creditors.¹

The estate plan² may contain a will or living trust, the names of your beneficiaries, the appointment of an executor, a letter of intent that tells a beneficiary or executor what you wish to be done with specific assets, funeral details, and special requests. It should contain a healthcare directive with a power of attorney appointing a trusted person to make medical decisions for you when you can no longer voice your opinion, and a durable power of attorney appointing a trusted friend or relative to make financial and legal decisions for you, if you become incapacitated. It may also contain a trust or trusts for passing on assets to your beneficiaries. Life insurance can be an important component in the overall estate plan.

You should update your estate plan whenever a major change occurs in your life, such as purchasing a home, moving in with a

significant other, getting married, having or adopting a baby, selling your business, getting a divorce, retiring, or having a beneficiary die before you do. Review your plan when federal and state laws on estate taxes change.

If you should die without a will (which is called "intestate"),³ the state and federal governments will have standard procedures for distributing your assets, and they may not be in line with your wishes. Your beneficiaries may have to pay more in estate taxes, and probate may take considerably longer than it would if you had a will in place.

Consult a professional financial advisor on tax and estate planning. Trusts can be complicated to set up, so consult a professional trusts and estates attorney or certified public accountant before you begin.

This educational, third-party article is provided as a courtesy by Julie A Cord, Agent, (CA Ins. Lic. #4166847) New York Life Insurance Company. To learn more about the information or topics discussed, please contact Julie A Cord at 317.289.3010 or jacord@ft.newyorklife.com.

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TWO IN FIVE AMERICANS DEFINE 'MAKING IT' AS ACHIEVING FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

(BPT) - Financial independence is important to 67 percent of Americans, though nearly a quarter (24 percent) say they haven't yet achieved it, according to new research from Empower, a leader in financial planning, investing and advice.

The definition of "making it" financially varies among spenders and savers, though many equate it with resilience and independence: 44 percent of Americans say it's synonymous with not needing to rely on anyone else for money, 39 percent say it's career advancement and one quarter say it's reaching a certain net worth.

To put a dollar value on it: \$94,000 per year is the magic number average Americans feel they need to earn to achieve financial freedom, and 60 percent feel optimistic they can reach this money milestone.

Top signs you've financially "made it" in life:

- * Being financially independent/not relying on anyone else for money - 44 percent
- * Moving up in my career/getting promoted - 39 percent
- * Having a job I love - 37 percent
- * Making a certain amount of money - 25 percent
- * Not having to work at all - 25 percent
- * Being able to spend money without worrying - 22 percent
- * Being able to pay my bills on time - nine percent
- * Buying luxury items I want - seven percent
- * Being able to retire comfortably - seven percent
- * Buying a home - six percent

Set clear financial goals

Despite having financial aspirations for the future, a majority of people (72 percent) admit they currently stress over their finances at least once per month and nearly one in five (17 percent) say they worry about money

daily.

Getting on track doesn't have a time limit, but it does require a honed focus. "No matter your age, financial independence starts with clarity," underscores Keith Jones, senior financial professional with Empower. "Ask yourself what you want and why you want it. Establishing clear financial goals provides both direction and purpose, motivating you to work towards a more secure and satisfying financial future."

The journey looks different for everyone

Over half (57 percent) of Americans say they still rely on their family and friends for financial support, especially for help paying their rent (62 percent), internet and streaming services (56 percent), and their phone bill (54 percent). Of those who don't feel financially independent, three in 10 (31 percent) are optimistic they will be in the future, while 54 percent don't think they'll ever be able to pay their bills without help.

The majority (92 percent) of financially independent Americans say they only started to feel that way once they reached the age of 36.

Money talks are important

Among parents surveyed, many linked communicating about finances to achieving financial independence, with 57 percent saying they regret not having more money conversations with their children while they were growing up. In fact, three in five parents (60 percent) say if they could turn back the clock and do things differently, they would have made financial literacy a priority.

Although many believe their kids should be able to pay their own bills and expenses by age 23, 40 percent of parents with adult children aged 20 or older currently support them financially. More than half (53 percent) are dipping into their retirement savings to do so and 49 percent say they live with their children to help manage expenses.

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HONORING OUR CENTENARIAN By Cynthia Ford



Anceline Williamson celebrated her 100th birthday.

DARLINGTON - Dedicated Community Bank is known for providing quality services to customers. One of their valued longtime customers has the honor of celebrating a very special birthday this year. Darlington native Anceline Williamson celebrated her 100th birthday on January 10. Williamson gets around well and appears to be much younger than her age.

"I love the Lord. He has been with me and kept me all these

days," stated Williamson.

Williamson stays active as much as possible. She seldom eats out, regularly juices vegetables for consumption and does light exercises in her home. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Williamson exercised at the local gym. Out of precaution, she completes light exercises that she was given to do at home.

Williamson attended Society Hill Elementary, Mayo School in Darlington and graduated from Dudley High School in Greensboro, NC. She moved to New Jersey, where she met her husband, Aurthur Williamson Jr., who was enlisted in the military. Williamson states that he was her tall, handsome sergeant. Shortly after dating, her husband was deployed overseas. She wrote one letter to him, which he did not receive until he returned. As fate would have it, the couple reconnected upon his return to New Jersey. The couple became parents to three daughters and one son. Williamson returned to school to

become a licensed nurse after the children were older. Williamson's husband, one daughter and son passed away, with two daughters remaining with Williamson.

After living in New Jersey for forty years, the Williamson family relocated to Darlington, SC, to the land that was her grandfather's farm. Williamson's father was also a farmer. Williamson retired as a Nurse with McLeod. She worked in the intensive care unit with newborns and still has contact with some of the families she served.

Williamson advises youth today to, "Be obedient to their elders and the Lord." Williamson notes that she, "kept her children in church," and expressed that church is one of the few places she frequents today, along with stores, when accompanied by her children or grandchildren. Williamson desires to leave a legacy of love with her family. "I want them to continue to love one another, be obedient and prepare to have a good life," stated Williamson.

Williamson had eleven siblings, two of whom are in their 90s, and one brother who remains. She has daily contact with her siblings. She enjoys reading, listening to specific segments on the radio, and staying busy each hour. She also enjoys watching shows such as Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune and religious channels.

Williamson has learned much during her lifetime and appreciates the memories she makes with her family. She enjoyed her 100-year birthday celebration with family, who traveled from all over for the prestigious occasion. Williamson also received the key to the city of Darlington after joining the centenarian ranks. She recalls traveling to other countries, such as Europe and France, and a special cruise with her husband. She holds on to knowledge she learned from her parents and recalls memories from her grandparents as well. Williamson is a beacon of inspiration in Darlington County, with decades of wisdom to share with those fortunate enough to cross her path.

"I've had a good life, and I am satisfied," Williamson said.

Happy 100th Birthday

to our dear customer and friend,

Anceline!

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MUSC HEALTH PARTNERS WITH YALE TO EXPAND CLINICAL TRIALS

Submitted by Kimberly McGhee, MUSC Catalyst News



Rami Zebian, M.D., chief medical officer at MUSC Health-Florence

The MUSC Florence Research Center, located at MUSC Health-Florence, is one of four community-based clinical research sites across the Southeast, chosen to participate in the Equitable Breakthroughs in Medicine Development (EQBMED) Initiative.

The initiative seeks to build a clinical trial network of community-based sites to attract more people of color to participate in clinical research. The selection of these sites is part of EQBMED's plan to identify an initial 10 community-facing clinical trial sites in historically underrepresented communities of color across the country.

EQBMED is led by Yale's School of Medicine, which has deep expertise in running clinical trials. Yale's collaborators on the initiative include Vanderbilt University, Morehouse School of Medicine and the Research Centers in Minority Institutions Coordinating Center located at the Morehouse School of Medicine, with grant funding from the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA). EQBMED seeks to bring together researchers, patients, communities and trial sponsors to co-design research studies that will engage people of color and then to make those trials accessible to them in their local communities.

"We are very honored to be chosen as a site and to partner with EQBMED. We know that access is a huge barrier for our patients locally in terms of research," said Rami Zebian, M.D., chief medical officer at MUSC Health-Florence. "Bringing additional clinical trials to the area and building on the efforts that we have spent in developing our research site

locally will be a huge benefit to our patients. As a physician, and I can speak for my colleagues, we are very excited about the prospect of clinical trials here locally."

Traditionally, most clinical trials have been centralized in urban academic medical centers, with the expectation that participants would come to them. However, distance and transportation costs have barred many rural residents, especially those of color, from participation. To address that problem, the EQBMED program aims to restore these communities' trust in science through outreach and community engagement activities. The program is intended to provide people of color easy access to clinical trials in their own communities and to adapt trial designs to better suit the needs and preferences of regional hospitals and the populations they serve.

Through the efforts of the South Carolina Clinical & Translational Research Institute (SCTR), MUSC Health had already begun building research capacity throughout its Regional Health Network. SCTR obtained funding from the Duke Endowment to build clinical trial infrastructure and train personnel at MUSC Health-Florence and other regional hospitals.

Several barriers to pursuing clinical research were identified. Physicians' busy clinical schedules often hindered their ability to lead trials. The local community was not always aware that clinical trials were available nearby. The timely delivery of study medications to community-based sites presented a significant challenge. It soon became clear that more needed to be done to ensure the sustainability of clinical research at the regional sites, and SCTR reached out to the Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) consortium for ideas.

Thanks to these discussions, Tesheia Johnson, chief operations officer of Yale's CTSA, the Center for Clinical Investigation, was aware of both SCTR's ambitions to expand the clinical research footprint in South Carolina and the challenges it faced. She informed SCTR leaders that opportunities existed with EQBMED and nominated the MUSC Florence Research Center as a site.

After applying in October and a virtual site visit by EQBMED leaders in late November, SCTR and Florence leaders were notified in January that they had been chosen as a site, and that Yale would be their hub partner. MUSC will work collaboratively with the Yale EQBMED hub site to expand clinical trial

capacity at the MUSC Florence Research Center and to increase awareness of and access to those trials by the diverse community residing in the greater Florence area. The Yale hub will also create a, "sponsor front door," which will enable industry sponsors to learn more about the site and its capabilities and should help to attract more trials to Florence.

"We have had early success in establishing a research footprint in Florence and other sites through support from the Duke Endowment," said SCTR co-director Patrick Flume, M.D. "This new opportunity will help us grow the program further on a path to sustainability, bringing clinical research to the community."

"The partnership with EQBMED brings to the table experts in this area who can help us to navigate some of the challenges that we have and can bring studies that will benefit the Florence region while being well-suited to community hospitals," said SCTR administrator and director of MUSC's Office of Clinical Research Royce Sampson.

For MUSC Health-Florence, the partnership between the MUSC Florence Research Center and EQBMED will mean that more of its patients and members of the surrounding community have access to cutting-edge therapies through industry-sponsored clinical trials. It will ensure that its physicians can refer their patients and engage in clinical research. It will lead to stronger ties between community hospitals and communities of color and the selection of trials focused on diseases of greatest concern to residents of the region.

For SCTR, it will mean that lessons learned about building sustainable clinical trial infrastructure at MUSC Health-Florence can be applied at other community hospitals in its Regional Health Network.

For EQBMED, this collaboration with MUSC Health-Florence and other selected sites located in racially diverse communities across the Southeast and eventually across the nation will yield more representative data to inform decisions regarding the approval of new drugs and therapies, thereby ensuring equitable access to clinical breakthroughs for all Americans.



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Dr. Ashkia Pinckney, OB/GYN

HARTSVILLE-Though many chapters remain to be written, Dr. Ashkia Pinckney's brief professional journey is one of those "If you can dream it, you can do it" stories – one that demonstrates how inspiration and aspiration can lead a Darlington elementary student with an affinity for science to her calling today as an Obstetrics and Gynecology (OB/GYN) physician at Carolina Pines Medical Group (CPMG).

Pinckney, who joined CPMG in February, says she's wanted to be a physician "ever since I was a little kid," motivated by her

pediatrician, Dr. Flowers, an African American female. That feeling only grew stronger each time she visited the primary care office in her hometown, just down the street from the Darlington courthouse.

"The clinic was filled with people seeking care," she recalled. "I felt like there was a major need for physicians and I saw myself filling that need."

With the dream in place, next came the hard part – doing it. She went to Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. From there, she went to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina, where she gained her medical degree, and then completed an Obstetrics Gynecology Intern Residency at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, and an Obstetrics Gynecology Residency at the University of Tennessee in Memphis, Tennessee.

She earned several awards and accolades during her schooling and residencies and also served as a clinical instructor and assistant residency program director at the University of Tennessee School of Medicine. Her interest and knowledge in women's health blossomed along the way.

"Women's health has always been a passion of mine and my passion has now grown into my purpose," she added. "I believe that if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family because women are usually the people responsible for the health care needs of the family."

After roles as an OB/GYN at the University of Tennessee Region One Health in Memphis, Tennessee, and with the OB Hospitalist Group at McLeod Health in Florence, South Carolina, Pinckney says she is excited to be providing women's health care at CPRMC, close to her Darlington roots.

"I like the area, and that you will never meet a stranger," noted Pinckney, who says she likes to travel, cook, shop, and spend time with her family when she's not seeing patients. "Literally, everyone

knows everyone. I truly enjoy that connection."

She says that such connections and comfort levels are especially critical to Obstetrics and Gynecology, a very personal health care specialty where communication is vital.

"The first step in understanding your patient and being able to treat her is to make her feel comfortable," she pointed out. "OB/GYN for generations has been kind of scary to patients, and previously a very male-dominated role. Now, more women are coming into OB/GYN, and our goal is to make women feel as comfortable as they can be and explain to them what exactly is going to happen in the process."

"I build relationships with my patients by providing them honest and concise care," she continued. "I think that it is so important for a patient to understand what I am telling them about their health care plan. I commonly use analogies and demonstrations to help with my patients' understanding. I also think it is important for a provider to gain their patients' trust and that comes through a clear understanding."



Dr. Ashkia Pinckney, OB/GYN

Her patients likely gain additional comfort as they quickly pick up on Pinckney's passion for her practice.

"I think that women are the most powerful creatures in the world – our bodies can literally grow an entire human and that human goes out and functions and does amazing things," she said. "It is so rewarding when you see a woman transition into a mother – it's like a spark goes off in their eyes and you see them step into their power and step into that role."

That passion made her well-suited for Carolina Pines' plans to grow and improve its women's health services, according to the hospital's CEO.

"We believe Dr. Pinckney is a great addition to our Women's Care team at Carolina Pines Medical Group," said Bill Little, CEO of Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center. "Her skill, compassion and advocacy will serve patients well as we grow this service line to better meet the health needs of women who live or work in our area."

Though only a few weeks into her new role at CPMG, Pinckney is excited about making a lasting impression on women in the area.

"I am looking forward to growing my practice at Carolina Pines and taking care of the women of this community," she added. "I hope to build a legacy where one day I see women in the city telling me that I delivered their children, and eventually, their children's children."

And maybe one day, some of those children might be inspired by Pinckney to pursue their own careers as a physician.

Pinckney practices at Carolina Pines Medical Group's Women's Care services, located at 701 Medical Park Drive, Suite 304 in Hartsville. Patients can schedule an appointment with her online at themedicalgroup.com/womens-care or by calling 843.383.2764.



Dr. Pinckney with patient



Carolina Pines
Medical Group
Primary Care

FOR WOMEN ONLY – DON'T MISS YOUR ANNUAL WELL-WOMAN VISIT

Submitted by Gynecologist - HopeHealth



Mitchel Chere, MD

During COVID and even now, many women have let their annual OB-Gyn appointments lapse, also known as a well-woman, visit. Missing wellness appointments puts women at an increased risk for negative health outcomes. A well-woman visit focuses primarily on services relevant to women's health throughout their reproductive lives, from routine gynecological exams and contraception method options to medical education and an understanding and management of menopause. Often serious medical issues

may not have symptoms; completing a well-woman visit each year is a proactive approach to prevention and early detection of medical problems. Developing an ongoing relationship with your provider also helps build trust and confidence, especially if a medical issue does arise and other treatment or tests are needed. It will also help establish a preventative approach to overall health care.

A well-woman visit focuses primarily on preventive care and usually includes: a review of health habits, family and personal medical history, a physical exam, review of any needed vaccinations or screens such as mammograms or Pap test, addressing any symptoms including menstrual problems, sexual or birth control issues, fertility, menopause, as well as any education or counseling. It's also a time to ask questions and discuss topics such as breast health, contraception, pregnancy plans, menopausal issues, osteoporosis or other changes women may experience during the reproductive years and beyond.

Screening is a major preventative component of a well-woman visit, and guidelines have changed over the years as science and research continues to evolve. Some research indicates young women may not need to get screened as early and as frequently for cervical cancer as previously thought. However, the need for screening sexually active women for infections is important, especially as these may be silent but have devastating effects on their health and fertility.

The exact screening guidelines for a well-woman visit vary among different health organizations in the U.S. and worldwide. Physicians and other providers will use different guidelines based on their training, professional knowledge, experience and expertise along with a woman's individual health conditions. In my professional opinion, it's actually best to get screened a little early as opposed to a little late. That being said, these are the general guidelines for women's health screening recommendations:

Breast Health Screenings

Clinical Breast Exams

- Early in gynecological care and annually, along with instruction and reminders for a monthly self-breast examination

Mammograms

- Once a year, starting at age 45, and many organizations recommend starting at age 40.

- Mammograms may need to start earlier if there is a family history of breast cancer.

Cervical Cancer Screening – Pap test and HPV

A Pap test is part of the pelvic exam where cells are taken from the cervix to test for cervical cancer risk. Human papillomavirus (HPV), which may be tested for during the Pap test, is a sexually transmitted, tragically common, viral infection. HPV is associated with 98 percent of all known cervical cancers. The infection may resolve by itself with the help of your immune system, but then may reoccur. This virus is known to cause not only cervical cancer but also genital warts, oral cancer and anal cancer. There are many different HPV families, and about 14 of those families are considered high-risk, meaning they may lead to cervical cancer.

- Cervical cancer screening is recommended now to routinely begin

at age 21, or soon after becoming sexually active, and organizations differ on a particular age. In my opinion, an annual Pap test should in many cases be done at the time of the first well-woman visit as the best prevention for cancer. The final decision is between you and your provider. It is important to remember your first GYN exam should be soon after sexual activity begins, because of the risk of infection, even if the recommendations are to not have a Pap smear.

- Depending on past history, Pap tests can be done less frequently after the age of 65. Discuss how often to have Pap tests with your provider.

- If you've been treated for pre-cancer of the cervix, or have a high-risk form of HPV, a Pap test should be continued annually.

- If a woman has had the uterus and cervix removed (total hysterectomy) and has not been diagnosed with cervical or uterine cancer, a Pap test is not recommended but an annual well-woman visit is still needed.

If a pelvic exam or Pap test shows a specific abnormality, a colposcopy may be indicated. This is a simple and relatively painless in-office procedure where the physician can further examine the cervix. This procedure is used to diagnose precancerous changes of the cervix and a small biopsy (sample of cervical tissue) may be taken. Cell changes may occur years before cervical cancer develops, and treating cell changes at an early stage may prevent cervical cancer from developing.

HPV Vaccine

- Recommended for girls at age 11-12 and above, the vaccine, developed in 2006, has now been studied thoroughly and has contributed to a decrease in cervical cancer and genital warts. It should be considered with your health care provider.

Osteoporosis Screening

- All women over age 50 or at the time of menopause should be considered for osteoporosis screening and bone density testing. This decision should be discussed with your provider. Risk increases with smoking, steroid use and long-term use of Depo Provera.

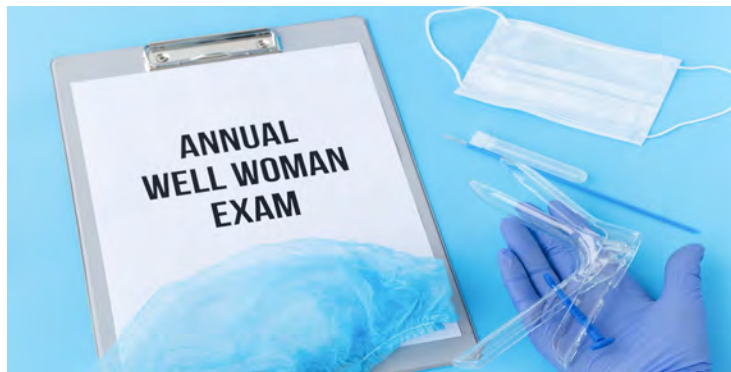
Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) Screening

- Women with new or multiple sex partners or a sex partner with a history of STI – test for gonorrhea and chlamydia annually, even if the Pap smear is not yet recommended.

- Talk to your provider about other testing if sexually active and/or with multiple partners.

Prevention is key in promoting and protecting women's health at any age. Regardless of recommendations for a Pap test every three years, it's still very important to schedule an annual well-woman visit. It is typically covered by insurance and is a best practice for preventative medical care. Make sure to schedule your well-woman visit in 2024 and each year after!

At HopeHealth, we provide a full range of services for women's health needs and also partner with evidence-based programs, non-profit organizations, and businesses to provide the best in women's health services, regardless of insurance status. Call (843) 667-9414 or visit hope-health.org for more information.



IT'S TIME TO M.O.V.E. By Jennifer Robinson



Twana McRae

There are many ads that are directed towards people who want to lose weight and want to do so quickly. The question is are the ways to lose weight always quick and easy or should weight watchers commit to working hard and planning? A local fitness coach helps people get committed, get moving and keeps them accountable!

Twana McRae, also known as Coach T, shared her fitness design to help people reach their health goals, stay motivated and be accountable. M.O.V.E. with Coach T is the fitness program McRae created in 2020, after taking control of her own health. M.O.V.E. is the acronym for Motivating Others Toward Victory Everyday. She said in the midst of the pandemic, she began classes virtually. She obtained her Zumba certification and later became ISSA (International Sports Sciences Association) certified to become a fitness trainer. When the pandemic subsided, Coach T moved her classes from virtual to in person. "I attribute my success to my family," Coach T says. They encouraged her and her clients to not give up. God has blessed this experience, and I will stay faithful in Him as we continue to grow, Coach T declared.

As McRae spoke about helping others on their journey, her passion was evident, and it shows in her work with clients. McRae said, "I

want to hold my clients accountable for changing their lifestyles and support them on their health journeys. Motivating others is my passion and I partner with my clients to help them reach their goals." There are spiritual, mental, physical and financial components to wellness and Coach T educates her clients on every aspect. "I'm not selfish in any way about how my clients are assisted. I am willing to partner with anyone to help them reach their goals," Coach T stated.

Coach T has trained many clients and there are several testimonials to the success of her training program. One particular client, Hilary Dolford, shared this testimonial:

"I had the privilege of meeting Coach T during a six-week complimentary challenge that she and one of my colleagues hosted. They came together with a fitness, medical and nutritional challenge to help women in the community jumpstart a fitness journey. I was immediately impressed with Coach T's personality and the cleanliness of her facility. What was more impressive was that she was willing to work with me on a one-on-one basis due to scheduling conflicts on my part. During our sessions, Coach T really listened to me as I shared many of my fitness struggles. She sprang into action by developing a team that best paired with my fitness goals. She covered every aspect of what I needed. This included encouragement calls/texts, nutritionalist and most importantly, she became my friend. Her dedication to wellness is infectious and I am thankful for our paths crossing.

M.O.V.E. with Coach T also has exercise programs for children. Her goal is to irradicate childhood obesity. Kids fitness classes are held Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. Coach T said M.O.V.E. is a gym that is safe, and all are welcome. It has a Christian environment with community supporters of all backgrounds. Anyone can start at M.O.V.E regardless of your fitness level. The goal is to encourage your success! Information about M.O.V.E. with Coach T Fitness can be found at movewithcoachfitness.com.



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"Placing the hands of concern back into the healthcare of our communities"

LISTEN TO YOUR GUT Submitted by Aftab Jafri, M.D., MUSC Health – Floyd Medical Group



Aftab Jafri, M.D.

Our gallbladder is in the upper right part of our abdomen, just below our liver. Its purpose is to store bile, which is made in the liver and dissolves fats for digestion. A significant number of adults develop gallstones, which can form in the gallbladder when the bile contains too much cholesterol or bilirubin, or the gallbladder doesn't empty properly. According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, gallstones are very common, affecting 10 to 15 percent of the U.S. population. Not all gallstones are painful,

but when they do cause pain, the recommended treatment is surgical removal of the gallbladder.

We talked with Dr. Aftab H. Jafri, a fellowship-trained surgeon at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, who specializes in minimally invasive foregut, bariatric and gastrointestinal surgery, to discuss gallbladder removal.

Q. What is a cholecystectomy, and why is the procedure performed?

A. A cholecystectomy is the surgical removal of the gallbladder. Cholecystectomies are performed to alleviate pain caused by intermittent or complete obstruction of the gallbladder by a gallstone, a condition called symptomatic cholelithiasis.

Cholecystectomies also are performed in cases of acute cholecystitis, acute pancreatitis, which occurs when a gallstone obstructs the flow of bile, or other functional issues of the gallbladder.

Q. Is cholecystectomy a major surgery?

A. Yes, removal of the gallbladder is a common but major abdominal surgery. The procedure is intricate because of the gallbladder's close proximity to important intraabdominal organs, blood vessels and ducts.

Q. How has gallbladder surgery changed in recent years?

A. I tell my patients that the gallbladder can be removed in two ways: open and minimally invasive. The open technique requires big, open incisions in the right upper abdomen, and healing can take longer, about one to two weeks.

Minimally invasive surgery has become the standard of care and can be performed in two ways: Robotic and laparoscopically.

Minimally invasive gallbladder surgery techniques

- Laparoscopic surgery involves the use of a camera (laparoscope) that transmits images to a video screen and provides visualization during the surgery. The laparoscope is inserted through a small incision. Additionally, three small incisions are made for the insertion of long instruments that are handled manually by the surgeon to remove the gallbladder. The first laparoscopic cholecystectomy was done in 1985, and since then, it has become the standard of care.

- Robotic surgery has emerged as the technique for removing the gallbladder and is my preferred method for a cholecystectomy. Unlike a laparoscope, a tiny camera provides a three-dimensional, high-magnification image of the patient's anatomy while the surgeon, who is sitting at a console, controls the robotic arm(s).

Q. How does robotic surgery benefit the patient?

A. Compared to open surgery, the incision is much smaller, so patients have far less pain and require less pain medication. As a result, patients recover more quickly.

Robotic cholecystectomy, like laparoscopic or open cholecystectomy, is performed under general anesthesia. Most patients can return home the same day, depending on the reason for the surgery, and are able to eat and drink. They also are able to return to daily living activities more quickly than patients who have open surgery.

Q. How does robotic surgery benefit the surgeon?

A. Robotic surgery provides more detailed visualization and very precise motion of the instruments, which is the key advantage of using the robot. I emphasize that throughout the procedure, the surgeon is in complete control of the robotic arms, which provide a wide degree of motion and precision.

Q. Is robotic surgery faster?

A. Laparoscopic and robotic surgery are faster because I don't have to close a large incision, but the time spent performing the cholecystectomy depends totally on the disease process of the patient.

Q. How does a patient prepare for a cholecystectomy?

A. Patients should do the following to prepare for gallbladder surgery:

- Patients must discontinue blood thinners before surgery. The timing of stopping their thinner depends on what type of blood thinner they are taking.
- They must not drink or eat after midnight the evening before surgery.
- I also urge my patients to do a 30-minute walk every day and do breathing exercises if they can.

Q. What do you want patients and prospective patients to know about cholecystectomy?

A. The most important factors in weighing the outcomes of surgery are the surgeon's credentials, the quality of the facilities and how patients are treated. MUSC Health excels in all these areas and offers an unmatched standard of care.

At MUSC Health Florence, we treat our patients just like our family, and our patients have all the advantages of a top academic medical center without having to leave the area for treatment and care.

To schedule an appointment or for more information, please call MUSC Health – Floyd Medical Group at (843) 669-1220.



MCLEOD WELCOMES RETURN OF MAUREEN BYRD, FNP-C

Articles submitted by McLeod Health



Maureen C. Byrd, FNP-C

McLeod Health welcomes the return of Maureen Byrd, FNP-C, to the McLeod Breast Health Center. Byrd will serve as the breast health coordinator/nurse practitioner and will see breast health and breast cancer patients in the Pee Dee surgical office. A native of Greenville, South Carolina, Byrd has been with McLeod Health for the past 26 years. She is pleased to return to caring for patients with breast health issues.

As the first breast health specialist for McLeod, Byrd has extensive experience with breast health and breast cancer patients. She was also an integral part of the team that started the McLeod Breast Health Center 20 years ago and was intricately involved in the breast center's initial accreditation by the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC) in 2010. McLeod has maintained this designation and continues to serve as the only accredited NAPBC program in the area.

Certified by the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, Byrd received a Master of Science in Nursing from Walden University and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of South Carolina. She joined McLeod Oncology and Hematology Associates in 2015 caring for breast cancer patients with Dr. Jamie Smith. She most recently worked for McLeod Outpatient Palliative Care where she continued caring for patients, including those with breast cancer.

Byrd welcomes new patients and physician referrals. For more information or questions, please call the McLeod Breast Health Center at (843) 777-4444.

MCLEOD INFECTION PREVENTIONIST RECOGNIZED AS A CHAMPION



Paige Storm

Paige Storm, an infection preventionist (IP) with McLeod Regional Medical Center, has been named a 2024 United States Tuberculosis (TB) Elimination Champion by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Each year, the CDC recognizes U.S. TB Elimination Champions to showcase best practices from individuals who are making significant contributions to eliminating TB in the U.S.

Storm was recognized for her work in 2022, when a TB outbreak occurred in a community at risk in South Carolina, and several people were diagnosed with TB disease. Storm worked tirelessly alongside the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and the facility to ensure enough negative pressure rooms were available for patients.

There are many individuals and organizations working in effective and engaging ways to end TB in the U.S. The CDC U.S. TB Elimination Champions Project provides an opportunity to recognize accomplishments and learn best practices from these individuals.

Storm has been a part of the McLeod Infection Prevention Team since 2016. She is Board Certified in Infection Control and a Level 2 IP. She is currently the McLeod Regional Medical Center liaison to DHEC. Storm has a master's degree in business administration and is also an ASCP-certified medical technologist.

MCLEOD HEALTH FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES RECORD-BREAKING GRANTS

The McLeod Health Foundation's Board of Trustees is pleased to announce that through the generous support of Foundation donors the largest dollar amount of grants in foundation history have been approved. More than \$3,280,600 will fund special projects to benefit patients in the inland and coastal regions served by McLeod Health.

"We are extremely appreciative of by our generous donors who place their trust in the McLeod Foundation to use their gifts wisely to fund the programs which improve the health and well-being of the regions McLeod Health serves," said Pierce Campbell, chairman of the McLeod Foundation Board.

McLeod Health leadership across the system has planned for significant improvements to patient care thanks to the support of generous donors to the McLeod Foundation.

"The years ahead will be filled with promise and progress because McLeod Foundation donors have shown time and again that they value excellent local health care. The lives of patients and their families across our region will be improved thanks to the generosity of our donors," added Elizabeth Jones, executive director of the McLeod Foundation.

Grants approved provide a wide range of improved care for the more than one million individuals who turn to McLeod Health for their care.

The following projects were funded by the McLeod Foundation:

- Early detection of cancer continues as a focus to save lives.
 - o A Whole Breast Ultrasound System will be added to the McLeod Breast Health Center in Florence to improve screening for women with dense breast.
 - o A second Ion Robot Bronchoscope will also be purchased to provide lung cancer patients with a faster diagnosis allowing for earlier treatment and improved survival.
- A second Transport Incubator will allow babies facing frightening birth complications in community hospitals to be safely transported to the region's only Level III Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at McLeod Regional Medical Center. To meet the ever-increasing numbers of babies in crisis, this transport incubator will be put into service to provide care during a baby's golden hours of transport.
- Ensuring highly trained professionals for the region is one of the greatest challenges facing healthcare systems across the country including McLeod Health. Several grants were approved to address this issue.
 - o A Simulator Mobile Lab and Transport Van will expose students to simulated clinical experience to spark an interest in a health care career. It will also provide training for medical students and opportunities for existing staff to develop critical skills.
 - o A pharmacy resident position will be funded. As medication needs for patients have become increasingly complex and expensive, completing a residency has become a vital part of training for this critical technician who will help ensure patient medication safety.
 - o Advance Practice Provider Post-Graduate Training Program. This pilot program will be established to help recruit providers who will offer high-quality health care to the region's underserved, rural areas. The six-week program will provide additional preparation to care for the complex patient populations in the region. The program will also build confidence and prepare advance practice providers for the delivery of excellent care for their patients.
 - o Graduate Medical Education Fellowships. These three specialized fellowship programs will include Primary Care and Sports Medicine, Hospice and Palliative Care and Addiction Medical Care.
- While these programs will improve care for patients in the entire McLeod Health service area, several funding priorities were also approved for McLeod Hospitals across the region.



SHARMEIKA MCDUFFIE'S



Breast Cancer Journey with McLeod

The McLeod Breast Health Center is dedicated to breast health excellence in our region. Sharmeika McDuffie, a survivor of breast cancer, personally experienced our collaborative team approach and shares her positive reflections on the experience.

"I'm 43 years old and I found my first lump at the age of 12. Over the years, I had numerous breast lumps removed. But in 2022, my mammogram came back abnormal. It was traumatizing.



"The first time I entered the McLeod Cancer Center, I felt welcomed. They are lovable people who love their jobs and care for their patients. When I met Dr. Clyburn, I was afraid to get chemotherapy or radiation. She encouraged me by saying: 'You've got this. You are going to do good! Even when I felt nervous or overwhelmed, their team calmed and encouraged me.'"

- Sharmeika McDuffie



Read Sharmeika's Story at McLeodHealth.org/Sharmeika
For more information, visit McLeodBreastHealth.org
or call at 843-777-4444.



NATIONAL ACCREDITATION PROGRAM FOR BREAST CENTERS

McLeod Breast Health Center



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Bennettsville Pediatric Center
210 W. Main Street
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.479.1200

Bennettsville Women's Center
1076 Marlboro Way Rd., Suite 1
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.454.2294

Bishopville Center
343 Sumter Highway
Bishopville, SC 29010
803.484.3317

Bishopville Pediatric Dental
101 Harris Street
Bishopville, SC 29010
866.813.9845

Cheraw Center
715 S. Doctors Drive Suite E
Cheraw, SC 29520
843.537.0961

Chesterfield Center
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CARESOUTH CAROLINA HONORED AS HEALTH INNOVATION AWARD RECIPIENT Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Ann Lewis, CareSouth Carolina CEO, speaking at the podium during the gala and QuinTasha Knox, founder & CEO of the Foundation for Community Impact and Health Equity, standing next to her.

COLUMBIA— CareSouth Carolina was honored as the recipient of the Healthcare Innovation Award at the Foundation For Community Impact and Health Equity Inaugural Impact Awards Gala, which took place on February 3, 2024, at the Metropolitan Convention Center in Columbia, South Carolina.

CareSouth Carolina CEO Ann Lewis — who has spearheaded the organization since its formation in 1980— received the award, which recognized CareSouth Carolina for its impact in the community by providing access to

healthcare and its collaboration with community agencies.

In the current year, CareSouth Carolina made significant contributions to community well-being, including hosting a Community Health Fair at the Dillon Wellness Center, distributing gun locks, and promoting information sharing among local residents. Furthermore, they've taken proactive measures to combat food insecurity by establishing a Food Pantry in Bishopville, addressing the critical needs of a designated food desert area.

CareSouth Carolina has also formed strategic partnerships with organizations like the Foundation For Community Impact and Health, the Lee County Library, and Marian Wright Edelman in Marlboro County to create Community Health Hubs at local libraries. These hubs offer the valuable services of Community Health Workers, who assist individuals and families in overcoming social barriers to health, including food insecurity, housing, Medicaid and SNAP enrollment, while also providing access to healthcare and information about other programs that can enhance their social and health outcomes.

CareSouth Carolina was very honored to be recognized for all the collaboration we do to provide health care and better access to health care for the people in our communities," CareSouth Carolina Chief of Community Health Joe Bittle said. "We look forward to continuing to be able to serve our community as we look toward the future."

The Impact Awards Gala honored and celebrated 10 remarkable individuals and organizations across a variety of categories, recognizing their exceptional efforts and positive impact on society. From philanthropy and environmental stewardship to education and healthcare, these honorees have dedicated their time, resources and expertise to uplift and transform the lives of others.

CareSouth Carolina is a private, nonprofit community health center delivering patient-centered health and life services in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. CareSouth Carolina operates centers in Bennettsville, Bishopville, Cheraw, Chesterfield, Dillon, Hartsville, Lake View, Latta, McColl and Society Hill.

Services provided by CareSouth Carolina include family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, women's services, OB/GYN, HIV/AIDS primary care, infectious disease primary care, IV therapy, substance abuse prevention, dental, chiropractic services, pharmacy, senior support services, family support services, clinical counseling, laboratory, ultrasound, X-Ray, agricultural worker health services and veterans' choice provider.



From left to right CSC Associate Medical Director Jeri Andrews, FNP-C; Staci Cassidy, FNP-C; CareSouth Carolina CEO Ann Lewis and Director of Behavioral Health Amy Cook, LISW-CP/S at the gala.

CARESOUTH CAROLINA NAMED COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENT

Articles submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Pictured CareSouth Carolina to receive this award," Director of Social and Community Services Marek Calhoun, DMAC, MSAJS and Shelia Squire, People of People Hartsville

HARTSVILLE— People to People of Hartsville, an organization dedicated to working towards creating a better community, has awarded CareSouth Carolina with the prestigious Community Service Award during its annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Award Service. The event took place at Jerusalem Baptist Church earlier in January.

The ceremony was a heartfelt celebration, acknowledging both organizations and individuals who have made contributions to their local communities. These contributions, encompassing their time, talent and unwavering dedication, have positively impacted the lives of many.

"The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Service Award, exemplified excellence for its achievement in the community," said Barbara Caraway, president of People to People of Hartsville. "One of Dr. King's quotes is, 'What are we doing for others?'" Care South Carolina has demonstrated its impact in our community by providing quality health care and collaboration with agencies. People to People of Hartsville, SC is honored to present this MLK Jr. Community Service Award to Care South Carolina for its commitments!"

CareSouth Carolina, a steadfast pillar of the community, received the award in recognition of its tireless efforts to promote community health and well-being.

"It was an honor for CareSouth Carolina to receive this award," Director of Social and Community Services Marek Calhoun, DMAC, MSAJS, said. "We work tirelessly in the communities that are in our service areas so that we have a healthy and more informed community. We'll continue to put the community at the forefront of everything we do as we have for the last 40+ years of our existence."

CARESOUTH CAROLINA'S NEW STATE-OF-THE-ART FACILITY IN CHERAW NOW OPEN!



CareSouth Carolina's Cheraw Facility

CHERAW- CareSouth Carolina is excited to announce the opening of its all-new state-of-the-art facility in Cheraw. The new facility, located at 812 State Road Cheraw, is now welcoming guests.

The office, with over 15,600 square feet, more than quadruples CareSouth Carolina's capacity to provide services to Cheraw and surrounding areas. In addition to the services provided at the current location, the new facility will provide space for additional primary care providers, behavioral health counseling, X-Ray, lab, ultrasound, a pharmacy with a drive-thru and a community room for various health and community events.

The new facility will also be home to CareSouth Carolina Foot Care, which provides numerous services, including General Foot Care, Foot Pain Management, Diabetic Foot Care, Sports Injuries Rehabilitation, and more. The opening date for CareSouth Carolina Foot Care will be announced at a later time.

"With the opening of this new building in Cheraw, CareSouth Carolina will be able to offer the community services in a modern, appealing setting that promotes access to a wide array of services – all geared to improving health and wellbeing," CareSouth Carolina CEO Ann Lewis said. "There will be features such as a pharmacy drive-thru and a community room along with new services – podiatry, for example. Come see us grow!"

For over four decades, CareSouth Carolina has proudly served as a medical home, a place where individuals can experience healing and nurturing relationships, regardless of their personal circumstances. As a dedicated community health center, CareSouth Carolina considers patients an integral part of their extended family. CareSouth Carolina takes pride in being an active part of its community, offering a comprehensive array of services, from pediatrics to pharmacy to community outreach, all conveniently accessible under one roof.

CARESOUTH CAROLINA PROVIDES MORE THAN \$149.5 MILLION IN ECONOMIC IMPACT

HARTSVILLE-CareSouth Carolina is pleased to announce the release of the comprehensive Value & Impact Report, which shows the organization made an economic impact of more than \$149.5 million. This report, which was released at the end of 2023 for the year 2022, underscores the influence CareSouth Carolina's health centers have had on the regions they serve, which include Lee, Darlington, Dillon, Marlboro and Chesterfield Counties.

Economic Stimulus

In 2022, CareSouth Carolina made a significant economic impact on the communities it serves, with a total economic stimulus of \$149.5 million. This stimulus was attributed to the creation of 1,062 jobs directly within health centers, \$74.5 million in health center job salaries, and an additional \$75.0 million in other jobs within the community.

Moreover, CareSouth Carolina's investment in direct health center spending amounted to \$2.0 million, while community spending reached \$14.3 million, contributing to a total economic impact of \$16.3 million. These figures underscore the organization's commitment to fostering economic growth in the regions it serves. The impact also extends to state and local tax revenues as well as federal tax revenues, resulting in substantial annual tax revenues for the community.

CareSouth Carolina has continued to grow and expand, most recently adding a new state-of-the-art facility in Dillon. In 2022, CareSouth Carolina and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) opened the new 18,640-square-foot Dillon facility, located at 1016 Old Latta Highway, as part of a partnership.

Care for Vulnerable Populations

CareSouth Carolina's commitment to caring for vulnerable populations is exemplified by its dedication to delivering essential health care services to those in need. In 2022, the organization saw 218,779 clinic visits, reflecting a 3.0 percent increase in patient growth over four years. Clinic visits amounted to 57,533, while virtual visits reached 276,312, culminating in a total of 276,312 visits.

Additionally, the report highlights that 37,483 patients received care from CareSouth Carolina. Furthermore, a significant percentage of patients served by CareSouth Carolina's health centers belong to vulnerable demographics, with 24.5 percent being children and adolescents, 69.5 percent identifying as low-income individuals, and 60.8 percent identifying as ethnic or racial minorities.

Savings to the System

CareSouth Carolina's health centers have demonstrated an impressive cost-saving effect on the health care system. The organization achieved a 24 percent reduction in health care costs, resulting in \$62.0 million in savings to the overall health system. A substantial portion of these savings was attributed to providing lower-cost health care options for Medicaid patients.

Pandemic Response

Throughout the ongoing pandemic, CareSouth Carolina has played a pivotal role in bolstering public health infrastructure. The organization has been instrumental in delivering vital services, including testing, vaccination and care, both in-person and virtually, to the communities it serves.



HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

Submitted by Sheridan K. Murray, BS, BA, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



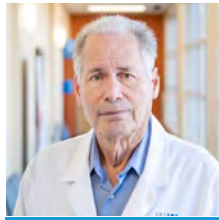
Breeanna Thames, LMSW

Breeanna Thames, LMSW, provides counseling services at HopeHealth Pediatrics in Florence. She received an associate degree in applied sciences and human services from Florence Darlington Technical College in Florence, South Carolina, and a Bachelor of Social Work degree from Limestone College in Gaffney, South Carolina. She holds a Master of Social Work degree from The University of South Carolina. Thames' clinical interests are parent coaching and working with children and adolescents in foster care. She works alongside another behavioral health consultant at HopeHealth Pediatrics in Florence. From Kingstree, Thames is excited to give back to her community.



Margaret A. "Ashleigh" Evans, MSPAS, PA-C

Margaret A. "Ashleigh" Evans, MSPAS, PA-C, is a physician assistant serving patients of Access Hope in Manning. She graduated from Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina, summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Science. She received a Master of Science with honors from the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina. Her clinical interests are cardiovascular disease, diabetes management and acute care. She is a member of the American Association of Physician Assistants and the South Carolina Academy of Physician Assistants.



Martin Weiss, MD, FACP

Martin Weiss, MD, is a board-certified internist and rheumatologist serving patients at HopeHealth in Orangeburg. Weiss received his Bachelor of Science and doctorate degrees from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He completed his residency at Akron City Hospital in Akron, Ohio. His fellowship in rheumatology was completed at the University of California Irvine Memorial Hospital Medical School. Weiss specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of inflammatory and autoimmune disorders of the joints, bones, and muscles. He treats conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, fibromyalgia, osteoporosis and gout. Weiss has written numerous peer-reviewed articles and was previously named, Author of the Year, by the American Public Health Association.



Francheska Russell, M.A.Ed, LPC

Francheska Russell, M.A.Ed, LPC, provides integrated behavioral health services at HopeHealth on Pine Needles Road. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. She earned a Master of Arts in Education degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke in Pembroke, North Carolina. Russell enjoys counseling children, adolescents and adults. Her clinical areas of interest include ADHD, anxiety, depression, trauma, parenting, career, grief and loss.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit leader in providing affordable, expert health care and infectious diseases services for all ages in Aiken, Florence, Clarendon, Orangeburg and Williamsburg Counties. Our federally qualified health centers are the primary care providers of choice for nearly 60,000 patients. To become a pa-tient, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.



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HOPEHEALTH'S NICOLE ECHOLS HONORED FOR ADVOCACY

Articles submitted by Sheridan K. Murray, BS, BA, publications coordinator



Nicole Echols

The National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) has honored HopeHealth and Nicole Echols, director of external affairs, with the Elizabeth K. Cooke Advocacy MVP Award. The award is named in honor of the late Elizabeth K. “Betsey” Cooke, whose effort and persistence as an advocate for America’s health centers and patients set an example for all health center advocates to follow.

The award recognizes advocates’ dedication and mobilization efforts to generate public and political support for the nation’s Community

Health Centers. Echols was presented the award recently during NACHC’s 2024 Policy and Issues Forum.

Echols holds both a bachelor’s and master’s degree from South Carolina State University and has years of experience in nonprofit leadership and operations. As director of external affairs at HopeHealth, she establishes relationships with stakeholders in media, academia, government and in the private sector. Dedicated to community service, she oversees development, advocacy, outreach and the volunteer program and helps organize programs to eliminate barriers to care.

Health centers are the largest primary care network in the U.S., serving 31.5 million people at more than 1,400 sites nationwide. The network of health center grassroots advocates comprises doctors, nurses, CEOs, frontline staff, board members and patients who have dedicated themselves to advancing health equity in rural, urban and frontier communities.

“We are thrilled to celebrate the largest class of grassroots advocacy awardees in NACHC history. These honorees consistently go above and beyond to foster a culture of advocacy within their organizations and the Community Health Center movement,” said Dr. Kyu Rhee, MD, MPP, president and CEO of NACHC.

“Their efforts to inspire and mobilize others are essential to building hope in a future where residents in all communities nationwide have access to quality and affordable health care.”

On receiving the award, Echols shared, “Being considered a superlative in the world of health advocacy is a true honor. As advocates, we stand not only with our partners, but with our community, and those who depend on us for excellent care.”

HopeHealth supporters can sign up to become a health center advocate at hcadvocacy.org.



Alan Barrett, PA-C, Receives Yvonne Van Camp Award

retired in 2018. Prior to her retirement, she served as director of quality and had a passion for continuous quality improvement.

This year, HopeHealth recognized Alan Barrett, PA-C, physician assistant at HopeHealth Medical Plaza, as the recipient of the 2023 Yvonne Van Camp Quality Improvement Award – Excellence in Community Engagement.

Barrett has been caring for patients at HopeHealth for over 12 years. He is passionate about community engagement and has spoken on several occasions at Seniors With Hope and other events. He has also written multiple articles for publication in regional journals and newspapers. During his tenure at HopeHealth, Barrett has served on several provider and organizational committees.

Barrett is specifically dedicated to health promotion, men’s health and improving health equity. Barrett also serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the South Carolina Air National Guard. HopeHealth is fortunate to have a physician assistant who is so committed to continuous quality improvement and dedicated to our community



HOPEHEALTH STAFF RECEIVE AWARDS AND RECOGNITION



Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ed Behling

Dr. Ed Behling, chief medical officer at HopeHealth, was presented the Constellation Quality Health’s Timothy Llewelyn, MD Memorial Award for his dedication to quality health care and outstanding achievements in the medical field.

Behling serves in many positions allowing him to spearhead change in patient treatment. As Chief Medical Officer, Behling oversees the development of effective supervision and collaboration software and works to constantly improve quality measures. Due to his achievements in cardiovascular health,

HopeHealth was designated as a Million Hearts Hospital and Health System Recognition Program in 2021.

Constellation Quality Health President and CEO Steven Martin shared, “Dr. Behling’s record of achievements and commitment to



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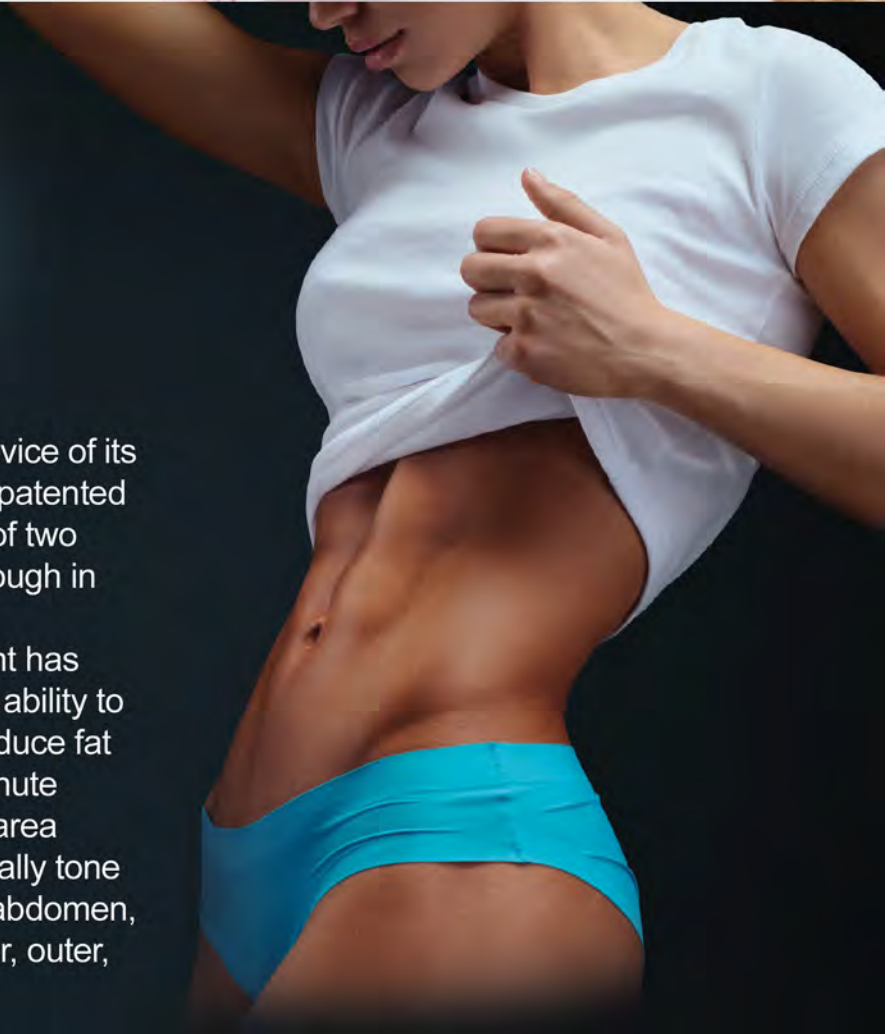
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MUSC HEALTH BLACK RIVER MEDICAL CENTER CELEBRATES ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY

Submitted by John Russell, marketing manager/Media Relations



Care team members celebrate the one-year anniversary of MUSC Health Black River Medical Center.

CADES— MUSC Health Black River Medical Center has taken care of more than 50,000 patients from Southern Florence and Williamsburg County area since opening in January 2023. The new rural hospital, located in Cades, has been described as a giant leap forward in obtaining unrivaled health care services for the surrounding area communities.

“The response from the community to MUSC Health Black River Medical Center has been very positive. This is due in no small part to the dedicated staff who truly care about our patients. We look forward to continuing to expand the medical services this rural hospital will provide,” said Allen Abernethy, hospital executive director.

Since opening, there have been 22,427 emergency department visits, 101,181 lab tests performed, 27,216 imaging studies, 1,356 inpatient admissions and more than 38,000 outpatient visits.

“The profound impact MUSC Health Black River Medical Center has had in providing health care to the lower Florence and Williamsburg County area is evident in the number of patients utilizing this rural hospital,” said MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Center Chief Executive Officer Jay Hinesley. “This hospital, in addition to nearly 20 surrounding area primary care providers and specialty physicians, shows the full scope of care we are able to provide to residents.”

MUSC Health broke ground in January 2021 to construct the new rural hospital. MUSC Health Black River Medical Center was built to replace Williamsburg Regional (Kingstree) and Lake City Community hospitals.

The 64,000 sq. ft. rural hospital allows residents of the community to have access to a full range of modern diagnostic and interventional capabilities. Some of the services offered include 3-D mammography, MRI, nuclear medicine, CT scanning, on-site pharmacy and a complete imaging department. MUSC Health Black River Medical Center features 25 inpatient beds, four observation beds, two operating rooms and 16 emergency treatment rooms.



MUSC Health Black River Medical Center Executive Director Allen Abernethy talks to care team members, administration and other stakeholders during the one-year celebration event.

MUSC HEALTH WELCOMES NEW GENERAL SURGEONS

At MUSC Health, we are committed to the health and well-being of all South Carolinians, with services backed by the advanced technology, specialty care and research available only through an academic medical center.

Dr. Cary Brewton



Dr. Cary Brewton

Brewton is experienced in all aspects of general surgery with a dedicated special interest in dialysis access. He has taken care of thousands of patients in the region and beyond. Brewton has remained dedicated to surgery and treatment of dialysis patients, providing an individualized approach to each dialysis patient. He is pleased to join the Medical University and collaborate with Dr. John Ross - Dialysis Access Institute to deliver and extend dialysis access care in the state of South Carolina.

Dr. Amy Murrell



Dr. Amy Murrell

Murrell is experienced in all aspects of general surgery. She has a special interest in the treatment of breast cancer and has taken care of thousands of patients in this region over the last two decades. Murrell has remained at the forefront in the advancements of breast cancer surgery and treatment, providing a personalized approach to each breast cancer patient. She is pleased to join the Medical University, the state's only National Cancer Institute designated cancer program.

Dr. Keith Player



Dr. Keith Player

Player is experienced in all aspects of general surgery, both laparoscopic and open surgery. He particularly enjoys laparoscopic abdominal surgery with an emphasis on laparoscopic colon surgery. Player has developed broad-ranging skills that include thyroid and parathyroid surgery, breast surgery, skin cancer and melanoma surgery, surgery of the intestinal tract for both cancerous and noncancerous disease and all varieties of hernia repair. He has gained a reputation as a primary provider of pediatric surgery in the area.

Brewton, Murrell and Player have joined MUSC Health's team of general surgeons in the Pee Dee region - Mark Harris, M.D., Mark Pack, M.D., Hatem Abdallah, M.D., Aftab Jafri, M.D., Robert De Grood, M.D. and Chadwick Thomas, M.D.

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FLORENCE TEEN DRE'SHON JACKSON ACCEPTED TO HARVARD UNIVERSITY



Dre'Shon Jackson

Dre'Shon Jackson is a senior in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program at Wilson High School, with a remarkable grade point average of 4.969 and is scheduled to graduate in the top five percent of his class. This extraordinary student is on his way to the oldest Ivy League university in the United States.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Jackson was born and raised in Florence, SC, and is the son of City Councilwoman LaShonda NeSmith-Jackson and Marcus

Jackson. His journey started at his fourth-grade graduation, when then, SC State Senator Maggie Glover, read a book about chickens roaming on the grounds, not going anywhere, and eagles flying high in the sky. Today, though Jackson doesn't recall the name of the book, what he does remember, is his mom looking at him, asking two questions, "Are you a chicken or an eagle?" "I'm an eagle mama," he replied. "Are you a leader or a follower?" "I'm a leader," he said confidently. Jackson knew he must have answered correctly, because his mother smiled, and every morning thereafter, she would ask him those two questions before he went into school. This became their morning routine, so much so, that Jackson doesn't quite remember when she stopped asking him, maybe when he started driving himself to school, or maybe when he learned the true qualities of a leader. Either way, in retrospect, Jackson truly believes those two questions, asked daily in his formative years, along with his responses, has shaped the trajectory of his life.

Growing up, Jackson's parents provided his foundation but his mother, LaShonda Nesmith Jackson serves as his role model. He admires his mother's determination and community activism and draws inspiration from her example. Jackson's story serves as a testament to the power of perseverance, community support and dedication to excellence. As a child, he went everywhere with his mother, from county party meetings, feeding the homeless, back-to-school events and Christmas toy drives, where he volunteered and learned the importance of giving back to his community.

In fifth grade, his mother ran for Florence City Council, which gave Jackson the opportunity to volunteer and help on her campaign. Though unsuccessful, this experience ignited his passion for civil service, and instilled in him a dedication to serving others. It also inspired Jackson to propose having class elections at school. He presented his idea to the principal who agreed to allow the students to hold class elections. At his fifth grade Class Presidential Debate, his opponent gave out candy and promised more once elected, however, Jackson promised to be a leader who would listen to them. Not surprisingly, his leadership prevailed, and Jackson became fifth grade class president, a proud moment for him, as he became a voice for his class.

Jackson's mother always stressed, from an early age, that he can be anything, he wanted to be, including the President of the United States. With inspiration and support from childhood, Jackson is a firm believer in blazing trails and being the change, he wishes to see. He continues to seek opportunities to make a meaningful impact and doesn't hesitate to create them if they don't already exist.

Jackson has excelled in numerous high school activities. He serves as an International Baccalaureate ambassador, Wilson High

School Student Body president, founder of the Wilson High School Newspaper Club and head designer and editor-in-chief of, The U News.

In addition to participating in the National Honor Society, he also serves as president of the National Junior Beta Club. If that's not amazing in and of itself, Jackson is also a member of the Tiger Club Community Service Organization, he volunteers as a poll manager for local elections and has served as a legal intern at the Law Offices of Linward Edwards II. The culmination of all the opportunities Jackson has been exposed to demonstrates his dedication to empowering others and fostering innovation. Jackson has been named an Envision WorldStrides Scholar and currently serves as their ambassador. He has successfully completed a ten-day Intensive Law and Trial Program at Stanford University. The program at Stanford in conjunction with Envision WorldStrides focused on teaching various aspects of trial law.

Jackson's outstanding academics have not gone unnoticed. In addition to his acceptance into Harvard University, Jackson has also been accepted at Clemson, University of California-Irvine, University of California-Davis and University of California-Berkeley. Accepted into Harvard University's Restrictive Early Action in December 2023, Jackson was one of 692 students, out of 7921 students who applied. With high hopes and the support from his family and community, Jackson hopes to pursue a double major in government and economics, with the goal of becoming a lawyer and eventually a leader in politics.

At such a fluctuating time in his life, Jackson has learned the skill of balancing his academic pursuits with his responsibilities as a shift leader at Chick-fil-A and his leadership roles in student government and various clubs. The structure set into place through the Wilson High School IB Program has helped him achieve the work-home-school-life balance. From authoring a book for his personal project to excelling in extracurricular activities, Jackson is clearly committed to making the most of his high school experience. "It's impressive how he's embraced the challenges and opportunities presented by the IB Program to shape his education and skills. Dre'Shon's involvement on the Wilson Mock Trial team, school newspaper and various leadership positions including student body president, demonstrates not only his academic prowess but also his ability to think critically and creatively; and, I couldn't be prouder," says his mom, LaShonda Jackson.

The Florence, SC community of educators, church members, employers, friends and family that make up the Village that supports the dreams and aspirations of Dre'Shon Jackson wishes him the very best success in his future endeavors at Harvard University.

Jackson's acceptance video went viral, and he appeared on the Jennifer Hudson show which aired March 18, 2024.



Pictured - Dre'Shon at the Jennifer Hudson show with parents, Marcus and Councilwoman LaShonda NeSmith Jackson along with Jennifer Hudson.



LE DINER EN BLANC – FLORENCE, SC RETURNS



Hostesses left to right: Charlene McKnight, Nicole Dixon and Sadia McKnight

Le Diner en Blanc returns to Florence, SC for its 4th edition on Saturday, May 18, 2024. As always, the venue will remain secret until the last minute.

To be part of the night under the stars, people can sign up to Phase 3 by visiting the official city website at florence.dinerenblanc.com

and clicking on the Register tab.

Le Diner en Blanc is:

- Getting all dressed up to attend a dinner à la française where conversation and champagne are essential.
- Getting together with long-time friends and meeting new friends in a unique setting.

Charlene McKnight, host of Le Diner en Blanc in Florence, SC, is elated that Le Diner en Blanc is returning to the city: “Le Diner en Blanc is a captivating event where guests are able to network, and we are able to showcase the best of the best of the city while enjoying fine food, wine or champagne, and dancing the night away. My co-hosts, Nicole Dixon and Sadia Ferrell-McKnight, and I are so excited to share an evening of magic and elegance in our beautiful city again. With the number of participants being limited, we strongly invite the participants to book their tickets as soon as their phases open.”

To maintain the uniqueness of Le Diner en Blanc, every guest has a part to play and observes certain requirements such as:

- Dress code: head-to-toe in white only. Elegance and Originality are key!
- Table setting: all white!
- To ensure that the location secret is kept undisclosed until the last minute, guests meet at the assigned departure location and are escorted by a Diner en Blanc volunteer.
- So that the event location is left as clean as when guests arrived, they are required to leave with all their belongings, leftovers, and litter.

Guests are to bring:

- A table, two white chairs, white tablecloth.
- A picnic basket comprising fine food and proper stemware and white dinnerware.
- o A catered picnic basket option, which can be picked up on site, will be available for those who do not wish to pack their own. Guests wishing to do so must reserve online through Le Diner en Blanc’s e-store.
- French-influenced event- only wine and/or champagne are served. Beer and hard liquor are prohibited.
- o Though guests can bring their own wine and/or champagne, those wishing to pack lighter can pre-purchase online through Le Diner en Blanc Florence’s e-store. In addition, guests are welcome to bring their own non-alcoholic beverages.

About the Hosts of Le Diner en Blanc – Florence

A strong village of diverse people in fellowship is important to the hosts of Le Diner en Blanc - Florence, SC, Nicole Dixon, Charlene McKnight and Sadia Ferrell-McKnight. Nicole Dixon is the owner of Rollington Enterprises, LLC. Charlene is the founder and executive director of Four Giving Hearts and Sadia is the owner of Classic Touch Event, Rentals, & More, LLC. They are elated and looking forward to greeting guests at this year’s event.

About Le Diner en Blanc

Le Diner en Blanc is so much more than an event. It’s a unique cultural movement that empowers friends of friends to gather and celebrate their shared passions for life, food, fashion, and community, year after year,

with a pinch of mystery and large serving of spontaneity. Elegantly dressed all in white, guests arrive at a secret location for a chic picnic en masse. They bring their own tables, chairs, picnic baskets—all the trimmings—to sit down with friends and make new connections in one of their city’s most beautiful public spaces. The location remains secret up until the very moment of arrival. Over the course of the evening, guests from all backgrounds eat, dance, and reconnect with the finer things in life, as they appreciate the night’s magical experience.

To this day, over 120 cities in 40 countries have joined the ever-growing and international network to celebrate gourmet cuisine, offer extraordinary entertainment, and bring together vibrant individuals and bon vivants around the world. While Diner en Blanc International is headquartered in Montreal, Canada, every event in every city is hosted by passionate local



Le Diner en Blanc 2023

organizers who fell in love with the original Parisian concept and wanted to bring it home and dress it up with local flair. For more info, photos, and videos of Le Diner en Blanc events from around the world, visit dinerenblanc.com.

A TENNIS LEGACY CONTINUES

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Ron James

The Florence Tennis Association (FTA) honored a local legend by naming its most ambitious youth program in his memory. The Ron James Youth Tennis Program (RJYTP) was created in 2021, to provide tennis instruction and academic assistance to underserved youth in Florence, South Carolina and the surrounding communities.

Coach Ron James, a retired educator who taught youth tennis for the City of Florence and the FTA, and coached the Wilson High School tennis teams, died unexpectedly in 2019. He was loved and respected by everyone in the tennis community.

To date, the RJYTP has worked with over 800 kids, bringing them the health, fitness and social benefits of tennis and emphasizing the importance of education. The program is a subsidiary of the all-volunteer, 501(c)3 Florence Tennis Association, which is a United States Tennis Association (USTA) member organization. It is also a member of the National Junior Tennis and Learning (NJTL) Network, a group of several hundred youth programs across the United States committed to making the benefits of tennis available to underserved children. The program is governed by a community-based Board of Directors and funded by grants and local donations, and instruction is provided by tennis pros and trained volunteers. There is no cost for participating youth or their families.

The RJYTP began on-court tennis instruction during the spring of 2021, with after-school sessions at the Dr. Eddie Floyd Florence Tennis Center. Initially, the program partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee, Girls University and the City of Florence After-School Centers. However, when COVID deprived these organizations of bus transportation, the RJYTP was forced to turn to mobile clinics at other locations.

In April 2022, the RJYTP began a partnership with Florence School District One’s Extended Day Academy, which serves youngsters at middle

A TENNIS LEGACY CONT'D



Ron James ready for a lesson

and elementary schools. This collaboration involves both after-school clinics using mini-nets in school gyms and support for the Extended Day summer camps. To date, eight-session clinics have been provided at eleven FSD1 schools, typically using mini-nets in the gyms. The same approach has been used at schools and youth organizations in Hartsville and Darlington.

The RJYTP also works with the City of Florence Parks and Recreation Division, which manages after-school youth programs at a few City Parks. During the

summer of 2023, the RJYTP conducted tennis sessions in conjunction with City summer camp. In addition, they worked with the City of Florence, the FTA, and USTA SC to erect fencing around two courts at Levy Park in southeast Florence and will begin teaching at that site this Spring. The RJYTP's volunteer leaders are committed to this idea of taking tennis to the communities and are advocating for new courts in northeast Florence.

In 2022, bi-monthly Saturday Fun Days were initiated for children whose parents can bring them to the Tennis Center. The Fun Days, which feature training, games, and a refreshment break, bring kids from all of the RJYTP partners together. They include basic training to newcomers and more advanced training for returning players and provide a way of growing the educational component of the program. In recent months, Saturday Fun Days have included basic tennis instruction for parents and adult family members, hoping to create lasting family involvement.

The Ron James Program's parent organization, the FTA, has worked

with the City of Florence, Florence County, area businesses, local tennis pros, and schools on many projects over the years. The FTA annually budgets funds to support area tennis pros and the Athletic Directors and tennis coaches at the three Florence public high schools, when their needs exceed available funding. FTA contributions have included wind screens, nets, scorecards and other equipment. All three high schools also regularly participate in the FTA's annual Boys and Girls High School Tournaments. The FTA, which was named national Community Tennis Association of the Year in 2007 and South Carolina CTA of the year four times, has been commended for community service on numerous occasions.

Each of its partner organizations has academic enrichment programs, but the RJYTP plans to greatly expand its own academic component within three years by engaging retired teachers to provide one-on-one assistance and an approved computer-based curriculum. The Curricula will be selected in collaboration with partner organizations and will emphasize STEM subjects, health and nutrition and social awareness. There are excellent educational resources available to programs like the RJYTP through the NJTL Network.

The overriding goal of the Ron James Youth Tennis Program is to provide the benefits of tennis, along with academic incentives and encouragement, to youth of all backgrounds. Tennis is a lifetime sport that improves physical and mental health and teaches many valuable lessons, and making the sport available to youngsters who might never have considered it can improve lives and communities. Coach James's legacy will grow and allow youth to have the opportunities beyond the tennis courts. By laying the foundations, youth will know they can be anything they want to be and achieve whatever they want to achieve. Coach Ron would be proud!!

HELPING FLORENCE FLOURISH WELCOMES WINSHAPE CAMP BACK Submitted by Helping Florence Flourish



For campers who have completed grades K5-5th

WinShape Camps

July 1st-5th

First Presbyterian Church
700 Park Avenue, Florence

REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!

\$185

Multi-sibling discounts and some scholarships available!

<https://camps.winshape.org/day-camps/florence-sc-2/>

1st 50 registrants get \$35 off initial child's registration. Join us!

Helping Florence Flourish is pleased to host the annual WinShape Camp July 1-5, 2024, once again! The camp will be held on the campus of First Presbyterian Church, 700 Park Avenue in Florence, SC. WinShape Camps for Communities, started by the Founder of Chick-fil-A, will bring this one-week day camp experience for campers who have completed grades K5-5th.

Florence was chosen along with more than 80 cities across the

country to host the WinShape day camp, where more than 15,000 campers will experience the summer of a lifetime in 2024. The camp provides professionally-trained staff to guide each day's activities – known as “Skills” – that are designed to provide something for every kid's interests.

Camp will be held from 8:15 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, with a half day on Friday known as Friday Family Fun Day. To wrap up the week, this day ends with lunch for the families catered by Chick-fil-A.

At WinShape Camp in Florence, campers from diverse backgrounds will come together for a week of life-changing, memory-making, adventure-taking experiences ranging from sports to creative play to worship! This is a next-level summer camp experience where kids can have fun and grow in their faith. The cost is \$185.00 per camper and multi-sibling discounts as well as some scholarships are available. The first 50 registrant's week of March 4th-8th get \$35.00 off initial child's registration. Learn

more or register for this week of fun, faith, fitness and fellowship at <https://camps.winshape.org/day-camps/florence-sc-2/>. For questions about camp (e.g., scholarships, location, times, etc.) email helpingflorenceflourish@gmail.com.

We hope you'll join us at WinShape Camp this summer!

ABOUT HELPING FLORENCE FLOURISH

Helping Florence Flourish is made up of four focus groups that were established as a result of a survey given to 68 Christian leaders in Florence, SC that asked them to identify the greatest needs in our community. The results were racial bridging, restoration of the family, educational partnership and care for the homeless. An additional area was added: prayer. The work of these focus groups, along with the Citywide Prayer Gatherings, are the core of Helping Florence Flourish. Through the willing coordination of local nonprofit organizations, Florence churches and volunteers, Helping Florence Flourish seeks to make visible positive changes in these critical areas. Helping Florence Flourish is working toward a visible demonstration of the unity of the body of Christ to bless Florence. To learn more, donate or get involved, visit www.helpingflorenceflourish.org.

ABOUT WINSHAPE CAMPS:

S. Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A, Inc., started WinShape Camps in 1985 with the hopes of creating a camp experience that would offer kids fun, adventure, lasting friendships and a closer relationship with God. Since then, thousands of campers have experienced the amazing programs at WinShape Camps.

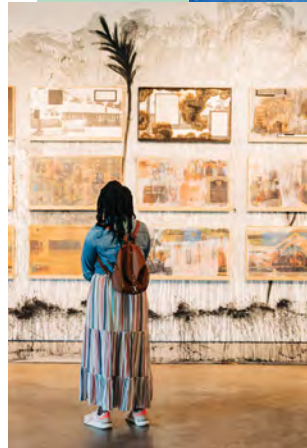
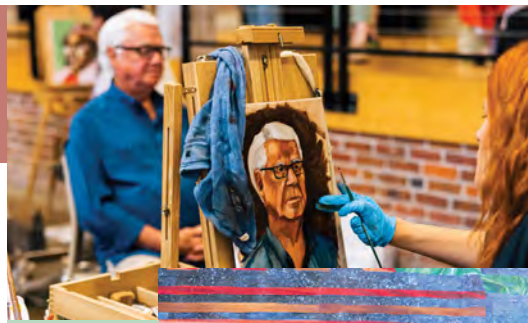
Today, WinShape Camps offers a variety of camp experiences for boys and girls of all ages, including one-week and two-week overnight camp programs for boys and girls, as well as 80-day camps throughout the nation called WinShape Camps for Communities.

WinShape Camps for Boys is located in beautiful Mt. Berry, Georgia, with one-week overnight opportunities in Cleveland, Georgia. WinShape Camps for Girls offers one-week overnight camps throughout North Georgia and a two-week overnight experience in Mt. Berry, GA.

Visit: www.winshapecamps.org | Follow: @winshapecamps

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DOWNTOWN FLORENCE ANNOUNCES 2024 EVENT SCHEDULE *Submitted by the Florence Downtown Development Office Staff*



*2024 Lucky Shamrock Festival
(Photo credited to True Light Photography)*

season with their Lucky Shamrock Festival over St. Patrick’s Day weekend to a crowd of over 4,000 attendees. Attendees enjoyed shamrock-themed fun with live music by the Jebb Mac Band to kick off Downtown Florence’s festival season.

The Florence Wine and Food Festival is first up in April with three days of culinary celebration April 4-6 downtown. Francis Marion University revives their Arts International Festival with a return to Downtown Florence on Saturday, April 13. Expect to find three stages of international music and dance acts, an artisan village, kids creative area and more! The festival takes place in the 100 and 200 blocks of S. Dargan with free admission. On May 3, the annual Habitat for Humanity Cinco de Mayo festival returns with live music by the Pizazz Band from 5:30 until 10:00 p.m. in the 100 block of S. Dargan Street.

The award-winning Florence After 5 concert series returns on Friday, May 31st with live music by Julio and the Saltines, a high energy party band hailing from Myrtle Beach. Florence After 5 takes place in the 100 block of S. Dargan Street in Downtown Florence on the last Friday of each month, May through September from 5:30 until 8:30 p.m. Admission is free thanks to our 2024 Platinum Season Sponsors, MUSC-Health, Victors, Legacy Chrysler Jeep Dodge Ram and Southern Crown Partners. Attendees can expect great live entertainment, plenty of food and drink and some exciting

surprises throughout the season.

Also returning this year, is Downtown Florence’s pub crawl, Tap into Downtown, which transforms downtown shops and boutiques into tasting rooms for the evening. Attendees sample a variety of craft brews while they shop and explore Historic Downtown Florence. This year, Tap into Downtown will take place on Friday, September 13. Tickets will go on sale through the Downtown Florence website on July 15, 2024. Leading up to Tap into Downtown, you don’t want to miss Downtown Florence’s Restaurant Week from September 7-14th!

In October, get your Halloween costumes ready for a kick-off to the spooky season with the Downtown Florence Fright Fest featuring live music by the Cat 5 Band. This event returns for its second year with plenty of food, drink, costume contests, trick or treating with Florence County Emergency Services and more. Downtown Fright Fest takes place Friday, October 11, and admission is free. Also in October are the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce’s annual Kickin’ Chicken and Wings Festival on Friday, October 18th and the Wilson High School Alumni Block Party on Friday, October 4th with a parade downtown on Saturday, October 5th.

The South Carolina Pecan Music & Food Festival takes over Downtown Florence on Saturday, November 2nd with over 250 vendors, nine stages of live entertainment, Run and Bike Like a Nut athletic events, classic car show, free kids fun zone, and so much more. The festival celebrates its 20th year in 2024 with the promise of exceptional live entertainment and family fun. Admission is free thanks to the presenting sponsor, Pepsi of Florence. Rounding out our Downtown Florence event season in 2024 is the annual Holiday Music and Light Show, a synchronized music and light experience in which lights are set to follow a holiday soundtrack. The Music and Light Show begins on Friday, December 6 and runs through Saturday, December 31. Downtown Christmas Magic is also set to return on Friday, December 6 at 5:30 p.m. to transform downtown into a winter wonderland with family entertainment, games, inflatables and more.

To learn more about the events above and see our complete calendar, visit our website, www.florencedowntown.com.

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Submitted by Lisa Moody, downtown coordinator City of Dillon



Downtown-Dillon Celebrate Main Street Festival

DILLON-Anderson Brothers Bank proudly presents the City of Dillon and Dillon County Chamber of Commerce 2024 Celebrate Main Street Festival in historic Downtown Dillon. This much-loved family-friendly event will take place on Saturday, April 27, from 10 a.m. – 10 p.m. Mayor Tally McCall and the City of Dillon Downtown Coordinator, Lisa Moody, will open the celebration on the Duke Energy Main Stage at 10:00, followed by the Dillon Police Department Posting of the Colors, Pledge of Allegiance led by Mayor McColl, the National Anthem beautifully sung by Barbara Causey and the invocation and blessing of the festival will be performed by Pastor Matthew Adams from the First Presbyterian Church. Starting at 11:00 a.m. the Duke Energy Stage will host three spectacular bands this year! Pepper Creek will perform from 11-1, Alyce-White Campbell & Friends from 2:30-4:00 and the headliner band, Outrun the Weekend, will take you into the night from 7:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m. The First Citizens Locals ONLY Stage will host a day full of local talent from 10:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. This year's local talent will include Dance Dimensions, Elite Dancers, Green Brother's Martial Arts Academy, Ronnie's Line Dancing Fitness Class and the Dillon High School Jazz Band. There is fun for the entire family with the Palmetto Cruisers Car Show, Huntington's Disease Society of America Bike & Walk-A-Thon, Petting Zoo and local farm industry displays with the Dillon 4-H, Clemson Extension and tractors, non-profit and merchandise vendors and crafters, food trucks and food vendors and so much more!

For more information regarding the festival contact Lisa Moody with the City of Dillon at 843-845-4393 or Johnnie Luehrs with the Chamber of Commerce at 843-774-8551.



Ladies enjoying the festival



Dan E. Main Street Festival



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HOW TO HAVE FUN, STAY ACTIVE AND BE BOLD AT EVERY AGE



(BPT) - No matter your age or fitness level, experts agree that physical activity brings multiple benefits to your mind and body. If you wonder how being more active as you get older can help you live a happier, healthier life - and how to get started - taking small, simple steps to boost your activity level can make a big impact.

Remember, before starting any new exercise, it's recommended to consult your health care provider.

Here are a few benefits of exercise that may inspire you to move a little more.

1. Protect your bones and joints

Stronger muscles help protect your bones and joints as you age. But if you think lifting heavy weights is the only way to strengthen your muscles, you're in for a pleasant surprise. If you haven't been active, you can begin strength exercises by starting slowly, using little to no special equipment and gradually improving your strength over time.

It's best to seek classes or programs specifically designed for seniors. Seniors can find classes for all levels focused on building strength and flexibility as they age, along with cardio exercises to get their blood pumping.

2. Help prevent falls

About one in four Americans aged 65 and older will fall each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Regular exercise that builds strength and improves balance is one of the best ways to help prevent falls or recover from a fall.

3. Learn about injury prevention

Injuries can happen at any age, but a few simple precautions can help to keep you moving injury-free. If you're a beginner, choose instructors and exercise programs that start slow - even seated - and build your strength and flexibility gradually, so you can

continue improving your fitness without risking injury.

4. Enjoy socializing

One valuable benefit of being active is finding a class or community of people you enjoy spending time with. Whether you're taking classes in person or online, you'll know everyone else in the class is also aiming to stay more fit and healthy. Taking classes together is a fun bonding activity that will help you stay motivated and may inspire you to create your own group of friends for walking or doing activities together.

5. Improve mindfulness and reduce stress

Physical activity can reduce stress, help you stay more present throughout your day and enjoy your life to the fullest.

Getting started

Workouts are offered at thousands of gyms, community centers and other participating fitness locations nationwide.

Members can participate in live, instructor-led and on-demand virtual classes in a variety of lengths and formats. Options include programming for those with chronic conditions, plus healthy aging workshops on topics including fall prevention and virtual learning opportunities.

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Pink Lychee Rose Gin Spritz

1 Serving | 5 minutes



INGREDIENTS:

- 1.5 oz Empress 1980 Elderflower Rose Gin
 - 9 Pieces of Fresh Lychee
 - 1/2 oz. Passion Fruit Syrup
 - 2 oz. Club Soda
- Lemon Twist / Rose Petals for Garnish

Directions:

1. Muddle Lychee & Passion Fruit Syrup in a shaker.
2. Pour Lychee mixture into a champagne flute.
3. Fill Champagne flute with ice and add Club Soda.
4. Float Empress 1908 Elderflower Rose Gin on top.
5. Garnish with Lemon Twist and Rose Petals.



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