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SOUTH CAROLINA



DIVERSITY WORKS

JANUARY 2025 VOLUME 15 ISSUE 1

"For All of Us"



COVER STORY: PGS. 42 & 43
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CAROLINA PINES MEDICAL GROUP



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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 New Year Diversity Works Readers!

In a spirit of gratitude and renewal, and the anticipation of what a new year brings, the staff at Diversity Works Magazine is excited to share its 2025 first quarter edition.

Included, find relevancy in the articles in our Special Section from January to March, as the nation celebrates and honors the legacy of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Black History Month and National

Women's History Month. In addition, our recurring sections on business, education, diversity in spirituality, health, financial and lifestyle are sure to enlighten and raise your situational awareness of what's happening in the Pee Dee.

As we honor the legacy of King, we do so with the theme, "Mission Possible: Protecting Freedom, Justice and Democracy in the Spirit of Nonviolence365." Noting that the solution to injustice in the world is through Kingian nonviolence which ultimately will lead to a Beloved Community. Are we living in a Beloved Community? Read the articles by and about local community leaders like Mayor Miko Pickett or SC State Mechanism NCNW President Ursula Gregg and the strides they are making to build and maintain a better community.

It is undeniable that the contributions of African Americans from slavery to the present day have propelled the country forward, and as such, we recognize that it takes ALL of us to create community. Read the articles enclosed under the theme, "African Americans and Labor," as we celebrate and observe National Black History Month. When you have a need for gravel driveways, hauling, landscaping, metal and steel for garages, building supplies or housekeeping, who do you call? In this special section, find interesting stories about our friends and neighbors who provide invaluable services through the practice of labor professions.

Women, the givers of life...Whether we know them or know of their amazing contributions; how knowing their history has impacted the development of society, locally or nationally, is inspirational. It is a shining example that charges us forward with the belief that, if they could achieve, so too, can others. The late President Jimmy Carter began Women's History observances in 1980 by issuing a proclamation for the first week in March. It has grown to a month-long National observance where this year's theme, "Moving Forward Together! Women Educating & Inspiring Generations," celebrates the united power and impact of women in our world, more specifically in our communities. As you read, you will find, in every genre, an opportunity to celebrate women for their courage, for breaking barriers, educating and inspiring others. Check out the stories of amazing women in our special section on Women's History Month, and throughout Diversity Works. Read and share the inspiring career paths of women like Dr. Leslie Bessellieu, Dr. Traci Cooper, Dr. Marilyn 'Murphy' Fore, Donna Isgett and Mindy Taylor. Join us in raising a toast to these local women and women everywhere, past and present, for their timely and important contributions to the fabric of our community and society.

The magnitude of our recurring sections continues to keep us

well informed. Our 2025 content is sure not to disappoint. In our business section, be informed about the exciting new ventures to come to the local area. With a deadline of February 6, the Greater Florence Chamber is now accepting nominations for its 2025 Small Businessperson of the Year. You'll find criteria and details as you read the article. Happy nominating! Our business and special sections overlap in this first quarter, and we are happy to congratulate other phenomenal women such as the 2024 SC Chamber Executive of the Year by the Carolinas Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives. Read the stories of President of the Greater Hartsville Chamber of Commerce, Margaret Monk, Darlington's new City Manager Lanessa Hawkins and many others. Along with other informative articles, get ready as Lake City continues to be on the move as the city has partnered with The Retail Coach to bring growth, benefiting residents and business owners.

You'll find interesting reads in our education section where various school districts share wonderful happenings in their specific counties. Read Superintendent Kandace Bethea's article on the Marion County School District's STEM Program, as well as educators in the local area. Don't forget to congratulate FS1 Teacher of the Year, Delmae Elementary School STEM Teacher Dr. Carson Kleinknecht for her commitment, dedication and service to local children. Included, the congratulatory story about Marlene Mitchell-Golding becoming a National Board-Certified Teacher. In this section you will be informed and proud of the educational achievements occurring at our private and state institutions of higher learning. Be informed about FMU's Evening College Program, FDTC's new leadership appointments and the new Certified Plumbing Program. These and other important educational news can be found in Diversity Works.

A new year is the perfect time to pay closer attention to your finances. Our financial section shares information on creating a budget, new staff announcements at Anderson Brothers Bank locations and more.

Our first quarter cover story from Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center shares the commitment and service to the people of Hartsville by Dr. Leroy Robinson. Read his story and see what makes him a beloved member of the Pee Dee. Stay abreast of health care news from local medical institutions like CareSouth Carolina, McLeod Health, Genesis Healthcare, HopeHealth and MUSC. Read informative stories like CareSouth Carolina welcoming Krista Poulton, FNP to the ROADS Team Mobile Initiative which serves the rural Pee Dee community. Learn new content on health professionals' comings and goings, national hospital rankings and the very best of excellence in health care. You'll share the enthusiasm and warm wishes once you read, articles like CareSouth Carolina, Jennifer Lynch, FNP as she receives the CSC Rural Practitioner of the Year Award. Don't stop there, keep reading and learn that McLeod Health is the recipient of a grant to support the Nurse Family Partnership Program in Marion County. In addition to MUSC's honor of being ranked a highly performing best hospital for maternity care, read and congratulate Florence/Marion/Black River CEO Jay Hinesley for receiving the W. Stuart Smith Leadership Excellence Award. Find these stories and more health news, right here in Diversity Works Magazine. Share it with friends, family and those who still find value in the written word. Visit diversityworkssc.com.

We hope you look forward with excitement as you read the plethora of stories submitted in our sections. Surely, there's much to experience in 2025! Happy Reading!

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FLORENCE IS MOVING: FULL LIFE. FULL FORWARD. – STRONGER TOGETHER.

Submitted by City of Florence



Mayor Lethonia Barnes

Two thousand twenty-four 2024 has been a year of change, growth and innovation in the City of Florence. With the appointment of new City Manager Scotty Davis at the end of 2023 and the election of new Mayor Lethonia Barnes in November 2024, the community has embraced fresh leadership that brings new perspectives and a continued commitment to progress.

Barnes, a graduate from Wilson High School and South Carolina State University, has served on the city council since 2020 as an at-large member. For 28 years, she owned and operated Florence's largest beauty and barber salon. She also served as an administrator at Florence-Darlington Technical College and Virginia College for a combined 21 years. Active in the community, Barnes has led initiatives supporting senior citizens, youth and city beautification efforts. She is the pastor of Fletcher Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Laurinburg, NC, and has served on multiple boards, including the Downtown Revitalization Board, Florence Cosmetology Association, Chamber of Commerce Board, Community Redevelopment Committee, Business Redevelopment Committee and the Pee Dee Community Action Agency Board.

Barnes' vision for the next four years, "Stronger Together," focuses on uniting the community and driving meaningful change. She is committed to addressing key issues such as affordable housing, job creation, infrastructure improvements and public safety. Her goal is to ensure that every area of Florence thrives. She is a supporter of the newly established Building Florence Together Community Development Corporation, which serves as a bridge between the public and private sector to address the needs of Florence. With an emphasis on long-term success and community engagement, Barnes aims to make Florence a more inclusive and prosperous city for all.

"I want to make one thing abundantly clear: this is only the beginning. We have an ambitious vision for what our city can be, but it's a vision that can only be realized if we continue to work together. The investments we're making today reflect our belief in our community's potential and the power of collaboration. Every step we take, every dollar we invest, will be made with the goal of improving

our city for everyone. But we can't do it alone. We need your continued involvement. We need your ideas, your feedback and your energy. This is your city, and it's only through your active participation that we can truly build the kind of community we all deserve," says Barnes.

Building Florence Together Community Development Corporation celebrated its first year in the City of Florence. The organization's vision is to ensure that all residents, neighborhoods and small businesses in Florence are positioned for economic stability, revitalization and growth. To read more about their initiatives, visit www.buildingflorencetogether.org.

To increase communication and transparency, the City of Florence introduced its new AI-powered chatbot, Ask Cy, in June 2024. To try out the new bot and sign up for alerts, residents can text "Hey Cy" to (855) 964-3929 or visit www.cityofflorence.com.

The Florence Downtown Development Corporation's SC Pecan Music and Food Festival celebrated its 20th year in 2024. Drawing over 50,000 attendees each year, the festival has become the area's largest event. It continues to win, "Best of the Pee Dee," awards and has been featured in numerous publications, including Travel + Leisure Magazine Online and AAA's Go Magazine. For those who missed the 20th celebration, mark your calendar for November 1, 2025!

In 2024, the City of Florence received the Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Award for Economic Development from the Municipal Association of South Carolina, recognizing its efforts in sports tourism. Through strategic investments in recreational infrastructure, the city has generated an economic impact of over \$10.6 million in the 2023-2024 fiscal year. This achievement would not have been possible without support from the city council, along with partnerships with the Drs. Bruce & Lee Foundation and local recreation associations. Looking ahead, Florence plans to expand further with new multi-purpose facilities and the addition of an arena-style stadium to the Pearl Moore Basketball Complex, continuing to drive economic growth and community development.

The City of Florence Police Department began using Flock Cameras, a brand of Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) technology, in April 2024. These cameras have already contributed to over 160 cases, aiding in issuing warrants, vehicle recovery, missing person searches and solving crime. They also serve as a visible deterrent to crime, helping to create a safer environment for all.

In 2020, the residents of Florence County voted to approve the Third Penny Sales Tax Program, marking the third time voters approved a one-cent sales tax for capital improvement projects. The Third Penny is anticipated to generate over \$140 million for capital projects throughout Florence County over seven years, with \$40 million of the tax specifically allocated to fund intersection and street improvement projects within the City of Florence. To date, 55 roads and one intersection have been completed, with 18 more roads and three intersections scheduled for completion throughout the City of Florence in 2025.



New construction

FLORENCE IS MOVING CONT'D

Stormwater system improvements have also been underway. Improvements will be made in the following areas: St. Anthony and College Park, Sandhurst, Tarleton Estates Culverts, Malden Drive, Cannon Street Outfall, Thomas Road Outfall, Rebecca Street Outfall, Pennsylvania Street Outfall, Dargan and Elm Street Culverts, Cheves Street Underpass Culvert, Oakland Avenue, Wisteria and Timrod Park. These improvements include removing roots, sediment, mud and trash from existing pipes, performing necessary pipe repairs and adding new inlets to increase capacity and reduce flooding.

As part of ongoing improvements to the City of Florence Water System, the city launched a new interactive water management portal to enhance communication with customers about system upgrades similar to the Stormwater Management Portal and the Third Penny Sales Tax Project Portal. The portal provides detailed background information, for residents to track progress. Visit the interactive portal at www.cityofflorence.com under the Capital Improvements tab on the homepage.

Looking ahead to 2025, construction of the AESC facility is on track for completion by summer of 2025, with operations beginning in 2026. The City of Florence continues to provide infrastructure improvements.

The Carolina Theater in Downtown Florence is undergoing an exciting transformation. Phase I has been completed and Phase II will finalize the renovations, with the theater expected to reopen in early 2026.

The City of Florence was awarded the National Park Service's Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Grant, which secured the remaining funds needed to fully finance the

Levy Park Reimagining Project. The project entails comprehensive renovation and expansion and parking facilities. Requests for bids were sent in December 2024, with construction anticipated early 2026. The City of Florence is also expected to gain three dog parks in 2025.



High Hill Creek

To enhance the quality of life for the Florence community, the City of Florence is expanding both the Rail Trail and the High Hill Creek Mountain Bike and Run Park. The Rail Trail extension will include a one-mile connector, linking the current trailhead at the EMS Station on Ebenezer Road to the soccer complex, passing through the Grove Subdivision. An 800-foot

boardwalk over Middle Swamp has already been completed, with the rest of the extension expected to finish soon. Meanwhile, the High Hill Creek Mountain Bike and Run Park, located at 2502 Prosperity Way, will add three to four miles of trail, doubling its length. Construction is set to begin this winter.

The Flo-Town 5K will celebrate 10 years in 2025! Grab your running shoes and mark your calendar for April 26, 2025. Walk or run—just get it done!

The City of Florence remains committed to collaboration, professionalism and ownership, ensuring all residents thrive, building a stronger, more vibrant community, embracing the vision of Full Life. Full Forward. – Stronger Together.

Florence is Moving
FULL LIFE. FULL FORWARD.
Into the New Year!

FULL LIFE. FULL FORWARD.
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DIVERSITY IN 2025: WHAT WILL THIS LOOK LIKE?

Submitted by Reginal G. Lyerly, Vice President- Cybersecurity Recruitment, Veteran Outreach, and Government Contracting DNA Diversity Executive Search



Reginal G. Lyerly

Diversity in the business world is a continual process. 2025 is here, but the challenges and opportunities have presented themselves long before today. The business world has come a long way in this area, but there is still significant progress to be made. Let's examine the key areas affecting this year.

***Strategies for Inclusion:** While recruitment and hiring remain important, more emphasis will be placed on retention. Retention

initiatives and opportunities for career advancement will play a more significant role.

***Supplier Diversity:** Companies will recognize that meeting customer needs requires continued work with diverse suppliers. This includes small businesses owned by women, minorities, and veterans. As of 2024, over 14 million small businesses are owned by women, over 2.5 million by veterans, and over 9.7 million by minorities.

***Marketing and Branding:** Companies will expand their efforts to ensure their products and services reflect a broad variety of identities. Realistic representation will attract customers and be better able to retain customer loyalty.

***Representation:** Businesses will seek ways to provide more inclusive leadership. While many DEI programs have been

formally removed from companies, the framework for creating a more inclusive business remains intact. Customers will make their preferences known through their interactions and sales transactions.

***The Rise of Generation Z:** Currently, millennials (born 1981-1996) make up 40 percent of the workforce, Generation X (born 1965-1980) comprises 36 percent, and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) represent approximately 19 percent. Generation Z (1997-2012) is currently the smallest group at 6 percent, but this shifts this year and beyond. Projections show Generation Z will constitute 27 percent of the workforce and become the largest group by the 2030s.

***Disability and Neurodiversity:** Awareness of neurodiversity will continue to grow, prompting businesses to make their environments more accommodating for employees with ADHD, dyslexia, autism and other cognitive differences. Technology will bridge the gap in creating these accommodations.

The landscape of how diversity is embraced will change. This will be a year of greater understanding of how diversity affects financial performance, employee satisfaction and innovative measures. Businesses that use the current landscape to meet customer needs will continue to evolve and grow into the next decade.



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LAKE CITY SHOWCASES SUCCESS AND GAINS INSIGHTS Submitted by Public Information Officer Donna Tracy



Members of the “Winning Strategies for Small Cities to Secure Grant Funding” panel pose for a photo with National League of Cities and Bloomberg Philanthropies representatives. Lake City Mayor Yamekia Robinson served on the panel during the NLC City Summit in Tampa.

LAKE CITY – Lake City leaders and staff recently represented our community at the National League of Cities City Summit held in Tampa, Florida, this past week. The annual event brought together municipal leaders and experts from across the country to share innovative solutions and strategies to improve communities.

As a city recognized for its success in securing federal infrastructure funding, Lake City Mayor Yamekia Robinson received special recognition at the conference and was invited to serve as a panelist for a session titled, “Winning

Strategies for Small Cities to Secure Grant Funding.” The panel focused on sharing practical advice and insights on navigating competitive grant processes, forming effective partnerships, and leveraging local assets to attract federal support.

“It was an honor to represent our great city and share our approach to securing vital infrastructure funding,” said Robinson. “The success we’ve achieved reflects the hard work and collaboration of our entire team. This summit was an incredible opportunity to both share our story and learn from

other cities.”

Joining the mayor at the summit were key city staff, including:

- William A. Hall, city administrator
- Wilhelmena Scott, council member
- Marshann Terwilliger, city clerk
- Brandon Carter, executive finance director
- Lisa Jones, grants writer
- Grayson Boyington, deputy recreation & tourism director
- Luke Godbold, economic development coordinator
- Nekeycha Izzard, water department billing manager

The city’s delegation engaged in workshops and networking sessions covering a wide range of topics, including sustainability, economic resilience, and best practices in municipal finance. These sessions provided valuable insights and tools to bring back to Lake City for continued progress.

“The National League of Cities is a first-class organization devoted to working for and on behalf of cities. My work with them in the Local Infrastructure Hub and Healthy Home

LAKE CITY SHOWCASES CONT'D



Lake City leaders and staff attended the National League of Cities City Summit in Tampa last week to learn about innovative solutions and strategies to improve our community. The summit brought together more than 4,000 attendees from villages, towns and cities across the United States.

Innovation Cohort has been invaluable," said Jones. "At the centennial summit, I was able to network with so many vendors, advocates and partners who are interested in working with Lake City for our future." The summit, held November 13-16, was attended by more than 4,000

individuals from villages, towns and cities across the United States. The event included more than 100 workshops that provided opportunities for each Lake City representative to advocate, learn, network, find innovative solutions and discover cost-saving opportunities for our community.

"The participation of Lake City leaders in this national event underscores the city's commitment to innovation and excellence in public service," said Hall, city administrator. "By sharing experiences and learning from peers, our city continues to strengthen its efforts to secure resources that benefit its residents and ensure a prosperous future."

CITY OF LAKE CITY PARTNERS WITH THE RETAIL COACH Submitted by Public Information Officer Donna Tracy



LAKE CITY— The City of Lake City has partnered with The Retail Coach, a leading national retail recruitment and development consulting firm. This collaboration is set to unlock growth opportunities in the city, benefiting local residents and business owners.

The Retail Coach specializes in identifying economic trends, assessing market potential, and connecting communities with targeted retailers and businesses that align with local needs and goals. Through this partnership, Lake City aims to boost economic development, attract new businesses and enhance the overall quality of life for residents.

"This venture begins the next chapter for our city as we work towards fostering a vibrant local economy, boosting employment opportunities and building for tomorrow," said William A. Hall, city administrator. "We were connected to The Retail Coach, a trusted advisor to communities across the United States that will help us promote Lake City and bring additional retail, service and entertainment opportunities to our community, through our membership with the Municipal Association of South Carolina."

The partnership will help Lake City leverage economic data and strategic partnerships to stimulate local economic growth and enhance quality of life.

"Here in Lake City, we want to create sustainable growth, more job opportunities and a thriving local economy," said Robinson. "This new partnership with Retail Coach will be the transformative move to attract new businesses and strengthen our existing businesses."

"This partnership with The Retail Coach represents a tremendous opportunity for Lake City," said Luke Godbold,

Lake City economic development coordinator. "By attracting new businesses and supporting our local entrepreneurs, we're building a stronger economy and a more vibrant community for everyone."

Key Benefits of the Partnership:

Business Attraction and Job Creation: By partnering with The Retail Coach, the city will have access to expert insights and targeted outreach strategies to attract retailers and service providers that complement our local economy. This will lead to job creation and new career opportunities for residents, empowering our workforce and strengthening community pride.

Enhanced Shopping and Dining Options: The Retail Coach will work closely with the city to identify and attract retail and dining options that cater to the needs and interests of the community. Expanding these options locally will offer residents greater convenience, reduce the need for travel and increase community engagement.

Increased Tax Revenue for Local Improvements: New businesses contribute to the city's tax base, enabling the funding of projects such as park upgrades, infrastructure enhancements and community programs. These improvements will directly benefit residents and make Lake City an even more appealing place to live, work, play and visit.

Support for Local Businesses: The partnership will also provide resources and support for existing small businesses, helping them grow and adapt to changing market demands. The Retail Coach offers data-driven insights that help businesses maximize their potential, fostering a thriving local business environment.

"The City of Lake City and The Retail Coach are committed to this collaboration and the positive impact it will have on the community," said Godbold. "The partnership will include ongoing assessments and outreach efforts to ensure that growth aligns with community values and goals."

For more information about the partnership and upcoming developments, visit the city website at LakeCitySC.gov or follow us on Facebook.



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RISING THROUGH THE RANKS By Cynthia Ford



Deloris Young

Deloris Young's career journey with McDonald's is a testament to perseverance, growth, and opportunity. At 47, Young has dedicated over two decades to the McDonald's brand, starting her career at the age of 20. What began as a part-time job evolved into a fulfilling career that has seen her rise from a biscuit maker to a general manager, overseeing restaurant operations and mentoring others. Her story is both inspiring and encouraging, especially for those considering joining the McDonald's team.

Young began her McDonald's journey in 1996, under the ownership of Ms. Laura Day. When the location transitioned to new owners in 1997, she continued her role before stepping away to focus on her family. She returned to McDonald's in 2007, where her leadership potential was quickly recognized, earning her a promotion to swing manager after just two weeks. Over the years, she advanced steadily, taking on roles such as assistant manager, store manager and eventually general manager.

Reflecting on her challenges, Young recalls a pivotal moment in 2010, when she was unexpectedly thrust into the role of store manager. "I had to learn everything overnight—inventory management, food costs, labor control and team leadership," she says. While the transition was daunting, Young credits the experience with honing her skills and preparing her for greater responsibilities.

Young's journey was not without personal trials. She experienced the heartbreaking loss of her eldest daughter, Tyshanna, in 2009. "It's been 14 years, but it still feels like yesterday," she shares. Despite the pain, she found strength in her remaining

children, Jazmin, now 24 and a truck driver, and Zyriel, who is currently in his senior year of high school. "Family is everything to me," Young says. "When I leave work, I do my best to separate myself from the store and focus on spending time with my kids."

Young also shares a close bond with her twin sister, Delaura, who has been a source of support throughout her life. Together, they have navigated challenges and celebrated successes, a reflection of Young's deep commitment to family and community.

For Young, McDonald's has been more than a job—it's been a career that provided stability and growth. She emphasizes the opportunities available to anyone willing to put in the effort. "I started as a biscuit maker and worked my way up to general manager. McDonald's offers scholarships, college credits and even Hamburger University, where managers can become certified to run restaurants," she explains. Hamburger University, located in Chicago, provides comprehensive training through courses and real-world scenarios, equipping managers with the skills needed for success.

One of Young's proudest achievements was mentoring her current owner-operator during his early career. "Back in 2010, I trained him as he transitioned into the business. Knowing I contributed to his success is a big highlight of my career," she says. Young encourages others to consider joining the McDonald's team. "There's room for growth at every level. You don't have to stay in one position. If you're serious about building a career, McDonald's can take you far. It has allowed me to raise my family, provide for them and achieve personal success."

Young's story is a shining example of what dedication and hard work can achieve. Her journey with McDonald's is not just a career narrative but an inspiring roadmap for others looking to grow, overcome challenges and make a difference in their lives and communities.

BISHOP KENDALL FLEETWOOD PRESENTED WITH KEY TO THE CITY

Submitted by Hunter Thomas, public & community affairs director



Pictured, Councilwoman Elaine Reed, Bishop Fleetwood and his wife Pastor Joyce Fleetwood

DARLINGTON – The City of Darlington recently presented the Key to the City to Kendall Fleetwood, honoring his community leadership and his role in founding Victory Tabernacle Bible Training Center.

During a service celebrating his 60th birthday, Councilwoman Elaine Reed presented Fleetwood with the Key to the City on behalf of Mayor Curtis Boyd and Darlington City Council. Victory Tabernacle Bible Training Center paused its worship service for the presentation.

“Bishop Fleetwood is an inspiration to all,” Reed said. “Through his ministry, he has impacted countless lives here in the City of Darlington. His devotion and dedication strengthens Darlington and builds upon the city’s efforts to bring everyone together in the community. His contributions have not only served Darlington, but he has also made an impact around the nation and the world.”

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, Fleetwood moved to the Pee Dee region at age 15 to care for his grandmother. After a 28-year career in the finance sector, he retired to dedicate his time to ministry.

Fleetwood founded Victory Tabernacle Bible Training Center in April 1999, initially operating from a storefront on Exchange Street before relocating to its current location at 300 E. Hampton Street. He has recently purchased land in Darlington for expansion.

Known as, “The Great Encourager,” Fleetwood is recognized for his devotion to his congregation and community. Victory Tabernacle Bible Training Center focuses on sharing God’s Word through traditional fellowship, brotherhood, help ministry, singles fellowship and teaching women of all ages to be strong Christian leaders.

In April 2023, Fleetwood founded the Alliance of Christian Ministries (ACM) to support struggling pastors and ministries. The ACM provides guidance and wisdom to churches.

Fleetwood and his wife, Pastor Joyce Fleetwood, have been married for 39 years. They have two sons, Kendall Jawan (Arnecia) and Joshua Fleetwood and two grandchildren, Kendall Jr. and Kendaesia Fleetwood. A survivor of thyroid cancer and a stroke, Fleetwood has never allowed health challenges to diminish his dedication to family, community or ministry.

For more information on the City of Darlington, visit cityofdarlington.com or call 843-398-4000.



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CHAMBER NOW ACCEPTING SMALL BUSINESSPERSON NOMINATIONS

Submitted by the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce



The Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce is now accepting nominations for the 2025 Small Businessperson of the Year sponsored by Dedicated Community Bank. Area business and community individuals can submit names of people who have managed a successful small business with a record of responsibility toward employees, customers and members of the community. Last year's recipient was Florence businessman and developer Chris Scott.

Nomination criteria include Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce membership associated with a sole proprietorship, partnership, corporation or professional practice in the Greater Florence area with less than 50 employees. (Elected officials, employees of government and not-for-profit organizations are ineligible unless they are also involved in a for profit business).

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Please contact Susan Farver at sfarver@flochamber.com for nomination submissions or any questions. The deadline for nominations is February 6, 2025. The SBOY award will be presented at the Chamber's Annual Outlook Luncheon on March 19, 2025.

The Chamber will be hosting a Women In Commerce Galentine's Social at Seminar Brewing on Thursday, February sixth from 5:30 p.m.- 7:00 p.m. It's time to put on your dancing shoes or boots and learn new line dance moves. While attendance is free, space is limited, thus early registration is recommended. This event is made possible by First Bank. Register online at the following link: web.florescscchamber.com/events/Women-In-Commerce-Galentine-s-Social-3373/details.

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PDRTA HOSTS PASSENGER APPRECIATION WEEK Submitted by Lauren Leonard, PIO, PDRTA



The Pee Dee Regional Transportation Authority (PDRTA) celebrated Passenger Appreciation Week starting Monday, November 18, 2024, to honor the passengers it serves across the Pee Dee region.

Fare-Free Week

In an effort to make public transportation more accessible and encourage ridership, PDRTA waived fares on all routes during the week, including those in Florence County and routes serving Myrtle Beach.

Passenger Appreciation Week Highlights Fare-Free Rides

From Monday, November 18, through Friday, November 22, passengers enjoyed free rides on all PDRTA routes.

Passenger Surveys

Throughout the week, PDRTA staff conducted surveys to gather valuable feedback from riders. These insights

on ridership habits, preferences and suggestions will help PDRTA refine its services and better address community needs.

Community Engagement

PDRTA staff actively engaged with passengers on various routes to answer questions, interact and collect survey responses. The engagement schedule included:

- Monday, November 18: Florence County routes and Florence Transit Center, 9:45 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
- Tuesday, November 19: Darlington County routes (Darlington Walmart, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.; Hartsville Walmart, 2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.).
- Wednesday, November 20: Marlboro County routes (Carlie C's, 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.).
- Thursday, November 21: Chesterfield County routes (Pageland KJ's, 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.; Chesterfield Walmart, 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.).
- Friday, November 22: Dillon and Marion County routes (Marion Walmart, 8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; Dillon Walmart, 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.).

Partnering for a Brighter Future

Passenger Appreciation Week was

made possible by the support of the following sponsors:

- Palmetto Bus Sales • Florence Center
- Darlington Raceway • First Bank
- Anderson Brothers Bank • Pepsi
- Scotland Health Care System
- Darla Moore Foundation
- Florence County Economic Development Partnership

About PDRTA

Established in June 1974, the Pee Dee Regional Transportation Authority (PDRTA) is the largest Regional Transit Authority in South Carolina and the third largest in the nation. Serving Chesterfield, Darlington, Florence, Marlboro, Dillon and Marion Counties, PDRTA has been a cornerstone of reliable transit for 50 years.

With a network of 35 bus routes, including 26 fixed routes, six Demand Response routes, and three Workforce routes, PDRTA facilitates over 30,000 passenger trips per month. The organization remains dedicated to connecting communities, promoting sustainable transportation and fostering regional growth.

For more information about PDRTA, call (843) 665-2227, email info@pdrta.org, or visit <https://pdrta.org>.

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PEOPLE ADD SUCCESS TO FOOD MANUFACTURING Submitted by Ruiz Foods



Ruiz Foods team member conducts product quality testing.

When Ruiz Foods sets out to create the beloved frozen Mexican foods sold under the El Monterey® and Tornados® brands, using the right ingredients in precise proportions is essential to delivering the flavors consumers love. But ask the company's leaders, and they'll tell you the most vital ingredient isn't listed on any product label.

"It's absolutely our people," says Mitch Martin, plant manager at Ruiz Foods' Florence facility. "Our success depends on every single team member in every role at this plant. In fact, we have approximately 50 different types of jobs here in Florence, and each one is critical to producing the great products we make—from the team unloading ingredients to those on the production lines, sanitation workers, logistics staff and administrative professionals. Every role matters, and that creates a lot of opportunities to learn and grow."

When Ruiz Foods acquired the Florence facility in 2014, the goal was to expand its geographic footprint and bring production and distribution closer to customers. However, company leaders understood that success would take more than just equipment and infrastructure; it would require building an exceptional team that embraced the company's culture and commitment to customer satisfaction. They found that team

in Florence.

"Our owners often say our team members are our, 'secret sauce,' and we want them to grow with us and achieve their goals as part of the Ruiz Foods family," Martin explains. "Whether that means learning new skills to pursue different roles or developing professionally, we support them. We're proud to offer a comprehensive compensation and benefits package, including tuition reimbursement, to reward those who embody Ruiz Foods' values and want to grow with us."

Careers in food manufacturing often require a mix of technical knowledge, practical skills and regulatory awareness. Entry-level positions may only require a high school diploma, while specialized roles like food scientists often demand a bachelor's degree in fields such as food science, microbiology or chemistry.

Key skills include operating machinery, understanding production processes, familiarity with safety and quality standards, teamwork, communication and problem-solving. Attention to detail is also critical for ensuring quality and compliance with health standards.

At Ruiz Foods, on-the-job training is a cornerstone of career development. The company's hands-on training programs help team members learn new skills, opening doors to internal growth opportunities.

"We've had some remarkable career success stories here in Florence," says Opal Jones, human resources manager. "For example, one team member started on the production line, utilized our training resources, and eventually became an HR generalist. Another team member leveraged on-the-job experience and training to become an associate operations manager. These stories are a testament to our team members' dedication, the quality of our training programs and the support of our leadership."

Since starting production in 2016, the Florence plant has grown to approximately 1,000 team members. Impressively, one-

third of these employees have been with the company for over four years, and several have celebrated their 10th anniversary with Ruiz Foods.

Team member longevity is a hallmark of this third-generation, family-owned business, which also operates facilities in California and Texas. This year, the company celebrated founder Fred Ruiz's 81st birthday—a reflection of its deep roots and commitment to its people.



Ruiz Foods team member works on the production line.

As Ruiz Foods approaches its first decade in Florence—and its seventh decade as a company—it remains focused on the future of food manufacturing. Nationally, food manufacturing employs 1.7 million people. Between 2017 and 2022, jobs in the sector grew 6.6 percent, outpacing the 3.8 percent growth of the overall economy, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Growth is projected to continue at seven percent from 2022 to 2027.

In South Carolina, food manufacturing jobs are also on the rise, according to the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce.

"We're proud to be part of a vibrant and growing sector in this state," says Martin. "And we're even prouder of our team members who have found their own recipe for success here at Ruiz Foods."

For current opportunities at Ruiz Foods' Florence facility, visit <https://ruizfoods.com/careers/florence-sc/>.





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HONDA TURKEY RUN TO BENEFIT HARVEST HOPE FOOD BANK *Submitted by Honda South Carolina Manufacturing*

TIMMONSVILLE – Honda South Carolina Manufacturing (SCM) hosted the Honda Turkey Run on Saturday, Nov. 9, at Carolina Bank Field. This fun, family-friendly fall event featured both in-person and virtual 5K races, focusing on fundraising to support Florence County residents in need.

Established in 2012, the 2024 Honda Turkey Run took place at Carolina Bank Field (1200 Jennie O’Bryan Ave., Florence), home to the summer collegiate baseball team, the Florence Flamingos. Runners completed the race at home plate, and virtual participation options were also available.

All registered participants received an event T-shirt and finisher medal. Additionally, the top three winners in each age and gender category were awarded a special-edition trophy and a \$10 Starbucks gift card. The event was open to the public.

“We celebrated the return of the Honda Turkey Run last year after a brief hiatus, and we were encouraged by the support from the Timmons ville community,” said Travis Lee, Honda SCM site lead. “This event is a great way to kick off the holiday season while benefiting the community where Honda associates live and work.



Over 80 walkers and runners participated in the 2024 Honda Turkey Run on Saturday, Nov. 9, at the Florence Flamingos ballfield in Florence, S.C.

We are proud to host a fun and exciting event that provides aid to families in need during the holidays.”

In addition to proceeds benefiting the Harvest Hope Food Bank, non-perishable food donations were collected during the event. Participants were encouraged to bring items such as canned

vegetables, fruits, meats, tomato products, cereal, oatmeal, potatoes, dry pasta, mixes and individually wrapped snacks. All donations to Harvest Hope Food Bank are tax-deductible.

Registration fees for the Honda Turkey Run were \$35 for pre-registrants and \$40 for those registering on the day of the event.

To learn more about the Honda Turkey Run, visit bit.ly/HondaTurkeyRun. Stay updated by following the event’s Facebook page at fb.com/hondaturkeyrun.

Honda Manufacturing in South Carolina

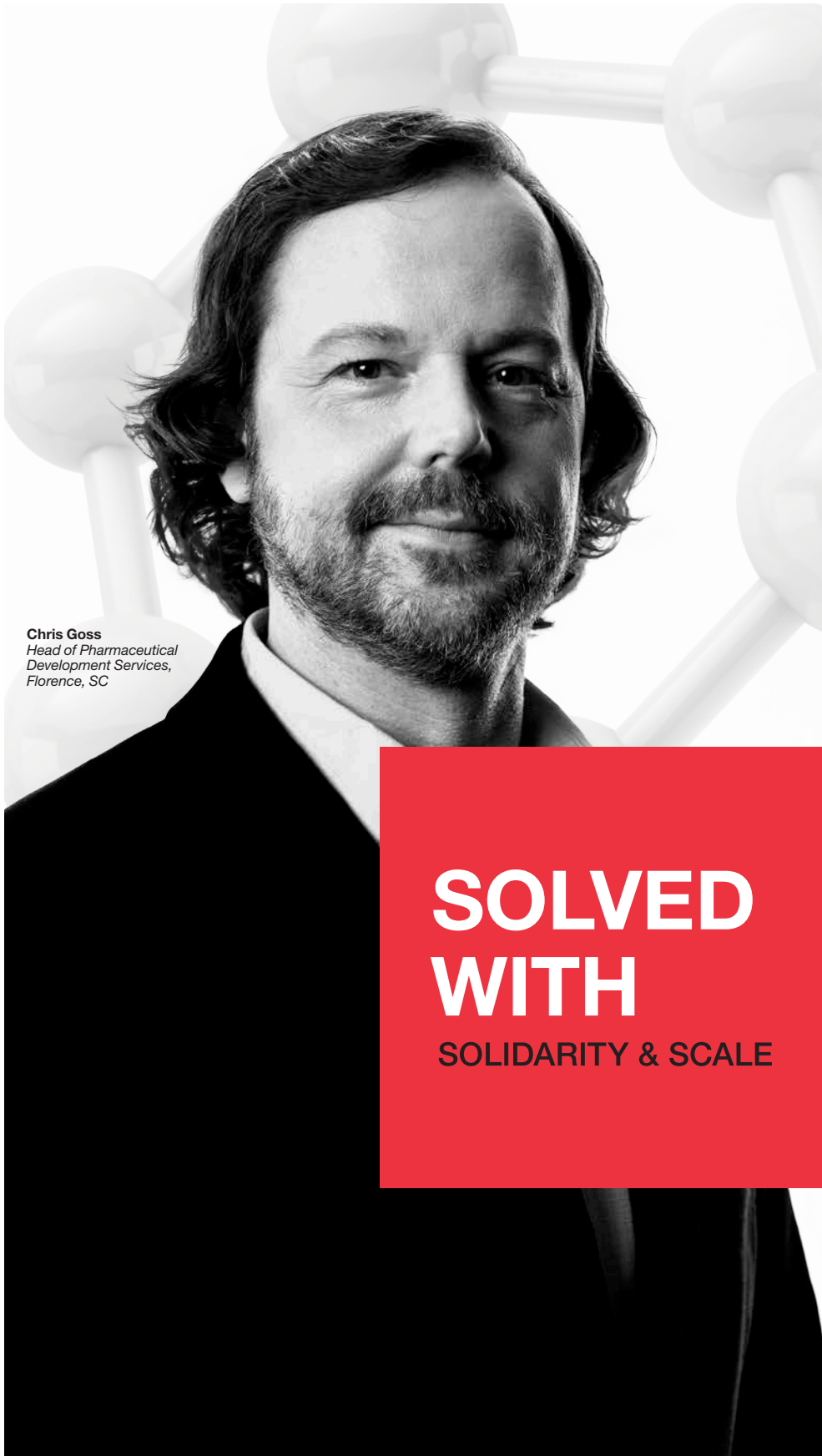
Honda has been producing powersports products in South Carolina for over 25 years and is one of 12 major Honda production facilities in the U.S.

The Timmons ville facility employs 1,000 associates and serves as the exclusive global production site for Honda side-by-side vehicles, including the Pioneer and Talon. These vehicles are manufactured using a combination of domestic and globally sourced parts.

Since production began in 1998, the facility has grown steadily, expanding from 200,000 to one million square feet and increasing capital investment to \$450 million.



All Turkey Run registered participants received an event t-shirt and finisher medal. Additional prizes included Honda branded sweatshirts, gift cards and special-edition trophies. Proceeds from the Honda Turkey Run benefitted Harvest Hope Food Bank.



Chris Goss
Head of Pharmaceutical
Development Services,
Florence, SC

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CITY OF DARLINGTON HIRES NEW CITY MANAGER Submitted by Hunter Thomas, public & community affairs director



Lenessa E. Hawkins

DARLINGTON – Darlington City Council has unanimously voted to appoint Lenessa E. Hawkins as its new city manager.

Hawkins joins the City of Darlington with more than 19 years of governmental experience, including 13 years in local government service.

“I would like to welcome Lenessa Hawkins, our new city manager, as she joins us in working to build a beautiful city for all our residents,” said Mayor Curtis Boyd.

“I’m excited for our new journey together.”

Hawkins fills the position previously held by John Payne, who departed in April 2024. The South Carolina Municipal Association recommended more than 20 applicants to Darlington City Council, and Hawkins was one of five candidates interviewed. Bill Taylor and longtime city employee Gloria Pridgen served terms as interim city manager.

“It is an honor and a privilege to serve as the next city manager for the City of Darlington,” Hawkins said. “Having grown up in Hartsville, I have connections to the City of Darlington through family and former work experiences. As a public servant leader, I anticipate serving all of Darlington, from the youngest to the oldest and from newcomers to longtime residents. I look forward to working with city council to carry out their vision on behalf of the citizens.”

Hawkins joins Darlington after serving as grants and contracts administrator for Centralina Regional Council in Charlotte, NC, since August 2022. Her previous roles include finance/human resources director for the City of Lake City, SC (2015), and deputy county administrator for Calhoun County, SC (2019). While in Calhoun County, she oversaw Animal Control, Parks & Recreation, Building & Planning, and E911 addressing departments, while also supporting Economic Development initiatives.

Hawkins holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Francis Marion University and a Bachelor of Science degree in Financial Management from Clemson University. She was a member of the inaugural class of the Local Government Leadership Institute (LGLI), hosted by Coastal Carolina University, College of Charleston, Francis Marion University, The Darla Moore Foundation and South Carolina City and County Management Association. Additionally, she completed the prestigious NC Municipal and County Administration course offered by UNC Chapel Hill’s School of Government.

To learn more about the City of Darlington, visit cityofdarlington.com or call 843-398-4000.



BUSINESS GROWTH, INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Candice Williams

Candice Williams, a rising star in ADP Tax Credit Services, shared her enthusiasm for being a long-time member of the team in Florence, SC. A proud graduate of Francis Marion University with a degree in management information systems, Candice joined ADP Tax Credits in 2006, and has been making an impact ever since.

ADP provides workforce solutions for small, medium and large companies.

Their products include human resource solutions, payroll solutions and tax services. Candice shared about her initial job with ADP in the call compliance department. She explained that her role involved ensuring compliance with the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) program by reminding clients to submit their time-sensitive 8850 forms. WOTC is a federal tax incentive designed to encourage U.S. employers to hire individuals from specific target groups facing barriers to employment.

She spent a year in the compliance department before transitioning to Data Operations as an associate operations analyst. In her role within Data Operations, she contributes to calculating federal and state tax credits while overseeing every phase of the program for clients. Her department also manages payroll file processing, identifies additional tax incentive opportunities and delivers a range of compliance and credit reporting solutions, all aimed at driving client success.

Currently serving as a data analytics consultant, a position she earned in 2023, Williams focuses on enhancing and modernizing credit and compliance reporting packages to improve functionality and usability. "There are many business units under the ADP umbrella," Williams explained, "and I work in the tax credit division." Through ADP's workforce management solutions, businesses can better track employee compliance, absences, payroll, HCM integration and scheduling. They have served more than 1,000,000 clients because of the growth opportunities they provide. "I am also a part of the change management team that facilitates development changes within our department," Williams said. ADP follows set guidelines to ensure product maintenance and upgrades are done in a manner that limits or prevents client disruption. Williams said it has been interesting to witness the growth in technology over the past few years.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a go-to tool for businesses to enhance service and communication, and ADP continues to leverage that technology to remain competitive.

ADP cares about quality customer service and values the employees who provide that service. Employees receive frequent training and the tools necessary for efficient management. They also cultivate an inclusive environment. Williams said that as an African American woman, it is great to know they welcome women's empowerment. There is a program within the company called IWIN (International Women's Inclusion Network). This program also has male allies that encourage women to explore roles that are male-dominated. Other cultures are recognized and have

opportunities for empowerment. ADP cultivates exposure to various processes which motivates employees for better productivity. ADP appreciates their employees, and Williams said she appreciates how they show representation. Other parts of their appreciation culture are employee development, tuition assistance, work development and opportunities to learn from other employees within the company. By honoring cultural identities, ADP creates an environment where employees feel seen, heard and motivated to excel.

ADP also shared their commitment to service outside of their business. They have partnerships with various nonprofit organizations which they heavily support. They participate in the United Way's Day of Caring, and employees are encouraged to volunteer to enhance the services of United Way partners. They also sponsor children in need during the Salvation Army Angel Tree Program in December. This is their way of supporting children who would not otherwise receive gifts on Christmas Day. They have a program within ADP called ADP Cares for their associates. After natural disasters occur, this program helps with relief from events such as Hurricane Helene. It is a year-round program, and many ADP associates have been assisted.

ADP's culture is dynamic, vibrant and thrives on the unwavering support provided by its business staff and administration. Recognizing dedicated employees like Williams is vital for individuals who are driven not merely by job requirements but by the opportunities and growth they have experienced.



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DOWNTOWN FLORENCE CELEBRATES EIGHT NEW BUSINESSES IN 2024!

Submitted by the Florence Downtown Development Office Staff



Erin McDaniel

Downtown Florence grew by eight new businesses in 2024. Downtown Florence's Main Street Program supports entrepreneurs from idea to open, and most of these new additions took advantage of programs, training and other services offered by the office to realize their vision of a bricks and mortar location.

Congratulations to these entrepreneurs for their hard work! Here's who we welcomed in 2024:

Trendy Twist Boutique (182 W. Evans Street) - This mother-daughter duo originally located their business off Cashua Drive in Florence, but soon outgrew their space and made their way downtown to the former MiLadies 182 location. This boutique offers a wonderful selection of women's apparel, accessories and shoes.

Smiling Scoops, LLC (184 W. Evans Street) is a brand-new classic ice cream shop that opened in July and serves scoops and specialty ice cream dishes including sundaes, milkshakes, stack 'ems, ice cream tacos and ice cream nachos. This family-friendly space is open six days per week and provides special events for families.

Grace & Grounding (116-B S. Irby Street) is a Christian-based wellness studio featuring a variety of holistic health practitioners and a yoga studio. They offer a diversity of yoga classes, children's camps and evenings out, art-based workshops and more. They even offer memberships for various services within the studio setting.

Jack's Books (152 S. Dargan Street) is Florence's only independent

book store specializing in new and used books. The shop opened in October 2024 with the goal of filling a gap in Florence's retail offerings. The warm and inviting space complete with library ladders takes visitors to a different place filled with wonder and excitement. The shop also offers a variety of gifts and handmade artisan goods.

Ship with E's (150-C N. Dargan Street) is an independent packing, shipping and business center complete with mailbox services and office supplies. They opened in December 2024.

Signature Accounting (135 S. Dargan Street inside the Waters Building) is a full-service CPA firm offering solutions and resources for small businesses. They have an experienced team of Certified Public Accountants, which can offer accounting and business consulting services.

Downcountry Grill (360 N. Irby Street inside HopeHealth) offers breakfast and lunch. Downcountry Dining Group, which also owns the popular Tubb's Seafood and King Jefe restaurants, brought this concept to HopeHealth serving a variety of breakfast and light lunch options with a diner and fast-casual feel.

Inetta's Sewing Shop (292 W. Evans Street) is a full service alterations and garment repair shop.

Are you interested in opening a business? Visit our website at www.florencedowntown.com and make an appointment with our team today. The Downtown Florence Main Street Program is nationally recognized for its work in cultivating inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Staff and partners work 1:1 with small businesses to help them grow from idea to open and provide supportive services throughout the lifecycle of a small business operation.



-ROALD DAHL

Downtown Florence is built for small business. Congratulations to these new small business owners who chose to open in Downtown Florence in 2024: Trendy Twist Boutique, Jack's Books, Smiling Scoops, LLC, Signature Accounting, Shipping with E's, Downcountry Grill, Grace & Grounding, and Inetta's Sewing Shop. Learn more about our award-winning Main Street Program. www.florencedowntown.com.



Robin Lewis



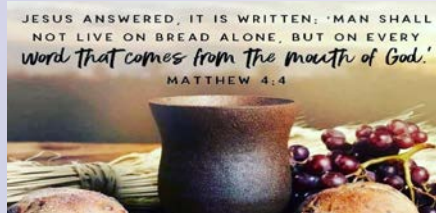
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Retreat Leader, Daughter of the King

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www.RobinLewisLife.com

HEMINGWAY - God is in the Details



Did you know it's the job of the Holy Spirit to tell us things that are to come? In John 16:13, Jesus says, "When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future." God always prepares us for what the future holds. New Years can feel a bit iffy. God has the power to get us ready, speak into our lives and get us on track for the next phase of our destiny. Do you have ears to hear what the spirit is saying? (Revelation 2:7) At the beginning of this year, it's important to know so we can align our hearts and minds to follow where he leads us.

God's Word for Your Business

Did you know Jesus spent 75 percent of his time in the marketplace? God has a word for you about your business, career or profession. He wants you to align your business with kingdom principles. Jesus did that for Zaccheus when he met him. Zaccheus was a tax collector. After finding love and fulfillment in Christ, he repaid everyone he had cheated. Why else do you climb up in a tree to see Jesus?

As we enter 2025, the Spirit of God says to us, "I want you to view your business life differently than you have before. I want you to see me directing you, prospering you, and guiding you in the way to do business. For it is not the world's way that creates lasting difference, but if you apply my scriptural principles to how you do business you will cause a ripple effect of multiplication and prosperity in your life and in the lives of others. Seek me with all your heart and take me to work with you. Don't just spend time with me on Sunday. Do you not think I am with you seven days a week? I am always with you even to the end of the age. Let 2025 be a year like no

other where, even in strained times where others are lacking, I will multiply what you have been given as you apply the principles laid out in My word. It's time for 'people over profit.' Test me in this and I will prove myself to you that I am your faithful, loving Father who wants the best for you in every part of your life. Let me be your business coach. Let's multiply prosperity!"

God's Word for Your Family



The family is the nucleus of culture and includes all those under your care. Family covenant is honored and blessed by God. That covenant is a deep commitment formed in the heart and mind. When you are committed to giving honor and respect to your spouse and your children, you create an environment where all can thrive. Joshua 24:15 says, "Choose this day who you will worship. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." God is a God of order and when we follow his model for families, parents and children alike are blessed.

So, the Spirit of God says, as we enter 2025, "In this coming year, I am calling you aside to stop, rest and play together as a family. I know if you are a single parent. I know what all your needs are. I am here to help you in this day where culture says the opposite of my word. If you build your family and your home on the precepts found in my word, you will be creating a legacy that will outlast you and shape future generations for years to come. Spend time with your children. I know you long to protect them and spending time with them is part of that protection. Learn how to talk to them on their level. Value them, cherish them, and let them know they are loved unconditionally. If you do, you will help me to shape a generation yet to be born. Look again at your spouse. It doesn't matter what the problems or differences are between you. Have you sought me? I want to help you build a marriage that

is strong, loving, and a marriage that lasts the rest of your life. Forgive where you need to forgive and build a team that is strong as you focus your lives and hearts on me. Family is the cornerstone of culture. I established it that way myself in the beginning. Let me be the cornerstone of your home and blessings will pour out in abundance this year!"

God's Word for Your Faith



In 1 Samuel 16:7, God says, "For the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Our hearts determine our steps. For us to enjoy a blessed life, our hearts must prioritize our relationship with God as the foundation of our life. God does not look on our outward appearance, what job we have or what kind of car we drive, or what neighborhood we live in. God looks at our hearts and invites us to pour our hearts out to him. In Psalm 62:8, we read, "O my people, trust confidently in the Lord at all times. Pour out your heart to Him, for God is our refuge."

So, the Spirit of God would say to us as we enter 2025, "You have no idea how important you are to me or how much love I hold within my heart for you as my child. To come to know my love more deeply, in this coming year it is very necessary for you to spend time with me daily. I want to lead your life forward but if you don't sit down to converse with me like you would with a friend, then you won't know what is in my heart for you. You are my cherished possession! I know what the year ahead holds for you so build your life on me and you will never be left alone, without hope, or floundering in disappointment. When you trust in me to lead your life you are trusting in the one who chose to create you and give you life. I want you to know how great my love is for you, so seek me with your whole heart this year. You will find your confidence and self-esteem begin to soar! As you soak in my love, your insecurities and anxieties will melt away like wax dripping off of a candle. Come, talk to me, and let us reason things out together. Yes, your life is your own and you can make your own choices, but I am your loving Heavenly Father who is watching daily over your life. I'm so glad you are mine. Seek me and I promise you'll never be disappointed."

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Spencer R. Scott

For 25 years, First Steps led by Spencer R. Scott has successfully served the communities of Florence and Marion Counties. Scott is a native of Lancaster, SC. He moved to Florence, SC to attend Francis Marion University (FMU). In 1994, Scott graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with a dual collaboration in sociology and business administration. In 2006, he obtained his Master of Business Administration specializing in Nonprofit Management from Walden University. He began his career at Circle Park Prevention

Center as a prevention specialist. He later became the program director for the Florence Area Literacy Council focusing on parents receiving their GED while providing childcare for their children. Before becoming the Executive Director of both Marion and Florence County First Steps, Scott was the first Fatherhood Director of Man 2 Man Ministries located in Marlboro County.

Scott has served on numerous boards such as the SC United Way, United Way of Florence County, Hope Health Advisory Council, Smart Start Advisory Council and currently serves as the President of the First Steps Directors Network. He also served as a member of several civic, community, and fraternity organizations such as Rotary International, Kiwanis Club, past Chairman of the Florence County Democratic Party, and a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Scott is married to Tracey Scott, a retired social worker and they have four beautiful children, Brittani (deceased), Autumn Ciera, 2020 graduate of Clemson University known as Chef AC, a personal traveling chef, Ayshia Cherrell, 2021 graduate of Johnson and Wales University and owner of 2Smooth Visual Media, LLC. and son, Spencer II, attending Guilford College in Greensboro, NC where he's a Junior playing football and majoring in Business Administration and Sports Management. Scott has been at the helm of Florence County First Steps (FCFS) since its inception in 2000 and Marion County First Steps (MCFS) since 2003 (Florencefirststeps.org).

As executive director, Scott takes on many roles that enable him to provide families with access to quality childcare, literacy initiatives, parenting programs, and quality-focused training for childcare staff. Scott manages his time between the two counties. Each county has its own separate board of directors, operating programs, and budgets. The offices are available for service Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. After years of partnering with Florence County First Steps, Marion County First Steps acquired its location in July 2024. The office is open while currently finalizing renovations. Once completed, the office will be able to accommodate meetings for teachers, parents, and childcare training.

FCFS and MCFS have progressed exponentially over the twenty-five years under Scott's leadership. The number of programs offered in Florence County has increased from five to nine. Marion County has increased the number of programs available to the community from three to nine, with plans in place for additional expansion. "Parenting - First Steps provides support in the home for children and their caregivers through proven, evidenced-based home visitation and parenting programs like HIPPI, Parent-Child-Plus Program, and family literacy programs. Parent educators partner with caregivers to develop healthy practices that will encourage children to be successful at home, school, and beyond. FCFS and MCFS bring together members of the community, including businesses, faith-based groups, health care providers, social services, community associations, and local governments to support families and advocate for children's educational opportunities and achievements.

Effective communication with educators provides quality education in an environment conducive to learning, meets individual learning and developmental needs, and appreciates individual uniqueness and cultural values. Child Care Training - First Steps assists childcare providers with staff development opportunities and consultation to ensure compliance with DSS training requirements, expand the knowledge and skillset of childcare educators, and improve the overall quality of curriculums offered in partnered childcare programs. Child Care Quality Enhancement - Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers need quality care to grow healthy and succeed in school. While providers want the best for their children in terms of care, they often lack the same access to resources readily available to publicly funded early childhood programs, including learning materials, training opportunities, technology, and more. With First Steps' Quality Enhancement initiative, participating programs are assisted with funding for educational supplies and equipment, skills training and professional development, technical assistance (TA), and other support services (florencefirststeps.org).

At Marion's recent annual meeting, with approximately 300 guests in attendance, Scott proudly shared, "Marion County First Steps budget reached over a one-million-dollar in 2023 - 2024." Scott gives thanks to local elected officials who have been supportive in their efforts for expansion in their reports to the SC House and Senate. The annual funding awarded is designated for strategic investment within the served communities, supporting initiatives operated through partnerships.

According to Scott, "Part of the funding includes childcare scholarships that are available to families with children birth to four years old. Previously, over six hundred thousand dollars were awarded and provided scholarships for sixty-eight families." According to Scott, "As the saying goes, the workforce can't work without quality childcare, so we are here to assist families in the workforce with childcare scholarships which in turn sustains the early childhood workforce and the business community. We actively support and strengthen the economic foundation of our communities."

FCFS and MCFS are appreciative of their partnerships with local and state agencies. Both offices have also established partnerships with the local school districts, Libraries, Head Start, DSS, DHEC, and churches in their respective counties. The establishment of these partnerships provides Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps with needed and necessary connections for parents who participate in the partnership's initiatives or who are simply in need of assistance in the community. "One of my proudest moments in the 25 years with First Steps is talking to families that have been a part of our program(s) and hearing how we as an agency have impacted their lives," Scott stated,."

In their Literacy Program, led by Beryl Collington, she reads to approximately 700 children each month through their partnership with local childcare facilities, Head Start, school districts, and churches. The children are given universal-themed books for Christmas, Halloween, Easter, and other books that are culturally inclusive. Students from birth to five years old can participate in the program. Each office has a partnership with their childcare facilities and school districts to help children continue in their reading development. Establishing partnerships encourages greater reach for families who need assistance with their children's cognitive development.

The impact of this thriving organization is truly worth celebrating, as the efforts of Florence County and Marion County First Steps have helped children and families become healthier and empowered them with opportunities for successful academic futures. Twenty-five years marks not an end, but a new beginning. Both offices remain steadfast in their mission to support the families and children of the Pee Dee region for generations to come.

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415 SOUTH COIT STREET
FLORENCE, SC 29501
(843) 629-0202



MARION COUNTY
528 NORTH MAIN STREET
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FOR FAMILIES

We assist families in creating home environments that are safe and supportive of children's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth.

Parenting - First Steps provides support in the home for children and their caregivers through proven evidenced-based home programs such as the Parent Child+ or Nurturing Parenting Program. Parent Early Learning Specialists/Parent educators, with these initiatives partner with parents to develop healthy practices that will encourage children to be successful at home, school, and beyond.

HIPPY - Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is a home visiting program that supports parents in their role as a child's first and most important teacher. a program that works to increase your child's skills in many areas while providing you, as a parent/caregiver, with additional knowledge of early childhood development.

Raising A Reader – An evidence-based Classic Red Book Bag Program fosters family bonding moments and develops critical literacy and social emotional skills through shared reading.



FOR COMMUNITIES

We bring together members of the community, including businesses, faith-based groups, health care providers, social services, community associations, and local governments to support families and advocate for children's educational opportunities and achievements.

Countdown to Kindergarten/4K - A summer school transition strategy designed to support smooth transitions into kindergarten by connecting rising kindergartners, their families, and their teachers in a series of six sessions during the summer.

Child Care Scholarships - For qualified families, First Steps awards scholarships to increase children's access to quality child care programs, as well as make valued child care affordable for parents looking to return to school or work.



FOR EDUCATORS

We provide quality education in an environment conducive to learning, meet individual learning and developmental needs, and appreciate individual uniqueness and cultural values.

Child Care Training - First Steps assists child care providers with staff development opportunities and consultation to ensure compliance with DSS training requirements, expand the knowledge and skillset of child care educators, and improve the overall quality of curriculums offered in partnered child care programs.

Child Care Quality Enhancement - Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers need quality care to grow healthy and succeed in school. While providers want the best for their children

in terms of care, they often lack the same access to resources readily available to publicly funded early childhood programs, including learning materials, training opportunities, technology, and more.

With First Steps' Quality Enhancement initiative, participating programs are assisted with funding for educational supplies and equipment, skills training and professional development, Technical Assistance (TA), and other support.

With your donation, 100% of funds go back to programs. Help support programs dedicated to the healthy development of children in our community with your donation! You can also become a volunteer and help provide our youth with opportunities that will serve them for a lifetime.

<https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/florencefirststeps>

<https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/marionfirststeps>

DONATE TODAY!





The Francis Marion University Board of Trustees held its quarterly meeting at The Cottage on FMU's campus in December. During the meeting, the naming of facilities in the School of Business/School of Education Building, a utility easement and holiday bonus were approved.

The Dr. Cynthia Nixon Atrium in the School of Business/School of Education Building will be named in memory of Nixon, who served as a professor of education at FMU from 2007-2024. During this time, she was associatedean of the FMU School of Education and director of the graduateprogram. Nixon led Project CREATE and was instrumental in helping hundreds of South Carolina teachers obtain and maintain teacher certification. In addition, she was a member of numerous university committees, led several special projects and managed significant grant programs in support of graduate students.

The Dr. Regina Yanson Conference Room, located in the School of Business/School of Education Building, will be named in memory of Yanson. Yanson served as a faculty member in the School of Business for twelve years and was an associate professor of management. During her career, she prepared numerous students for successful business careers and graduate studies through her engaging and thoughtful instruction. She implemented advancements in teaching methodologies with innovative technology and integrated media. Her knowledge

and expertise in humanresourcemanagement was particularly beneficial to her students as they prepared for careers.

"We are all deeply appreciative of the service that Cindi and Regina provided to this university and our students," said FMU President Fred Carter. "With the naming of these two facilities within our School of Business/School of Education Building, we are able to honor the memory of these two beloved scholars, professors and friends permanently."

The board also approved a resolution to grant a utility easement to the South Carolina State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) for the development of its Pee Dee Regional Office, which is currently under construction south of the Griffin Athletic Complex. The university's new Forestry and Environmental Sciences Building will be located beside the SLED facility. Construction of this new building will begin in the spring.

In his remarks, Carter shared the university's FY 2026 state funding request. For the upcoming fiscal year, the university has requested \$14.37 million from the state. Of this, \$4.12 million is requested for tuition mitigation funding; \$7.5 million for upgrades to the Hyman Fine Arts Center Building; \$2 million for additional renovations to the Robert E. McNair Science Building and the Hugh K. Leatherman Sr. Science Facility; and \$750,000 to construct two pedestrian crosswalks across Highway 327.

The board also unanimously approved a motion at the request of President Carter to provide all full-time permanent employees with a \$2,000 holiday bonus. "No workforce in South Carolina is more deserving of this annual bonus," Carter said. FMU has provided holiday bonuses each year since 1999.



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Francis Marion hosted the 17th annual Pee Dee Fiction and Poetry Festival on campus November 7 - 8. This year's authors include Jamila Minnicks, Santiago García, Franny Choi and Jo Angela Edwins.

The two-day festival features panel discussions, lectures, book signings and more. All events are free and open to the public and will be held in Lowrimore Auditorium on FMU's main campus.

Minnicks won the 2021 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction for her debut novel, *Moonrise Over New Jessup* (Algonquin Books, 2023). In 2022, she was awarded a Tennessee Williams scholarship for the Sewanee Writers' Conference and earned residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *CRAFT*, *Catapult*, *Blackbird* and *The Write Launch*, among others. Additionally, her piece, "Politics of Distraction," was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan, Howard University School of Law and Georgetown University Law Center. She currently resides in Washington, D.C.

García has been creating comics for over 15 years. His works include *El Vecino: Origen* and *El Vecino: Historias* with Pepo Pérez; *La tempestad*, *Héroes del espacio*, and *El fin del mundo* with Javier Peinado; *Beowulf* with David Rubín; *Tengo hambre* with Manel Fontdevila; and *Fútbol: La novela gráfica* with Pablo Ríos. In 2015, he received the award for the Best Spanish work of the year at the *Salón del Cómic* in Barcelona and the National Comic Prize for *Las meninas* and was nominated for the Eisner Award in 2018 for the best American edition of international material when it was published by Fantagraphics as *The Ladies-in-Waiting*. His academic essay *La novela gráfica* has been translated in Brazil and the United States (United Press of Mississippi) and earned him the prize for best writing on comics at the *Salón del Cómic* in Barcelona in 2011. *El Vecino* has been adapted as a television

series for Netflix, and *jGarcia!* has been adapted for HBO Max.

Choi is a poet and essayist with works including *The World Keeps Ending*, and *The World Goes On* (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2022), *Soft Science* (Alice James Books, 2019) and *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2014). Choi's writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Paris Review*, among others. A recipient of the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship, Princeton's Holmes National Poetry Prize, and the Elgin Award, Choi is a member of the literature faculty at Bennington College and the founder of *Brew & Forge*. Currently, Choi is working on an essay collection about Asian robot women.

Edwins is a native of South Carolina, professor at Francis Marion University and poet laureate of the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. She has published poems in over 100 journals and anthologies including *The Hollins Critic*, *Calyx*, *Descant* and *New South*. Edwins is the author of the collection *A Dangerous Heaven* (2023, Gnashing Teeth Publishing) and the chapbooks *Bitten* (forthcoming 2024, dancing girl press) and *Play* (2016, Finishing Line Press). She has received awards from *Winning Writers*, *Poetry Super Highway*, the *Jasper Project* and the *SC Academy of Authors*. Edwins has also been nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*, *Forward Prize*, *Best of the Net* and *Bettering American Poetry*.

The Pee Dee Fiction and Poetry Festival began in 2006 and is coordinated by FMU's English faculty.

For a full schedule and additional information about the November 7-8 event, visit peedeefiction.org.



FMU EVENING COLLEGE PROGRAM

Francis Marion will offer six courses as part of its spring Evening College program. Registration for Evening College courses is open now. Courses begin the week of January 27 and meet once per week for eleven weeks.

This semester's offerings include:

- *Photography: Make – Not Take – Better Photos* taught by Professor Julie Mixon
- *Murder in the Family: Familial True Crime from Lizzie Bordon to Alex Murdaugh* taught by Dr. Rebecca Flanagan
- *Intermediate Spanish: Tuesday de Tacos y Tertulia con amigos (Taco Tuesday & Social Gathering with Friends)* taught by Professor Rocio Brown
- *Songwriting and Recording Workshop* taught by Dr. Brandon Goff
- *Genealogy: Finding Your Roots Using Free Resources* taught by Dr. Erica Johnson
- *American Sign Language for Beginners* taught by Jazzmyne Pipkins

The FMU Evening College program is for professional and personal development. Evening College credits are not applicable to degree programs. The eleven-week program, taught by experts in each field, is only \$200.

For more information on each course or to register, visit fmarion.edu/eveningcollege, email eveningcollege@fmarion.edu, or call (843) 661-1281.

FMU'S SPEECH PROGRAM RANKED SECOND IN SC

Francis Marion University's Master of Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) program has earned the distinction of being ranked second among SLP programs in South Carolina by Research.com, a premier university ranking platform that assists students in making informed educational choices.

Research.com's 2024 rankings were compiled based on a deep analysis of numerous data points gathered from sources such as College ScoreCard, IPEDS and Peterson. The rankings consider key factors such as overall quality, affordability, popularity and time required to complete a degree.

"We are proud to be recognized as one of the top SLP programs in the state," said FMU President Fred Carter. "This distinction appropriately reflects the quality of our education, strength of our students, and dedication of our faculty."

FMU's Speech-Language Pathology program offers a comprehensive five-semester master's degree that equips students with the knowledge and skills needed for the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology. The program is currently accepting applications for its Fall 2025 cohort.



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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HGTC CELEBRATES SUCCESSFUL SKILLED TRADES EVENT Submitted by HGTC



(left to right) BJ Beaver, Partnership Grand Strand; Eileen Patonay, South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce Doug Obenour, Building Talent Foundation; Vincent Myers, Horry-Georgetown Technical College; Amanda Van Natta, Horry County Schools; Morgan Dendy, Horry-Georgetown Technical College

MYRTLE BEACH— Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), in partnership with the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, Horry County Schools and Partnership Grand Strand, successfully hosted the “Build Something Amazing” event on November 20, 2024, at HGTC’s Grand Strand Campus Conference Center. The career exploration event welcomed nearly 500 high school seniors from across Horry County for an immersive experience in skilled trades, connecting students directly with faculty, industry leaders and hands-on demonstrations in fields such as electrical, HVAC, welding and automotive technology.

This impactful collaboration between HGTC, local businesses and community partners provided students with a first-hand look at the career opportunities available within skilled trades. Business representatives, faculty and advisory board members worked together to give students a comprehensive understanding of career and apprenticeship options, including pathways in plumbing, construction and mechanics.

“We were thrilled to see so many Horry County students engaging with local industry professionals and exploring the possibilities available to them in skilled trades,” said HGTC President, Dr. Marilyn “Murph” Fore. “This event represents our shared commitment to guiding students towards careers that not only support our community but also offer

them fulfilling and rewarding futures. It was a true celebration of partnership and purpose.”

The event highlighted HGTC’s commitment to workforce development, showcasing the college’s extensive degree and certificate programs tailored to meet the needs of today’s evolving economy. Students gained valuable insights through hands-on demonstrations, faculty interactions and discussions with representatives from local businesses, apprenticeship programs and organizations like Apprenticeship Carolina and the Building Talent Foundation.

“The success of the Build Something Amazing event was a true testament to the power of collaboration,” said Fore. “With the incredible support of Horry County Schools, Partnership Grand Strand, the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (SCDEW) and the Building Talent Foundation, we were able to provide a transformative experience for Horry County’s high school seniors. Together, we offered students an in-depth look at the promising careers available in skilled trades and underscored the strength of our region’s commitment to developing a robust and talented workforce. We are grateful for the unified efforts of all our partners in creating an inspiring pathway to success for these young individuals.”

Key Highlights of the Event

Interactive Career Exploration: Students rotated through engaging stations representing fields such as CDL, diesel mechanics, machine tool technology and marine and boat building, discovering the diversity of careers available.

Pathways to Apprenticeships: With representatives from leading local businesses on hand, students learned about apprenticeships and job shadowing opportunities, gaining a clearer picture of the skills and experiences needed for success in various trades.

Community Partnership: Business leaders, educational partners and community organizations united to bridge the gap between industry needs and educational offerings, fostering a stronger connection between students and future employers.

HGTC CELEBRATES CONT'D



Scott Shoemaker, HGTC professor, talks to students about the HGTC Electrical Line worker Program and other engineering technology programs.

professionals.

For more information about HGTC's skilled trade programs and future events, please visit www.hgtc.edu.

HGTC FOUNDATION RECEIVES BOA GRANT



Representatives from Bank of America Myrtle Beach present the HGTC Foundation with \$18,000 check to Support Workforce Training and Student Emergency Fund. (left to right) HGTC President Dr. Marilyn Fore, John Sawyer, HGTC Foundation chairperson, Cecilia Evans, market executive, Bank of America Myrtle Beach Kelly Tyler, president, Bank of America Myrtle Beach, Shannon Detzler, HGTC Foundation president & CEO

MYRTLE BEACH—The Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) Foundation is pleased to announce Bank of America has awarded an \$18,000 grant to support its Workforce Training programs and the Student Emergency Fund (SEF). This is the latest in a series of investments that Bank of America has made in recent years to bolster these programs and HGTC's overall mission to provide students with access to in-demand career training and essential financial assistance for educational needs.

Of the total grant, \$15,000 will fund career-focused training programs in high-demand fields such as Certified nursing assistant (CNA), commercial driver's license (CDL), electrical line worker, outboard marine and welding. These short-term programs enable students to obtain the skills needed for good-paying jobs in as little as six weeks, meeting local industry demands and helping to fill crucial workforce gaps in our community. The grant from Bank of America will assist students with expenses such as tuition, fees, books and supplies, making these programs more accessible to students eager to enter the workforce.

"This grant reaffirms Bank of America's commitment to empowering students and supporting workforce development," said Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, HGTC president. "HGTC's career training programs are designed to prepare students quickly for high-paying jobs in fields with urgent workforce needs. Our partnership with Bank of America enables us to help even more students achieve their educational and career goals, offering them pathways to success in months rather than years."

In addition to career training, \$3,000 of the grant will support HGTC's Student Emergency Fund. The SEF assists students facing short-term financial hardships that could otherwise hinder their academic progress. This critical funding provides relief to low-income students at risk of dropping out due to unexpected expenses, allowing them to continue their education and pursue a sustainable career.

"At Bank of America, we are committed to advancing economic opportunity through strategic investments that make a difference in communities we serve," said Kelly Tyler, president, Bank of America Myrtle Beach. "Partnering with educational institutions like HGTC allows us to support workforce development while empowering students to pursue careers that lead to financial stability and growth. HGTC's programs are vital in training the next generation of skilled workers, and we are proud to support these students as they prepare for

successful futures."

The HGTC Foundation is dedicated to raising funds in support of the college's programs, services and students. Contributions like Bank of America's grant play a pivotal role in enabling HGTC to continue delivering educational excellence while fostering strong connections within the community. For the last academic year, 69 student emergency and book loans totaling \$26,177.96 have been disbursed to students in need.

"Bank of America's generous grant allows us to expand opportunities for students to gain essential skills and financial support as they work towards life-changing careers," said Shannon Detzler, president & CEO of the HGTC Foundation. "Their support not only empowers our students to pursue high-demand careers but also strengthens our community by providing a well-trained workforce. We are grateful for this partnership and its positive impact on our students' lives."

To reach the HGTC Foundation, call 843-477-2105 or visit the website.

HGTC WELCOMES NEW GAP INSTRUCTOR



Alan Owen

CONWAY—Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) proudly announces the appointment of Alan Owen as the new instructor for its highly anticipated USGA Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program (GAP). Owen, a distinguished industry professional, will officially join HGTC in December, bringing decades of expertise and an impressive resume to his new role.

Owen's career highlights include significant contributions at Pinehurst Resort, where he played pivotal roles during the back-to-back U.S. Men's and Women's Opens in 2014 and the U.S. Amateur in 2019. For the past three years, Owen has managed SiteOne Landscape Supply's facility in Aberdeen, NC. A native of England, he studied at Myerscough College and completed his own greenkeeping apprenticeship at the iconic Royal Birkdale Golf Club, host to 10 British Opens.

"We are thrilled to welcome Alan Owen to the HGTC family as we prepare to launch the USGA Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program," said Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president of HGTC. "His unparalleled expertise and passion for the industry will undoubtedly inspire our students and elevate our program to national prominence. At HGTC, we are committed to meeting workforce demands with innovative solutions, and Alan's leadership ensures we're on the path to great success."

In his full-time position at HGTC, Owen will educate and train hourly golf course maintenance workers, or greenkeepers, to fulfill careers in the field. GAP, which debuted at Pinehurst in 2022 under the guidance of the USGA, addresses labor shortages in the golf industry by offering aspiring greenkeepers a year of coursework in agronomy and botany, combined with a paid, 2,000-hour apprenticeship. The program is tuition-free and aims to build a skilled workforce for golf facilities nationwide.

"We're very excited that Alan is joining us. He will be a tremendous asset to the program," said Jim Huntoon, professor of Golf and Sports Turf Management at HGTC. "Finding the right candidate took a little longer than we anticipated, but we're confident Alan's arrival will set the program on a fast track to success."

Owen's hiring marks a special reunion with Huntoon, as the two professionals first crossed paths during an internship at Pinehurst in 2000. The launch date for the GAP program at HGTC will be announced soon, with Owen taking the lead in preparing the curriculum and building partnerships with local golf courses. His appointment reflects HGTC's ongoing commitment to innovation and excellence in workforce development.

For more information about the USGA Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program and HGTC's Golf and Sports Turf Management programs, please visit Golf and Sports Turf Management.

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

DISTRICT'S FALL 2024 ACADEMIC AWARDS CELEBRATION

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



BISHOPVILLE-Consistency and persistence can conquer the most difficult tasks, including academic success. Lee County School District's students, parents, and staff members have been persistent and consistent in improving and celebrating academic achievement. The district honored nearly 300 students for excellence in academics during their third annual district-wide academic awards

celebration on Tuesday, December 10, 2024. The number of award recipients increased by 40 percent since the district's first district-wide awards celebration in 2022. The event took place in the gymnasium at Lee Central Middle School and a reception immediately followed in the cafeteria.

"Celebrating our students' academic achievements is one of the major highlights of the school year," said Mr. Bernard McDaniel, Sr., superintendent. "This celebration also provides an opportunity to share students' accomplishments that otherwise might not be known within our district community and beyond. A 40 percent increase in academic award honorees confirms that

consistency and persistence can increase academic achievement."

A musical interlude was provided by the Lee Central High School Band under the direction of Mr. Joshua Jefferson prior to the presentations. Awards were presented for academic achievements on the Spring 2024 SC Ready, end of course algebra I, English II, biology and U.S. history exams.

"Our student's academic achievements are extremely important, and they deserve to be honored at the district level," said Dr. Barbara Champagne, interim executive director of curriculum and instruction.

Our 2024-2025 Teacher of the Year, Ms. Karine Dobson, served as the presider for the occasion. The ceremony began with remarks from Superintendent McDaniel, followed by special presentations from Lee Central High School students and academic award honorees Darryl Robinson, Ruben Jay, Justin Aguilar and Jaida Fortune. The principals from the respective schools presented the awards to their students, Ms. LaToya Boyd, Dennis Elementary School; Dr. Veronica Bradley, West Lee Elementary School; Dr. Shelia Stukes, Lower Lee Elementary School; Dr. John C. Kennedy, Lee Central Middle School and Ms. Anjennette James, assistant principal at Lee Central High School.



Student - Kyla Chapman
Principal - Ms. LaToya Boyd
Dennis Elementary School



Student - Symir Pouge
Principal - Dr. Veronica Bradley
West Lee Elementary School



Student - Jayden Davis
Principal - Dr. John C. Kennedy
Lee Central Middle School



Student - Akira Nelson
2024-2025 Teacher of the Year
Karine Dobson (presenting)



Student - Lucas Diaz
Principal - Dr. Shelia Stukes
Lower Lee Elementary School

MARLENE MITCHELL-GOLDING ACHIEVES NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION



Marlene Mitchell-Golding

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards announced that 2,570 teachers received the distinction of National Board-Certified Teachers (NBCTs). Marlene Mitchell-Golding, an early childhood teacher at West Lee Elementary School, is among the number of newly certified teachers.

"Ms. Mitchell-Golding is truly an outstanding early childhood teacher who is very passionate about her profession, loves her students, and is committed to the task of establishing strong academic foundations from which students can excel" said Superintendent of Lee County Schools Bernard McDaniel, Sr.

"We are thrilled to announce that Ms. Mitchell-Golding, has achieved National Board Certification, a prestigious and rigorous accomplishment that recognizes the highest standards of teaching excellence," McDaniel added.

National Board Certification, awarded by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), is considered the

gold standard in the teaching profession. It is a voluntary, performance-based assessment that evaluates teachers' knowledge, skills, and commitment to student success. Fewer than three percent of teachers in the United States earn this esteemed certification, placing Mitchell-Golding among an elite group of educators who are recognized for their ability to provide an exceptional learning experience for students.

For Mitchell-Golding, "receiving National Board Certification is a testament to the hard work, perseverance, and dedication required to navigate an incredibly intense and rigorous process. This achievement reflects my commitment to being a reflective practitioner, deeply understanding my students' needs, and fostering personal growth. As a lifelong learner, it reinforces my belief in continuously evolving to provide the highest level of support and inspiration to my students and the broader learning community."

The certification process involves an in-depth examination of teaching practices, including the development of instructional materials, assessments, and reflection on teaching strategies. It also includes a comprehensive portfolio of evidence demonstrating how the teacher meets rigorous standards of excellence in student learning.



2024 - 2025
Teacher of the Year
DR. CARSON KLEINKNECHT

DR. CARSON KLEINKNECHT: FLORENCE 1 SCHOOLS TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Kleinknecht is the Florence 1 Schools 2024 - 2025 Teacher of the Year. As a STEM teacher at Delmae Elementary in Florence 1 Schools, Dr. Carson Kleinknecht instructs over 900 students in grades first through fifth. A product of Florence One Schools, she graduated from West Florence High School before attending Francis Marion University. While attending Francis Marion, she played softball and earned a degree in early childhood education. Kleinknecht then later received a master's degree in instructional technology from Coastal Carolina University. Concurrently, she obtained a certification in online teaching and training. She continued her educational journey at Liberty University, where she earned a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction.

Kleinknecht's desire and journey to become a teacher began early in life with an innate calling to lead and guide others in their educational journey. This yearning to teach stems from the excitement of

watching students' eyes light up in understanding, earning the complete trust of a student when he knows that he is in a safe place to try new things and that it is perfectly acceptable to make mistakes along the journey. Kleinknecht's dedication to education spans beyond the physical constructs of her classroom. Since becoming a teacher, Kleinknecht has served as a mentor teacher, received over \$5,000 in grants to further STEM education for students and teachers, played a leading role in her school's STEM accreditation through COGNIA and worked with the National Inventors Hall of Fame, serving as director for a community-wide STEM camp. Additionally, Kleinknecht is a published researcher who has spent years studying teacher burnout, its causes, and how districts can improve teacher retention. Kleinknecht has utilized her research to lead professional development for fellow educators to reduce teacher attrition in schools.



Celebrating Elevation and Transformation in Chemistry

The Claflin University Chemistry Department Celebrates its 20th Anniversary of accreditation by the American Chemical Society (ACS).



- Claflin is the only ACS Accredited Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in South Carolina and one of 19 HBCUs nationally with ACS accreditation.
- Claflin is one of 12 total ACS accredited colleges/universities in South Carolina.

Claflin's Student Chapter of the ACS hosted a celebration dinner for Chemistry Department administrators, faculty, staff, and invited guests. Dr. Dorothy Phillips, ACS President-Elect was the keynote speaker.

Other speakers included (From left) Akyla Aiken (ACS Student Chapter President) Dr. Verlie Tisdale (Acting Dean, School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics) Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack (Claflin President), Dr. Dorothy Phillips, Dr. Angela Peters (former chair, Chemistry Department), Dr. Uruthira Kalapathy (chair, Chemistry Department) and Dr. Arezue F. Boroujerdi (associate professor, Chemistry Department).

To learn more about how Claflin University is preparing globally engaged visionary leaders through Elevation and Transformation, visit:

www.claflin.edu or contact us at:
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(803) 535-5000

FROM CAREER TO CLASSROOM: SIX STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS



(BPT) - We see eager students returning to the classroom with new backpacks, sharpened pencils and a renewed focus - ready to take on the school year ahead. Nowadays, "back-to-school" season can be anytime, especially with

the rise of students - specifically working adults - taking up opportunities to pursue new skills in their own time.

For working adults, this leap from career back to a classroom - whether online or in-person - can be daunting, especially if they've been out of school for a long period of time. Luckily, there are several simple strategies to help reduce anxiety about becoming a student again. Read on for important tips to help you succeed!

1. Find new opportunities for growth.

Have a few extra hours a week? Consider taking some courses to sharpen your skills and stay current with your career. There are numerous online programs designed specifically for adult learners that cater to your unique learning needs and provide electives that can help you potentially expand your career aspirations.

2. Choose a flexible program that works for you.

Fortunately, online learning platforms offer a lot of flexibility compared to on-campus programs. You can complete coursework on your own schedule, whether that's first thing in the morning, during a quiet afternoon or in the late hours when everyone else is sleeping.

3. Seek out affordable learning.

If you're employed, check to see if your employer has a formal

education benefits program or, at a very minimum, offers discounts on select partner schools.

Earning AP credits or taking general education courses online at an affordable institution like Sophia Learning may also help you save money. You can then transfer these courses to your chosen college or university to bring down the cost of college. Be sure to check with your school's advisor about the credit transfer policy.

4. Manage your time.

The ability to manage your time wisely can contribute to your overall success, especially if you're a learner with full-time employment or family care commitments. Safeguard your time for learning by setting specific goals and schedules, creating calendars for deadlines and asking for help if you're feeling overwhelmed.

5. Develop strong study habits.

It's important to remember that an all-nighter study session isn't the most conducive strategy for understanding and retaining your coursework knowledge. Learn about proven study methods and think about utilizing tools like flashcards, practice tests, homework assignments and developing your own study guides to help foster continuous learning - resulting in higher performance!

6. Practice self-care.

Test taking can be stressful for everyone, even if you know the material. Practicing self-care such as getting a good night's sleep, finding a space with minimal distractions to take the exam, eating a good breakfast and giving your brain a break with a relaxing hobby can minimize nervousness and garner greater success.

It's never too late for your own back-to-school season. Practicing these adult learner strategies can help you succeed in opening new doors for your personal and professional growth.

Feeling inspired to continue your education online after reading this? Explore your options with Sophia Learning.

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MCSO TAKES STEM EDUCATION TO THE NEXT LEVEL Submitted by Dr. Kandace Bethea, superintendent



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION—The Marion County School District (MCSO) is charting an ambitious new course for STEM education with the launch of its EPIC STEM Labs for the 2024-2025 school year. Partnering with the forward-thinking STEM U organization, MCSO has unveiled four state-of-the-art STEM labs in all its primary and elementary schools, complementing the existing lab at Marion Intermediate School. With five

cutting-edge facilities now in operation, the district is revolutionizing how young minds interact with science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

These EPIC STEM Labs are anything but ordinary classrooms. They are vibrant, hands-on hubs of innovation, designed to fuel curiosity and spark creativity in students of all ages. Outfitted with cutting-edge tools like robotics kits, 3D printers and digital sensors, the labs bring learning to life. Adaptable workspaces can be reconfigured for various activities, fostering collaboration and teamwork as students tackle real-world challenges together.

At the heart of the EPIC STEM Labs is a groundbreaking curriculum that blends STEM concepts with practical applications. Through project-based activities addressing actual global issues, students connect theoretical knowledge with the problems of today's world, making learning both meaningful and impactful. The labs empower students to take an active role in their education, unlocking their potential and inspiring them to innovate for the future.

Inclusivity is a cornerstone of this initiative. The EPIC STEM Labs ensure equitable access to high-quality STEM education, breaking down barriers for students of all backgrounds and abilities. By fostering an inclusive environment, MCSO is empowering every child to dream big and succeed in the fields shaping tomorrow.

"This is a transformative step for our district," said Kim Stone, MCSO's STEAM facilitator. "Children naturally love asking 'why,' and these labs let them discover the answers through exploration and problem-solving. We're nurturing their innate curiosity, sharpening their critical thinking and teaching essential teamwork skills—tools they'll need to thrive in an ever-evolving world."

The initiative has also garnered enthusiastic support from STEM U, whose partnership has been instrumental in the success of adding the new STEM Labs. Christopher Williams, president and CEO of STEM U, notes that, "We're thrilled to collaborate with Marion County Schools on these EPIC STEM Labs. Together, we're sparking curiosity, igniting passion and empowering students to pursue their interests in STEM. This is how we build a foundation for a brighter, more innovative future."

With these groundbreaking labs, Marion County Schools are not just preparing its students for tomorrow's challenges, it's equipping them to shape the future. As the EPIC STEM Labs continue to roll out, their impact is expected to resonate far beyond the classroom, setting a new benchmark for STEM education in the region.

In Marion County, innovation is no longer just a goal; it's a way of life. And with the EPIC STEM Labs leading the charge, the possibilities are limitless.

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Each year the General Assembly appropriates lottery net proceeds for educational purposes.

FDTC ANNOUNCES LEADERSHIP PROMOTIONS Submitted by FDTC

Florence-Darlington Technical College is proud to announce two promotions within its leadership team: Tyron Jones has been promoted to vice president of information technology, and Terry Dingle has been promoted to vice president of human resources and organizational development.

"We couldn't be more pleased to announce the promotions of these two longtime FDTC leaders who exemplify our college's mission," FDTC President Dr. Jermaine Ford said. "Their expertise and commitment to not only our college but our community, will undoubtedly enhance our ability to serve our students and community effectively."



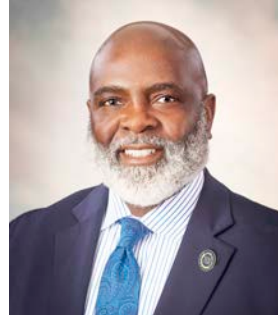
Tyron Jones

Jones has over 29 years of experience in information technology, including 12 years dedicated to supporting the mission of technical colleges. In his previous position as associate vice president of IT, Jones coordinated and directed numerous IT projects aimed at enhancing institutional support services across all divisions and workforce development activities. His strategic initiatives included the successful

implementation of student and staff self-service platforms, distance learning programs and migration to interactive institutional metrics and dashboards.

"Student success and workforce development drives all efforts at Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC)," Jones said. "Aligned with Ford's leadership and vision, we are laser-focused on meeting the needs of our students, community, educational

and business partners. In this new role, I have been blessed with the privilege to partner with Ford, FDTC's executive leadership, faculty and staff on the mission of service to Florence, Darlington and Marion counties and this great institution."



Terry Dingle

Dingle has been with Florence-Darlington Technical College since January 2008, most recently serving as associate vice president of human resources/employee relations. With a strong background in human resources management at Crenlo and La-Z-Boy, Dingle holds certifications as a SHRM Certified Professional (SHRM-CP) and a professional in human resources. His leadership experience includes serving

as past president of the Pee Dee SHRM Chapter and the HR Peer Group for the South Carolina Technical College System.

"I am truly appreciative to Dr. Ford for the opportunity to serve as vice president of HR and Organizational Development," Dingle said. "I look forward to continuing to work with Dr. Ford and the cabinet as we continue to fulfill the mission of student success and workforce development. I look forward to continuing to work with my team to make FDTC an Employer of Choice."

In addition to their professional achievements, both leaders are actively involved in their communities serving on various boards and committees. They are both dedicated to enhancing the educational environment at FDTC.

For more information about Florence-Darlington Technical College, visit fdtc.edu



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FDTC EXPANSION PLANS FOR HARTSVILLE

Articles submitted by FDTC



HARTSVILLE—Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) is excited to announce plans to construct a new educational facility in Hartsville, furthering its commitment to providing quality education and workforce training in the region. This new campus will enable the college to serve a greater number of students while offering programs that meet the needs of the local economy.

“By expanding our presence in Hartsville, we’re committed to making educational opportunities more accessible and aligning our programs with the workforce demands of the region,” FDTC President Dr. Jermaine Ford said. “This new facility will allow us to better support both students and the local economy.”

The decision to construct a new facility in Hartsville is part of FDTC’s mission to expand access to high-quality education and workforce training. The new campus will support the college’s efforts to better serve the educational needs of Hartsville and surrounding areas, particularly in key industries such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, transportation and warehousing.

Senator Gerald Malloy has been a huge proponent for a new Hartsville campus for years.

“The people of Hartsville, and Darlington County as a whole, deserve easy access to top-notch educational opportunities,” Malloy said. “With the growing demand for skill trades and closing the talent shortage, the investment into Florence-Darlington Technical College’s Hartsville campus is an investment to the future generations within Hartsville, Darlington County and our Pee Dee Region. I have been committed to securing state funding to make

this new facility a reality. This investment will ensure our residents have access to the training and skills they need for the future.”

Thanks to the support of the region’s local delegation, including Malloy, the college has secured \$30 million in funding for the Hartsville campus. FDTC is currently in the planning stages of determining the full construction and operational costs, which will guide the next steps for the project. While the specific location of the new Hartsville campus is yet to be determined, FDTC is actively exploring options to ensure the site is best positioned to serve the community. The timeline for construction is still in development as the college works through the planning and fundraising process.

Over the past two and a half years, FDTC’s Hartsville site has served more than 498 students. With the new expansion, the college anticipates serving over 500 students annually, along with continuing to support more than 100 students from the Darlington County School District through the college’s dual enrollment program.

“We are excited for the growth this facility could mean for the citizens of Hartsville and the surrounding areas,” FDTC Area Commission Chairwoman Dr. Ershela Sims said. “By investing in these new facilities, we’re not only expanding access to quality education but also strengthening our workforce to meet the demands of key industries in our region. This is an exciting time for FDTC, and the Area Commission is proud to play a role in shaping the future of education and workforce development in our region.”

The expanded Hartsville campus will offer a range of new programs tailored to the needs of the local job market. These include Advanced Manufacturing, Health Care and Allied Health Care Programs, Transportation and Warehousing. These programs will equip students with industry-relevant skills, ensuring that graduates are prepared for in-demand careers in the region.

To learn more about FDTC or their current Hartsville camps visit fdtc.edu.

FDTC LAUNCHES NEW CERTIFIED PLUMBING PROGRAM



Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) is excited to announce the launch of a brand-new NCCER-Certified Plumbing Program, beginning January 21, 2025, at The Continuum in Lake City. This comprehensive program, offered through the college’s Corporate & Workforce Development (CWD)

Division, is designed to equip students with the essential skills needed for a successful career in the plumbing industry.

The course will take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., with three Saturday sessions from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. periodically throughout the course. The program will run from January 21, 2025, through June 12, 2025, providing a thorough introduction to the plumbing trade for aspiring professionals.

“We are thrilled to bring this valuable training opportunity to the Lake City community,” FDTC’s Vice President of Workforce & Economic Development Rhonda Johns said. “Our new NCCER-Certified Plumbing Program is designed to provide hands-on practical training that will prepare students for real-world success in an industry that is in need of talented professionals.”

The inaugural class will be limited to 10-15 participants, ensuring small class sizes for more personalized instruction.

Students will learn a variety of core skills, including:

- NCCER Core: Introduction to Basic Construction Skills
- Introduction to the Plumbing Profession
- Plumbing Safety
- Tools of the Plumbing Trade
- Introduction to Plumbing Math
- Introduction to Plumbing Drawings
- Plastic Pipe and Fittings
- Copper Tube and Fittings
- Cast Iron Pipe and Fittings
- Steel Pipe and Fittings
- Introduction to Plumbing Fixtures
- Introduction to drain, waste and vent (DMV) Systems
- Introduction to Water Distribution Systems

These modules are designed to provide students with a strong foundation in plumbing, preparing them for entry-level positions in the field and giving them a competitive edge in the job market.

For more information or to register for the NCCER-Certified Plumbing Program, please contact the Corporate & Workforce Development division at 843-413-2715 or via email at ceregistration@fdtc.edu.

More information is also available on the college’s website at fdtc.edu/plumbing.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AT CENTRAL CAROLINA TECHNICAL COLLEGE By Zeniya Cooley



Central Carolina English Instructors Margaret Floyd and Scott Chalupa Each year, the SC IT Directors Association (SCITDA) Conference in Columbia recognizes two projects undertaken by a state agency or institution of higher education that use creative and innovative technology solutions, resulting in a positive impact for the organization and the state. Natalie Mahaffey, Dean of Arts and Sciences, is happy to announce that CCTC's AI for the Trained Eye was honored as the Runner-Up. The work Maggie and Scott have done on this series in collaboration with the State Tech System helped launch the first real discussion of AI in Higher Education in the state of South Carolina. They created a cohort of more than 100 educators from across our technical system and began not only the discussion, but also the first launch of resources and best practices that can be used within higher education to ethically navigate the usage of AI in and out of the classroom.

SUMTER-When the Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot ChatGPT launched in 2022, educators and academic leaders across the world wondered how AI would impact higher education. Would it destroy the humanities and other academic disciplines? Would it diminish the value of a college degree by enabling students to cheat en masse? Aside from these broader concerns, education professionals also had simpler, more immediate questions: What is AI and what do we do about it?

In the nearly two years following ChatGPT's release, educators in South Carolina didn't receive many answers to their questions. That was until Central Carolina English Instructors Margaret Floyd and Scott Chalupa launched their online professional development program, "AI for the Trained Eye," the first comprehensive statewide discussion of AI in higher education, this past summer.

"We've heard of a number of folks just blocking access [to AI]. Nobody can access it. You're not allowed to use it," said Floyd of her and Chalupa's motivation for starting the program. "We saw that as a larger gap that, number one, there wasn't a lot of conversation about what this actually is, but also that there's just so much stress and anxiety and overwhelm that folks were feeling that could be impeding that conversation."

Delivered as an online course on D2L, "AI for the Trained Eye," provided 103 educators and professionals across South Carolina's 16 technical colleges, a hands-on, collaborative learning experience focused on AI's impact on education and its implications for South Carolinians.

Over the course of ten weeks, participants completed assigned readings, engaged in discussions and experimented with generative AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude and Microsoft Designer. The course culminated with an in-person conference at Central Carolina, where participants presented projects they created during the course.

The design of "AI for the Trained Eye" reflected Floyd and Chalupa's desire to foster solution-oriented discussions about how to approach AI with integrity. Participants wrote weekly discussion posts where they applied concepts from the book, "The Ethical Algorithm: The Science of Socially Aware Algorithm Design," to real-life academic policies and practices. They also responded to prompts with ideas on how to responsibly integrate AI into their jobs and joined Floyd and Chalupa for optional live Zoom meetings to further explore course topics.

The decision to make the course discussion rather than lecture-based allowed Floyd and Chalupa to serve as facilitators, which Chalupa said he and Floyd aimed for all along.

"We were very intentional about using the term co-facilitators because the

whole point of the program was to facilitate learning about AI, not tell and direct learning about AI," said Chalupa.

They also made sure to model responsible AI usage by noting when they leveraged the technology to create images, topic descriptions and other materials for the course.

"We were pretty open and intentional about 'Here's how we used AI for this thing. Here's how we used AI for that thing,'" said Chalupa. "We don't just preach this positive example. We have to lead this from the beginning."

The educators' deliberate and diligent work on, "AI for the Trained Eye," has received recognition. In September, Floyd and Chalupa were honored as runners-up for the Innovation Award at the South Carolina Information Technology Directors Association Conference. The award recognizes a state agency or higher education institution that takes a creative or innovative approach to implementing a technology solution.

Floyd and Chalupa hope to continue their work. The educators have spoken with Dr. Rosline Sumpter, vice president for academics, student affairs, and research at the South Carolina Technical College System about establishing future summer sessions and smaller webinars of, "AI for the Trained Eye," for a more targeted audience.

Floyd believes these endeavors will foster a critical, ongoing conversation about AI and its evolving impact not only on education but also on the lives of community members.

"That is what the heart of 'AI for the Trained Eye' is: How do we come together as a community to adapt to emerging technologies in a way that continues to elevate and prioritize the human contribution to our community?" Floyd said. "And that is a conversation that needs to continue."

WHAT IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE?

Machine Learning

Using sample data to train computer programs to recognize patterns based on algorithms.



Neural Networks

Computer systems designed to imitate the neurons in a brain.



Natural Language Processing

The ability to understand speech, as well as understand and analyze documents.



Robotics

Machines that can assist people without actual human involvement.



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READING NONFICTION PREPARES KIDS FOR SUCCESS



(BPT) - By Melissa Taylor, [M.Ed.](#), former elementary teacher and K-12 literacy trainer

Nonfiction is essential in a child's reading diet. Most children primarily read fiction, but as they progress in their education, they will be expected to read for information. That means they must be able to comprehend informational/expository texts as they progress through the grades. The only way to equalize a child's comprehension in nonfiction to their fiction reading level is to practice reading high-quality nonfiction. Practice makes progress. Not perfection, but progress! That's the goal.

As a child reads facts, they're learning useful new information. This new information builds background knowledge and teaches them new words about the subject matter.

Knowing more vocabulary words and having a greater depth of background knowledge improves reading comprehension in both fiction and nonfiction. How? By providing context and a connection when kids encounter similar reading material in the future.

Hands down, the National Geographic Kids Almanac is a top nonfiction reading choice for kids in elementary and middle school. It's what children's nonfiction authors Melissa Stewart and Marlene Correia call "browsable" nonfiction, because readers can start and stop at any page of the book. It's not a front-to-back kind of reading experience, and most kids love that.

You can also help kids level up their nonfiction reading by explaining how text features like subheadings, photographs and fact boxes help organize and prioritize information, and by sharing specific nonfiction reading comprehension strategies.

Practice using text features in the Almanac

Ask your reader to use the table of contents to pick a topic that looks interesting.

Flip to that section. Ask your reader to find: a heading, a subhead, an illustration, a photo and a caption. Have them point out each one and read the text out loud. Now, ask them to read the whole section.

After they read, ask the reader what they learned and if they thought the text features helped organize the information they read.

Ask readers to flip to the index and find an animal. What page is it on?

Ask if they can explain the difference between a table of contents and the index. Help them compare the similarities and differences. Ask why they might use one instead of the other.

Nonfiction reading strategies

General reading skills can be strengthened by using specific

nonfiction reading strategies. These include determining importance, accessing background knowledge, asking questions and summarizing information.

Brainstorm with your reader on how to tell if information is important or just interesting. Ask these questions:

Can you figure out what's important using the heading or title? What's an interesting fact you learned? What's the important big idea? How do the text features help you figure it out?

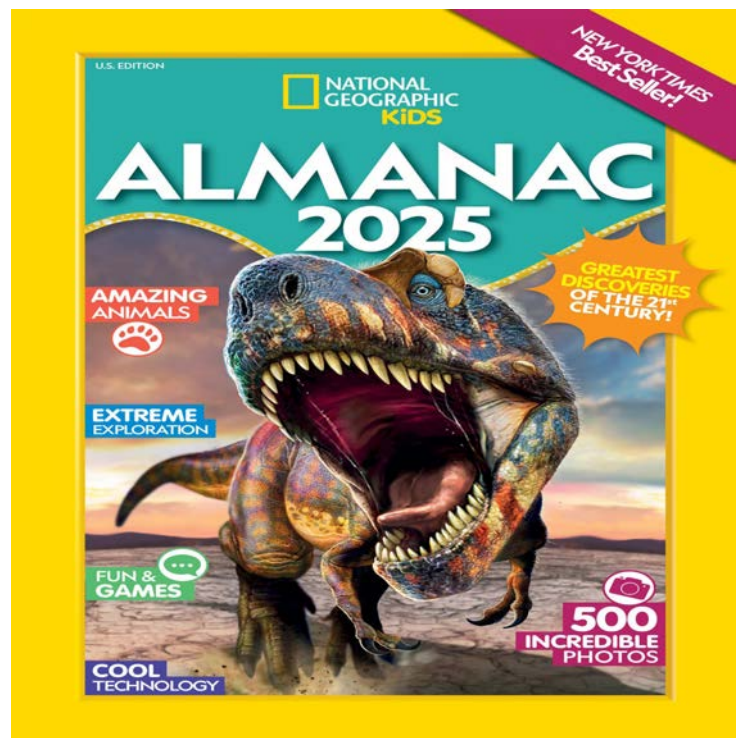
The Almanac exposes kids to a wide world of background knowledge in an engaging, accessible way, from spelunking to ice climbing to cave diving and beyond! Here's an example. A child encounters an article about spelunking. If they've never been exposed to the word or concept, it makes comprehension much harder. But, if the reader knows a little about spelunking, they'll be better able to comprehend the text about it.

Reinforce kids' curiosity by encouraging them to pick something they want to learn about. There will be implied questions. Ask your reader to tell you what they are wondering about the topic.

A beneficial feature of the Almanac is its multitude of short text passages. The more readers explore the content, the more practice they get by summarizing short passages. Observing your reader's ability to tell you about what they read - or if they are struggling to tell you about what they read - can be a diagnostic tool. Could it be that they can't differentiate what's important? Are you sure they're comprehending what they are reading? Answering these questions will help you guide them as they continue to read and learn.

Building knowledge, expanding vocabulary, encouraging curiosity, asking questions, forming opinions, having conversations and developing critical thinking skills about the world ... these are just some of the outcomes - and tools for success - that nonfiction provides. Plus, research shows that when kids have access, they enjoy both fiction and nonfiction equally.

Ready to start reading? Grab your own National Geographic Kids Almanac 2025 at any bookstore or library!



GSSM - INSPIRING THROUGH STEM



SOUTH CAROLINA GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL FOR
SCIENCE+
MATHEMATICS

HARTSVILLE—Each year, the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) opens its doors to families from across the state for INSIDE GSSM, a free event designed to spark curiosity, foster community connections and showcase the innovative educational opportunities available at this one-of-a-kind institution. With activities ranging from liquid nitrogen ice cream making to archaeological excavations, the day blends excitement and education, leaving participants inspired and eager to learn more about STEM and the unique environment GSSM offers.

"We want participants to feel excited about learning, having experienced hands-on activities that spark curiosity and creativity," said Irene Middleton, director of academic year programs at GSSM. "INSIDE GSSM is a bridge between our school and the broader community, demonstrating how STEM can be accessible, engaging and life changing."

A Vision of Engagement and Exploration

Initially conceived as a way to connect the local community with GSSM's mission, INSIDE GSSM has grown into a statewide celebration of imagination, inspiration and innovation.

"From its inception, the event was designed to showcase what GSSM is all about," Middleton said. "It's a platform for families to explore STEM through fun, interactive activities, while also connecting with our dedicated faculty, staff and students."

Over the years, INSIDE GSSM has expanded to include collaborations with the SC Governor's Schools for the Arts and Humanities and for Agriculture, further enriching the experience. This year, attendees can look forward to exciting new additions such as DNA extraction labs, artificial intelligence demonstrations and virtual reality explorations, alongside perennial favorites like slime-making and rockets.

Cultivating a Love for STEM

One of the key goals of INSIDE GSSM is to inspire young learners to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Activities are designed to make STEM accessible and enjoyable, offering hands-on experiences that leave lasting impressions.

"Popular activities like liquid nitrogen ice cream and the science of soap bubbles are not just fun—they're educational," Middleton said. "They allow families to see the real-world applications of scientific principles, sparking curiosity and enthusiasm."

Incorporating culturally diverse perspectives is also a priority. GSSM showcases initiatives such as 50-plus student clubs and a variety of interim courses, many of which include international travel. "These programs give students a chance to explore global cultures and perspectives," Middleton said. "It's an integral part of how we prepare students to be well-rounded, globally aware individuals."

A Collaborative Effort

The success of INSIDE GSSM is a testament to the collaborative efforts of GSSM's community. Students serve as ambassadors, guiding visitors through activities and sharing their experiences as Govies. Faculty members lead workshops and demonstrations, bringing their expertise to life in engaging ways. Behind the scenes, staff ensure that every aspect of the event runs smoothly.

"This collaborative spirit is what makes INSIDE GSSM so special," Middleton said. "It's not just about the activities—it's about the sense of community and pride that we all share in showcasing what GSSM has to offer."

Shaping Perceptions and Building Connections

Beyond inspiring future STEM professionals, INSIDE GSSM plays a vital role

in shaping how the public perceives GSSM and its place in South Carolina's educational landscape.

"We want families to see GSSM as a vibrant hub of innovation and excellence," Middleton said. "This event highlights our commitment to fostering curiosity and preparing students for future challenges, while also showing that we are an accessible and supportive resource for the community." The impact of INSIDE GSSM extends beyond the day itself. Many participants leave with a deeper appreciation for STEM and a newfound interest in GSSM's programs. Middleton hopes families take away more than just memories—they leave motivated to explore further learning opportunities, whether at home or within GSSM's offerings.

Looking Ahead

As INSIDE GSSM continues to grow, its mission remains the same: to inspire, educate and connect. Middleton reflected on the event's significance.

"This isn't just a day of activities. It's a chance for us to open our doors and show families the possibilities that STEM and GSSM can offer," she said. "We hope every attendee leaves feeling inspired and supported in their educational journey."

Don't miss out on this unforgettable day and bring the family to the next INSIDE GSSM event!

When: March 1, 2025, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Where: 401 Railroad Ave., Hartsville, SC 29550.

For more information, visit our website at www.scgssm.org.



Guests engage in hands-on activities during the 2024 event.

LEGACY OF CARE AND CONNECTION

Dr. Leroy Robinson's Profound Impact on Hartsville



Dr. Leroy Robinson

When Dr. Leroy Robinson began practicing obstetrics and gynecology in Hartsville in 1994, he had no idea the indelible mark he would leave on the community. Initially, his plan was modest—fulfill a three-year obligation to provide care to an underserved population. However, by 1996, the opening of Carolina Pines Medical Group Women's Care marked the beginning of a legacy that has spanned nearly three decades.

"I wanted to be a surgeon, but obstetrics and gynecology gave me the chance to combine that with forming lifelong relationships with my patients," Robinson shares. Over the years, his practice has become a cornerstone of women's health in Hartsville, providing generations of families with compassionate, accessible care.

Generations of Care

For Robinson, practicing in a close-knit community like Hartsville is both a privilege and a unique challenge. "Delivering the babies of mothers I delivered years ago was amazing and humbling at first," he says. "Now, it's just what I do."

With an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 deliveries, his role extends beyond the clinical; it's deeply personal.

Families who have been under his care often consider him part of their own. "There are families here who have become like my own family. My kids grew up alongside the children of patients I've cared for, as if they were cousins," Robinson reflects.

"I've celebrated with them, mourned with them, and shared in their lives. It's not something I can explain—it's just who we are."

A Call to Service

Robinson's work has always been rooted in accessibility. From launching satellite clinics to bridging gaps in care for rural patients, he has tirelessly advocated for equitable health care. "When I started, rural physicians like me couldn't provide the level of specialty care now available. Today, we have access to advanced surgeries and direct communication with perinatologists and neonatologists. It's a different world."

Despite advancements, Robinson remains grounded in his purpose. "I've always felt this was a calling," he says. "The number of babies delivered or surgeries performed doesn't matter. What matters is that I've been here, doing my best to care for this community." At this point, my aim is to someday hear, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

A Community Leader

Robinson's contributions to Hartsville extend far beyond the hospital walls. His involvement in nearly

every major initiative has shaped the town's growth and identity. From the Byerly Foundation to the YMCA transformation and the advancement of Coker University and Florence-Darlington Technical College, his fingerprints are everywhere.

"When you look at Hartsville's major undertakings over the years, the name 'Robinson' is almost always on the record in some way," Robinson shares with pride. His commitment to building a thriving, close-knit community stems from a deep love for his hometown. "I'm proud of where I live, and I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to contribute to it in meaningful ways."

Robinson's impact is magnified by his family's shared commitment to service. His wife, Tammie, a pharmacist, and his daughters Savannah, a registered nurse, and Ashley, a high school counselor, have also left their mark on their community. Robinson notes, "We've always worked to leave this community better than we found it."

The Delicate Balance of Community and Care

Being both a health care provider and an integral part of Hartsville means navigating unique relationships. "Providing care in a small community is delicate. You have to nurture, cultivate and sometimes step back from relationships. It's a skill you develop over time," Robinson explains.

This connection to his patients and the broader community has shaped his approach to care and extended into his ventures outside of medicine. As the owner of DOCS Humidor – Cigar, Wine & Jazz Lounge, Robinson has created more than just a place to unwind; it's a gathering space where people from diverse backgrounds come together to share their stories, celebrate their differences and discover

common ground. The lounge embodies his commitment to fostering meaningful connections, whether through his work as a physician or his role as a small business owner.

"I've learned that if you really listen, people will tell you what you need to know," he says. "But first, they have to know you care."

Looking Ahead

As he reflects on his career, Robinson's focus remains on the future of women's health care. "I'm excited that we're addressing long-standing inequities and making progress. Women's health has always been a pioneering field, and I hope that progress will spill over into health care as a whole," he says.

To the community he has served for three decades, Robinson offers a simple message: "Thank you for taking care of me, as I've done my best to take care of you."

Robinson's legacy is one of care, connection and unwavering dedication. For Hartsville, he is more than a physician; he is a cornerstone, a community leader and a cherished part of the town's story.

Well done, Dr. Robinson... Well done.



To learn more about Women's Care services at Carolina Pines Medical Group, visit themedicalgroup.com/womens-care or call 843.383.2764.

The Carolina Pines Medical Group Women's Care Team



THE INSPIRING LEADERSHIP OF URSULA GREGG *By Kionnie Epps*



Ursula Gregg

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of equality and empowerment lives on through leaders like South Carolina State Mechanism President NCNW, Ursula Gregg. As the state president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Gregg exemplifies resilience, advocacy and a commitment to uplifting her community. Her story, rooted in quiet beginnings, is a powerful testament to the transformative power of stepping into one's purpose.

From the Background to the Forefront

"I was always the shy kid," Gregg admits, reflecting on her early years. "I stayed in the background, quietly helping where I could." When she joined the NCNW in 2018, Gregg gravitated toward behind-the-scenes roles, but in September, a series of phone calls encouraged her to take a leap of faith and run for president at the state level and won!

"It wasn't something I sought out, but it was an opportunity to step into something bigger," she shares. This bold move propelled Gregg into a leadership position where her quiet strength now resonates loudly across her community.

Addressing Community Needs

COVID-19 had a profound impact on communities across the globe. During the pandemic, NCNW launched a program called, "Good Health Wins," to promote vaccine education and public health awareness. "We took the forefront when COVID hit," she explains. "I learned so much about prevention

and how we can protect our loved ones." The program, which initially focused on COVID-19 vaccines, has since expanded to broader health initiatives.

In addition to health advocacy, Gregg is passionate about addressing issues on the systemic level. She highlights the detrimental impact of unpaid medical bills on credit scores and how this issue disproportionately affects Black families.

"We're advocating for policies that prevent unpaid medical bills from being reported on credit," she says. "If you experience a medical emergency and can't afford the bills due to a lack of insurance, it shouldn't define your financial future. Families need to understand how much this impacts their legacy." This dual focus on education and policy reform demonstrates Gregg's dedication to empowering her community through systemic change.

Encouraging Bold Leadership

As someone who stepped out of her comfort zone to lead, Gregg offers invaluable advice to younger generations aspiring to make an impact. "Be bold and be different," she urges. "Everyone's path is unique. When you see a door, step through it and explore what's on the

other side. Faith over fear—it's the only way to grow."

Her personal journey is also a source of inspiration. Growing up as the only girl among two brothers, Gregg credits her mother for instilling confidence and resilience. "My mom always told me I could do whatever I wanted. That encouragement shaped who I am today."

Keeping King's Vision Alive

For Gregg, King's dream remains a guiding light. She believes the community must return to its foundational principles to create meaningful change. "We've lost focus on his vision," she reflects. "It starts with personal change and branches out to collective action. We must keep his history alive by sharing his speeches and reminding ourselves how relevant his words still are."

Gregg's story is a shining example of King's enduring legacy. Her message is clear: anyone, even those who start in the background, can step forward and create lasting change. As she continues her journey, Gregg remains a beacon of hope and action, proving that King's dream is alive and thriving in the hands of dedicated leaders like her.



Bethune Height Recognition Program with the following pictured left to right: Janice Mathis - general counsel, Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley, MPH, Mdiv - president & CEO NCNW, Ursula Gregg - South Carolina State Mechanism president NCNW, Mary B. Abraham past president NCNW Darlington County Section, Gwen Dixon-Coe - NCNW Darlington County Section member and Dr. A. Lois Keith national chair NCNW.

BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY By Cynthia Ford



Mayor Miko Pickett

MARION-Mayor Miko Pickett, the first African American mayor of Mullins, South Carolina, embodies the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of a Beloved Community. With over 30 years of business experience and a passion for unity, Pickett is leading Mullins toward a future rooted in justice, equity and progress.

"Being the first African American female mayor means everything to me," Pickett says. "I stand on the shoulders of so many, including my mother-in-law, who raised seven children during Jim Crow. This moment is about honoring them and shaping a brighter future for all of Mullins."

Guided by the 2025 Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday theme: Mission Possible: Protecting Freedom, Justice and Democracy in the Spirit of Nonviolence365, Pickett sees justice as ensuring equal opportunities for all. "Justice isn't about asking for something extra," she explains. "It's about having the same opportunities—whether

you're a child striving for a good education or an adult seeking a living-wage job."

When asked how King's philosophy of nonviolence informs her leadership, Pickett emphasizes its relevance in addressing injustice and fostering unity. "Nonviolence is not passive—it's intentional," she says. "It's about approaching challenges with integrity and focusing on solutions that benefit everyone. For me, that means ensuring that every decision I make prioritizes all the citizens of Mullins."

Pickett draws inspiration from King's writings and Frederick Douglass's famous words: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." Her approach centers on bringing the community together through collaboration. "I believe we're stronger together," she says. "When neighbors help neighbors, and when we all work together, we can create positive outcomes for families, businesses, and our city."

Her administration emphasizes inclusive governance through initiatives like community committees, which give residents a voice in shaping policies. Pickett's commitment to civic engagement extends to youth involvement. "I encourage young people to step up—whether it's running for school council or leading a community program," she says. "I want them to see themselves as future leaders of Mullins." Pickett also prioritizes addressing

systemic challenges, such as housing and economic disparity, through strategic initiatives. "When people lack access to basic necessities like housing and food, it creates imbalances in society," she explains. "Focusing on economic development and housing is how we empower our community."

When discussing King's vision of a Beloved Community, Pickett highlights its practical application in Mullins. "The Beloved Community is more than a vision—it's a mindset," she explains. "It's about creating a city where love, equity and justice drive our decisions and actions."

Outside of her role as mayor, Pickett is devoted to her family. She and her husband, Dominic Pickett, have four children and six grandchildren. Her family serves as her grounding force, reminding her of the importance of working toward a brighter future for the next generation.

Reflecting on her legacy, Pickett envisions Mullins transformed by her efforts. "I want to be remembered for bringing economic growth, living-wage jobs and better housing to our city," she says. "And I want to inspire young people to believe that they, too, can lead."

Pickett's leadership is a testament to the enduring power of Kingian Nonviolence and the pursuit of justice. Her work in Mullins demonstrates how communities can thrive when grounded in unity, integrity and love.





Dr. Bobby Donaldson

COLUMBIA - Dr. Bobby Donaldson is a distinguished scholar, public historian and archivist whose work has profoundly impacted the preservation and dissemination of African American history. As an award-winning educator and community leader, he has been celebrated for his dedication to documenting African American life and the broader history of the American South. Currently, Donaldson serves as the founding executive director of the Center for Civil Rights History and Research at the University of South Carolina,

where he holds the James E. and Emily E. Clyburn Endowed Chair of Public Service and Civic Engagement.

Born in Augusta, Georgia, Donaldson's formative years were shaped by the stories and lessons passed down by his grandparents and the supportive community of the Delta Manor Housing Project. This upbringing inspired his passion for history and storytelling. He earned his undergraduate degree in history and African American studies from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, followed by a Ph.D. in American history from Emory University. During his academic journey, he served on the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project and contributed to significant archival and scholarly initiatives. He also worked as a graduate assistant in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory.

Donaldson has held visiting professorships at Dartmouth College and participated in prestigious fellowships, including the Thurgood Marshall Dissertation Fellowship at Dartmouth and a fellowship at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University.

His scholarship focuses on Southern history and African American life and culture in the 19th and 20th centuries, delving into African American intellectual thought, education, religion and print culture. At the University of South Carolina, he has received numerous accolades, such as the Michael J. Mungo Undergraduate Teaching Award and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Social Justice Award, for his student-centered and innovative teaching methods. Donaldson's work has been recognized by the South Carolina Governor's Award in Historic Preservation and the South Carolina Governor's Humanities Award.

Beyond academia, Donaldson has made significant contributions to public history. He is the founding director of, "Columbia SC 63: Our Story Matters," a groundbreaking initiative launched in 2013 in collaboration with Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin and Historic Columbia. This project documents the struggle for civil rights and social justice in Columbia and South Carolina, preserving untold stories for future generations.

Donaldson is also revising his forthcoming book, "In Our Own Defense," which examines the intellectual and cultural landscape of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Using Georgia as a focal point, the book explores how African Americans developed and promoted, "New Negro," ideologies, redefining cultural and political aspirations under oppressive conditions. His work highlights the roots of these movements in the South, challenging the perception that they



Pictured Hartsville resident Jannie Harriot, Congressman James E. Clyburn, USC Professor Bobby Donaldson, Journalist and Author Michael Harriot. At a session of the 53rd Annual Legislative Conference sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation in Washington, DC-September 2024.

were exclusively Northern phenomena.

Through his teaching, scholarship, and public history initiatives, Donaldson has enriched our understanding of African American history and its enduring significance. His work not only honors the past but also inspires future generations to continue the pursuit of justice and equality.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. HOLIDAY

EVERYBODY
can be
great.
Because
ANYBODY
can
SERVE.
You only
need a
HEART
full of
A grace.
SOUL
generated
by LOVE.

REMEMBER! CELEBRATE! ACT!

The 2025 Black History Month theme, “African Americans and Labor,” sets out to highlight and celebrate the potent impact of the various and profound ways that work and working of all kinds – free and unfree, skilled, and unskilled, vocational and voluntary – intersect with the collective experiences of Black people.

Work is at the very center of much of Black history and culture. Be it the traditional agricultural labor of enslaved Africans that fed Low Country colonies, debates among Black educators on the importance of vocational training, self-help strategies and entrepreneurship in Black communities, or organized labor’s role in fighting both economic and social injustice, Black people’s work has been transformational throughout the U.S., Africa and the Diaspora.

2025 marks the 100-year anniversary of the creation of Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids by labor organizer and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, which was the first Black union to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor. Martin Luther King, Jr, incorporated issues outlined by Randolph’s March on Washington Movement such as economic justice into the Poor People’s Campaign, which he established in 1967. For King, it was a priority for Black people to be considered full citizens.

We will be sharing the following stories of local African Americans employed in labor industries in the Pee Dee, who understand that their contributions, like the contributions of the ancestors moves the country forward and impacts our local and national economy.

A JOURNEY OF DEDICATION AND PURPOSE *By Cynthia Ford*



Crystal Wheeler

HARTSVILLE - Crystal Wheeler, a dynamic health care professional and devoted family woman, embodies resilience and passion. At 43, she has built a remarkable life in Hartsville, South Carolina as a wife, mother of six and the practice manager at Gold Star Urgent Care.

Wheeler’s story is one of profound purpose. She explored fostering and adoption early in life, leading her to adopt two children, now thriving young adults. Her 19-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter are a source of immense pride, complementing her four biological children. “My children are my motivation and inspiration,” Wheeler shares.

Wheeler is married to Orlander Wheeler, whom she calls her steadfast partner and supporter. Her roots run deep in Hartsville, where her parents Herman and Connie Coe instilled the values that guide her life and work today. As the youngest of two siblings, Wheeler’s family ties have always been central to her identity.

Her adoption journey is a reflection of her deep faith and sense of purpose. “God gives us a commandment to watch after the widows and the orphans,” she says. For Wheeler, adoption wasn’t just a decision—it was an assignment from God. “I feel like my children, especially my two adopted children, were assignments from God. When you were forming in your mother’s womb, God had a plan for you—plans for you to prosper. Things don’t always work by design, but God’s plan is always intentional. I feel like my

children were designed for me.”

She recalls how her son Zion transformed her life. “I may have been born on May 4, 1982, but without a shadow of a doubt, my life truly began on July 4, 2005. That’s when I found direction and reason. Zion was like the atom bomb that went off in my life, giving me pure motivation to make sure that every little black boy would have an opportunity.”

As a health care administrator with a bachelor’s degree in science concentrating on health care administration, Wheeler’s role involves overseeing the daily operations of a medical office, including financial reporting, credentialing and maintaining operational standards. She credits Dr. William H. Cooper IV, a pivotal mentor, for teaching her the “art of the profession” and instilling a mantra: “Treat every patient like they’re your family.”

With over 20 years in health care, Wheeler emphasizes the importance of her work in the broader society. Returning to South Carolina, she feels a deep calling to address the health care needs of underserved and underrepresented communities. “It’s about ensuring that everyone, regardless of their background, has access to quality medical care,” she says passionately.

Outside of work, Wheeler finds joy in family time. Her advice for young people considering a career in health care administration is clear: “It’s a field where you will always be needed. Medicine and health care are essential, regardless of the state of the economy. It’s a rewarding and stable career path.”

Wheeler’s life is a testament to her belief in making a difference, whether through her professional work or personal commitments. With the support of her husband Orlander and the enduring values passed down by her parents, she continues to inspire those around her, leading with heart, determination and faith.



SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

Fought for labor and civil rights

HGTC CELEBRATES LOCAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Submitted by HGTC



(left to right) Vincent Myers of Horry-Georgetown Technical College, Tania Appel of Apprenticeship Carolina, Cleveland Williams of US Department of Labor, Amber Morris of UCI Medical Affiliates, Roy Robinson of US Department of Labor, Leslie Lovett of Apprenticeship Carolina

CONWAY — Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), in partnership with Apprenticeship Carolina, held its first Apprenticeship Appreciation Event at the HGTC Conference and Business Center on the Grand Strand Campus. The event brought together local businesses, apprentices, and community leaders to celebrate the success of registered apprenticeship programs in the region.

Participating organizations included AGRU America, Brightwater Senior Living, Building Talent Foundation, Carolina Temperature Control, City of North Myrtle Beach, Doctors Care, First Choice Plumbing, Kokobeenz, Positive Moves, UCI Medical Affiliates, the U.S. Department of Labor and Visions. The event featured engaging discussions, networking opportunities, and a slideshow showcasing apprentices and staff from the participating companies.

"This event was a powerful reminder of how partnerships between industry and education can transform careers and strengthen our community," said Vincent Myers, HGTC workforce development manager. "We were honored to recognize the contributions of our apprenticeship partners and the remarkable potential of their employees."

The event highlighted the value of Registered Apprenticeship programs in addressing workforce development needs by providing hands-on training opportunities. Attendees celebrated the success stories of apprentices while fostering connections to support the growth of these programs in the future.

HGTC and Apprenticeship Carolina remain committed to empowering local businesses with the talent and resources needed to thrive in today's economy.

For more information about apprenticeship opportunities with HGTC, contact Vincent Myers, HGTC workforce development manager, at vincent.myers@hgtc.edu or 843-349-5387.

For more information about Apprenticeship Carolina, contact Tania Appel, apprenticeship consultant, at Appelt@sctechsystem.edu or 803-397-0278.

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

BUILDING A LEGACY OF LABOR AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

By Cynthia Ford



Lyvetta Spears

Lyvetta Spears, owner of Extra Hands Cleaning Services LLC, has spent decades perfecting her craft and nurturing her business. Since founding her company in 1998, Spears has become a respected entrepreneur in the cleaning industry, inspiring others with her journey of perseverance and dedication. Her story aligns closely with the 2025 Black History Month theme, "African Americans and Labor."

Born in Florence, South Carolina, to Lenoia James and Johnny Henicks, Spears grew up in a family that valued hard work. She often accompanied her father as he cleaned churches, an experience that sparked her dream of owning a business. "I told my dad I was going to keep my dream alive," Spears recalls. After graduating from Wilson High School in 1983, she worked full-time

while raising her children and pursuing her entrepreneurial vision. That dream became reality in 1998 when she founded Extra Hands Cleaning Services. While managing her business, Spears also worked as an office manager for McLeod Family Practice in Timmonsville until her retirement in 2023.

"My business is about more than just cleaning," Spears says. "It's about disinfecting, creating safe environments and educating others on maintaining cleanliness." Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Extra Hands Cleaning Services has shifted its focus entirely to commercial properties, helping businesses maintain healthy workspaces. Spears emphasizes the importance of her company's role in society: "Cleaning services are vital, and I take pride in knowing my business contributes to the well-being of others."

With a team of 13 employees, Spears manages contracts with local housing authorities, churches and businesses. Spears sees her work as a contribution to the broader community, ensuring clean and safe environments while creating economic opportunities. "Labor is the backbone of progress," she says. "It's not just about cleaning; it's about contributing to the health and growth of our society."

Spears is deeply committed to her family. She and her husband, Kevin Spears, have four children, six grandchildren and eagerly anticipate their first great-grandchild in March 2025. Every December, they travel to Jamaica, where Spears supports a local family she adopted five years ago. "Giving back is a blessing," she says. "I believe in helping others whenever I can."

Her advice to aspiring entrepreneurs is grounded in faith and perseverance. "Put God first, keep your head up and never give up," she says. "Success doesn't come overnight, but with faith and hard work, your blessings will come."

Spears' story is a testament to the transformative power of labor and entrepreneurship, reflecting how African Americans in labor industries have shaped society. Her journey continues to inspire others to pursue their dreams and create meaningful change.

BUILDING SUCCESS ONE STEP AT A TIME

By Ronette Genwright



Shirley March

DARLINGTON- Shirley March, the daughter of Hanison March Sr. and Sadie Mae Williams March, grew up in Darlington, South Carolina, in a family of sharecroppers. She is the second youngest of eight siblings. After graduating from Darlington High School, March pursued higher education at Francis Marion University, earning a bachelor's degree in psychology. She later obtained a master's degree in business management from Webster University.

Throughout her career, March has devoted herself to working with children and families in the Pee Dee area. She has held significant roles, including director of Florence-Darlington Tech's Upward Bound Program, director of Marion County First Steps, Prevention Coordinator for Pee Dee Coalition's Prevent Child Abuse Pee Dee and parent educator with Growing Home Southeast.

In 2002, March and her partner, the love of her life, founded Rockwild Industry, LLC, a cleaning company. After her partner's passing eight years ago, March faced the challenging decision of whether to continue the business. Determined not to disappoint her customers, she chose to manage the company, overseeing its daily operations. This journey has been a valuable learning experience for her.

"There are similarities in working with families and customers," March explains. "With both, you must build relationships based on trust and provide what they need and want. It's all about addressing those needs and satisfying the customers."

When not managing the company, March treasures her privacy and enjoys spending time with her family. She is actively involved in her church and cherishes moments with her son Quentin, and her five grandchildren.

BREAKING BARRIERS, PAVING ROADS By Ronette Genwright



Devante Parker

COLUMBIA—Engineering has long been a cornerstone of societal progress, shaping everything from infrastructure to technology. The contributions of African Americans to this field are often overlooked despite their profound impact on the nation’s engineering landscape. Historically marginalized, African Americans have been integral to labor movements and have navigated the complexities of race and labor in a country where

opportunities and obstacles are intricately connected.

Devante Parker was born in Mullins, South Carolina. Raised by his mother, Claudette Parker, a single parent, and his grandmother, Louvenia Parker, Parker is the middle child between two sisters. After graduating from Mullins High School, he enlisted in the Marines, where he served as a warehouse clerk. Following his military service, he attended South Carolina State University, earning a degree in engineering.

While pursuing his degree, Parker interned with Pike Engineering, where he gained valuable experience. Reflecting on his career, he said, “When I first got out of college, I didn’t like engineering as much, but when I started working on roadways, like paving roads for another company called

KCI, my perspective changed.” Currently, Parker works as a construction inspector, overseeing job sites assigned by the Department of Transportation (DOT). He is involved in rebuilding roads, ensuring that the work meets DOT standards.

Parker measures the crew’s work to ensure accuracy in rebuilding roads, typically covering two-mile sections. He has been in the engineering field for approximately six months, with a year and a half of experience in engineering work. Initially, he worked in a designer role, but now he enjoys the hands-on nature of his current position. He takes pride in his work, emphasizing its societal impact: “I’m proud of what I do for society, making sure the roads are safe for driving.”

Parker highlights the importance of road maintenance, noting the potential dangers of neglected infrastructure. “If roads aren’t repaired, they can damage vehicles. Imagine an 18-wheeler swerving to avoid a pothole—it could cause a fatal accident,” he explained. His role ensures that roads are paved according to DOT standards, contributing to the safety and appearance of South Carolina’s roadways. In his spare time, Devante enjoys playing video games and basketball.

For those pursuing a career in engineering, Parker recommends staying focused on education. “The engineering field is broad, and finding internships is essential to discovering the best job,” he advised. He also emphasizes the importance of networking as a valuable asset in securing employment in the field.

A TRAILBLAZER IN LABOR AND RESILIENCE

By Cynthia Ford



Kelley Sellers

Kelley Sellers embodies the theme of Black History Month 2025, “African Americans and Labor,” through her extensive career in blue-collar industries and her trailblazing efforts in traditionally male-dominated fields. Born in Harlem, New York, and raised in South Carolina, Sellers developed a passion for hands-on work, a love of horses and a commitment to breaking barriers.

Starting as a school bus driver at 18, Sellers gained her Class B license and transitioned into various trucking roles, securing her CDL Class A as a dump truck and log truck driver. Currently, she works for Ryder as a non-CDL box truck driver contracting with the U.S. Postal Service to transport mail. Sellers emphasizes the critical nature of her work, highlighting its role in maintaining societal infrastructure: “Mail delivery is a high-demand job that keeps the country moving especially during peak seasons.”

Her professional journey also includes nearly a decade as a career firefighter, where she shattered stereotypes as one of the few Black women on her shift. Despite facing challenges such as skepticism about her capabilities, Sellers excelled, becoming a driver engineer. She credits her success to resilience and a refusal to let barriers deter her, saying, “You have to encourage yourself,” a piece of wisdom imparted by her grandmother that she carries to this day.

Family is at the heart of Sellers’ life. She has a twin sister, whom she fondly describes as “the nice twin,” who is also a certified EMT and dialysis patient care technician. Her mother, Barbara Sellers, resides in South Carolina, and her children have been an integral part of her journey. Sellers introduced all her children to horseback riding, instilling in them the same love for the outdoors that fuels her own passions. She explains, “I started them young, putting them on horses as soon as they could sit up.



Kelley Sellers at a rodeo in Raleigh, NC.

It’s been a way to bond and share a love for the outdoors.”

Beyond her career, Sellers is a dedicated horse trainer and competitor with over 27 years of experience in rodeo sports. She has also used her skills as a certified registered-level therapist through NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association), now known as PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship). Her therapeutic work has helped individuals with special needs benefit from horseback riding.

“Horses are a powerful therapeutic tool,” she explains, “stimulating communication and physical strength in ways few other activities can.”

Sellers advises aspiring tradespeople to seek paid training opportunities, underscoring the importance of versatility and marketability in today’s economy. Her story of determination and adaptability serves as an inspiration, aligning with the enduring legacy of African Americans whose labor has shaped the nation.



A VISIONARY BLACK-OWNED JANITORIAL COMPANY Articles by Ronette Genwright



Akeem Evans with wife Alicia

BLYTHWOOD - In an industry often dominated by large, impersonal corporations, Longevity Commercial Cleaning LLC stands out as a beacon of innovation, service and community empowerment. Founded by a passionate entrepreneur, this Black-owned janitorial company has redefined what it means to provide high-quality cleaning services. With a commitment to sustainability, diversity and excellence, Longevity Commercial Cleaning LLC not only transforms spaces but also creates

opportunities, employing local talent and contributing to the economic growth of its community. Its story is one of resilience, vision and the belief that business can be a force for good.

Akeem Evans was born in El Paso, Texas, to Dionne Edwards and Richard Evans. His stepfather is Larry Edwards. Evans is the second oldest child of three sisters and two brothers. He is originally from Greenwood, South Carolina, where most of his family lives in the upstate area, including Laurens and Clinton. His father served in the military, and his mother works as a respiratory therapist. He graduated from Emerald High School in 2003 and attended the University of South Carolina, where he earned a degree in business management in 2007.

For Evans, USC holds a special place in his heart, as it is where he met his wife, Alicia Genwright Evans. They have two sons, Tykeem, 17, and A'mere, 10. In 2019, he started his cleaning business, Longevity Commercial Cleaning LLC. The journey of entrepreneurship hasn't been easy, but it has been incredibly rewarding. Watching his vision grow from a small seed to a flourishing enterprise was one of the most fulfilling experiences of his life.

As the owner of Longevity Commercial Cleaning LLC, Evans oversees and manages the business operations of the commercial cleaning company. His responsibilities include daily operations, staff management and quality assurance. He also focuses on client relations, budget management and ensuring compliance with safety regulations. Evans ensures that daily operations run smoothly, supports strong client relationships and focuses on business growth.

At Longevity Commercial Cleaning LLC, the team tells clients, "Once you work with us, you become family." This is the culture Evans wants to foster across the organization, whether with clients or employees. Managing employees is crucial to their success. Evans values having hard workers who are passionate about delivering impressive results. He often visits job sites with his team to set expectations and lead by example. He believes you cannot ask employees to do work you are not willing to do yourself.

Evans gained foundational experience working at Jan-Pro, where he learned a great deal about cleaning operations. He also has a mentor who guided him in structuring his business. However, the most valuable lessons came from hands-on experience. In the early years, he was an employee, doing challenging work himself. That helped him understand the ins and outs of the job and what it takes to succeed. He has been in the cleaning field for 15 years and has been an owner for six.

Evans' business provides opportunities for others by creating jobs within the community. It is also a way to build something meaningful for his sons and his family's future. He hopes to show others that hard work and perseverance truly pay off. When Evans is not working, he enjoys target shooting, spending time with his family and watching football and girls' basketball. He is a die-



Akeem with his wife Alicia and their kids Tykeem and A'mere.

hard football fan—his NFL team is the 49ers, and his college team is the Gamecocks.

The advice he would give to young journeymen is: Do not give up and have patience. Consistency is key—always strive to perform your best work, treating each job as if it is your first.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES



Curtis Richardson

MULLINS—Empowering communities as an African American general contractor and laborer extends far beyond completing construction projects. It involves fostering stronger, more resilient neighborhoods through a commitment to hard work, leadership and creating opportunities. By leading with purpose in the construction industry, African American contractors have the power to shape spaces that reflect the diversity and needs of their communities while also providing avenues for growth, skill development and pride.

Being a general contractor and laborer is not just about managing construction sites or performing physical labor—it is about contributing to the economic and social fabric of a community. By hiring locally, mentoring younger generations and promoting diversity on job sites, African American contractors can directly affect their communities' growth. They provide mentorship and introduce new ways of approaching projects that celebrate cultural identity while fostering economic development. This involvement, in turn, empowers others to pursue careers in construction and related trades, breaking barriers and creating lasting change for future generations.

Curtis Leon Richardson was born to Charles W. and Merion R. Richardson. The youngest of seven children—four sisters and two brothers—Richardson graduated from Marion High School, Marion/Mullins Vocational School, and South Carolina State University. He later enlisted in the military, completing the Officer Basic Course and Phase I of the Engineer Officer Advanced Course.

Richardson is married to Janice B. Richardson and lives in Florence, S.C. He has 28 years of progressive leadership and management experience in both military and civilian roles, demonstrating success in staff management, operations management, construction and facilities engineering.

Richardson is currently employed with the City of Mullins as a building official. His duties include managing, coordinating and supervising the activities and operations of the Building, Planning and Code Enforcement departments within the city. This includes plan review, issuing building permits and overseeing building construction inspections. He also coordinates activities with other departments and outside agencies, providing technical and administrative support to the special projects coordinator.

As the building official, Richardson handles the administration, interpretation and enforcement of all building code regulations adopted by the City of Mullins. He also serves as the ADA compliance officer, as defined by Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Richardson's primary mission is to protect the citizens of Mullins from unsafe, unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, ensuring that the built environment is code-compliant and conducive to the city's planned development. He is also the owner of CLR Construction LLC, a general contracting company he has operated since 1991, specializing in residential building, commercial plumbing, general construction management and mechanical construction management.

Richardson's advice for those contemplating a career choice is to spend time reflecting on their likes and dislikes as they relate to work. He advises analyzing career choices for compatibility, considering whether the occupation will withstand economic changes and advancements in technology, and determining if the skills developed are transferable to similar occupations or industries. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of mastering your craft.

FROM INDUSTRIAL LABOR TO RETIREMENT

Articles by Glaciera Brown Mason



Ron Williamson

In alignment with this year's Black History Month theme, "African Americans and Labor" celebrates the various and profound ways that work intersects with the collective experiences of Black people. Work remains central to Black history and culture. Diversity Works focuses on local African Americans employed in the labor industries in the Pee Dee, highlighting how their contributions, like those of their ancestors, move the country forward and impact the local and national economy. This feature introduces recently retired

Nucor Steel employee and entrepreneur, Ron Williamson.

Williamson recently retired from Nucor Steel Darlington, where he served as a refractory brick mason in its melt shop. Nucor Steel is one of the largest steel producers in North America, and its Darlington facility is renowned for its state-of-the-art temper-leveling equipment, producing high-quality steel products. Over the past 35 years, Williamson honed his knowledge, skills, and abilities in the production phase at Nucor Steel Darlington. In an industrial environment where materials are fed into a hot furnace producing molten metal weighing up to 200 tons at temperatures reaching 1,600 degrees Celsius, Williamson ensured quality control and

safety by properly repairing empty refractory vessels, called ladles, for the safety of his teammates.

Raised in a farming community in Darlington, S.C., Williamson acquired his business skills through farming. These skills, combined with his experience at Nucor, enabled him to establish his own small business, where he repairs and builds new driveways for existing homes and hauls materials such as aggregate, topsoil, and sand clay for customers, helping them upgrade their properties.

Born in Darlington, Williamson is the fourth child of the late James Williamson and Naomi Williamson, who recently celebrated her 91st birthday. He is a son, brother, and husband of 31 years, and the father of two sons, ages 24 and 17. Now newly retired, Williamson can devote more time to activities he enjoys, such as hunting, fishing, spending time with family, coaching football, and participating in his beloved Trinity Baptist Church under the leadership of Pastor Reverend Calvin Robinson, where he is active in the deacon ministry and operates his business. He also enjoys supporting his sons in their extracurricular activities; his eldest son was a band member at the University of South Carolina, and his youngest son plays football and basketball and runs track at West Florence High School.

Offering advice to aspiring journeymen in the field, Williamson shared, "Always set goals because you have to have something to work towards. Embody integrity, honesty, and never be afraid to take a chance, especially on yourself."

CONTINUING LEGACY THROUGH LABOR



Telly Isaiah, owner Isaiah, LLC

Black History Month can trace its roots back to 1915, but it was officially recognized in 1986 when Public Law 99-244 declared February as National Black History Month. The 2025 theme, "African Americans and Labor," holds significant historical meaning, reflecting on the journey of African Americans from the post-slavery era to the present. During the Great Migration, many African Americans carried their skilled trades northward, seeking better opportunities. Throughout

Reconstruction, they founded businesses to sustain themselves and their communities.

This theme highlights the profound impact of various forms of labor—whether free or unfree, skilled or unskilled, vocational or voluntary—on the collective experiences of Black people. Work has always been central to Black history and culture. From traditional agricultural labor to modern enterprises, Black Americans' contributions have been transformative throughout the U.S.

In this special section, we feature local African Americans whose work drives community progress and strengthens the local economy. This industrious and entrepreneurial spirit is alive today, exemplified by Telly Isaiah, owner of Isaiah, LLC. His company provides residential and commercial lot clearing, driveway installation, landscaping, and hauling services.

A native of Florence, S.C., and the youngest child of the late Roosevelt and Betty Isaiah, Isaiah is a 1995 graduate of South Florence High School. With over 25 years of experience, Isaiah has honed his craft and business acumen, inheriting the business from his late father, who instilled in him the

qualities essential for a thriving enterprise: responsiveness, trustworthiness, integrity, and a commitment to quality work.

"Isaiah, LLC has helped many in Florence and surrounding counties," Isaiah says. "Our lot clearing services have addressed issues like waterlogged roads and large potholes, improving driveways for both aesthetics and functionality." The company is equipped with the staff, machinery, and innovation necessary to clear land for residential and commercial construction projects.

Understanding the importance of diverse career paths, Isaiah encourages those inclined toward in-demand skilled labor to consider this field. "There's a place for skilled laborers with a strategic mindset and expertise," he notes. "Quality work creates satisfied customers." His advice to aspiring journeymen: "Always perform quality work, prioritize the customer, and be respectful and honest."

Isaiah is married to his high school sweetheart of 28 years, with whom he shares two adult children and two granddaughters. As the youngest of four siblings, he enjoys fishing, hunting, traveling, and spending time with his family. His faith is central to his life, and he serves on the security team at Elizabeth Baptist Church.

For skilled labor services, contact Isaiah, LLC at 843-250-1960.



A FIREFIGHTER WITH RESILIENCE, PASSION, COURAGE AND HEART By Les Echols



Jade Boone

GEORGETOWN — Jade Boone's story is one of perseverance, courage and unshakable determination. Born in August 1996 in Newark, New Jersey, Jade is the second of four siblings. Her childhood was marked by sacrifice, hard work and love. Reflecting on those years, she says, "We didn't have much money, but the memories of splitting food

among the four of us grounded me and shaped my perspective on life."

Her family moved frequently, from New Jersey to Maryland and finally to South Carolina. Despite these transitions, Boone remained determined. She began working at 15, holding multiple jobs — from consignment stores to dog grooming. By 19, she moved out on her own, balancing long hours and multiple jobs. Yet, she felt unfulfilled. "I knew my purpose was to help people — whether through the arts, emotionally or physically," she says.

Boone had long dreamed of becoming a firefighter but hesitated to take the leap. In 2020, her father, Erik Boone, fell ill with cancer for the second time. Tragically, he passed away after contracting COVID-19 during treatment. His loss devastated Boone, but his words gave her strength. "I told my dad I wanted to be a firefighter, and he said, 'You can do whatever you put your mind to in the name of the Lord.' I held on to that promise, even after he was gone."

With her father's encouragement as her guiding light, Boone

began her journey. She trained, researched and prepared while juggling three jobs. Financial struggles, failed relationships and sacrifices — like skipping meals to feed her pets — defined her path, but her willpower prevailed. "Although my father wasn't physically there, I knew he was smiling down from heaven. That made every struggle worth it."

Boone learned that firefighting requires more than physical strength; it demands heart, accountability and compassion. She experienced moments of both tragedy and miracles, inspiring her to write songs to process and heal. "Being a firefighter isn't just about responding to emergencies; it's about empathy for people you may never see again. It's about showing up as your best self every day and being part of a team."

As a woman in a male-dominated field, Boone faced judgment and doubt. Instead of letting it deter her, she used it as fuel to pave the way for other women. "Some people doubted me, but I remembered why I started. I thought about the men who saw my potential and encouraged me. Their support kept me afloat on the hard days."

Boone believes women are capable of incredible things. "Yes, females and males operate differently, physically and biologically, but we all have a purpose and a gift to contribute. Everyone has superpowers — it's just a matter of asking yourself: How can you contribute? What is your power?"

Today, Boone embodies resilience, passion and courage. Whether firefighting, acting in community theater or songwriting, she inspires others to dream big. Her story reminds us that with heart, hard work and hope, anything is possible.

"Being a good firefighter isn't about being the strongest — it's about heart. It's about showing up, learning and giving your all. That's what being a woman is, too. We're strong in ways the world doesn't always see," concludes Boone.





Dr. Leslie Bessellieu

PAWLEYS ISLAND-Ideologies surrounding leadership often place leaders as persons who have to be served, but not often in positions to respectfully manage others. Dr. Leslie Bessellieu is an executive and leadership coach who helps navigate leadership in the workplace. “Dr. Leslie Bessellieu partners with leaders to optimize business strategies, drive change, engage employees and enhance organizational performance. Known affectionately as, ‘Dr. Leslie’ she adeptly wears various hats — consultant, executive coach, facilitator and speaker — all united by her unwavering commitment to empowering others in their professional transformations.

Her approach is characterized by a deliberate integration of empirically grounded psychological principles across all interactions. Whether leading leadership training, spearheading strategy sessions or providing executive coaching, Bessellieu imparts actionable wisdom and astute insights, ensuring clarity in the next steps and equipping individuals to conquer challenges that lie ahead. In other words, she uses all of her expertise to help you get to where you are going!” (transformationscoach.net) As a Coach, Bessellieu equips leaders with the tools they need to navigate challenges, inspire their teams and drive positive changes, ultimately shaping them into impactful and influential leaders. She uses psychological health assessments to build a foundation for sustainable growth when consulting with businesses; and she facilitates training that fosters communication, relationships and skills.

Bessellieu works on helping leaders develop more influential relationships and helping clients reach key goals. Although she is a licensed clinical psychologist, she operates as an executive coach, using her expertise to assess the needs amongst businesses and organizations to develop appropriate leadership training for their employees. She said people may misperceive her training as a psychologist to, “think I will analyze them,” however, she is more concerned about their personal growth and professional development. “People must take care of themselves.” So many people in businesses experience burnout or dissatisfaction in reaching their career goals. She is passionate about helping them

reach their full potential. That means engaging in self-care, forming key alliances in and out of the workplace, developing strategic thinking skills, integrating their core values with their organization’s values and honoring themselves.

As a Women’s History Month honoree, Bessellieu acknowledged, she is not often the only woman in certain spaces, unlike many of the women she coaches. However, she has been able to help them, “learn to navigate the political dynamics of the workspace. We are a part of a system that doesn’t always recognize women, but you cannot subscribe to that mindset, because unfortunately there will often be rules, we may not be aware of and situations we cannot control; yet we have to figure out what we can control.” Bessellieu shared that women should lean into who they are and connect with their true identities. Women should know what others say doesn’t always matter. What is important is managing your own response. They should focus on their strengths and not get lost in comparisons. Women do not just have to stand against patriarchy, but those isms that dominate ageism, ableism, sexism, etc. To not be affected by those negative expressions, Bessellieu talked about the importance of having a strong support system. She stressed leaning into a network of peers that have similar goals.

Networking is one of the tools that contributed to the growth of her business, Transformations Coaching and Leadership Development. As Transformations grows, she wants to expand her reach. She said she is passionate about leadership development and helps leaders feel more comfortable and confident in their leadership roles. Executive coaching is the tool that more leaders are taking advantage of to develop essential strategies to lead themselves, their teams and their organizations. Bessellieu works with businesses and employees to increase productivity and overall organizational performance.

Recognizing the needs of leaders and working to co-create plans with them represents a vital aspect of her work. Partnering with those leaders to address their challenges strategically, whether through coaching, team coaching for leadership teams or full day training, has proven to be mutually satisfying and fulfilling. She believes that the work culture should be a positive and healthy environment for leaders as well as employees. Bessellieu uses her expertise to help those who want that experience.



BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING COMMUNITIES By Kionnie Epps



Mindy Taylor

For nearly four decades, Mindy Taylor has dedicated her career to Duke Energy and the communities large and small across the Pee Dee Region of South Carolina. As the Director of Government and Community Relations, her role is much more than a job—it's a testament to resilience, purpose and a passion for making a difference.

Taylor's journey began humbly during her college years at Clemson University, where she worked summer jobs taking customer payments at Duke Energy. After earning her degree in Economics, she transitioned to full-time work with the company where she got the opportunity to learn and grow in many roles serving in North and South Carolina. In 1998, she made a pivotal move back to Florence, her hometown, and is now the bridge between Duke Energy, the local government and our community. While many may see her in the community with checks, she emphasizes, "We don't just give away money, we invest in the community." She ensures that they are doing the work to serve the greater good.

In honor of Women's History Month, Taylor gives us a peek behind the scenes of her journey in leadership, family and serving the community.

From Summer Job to Leadership Roles

As a woman in leadership, in a traditionally male-dominated industry like energy, Taylor has often found herself as the only woman in the room. While Duke Energy has been supportive, other spaces have sometimes presented challenges. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast. "I didn't back down because I was the only woman," she reflects. Her determination has helped pave the way for greater inclusivity and respect in male-dominated spaces.

Taylor is passionate about encouraging young women to step outside of their comfort zones and to not be afraid to take risks. "Don't underestimate yourself or your abilities. If someone asks you to do something, don't ask, 'Why me?' Ask, 'Why not me?'" She emphasizes the importance of taking calculated risks, maintaining confidence and being a constant student of life.

Balancing Work and Life

For Taylor, family is the foundation of success. She credits her ability to prioritize home life as key to her productivity at work. "Growing up, my son played sports, and I missed very



Florence Chamber Women in Commerce luncheon in August 2024. Mindy Taylor is pictured in the middle.

few games. Family is most important!" Taylor reflects on her upbringing saying her mom's gentle spirit, as a nurse, and her dad's entrepreneurial spirit all helped her become the woman she is today and is the reason she cares so deeply for people. She also acknowledges the support she receives from her husband, who has stood by her through abnormal work hours and the growth of her career. This balance has allowed her to bring her whole self to every endeavor, both personal and professional.

Giving Back to the Community

Taylor's impact extends beyond her professional responsibilities. About 13 years ago, she partnered with The School Foundation to create "Dancing for Our Future Stars," a community fundraiser for Florence County schools. What began as a creative way to raise funds has since become a beloved annual tradition, generating over \$1.6 million to support students and teachers. "Education is the great divide," she says. "If we can make sure our kids are educated, they can have the opportunity to do great things." Taylor now chairs the board and leads the planning committee, ensuring the initiative continues to thrive and benefit future generations.

Honoring Women's History

Reflecting on Women's History Month, Taylor speaks with gratitude and hope. "Like all history, it's important to remember where we've been. We must recognize the women who came before us and appreciate their sacrifices."

A quote she lives by, which hangs in her office, perfectly encapsulates her philosophy: "The key to happiness is not learning to weather the storm, but to dance in the rain."

As Taylor looks to the future, she sees a generation of rising stars ready to lead and thrive. With leaders like her paving the way, the sky is truly the limit.

AN INTENTIONAL SUPERINTENDENT By Jennifer Robinson



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION-Women continue to make significant strides in their aspirations, achieving goals that positively impact communities and drive progress. One such influential leader is Dr. Kandace Bethea, an educational leader who has impacted education and leadership during her 27-year career as a public-school educator in South Carolina. Bethea currently serves as the superintendent of Marion County School District. As a native of Marion

County, Bethea welcomed the opportunity to return to her home community after serving nearly 15 years as an educator in other districts across the state. Bethea is grateful to have the opportunity to serve a community that has poured abundantly

into her, giving her a deep sense of purpose and commitment to making a difference.

March, recognized as Women's History Month, is a fitting time to recognize Bethea for breaking barriers as an African American woman leading in the historically male-dominated field of school superintendents. Over the past several years, she has skillfully guided her district, prioritizing the well-being and development of students and staff. Bethea's leadership is characterized by her focus on education, awareness and holistic student support. Bethea acknowledges that the district faces challenges, but she is passionate in her belief that those challenges are not insurmountable. She expressed, "As superintendent, it will always remain a priority for me to be steadfast in my commitment to transform the academic landscape and foster a sense of hope for our students and community."

AN INTENTIONAL SUPERINTENDENT CONT'D

Betha highlights the unique challenges faced by women in educational leadership. Citing statistics that only 20-24 percent of U.S. superintendents are women, and just two percent are African American women. She acknowledges the underrepresentation but refuses to let it limit her vision. "I strive to perform at my best consistently," she says. Her dedication extends beyond her district, as she has served numerous capacities within the education field. Some of her current involvement includes being the president of the South Carolina Association of School Administrators' Superintendent's Division, executive board member of the Pee Dee Education Consortium Board of Directors, member of the S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce Regional Education Advisory Board, member S.C. Education Oversight Committee Survey Advisory Group (SAG) Committee and the University of South Carolina - College of Education Leadership/Superintendent's Advisory Board.

Despite challenges often associated with female leadership, Betha feels blessed to be supported by her community and peers, reinforcing the importance of collaboration and shared purpose in achieving personal and professional goals.

While women remain underrepresented in superintendency - only 28 percent of superintendents nationwide were women in the 2022-23 school year, according to Education Week. Betha believes that the lack of gender diversity has not hindered her

work. She emphasizes that leadership transcends gender, as both men and women bring empathy, approachability and an unwavering focus on student success to their roles. Her district incorporates social-emotional (SEL) programs, promoting self-awareness, conflict resolution and inclusive student spaces. These efforts exemplify her commitment to ensuring students and staff feel valued and supported and have a sense of belonging.

Betha feels that she has been blessed with a great career and credits her mentors and peers for inspiring her leadership journey. Regular conversations with other superintendents provide a space for shared ideas and continuous learning. She stresses the importance of mentoring, networking and community involvement, encouraging women to seize opportunities that foster professional and personal growth. "Women superintendents have a unique leadership role," Betha notes, "but women in administration should not be the exception—they should be the norm."

Through her vision, resilience and dedication, Betha exemplifies the potential of women leaders to inspire current and future generations. Her advice to aspiring leaders is clear: embrace communication, cultivate relationships and invest in mentorship. By doing so, women can create opportunities for advancement that elevate their careers and transform the communities they serve.

FORGING IN ADMINISTRATION WITH FORTITUDE

By Jennifer Robinson



Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore

CONWAY-Women in positions of power are more prevalent in 2024 than they were several years ago. They are now CEOs, founders, managers, head administrators and other lead roles. In mostly male dominated positions, women still only occupy a small percentage, but that does not stop those who are committed to influencing future leaders.

The phenomenal leader that has encouraged generations of other leaders is Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, the first female president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College. Fore has held various positions in the educational field since she began working in 1974. According to her biography, "Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, or "Murph" as she prefers to be called, was born and raised in Ohio and West Virginia. She arrived in South Carolina to begin her career as an educator in higher education several years ago. Fore's experience at Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) spans through a number of leadership roles from professor of economics to academic dean and senior vice president of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to the first female president of the college, a position she's held since April 2017. She has led the implementation of digital classrooms, developed more than 80 programs of study, served on more than 30 accreditation teams across the Southeast and helped create the Horry County Schools' Early College High School, a model for the nation. She holds an honorary degree of Doctor of Public Service from Coastal Carolina University, an education doctorate in curriculum and instruction, a Master of Arts in Economics, a Master of Arts in Educational Administration from the University of South Carolina and a Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences from Fairmont State College. Her late husband, Dr. Fred Fore, was the first president of Florence-Darlington Technical College. Fore resides in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina."

A woman of great influence, Fore said being a woman in the administrative field that many see as male dominated has not been a factor for her. She stated she has colleagues of both genders, and she gives and garners respect. Her focus in her role as president is education and students having a better quality of life as a more informed citizen. She influences through mentorship for women colleagues and students in their development as future administrators. Fore said women request mentorship from her and she is pleased to share guidance because it allows her to get to know her mentees and understand their intentions.

Fore encourages mentorship, because she was mentored by someone that had the greatest impact on her life. She spoke lovingly of her grandmother's influence on her life. She said her paternal grandmother saw something in her when she was younger. Growing up in West Virginia, Fore said her grandmother's expertise in business stemmed from the Great Depression which led to her attending business school. She owned a lodging facility for traveling businessmen. Fore patterned much of her life based on the care and encouragement her grandmother gave her.

Her relationship with her grandmother impacted how Fore is able to connect with the students of Horry-Georgetown Technical College. She said she is not in a position to be too lofty to speak to them, and that strengthens the connection with students. Fore's leadership, vision and connections have elevated Horry-Georgetown Technical College to a nationally sought-after institution. Reflecting on her journey, Fore shared, "It is a tremendous honor to serve in this role, where I have the opportunity to make decisions that positively impact our community, the state of South Carolina and the lives of our students. I am equally proud to foster a high-quality workplace for our dedicated faculty and staff. Coming from humble beginnings, I feel incredibly fortunate for where life has brought me. I am constantly reminded of the blessings in my life and the grace of God that has guided me."

EMBODYING PERSEVERANCE, HUMILITY AND SERVICE By Les Echols



Donna Carmichael Isgett

In the heart of South Carolina, McLeod Health has long been synonymous with quality care and community service. At the helm of this prestigious health care organization is Donna Carmichael Isgett, a visionary leader whose journey is as inspiring as it is instructive. From her humble beginnings in a small Georgia town to becoming the first female CEO of a major health system in South Carolina,

Isgett's path embodies perseverance, humility and a steadfast commitment to serving others.

Raised in Cedartown, Georgia, about 50 miles northwest of Atlanta, Isgett grew up as an only child in a close-knit, middle-class family. "My parents couldn't afford the big college experience, so I put myself through school," she recalls. Her journey began with an associate degree in nursing from Floyd Junior College where she worked full-time to support herself. Determined to grow professionally without incurring debt, Isgett took a step-by-step approach to her education. She earned a bachelor's degree in nursing from Georgia State University, followed by a master's in critical care nursing from the Medical University of South Carolina. Later, she pursued her MBA at Duke University. "I did it that way because I paid my own way," Isgett explains. "My parents were great, but writing college checks just wasn't in their budget. I didn't want to take on debt, so I worked hard for it."

Growing up in a small town instilled in her a deep sense of responsibility and care for others. "Being from a small town, you learn about taking care of your neighbors. It's about loving your community and being there for the people in it," she says. Today, those values remain at the core of her leadership philosophy.

Isgett began her career on the front lines of health care, primarily in nursing roles. Her experience ranged from emergency rooms to air-ambulance services, where she developed a reputation for excellence and leadership. In 1997, she joined McLeod Health—a pivotal moment she describes as her "first and only true job application." Under the mentorship of a former McLeod leader, Isgett was given an opportunity to make a significant impact. "Rob Colones brought me in and said, 'We're going to differentiate ourselves with quality,'" she recalls. That chance marked the beginning of her journey into health care leadership.

Over the years, Isgett rose through the ranks, earning leadership roles as senior vice president and eventually chief operating officer. When her predecessor, Colones, announced his retirement, he personally recommended Isgett for the role of CEO—a testament to his confidence in her leadership. "Rob was one of the most influential people in my life, alongside my father," Isgett reflects. "He saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself. He taught me the importance of continuous improvement and staying humble as a leader."

In 2021, Isgett officially became CEO, making history as the first woman to lead a major health system in South Carolina. However, for Isgett, titles were never the goal. "I never set out to be CEO," she admits. "I just focused on doing a better job tomorrow than I did today. When you work with that mindset, success often follows."

As CEO, Isgett remains deeply connected to people, whether patients, staff or community members. "My day-to-day is about being with people," she says. "I make sure to visit all seven campuses regularly. You can't lead an organization if you don't

know what's happening in the hallways and in the community. Her presence extends far beyond hospital walls. "We are the community's health care system, and it's important for me to be in the community, listening and learning." From attending local events to engaging with leaders, Isgett's hands-on approach has earned her the respect of colleagues and residents alike. "Health care is complex, but at its heart, it's about people—caring for them and working together to make a difference."

Throughout her life, Isgett has drawn inspiration from key role models, including her father and Colones. Her father instilled a belief that hard work and determination can overcome any obstacle. "My dad taught me that I could do anything I wanted to," she shares. "There were no limits. He told me to put on the blinders, lean into the work and not get distracted." That philosophy became a cornerstone of her career. "I've always described myself as a good old plow horse," she adds with a smile. "Plow horses put on the blinders, focus on the job ahead and keep pulling. That's what I've tried to do throughout my career."

From Colones, Isgett learned the importance of humility and growth. "Rob always said, 'It's not about you as the leader; it's about the greater purpose.' That's a lesson I carry with me every day."

As the first woman to lead a health system of McLeod's size, Isgett recognizes the significance of her role, particularly for women aspiring to leadership. "I'm proud to be a woman, and I know other women see me and think, 'If she can do it, so can I,'" she says. "But for me, it's about celebrating everyone—not just women. One of our core values at McLeod Health is the value of the person. We celebrate contributions regardless of race, gender or background."

She believes representation matters. "If seeing me in this role gives someone hope or inspires them to dream bigger, then that's meaningful to me." Looking back on her journey, Isgett shares advice for young professionals. "It's all about relationships," she says. "Not superficial ones, but authentic, personal relationships. Take the time to build trust and connections along the way." She also emphasizes the importance of humility. "Get over yourself early," she advises with a laugh. "When you're young, you think you know so much more than you actually do. Be willing to learn and grow."

For Isgett, leadership is not about power or prestige; it's about making a meaningful difference. "I'm honored to lead McLeod Health, and I don't take it lightly," she says. "At the end of the day, it's not about me. It's about serving this community and working with our team to provide the best care possible," Isgett concluded.

Her journey is a testament to the power of hard work, humility and a commitment to others. "I never set out to be CEO," Isgett reflects. "But when you focus on doing good work every day, success has a way of finding you."



AMBASSADOR FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION WITH A MISSION By Les Echols



Dr. Traci Cooper

COLUMBIA-Dr. Traci Cooper, director of Strategic Partnerships and Extended Day Programs for Richland School District 1, has had a transformative 30-year career in public education. Her professional career includes roles as a teacher, school administrator and positions with the South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment and Retention. These roles reflect her unwavering dedication to education policy, student success and community engagement.

In her current role at Richland One, Cooper oversees expansive after-school programs that serve nearly 15,000 students. These programs operate as a “full school district” outside regular hours, offering academic support, enrichment activities, sports and cultural programs. Leading a team of over 500 staff members, her focus is on ensuring that students remain safe, engaged and thriving. “We believe strongly in out-of-school learning,” Cooper states. “It’s just as important to make sure students are healthy, safe and learning after school hours as it is during the day.”

Cooper also directs the district’s volunteer program, which fosters partnerships with faith-based organizations, military installations, corporations, non-profits and higher education institutions. Collaborations with organizations like Fort Jackson, Shaw Air Force Base and McEntire Joint National Guard Base provide students with opportunities to prepare for college, careers and citizenship. “Education doesn’t happen in isolation,” she explains. “It’s vital to invite the community in to support our students from pre-K to adult learners.”

A cornerstone of Cooper’s work is her strong commitment to equity and inclusion, particularly through Title IX initiatives. She prioritizes creating environments where every student feels safe, included and valued. “We invest in making every student feel safe, included and valued,” she says. “We ensure gender equity and celebrate the contributions of women, making sure our female students know they can excel as future leaders, even becoming superintendents, governors or presidents.” Her commitment also extends to male students, emphasizing the importance of respecting diverse perspectives. “Understanding the value of women’s contributions will make them better leaders, bosses and CEOs,” she adds.

Cooper’s passion for equity and education is deeply influenced by the strong female role models in her life, beginning with her mother. “My mother balanced work, family and community beautifully. She was a highly decorated mathematician, staying countless hours after school to help students succeed,” Cooper reflects. She also admired pioneers like Captain Estelle Young, the first female police captain, and Judge Mildred McDuffie, a judicial trailblazer and school district ombudsman.

Her professional development was further shaped by mentors such as Inez Tenenbaum and Barbara Nielsen, former state superintendents of education, who guided her during her tenure as state teacher of the year. “They showed me how to be an ambassador for public education, and I try to model my life after their leadership.”

Cooper’s academic achievements include a Bachelor of Arts from Georgetown University, a master of teaching from the University of South Carolina and both an educational specialist degree and Ed.D from South Carolina State University. Serving as a former state board of education chair remains one of the significant milestones of her career.

Throughout her career, Cooper has remained steadfast in her mission to uplift students, teachers and communities. Her dedication to equity, strategic partnerships and public education continues to position her as a leading advocate for South Carolina’s education system. “I am blessed to be inspired by women in this community who continue breaking barriers,” she concludes. “Whether in medicine, law enforcement, politics or business, they prove that the glass ceiling cannot contain them.”

MARCH IS
**WOMEN'S
HISTORY
MONTH**

Women's History Month is an annual celebration that highlights the contributions of women to events in history and contemporary society.

NEW STUDY FINDS AMERICAN'S SECRET TO SUCCESS



(BPT) - Is there a secret to financial success? Most Americans (52 percent) say “yes” - and the average salary considered successful is \$270,000 per year, and \$5.3 million in net worth, according to new research from Empower, a financial services leader in investing, planning and advice. But it’s not just money - it’s what money can buy. Only 27 percent rank wealth as the highest measure of financial success. Rather, most Americans say happiness (59 percent) is the most important benchmark - being able to spend money on the things and experiences that bring the most joy, doing what you love, followed by the luxury of free time (35 percent) to pursue personal passions.

People say success is about the “Factor of Four”: hard work (84 percent); talent (65 percent); who you know (55 percent) or The Network Effect; and luck and circumstance (51 percent). The secret is to be a visionary (36 percent) - and then outwork everyone (32 percent), a belief held most firmly by those with incomes over \$100k, rising to 40 percent. Pay yourself first, say over one third of people (35 percent), by putting money away and saving for retirement. For one in five younger generations (Gen Zers and Millennials 19 percent) a secret to success is “fake it ‘til you make it.”

“Fortune favors the bold, and people feel success is within their grasp with the right combination of dreaming and planning,” says Rebecca Rickert, head of communications at Empower. “It’s about disciplined, smart money choices, but overall people define financial success as very meritocratic, and a little serendipitous. There’s a sense that effort and outperformance will take you far.”

Still, nearly half of Americans (47 percent) feel they’ll never achieve the level of success they’re seeking. Just 37 percent of people consider themselves financially successful right now - with higher numbers of men than women (42 percent compared to 33 percent). Only half (50 percent) of people state they are or will be better off financially than their parents, a long-held meterstick for generational success.

Barriers to Success

More than one third say the economy (35 percent) and income instability - irregular or insufficient income streams (30 percent) - is a culprit, along with lack of knowledge about managing finances (20 percent). Nearly a third say the biggest obstacle to success is not setting clear financial goals (28 percent). Over one in four (26 percent) say procrastination or delaying financial planning or decision-making gets in the way. People see a lack of savings (35 percent), overspending and not budgeting effectively (37 percent), and debt (36 percent) as barriers to success.

Despite hurdles, most Americans (58 percent) believe that they will achieve financial success in their lifetime, with the younger generations most optimistic (Gen Z 71 percent, Millennials 70 percent, Gen X 53 percent and Baby Boomers 45 percent).

Success, realized.

For most people (63 percent), financial success is found in tangible wins: being able to pay bills on time, owning a home (52 percent), and affording experiences like travel and entertainment (47 percent). For 40 percent, it’s about retiring at a goal age - and while they are working, enjoying the job (42 percent).

Having a financial plan (45 percent), building up retirement plan savings like 401(k) investments (30 percent), and investing in stocks (27 percent) are top money moves people say propel greater success. One in 3 people (30 percent) say getting good financial advice is worth its weight in gold.

More key findings from Empower’s report, “Secret to Success:”

*** Making it:** People say the surest path to success is a well-paying job (51 percent), saving as much as possible and the power of compounding (46 percent), along with making smart investment decisions (46 percent). Some 36 percent say it’s financial education. People reveal that a secret to success is never spending more money than you make (52 percent).

*** Risking it:** Nearly one in four (23 percent) say taking risks is an important money move to get richer. A third (34 percent) believe success means prioritizing your efforts because Time is Money.

*** Society says:** Americans say their personal definition of success is often at odds with what society prizes. Less than half of people (43 percent) define financial success as having a certain amount of money or assets. Conversely, people say society equates success with wealth (59 percent), power (44 percent), and fame (35 percent). Just six percent say they value “power” as a measure of success for themselves.

*** Success through the ages:** Almost half of Americans (49 percent) feel less financially successful compared to others. Sixty percent say that for their generation, financial success is much harder to achieve than for other generations - a sentiment highest among Millennials at 69 percent, and lowest among Boomers at 49 percent. Still, the definition of success may be evolving, as 83 percent agree that each generation has its own idea of success.

*** Success is in the eye of the beholder:** Most Americans agree (71 percent) that there is no single measurement for financial success. One point of agreement: 61 percent say you can never have enough money.

*** Health = wealth:** Over a third say success is just as much about physical well-being (35 percent) as it is how much money they have (27 percent).

*** More money, more problems:** Forty-seven percent agree with the adage “more money, more problems.” The majority (71 percent) say being rich has a positive connotation, and 61 percent say being rich is more than dollars and cents.

*** Success at work:** People say the definition of success at work is how much money they earn (38 percent), benefits like healthcare, insurance and time off (36 percent) - but it’s also about the intangibles: finding the right job fit that aligns with their values and personality (35 percent) and receiving recognition and appreciation (35 percent). A third say having a good boss is worth its weight in gold (29 percent), and people view success in the workplace as flexibility (26 percent) and autonomy (20 percent).

*** The value of a degree:** Thirty-five percent say the college you attend is a big determinant of how rich you are (vs 65 percent who say it isn’t).

Visit The Currency™ to read Empower’s full research report, “Secret to Success.”

YOUR OPTIONS TO GET OUT OF CREDIT CARD DEBT



(BPT) - Many people have a hard time keeping up with their bills. More than three-fourths of Americans have some type of debt. Fortunately, there are several options to get out of debt, including working directly with your credit card

company or a non-profit credit counselor.

As the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau highlights, the best option is to contact your credit card or financial institution directly. Banks can sometimes offer a “hardship program,” also called a lender workout, which is an agreement between you and your creditor to address the situation, for example by lowering your monthly payment or waiving fees. It is in the card company’s best interest to help you with a manageable repayment plan. Working with your lender may offer a solution that does not result in losing your card or damaging credit. Since this doesn’t involve a third-party, these workouts are usually faster and safer than other options.

“When late payments pile up, many people avoid answering the phone when their credit card company calls. But as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau notes in its own research, it’s the card company that can often get you back on track. Card companies want to protect their greatest asset - their customers,” said Lindsey Johnson, president and CEO of the Consumer Bankers Association.

If you’re struggling with debt across many different creditors, another option is to talk to a credit counselor. An accredited, non-profit credit counselor offers advice on how to manage multiple

debts and provides free BPT education. Importantly, these agencies can also negotiate with lenders on your behalf and create a debt management plan that allows for one monthly payment. This option protects your credit and can be less expensive than debt settlement companies because they are not for profit.

Debt settlement companies are a third option; but they can come with some serious risk. Debt settlement companies market and advertise aggressively and people may think because they offer one point of contact, they’re a good option. The fact is, however, working with a debt settlement company can make your financial situation worse.

Here is what you need to know about debt settlement companies: Debt settlement companies may not resolve all your debt and can hurt your credit score for up to seven years. In fact, the industry itself concedes that 25 percent of their clients do not settle any accounts. In addition, debt settlement companies charge big fees - sometimes up to 25 percent of the balance on a card, which can add up over time.

Yet, according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, often the “deal” that debt settlement companies are selling is similar to what you can get by talking directly to your credit card company or financial institution - without your having to pay excessive fees. Working with a debt settlement company may also have you paying more in taxes. And sometimes creditors, who are wary of debt settlement companies, may refuse to work with them or file a lawsuit against you.

If you are confused about the options, you can turn to a trusted source such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau for reliable information. There is helpful information available on their website and you can find out more about your options at the Consumer Bankers Association’s website: www.aboutdebtrelief.com.

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ABB ANNOUNCES NEW MARKETING MANAGER

Articles submitted by Morgan Holden



Michele Rogers

MULLINS - Anderson Brothers Bank is pleased to announce Michele Rogers' promotion to marketing project manager. Rogers has made significant contributions to the Marketing Department during her four years as our brand strategist.

In her new capacity, she will be responsible for coordinating and executing campaigns across multiple channels, ensuring initiatives align with the company's goals. Rogers will focus on ensuring that all projects are delivered on schedule while

maintaining consistent messaging across various platforms. Additionally, she will work closely with creative, content and marketing teams to ensure cohesive communication. Rogers will also track project progress, provide updates to the marketing director and manage relationships with vendors, to guarantee timely delivery of materials. Her role will be vital in supporting the planning and execution of marketing strategies that align with our organizational goals.

Rogers was recently awarded the Certified Financial Marketing Professional certification from the American Bankers Association. This certification is awarded to individuals who demonstrate excellence in the field of financial services marketing. "Michele's understanding of our brand and exceptional organizational skills make her an ideal candidate for this position," stated Susan Grant, CFMP marketing director. We're excited to see her grow in this new position and look forward to seeing what she will bring to our marketing operations.

ABB WELCOMES NEW COMMERCIAL LOAN OFFICER



Doug Shaffer

MULLINS - Anderson Brothers Bank is pleased to announce the addition of its newest Commercial Loan Officer, Doug Shaffer. Shaffer will be based in the bank's North Myrtle Beach office at 1799 Hwy 17 N, Myrtle Beach, SC.

In his role as commercial loan officer, Shaffer will oversee and expand commercial loan portfolios, conduct financial statement analyses, underwrite loans and foster strong relationships with clients. He will collaborate closely with local businesses, offering guidance throughout the loan application

process to ensure a positive and customized experience tailored to their specific financial requirements. Shaffer brings a wealth of experience to this position, having graduated from Redbank Valley High School and obtained his bachelor's in Business Administration from Grove City College in 1980.

"We are very fortunate and excited to add Doug to the Anderson Brothers Bank Team," said Bryan Lenertz, VP Horry County executive for Anderson Brothers Bank. "He has been a fantastic banker up and down the coast for many years, and we look forward to welcoming his customers and friends to Anderson Brothers Bank."



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NEW STUDY FINDS AMERICANS SAY, “CASH IS KING!”

(BPT) - As digital wallets and contactless payments become more popular, 52 percent of Americans say cash is king, and nearly a third carry it every day (27 percent), according to new Empower research.

Key takeaways

*Forty-nine percent of Americans feel safer holding cash versus other investments.

*Forty-two percent of people say market uncertainty and the threat of a recession is the top reason for holding money in cash.

* Gen Z is the generation most likely to use cryptocurrency instead of cash (34 percent).

*Two in five Americans say they never pay with a check.

*Forty-one percent of Gen Zers use digital payment platforms more often than cash, compared to 27 percent overall.

* Nearly a third of Americans (29 percent) are cashing in on using rewards program points every month as a form of payment.

Cash in the balance

According to more than half of Americans (52 percent), “cash is king” - a significant increase from the 17 percent who reported the same last year. Twenty-seven percent carry cash with them every day. This trend is particularly strong among older generations, with Baby Boomers (42 percent) and Gen Xers (31 percent) more likely than Millennials (23 percent) and Gen Zers (24 percent) to carry cash daily. Nearly a third of Americans (32 percent) generally keep at least \$100 in cash on hand.

Half of Americans (49 percent) also feel safer holding cash versus other investments. Gen Xers (57 percent) are the most likely to feel this way, compared with 41 percent of Gen Zers. Market uncertainty and the threat of a recession are the top reasons people stash money in cash, as noted by 44 percent of Gen Xers, 42 percent of Millennials and 39 percent of both Gen Zers and Baby Boomers.

About a third of Americans (31 percent) say cash will reign

supreme indefinitely vs. other forms of payment, though not everyone has the same idea of what “cash” means. People define it in the following ways:

* Bills and coins (98 percent)

* Traditional savings accounts (24 percent)

* High-yield cash accounts (18 percent)

* Checks (13 percent)

* Money market accounts (13 percent)

Cashing in

In addition to market volatility or fear of a recession, nearly a third cited regional bank failures as a key motivator for keeping more cash on hand, while over a quarter noted cybersecurity concerns (26 percent).

New money moves

Most generations are exploring other payment, savings and investment vehicles. Gen Z, in particular, stands out in its adoption of cryptocurrencies, with 34 percent using them (the highest among all age groups).

While traditional payment methods like debit and credit cards are the most common, digital payment platforms are gaining traction. Overall, one in four Americans (26 percent) say they are using digital payments weekly. The method is particularly popular among younger users: 41 percent of Gen Zers use digital payment platforms more often than cash, compared to 27 percent overall.

Nearly a third of Americans (29 percent) are cashing in on using rewards program points every month and a quarter swipe their credit card daily to pay for something (24 percent).

High-yield savings accounts, stocks and bonds are top savings vehicles across all age groups. When selecting a savings account, Americans prioritize the following features:

* Low or no fees (72 percent)

* Interest rate (62 percent)

* Ease of online and mobile access (56 percent)



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PROTECTING YOUR BUSINESS AND EMPLOYEES



If you have employees, you know firsthand that the loss of a key employee can have a profound impact on business operations. When an employee leaves, customers who dealt directly with that person may worry about receiving their goods or services in a timely manner; suppliers may be concerned about getting paid for their deliveries; and staff morale can also take a dip as remaining employees worry about assuming a heavier workload.

That's why it's important to make sure that your business is prepared to deal with the unexpected departure of a key employee which usually happens for one of three reasons: the employee chooses to resign, the employee becomes disabled, or he or she passes away.

While life insurance cannot protect against employees choosing to leave, it is often used as a tool to help incentivize them to stay; deferred compensation plans are powerful vehicles for doing just this. Deferred compensation arrangements allow you to provide retirement income to select employees. The way it works is that you and the selected

employee enter a contract that specifies the compensation you will pay out to him or her in the future. Since you may not set up a specific reserve fund in which a participant has a vested right, a life insurance policy is uniquely suited to informally finance a deferred compensation plan. The future of your business depends on attracting and retaining the right talent with the right tools.

It's also important to protect your business against the economic losses it may face as the result of a top employee's death with the use of key person insurance. The way it works is that the business applies for and becomes the owner and beneficiary of a life insurance policy covering the key employee. If the insured employee dies, the business receives the policy proceeds.

Deferred compensation and key employee insurance are benefits that are related exclusively to your top employees, but New York Life also has options that you can offer your entire team to help cultivate a rewarding work environment, such as life and disability insurance. These benefits can provide employees and their family's peace of mind and added financial security, which can go a long way toward attracting and retaining valuable employees.

As a business owner, you've worked hard to get where you are today. Having a contingency in place will allow you to focus on making the best possible decisions for the future your business.

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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FINANCIAL FIRST: MAKING YOUR FIRST BUDGET PLAN Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



How many times do we set a financial goal with the full intention of achieving it only to stop within a month? This time, we're ending just as strong as we started. And our secret weapon is going to be a budget plan! We promise it's not as stressful as it sounds, especially with Palmetto First Federal Credit Union on your side.

By creating a budget, you will be able to see where your money is going, where you will be able to save money, and how to have a clear mind when it comes to your finances. Today, we'll explain two popular budgeting methods for you to consider: the "Zero-Sum Budget" and the "50-30-20 Method."

One of Dave Ramsey's philosophies for financial success is the zero-sum budget. Essentially, it is your monthly income minus expenses equals zero. So, if you make \$3,000 a month, that \$3,000 should be allotted to food, utilities, transportation, housing, insurance, miscellaneous expenses (giving yourself a buffer), debt, etc. This way, every dollar you make is being put to good use—either by spending or saving. Click the following Ramsey website link to see how you can make your zero-sum budget for free.

<https://www.ramseysolutions.com/ramseyplus/everydollar>

This source will take you through a series of questions asking your current financial goals, your monthly income, your monthly payments and debts and savings, and will calculate it all for you. It's free, and it does the math for you—sounds like a win, win!

Another budget plan that could work for your savings plan is the 50-30-20 method. That is, 50 percent on needs, 30 percent

on wants and 20 percent on savings. The "needs" department includes rent, mortgage payments, utilities, food and transportation. The "wants" area is designated for dining out, vacations, entertainment, new electronics and fancy coffees. And the "savings" is allotted to exactly what it is named: savings and investments. This can be your regular savings account, an IRA account, or investing in the stock market. Take the time to write down all of your expenses and categorize them within these three departments, and you will thank yourself later.

With either of these budget plans, you will go from wondering where your money went over the month to knowing where, when and how it was spent. Life should be enjoyed without the looming stress of your financial status. Start the



new year off right while also looking out for your future self and start your budget today!

Need an extra set of eyes for your budget? Don't hesitate to reach out to our team for advice or financial help!

Sources:

<https://savvybudgetboss.com/budgeting-tips-for-beginners/>

<https://www.ramseysolutions.com/budgeting/how-to-make-a-zero-based-budget#:~:text=Zero percent2Dbased percent20budgeting percent20is percent20when, percent2C percent20a percent20job percent2C percent20a percent20goal.>

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AMERICAN HEART MONTH: BENEFITS OF THE DASH DIET Submitted by Caitlin Guess, MPH, RDN/LDN, CDCEs



Caitlin Guess

The DASH eating plan was introduced over 25 years ago by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute to help people lower their blood pressure with foods that taste good. DASH stands for Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension, and the eating plan includes fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, lean proteins (poultry, fish, and beans), low-fat dairy products, and vegetable oils. The DASH eating plan works well for lowering blood pressure, with many people seeing lower numbers in two weeks! Making the change to a DASH-based lifestyle helps with the lowering and maintenance of blood pressure and provides many other health benefits.

Over the years, ongoing research has shown numerous other health benefits from the DASH diet including a decreased risk of:

- High LDL (bad) cholesterol
- Heart disease, heart failure and kidney disease
- Colon and rectal cancers
- Insulin resistance and diabetes
- Kidney stones and gout

A unique aspect of DASH is the focus on foods high in potassium (fruits and vegetables), magnesium (nuts and leafy greens) and calcium (dairy and leafy greens) for blood pressure control and overall cardiovascular protection. Adequate potassium helps relax blood vessel walls, keeping the arterial walls from getting hard and easier to clog. Magnesium helps balance sodium and calcium and promotes a strong healthy heartbeat. Calcium helps muscles and nerves function properly, blood to clot properly and the heart to beat normally. While these nutrients typically work better from food rather than supplements, you should talk to your health care provider or dietitian about what works best for your individual needs.

The DASH plan is lower in sodium, animal fat and added sugars. The standard DASH plan recommends 2300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day, which is the equivalent of one teaspoon of salt. A lower-salt version of DASH recommends 1500 mg or ¾ teaspoon of added salt. It is important to read nutrition labels when following this plan to limit high sodium intake from processed foods. Red meat and processed meat (beef, pork, lunch meat, bacon, sausage, etc.) are also limited, as well as coconut and palm oils. DASH recommends five or less servings per week of sweets such as candy, dessert or sugary drinks.

Instead of being restrictive, DASH provides a balanced, flexible eating plan and a wide variety of delicious, nutritious foods. The health benefits make this eating plan a favorite of many health experts and a great option to consider on your health journey.

What does a DASH eating plan look like? Here are a few examples:

- **Breakfast** - High-fiber cereal with low fat milk topped with fruit and nuts, or peanut butter toast on whole grain bread topped with sliced bananas
- **Lunch** – Turkey sandwich on whole grain bread with a side of fruit, or a large salad with chicken or salmon and whole grain crackers
- **Supper** – Grilled chicken, baked sweet potato and green beans, or spaghetti with ground turkey, whole wheat noodles and roasted broccoli
- **Snacks** – A handful of unsalted nuts with fruit, or whole grain crackers with low fat cheese and fruit

When moving to a DASH eating plan, it's important to focus on sustainable changes over time as opposed to an all-or-nothing mentality. Implement one nutrition change, and once it is a part of your routine, add another change. Focus on the DASH foods you like and eat more of those foods, wean down from added salt and processed foods, add a meatless meal each week, or aim to include fruit or vegetables at most meals and snacks.

Taste buds do adapt to a lower salt diet over time. Simple goals to choose from are to leave off added salt at the table, explore salt-free seasonings like Mrs. Dash, herbs

and spices, use less salt in cooking, or eat less processed foods that are high in sodium. Rinsing regular canned veggies, choosing plain frozen or low-salt canned veggies, and purchasing fresh produce in season can all help decrease sodium and save money.

High-fiber foods including fruits, veggies, and whole grains protect the heart but can cause gas and bloating if added too quickly. Add a few-high fiber foods at a time and give your body time to adapt. Proper hydration is important for the heart and digestive systems and drinking adequate water each day keeps these systems working properly.

Make DASH foods accessible, do what works for your budget and lifestyle and include the entire family in the plan. Instead of judging foods as good or bad, plan to add treats, traditional or fun foods and meals once or twice a month to avoid feeling deprived. It can be a challenge to make lifestyle changes, but research shows even moderate changes lead to health benefits. Any DASH change is a step to improve your health!

Caitlin Guess is a registered dietitian nutritionist at The Diabetes Institute located at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. She is passionate about teaching clients how to use nutrition and healthy behaviors for disease management and health promotion. For more information visit hope-health.org or call (843) 667-9414.

| DASH Eating Plan | |
|--|---------------------------|
| The Benefits: Lowers blood pressure & LDL "bad" cholesterol. | |
| ✓ Eat This | ⚠ Limit This |
| Vegetables | Fatty meats |
| Fruits | Full-fat dairy |
| Whole grains | Sugar sweetened beverages |
| Fat-free or low-fat dairy | Sweets |
| Fish | Nuts & seeds |
| Poultry | Vegetable oils |
| Beans | Sodium intake |
| Nuts & seeds | |

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/DASH

NIH National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

MUSC HEALTH CEO RECEIVES LEADERSHIP AWARD Submitted by MUSC Health



Jay Hinesley

CHARLESTON - MUSC Health presented its highest leadership award to MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Center's Chief Executive Officer Jay Hinesley on December 6.

The W. Stuart Smith Leadership Excellence Award is presented annually for meritorious service to a member of the MUSC Health leadership team. The award recognizes leaders who have served as role models for MUSC Health's values, have been instrumental in enabling the

achievement of the strategic initiatives and/or organizational goals, and have favorably impacted MUSC Health's image and reputation in the community or state.

"I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers Chief Executive Officer Jay Hinesley on receiving the prestigious W. Stuart Smith Leadership Excellence Award," said Dr. Patrick Cawley, MUSC Health chief executive officer. "This recognition is a testament to his exceptional leadership, unwavering

dedication and steadfast commitment to the values and mission of MUSC Health."

Under Hinesley's guidance the exceptional team at MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers have not only achieved significant strategic objectives but also strengthened the reputation for delivering compassionate, high-quality care. Their collective efforts continue to shape the future of health care for the patients in the local communities.

"On behalf of the MUSC Health family, I want to thank Jay Hinesley for his dedication, passion and extraordinary contributions. This award is a well-deserved recognition of the impact he and his team have made, and I am confident that his vision will continue to inspire us all," Cawley added.

W. Stuart Smith, vice president for clinical operations and executive director of the medical center, retired from MUSC in December 2012 after 40 years of dedicated service. Smith, who started at MUSC as a hospital administrative resident in 1973, was instrumental in several of the medical center's projects, such as establishing the first comprehensive strategic plan and the opening of Ashley River Tower in Charleston. He also worked with the South Carolina Hospital Association (SCHA) to improve quality initiatives and patient safety, as well as state legislators to approve the formation of the Medical University Hospital Authority (MUHA).

MUSC HEALTH FLORENCE JOINS THE MUSC HOLLINGS CANCER NETWORK

MUSC Health Florence Medical Center today announced its integration into the MUSC Hollings Cancer Network, anchored by MUSC Hollings Cancer Center in Charleston. Joining the network represents a crucial expansion of cancer care resources for the Pee Dee region, enhancing access to advanced cancer research, clinical trials, treatment and prevention services close to home.

As the only National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated cancer center in South Carolina, MUSC Hollings Cancer Center is at the forefront of groundbreaking cancer research and innovative treatments. By joining this network, MUSC Health Florence Medical Center connects physicians and patients with leading-edge cancer care, including access to a wider range of clinical trials, and specialized therapies. Further, it enables Florence Medical Center to provide a comprehensive continuum of care that will meet the needs of patients with various cancer diagnoses, from early detection and treatment to follow-up care and support services.

"Joining the MUSC Hollings Cancer Network is a significant advancement in cancer care for the Pee Dee and a reason to celebrate," said Jay Hinesley, CEO of MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers. "We are committed to delivering high-quality, compassionate cancer care close to home and this is a major step in broadening our ability to provide patients from any cancer center with the best possible outcomes by connecting them to cutting-edge resources."

This expansion brings with it access to extensive cancer research and clinical trials offered through MUSC Hollings Cancer Center, opening new avenues of hope for patients who require advanced treatment options. Clinical trials provide patients with opportunities to participate in studies of new treatments and therapies that would not normally be available, often leading to improved survival rates and quality of life.

In addition to clinical advancements, this integration emphasizes cancer prevention and community outreach, which are core to both MUSC Health Florence Medical Center's mission and MUSC Hollings Cancer Center. Preventive screenings, education on cancer risk factors and outreach initiatives will help improve overall community health and facilitate early detection, which is critical for better prognoses and treatment outcomes.

The MUSC Health Hollings Cancer Network - Florence and MUSC Hollings Cancer Center aims to create a seamless care pathway that empowers patients, providing them with the best academic medicine combined with compassionate, personalized treatment. The collaboration also strengthens the entire health care network across South Carolina, ensuring that high-quality cancer care is accessible to all South Carolinians, regardless of location.

For more information about cancer services at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center or to learn about available clinical trials, please visit HollingsCancerCenter.musc.edu.



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HELP FROM A HEALING ADVOCATE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Dr. Hillery Dolford and Mr. Eddie White
(Dr. Dolford's uncle).

Mr. Eddie White visits Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa for routine foot care. A typical treatment includes a foot assessment that involves observing the skin. During a routine visit Dr. Hillery Dolford, owner of Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa, noticed a change in a discolored spot on the heel of White's foot. The borders/edges of this spot changed, which indicated

to her that something abnormal, melanoma, had invaded his body. Dolford identified the spot as needing a more definitive diagnosis. Dolford stated, "Medical pedicures cover more than just nail care, they can be lifesaving." She contacted a surgeon in collaboration to express her concerns and forwarded pictures to this surgeon. A biopsy was taken by the surgeon that definitively identified the spot as malignant melanoma. White's daughter, Selina stated melanoma is rarely diagnosed in African Americans. Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that will grow and spread if not properly treated. Medical News Today reports that melanoma is the deadliest form of skin cancer. Melanoma is more common in white people than in Black people. Only about one in 1,000 Black people will develop melanoma, but doctors typically diagnose melanoma much later in Black people, increasing their risk of developing a serious case. Knowing how to identify melanoma on darker skin can be lifesaving ([medicalnewstoday.com](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com)).

The surgeon thought amputation would more than likely be the initial treatment plan; however, Dolford collaborated with the surgeon for other possible interventions, and the surgeon

developed a treatment plan that required removing a large portion of the heel tissue. White's recovery did require him to receive a wound vac. The wound vac, a vacuum assisted closure (VAC), is a method of decreasing air pressure around a wound to assist the healing. The wound vac was managed by home health nurses; however, when there was a troubleshooting issue during the night hours, Dolford would make a home visit to correct this issue as maintaining proper functioning of this device is imperative to promoting wound healing. Dolford is an expert in managing wound vacs as this is part of her wound care certification. White received chemotherapy and physical therapy. Once healed, Selina stated, White was able to start walking again. Unfortunately, melanoma was later found in his leg. He was taken to Duke University for trial treatments. Selina proudly shared the impression Dolford made on the melanoma physician at Duke University in her discovery of the melanoma spot under the bottom of White's foot. White maintains his regular foot exams with Dolford, with follow-up oncology visits.

Selina stated she admires that Dolford follows her patients throughout the diagnostic process by communicating with providers and providing emotional support to patients and their family. She talked about the time from recognizing the spot to



Image of the initial lesion Dr. Dolford found on Mr. White's foot.

being diagnosed to getting treatment was detrimental. "Time was of the essence." Selina exclaimed, "Because of Dolford's skills and reputation, it made the healing process for her father better. She goes the extra mile for her patients." Selina is grateful for all Dolford has done for her family and her father. White is doing well and has returned to normal activities.

CARE SOUTH CAROLINA WELCOMES DR. CAROLYE MASON, DMD *Submitted by CareSouth Carolina*



Dr. Carolye Mason, DMD

BISHOPVILLE-CareSouth Carolina is excited to announce the addition of Dr. Carolye Mason, DMD, as the newest member of its dental team. Mason brings decades of private practice and public health experience, with a focus on health education and providing care to underserved communities.

"It was an opportunity to serve in the community and the school-based program. Getting back in touch with the underserved population, which is very important. It's one that I think I connect with the most. We're not just

treating teeth, we're treating people and transforming smiles," said Mason about her decision to join CareSouth Carolina.

Mason will primarily serve the Bishopville Dental Office and will also assist with school-based programs in Darlington and Bishopville. She will provide care for both children and adults, ensuring patients receive as much access to care as possible.

"If I can make the patient most happy, they're most gratified. They're more confident. We're here to serve and make sure that access to care is given," Mason added.

CareSouth Carolina is home to a world-class dental program that includes the Miles of Smiles initiative, offering comprehensive oral health services to children throughout the Pee Dee region. The program provides preventive, emergency and restorative care at various schools and community locations.

CareSouth Carolina also offers specialized dental clinics for individuals with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and special health care needs. The Ryan White Dental Care Clinic provides vital services for those living with HIV/AIDS, while the Adult Dental Care Cooperative serves adults needing comprehensive care. Additionally, CareSouth's Mobile Dental Unit ensures that underserved communities have access to oral health services, reaching patients where they are.

In addition to her professional responsibilities, Mason enjoys cooking, gardening, playing volleyball and playing the piano during her time away from work.

To schedule an appointment or learn more about CareSouth Carolina's dental services, call 866-815-9845 or visit the website to request an appointment online.

CARE SOUTH CAROLINA HONORED FOR COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP



Family Nurse Practitioner Haley Jones and CEO Ann Lewis

DILLON - CareSouth Carolina is proud to announce that CEO Ann Lewis and Family Nurse Practitioner Haley Jones were recognized for their contributions to community health at the Second Annual Health Promotion and Legacy of Leadership Excellence Awards Conference,

held on November 9 at the Dillon Wellness Center.

The event, founded by Manning Baptist Church and organized with Conference Chair Dr. Carolyn Covington, brings together community leaders and organizations dedicated to improving health, safety and quality of life in Dillon County. Manning Baptist Church has more than 17 health educators, community leaders and community organizations working with them to bring the "Soup for the Soul," series each month.

The 2024 Legacy of Leadership Excellence Award was presented to Lewis on behalf of CareSouth Carolina for the organization's commitment, dedication and exceptional service to the community.

CareSouth Carolina's role in providing accessible health care and educational outreach in the Pee Dee region has made a significant impact, earning recognition from Covington and event organizers.

Dr. Marcella Ford was the keynote speaker for the Health Promotion Conference at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC).

Jones, who was a leadership speaker at the event, shared her experiences with CareSouth Carolina's outreach programs.

"Approximately two years ago, Dr. Covington invited me to speak at the 'Soup for the Soul' Community Outreach Program," Jones said. "Since then, it has been a pleasure to provide essential health care information to the community and educate about CareSouth Carolina's services. Over the past two years, we've addressed key health topics, including hypertension, diabetes and various cancer screenings. Our community health workers have provided free screenings for blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol, making health care more accessible to those in need."

The event's theme was, "Working Together to Improve the Health, Safety, and Quality of Life of the Dillon County Community for Future Generations."

JENNIFER LYNCH, FNP-C, RURAL PRACTITIONER OF THE YEAR



Jennifer Lynch, FNP-C

CareSouth Carolina's very own Jennifer Lynch, FNP-C, has been named the Rural Practitioner of the Year by the South Carolina Office of Rural Health (SCORH). This prestigious award recognizes a rural primary health care practitioner whose dedication and commitment have significantly enhanced primary health care services in rural communities across the state.

Lynch, a dedicated provider at CareSouth Carolina since July 2015, was acknowledged for her outstanding work and community service.

"I am extremely grateful for this recognition and the award I have received," she said. "I truly feel blessed that I get to deliver quality medical care where it is needed most. I feel humbled and validated that all of my hard work and efforts have been noticed."

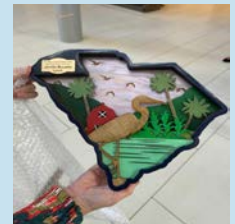
Dr. Graham L. Adams, CEO of SCORH, expressed his excitement in presenting this award, highlighting Lynch's contributions to rural health care.

"Your exceptional accomplishments and dedicated efforts in improving health care services in rural communities have truly set you apart as an outstanding individual in the field," Adams said. "Receiving this prestigious award is a testament to your unwavering commitment and tireless work in addressing the unique challenges faced by rural populations."

In addition to her work in family practice, Lynch oversees and founded CareSouth Carolina's CareFusion program, located in Hartsville, SC. The program offers IV infusion services for various conditions, providing patients with high-quality care without the need for hospitalization. The conditions treated include multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoporosis and more.

This service is not limited to CareSouth Carolina patients, anyone referred by a specialist can access the program.

For more information about CareSouth Carolina's CareFusion program or to inquire about treatment options, please call 843-758-0044.



Practitioner of the Year award

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Bennettsville, SC 29512
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843.921.6711 Foot Care

Chesterfield Center
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Hartsville Center
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KRISTA POULTON JOINS CARESOUTH CAROLINA'S ROADS TEAM

Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Krista Poulton, FNP

HARTSVILLE-CareSouth Carolina is excited to welcome Krista Poulton, FNP, to the ROADS (Reaching Out and Delivering Services) team, where she will be focusing on Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) services.

CareSouth Carolina's ROADS mobile initiative is a comprehensive health care program that serves rural communities throughout the Pee Dee region. The ROADS program features three fully equipped mobile medical units that provide essential services like school-based health care and telehealth, in addition to offering specialized care like MAT services.

With over seven years of experience in MAT, Poulton is passionate about providing essential care to those struggling with substance use disorders and is thrilled to be a part of CareSouth Carolina's community-driven initiative.

Poulton's work with the ROADS team will focus on providing MAT services by bringing remote MAT care to several different areas, including Hartsville, Dillon and Chesterfield. This effort is part of CareSouth Carolina's ongoing commitment to ensure that those struggling with substance use disorders have access to the care and resources they need, no matter where they live.

"For the past seven years, while I've been doing MAT, I've been traveling around. It's nice to be able to be in different locations every day," Poulton shared. "It's an opportunity to see different people and provide the care they need."

CareSouth Carolina's ROADS units not only deliver medical care but also work to break down the stigma surrounding mental health and addiction.

"I wish we didn't have the stigma," Poulton said. "More people are starting to seek help because we've broken down the stigma. People feel like they can get help without feeling a certain way, but there's still work to be done. It's a disease, and we need to treat it that way."

Poulton's decision to join CareSouth Carolina was motivated by her passion for community-focused care. "I've been thinking about this move for a little bit. The general idea that CareSouth Carolina is here to help those who may not be able to get help otherwise—I'm thankful to be a part of that mission and passion."

The ROADS program makes a significant impact on rural health access. In addition to MAT services, the ROADS team also offers school-based health services, providing annual wellness visits and screenings to students in 57 schools across five school districts in the Pee Dee.

When she's not working, Poulton enjoys reading, going to the movies and spending time at the beach.

For more information on CareSouth Carolina's ROADS program or the services Poulton and the team provide, contact the ROADS team at 843-309-8102.



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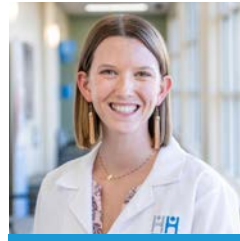
HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

Submitted by Sheridan K. Murray, BS, BA, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



Telatha Powell, AGPCNP-BC

Telatha Powell, AGPCNP-BC, is a nurse practitioner serving patients in Manning, Greeleyville, Hemingway and Kingstree. She received a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina, and a Master of Science in Nursing with a gerontology primary care focus from Purdue University Global in West Lafayette, Indiana. From Johnsonville, Powell is a member of the South Carolina Nurses Association, the American Nurses Association, the Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing and the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners. Her clinical interests include serving the geriatric population, senior health and primary care. She has 14 years of experience in senior care.



Anna Rhoads, MS, RD, LD, CDCES

Anna Rhoads, MS, RD, LD, CDCES, is a dietitian who provides services to patients at HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence and HopeHealth in Manning. She completed a Bachelor of Science in Food Science, Nutrition and Health Promotion Concentration in Food and Nutrition from Mississippi State University in Starkville, MS, and a Master of Science in Food and Nutrition Concentration in Nutrition Science from Florida State University in Tallahassee, FL, where she also completed a dietetic internship.

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 patient, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

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HOPEHEALTH EIGHTH ANNUAL GOLF CLASSIC

Submitted by HopeHealth



Team McGriff

HopeHealth hosted its eighth annual Golf Classic on Thursday, November 21, at the Wyboo Golf Club in Manning (2565 Players Course Dr., 29102).

Open to all, the one-day tournament was a four-man captain's choice that began with a shotgun start at 11:45 a.m. The tournament included 18 holes of golf with a cart, a brunch buffet and awards.

Championship flight winners were Lawton Greenwood, Robbie Timms, John D. Gooden and Jason Howard with Team McGriff. The first flight was awarded to Marion Ford, Michael Campbell, Joe Campbell and Randy Godbold with Team Ford. The second flight winners were Chippa Smith, Chevron Scott, Greg Eaddy and Marcus Burgess with Smith Funeral Home.

All proceeds from the tournament benefit the HopeHealth Compassionate Care Fund. At times, HopeHealth patients have needs that cannot be met directly by our providers. The Compassionate Care Fund exists to bridge the gap to quality health care by contributing to these unmet needs.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit leader in providing affordable, expert primary and specialty health care services for all ages in Florence, Aiken (Infectious Diseases), Clarendon, Orangeburg and Williamsburg Counties. Our federally qualified health centers are the health care home of choice for nearly 85,000 patients. To become a patient, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

A FRESH APPROACH TO NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Submitted by Sharon Black, PhD, MSW, LISW-CP/S



Sharon Black

Are you motivated to change to improve your health in the new year? A recent survey of 2000 adults showed that while the concept of New Year's resolutions is considered outdated by 55 percent of Americans, they still want to set health goals in 2024.

The concept of resolutions being outdated was reported by people in the survey who made New Year's resolutions in the past and then gave up by March, saying they lost motivation, life priorities shifted, or the goal was forgotten altogether. Other reasons for giving up were feeling too much pressure, and the goal being seen as a chore with no hope of lasting change. Respondents also reported making one significant change seemed harder than incremental lifestyle changes. The top three goals people were still interested in pursuing were related to health, including eating healthier, drinking more water and becoming more active.

Research indicates people who don't stick with their goals tend to try and do too much, set goals that are not specific to their life, don't modify a goal when it's not working or fail to look at the big picture. With a "can do" mindset and practical goal setting, it becomes much easier to stay on course with strategies that work for the long term. It's important to think through the process first, similar to bringing together the ingredients for baking a cake and reading the directions before beginning.

What is your overriding goal? For example, if the goal is to eat healthier, what does this mean in terms of your lifestyle, and where is an easy place to start? Goals should be challenging but achievable, with no glaring red flags. Make sure to question any goals or social media trends that sound unrealistic to you. It is also helpful for long-term success to have a mindset of developing goals around lifestyle

A FRESH APPROACH CONT'D

change instead of restriction, and to individualize goals to fit with your personality and environment.

Start by setting one small goal at a time and making it part of your routine before adding another. Find something you want to work on to improve health instead of “need” or “should.” Be curious and do a little research to find options you think will work for you. When developing a goal, a helpful strategy is to think SMART, an acronym for: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time related. A plan with simple steps that work with your lifestyle helps increase the chances of being successful.

For example, if you want to add more fruits and vegetables to your diet, a SMART goal might be, “I will prep and add a vegetable to my dinner meal at least five days a week.” Once this goal is met for several weeks, add a fruit or veggie to another meal or snack. An activity SMART goal might start with, “I will walk for 10-15 minutes over my lunch break at least two days a week,” then more activity can be added over time. Also, consider how to set up your environment with opportunities to decrease barriers, such as planning to purchase veggies weekly to have available for meals or keeping walking shoes at work for walking at lunch time.

Another strategy called habit stacking can pair a new goal with something you’re already doing, such as using a walking trail located on the route home from work or putting medications by the coffee pot as a reminder to take them more consistently.

Getting creative with goal setting and adding in the fun factor is another ingredient in the recipe for success. Enlist help by discussing your goals with someone you trust and having follow-up conversations over time, joining an exercise group or cooking class, or journaling about the goal and reviewing it regularly. With any goal, check in at intervals and adjust as needed. A goal might need to be adjusted, abandoned or changed, depending on what’s going on in life.

Take the time to regularly analyze your goals without harsh judgment. Developing accountability is an important tool to help stay on track with goals. If you think of goals as experiments, it’s easier to evaluate them more objectively and figure out any changes needed. Or, if the goal isn’t working at all, explore other alternatives and set a new goal. Throw out any guilt or shame and develop grace and self-compassion. Learn to treat yourself well, like you treat a dear friend. Aim not to compare yourself to others and be okay with not being perfect.

Setbacks, challenges and curveballs are a normal part of life. Embrace the ebb and flow, keep a positive mindset and give yourself a break during challenging times. If you feel like a failure and find yourself in the middle of a pity party, allow it and set an end time. Brush yourself off and try again. Success comes by sticking with goals, even if you don’t feel like it at the moment. Any step toward good health is a step in the right direction. Look at the big picture and be aware of things going well, such as more energy, a better mood, a clearer mind or less stress. Find your stride and learn to develop a “bounce back” mentality when you get off track.

Make sure to celebrate small wins. We tend to beat ourselves down for failing instead of lifting ourselves up when we do well. Aim to reframe a negative mindset to a positive one. It’s not failing - it’s struggling. Goal setting is more about progress over time, not perfection. When doing well, embrace progress and reward effective behaviors. Rewards don’t have to be about money or food. Take a nap, read a book, schedule fun time with loved ones, listen to a podcast or visit a free museum or local attraction. Rewards for your accomplishments are more about doing nice things for yourself!

While the first of the year has traditionally been a time for changing habits, any time can be the moment to focus on building new habits to improve health. Small steps lead to big changes over time, and improving health is a journey that takes time. Set your course, readjust your goals when needed, and correct your course when you get off track. Take the time to enjoy the journey and the many wonderful benefits of taking care of yourself in the new year and beyond.

Sharon Black is a licensed clinical social worker and the director of Integrated Behavioral Health at HopeHealth.



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MUSC Health Florence Medical Center Physical Therapist Nicholas Everetts and Mitch House

According to the Parkinson's Foundation, Parkinson's disease affects approximately 15,000 South Carolinians, and it projects that nearly 1.2 million people in the U.S. will be living with this condition by 2030.

The symptoms of Parkinson's disease can be caused by a variety of factors, although most people are primarily familiar with tremors. The risk of developing Parkinson's increases with age, particularly for those over 60. While herbicides and pesticides are significant risk factors, exposure to other common toxins, such as those found in dry-cleaning agents, can also increase the risk. Additionally, men appear to be more susceptible to this neurodegenerative disease than women.

Mitch House, 74, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease eight years ago. After being diagnosed, House found MUSC Health Florence Medical Center Physical Therapist Nicholas Everetts, who he credits for having been a vital support to him in his journey of living with and fighting this disease.

"There are a myriad of symptoms, some of which I have, but most of which I do not have. The variation among the different approaches neurologists take has been very large," said House. "Enter Nick Everetts, who is totally knowledgeable, encouraging, compassionate and professional. As the disease inevitably progresses, I fully believe that he will help me do all the right things to enjoy a productive life as much and as long as possible."

Everetts holds a specialized certification and brings extensive experience working with Parkinson's disease patients. He focuses on helping them to regain more natural movement patterns, which are often affected by the disease. Parkinson's can slow down and reduce the range of a person's movements, making everyday tasks like dressing, walking and getting up from a chair challenging. Everetts uses targeted therapies to help patients to recalibrate their perception of their movements, thereby improving their walking, balance and self-care activities. By guiding patients to use larger, more deliberate motions, he helps them to enhance their quality of life and independence.

Having witnessed the impacts of Parkinson's disease firsthand, Everetts is committed to expanding resources and support for those living with the condition. To that end, the Florence Medical Center has reinstated its Parkinson's Support Group that was shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Everetts said this support group was needed because there are so many other challenges that come along with Parkinson's outside of movement, emphasizing how 30 to 40 percent of people also suffer with anxiety or depression. In addition, caregivers frequently experience a number of difficulties at home that equally need to be addressed and supported.

"There's really not a lot of support groups for anything in Florence," said Everetts. "So, I thought it was really important for people to come together to help reduce some of their fears and

anxieties with Parkinson's. It was a big push, you know, seeing it in other places and thinking, 'We need a support group.'

The support group has had as many as 25 members at the monthly sessions. It's a combination of individuals who've been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, as well as their family members and support systems. These sessions are organized as an open forum for people to talk about what they're going through. A psychologist is present to facilitate the sessions and answer questions related to Parkinson's. Sessions have also included guest speakers, including Senior Advanced Director Diana Parish from the Parkinson's Foundation.

"Nick disseminates a wide variety of excellent information to the group at every meeting, which we might not otherwise get. Just today, he covered two new medications for us to consider discussing with our neurologists," said House. "Nicole Cool coming up from Charleston, as well as a member from the Parkinson's Foundation, were helpful, as they added significantly to our knowledge. As the disease inevitably progresses, I fully believe that he and this support group will help me do all the right things to enjoy a productive life as much and as long as possible." Cool is a nurse manager with the MUSC Health-Charleston Movement Disorders Program.

Occupational therapist Roxie Smallwood, Florence Medical Center's outpatient rehabilitation director, said that she finds it very rewarding to work with individuals who need resources and support and also being able to provide those services for them. "The support group is a great combination of patients, caregivers and other support systems. I think one of the great things about our support group is that we have resources provided from the clinician."

The Parkinson's support group meets on the first Wednesday of every month at MUSC Florence Medical Center. For more information on the support group and how you can participate, please visit <https://muschealth.org/locations/florence-medical-center/services/outpatient-rehabilitation-center/parkinsons-support-group>.

| Early Warning Signs of Parkinson's Disease | |
|--|--|
| Tremor  Slight shaking in hand, finger, or chin while at rest | Loss of Smell  Inability to smell certain foods, such as bananas, pickles, and licorice |
| Small Handwriting  May include smaller letters and/or words crowded together | Sleep Problems  Sudden movements during sleep, acting out dreams |
| Trouble Moving  Stiffness in limbs, body, or shoulders; feet feeling "stuck to the floor" | Constipation  Difficulty moving bowels without straining |
| Voice Changes  Voice may sound soft or hoarse | Masked Face  Face looks angry, serious, or depressed even when happy |
| Dizziness  Feel dizzy or faint upon standing | Stooping  Change in posture when you stand, such as stooping or slouching |



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MUSC AMONG 2025 BEST HOSPITALS FOR MATERNITY CARE

Submitted by Kristin Merkel, MUSC Office of Communications & Marketing

CHARLESTON- MUSC Health University Medical Center in Charleston and MUSC Health Florence Medical Center were rated as “High Performing” in U.S. News & World Report’s Best Hospitals for Maternity Care rankings released today.

Both hospitals improved over last year’s ratings from “Participated” to “High Performing” maternity and perinatal care hospitals. This is the highest rating awarded by U.S. News & World Report for maternity hospitals. This is the third year that U.S. News & World Report has rated maternity hospitals.

Donna Johnson, M.D., chair of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, welcomed the rating improvement, stressing that, “Our care teams consistently advocate for the safety and well-being of our maternity patients and their babies. Our goal is to deliver compassionate and patient first care during an exciting and cherished time in a family’s life. We strive to provide the highest quality maternity experience for every family. I am immensely proud of our care teams and know this is well-deserved recognition.”

The High Performing rating indicates that both locations provide high-quality labor and delivery services for uncomplicated pregnancies. The High Performing status rates how well a hospital performs in childbirth utilizing criteria such as:

- Cesarean section (C-section) rates.
- Newborn complication rates.
- Breast milk feeding rates.
- Early elective delivery rates.
- Routine vaginal birth after cesarean delivery (VBAC) rates.
- Episiotomy rates.
- If a hospital meets new federal criteria for “birthing-friendly” practices.

- Whether a hospital tracks and reports outcomes for patients of different races and ethnicities.

“At MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, we are deeply honored to be recognized as a high-performing hospital for maternity care by U.S. News & World Report. This achievement reflects our unwavering commitment to providing exceptional, patient-centered care for mothers and their babies. Our dedicated team of health care professionals strives every day to deliver the safest and highest quality care, ensuring that families in our community can welcome new life with confidence and compassion,” said Jay Hinesley, chief executive officer of MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers.

U.S. News & World Report initiated the Best Hospitals for Maternity Care ratings to assist expectant mothers and families with choosing a hospital that best cares for patients during labor and delivery following an uncomplicated pregnancy. Mirroring the U.S. News’ Best Hospitals rankings, the best maternity care ratings draw from three categories: outcomes, process and structure.

The website FAQ section provides additional information on how U.S. News & World Report evaluates Best Hospitals for Maternity Care.

About MUSC Shawn Jenkins Children’s Hospital and Pearl Tourville Women’s Pavilion

The MUSC Shawn Jenkins Children’s Hospital (SJCH) consists of 250 beds and opened in February 2020 as a replacement facility for the MUSC Children’s Hospital formerly located on Ashley Avenue. The SJCH provides the most advanced pediatric care possible in

more than 27 specialty areas, in person or through a robust telehealth network, and includes a level one trauma center and emergency department, the state’s only pediatric burn center and solid-organ and bone marrow transplant programs, the state’s largest level four neonatal intensive care unit, an advanced fetal care center, and the number two ranked U.S. News & World Report children’s heart program which functions through a nationally unique statewide collaboration of pediatric heart surgeons and cardiologists. The MUSC Pediatric Heart Program is also annually recognized as providing exceptional care by the Society of Thoracic Surgeons Congenital Heart Surgery Public Reporting. In January 2022, the MUSC Children’s Health surgery program was verified as a level one children’s surgery center by the American College of Surgeons Children’s Surgery Verification Quality Improvement Program.

Housed within the SJCH, the Pearl Tourville Women’s Pavilion (PTWP) seamlessly integrates children’s care and obstetrical services, thereby enhancing safety and improving outcomes in low and high-risk pregnancies. The Advanced Fetal Care Center ensures that families expecting babies with complex congenital birth defects or medical problems receive care from board-certified maternal fetal medicine providers collaborating with a large multidisciplinary care team of pediatric specialists. The PTWP care is one of only a handful of women’s facilities in the country to offer couplet-care rooms, where newborns and mothers can recover together in an intensive-care setting.

A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION WORTH YOUR TIME

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



Erica Buffkin

As we enter a new year, many eagerly anticipate the opportunity for a fresh start. Goal setting and resolutions are made in hopes of enhancing, organizing and improving our lives. While resolutions tend to focus on diet or exercise, these aren't the only pathways to improving our health and wellbeing.

Popular resolutions are reducing alcohol consumption or a period of complete abstinence. The benefits extend far beyond by avoiding the risks of intoxication, danger to oneself and others or

the unpleasantness of a hangover. Cutting back on alcohol can boost overall happiness, as it strengthens your ability to handle life's challenges. By consuming less, you may save money, sleep better, feel more energized and potentially shed holiday pounds. Reducing alcohol intake lowers the risk of liver and heart disease, and certain cancers.

New Year's resolutions are the easy part. Maintaining those goals can feel overwhelming, causing many to falter along the way. Fortunately, there are strategies to increase your chances of success in alcohol reduction.

Consider the quantity and type of alcoholic beverages consumed. According to the CDC, a standard drink is defined as 12 ounces of beer with five percent alcohol by volume (ABV), eight ounces of malt liquor at seven percent ABV, five ounces of wine at 12 percent ABV, or 1.5 ounces of liquor with

40 percent ABV (80 proof). For women, consuming more than eight alcoholic drinks per week constitutes heavy drinking, and having more than four drinks in a three-hour period is considered binge drinking. For men, heavy drinking is defined as more than 15 drinks in a week, and binge drinking involves five or more drinks in a single sitting.

To achieve your goal, develop a clear plan. Set goals and create a timeline for reducing consumption or to stop drinking altogether. Share your intentions with a trusted individual to hold you accountable. Consult a physician to ensure your safety.

Alcohol-free alternatives for social occasions ensure you can enjoy an activity without feeling deprived. Identify triggers or emotional patterns that lead you to drink and strategize how to manage them effectively.

Persistence is key. If you over indulge, don't be discouraged. Firmly move forward with your goals and continue your journey. Resilience is the aim. Strengthen your resolve and reflect on what led to your setback. True success lies in pursuing your goals despite setbacks.

Support is crucial to your progress. Accountability partners, a group or professional resources are available to help. With the right plan, persistence and support, your commitment can yield a lasting change. Circle Park Behavioral Health offers structure through effective and evidence-based treatment and prevention services from peer support, therapy, counseling and Medically Assisted Treatment.

We are committed to the citizens of Florence County. For information contact Circle Park on 843-665-9349 or visit us at 238 S. Coit Street; www.circlepark.com.

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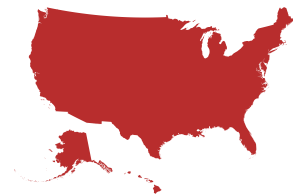
To learn how to perform Hands-Only CPR, visit McLeodCPR.org.



HEART HEALTH FACTS

Heart Disease is the leading cause of death

for men
and women
in the U.S.



One person dies from heart disease in the U.S. every



33 seconds

Someone has a heart attack

every **4**  seconds in the U.S.

Approx. 10% of heart attacks are fatal

The **average age** a person will have a heart attack



men
is **65**

women
is **72**

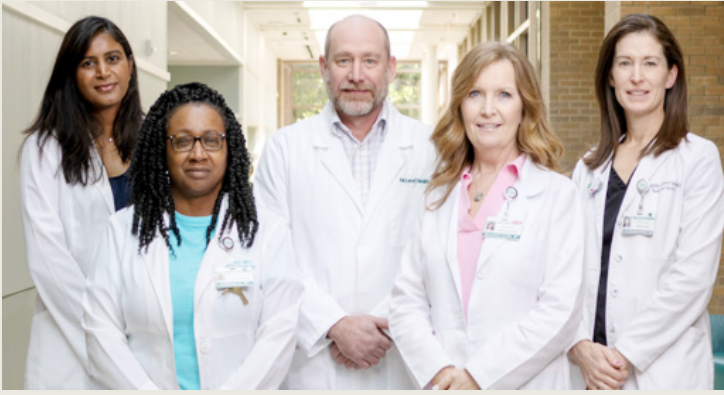


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20TH ANNIVERSARY OF MCLEOD'S BREAST HEALTH CENTER Articles submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Members of the McLeod Breast Health team include Dr. Swarna Nalluru, Christel Hayes, FNP-C, Dr. Shawn Conwell, Maureen Byrd, FNP-C, CBCN and Dr. Virginia Clyburn-Ipock. Dr. Nalluru is the newest member of the team. The multidisciplinary team of providers dedicated to the breast health needs of women in the region also include surgeons Dr. John Sonfield, Dr. Hugh Willcox and Dr. John Gause.

In 2004, the McLeod Breast Health Center was established to ensure rapid diagnosis, education and emotional support for women facing a diagnosis of breast cancer. Twenty years later, this team of providers continue to promote continuity of care by offering the full spectrum of breast services from prevention and diagnosis to treatment and support.

Tracey O'Neal, RN, OCN, BCBN, became only the second breast health specialist to care for women at McLeod in 2015 – a role she continues to serve in today. Coming full circle, in early 2024, Maureen Byrd, FNP-C, CBCN, the first McLeod breast health specialist, returned to the Breast Health Center to serve as the breast health coordinator for the new High-Risk Breast Clinic. Byrd set the standard for oncology nurse navigation at McLeod.

After completing her education to become a nurse practitioner, Byrd began working with cancer patients at McLeod Oncology and Hematology Associates and then with the McLeod Home-Based Palliative Care Program.

Each team member at the McLeod Breast Health Center makes it their purpose to involve patients and their families with the treatment plan. The goal is to make the individual's entry into the system as painless and seamless as possible. McLeod also strives to provide personalized breast cancer care since one treatment does not fit all. The team individualizes a plan to each and every patient's needs.

"We are making sure there are no gaps between patients and their medical decisions," said Byrd. "We are their advocates and will help with anything they need, even if they need us to hold their hand. McLeod is concerned about easing the mind of patients and ensuring the best individualized treatment plan in a timely manner. We want to educate our patients, expedite their waiting process and make sure they are given the appropriate referrals."

Dedicated to the early detection and treatment of breast cancer, McLeod is the only Breast Health Center in the area accredited by the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC), a program administered by the American College of Surgeons. McLeod received this prestigious acknowledgement of the quality of care it offers to breast cancer patients in 2010 – the first and only breast program in the region to achieve this designation. In addition, the McLeod Breast Health Center is a Designated Comprehensive Breast Imaging Center by the American College of Radiology.

For more information on the McLeod Breast Health Center, please call (843) 777-4444.

25TH ANNUAL CANCER BENEFIT RAISES MORE THAN \$154,000 Submitted by McLeod Health



During the finale of An Evening of Hope, celebrity guest performers and the featured cancer survivors joined the band on stage for the song, "Don't Stop Believing."

Providing thousands of cancer patients in the region with assistance related to transportation, medications, nutrition and personal financial challenges, the McLeod HOPE (Helping Oncology Patients Everyday) Fund benefits oncology patient support services and provides oncology staff with improved access for immediate needs for their patients.

This is made possible annually through gifts directed to the HOPE Fund.

Most recently, the 25th Annual An Evening of Hope raised more than \$154,000 to further assist patients through the HOPE Fund. Held in September at the Francis Marion University Performing Arts Center, the event included inspirational video testimonials featuring Cancer Survivors Joe Bibbo, Leroy Blackwell, Michael Branham, Helen Gooden, Lynne Head and Daryn Sasser. Attendees were also entertained by Fran Coleman

and the Emerald Empire Band with celebrity guest performances by McLeod Oncologist Dr. Rajesh Bajaj, Cancer Survivor Sharmeika McDuffie, the "Shirelles" and the "Drifters" from the Florence Little Theatre production of, "Beautiful, The Carole King Musical."

Proceeds from the evening benefit the HOPE Fund. Gifts made in support of the HOPE (Helping Oncology Patients Everyday) Fund benefit oncology patient support services and provide oncology staff with improved access for immediate assistance needs for their patients. Since its establishment in 2014, the HOPE Fund has helped thousands of patients with needs such as transportation, medications, nutrition and unique personal financial challenges.

We appreciate all our sponsors for the McLeod HOPE Fund in making the 25th Annual An Evening of Hope a huge success.

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GENESIS HEALTHCARE, INC. LAUNCHES MOBILE UNITS Submitted by Genesis Healthcare



Two of the many Mobile Healthcare Units which are utilized by Genesis Healthcare, Inc. to provide excellent healthcare to those in the community who may not have adequate transportation to receive medical care. Contributed photo

DARLINGTON - Genesis Healthcare, Inc. is proud to announce the launch of groundbreaking mobile health care units designed to address health care disparities and enhance access to medical services in underserved communities throughout the Pee Dee and Lowcountry regions of South Carolina.

This cutting-edge mobile clinic underscores Genesis Healthcare's dedication to community health and disaster preparedness. The initiative responds to the urgent need for accessible health care, particularly during emergencies such as hurricanes and natural disasters, which disproportionately impact individuals living at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

"Genesis Healthcare recognizes the significant challenges faced by underserved

communities, especially in times of crisis," said Kim Weatherford, COO of Genesis Healthcare. "With the launch of our mobile health care units, we are reaffirming our commitment to reducing health care disparities and ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality medical services, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location."

The mobile clinics will also be integral to community outreach efforts, participating in local events, festivals and educational programs to raise health awareness and provide on-site medical assistance. Additionally, Genesis Healthcare plans to extend its services to rural agricultural farms, offering health care to migrant workers who often lack access to traditional medical facilities.

Genesis Healthcare remains steadfast in its mission to deliver high-quality health care to underserved communities and looks forward to strengthening its partnership with HRSA through this innovative initiative.

For more information about the mobile health care units, please visit our website at www.genesisfqhc.org.

About Genesis Healthcare

Howard J. Nettles - Director of Community Outreach and Engagement says Genesis Healthcare is a nationally recognized health care provider committed to delivering

high-quality, compassionate and affordable care to the communities of Darlington, Florence, Lamar, Olanta, Goose Creek and Walterboro. We are deeply rooted in these communities and committed to improving their health through prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and education.

We even have programs that focus on detecting and managing any chronic pains, chronic illnesses and chronic ailments you have, providing you with care that allows you to live a happier and healthier daily life. Genesis provides quality health care services to patients of all ages, regardless of their ability to pay. Services include, but are not limited to:

- Primary care & preventative care
- Chronic disease management
- Lab diagnostics
- OB/GYN
- Pediatrics
- Patient transportation and many more.

We are dedicated to improving the health of our community, and we bring a rich list of tools to ensure that together we can achieve the goal of improving community health.

Focused on accessibility, excellence and innovation, Genesis Healthcare strives to positively impact the health and well-being of individuals and families. For more information, visit www.genesisfqhc.org.



Genesis

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DUKE ENERGY CELEBRATES GIVING TUESDAY Submitted by Ryan Mosier, principal communications manager



Help 4 Kids

GREENVILLE — Duke Energy is wrapping up a month-long initiative to support organizations addressing food deserts, insecurities and inequities across South Carolina by announcing more than \$300,000 in surprise microgrants and contributions to community organizations across the state.

The announcement concludes a campaign by Duke Energy and the Duke Energy Foundation that provided over \$500,000 to feeding programs through Giving Tuesday. Supported organizations included Mill Village Farms, Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina, FoodShare South Carolina, Harvest Hope Food Bank and AIM, among others.

“If you grew up in South Carolina, you likely know that a ‘surcee’ is a small, unexpected gift,” said Tim Pearson, Duke Energy’s South Carolina president. “Giving Tuesday is the perfect opportunity to give a little something extra and highlight the great work these organizations do throughout the year to help keep our friends and neighbors from going hungry.”

The microgrants and contributions were not solicited by the receiving organizations. The ‘surcee’ funding opportunities recognize the important gaps these typically smaller agencies fill in the neighborhoods they serve.

Duke Energy employees also volunteered throughout the month, assisting in packing and distributing food boxes, preparing backpacks for weekend food programs for students and supporting senior mobile food programs and other feeding

initiatives in their communities.

Support for local food banks and soup kitchens is valuable year-round but is particularly critical during the holiday season. To find a community feeding partner near you, visit [SC211.org](https://www.SC211.org) or text “FOOD” to 211211.

“We also know customers struggling to put food on the table are making decisions about what bills to pay at home, including their electricity bill,” Pearson said. “That’s why it’s important for us to also share information that can assist families in managing their energy bills during tough times.” To learn more about these programs, visit [duke-energy.com/SeasonalSavings](https://www.duke-energy.com/SeasonalSavings).

Quotes

“Food insecurity is a growing issue in our area as the price of groceries continues to rise,” said Shelley Price, executive director of GRASP in Chester County. “The generous grant funding from Duke Energy not only provides much-needed food for our pantry but also serves as a lifeline for those doing all they can to make ends meet. As the holiday season approaches, let’s remember that while we are shopping and planning family gatherings, many of our neighbors are struggling just to put food on the table.”

“Duke Energy’s partnership with this ministry is making such a difference in the lives of our recipients — providing a hot meal and a visit by a volunteer,” said Laura Boles, president and CEO of Mobile Meals. “The funds will ensure that we can carry out that mission, improving the lives of so many deserving neighbors across Spartanburg County.”

“On behalf of the 22.7 percent of the food-insecure children in Florence County, a big thank you to the Duke Energy Foundation for the recent donation,” said Diane Welch, founder and president of Help 4 Kids. “Families in Florence County are dealing every week with increasing food costs, and the bags their children receive each Friday help reduce some of the stress of food insecurity.”



Caring and Sharing Inc.

“This generous grant from the Duke Energy Foundation will help us make bulk purchases of a wide variety of healthy groceries that will provide extra food for low-income individuals, seniors and families who don’t always have the money to pay their bills and afford food too,” said Mike Harlin, board chair of Golden Corner Food Pantry in Oconee County.

Duke Energy Foundation

The Duke Energy Foundation provides more than \$30 million annually in philanthropic support to meet the needs of communities where Duke Energy customers live and work. The Foundation is funded by Duke Energy shareholders.

Duke Energy

Duke Energy (NYSE: DUK), a Fortune 150 company headquartered in Charlotte, N.C., is one of America’s largest energy holding companies. The company’s electric utilities serve 8.4 million customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, and collectively own 54,800 megawatts of energy capacity. Its natural gas utilities serve 1.7 million customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, and Kentucky.

Duke Energy is executing an ambitious clean energy transition, keeping reliability, affordability and accessibility at the forefront as the company works toward net-zero methane emissions from its natural gas business by 2030 and net-zero carbon emissions from electricity generation by 2050. The company is investing in major electric grid upgrades and cleaner generation, including expanded energy storage, renewables, natural gas and nuclear. More information is available at [duke-energy.com](https://www.duke-energy.com). Follow Duke Energy on Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook, and visit [illumination.duke-energy.com](https://www.illumination.duke-energy.com) for stories about the people and innovations powering our energy transition.



Dillon County Council of Aging

PERFORMING ARTS CENTER UPCOMING EVENTS *Submitted by FMU*



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African dances; and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience.

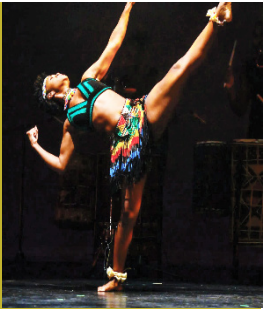
Ranky Tanky! March 20, 2025 at 7:30 p.m.



Ranky Tanky!

Ranky Tanky (a Gullah phrase for “get funky”) are five lifelong friends from Charleston, South Carolina who have established themselves as passionate global ambassadors for their local culture and community, helping to

Step Afrika! February 1, 2025 at 7:30 p.m.



Step Afrika!

Step Afrika! - Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the world’s leading authority on the artform of stepping. Under Williams’ leadership, the group has evolved into one of America’s cultural exports, touring more than 60 countries across the globe and ranking as one of the top 10 African American Dance Companies in the U.S.

Step Afrika! blends percussive dance styles practiced by African American fraternities and sororities; traditional

faithfully preserve the traditions originated by African Americans in the coastal South during slavery that are kept alive through the present day. The GRAMMY award winning band has been featured on, “NPR’s Fresh Air,” “The Today Show,” “PBS Newshour” and “The Late Show” with Stephen Colbert’s #PlayAtHome series. Ranky Tanky was honored to be a featured artist in President Biden’s inauguration event, “We The People.” They were the subjects of a 10-page profile in Oxford American’s South Carolina Music Issue and were named 2020 Artist of The Year by the Charleston City Paper.

For more information about the spotlight series contact FMU Performing Arts Center 201 South Dargan Street Florence, SC 29506. Box Office: 843-661-4444.

STEP AFRIKA!

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Stay Connected:



A VINTAGE VOGUE AFFAIR: A NIGHT OF ELEGANCE AND GIVING BACK

Articles submitted by Earline McClary, AKA Epsilon Chi Omega, Florence Chapter



The Epsilon Chi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.®, in partnership with The Palmetto Pearls Foundation

The Epsilon Chi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.®, in partnership with The Palmetto Pearls Foundation, hosted the highly anticipated Pink Gala – A Vintage Vogue Affair on October 19, 2024, at the Florence Center in Florence, S.C. This elegant, sold-out event brought together community leaders, supporters and stakeholders for an unforgettable evening.

The gala was made possible through the generous contributions of 26 community sponsors, each supporting the event at various levels. In addition to being a celebration of community and culture, the gala served as a powerful fundraiser for initiatives supported by the chapter. A portion of the proceeds will benefit scholarships and service projects that aim to create lasting positive change in the community.

Through its continued commitment to service and philanthropy, the Epsilon Chi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.® is proud to make a meaningful impact through events like the Pink Gala, which highlight the power of collaboration and community engagement.

HEALTHY COPING SKILLS HIGHLIGHTED AT BLACK TEEN SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS FORUM



Black Teen Suicide Prevention Awareness Forum

Awareness Forum at the Strive Hard Educational, Recreational and Enrichment Center (SHEREC) during the church’s Family & Friends Day event. This impactful forum, designed for young people ages nine to 19, aimed to promote mental health awareness and healthy coping skills.

The forum was led by Nicole Quick, alongside four other licensed professional counselors and one board-certified behavioral specialist. Topics covered during the session included grief, presented by Dr. Patricia Morrissey; healthy relationships, presented by Mrs. Campbell;

substance abuse, presented by Mrs. Wiley; anti-bullying strategies, presented by Isaac Wilson and after-school programs such as the Boys & Girls Club and Dramatic Coffee Beans, presented by Carla Angus.

The event also featured a variety of engaging activities to support mental well-being, including a table display from Natalie Whitfield’s AKA Youth Leadership Initiative and interactive presentations from Dramatic Coffee Beans’ Angus. Over 36 students and 15 members of the AKA chapter attended, participating in workshops designed to help young people develop positive coping skills for life’s challenges.

In addition to the educational sessions, attendees enjoyed fun activities, treats and a picnic, creating a welcoming atmosphere that emphasized mental health as a priority for all ages. Morrissey and Mr. Howard were also present to offer parental support, helping parents recognize signs of mental distress in their children and learn how to address mental health concerns effectively.

The forum underscored the importance of fostering resilience and healthy mental habits in young people, creating a community-centered approach to supporting mental wellness.



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LETTER FROM TONYA MORMAN JACKSON FOR FLORENCE! Submitted by Tonya Morman



Tonya Morman Jackson

my life has been centered around commitment, hard work and responsibility.

Florence is my home, and like you, I believe in putting family, faith and community first. I've seen firsthand the power of personal responsibility and the need for strong leadership that fights for the rights of hardworking families. I'm running for City Council because I believe in protecting our values, defending our freedoms and ensuring that Florence is a place where we can raise our families in safety, with access to opportunities for all.

As a mother and a mentor to young people, I've been committed to creating pathways for success. Our children deserve a future where they can thrive, and that starts with ensuring our schools are safe, our neighborhoods are secure and our small businesses have the support they need to grow. I believe in cutting red tape, reducing burdensome regulations and empowering local businesses to create jobs and opportunities right here in Florence.

We need leaders who will stand up for fiscal responsibility—leaders who understand that our tax dollars belong to us and should be spent wisely. I will work to ensure that the city council prioritizes

Good afternoon, Florence!

I'm Tonya Morman Jackson, and I stand before you today not just as a candidate but as someone who has spent a lifetime serving others and working to uphold the values that make our community strong. From caring for the elderly and those with special needs to raising my family with the same love and responsibility that every parent understands,

essential services, supports law enforcement and takes steps to protect our citizens. Crime prevention and public safety must be a top priority, and I will make sure our police have the tools they need to keep Florence safe.

I'm not here to play politics or make empty promises. I'm here to represent the real concerns of Florence's families and businesses. I'm running for city council because my voice is your voice. I understand your concerns because they are my concerns. Together, we speak the same language, share the same values and honor the truth that we are more alike than different. You can trust me to bring your issues to the table, and I will fight tirelessly to ensure they are addressed.

We need more good-paying jobs, more support for our working families and more focus on making Florence a place where everyone has the chance to succeed through hard work and determination. I also believe in transparency. You deserve to know where I stand on every issue. I will always be open about my votes and decisions because I work for you. Accountability is crucial, and I invite you to track my record and ask me the tough questions—because I am here to serve you.

As I run for this seat, I want to make it clear: I'm not running against anyone—I'm running for the people of Florence. While I am not the only candidate, I am focused on serving you, not competing with others.

Florence, it's time for leadership that puts us first—leadership that respects our values, promotes freedom and builds a future where Florence continues to grow, thrive and be a beacon of opportunity for generations to come. Together, we will build a stronger, more compassionate Florence—one where everyone has a seat at the table. Your Voice—Our Florence.

Thank you, and let's move Florence forward together—stronger, safer and more prosperous!

Juniper Breeze

1 Serving | 2 minutes



INGREDIENTS:

- 2 oz. McQueen & the Violet Fog Gin
- 1 oz. Lemon Juice
- 1 oz. Juniper Rose Simple Syrup
- Dried Juniper Berries & Culinary Grade Juniper Sprig for garnish

Directions:

1. Fill your cocktail shaker with ice and add your gin, lemon juice & simple syrup.
2. Shake vigorously for at least 15 seconds.
3. Strain shaker contents into martini glass.
4. Garnish with juniper berries and/or juniper sprig.
5. Enjoy!





Terry James

Terry James spent several years creating a historical timeline of the James family, specifically Ervin James. Ervin James was an entrepreneur at a time when Black individuals were not accepted as equals by white society. When Terry James began researching his family history twenty years ago, he learned much about the impact Ervin James had on the Mars Bluff community and felt the story needed to be told. His interest and passion for documenting factual information about Ervin James and his wife have piqued the interest of media

across the state and nation over the years. He has been interviewed by several news stations, gaining nationwide attention for his purpose. This attention turned into appreciation for his work, and he has received several awards since 2018.

The Jamestown Foundation received the NATAS (National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences) 50th Annual Southeast Emmy Award (WMBF News) for Derrion Henderson and George Hansen, covering Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Asheville, North Carolina, along with the RTDNA Edward R. Murrow Award for region eight, which includes Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. They were also honored with the SCBA (South Carolina Broadcasters Association) MERIT AWARD for TV Broadcast News: Feature/Franchise and most recently, the RTDNAC Awards Competition for North Carolina and South Carolina Light Feature. Additionally, the foundation has been awarded the National NABJ (National Association of Black Journalists) Award and the National Edward R. Murrow Award.

Terry James said the story of Ervin James is fascinating because it reminds us of the real struggles of slavery. During the Civil War, slaves had to persevere through extreme hardships. Terry James proposed a thought-provoking question: “What was harsher than slavery?” He noted



WMBF News Morning Anchor Derrion Henderson and Chief Photographer George Hansen won an Emmy award at the Southeast Emmy Awards Ceremony in Atlanta in the Nostalgia Category for *The Story of Jamestown*.

that for Ervin James to accomplish what he did was unheard of. Ervin James’ land ownership was the culmination of an 1870 vision when he purchased 109 acres of land from Eli McKissick and Mary Postron. The land became known as Jamestown, an African

American community that has flourished in Florence County for decades. Only three percent of enslaved people purchased property, Terry James stated. Ervin James was educated and met the goals he set out to accomplish. Unfortunately, many African Americans in the lower parts of South Carolina and Georgia faced significant challenges in maintaining property ownership. Due to systemic inequities, they were often unable to keep up with tax payments and were subsequently forced out of their land. White landowners, motivated by economic and social dominance, frequently targeted these properties.

Terry James emphasized that many African Americans do not see the value of property and the importance of preserving it. To keep younger generations informed about Ervin James and his project, he continues sharing the story through church engagements and other events. He also shares the story of Jamestown in magazines and other media. Terry James believes the stories of slavery must be taught through generations to understand and uphold the value of what enslaved people endured for African Americans to have lasting family legacies. Additionally, he noted that other stories from the African diaspora facing white dominance should also be passed down. Teaching the pride of those who fought to maintain their rights and property is why the Jamestown Foundation has been recognized for its perseverance in sharing the valuable history of Ervin James.

AMERICANS SAY NETWORKING OPENS DOORS TO OPPORTUNITIES

(BPT) — One in three (31 percent) Americans say they owe the job they have now — and the salary they make (29 percent) — to their personal network, according to new research from Empower, a leader in financial planning, investing and advice. For millennials, that number rises to 40 percent in both dimensions.

Six in 10 Americans believe that the strength of their connections is key to success, from career advancement to pay and promotions. Half (50 percent) say it would be naive not to take advantage of personal connections. Additionally, 75 percent say it’s important to use their network to help others, and half of Americans report actively helping others get a job (53 percent overall, 61 percent millennials).

“The ‘network effect’ is real, and your dream salary may be one connection away. Many Americans see the power of personal connections as a key to unlocking money-making opportunities,” says Rebecca Rickert, head of communications at Empower. “People view the investment of time or money as a means of paying it forward—an investment that pays back.”

People are also turning to their inner circles for financial help. A third of Americans (32 percent) say they have not saved enough and need to rely on their network to make ends meet (41 percent of Gen Z and millennials). One quarter receive an average of \$390 per month (\$4,680 annually) in financial support from relatives or personal connections. Nearly a third admit to receiving financial assistance from their parents after the age of 18 (30 percent), while 45 percent of parents report providing financial support to their adult children. Additionally, 28 percent of people have received help with living expenses such as groceries, rent or mortgage payments.

Still, 50 percent feel embarrassed about having to rely on others for financial help, as the majority (79 percent) of Americans believe it is important to be financially independent, and many (57 percent) are doing everything they can to achieve it. Some 61 percent say rising prices and inflation are preventing them from getting ahead financially.

The power of personal connections extends to giving back, too: 66 percent say paying it forward to others in this way increases their happiness. Six in 10 Americans have paid it forward to strangers in small ways, such as paying for the person behind them in the drive-thru line.

Additional Findings:

- **Generational hardships:** Forty percent of respondents overall say their generation needs financial help because they are at a disadvantage compared to other generations (54 percent of Gen Z, 55 percent of millennials, 36 percent of Gen X, 23 percent of baby boomers).
- **Keeping up with the Joneses:** A quarter say they spend more than they make trying to keep up with others (23 percent overall, 33 percent of Gen Z). Men are more likely than women to agree (27 percent of men, 19 percent of women).
- **Diploma dilemma:** More than one in five (21 percent) have received financial help for education from their network. Nearly a third say that due to their career choices (e.g., lack of a degree or low-paying jobs), they need to financially rely on others (27 percent overall, 38 percent of Gen Z and millennials). Just 7 percent say they received legacy admission to a college of choice due to personal connections.
- **Opening doors:** Twenty-five percent of Americans say they’ve received career support from their parents, including connections, advice, introductions and professional development. One in 5 millennials report getting freelance opportunities through their personal connections.
- **Picking up the bill:** One in four admit to having daily discretionary expenses, such as eating out and getting coffee, covered by others. Seventeen percent of people enjoy a fully paid vacation courtesy of their relatives, friends or personal connections (20 percent of Gen Z and 22 percent of millennials).
- **Family ties:** Fifty-eight percent believe family members and close friends need to help each other financially, while 35 percent prefer to live at home with family or roommates to save money.



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- Martin Luther King Jr.

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