

PG. 59

PATRICK NETTLES
GENESIS HEALTHCARE

PG. 52

TABITHA D. JAMES
SHE IS ME

PG. 91

**DR. HEATHER
KILPATRICK**
CARESOUTH CAROLINA

PG. 23

WILLIAM LENARD
DCSD

DIVERSITYWORKS

APRIL 2025 VOLUME 15 ISSUE 2

"For All of Us"



COVER STORY: PGS. 42 & 43
DR. HILLERY DOLFORD, DNP
SWEET FEET DIABETIC FOOT SPA
PHOTO BY WILLIAMS "CASH" STUKES, AYS MEDIA

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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



Glaceria Brown Mason
Editor

Greetings Diversity Works Readers,

Diversity Works Magazine welcomes you to its second quarter edition! In this issue, you will find continuous high-quality articles covering the period, April - June 2025. Our recurring sections are accompanied by observed special sections articles specific to autism, child abuse, Earth Day, homeownership, mental health, military appreciation, sexual assault and volunteerism.

Find local news and get your entrepreneurial fix, reading our business section, with the latest from Florence County, as they introduce and welcome their new Public Information Officer Stacie Davis Hamilton. Let Ruiz Foods' community outreach efforts inspire your business model to do more and give more in the community. Read the article highlights from Lake City's Mayor Robinson's second State of the City address and, the BBB's tips for ensuring the well-being of your workforce.

Throughout, see ads from local advertising partners, available at the turn of a page. Diversity Works thanks partners and our readers for the opportunity to share your stories. We encourage you to shop locally to help stimulate the economy where we all live, work and play.

With fluctuations in our economy, take special care to educate yourselves. Read in our financial section, the five ways to turn everyday items into extra

cash. Keep reading and learn who's new at Anderson Brothers Bank and be sure not to miss the article on how to strategically boost your savings and much more.

In 1944, Ruth Caye Jones wrote the hymn, "In Times Like These," we need an anchor. In that spirit, see what Spirit-Led Coach and Author Robin Lewis shares about the unlimited compassion of God. Our education section shares news and announcements of the best and brightest in our communities. Whether from your alma mater or your local school districts, read the always interesting education section and learn who's been awarded Teacher of the Year, new board appointments, educator promotions, institutional anniversaries, facility naming, honors and awards. "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." - Benjamin Franklin

We celebrate education professionals and institutions from the various local school districts to area institutions of higher learning for their progressive achievements in education for the benefit of the next generation. You'll find articles from Claflin University, Florence Darlington Technical College, Francis Marion University, Horry Georgetown Technical College, the Darlington County School District, the Governor's School for Science & Mathematics and the Marion County School District.

He's been called a, "walking miracle!" In any health emergency, clear thinking and quick action can be critical. Read the amazing story of how Jason Bazen survived a heart attack after his heart stopped for 31 minutes. Read Bazen's story and what MUSC Cardiologist Dr. Abdallah Kamouh shares about learning CPR. Also check out the American Heart Association's signs of a heart attack. While you're perusing, be informed about the grand opening of the newly renovated Streater Community Center and what it offers. Want to feel and look better? See what HopeHealth's Physician Assistant Alan Barrett shares about overall health and physical activity. To ensure the best

patient care is available, read MUSC's announcement on the expansion of the Hollings Cancer Center in Florence. Read this and much more informative content in our health section.

Our Cover Story - She, is a delightful, friendly, competent, capable, educated, faith-filled, home-grown Florence, SC native. A local business entrepreneur and Owner/Founder of the increasingly popular, Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa! In our cover story, we meet Dr. Hillery Dolford. We invite you to read with interest Dolford's career and educational paths which qualify her, her abiding faith which sustains her and her commitment and dedication to her work. It was my absolute pleasure working with Dolford. Read the doctor's story which includes the importance of proper foot care to add to your overall health.

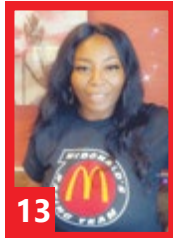
Diversity Works' special sections mirror the national observances observed around the country. Read with appreciation the stories shared as we celebrate U.S. military achievements and service from various branches. To all of our local and national veterans, Diversity Works staff and the community at large THANKS YOU for your service, your sacrifice and for the protections you have afforded us.

To lift you in the humanity of ordinary people doing extraordinary acts of kindness, we also thank and recognize our friends, neighbors and community for the act of volunteering. The selfless act of pitching in to help someone or a cause is immeasurable to our local community. Read the section on volunteers and maybe recognize a face or a name that you may know. The next time you see them, thank them for serving our community. These stories and so many more can be found among our special section.

May the renewal of spring and the days ahead, spent reading the latest news be filled with edification, information and enlightenment, found in these pages. Happy Spring and Happy Reading!

Glaceria Brown Mason

FEATURED ARTICLES & CONTENT



13

Lily Wilson
McDonald's



24

GSSM Summer Camp Students



81

Alan Barrett
HopeHealth



76

Jody Lambert
Anderson Brothers
Bank



18

Gentleman Leadership Club



47

Amber Flowers
Florence County
Sheriff's Office

BUSINESS

4	NURTURING DIVERSITY AT THE TOP
5	FLORENCE COUNTY WELCOMES NEW PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER
6	HONORING OUR HEROES & EMPOWERING OUR TROOPS AT MCCALL FARMS
9	HOW DOES AI HELP CREATE MORE DIVERSE WORKPLACES?
10	KEEPING OUR PROMISE
13	ASPIRATION FOR MCDONALD'S MANAGEMENT
15	SMALL CHANGES CAN LEAD TO BIG MORALE
16	MAYOR ROBINSON DELIVERS SECOND STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS
16	PAPER COMPANY SELECTS LAKE CITY FOR GROWTH
18	LAKE CITY'S YOUTH INTERVENTION OFFICER SHARES ACTIVITIES AND LIFE SKILLS
20	UNITED WAY'S BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM IS CHANGING LIVES

DIVERSITY IN SPIRITUALITY

22	THE UNLIMITED COMPASSION OF GOD
----	---

EDUCATION

23	DCSD NAMES WILLIAM LENARD PRINCIPAL OF LAMAR HIGH SCHOOL
23	DCSD ALERT GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM FINDING SUCCESS
24	GSSM EXPANDS STEM ACCESS ACROSS SOUTH CAROLINA
24	DARLINGTON'S GOVAN NAMED SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT
26	FDTC PHI THETA KAPPA ALL-STATE ACADEMIC TEAM HONOREES
26	FDTC EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION TO ESTABLISH ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIPS
28	NAVIGATING CHANGES AS A FAMILY
31	EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS
33	FROM STRUGGLE TO SUCCESS: DR. SHERIKA STUCKEY-HARRY'S JOURNEY
34	CLAFLIN PRESIDENT EARNS 2025 NASPA PRESIDENT'S AWARD
36	HGTC ANNOUNCES HISTORIC SPRING ENROLLMENT INCREASE
36	HGTC CHEF EARNS PRESTIGIOUS CERTIFIED MASTER BAKER CREDENTIAL
37	HGTC NAMES SCTEA EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS 2025
38	FMU 2025 MARION MEDALLION AWARDS
38	FMU HONORS DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI
38	FMU'S NEW DEGREE PROGRAM AND FACILITY
39	FMU'S AA FACULTY AND STAFF CELEBRATE 30 YEARS
40	IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?
41	LEE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXCEL IN STATE-WIDE COMPETITIONS

SPECIAL

42	FOOT CARE WITH DR. HILLERY DOLFORD AND SWEET FEET DIABETIC FOOT SPA
44	AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH: DIFFERENT, NOT LESS
44	EMBRACING THE JOURNEY
45	ASD RESOURCE SUPPORT PROGRAM
46	BREAKING THE SILENCE: PLAYING A ROLE IN SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION
47	LAWFUL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN
47	PROTECTING OUR FUTURE: DURANT CHILDREN'S CENTER
48	BREAKING CYCLES, BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES
49	HONORING THE STATE'S MOST DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS
50	MARY ALICE BOWLES HONORED AS VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR AT MCLEOD
50	TAKING ACTIONS THROUGH VOLUNTEER INITIATIVES
51	THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS IN DOWNTOWN FLORENCE
52	MENTORING FOR SUCCESS
53	A LEGACY OF VOLUNTEERISM AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

54	DUKE ENERGY ENGAGING THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE
55	FMU RECEIVES GRANT FROM DUKE ENERGY FOUNDATION
56	ADVANCES IN MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS
57	HEALING WITH HEART: HOW FAITH AND THERAPY TRANSFORMS LIVES
57	GAINING SKILLS FOR BETTER DAYS
58	BREAKING THE STIGMA: A CONVERSATION ON MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY
58	REDUCING STIGMA THROUGH ACCESS TO CARE
59	HELPING PATIENTS LEAD FULLER LIVES
60	HELPING STUDENTS MAKE POSITIVE CHANGES
60	"MOORE" CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY
61	RESILIENT WISDOM COUNSELOR AND LIFE COACH
61	MEETING KIDS WHERE THEY ARE
62	FINDING COMMON GROUND WITH STUDENTS
62	FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
62	FROM HEARING STORIES TO CHANGING LIVES
63	MORE THAN WAR IN VIETNAM
64	HONORING WILLIAM CANERY: A LEGACY OF SERVICE AND SACRIFICE
64	A LEGACY OF SERVICE AND RESILIENCE
65	SACRIFICE FROM THOSE WHO SERVED
66	HGTC PROFESSOR DR. MICHAEL ROBERTS DEBUTS NEW BOOK
66	TWO INSPIRING MILITARY VETERANS
67	HOMEOWNERSHIP ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY GROWTH
68	THE REAL ABOUT REAL ESTATE
68	HELPING TO BUILD GENERATIONAL WEALTH
69	YOUR ONE-STOP SHOP FOR ALL YOUR REAL ESTATE NEEDS!

FINANCIAL

70	SMART STRATEGIES TO SAVE WITH INTENTION
71	WHY YOU NEED LIFE INSURANCE — EVEN WITH NO DEPENDENTS.
72	HOW TO BUILD CREDIT - WE CAN HELP
74	AMERICANS CONFIDENT ABOUT FINANCIAL GOALS
76	ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK ANNOUNCES VP ROLES IN DEALER SERVICES
77	FIVE WAYS TO TURN EVERYDAY ITEMS INTO EXTRA CASH

HEALTH

78	FLORENCE DOCTORS SAVE MAN WHOSE HEART STOPPED FOR A HALF-HOUR
81	MOVE MORE FOR A HEALTHIER LIFE
81	HOPEHEALTH HOSTED STREATER COMMUNITY CENTER GRAND OPENING
82	CAROLINA PINES MEDICAL GROUP WOMEN'S CARE TEAM
84	ARTS IN HEALING PROGRAM HELPS FLORENCE STUDENTS EXPRESS
84	MUSC HOLLINGS CANCER CENTER ANNOUNCES EXPANSION OF NEW FACILITY
86	HOPE AND HEALING FROM PTSD
90	CELEBRATING NATIONAL SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CARE AWARENESS MONTH
91	CARESOUTH CAROLINA WELCOMES DR. HEATHER KILPATRICK
91	CARESOUTH CAROLINA'S BROOKE JACOBS HONORED
91	TERESA HENDRIX NAMED FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

LIFESTYLE

93	MITCHELL DRIGGERS' ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY STORY
94	A PERFECT SUMMER FOR YOUTH, TWEENS AND TEENS
95	LAKE CITY ENTREPRENEURS CREATE COMMUNITY RESOURCE
97	SPRINGBOARDERS BOOT CAMP – MOVING BEYOND GRIEF

NURTURING DIVERSITY AT THE TOP Contributed by InDepth Research Institute (IRES)



In recent years, the focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has become a priority for organizations. While many companies have made strides in diversifying their workforce, boardrooms still have a long way to go.

A diverse board is more than just a symbolic gesture—it's a strategic advantage. Leaders with varied backgrounds bring a wealth of perspectives, experiences and skills that can drive innovation and growth. To effectively promote board diversity and inclusion, it is essential to understand both the business case and the challenges that come with it.

Why Board Diversity?

When we think of diversity, we often focus on gender, race and ethnicity. However, board diversity extends beyond these dimensions—it includes a variety of experiences, skill sets and viewpoints. This broad range of perspectives enhances decision-making, fosters creativity and ultimately drives better business outcomes.

Research consistently highlights the benefits of diverse boards. A McKinsey study found that companies with diverse executive teams are 21 percent more likely to outperform their less diverse peers in profitability. Beyond financial gains, diverse boards are better equipped to tackle complex challenges, understand diverse customer needs and seize global market opportunities.

Effective Strategies for Board Diversity and Inclusion

1. Set Clear DEI Objectives

Establishing clear and measurable diversity goals is a powerful tool for progress. Embed diversity and inclusion objectives into the organization's mission and values. Define specific targets, such as aiming for a certain percentage of board members from underrepresented groups. Ensure these goals are realistic, trackable and supported by a timeline and key performance indicators (KPIs).

2. Implement Inclusive Recruitment Processes

Reduce unconscious bias by introducing blind recruitment practices. During the initial screening phase, remove personally identifiable information—such as names—that could reveal a candidate's gender or ethnicity. This allows the focus to remain on skills, qualifications and experience. Additionally, partner with recruitment firms that specialize in placing diverse candidates to broaden the talent pool.

3. Establish Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Create mentorship and sponsorship initiatives to

support underrepresented individuals. Pairing emerging leaders with experienced mentors provides guidance, enhances their skills and expands their professional networks. This proactive approach helps cultivate a pipeline of diverse talent prepared for board roles.

4. Educate Board Members on the Value of Diversity

Conduct regular training sessions to highlight the tangible benefits of board diversity. Educate current board members on how diverse perspectives lead to stronger decision-making, innovation and adaptability. This can help reduce unconscious bias and foster a more inclusive board culture.

5. Build a Diverse Candidate Pipeline

Actively develop a pipeline of diverse board candidates. Engage with industry groups, associations and leadership programs that focus on underrepresented professionals. Encourage participation in networking events and leadership development programs to prepare potential candidates for board service.

6. Assess Board Composition Regularly

Routinely evaluate the board's composition to ensure it reflects diversity in demographics, skills and experiences. Introduce policies such as term limits or mandatory rotations to promote fresh perspectives. This assessment helps identify gaps and informs future recruitment efforts.

7. Leverage Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Establish ERGs within the organization to support underrepresented employees. These groups foster connection, promote diverse leadership development and serve as talent pools for future board members. Additionally, ERGs can enhance employee morale and create a more inclusive workplace culture.

8. Institute ESG Reporting Mechanisms

As companies increasingly prioritize Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors, transparent reporting on board diversity is essential. Regularly track and disclose progress toward diversity goals. Public reporting not only enhances accountability but also demonstrates the organization's commitment to social responsibility.

Key Takeaways

Board diversity and inclusion are not just buzzwords—they are essential for effective governance, innovation and long-term success. By implementing these strategies, organizations can build stronger, more representative boards that reflect the diverse markets they serve. The journey toward board diversity requires ongoing commitment, adaptability and a genuine willingness to embrace different perspectives as valuable business assets.



FLORENCE COUNTY WELCOMES NEW PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER By Glaceria Brown Mason



Stacie Davis Hamilton, Florence County PIO

Stacie Davis Hamilton joins the staff of the Florence County government as its new public information officer (PIO) with high hopes of continuing the continuity of messaging to the residents of Florence County. As a seasoned communicator, with the goal of strengthening its connection with residents and visitors alike, Hamilton will implement Florence County's main priorities of informing, educating and connecting with residents

to increase engagement and bringing people together across the broad spectrum of the community. Florence County's goals are:

- to inform the public.
- educate residents about new ordinances and projects, and
- connect with the community through a plethora of media.

Hamilton's role as PIO includes engaging residents and providing information on county operations, services, projects, events and initiatives to keep residents informed about what's happening in our beautiful county.

While the role and title of public information officer is relatively new for Florence County, and the team, small in number, Hamilton has substantial county administration and staff support to fulfil the task. Not only does she possess the knowledge, skill and ability to operate in the communications and media environment, but she also brings to the position, a wealth of past experiences from which to draw from. A resident of Marion, SC, she began her career in the news field before transitioning into local government. She is a graduate of Marion High School and attained a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communications and Public Relations from Claflin University. The

mission of Florence County, "...to provide high-quality public services, plan for the needs of our citizens, and promote a safe, healthy, and thriving community for all," was the catalyst in Hamilton's decision to serve. "This belief, that we are people serving people, motivates my activity," Hamilton says.

Hamilton's vision for managing the county's public image is to maintain positivity and create an insightful communications outreach. Her leadership style emphasizes accountability, open-mindedness and a commitment to continuous learning. She enjoys covering stories throughout the county, interviewing folks that are making a difference in our community. Among her duties as PIO, Hamilton will increase the county's social media presence and measure its effectiveness and website traffic by tracking metrics such as reach, frequency, engagement rate and follower growth.

As for what's in store for Florence County, Hamilton emphasizes the knowledge of the growth in the area and how it involves not only industry development but also land protection and conservation. "The County offers many great recreational opportunities; and recreation and wellness are equally important in Florence County," she shared.

Hamilton encourages residents to participate in the countywide initiative, "Keep Florence Beautiful," where everyone is urged to refrain from littering, and to schedule litter pickup days as a form of community service. "Keeping our county clean is always beneficial," says PIO Hamilton.

To learn more about what's happening in the county and access information, residents may follow Florence County, SC on Facebook, Instagram and on the county website. Residents may also watch the live stream of the monthly Florence County Council meetings at www.florenceco.org.



Florence County Council

We Share Focus... Understand the Value of Patience... And Work Together to Attain Our Goals

Florence County provides services consistent with the needs of its citizens in a cost-effective, efficient, and customer friendly manner. We are people serving people. County government assumes a proactive leadership role in determining the future direction of the county. County government exists to serve the needs of its citizens for a safe, secure, and healthy environment. It seeks to foster planned and managed growth and desirable economic development that creates prosperity and job opportunities for all its citizens.

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HONORING OUR HEROES & EMPOWERING OUR TROOPS AT MCCALL FARMS Submitted By Cortney Huggins



Pictured left to right: Cortney Huggins, Janette Ignacio and SFC Bykei B.K. Durham Sr.

EFFINGHAM – What started as a family-owned and operated 2,000-acre farm in 1954 has flourished into one of the largest employers in the Pee Dee. In the beginning, the canning operations ran 10 weeks of the year. Due to the growth of brands and demand, the operation now runs year-round. Many of the vegetables prepared are grown locally and delivered fresh daily. This would not be possible without the reliable and hardworking team members at McCall Farms, which currently employs more than 1,000 people.

McCall Farms was the first business in the Pee Dee region to join the U.S. Army Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS) program in 2021. The company is deeply committed to supporting the brave men and women who have served the country.

The skills and experience veterans bring to the workplace are invaluable, which is why McCall Farms recognizes the importance of helping them find meaningful careers within the company.

The company is proud of this partnership, as the program helps connect it with qualified candidates and provides American soldiers with opportunities for meaningful employment while serving their country. As part of the program, PaYS partners agree to interview soldiers for selected positions, provided they receive an honorable discharge after enlistment and meet the job qualifications.

The team at McCall Farms understands how challenging the transition from military to civilian life can be, which is why they take pride in this partnership. The goal is to offer guidance on how military skills can translate into civilian job qualifications.

Matthew Moore, one of McCall Farms' own veterans, feels strongly about the program's mission. When asked about his perspective on diversity in the workplace, he said, "Diversity at McCall Farms is not just beneficial; it is essential. Each individual's unique perspective, culture, experiences and skills contribute to a more innovative and efficient workplace. Embracing a diverse workforce allows us to

tackle challenges from various angles and fosters a culture of collaboration and understanding. As we forge ahead, let us commit to creating an inclusive environment where everyone's voice is valued and heard."

Janette Ignacio and Cortney Huggins, members of the McCall Farms hiring team, had the privilege of attending the Fort Eisenhower, Georgia, job fair in March. During the event, they were able to connect directly with service members and share the exciting career opportunities available at McCall Farms.

Attending the job fair was a true honor, as the company is always seeking ways to support the troops. McCall Farms looks forward to continuing to support the nation's heroes as they transition into the civilian workforce.



Pictured left to right: Janette Ignacio, Cortney Huggins, and London Dubois



TOGETHER  **WE CAN!**
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McCall Farms, is a family-owned company in Effingham, SC. We have been harvesting a wide range of fresh vegetables for over 180 years. Most of our produce is locally grown by generations of proud South Carolina farmers. But the flavor of our Real Southern Style cooking is savored beyond the south, to every region of the country. And our offerings continue to grow. Our brands include Margaret Holmes, Glory, Peanut Patch, Allens, Veg-All, Popeye Spinach and Bruce's.

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SOLIDARITY & SCALE

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

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

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HOW DOES AI HELP CREATE MORE DIVERSE WORKPLACES?

Submitted by Reginal G. Lyerly, VP of Recruitment - (Cybersecurity, Construction, Manufacturing)



Reginal G. Lyerly

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is everywhere - from our smartphones to our workplaces. But how can it promote diversity in the workforce? Increasingly, organizations are leveraging AI to recruit more diverse talent and create equitable opportunities. According to recent data, 40 percent of companies worldwide report using AI in their daily operations, while over 80 percent are either actively using it or exploring its potential. For many businesses, AI has become a top priority.

AI offers several ways to reduce bias and foster inclusion. It can identify patterns in hiring practices that may reflect unconscious biases. By automating certain processes, AI helps remove potentially biased elements from recruitment, ensuring a fairer selection process. AI can also analyze factors such as age, gender and ethnicity to detect disparities in representation across different career fields. This data enables companies to address gaps and create more equitable hiring strategies.

Another advantage is the ability to anonymize resumes by removing identifying details, such as names and locations. This ensures that candidates are evaluated based on their skills and qualifications rather than potentially bias-triggering information. AI can also match employees with tailored training and development programs suited to their unique

needs and learning styles. This creates greater accessibility to growth opportunities, especially for underrepresented groups.

AI-powered performance evaluations reduce the influence of personal bias. By focusing on measurable achievements and key performance indicators, these reviews provide a fairer assessment of employees' contributions.

For employers to effectively harness AI in diversity initiatives, they must prioritize accurate and comprehensive data. Quality data is essential for AI to detect inequalities and support fair decision-making. Companies must also combine AI insights with human oversight to prevent errors and promote fairness. While AI can enhance decision-making, it should not replace human judgment.

Companies using AI for diversity purposes must be transparent about their practices. They should also hold themselves accountable for the outcomes, ensuring AI-driven initiatives truly promote equity.

While AI can help employers identify and select top talent, employees also have a role to play. Prospective candidates must clearly communicate their value, highlighting the skills and experiences that make them stand out. Using AI-powered tools, such as skills-matching platforms, can help job seekers showcase their qualifications more effectively.

By integrating AI into recruitment, development, and evaluation processes, organizations can take meaningful steps toward building more diverse and inclusive workplaces. However, AI is not a one-size-fits-all solution—it requires thoughtful implementation, consistent monitoring, and a commitment to fairness. With the right approach, AI can be a powerful tool in shaping a more equitable future for all.



KEEPING OUR PROMISE: MAKING GREAT FOOD AND DOING GOOD IN THE COMMUNITY

Submitted by Ruiz Foods



Ruiz Food Florence Wreaths volunteers

When Louis and Fred Ruiz started Ruiz Foods more than 60 years ago, it was a family business in almost every sense of the word. They had a few employees, a small array of appliances, Grandma Rosie's treasured recipes and a promise – to make good food while doing good in the community.

While the business has grown significantly over six decades – and the “family” now includes approximately 3,500 valued Ruiz Foods team members in multiple locations – the commitment to that long-ago promise holds firm.

Making good food remains as important now as it was in those early days. And while the Ruiz Foods product lines have expanded to satisfy evolving consumer desires, the commitment to making great Mexican food never wavers. Still influenced by Grandma Rosie's recipes for enchiladas, burritos and tamales of the 1960s, the Ruiz Foods team commits every day to producing quality, great-tasting frozen Mexican food.

Fulfilling that promise begins with understanding and anticipating what consumers want and will love. The Ruiz Foods Research and Development team continuously explores ever-changing consumer trends and tastes. Those learnings help inform product formulations and flavors.

But the team doesn't stop with simply knowing what customers want – they make those products. Just as in the early days, Ruiz Foods maintains a constant focus on improvement. They know even beloved products can always be enhanced. They ask the questions, do the research and find the next path. Should it have more cheese? Would it be better with a spice tweak?

“We are always looking for ways to make our products taste even better for our consumers. That includes not only the flavors but performance and adaptability to new cooking tools and techniques – whether that be ovens, microwaves or the hugely popular air fryer. While Grandma Rosie might not have envisioned such an appliance, our products are excellent in the air fryer!” says Tammy Tu, Vice President of Research and Development.

With this promise top of mind, over the past year Ruiz Foods has launched new products and improved versions of some fan favorites. The company's product development mantra is clear: Ruiz Foods must remain proactive to keep its brands ahead of the curve. That means staying laser-focused on delivering the very best frozen Mexican food in every category, whether it's breakfast, meals, snacks or popular products prepared on convenience store roller grills.

“We've enhanced products in several of our categories,” says Tu. “For example, within snacks we've improved our classic burritos, premium burritos and taquitos. And we are not done.”

The Florence team is central to making that happen, adds



Ruiz Foods Bakery Team Members

Mitch Martin, Director of Operations at the Florence facility. “They really shine by ensuring a high level of quality production in our plant. Our team members' pride in their work and focus on excellence is the foundation of our

relentless commitment to achieving and maintaining quality throughout the entire process.”

Today, processes go far beyond the original Ruiz Foods family kitchen. Florence team members produce the perfect fresh tortillas in the on-site bakery. There are skilled and dedicated tortilla throwers, mixers and wrappers. And there are team members who ensure everything is going just right at each step and every stage of production with continuous testing. The ultimate goal is to ensure every product and package meets Ruiz Foods' exact quality standards.



Ruiz Food Florence burrito line

“The job doesn't end with packaging. Our logistics team knows success includes getting our great products out the door to our customers as quickly and efficiently as possible,” says Martin.

Ruiz Foods not only brings tasty food products to its neighbors, Ruiz Foods team members are also dedicated to serving the communities where they work and live. Giving back remains a cornerstone of the decades-old Ruiz Foods legacy.

That legacy comes alive through the hard work, commitment, time, talent and resources of not only the company but also Ruiz Foods team members. In Florence and other communities, the Ruiz Foods team has built a reputation for being people you can count on. That includes support of the Ruiz 4 Kids program, donations and support through Community Relations and the tremendous volunteer efforts of team members through Ruiz Cares activities.

“Our Florence team members are proud to be part of this great community and are committed to doing good here,” says Opal Jones, human resources manager for the Florence facility. “In 2024 alone, Ruiz 4 Kids supported education in the Florence region through \$69,000 in college scholarships for area high school seniors.”

Florence team members are also avid supporters of the Ruiz 4 Kids Mini-Grants for Teachers program, a program fully funded by Ruiz Foods team member donations. In 2024, that team-driven program provided \$14,574 in mini-grants to local teachers finding creative ways to educate preschool through high school.

The long-standing legacy commitment included the 2015 creation of the Ruiz Cares program, a company-wide initiative encouraging community service among team members and supporting their efforts of giving back. Ruiz Foods team members make a difference through service projects, and, to date, have participated in hundreds of hours of community service.

In 2024, through Community Relations, the corporate giving program and Ruiz Cares team member volunteerism, Ruiz Foods supported many important Florence-area organizations, including McLeod Hospital, the Boys & Girls Club, House of Hope, the American Heart Association, UNCF, Florence Area Literacy Council, Florence Humane Society, Habitat for Humanity and other local nonprofits and educational institutions. Team members also combined good works with meaningful service like laying memorial wreaths with Wreaths Across America and participating in the Salvation Army Angel Tree Program.

“More than 60 years later, we think Grandma Rosie and the founding family members would be so proud of the way this team continues to build on those dual commitments made four generations ago – by continuing to do more for our communities while making great food products we can all feel good about,” says Martin.

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Ruiz 4 Kids awarded \$14,573 in Mini Grants to 18 local teachers and \$73,000 in scholarships were awarded to 73 high school seniors from 15 local high schools in 2024!



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ASPIRATION FOR MCDONALD'S MANAGEMENT By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Lily Wilson

General managers at each McDonald's have several duties that help their restaurants operate at full service. To maintain well-organized and structured establishments, general managers must be willing to meet the standards set by McDonald's and their owners. Their duties often include:

- **Running a profitable restaurant and ensuring it meets McDonald's critical customer standards of quality, service and cleanliness. General managers work with their leaders to set the restaurant's goals and create a plan to achieve them.**

- **Leading a team of department managers with specific responsibilities in the restaurant. This includes helping department managers set their own goals, following up on their progress and providing coaching and direction to improve their departments.**

- **Hiring and developing department and shift managers to ensure the restaurant has the right team to lead in the future.**

- **Being at least 18 years old to be a manager in corporate-owned and operated restaurants.**

These are the duties Lily Wilson, general manager of the Hwy 52 McDonald's in Florence, South Carolina, embodies to maintain an effective operation. Wilson has been employed with McDonald's for 25 years, starting as a crew member

while in high school. She was later promoted to swing manager. By happenstance, the general manager at the time resigned, and the McDonald's owners offered Wilson the position. She received proper training and has held the role ever since.

After high school, Wilson originally planned to attend college and study nursing, but she grew to love her work at McDonald's and put her education plans on hold.

McDonald's values food, family and the community—and they value their employees. According to [McDonalds.com](https://www.mcdonalds.com), "One in eight Americans have worked at a McDonald's restaurant. Some go on to be CEOs or astronauts, others stay on as part of the best Crew in our restaurants." Wilson loves and appreciates her career with McDonald's. She has grown to cherish the people who regularly patronize her location, considering many of them family.

Wilson is proud of the changes she has seen at McDonald's over the years. The old locations with "playlands" have been remodeled, and technology is now used for almost all aspects of operations. She appreciates the efficiency of customers being able to order online and receive their purchases through DoorDash. The changes reflect McDonald's commitment to its customers and continuous service improvements.

But service doesn't end with food. McDonald's provides discounts and free food to customers through its mobile app and offers scholarships and incentives to employees for motivation. "Behind our counters are thousands of hardworking people who make our Golden Arches shine. We're honored to recognize the vast and unique network of 1 in 8 Americans who can say they've done just that."



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[To Table of Content ↑](#)

SMALL CHANGES CAN LEAD TO BIG MORALE

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



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH – Aside from profitability concerns, one of the top priorities for most business owners is the well-being of their employees. Are they happy? Are they healthy? What can I do as an employer to help them become more well-rounded individuals — and, in turn, more productive employees?

According to the CDC's guidance on mental health in the workplace, "the workplace is an optimal setting to create a culture of health." That is why employers need

to be aware of some simple steps they can take to promote total health and wellness among their employees.

1. Take the time to connect

Mental health is a major part of overall health and wellness. One thing employers can do is be an open door to any employee who may need to talk. Be transparent and let them know you are willing to help and lend an open ear. If that feels outside your comfort zone, create a list of resources and contacts that can support employees when they need to chat.

2. Promote work-life balance

As an employer, you are probably aware of the paid time off (PTO) each employee has. Encourage them to take advantage of that allotted time. According to a 2023 study by Pew Research Center, nearly half of American employees do not take their PTO. Some cited fear of losing their jobs for using the time they were entitled to. Be mindful that some employees may feel this way, and do your best to not only encourage them to take PTO but also

assure them their position will not be compromised for doing so.

3. Encourage self-care activities

People often skip simple self-care activities because they feel they don't have the time. Once a week, try scheduling a self-care activity the entire office can participate in. Even a 20-minute office-led walk, meditation, or team outing can do wonders for office culture and personal health. Not only will your employees be moving, but they will also be connecting with others and perhaps striking up conversations with colleagues they wouldn't normally interact with.

These three tips can make a real difference. It is important to remember that during the workweek, your employees spend more time at the office with their co-workers than they do at home. Keep that in mind when shaping your office culture, and make sure health and wellness are part of it.

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MAYOR ROBINSON DELIVERS SECOND STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Submitted by Public Information Officer Jonathan Laster



Mayor Yamekia Robinson delivers her 2nd Annual State of the City Address on Tuesday, Feb. 4. Robinson spoke about the achievements of the city during the past year and her goals for sustainable growth in 2024.

LAKE CITY – Speaking before an audience of city council members, staff, citizens and her family, Lake City Mayor Yamekia Robinson delivered her 2nd Annual State of the City Address on Tuesday, Feb. 4. “This address allows us to pause and look back on the hard work and resilience in our community while creating a path for continued progress,” Robinson said. “I remain committed to making decisions that reflect the values and needs of our diverse and vibrant community.”

During her address, Robinson highlighted key accomplishments in city recognitions, economic

development, infrastructure improvements, public safety and community initiatives.

City Recognitions

- **National Spotlight:** Lake City was featured in the National League of Cities’ (NLC) 100-Year Celebration Roadshow.
- **Healthy Housing Initiative:** The city was selected for the NLC’s Healthy Housing Initiative Cohort, furthering its commitment to safe and affordable housing.
- **Small Business Expo:** Lake City was chosen to host a small business expo featuring former Small Business Administration (SBA) Administrator Isabel Guzman, highlighting the city’s growing reputation as a hub for entrepreneurs.

Economic Development

- **Collaborative Growth:** The city continued working with developers to bring new housing, businesses and jobs to Lake City.
- **Beautification and Infrastructure:** Ongoing discussions with local organizations are exploring the burial of power lines along HWY 52 to improve both infrastructure reliability and city aesthetics.

Infrastructure Improvements

- **Stormwater Upgrades:** The city secured a \$13.5 million grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for stormwater drainage improvements.
- **Safety Enhancements:** Lake City received a \$176,000 Safe Streets grant to develop a comprehensive safety action plan.
- **Wastewater Treatment Upgrades:** The city celebrated the opening of the new wastewater treatment plant lab and offices, improving efficiency and service capacity.

Public Safety

- **Leadership Promotions:** Patrick Miles was promoted to police chief, and Dedrick Graham was elevated to major, strengthening leadership in law enforcement.
- **Bike Patrol:** The introduction of a bike patrol unit for major events has enhanced both security and community engagement.
- **K9 Unit:** The city launched a K9 unit to support law enforcement operations, bolstering public safety efforts.

Community Initiatives

- **New Event Space:** The city opened LC 278, a community and events center located at 278 W. Cole Road, providing a versatile space for gatherings and activities.
- **Enhanced Communication:** An opt-in notification system was implemented to keep residents informed about important updates.
- **Sustainability Strategies:** The city developed sustainability-focused strategies to promote growth and longevity in 2025 and

beyond.

- **Expanded Services:** New roles in youth intervention, code enforcement, and animal control were established to enhance community services.

“Our focus continues to be on ensuring that our goals for growth and sustainability are maintained and advanced,” Robinson said. “We believe in the values of transparency, accountability, service and respect for each other.”

During the address, Mayor Pro-Tem DeWonica “Cola” Cooper and Councilmember Wilhelmena Scott also shared updates on projects in their respective districts.

- **“The HWY 52 stormwater project in District 4 is approximately 75 percent complete,”** said Cooper. “This Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)-funded project helps alleviate flooding in areas such as Franklin Street and Thomas Street.”

- **“I am honored to share the progress our city has made and highlight the exciting projects that will drive our future growth,”** Scott said. “Our slogan is live, work, play and visit, and we encourage you to come and experience all that Lake City has to offer — and eventually make it your home.”

Robinson, Cooper, Scott, and the city staff extend their gratitude to everyone who attended the address, either in person or virtually.

Stay informed about upcoming council meetings by signing up for notifications at LakeCitySC.gov or following Lake City’s Facebook page.

Lake City is a welcoming community of 6,000+ residents located in the southern part of Florence County, inviting you to live – work – play – and visit.

For questions or more information, email pio@cityoflakecity.org.

PAPER COMPANY SELECTS LAKE CITY FOR GROWTH

Submitted by Public Information Officer Donna Tracy



Martha Law Giveaway

LAKE CITY – As part of a continued effort to improve and maintain Lake City’s tree canopy, dozens of new trees were planted at Florence School District 3 schools, March 12, with the help of Green Infrastructure Center (GIC) team members, Lake City staff and several volunteers.

The latest plantings included willow oaks, tulip poplars and crepe myrtles at Lake City schools:

- **Main Street Elementary – six trees**
- **Pee Dee Head Start and Adult Education Center – 16 trees**
- **Lake City Early College High School – three trees**
- **Dr. Ronald E. McNair School of Digital Communication and Leadership – three trees**
- **Lake City Early Childhood Center – 12 trees**

Several volunteers joined Lake City staff and GIC team members to get the dozens of trees planted, including Ashley Hamilton, who spent the entire morning helping shovel soil, sand and clay around the freshly planted specimens, ensuring the best possible start for their growth, and Nickemea Whitfield,

PAPER COMPANY CONT'D



Trees 4 SC January Giveaway (Photo Credit: City of Lake City/ Donna Tracy Jonathan Laster)

who stepped up to help plant at Lake City Early Childhood Center.

"I love plants and trees and think they are great for the community," Whitfield said. "They provide shade and beauty, and without trees, we can't survive."

The tree plantings are part of the Trees4SC program, a collaboration

between the GIC and the South Carolina Forestry Commission's Urban and Community Forestry Program, which champions urban forestry initiatives across the state. Lake City is one of three cities selected to receive technical support to plan for and plant trees over two years. That support included help in selecting the appropriate areas for planting and choosing the right tree species.

"Plantings at Head Start showed the importance of putting the right tree in the right place," said Tom Knowles, community forester with GIC. "The original intention was to plant willow oaks and tulip poplars along the back fence of the playground, but the high water table required trees suited to a wetter environment. As a result, those trees were relocated to a different area, ensuring the long-term success of the plantings."

In addition to the March 12 plantings, several trees were planted at Martha Law Park earlier in the month to provide much-needed shade and beautify the space for residents and park visitors.

The initiative has already distributed more than 100 trees to residents in three community tree giveaways at the Village Green, LC 278 Community Center (as part of Arbor Day celebrations) and Martha Law Park. Lake City residents were able to reserve and receive a tree for planting on their own properties within the city limits.

Leo Brizzi, another volunteer who helped plant many of the trees March 12, participated in one of the tree giveaways and has planted trees on his own property.

"Well, the nice part of it is you're replenishing the oxygen in the air every time you plant another tree, so it's nice that we get that opportunity," Brizzi said.

Tree giveaways have included a variety of species with different location and space requirements. Some of the specimens given away and planted in the community include:

- Flowering cherry
- Peach
- Wax myrtle
- Saucer magnolia
- Sweetbay magnolia
- Persimmon
- Oak
- Red maple

"We are coming up on the end of planting season for trees but hope to do some more giveaways in the fall," Knowles said.

The Trees4SC program is a multi-year effort to enhance urban tree cover and engage the community in sustainable forestry practices.

For more information about upcoming tree initiatives, follow the City of Lake City on Facebook or sign up for public notices at [LakeCitySC.gov](https://www.lakecitysc.gov).

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LAKE CITY'S YOUTH INTERVENTION OFFICER SHARES ACTIVITIES AND LIFE SKILLS

Submitted by Public Information Officer Donna Tracy



Dwayne Skinner, a youth intervention officer with the City of Lake City, encourages a student on their second attempt using a hula-hoop during a Gentlemen's Leadership Club session at Main Street Elementary. Lake City's Youth Intervention and Development program directs and mentors' youth within our neighborhoods and communities.

LAKE CITY—Cheers and laughter rang out as students from the Gentlemen's Leadership Club at Main Street Elementary School tried feverishly to keep a hula hoop spinning around their hips during an interactive session March 13.

The series of team-building games was led by Dwayne Skinner, a dedicated youth intervention officer with the City of Lake City. The activities aimed to teach important life skills such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving. The event gave students an opportunity to learn and grow through fun, engaging

activities that emphasized the importance of collaboration and positive communication.

The day's activities were designed to promote mutual respect and effective teamwork, helping students understand how working together can lead to successful outcomes. Through a variety of hands-on games and challenges, Skinner encouraged the students to solve problems, communicate clearly and support each other – skills that are essential both in and outside the classroom.

"Sometimes teamwork is going to require 'not-succeeding,'" Skinner told students after a particularly difficult challenge. "Some people call it 'failure.' I call it 'not-succeeding' because you just have to try again to get there – and every time you try something, you learn something."

The Gentlemen's Leadership Club aims to provide a safe and enriching environment where kids can engage in activities that encourage personal growth, learning and community involvement. This visit was part of Skinner's ongoing efforts to connect with Lake City's young people and offer mentorship in ways that resonate with their interests and experiences.

"My goal is to show this doesn't have to be expensive. It just has to be engaging," Skinner said.

The event concluded with a brief discussion where Skinner highlighted key takeaways from the day, reminding students that strong communication, patience and collaboration are essential to overcoming challenges – both in school and in life.

For more about Lake City and its programs, follow the City of Lake City Facebook page or sign up for city email, text or voicemail notifications at LakeCitySC.gov. Lake City is a community of 6,000-plus residents who invite you to live, work, play and visit in the southern part of Florence County.



Dwayne Skinner, youth intervention officer with the City of Lake City, and the Gentlemen's Leadership Club pose for a photo. Lake City's Youth Intervention and Development program directs and mentors' youth within our neighborhoods and communities. (Photo Credit: City of Lake City/Aaron Brickle)



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UNITED WAY'S BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM IS CHANGING LIVES Submitted by Staff



Kay Packett (right) interviews a client (left) for United Way of Florence County's new Barriers to Employment program.

For many individuals, finding and maintaining a stable job is not as simple as submitting an application and receiving an offer. Certain challenges, such as lack of transportation, limited access to childcare and the inability to afford work uniforms or necessary certifications can prevent people from securing the jobs they need to support themselves and their families.

Recognizing these difficulties, United Way of Florence County launched the Barriers to Employment program to provide Florence County residents with essential tools, supplies and resources needed to overcome immediate obstacles to starting a new job. Launched in September 2024 and inspired by a similar model at Trident United Way, the program offers one-time, short-term assistance to individuals with documented job offers who require support for items such as uniforms, work footwear, tools, bus passes, childcare or certification fees. By addressing these critical needs, the program ensures individuals can take the first step toward long-term financial stability and career growth.

The inspiration behind Barriers to Employment began with the concept of ALICE, a United Way initiative that stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE represents hardworking individuals and families who earn above the federal poverty level but still struggle to afford basic necessities like housing, food, transportation and health care.

The Barriers to Employment program in Florence County was made possible by the generosity of Sen. Mike Reichenbach and his wife, Charisse. During an ALICE presentation led by Katie Reams, the statewide ALICE director and Trident United Way staff, the Reichenbachs learned about Trident United Way's Barriers to Employment program and immediately saw the potential impact such an initiative could have in Florence County. Wanting to bring this resource to their community, they worked closely with United Way of Florence County and provided crucial funding to make it a reality.

Since its inception, Barriers to Employment has been primarily operated by Kay Packett, one of United Way of Florence County's many dedicated volunteers. Packett emphasized how rewarding it is to help people making positive, long-term changes in their lives.

"I also love the fact that we are quick and nimble," Packett said. "If you need to start work tomorrow, we can help you get what you need today. If it's something we haven't thought of before, we can consider it. We have a straightforward process with minimal bureaucracy and a clear focus on good investments in people and the community."

Packett also highlighted that while Barriers to Employment fills an important gap, increasing awareness of the program is just as crucial.

"People who've been offered good job opportunities might understandably hesitate to tell employers about any difficulties they might face," she said. "One of our ongoing priorities is to enlist the help of human resources personnel in sharing our program with new employees who could benefit from it."

Since 2022, United Way of Florence County has shifted its focus to tackle the community's most urgent needs while ensuring resources are used in ways that create measurable, meaningful and lasting change. Packett noted that this approach is reflected in the Barriers to Employment program, which aims to track its impact by following improvements in job stability, income growth and overall financial security.

"If we prove we're making a long-term difference, we'll have benefited individuals, Florence-area employers and the entire community," Packett said.

Cameron Campbell, president of United Way of Florence County, is optimistic about the program's long-term benefits.

"The idea is that it's a springboard that gives [individuals] the momentum they need to gain initial financial stability but then eventually economic mobility," Campbell said. "In other words, we hope that when we check in at the six-month and one-year mark that they have been promoted or even moved on to better opportunities."

In the near future, Campbell hopes to collaborate with more partners in the community to amplify the positive impact on ALICE individuals and those in poverty.

"Barriers to Employment is an important piece of the solution puzzle, but no one organization or program can solve complex issues alone," she said.

United Way of Florence County is proud to offer Barriers to Employment as part of its ongoing commitment to supporting individuals on their path to financial stability. No one should have to turn down a job opportunity because they lack the means to get started. If you or someone you know is facing obstacles to employment, reach out today by visiting uwflorence.org/barriers-to-employment or emailing uwfloinfo@uwflorence.org.





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HEMINGWAY—Being taught about God's love is one thing. Seeing God's love modeled through others is yet another. But when you experience God's love for yourself, actually feeling like you have been wrapped in His arms, like you're the apple of His eye, you feel like you have found what your heart has desired all along.

Have you been taught about the Father Heart of God, about the compassion and love He has for you? If you have made it your purpose to get to know Him — through the Bible, time in prayer, and through personal experience, then you know what it's like to grow spiritually in relationship with Him.

The God of the Bible is the One True God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 103:8).



Most people have been taught to be afraid of God's wrath, His punishment, or His judgment. Many people seek to please God, live right, and follow what He says out of a motivation of fear. But that's not in line with His character or His way. He doesn't expect us to perform for Him. He wants us to know His love, compassion and acceptance.

How do we get to know His character? By looking in His Word at who He says He is for us. Here are just a few verses that describe Him and His abounding love for us.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will never perish." —

John 3:16

"God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all." — 1 John 1:5

"The Lord is a shield for those who take refuge in Him." — Psalm 18:30

"Fear not, for I am with you; I will strengthen you and help you." — Isaiah 41:10

"Cast all your cares on Him for He cares for you." — 1 Peter 5:7

"Our God is full of compassion." — Psalm 116:7

Compassion is defined as a "sympathetic awareness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." The Bible teaches us that not only does God understand what we go through on earth, but that He desires to bring comfort, healing and relief to our hurts.

'Compassion' may also be the most powerful word used in Scripture to describe the ministry of Jesus — "When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matt 10:36).

We are created to draw close to God and enjoy a vibrant and real relationship with Him. When we take steps to develop and grow that relationship, we will find ourselves reflecting the love and compassion of God to others around us.

Believers who are caught up in a wrong fear of God, pride or religious performance will not be able to reflect the loving image of God to those around them. When it comes to love and compassion, we can't give away what we don't have ourselves.

Don't misunderstand me. This isn't just about how you treat other people. God wants you to know His heart of love for you! He wants you to know that your heart can find a 'safe place' to be real and honest inside His heart.

Psalm 143 says that we can come to Him when we are weary and tired

and find rest in His love. We can truly 'come as we are' because God's unconditional lovingkindness and mercy are without limit. In fact, it's the only true and lasting thing there is! He doesn't change. He always loves us, accepts us and desires to comfort us with His compassion.

He wants us to know that He will answer us when we pray. We need to know his loving kindness, that we are created to live in His love and be protected. We need to know that God will deliver us and guide us throughout our lives. All because of His unlimited love and compassion for all humankind.

Where are you today? Do you need acceptance, compassion and comfort? Maybe you need to be rescued? Maybe your needs are so great that you are afraid it will be too much for God to handle?



His unlimited power and ability begin where our own effort and capacity end. The place where we fall flat on our faces without any answers, God is always ready to bring strategy and solution covered with unending love.

In His great compassion, He loves to make it easy for us. All we have to do is cry out to him and draw near. We are all invited at any time to, "draw near the throne of grace and find mercy to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16).

Come as you are. It doesn't matter how big the mess is or how deep you may have fallen. Just call out to Him today — for yourself, your family, your business, all your needs and endeavors. He is always available to you and loves you with an everlasting love. When you experience God's compassion for yourself, you will feel like you're supported by, "the everlasting arms."

DCSD NAMES WILLIAM LENARD PRINCIPAL OF LAMAR HIGH SCHOOL

Articles submitted by Christopher McKagen, communications manager



William Lenard Principal of Lamar High School

LAMAR – The Darlington County School District announced today that William Lenard, currently the interim principal of Lamar High School, will fill the role permanently.

The district named Lenard interim principal of the school in June, and he began serving in July.

Superintendent Dr. Tim Newman praised Lenard's focus on student success and commitment to preparing students for college or a career after graduation.

"In his short time there, Mr. Lenard has quickly been accepted by the Lamar High School faculty, staff, students and parents," Newman said. "He is committed to excellence for both the school and community. I know Lamar High School will continue to be successful under Mr. Lenard's leadership."

Prior to arriving at LHS, Lenard most recently served as an assistant principal at Hartsville High School. He has an extensive and varied career in education which also includes

service as a classroom teacher, a coach and an assistant athletic director.

"I am honored and humbled to accept the role as principal at Lamar High School," Lenard said. "It is with great enthusiasm that I embrace this opportunity to serve our students, staff and community. Lamar High School has a rich tradition of excellence, and I am committed to building upon that foundation to ensure every student is empowered to achieve their highest potential. Education is the foundation of opportunity, and I am committed to fostering an environment where every student feels supported, challenged and inspired to achieve their best."

Lenard graduated from Benedict College with a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Mathematics. He went on to earn a Master of Education in Educational Administration and an education specialist degree in educational administration, both from the University of South Carolina.

He holds a teaching certification in mathematics, as well as endorsements in Gifted and Talented, advanced placement/calculus, secondary principal and superintendence. He is a member of numerous national and state organizations.

DCSD ALERT GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM FINDING SUCCESS



Amanda Saleeby, center, leads an ALERT class at Thornwell School for the Arts surrounded by some of her students. Pictured are, from left, Raelynn Bell, Saleeby, Ny'Sir Coe and Essence White.

DARLINGTON –

The Darlington County School District (DCSD) is excited to relaunch the ALERT Gifted and Talented program. Designed to help students who show high academic or artistic potential, ALERT is giving them learning experiences that go

beyond the regular classroom.

ALERT challenges students to think critically and solve real-world problems. The goal is to help them reach their full potential through engaging lessons that go beyond standard coursework.

The idea of relaunching ALERT, a program that existed in the district about 20 years ago, came from the Darlington County Board of Education and Superintendent Dr. Tim Newman after listening to teachers, the DCSD instructional team and parents. Recognizing the need for more support for gifted students, Newman prioritized bringing back the program to ensure that these students receive the resources and challenges they need to excel. An important update to the ALERT program concerns the location of the classes. In the past, students left their school buildings to travel to a central location. Now, the teachers will travel to each school for the classes. This not only removes much of the disruption from students leaving campus but also it increases the amount of time available for instruction.

"Our mission is to identify and develop gifted students by providing lessons tailored to their interests," Newman said. "We want to encourage and challenge these students so they can grow academically and personally."

Marisa Johnson, DCSD's coordinator of Arts and Innovative programs, is guiding the ALERT initiative.

The ALERT GT program is for elementary students who show strong academic or artistic ability. Since gifted students have unique learning needs, DCSD provides extra support to help them succeed. Nearly half (49 percent) of ALERT students start with a trial placement, allowing more students to

experience the program before being officially identified as gifted.

DCSD uses a three-part system to find students who might benefit from ALERT:

- **Reasoning Abilities: Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)**
 - **Academic Achievement: SC Ready, MAP, ITBS assessments**
 - **Academic Performance: Performance-based tasks**
- Students who qualify in one of these areas are given a chance to join the program.**

The ALERT GT program offers hands-on activities that make learning fun and engaging. Examples from this school year include:

- **Building hurricane-resistant structures.**
- **Completing STEM challenges.**
- **Analyzing fingerprints.**
- **Experimenting with chemical reactions.**
- **Exploring creative arts.**
- **Studying different cultures.**
- **Working with the S.C. Governor's School for Science and Math, including chess competitions.**

These activities encourage students to think outside the box and develop skills they will use in the future. The ALERT program is led by experienced and passionate educators:

- **Debra Davis-Byrd, M.Ed. (27 years of experience) – Brockington Elementary Magnet, Rosenwald Elementary, St. John's Elementary**
- **Dr. Kristen Miller (12 years of experience) – North Hartsville Elementary, Bay Road Elementary**
- **Dr. Susan Porter-Voss (15 years of experience) – Lamar-Spaulling Elementary, J.L. Cain Elementary**
- **Amanda Saleeby (26 years of experience) – Carolina Elementary, Thornwell School for the Arts**

Their dedication ensures that gifted students receive the best possible education.

The relaunch of ALERT GT shows DCSD's strong commitment to helping gifted students succeed. By expanding access and updating the curriculum, the district is creating an environment where students can thrive.

"Gifted education isn't just about working ahead, it's about making learning exciting and meaningful," Johnson said. "We want our students to dream big, think critically and achieve their goals."

GSSM EXPANDS STEM ACCESS ACROSS SOUTH CAROLINA

Submitted by Jennifer Furlong, director of marketing and communications



HARTSVILLE—The South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) has long been a leader in STEM (science, technology, engineering & mathematics) education, offering summer camps designed to ignite curiosity, foster innovation and create inclusive learning environments for students across the state. With a commitment to accessibility and diversity, GSSM has expanded its GoSciTech Day Camp summer program to 16 statewide locations, ensuring that students—regardless of their background or financial situation—can explore STEM in an engaging and supportive setting. Bringing STEM to More Students

GoSciTech offers three types of summer camps:

- **Residential Camp:** A week-long immersive experience in Hartsville for rising eighth- through 10th-graders, where students live on campus and engage in advanced STEM courses.
- **Day Camp:** Now expanded to 16 locations statewide, this program offers hands-on STEM learning for rising sixth- through eighth-graders closer to home.
- **Virtual Camp:** Open to rising sixth- through 10th-graders, this program provides live, interactive STEM experiences that remove geographical barriers to participation.

"We're bringing STEM to students across the state so they can expand their knowledge in learning communities where they feel like they fit in and are accepted," said Susan Engelhardt, GSSM's outreach director of summer programs. "The camp experience motivates the students to learn more and continue seeking outstanding STEM learning opportunities at GSSM and in their communities and schools."

For many students, GoSciTech is their first opportunity to engage with STEM in a meaningful way, and it can be a transformative experience. "The goal is to offer opportunities to students that they wouldn't get elsewhere and to allow them to interact with other students who also find STEM fun and cool—which they don't always find in their own communities," Engelhardt said. "Many of them, for the first time, will feel like they fit in because they're with like-minded kids who like the same things they do. Where

it's cool to be smart."

A Commitment to Accessibility & Inclusion

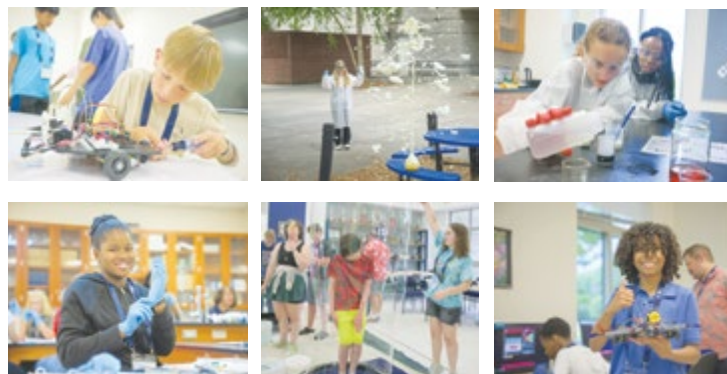
GSSM recognizes that financial and travel barriers can limit access to STEM opportunities, which is why the school has taken intentional steps to make its camps more inclusive. "We offer need-based financial aid," Engelhardt said. "It makes our camps accessible to more students."

Expanding GoSciTech's day camp to 16 locations ensures that students who may not be able to travel to Hartsville can still access high-quality STEM education. "With this age group, it's an important time to expose them to STEM because many of them are learning about it for the first time," Engelhardt said. "We want to get them excited about STEM, so they'll want to continue learning about it as they get into high school and beyond."

Shaping the Future of STEM in South Carolina

GSSM's summer programs are more than just camps; they are a pipeline for future scientists, engineers and innovators. By fostering a love for STEM in students from diverse backgrounds, the school is helping to shape the future workforce of South Carolina and beyond.

As GoSciTech continues to grow, its mission remains clear: to inspire, educate and empower the next generation of STEM leaders, ensuring that all students—no matter where they live—have the chance to discover their passion for science and technology.



Students at Summer Camp

DARLINGTON'S GOVAN NAMED SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT



Charles Govan

COLUMBIA — Charles Govan, a member of the Darlington County Board of Education representing District Six, was installed as president-elect of the South Carolina School Boards Association's Board of Directors during the group's annual business meeting in Charleston.

The South Carolina School Boards Association (SCSBA) is a nonprofit organization serving as a source of information and as a statewide voice for boards governing the state's 73 school districts.

"I am honored to serve as SCSBA president-elect and represent Darlington County," said Govan. "I am committed to working with the other board members as we address the educational needs of our students and school districts across the state."

Govan has been a member of the Darlington County Board of Education for more than 23 years, serving as a board member, chairman and secretary. He joins seven others elected to the association's board by delegates from the state's 73 school boards.

Govan was educated at Christ the King Catholic School and

Wilkinson High School (both in Orangeburg) before receiving a bachelor's degree in social studies from Claflin University and a master's in social work from the University of South Carolina. He also attended Francis Marion University, South Carolina State University, the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy and the S.C. Department of Corrections Academy.

He began his career in education in 1967, as a teacher and coach at Edgewood High School in 96. From 1968 to 1991, Govan was employed with the Neighborhood Youth Corp. in Orangeburg, the S.C. Alcohol and Beverage Commission, the S.C. Department of Mental Health and the S.C. Department of Youth Services. In 1991, Govan decided to return to a career in education as a teacher and coach in Lee County School District. He retired from public service in 2007, as a teacher at Marlboro County High School in Bennettsville.

He is married to Carolyn McCoy Govan, a former art teacher in the district. He has three daughters and four grandchildren, who all attended Darlington County School District. He also has three great-grandchildren, one of whom currently attends school in the district.

Govan is a past member of the S.C. School Boards Insurance Trust Board of Directors and was also recently appointed to the South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement.

2025



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Graniteville, SC 29829

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June 23 - 26

506 North Guignard Drive Sumter,
SC 29150

Denmark Technical College

June 23 - 26

1126 Solomon Blatt Boulevard
Denmark, SC 29042

Florence-Darlington Technical College

June 16 - 19

Main Campus:
2715 West Lucas Street
Florence, SC 29501

Greenville Technical College

June 16 - 19

Barton Campus:
506 S Pleasantburg Drive
Greenville, SC 29607

Horry-Georgetown Technical College

June 23 - 26

Conway Campus:
2050 US-501
Conway, SC 29526

Midlands Technical College

July 7 - 10

Northeast Campus:
151 Powell Road
Columbia, SC 29203

Northeastern Technical College

June 9 - 12

Cheraw Campus:
1201 Chesterfield Highway
Cheraw, SC 29520

Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College

June 16 - 19

3250 St. Matthews Road
Orangeburg, SC 29118

Piedmont Technical College

July 7 - 10

Lex Walters Campus:
620 Emerald Rd N
Greenwood, SC 29646

Spartanburg Community College

June 23 - 26

Giles Campus:
107 Community College Drive
Spartanburg, SC 29303

Tri-County Technical College

June 9 - 12

Pendleton Campus:
7900 Hwy 76
Pendleton, SC 29670



RESIDENTIAL

GSSM Hartsville

Campus:

June 15 - 20

June 22 - 27

July 6 - 11



VIRTUAL

Live Online Classes:

June 16 - 20

June 23 - 27

Trident Technical College

June 9 - 12

Thornley Campus:
7000 Rivers Avenue
North Charleston, SC 29406

Technical College of the Lowcountry

July 7 - 10

Beaufort Mather Campus:
921 Ribaut Road
Beaufort, SC 29902

Williamsburg Technical College

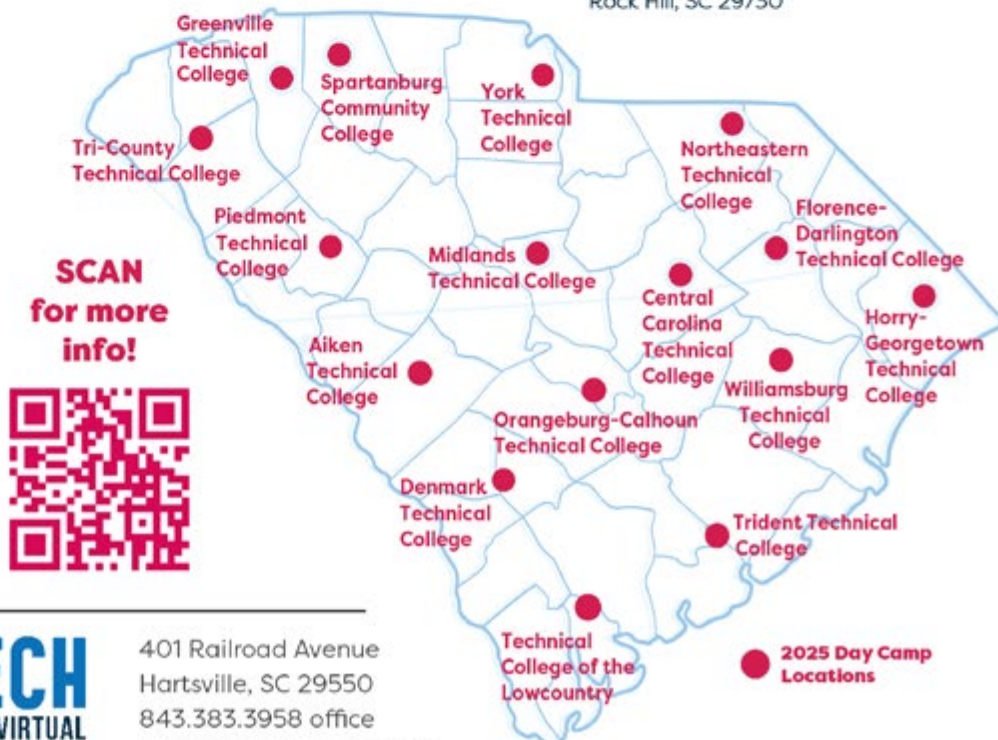
July 7 - 10

601 Martin Luther King Jr Ave
Kingstree, SC 29556

York Technical College

June 9 - 12

452 Anderson Rd S
Rock Hill, SC 29730



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FDTC PHI THETA KAPPA ALL-STATE ACADEMIC TEAM HONOREES Articles submitted by FDTC



Pictured left to right, top to bottom: Jiliyan Douglas, Komi Kassa, Nyashadzashe Makosa, Max McKnight, Myaisha Primus and Jessica Thompson

Florence-Darlington Technical College is proud to announce the selection of six outstanding students to the 2025 Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) All-State Academic Team.

This remarkable achievement reflects their dedication to academic excellence, leadership and service within their campus and local communities. These students are among 41 selected from colleges within the South Carolina Technical College System, making this a prestigious honor.

The 2025 PTK All-State Academic Team members from FDTC are:

- Max McKnight
- Jiliyan Douglas
- Nyashadzashe Makosa
- Myaisha Primus
- Jessica Thompson
- Komi Kassa

To celebrate their achievements, the South Carolina Technical College System will host a recognition awards ceremony on April 10, 2025, in Columbia, South

Carolina, to honor all students named to the All-State Academic Team.

April Cudd, FDTC's PTK Advisor, shared her excitement and admiration for the honorees, stating, "It is truly an honor to recognize these six outstanding students for their academic achievement, involvement, and service. These five students have shown exemplary personal growth and development all while encouraging and empowering others. That shows passion, enlightenment and leadership at its finest. Congratulations!"

Phi Theta Kappa is the premier honor society recognizing the academic achievements of students at two-year colleges. Membership provides students with leadership development opportunities, scholarships and access to a community of high-achieving peers.

FDTC EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION TO ESTABLISH ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIPS



FDTC President Dr. Jermaine Ford (third from right) shakes hands with Glenn Godfrey (fourth from left), president and CEO of QAT and Pee Dee Tank, at the college after donating \$35,000 to the FDTC Educational Foundation.

Florence-Darlington Technical College (FDTC) is proud to announce a generous \$35,500 donation from Mr. & Mrs. Glenn Godfrey, president and CEO of QAT, an automotive and petroleum equipment distributor and Pee Dee Tank, a local storage tank manufacturer. This significant contribution will fund three annual scholarships for students pursuing degrees in welding, civil engineering and business and other initiatives at the college.

Godfrey, a passionate supporter of education, has named the initiative the "Godfrey Family Scholarship" in honor of his father, a 1968 graduate of FDTC's Civil Engineering program. This annual gift reflects Godfrey's deep appreciation for education and his desire to give back to the Florence community.

"My passion for FDTC comes from a personal place. My father's experience here in 1968 laid the foundation for him to start what is now a very successful family business. Without the confidence and skills he gained at Tech, we may not be here today. These scholarships feel like a natural fit for our family to continue supporting

technical education," Godfrey said.

As a local business leader, Godfrey understands the critical importance of technical skills.

"I own and manage numerous properties throughout Florence, each with HVAC systems, and I know firsthand the value of skilled electricians, plumbers and engineers. At our manufacturing plant, we rely on engineering expertise, and as a developer and business owner, I see how vital these professions are. FDTC is at the heart of training the next generation for these essential careers."

Godfrey's passion for creating opportunities extends beyond his professional endeavors.

"One of the biggest reasons I wanted to do this is because I used to be a coach. I coached kids from U6 soccer at ESAB to track and field in high school, because I wanted to make an impact on their lives. Now, I have the opportunity to make a lasting impact on students through this scholarship. I'm passionate about helping people and giving back to the community. Everything I do, I'm all in, and this scholarship

is no exception."

The Godfrey Family Scholarship will provide life-changing opportunities for students pursuing degrees, equipping them with the skills needed to thrive in today's workforce. FDTC's Educational Foundation is deeply grateful for Godfrey's ongoing commitment to supporting education and workforce development in the Pee Dee region.

Sheryl Love, executive director of the FDTC Educational Foundation, expressed her gratitude:

"This generous gift from Mr. Godfrey exemplifies the power of community partnerships in transforming students' lives. His commitment to student success and workforce development will have a profound and lasting impact on our students and the local economy."

For more information about the Godfrey Family Scholarship or the Florence-Darlington Technical College Educational Foundation contact them at foundation@fdtc.edu or 843-661-8000.

About Florence-Darlington Technical College

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



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NAVIGATING CHANGES AS A FAMILY



(Family Features) Every family experiences changes. Some are planned; others are unexpected. Some are joyful, others are marked by pain or uncertainty.

Why Transitions Matter to Young Children

To understand why transitions affect children so deeply, it's important to remember children see the world differently than adults. Their routines, relationships and surroundings establish a sense of security and safety. Their families and role within them form their initial identities. Any disruption, big or small, can shake their foundation. Children can handle change, but adults must help them process it.

Children are naturally perceptive. When something changes, they notice. When they lack the language or understanding to ask questions, they express their feelings through behavior.

When children become clingier after a

new sibling is born or struggle with meltdowns in a new classroom, they're trying to process the changes in their lives.

Approaching changes through a child's lens helps reframe what's happening. Instead of minimizing feelings, adults can acknowledge the shift children are experiencing and guide them with care.

Proactively Communicate

When families face big changes, one of the most common questions is, "What do we tell the kids?" There's often a struggle between wanting to protect children from overwhelming emotions and offering them enough information to make sense of what's going on.

Rather than avoiding the conversation, discuss what's happening using this framework:

1. Acknowledge what's happening. Use clear, simple language, such as: "Daddy is moving to a different house, and you'll have two homes now."
2. Focus on the present or immediate future. Young children often don't have a solid grasp of time. While they can understand routines and orders of events, it takes well into elementary school for them to truly conceptualize time.
3. Name the feelings. Give children words for what they might be feeling. "It's OK to feel sad or confused right now. Sometimes

changes feel hard."

4. Provide reassurance. Let them know that even though things are changing, they're still safe and loved.

5. Encourage questions. If you don't have an answer, it's OK to say, "I'm not sure, but I'll find out," or "We're figuring this out together."

Avoidance is a natural instinct, but silence leaves children to fill in the gaps with their imagination, which can be scarier than reality. Moreover, when they sense something is different, but no one is talking about it, children might feel alone in their confusion. By proactively communicating, you tell them, "I'm here with you."

Embrace Feelings

Transitions can be emotional, and children need space to express their feelings without judgment. When a child cries or lashes out, instead of responding with, "Don't be sad," validate the experience by saying, "I see you have big feelings right now. I'm here with you." Help your child manage these feelings by encouraging active expressions, such as drawing, writing or moving to music.

Transitions can be challenging, but they're also opportunities to build resilience and deeper connections. Approaching big changes with empathy, proactive communication and an open heart helps children feel more secure and confident to move forward.

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Dr. Kandace Bethea

“The Hub,” ACT serves as a central location where all these programs and resources are housed under one roof, giving students easy access to a diverse range of opportunities on a single, convenient campus.

In today’s competitive job market, classroom learning alone isn’t enough. ACT’s Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs bridge the gap by combining academic instruction with real-world experience. These programs help students develop technical and soft skills, ensuring they are job-ready and equipped to handle professional challenges.

CTE programs are tailored to students’ individual graduation plans and career goals. A partnership with Florence-Darlington Technical College allows students to earn dual credits in machine tooling, welding, industrial maintenance and HVAC at The Continuum in Lake City. This enables students to gain industry-recognized credentials and practical experience while still in high school. Whether students plan to enter the workforce directly or pursue higher education, ACT ensures they are well-prepared.

Experiential learning is a key part of ACT’s approach. Work-based

internships provide students with hands-on experience while completing their studies. MCSD partners with local businesses and industries to create these opportunities, helping students build confidence and professional networks. Students gain industry-specific skills, from mastering software at a tech company to practicing lab techniques in a medical setting. Internships also develop essential workplace skills like meeting deadlines, collaborating with colleagues and adapting to professional environments. A strong internship experience on a resume signals initiative, work ethic and professional growth—qualities that appeal to future employers.

In addition to career preparation, ACT’s early college programs give students an academic advantage. High school students can take college-level courses and earn credits toward both their diploma and a college degree. Since relocating the Early College Program to ACT, student participation has increased significantly, reflecting the value of these opportunities.

Early college programs offer substantial benefits. Students can earn college credits—potentially completing an associate degree by the time they graduate—saving both time and money. This is especially beneficial for students from low-income families or those looking to reduce student loan debt. Early exposure to college-level coursework helps students adjust to the demands of higher education and explore different fields of study, aiding in informed career decisions.

ACT’s blend of career-focused education, hands-on learning and early college opportunities equips students with the tools to succeed. By offering a comprehensive, career-driven education under one roof, ACT empowers students to confidently pursue their goals, whether starting a career, attending college or launching a business. “The Hub” reflects MCSD’s commitment to student success, preparing young people to build bright futures for themselves and their communities.

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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.

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FROM STRUGGLE TO SUCCESS: DR. SHERIKA STUCKEY-HARRY'S JOURNEY By Cynthia O. Ford



Dr. Sherika Stuckey-Harry's

Dr. Sherika Stuckey-Harry's journey is one of resilience, sacrifice and determination. Raised in Bennettsville, South Carolina, she pursued higher education at Francis Marion University, earning a degree in biology with a minor in biochemistry. Today, she is a family nurse practitioner, a wife of 18 years and a mother to three children. Her path to success was filled with obstacles that tested her faith, endurance and strength.

At twenty-five, Harry discovered she was pregnant. Living in Florence, away from family, the thought of raising a child alone was overwhelming. "It was scary because I didn't have family locally, and I was just thinking, what am I going to do with a baby?" she recalls. Seeking stability, she temporarily moved home before returning to Florence to pursue her next steps.

While working at Florence-Darlington Technical College, she decided to go to nursing school. To make this happen, she resigned from her job at Fleet Mortgage and applied for government assistance programs, including Section 8, food stamps and First Steps, which helped cover daycare costs. "If I didn't get approved for First Steps, I wouldn't have been able to attend school," she says.

Spencer R. Scott, executive director of Florence County First Steps (FCFS), recalls Harry's inspiring journey. "Dr. Sherika and her son, Chandon, embody what we strive to achieve at First Steps," said Scott. "Through the ABC Scholarships, we helped Dr. Sherika pursue her education while ensuring Chandon had access to quality early learning. He remained in care for eight hours a day until he transitioned to 5K, receiving an early education foundation essential for lifelong success."

Florence County First Steps is a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring all children enter school ready to reach their potential. By engaging families, caregivers and community partners, FCFS delivers high-quality early childhood programs and serves as a vital connector for early education in Florence County.

Despite these resources, Harry's journey was challenging. While attending nursing school, she became pregnant with Chandon. A critical class in her program was only offered once a year, and she was told she'd have to sit out for a full year if she missed it. "My son was born on February 20, 2002, and I was back in class one week later," she says. Determined not to fall behind, she convinced her doctor to let her attend class while delaying clinical until after her six-week recovery. She drove an hour to class several days a week, pushing through exhaustion and pain.

"There were moments I felt like I wasn't going to make it. There were days I wanted to give up, but I looked at my baby boy and knew I had to do it for him," she reflects. The pressure

of motherhood, financial strain and school was intense, but she refused to let it break her.

Her family became her rock. "My mother, my father and even my younger sister—she was only fifteen at the time—were



Dr. Harry and Spencer R. Scott, executive director of Florence County First

instrumental in my success. During summers, my sister kept my son while I attended classes and clinical," she recalls. Their unwavering support reinforced her belief that success is not a solo journey but requires a village.

When she graduated from nursing school, she secured a job at McLeod Hospital, marking her transition from government assistance to financial independence. "I remember going to the Section 8 office and telling them I got a job

and didn't need assistance anymore. They hugged me and said this is how the system should work—as a steppingstone," she recalls.

Her son, the child whose daycare was funded by First Steps, followed in her footsteps of perseverance. Today, Chandon is a graduate of Coastal Carolina University and has built a successful career in IT, underscoring the impact of early childhood education. "This is why we do what we do," Scott emphasized. "Supporting parents while laying the groundwork for children's success is at the heart of our mission."

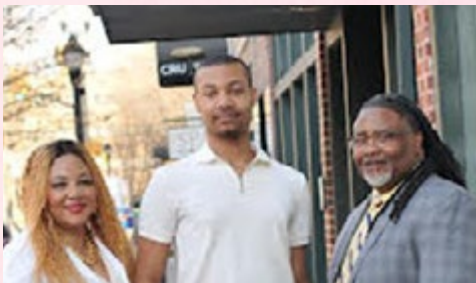
Harry's passion for health care started in high school but became clear in college. "I started working at McLeod as a nurse extern and became a CNA," she shares. From there, she advanced, earning multiple degrees, including an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN), a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) specializing in Family Nurse Practitioner, and a Doctorate in Nursing Practice (DNP). She also served as an adjunct professor at South University, mentoring future nurse practitioners.

Balancing motherhood, marriage and a demanding career was never easy. "My master's and doctoral degrees were hard but doable. It was tougher because I had children and a husband who still needed me at home," she explains. Careful planning, discipline and family support helped her succeed.

Now a successful health care professional, she is passionate about giving back to the community. "I did volunteer work at a free medical clinic in McColl, South Carolina, helping patients who didn't have insurance or couldn't afford to see a doctor. I've also participated in community wellness programs, precept nursing students, and been part of back-to-school giveaways," she says. She is in the process of opening a home care agency in the Pee Dee area, a project she hopes to complete next month. For young mothers facing adversity, she offers this advice: "Don't let what others tell you affect how you live your life. Make a plan. Don't let your circumstances hold you back. Research programs that can help you. Ask yourself if you want to be in the same situation in a year. If not, start making changes."

When asked what she would tell her younger self, she does not hesitate. "Everyone makes mistakes, and it's part of figuring out who you are. What matters is how you rise and make the change."

Harry's story is one of perseverance and the power of education and community support. She wants her legacy to be one of faith, hard work and inspiration. "I want my children to see me as a loving and hard-working parent who did everything for them to have a good life. I want them to be the best versions of themselves and know success is within reach if they put in the effort."



Pictured left to right Dr. Sherika Stuckey-Harry, her son Chandon and Spencer R. Scott, executive director of Florence County

CLAFLIN PRESIDENT EARNS 2025 NASPA PRESIDENT'S AWARD

Submitted by J. Craig Cotton, director of public relations



ORANGEBURG—The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) has selected Claflin University President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack for its 2025 President's Award. The award is presented annually by the organization to a college or university president or chancellor who has, over a sustained period, advanced the quality of student life on campus by supporting the institution's student affairs staff and initiatives. Warmack received the prestigious award at the 2025 NASPA Conference on March 18, in New Orleans, LA.

"I am immensely grateful to be selected as the winner of the 2025 NASPA President's Award," Warmack said. "I have a very special relationship with NASPA and the dedicated professionals who work tirelessly to achieve the organization's mission and vision at their respective colleges and universities. Thank you, NASPA, for this amazing honor and for supporting generations of outstanding student affairs professionals."

Warmack began his tenure as Claflin's ninth president on August 1, 2019. Claflin, founded in 1869, is South Carolina's oldest Historically Black College/University (HBCU). It was the state's first higher

education institution to admit all students regardless of ethnic origin, gender, race or religion.

Before Claflin, Warmack served for five years (2014-2019), as president at Harris Stowe State University. His previous leadership positions in higher education were in the student affairs divisions at Delta State University, Rhodes College, Western Carolina and Bethune Cookman. Those experiences gave Warmack a keen insight into supporting students in their academic, social and cultural development. They also nurtured Warmack's commitment to creating and sustaining a campus environment that promotes student success.

"As an undergraduate at Delta State University, I was surrounded by caring, attentive and intellectually stimulating mentors. Many were student affairs administrators," Warmack said. "They encouraged me to actively participate in student organizations and introduced me to various leadership opportunities. After completing undergraduate and graduate programs, I began my career in higher education. My first three administrative leadership positions were in student affairs, which provided a deep understanding of diversity within the

campus culture and the unique needs of the students."

Shortly after arriving at Claflin, Warmack announced that building a new student center to enhance the campus environment was one of his top priorities. In March 2024, Claflin opened an attractive, ultra-modern three-story facility, which Warmack described as the university's "new living room." The student center includes Orangeburg's only movie theater and the only multi-purpose conference room/ballroom in Orangeburg with seating for 800 or more guests. The center also features a communal retail space, eSports lab, Barnes & Noble Bookstore, a scenic outdoor terrace, administrative offices, and group study rooms. The \$42 million structure has become the hub for campus and community engagement.

Student success is prominent in Claflin SOARS: TRANSFORMATION & ELEVATION: 2021-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN. Strategic academic partnerships that encourage faculty and student engagement and expand academic/research opportunities are key components of the plan. Clemson University, Ohio Wesleyan University, the University of South Carolina, Yale, London Metropolitan University and the University of Florence are among the current partners. These relationships will ensure access to exemplary educational opportunities that develop globally engaged visionary leaders.

Warmack, who was named 2024 Person of the Year by The Times and Democrat Newspaper, has implemented advanced technologies and innovation into all facets of the University's operations, secured a portion of Goff Avenue – a busy thoroughfare through the heart of the campus and hosted a historic and amazingly impactful HBCU Tech Summit at Claflin in September 2024. However, the development, health, safety and welfare of Claflin students and the campus community take precedence over those achievements. When Claflin received more than \$17.4 million from South Carolina Congressman Jim Clyburn in 2023, to build a Center for Innovation and Technology, Warmack was focused on what the gift meant to the students and the campus community.

"This grant is an investment that will provide Claflin with the resources and the potential to lead research in critical areas that impact our nation and the world," Warmack said. "It will also expand collaborative research for our students and faculty."



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Our Vision

Timmonsville Charter School is a proposed tuition-free charter school dedicated to providing transformative educational opportunities for students in Timmonsville and surrounding areas. The school will focus on workforce readiness, innovative programming, and strong community partnerships, addressing the unique needs of a rural context.

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Why Timmonsville Charter School Matters to Our Community

- A School of Excellence for Timmonsville: The charter school will be a beacon of opportunity for students, families, and the broader community.
- Customized Support: Programs will ensure that each student is prepared academically, emotionally, and professionally for the future.
- Collaboration with Community Leaders: The school aims to partner with local businesses, churches, learners' families, and community organizations to reflect the needs and aspirations of Timmonsville and surrounding areas.

HGTC ANNOUNCES HISTORIC SPRING ENROLLMENT INCREASE Articles submitted by HGTC



CONWAY—Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) is proud to announce a record-breaking 11 percent increase in spring enrollment, marking the largest spring semester increase in the college's history. With over 7,700 students enrolled across its three campuses in Conway, Grand Strand and Georgetown, HGTC continues to defy national trends, which have shown significant enrollment declines at institutions following the pandemic.

This unprecedented growth includes a surge in both new and returning students. The college has welcomed more than 1,600 new students and over 6,000 continuing students, surpassing last year's enrollment of 6,900 students. Additionally, HGTC's dual enrollment program has reached an all-time high, with more than 1,700 high school students taking college courses this spring semester—an 18.43 percent increase over Spring 2024.

"As higher education institutions across the nation face enrollment challenges, HGTC's remarkable growth reflects our unwavering commitment to student success and workforce readiness," said Dr. Marilyn Murphy Fore, HGTC president. "We are honored that students continue to choose HGTC as their first step toward a high-quality education and a rewarding career. This growth is a testament to the dedication of our faculty, staff and community partners in creating opportunities for student achievement."

HGTC's success extends beyond its local impact, as it now boasts one of the highest percentage growth rates in the South Carolina Technical College System (SCTCS). Additionally, the college has seen strong growth in its career programs, which are preparing students to enter the local workforce. If this is an area of interest, HGTC can provide specific examples of

programs experiencing significant enrollment increases. The college attributes this achievement to its strong academic programs, industry-aligned training and an unwavering culture of care that prioritizes student success.

"We have built a community that fosters academic excellence and personal growth," added Fore. "Our culture of care ensures that students feel supported from enrollment to graduation, and that sense of belonging is reflected in our record-breaking numbers. We are committed to maintaining this momentum by continuing to provide innovative, high-quality education that meets the needs of our students and employers."

As HGTC continues its mission to prepare students for in-demand careers, the college remains focused on expanding opportunities, strengthening partnerships and enhancing student experiences to sustain its positive enrollment track.

Of the more than 7,700 students already enrolled this semester, 77 percent of students are residents of Horry and Georgetown Counties, and 97 percent are in-state residents. HGTC enrollment represents 32 states and approximately 37 percent are minority students.

There's still time to register for classes with eight-week classes starting on March 10. For more information about applying, enrolling and registering at HGTC, call 843-347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu.



HGTC CHEF EARNS PRESTIGIOUS CERTIFIED MASTER BAKER CREDENTIAL



Chef Cody Middleton

MYRTLE BEACH—Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) is proud to announce that Chef Cody Middleton, associate professor of Baking & Pastry Arts at the HGTC International Culinary Institute of Myrtle Beach, has successfully passed the Certified Master Baker (CMB) exam, a rigorous certification process administered by the Retail Bakers of America (RBA). Middleton achieved this prestigious credential in Charlotte, NC, marking a significant milestone in his culinary career and for the college's

esteemed culinary program.

The Certified Master Baker exam is a highly demanding test that consists of a 200-question written portion and a 16-hour, two-day practical exam covering 14 key areas of baking, including breads, cakes, pastries and nutritional baking. Unique to this exam, candidates are not allowed to premeasure ingredients or utilize any mise en place, requiring exceptional skill, accuracy, time management and adaptability. Many candidates do not pass all portions of the test on their first attempt, making Middleton's accomplishment even more remarkable. In fact, the last time an individual passed the full exam prior to Middleton was in 2019.

"Earning the Certified Master Baker credential was a true test of skill, accuracy, time management, perseverance, problem-



solving, and adaptability," said Middleton. "It was one of the most challenging experiences of my career, but I am incredibly proud to have successfully completed it. I look forward to bringing this level of expertise and dedication to my students at HGTC."

HGTC President, Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, praised Middleton for this extraordinary achievement. "Chef Middleton's success in earning this prestigious certification is a testament to his dedication to excellence in baking and pastry arts. His expertise further elevates the exceptional education we provide at the International Culinary Institute of Myrtle Beach. We are incredibly proud of him and look forward to the knowledge and experience he will continue to share with our students."

HGTC remains committed to providing top-tier culinary education, and Middleton's achievement underscores the college's mission to prepare students for successful careers in the culinary and hospitality industries.

For more information about the HGTC International Culinary Institute of Myrtle Beach, visit hgtc.edu/culinary or call 843-347-3186.

To learn more about admissions, enrollment and registration at HGTC, call 843-347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu/admissions.

HGTC NAMES SCTEA EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS 2025 Submitted by HGTC



Harold Hawley, vice president of finance & administration, in the administrator/manager category



Ed McCarthy, professor for electronics engineering technology and assistant chair for engineering technology and golf and sports turf management in the faculty/teaching category.

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

The employees were recognized along with their colleagues from other South Carolina technical colleges at SCTEA's annual conference February 20-22, 2025, where they received a certificate and a cash award.

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

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

- Harold Hawley, vice president of finance & administration, in the administrator/manager category,
- Ed McCarthy, professor for electronics engineering technology and assistant chair for engineering technology and golf and sports turf management in the faculty/



Kari Royals, administrative assistant for the executive vice president for academic and workforce development, in the staff category.

teaching category, and

- Kari Royals, administrative assistant for the executive vice president for academic and workforce development, in the staff category.

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

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



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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Horry-Georgetown Technical College prohibits discrimination against students and employees. Please direct discrimination and accessibility issues to the Office of Student Affairs at 843.347.5228. Public Institution of Higher Education.

FMU 2025 MARION MEDALLION AWARDS

Articles submitted by FMU



Pictured left to right: Dr. Fred Carter, Debbie Wall, Vickie Elliott, Kevin Elliott and Kyla Fraser.

The 14th annual Marion Medallion awards ceremony was held at the FMU Performing Arts Center on February 27, 2025. Debbie Wall, founder of the SC Senior Sports Classic and the Miracle League of Florence County were this year's recipients.

Wall has dedicated much of her life to inspiring others through sports. In 1985, she created the Senior Sports Classic to fill a need for programs for senior citizens in the area. The event initially began as a one-day competition for adults over 60. Today, it has expanded into a multi-week event that covers the state and has twenty sports.

The Miracle League of Florence County was formed in the fall of 2014, when a group of people came together to ensure that their children and others with physical and mental challenges had the opportunity to play baseball. What began as a small group has grown to over 250 athletes each season.

Francis Marion University and the Morning News have presented the Marion Medallion award annually since 2012, to recognize Pee Dee area citizens who have made sustained and significant contributions to improve the region and the lives of its residents. The award is given each year on or about February 27, Francis Marion Day.

FMU'S NEW DEGREE PROGRAM AND FACILITY

Francis Marion University's Board of Trustees held its quarterly meeting at The Cottage on FMU's campus. During the meeting, the Board approved a new undergraduate program, the naming of an atrium and garden and a utility easement.

The new Bachelor of Social Work degree program will address the growing workforce demand for trained social workers in South Carolina. According to the South Carolina Coordinating Council for Workforce Development, social work has been identified as a priority occupation in the state. This program will also be the first of its kind in this region.

"The approval of this new program in Social Work will help meet the increasing demand for social workers," said FMU President Fred Carter. "I'm pleased that the board has approved this degree program to prepare students for an occupation that has been identified as a priority for the state."

The Trustees also approved a resolution to name the Donald Jackson Atrium and Garden in the Stokes Administration Building in honor of Jackson, who will retire from the university in June 2025, after thirty-one years of service.

Jackson joined the university as an accountant in 1994. Since then, his leadership and commitment to excellence have been evident throughout the university. For decades, Jackson has worked tirelessly as an advocate for the Young, Gifted and Blessed Student Choir, where he mentored and encouraged hundreds of students. He is a founding member of the FMU African American Faculty and Staff Coalition, where he has served in a variety of leadership positions throughout the years. Jackson was also the recipient of the Marvin Lynch Humanitarian Award in 2015 for his service to the community.

"I am delighted that the board has chosen to name the beautiful atrium and garden in our administration building in honor of Donald," said Carter. "For over thirty-one years, Donald has diligently served the university and its students, so it's only fitting to acknowledge his work with a permanent tribute."

The board also approved a resolution to grant a utility easement to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) for its Pee Dee Regional Office, which is currently under construction, south of the Griffin Athletic Complex.

FMU HONORS DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI



L to R: Brooke Thibodaux, Col. Jay McElveen, Dr. Tim Hunter and Debbie Pollock-Berry

Francis Marion University honored four of its distinguished alumni at its annual Alumni Awards ceremony on Thursday, March 6.

Debbie Pollock-Berry ('88) of Ashburn, VA, was recognized as the university's 2025 Outstanding Alumnus. Pollock-Berry has over 25 years of experience as a global and domestic human resources executive with an extensive background leading culture transformation and new business development initiatives. She is currently the chief people and culture officer for PLEZI. Prior to joining PLEZI, Pollock-Berry served as chief people and culture officer for The Trevor Project and Save the Children, and held human resources leadership roles at XO Communications, North American Energy Alliance, Verizon and AOL.

Pollock-Berry serves on the governing body for the Washington, DC HR Leadership Summit. She has also served on Forbes Human Resources Council, the board of directors for LEADVA and on the Smart CEO's Executive Management Selection Committee. She was recently recognized as one of the 2024 Virginia Black Business Leaders. Brooke Thibodaux ('16) of Sumter, SC, received the Benjamin Wall Ingram III Young Alumnus Award. A first-generation college graduate and alumna of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, Thibodaux is the founder of B Marketing, a boutique creative marketing firm established in 2020. She is passionate about helping others build their brands through expert branding, web design and tailored marketing strategies. Her entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to innovation have allowed her to make a meaningful impact on businesses and nonprofits striving to grow and succeed.

Thibodaux is dedicated to serving in her community, where she is an active member of her church and serves on its communications committee. She is also a board member for the Sumter Tennis Association.

Col. Jay McElveen ('94) of Beaufort, SC, was awarded the Professional Industry Award for Public Service and Law. In March 1989, McElveen enlisted in the South Carolina Army National Guard as a UH-1 crew chief in the 659th Medical Detachment. After his commissioning in 1994, he attended the Army's Rotary Wing Flight School and was awarded the Army Aviator's Badge in 1997. He also earned a master's degree from the United States Air War College.

As a member of the National Guard, he was assigned to various positions including intelligence officer, battalion commander and brigade commander. His deployments include Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. He has received numerous awards and decorations including the Bronze Star (3rd Award), the Air Medal (2nd Award), Meritorious Service Medal (2nd Award), Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal with two Campaign Stars, Combat Action Badge and Master Army Aviator Badge.

Dr. Tim Hunter ('96) of Newberry, SC, received the Professional Industry Award for Education and Arts. After receiving his degree in elementary education from FMU, Hunter earned a master's degree in administration from Cambridge College and the Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University.

He began his career in education as an instructional assistant, later advancing to teaching fourth-grade math and science at Gallman Elementary in Newberry County for eight years. He later served as an assistant principal and principal in elementary schools and as the chief student services officer for the School District of Newberry County.

FMU'S AA FACULTY AND STAFF CELEBRATE 30 YEARS Submitted by FMU



L to R: Dr. Michele Norman presents Dr. Tim Hunter with the "Together We Can Award;" Dr. Kiley Molinari receives the AAFSC Diversity Award from LaTasha Brand.

In February, the Francis Marion University African American Faculty and Staff Coalition (AAFSC) marked thirty years at its annual scholarship reception held at the FMU Performing Arts Center in downtown Florence.

During the event, Dr. Kiley Molinari, assistant professor of anthropology at FMU, received the FMU AAFSC's Diversity Award. The AAFSC Diversity Award is given annually by the Coalition to highlight the work of individuals who are dedicated to celebrating diversity and inclusiveness at FMU and beyond.

Molinari's research focuses on topics including material and expressive culture, Indigenous communities and new media, visual anthropology and language and cultural revitalization. She joined the faculty of FMU in 2019. She received the Bachelor of Arts in United States History from Franklin Pierce University, the Master of Arts in Cultural Anthropology from the University

of Idaho and her Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology from the University of Oklahoma.

Dr. Timothy B. Hunter was the event's keynote speaker. He also received the Coalition's "Together We Can" award in recognition of his civic involvement.

Hunter earned a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from FMU, a Master of Administration from Cambridge College and a doctorate in educational leadership from Nova Southeastern University. Throughout his career, he has served as assistant principal at Batesburg-Leesville Elementary, principal at Boundary Street Elementary, chief student services officer for the School District of Newberry County and in Lexington School District Two. Outside of education, he is a lifetime member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated.

The AAFSC was founded at FMU in 1995, to enhance and stimulate cultural awareness, and to promote professional development and welfare among faculty, staff and students. Rev. Donald Jackson is the current president of the AAFSC.

FMU President Fred Carter concluded the ceremony by recalling his twenty-six years working with the Coalition. He thanked its membership and discussed some of their future trips and activities.

Past winners of the AAFSC Diversity Award include Dr. Rebecca Lawson, Dr. Louis Venters, Ms. Angela Crosland, Dr. Rhonda Brogdon, Ms. Yvonne Davis, Mrs. Crystal Graham, Dr. Will Wattles, Dr. Jason Owens, Dr. Ruth Wittmann-Price, Dr. Shayna Wrighten, Dr. Erica James, Dr. Daniel Brauss, Ms. LaTasha Brand, Dr. Charlene Wages and Dr. Christopher Barton.



WHERE EDUCATION MEETS INSPIRATION

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IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?

Florence 1 Schools has made its mark on the community, state and even the nation in garnering awards at the local, state and national level. At the helm of school leadership are principals who depend on a supporting cast to help keep school campus life running smoothly and effectively. Florence 1 salutes the supporting cast of assistants who are not only meeting the daily challenges of serving at the local schools, but have also found the time to seek terminal degrees in their fields of study. Meet these inspiring educators.



North Vista Elementary Assistant Principal, **Dr. Katrina W. Rouse**, received her Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from University of South Carolina in 2021. Dr. Rouse has served as an educator in Florence 1 for more than 20 years, teaching elementary and high school and serving as a district social studies coordinator until her present position as assistant principal.

Degrees:

- Cambridge College, B.S. in Elementary Education
- Cambridge College, M.Ed. in Education
- Arkansas State University, Education Specialist degree in Superintendency Administration

"If serving is below you, then leadership is beyond you."

Dissertation Title: Influential Factors of School Culture on Teacher Motivation and Self-Efficacy: An Ethnographic Case Study



Dr. Brian Phillips is currently in his fifth year as an administrator at Wilson High School and has spent 34 years in the field of education. He is originally from North Carolina, where he developed and shaped his professional career in education. Over the years, he has held numerous positions, including teacher, assistant principal, principal, associate superintendent, and professor.

Degrees:

- Appalachian State University, B.S. in Education
- UNC at Pembroke, M.A. in Administration and Supervision
- Fayetteville State University, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership

"Don't tell me what I want to hear—tell me the truth."

Dissertation Title: The Relationship Between the Percentage of Funds Spent on Direct Instruction and Student Achievement in Selected Grades.



West Florence Assistant Principal **Dr. James Sinkler** recently completed the requirements for earning a doctorate degree in Educational Administration from South Carolina State University (SCSU).

"I would like to thank a ton of people by name but the list would go on forever. I appreciate my friends, past/present coworkers, and most importantly my family for speaking this over me and encouraging me every day! You guys have no idea how much that meant to me! This was definitely a journey, and when I say journey, I mean just that. My goal is to always be a good example for my son Jace, and I think this accomplishment serves him well! Long story short- live in your purpose, remain humble, and never give up!"

Dissertation Title: The Impact of School Discipline on the Academic Achievement of African American Males in Grade 9 in the Pee Dee Region



Assistant Principal **Dr. Adrian Wilkins** also recently received a Doctorate in Higher Education Administration and Educational Leadership, (Ph.D.) from Liberty University. He will participate in graduation ceremonies at Liberty University on May 11th.

"The motivation behind this accomplishment stems from my family, loved ones, and so many students and staff members that told me that they could

not wait to witness the day I finish the race. With faith and understanding that it was a marathon and not a sprint, it came to fruition. Thank you all for the support and encouragement. Trust me, there is more to come."

Dissertation Title: Perceptions of Student Loan Debt and the Decision to Pursue Higher Education: A Qualitative Case Study of African American High School Students



Dr. Kevin George has been an Educator for the past 23 years (15 yrs. as a Classroom Teacher and 8 yrs. as an Administrator). Dr. George has a passion for Mentoring Students as he has seen it to be a most major component for motivating positive change in the lives of our youth especially those that live under very challenging circumstances.

Degrees:

- Francis Marion University, B.S. in Biology w/ minor in Chemistry and Sociology
- Francis Marion University, M.Ed. in Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities
- Capella University, Ed.D. Educational Leadership and Management

"It is easier to Build Strong Children than to Repair Broken Men." (Frederick Douglass)

Dissertation Title: Evaluating the Effects of Formal Corrective Feedback on Off-Task/On-Task Behavior of Mild Intellectually Disabled Students: Action Research Study



Wilson High School instructional coach **Dr. Sarhonda Wilkes** has just completed the requirements for receipt of the Educational Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Instruction Design and Technology from Liberty University.

Degrees:

- Franklin University, B.S. in Management and Leadership
- Liberty University, M.A. in Management and

Leadership and Special Education

"During my research, I discovered that teachers want to have professional development tailored to their curriculum, so I believe that by providing teachers with the training and professional development they need to be successful in the classroom with our students, we then have trained teachers who can meet student needs with a more innovative approach to the curriculum. It all begins with the teacher and effective classroom instruction."

Dissertation Title: Recommendations for Solving the Problem of Low End-of-Course Algebra One Exam Scores at Wilson High School in Florence, South Carolina.

LEE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXCEL IN STATE-WIDE COMPETITIONS AND RECOGNIZED NATIONALLY

Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) Awards

The Career and Technical Student organization (CTSO) prepares emerging leaders and entrepreneurs in marketing, finance, hospitality, and management. It also offers competitive events, leadership development, and community service opportunities for high school and college students. Lee Central High School had three students to place in the top ten of the Public Speaking division of the CTSO at the annual Conference recently held in Charleston, South Carolina.

Award winners are Shermerce Charles, 4th place; JaMirra Alston, 5th place; Justin Aguilar, 9th place.

Jacquetta Wilson is the advisor for the organization.



Pictured left to right: JaMirra Alston, Justin Aguilar and Shermerce Charles

Health Occupation Students of America (HOSA) Awards



Serenity Williams

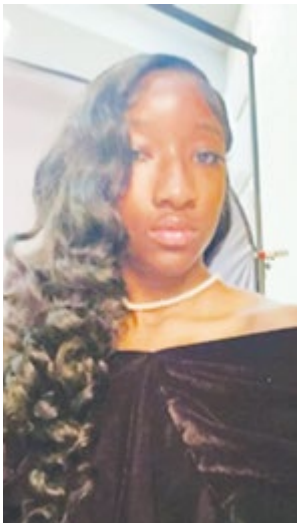
Health Occupation Students of America (HOSA) is an international career and technology student organization endorsed by the United States Department of Education and the Health Science Technology Division of Career and Technology.

HOSA sponsored competitive events during the CTSO annual conference.

Serenity Williams was declared the 1st place winner in the Medical Terminology Competition qualifying her to compete in the national competition which will be held in Nashville, Tennessee during the month of June.

Her advisors are J'Narda Kelly and Charity Days.

National Teacher Cadet Honor Society Inductee



Carmen Bates

Carmen Bates, a Lee Central High School teacher cadet, has been inducted into the National Teacher Cadet Honor Society. To qualify for this prestigious award the students must be a junior with a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or higher on the state grading scale; demonstrate leadership, character and service; and be recommended by a teacher leadership committee.

Her advisor is Pryncessa Cannon.

Lee Central High School 2025 Upper State Class 1A Championship Girls Basketball Team



Pictured in the front left: Head Coach Patrice Holmes

FOOT CARE WITH DR. HILLERY DOLFORD AND SWEET FEET DIABETIC FOOT SPA By Glaciera Brown Mason



Dr. Hillery Dolford, DNP
Owner/Operator
Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa

Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa is the first of its kind in the Florence area. Owned and operated by Dr. Hillery Dolford, DNP, FNP-C, WCC, DWC, Sweet Feet opened its doors on March 1, 2021. Having recently celebrated her fourth year as a business owner in Florence, SC, Dolford hung out her shingle, because throughout her extensive career, she witnessed a need for patient wound care, specifically related to diabetes mellitus.

Diabetes Mellitus is the official name of the problem within the endocrine system, often characterized by frequent thirst and urination,

elevated blood sugar levels and diminished eye sight. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 38.4 million Americans live with diabetes mellitus. Of that number, upwards of 95 percent are affected with Type 2 diabetes. No matter the type of diabetes, proper foot care is important to overall health; and with the increased rise in diabetes, the lack of care puts patients at risk.

Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa was created for diabetics, and centers around the physical health of patients; however the spa treats all patients, diabetics, seniors, soldiers, student athletes and amputees. Sweet Feet appointments provide diabetic foot care that includes a foot exam where critical foot health areas are checked and monitored for circulation, sensation, integrity of the skin, nails and wounds on the feet. Sweet Feet technicians look at shoes for appropriateness, provide nail care, skin care and patients are put on a treatment regimen to keep their feet safe.

Dolford comes to this business with over 23 years of practical health care experience, which has led to her current practice. Her CV and accomplishments are vast and impressive. This Florence native has studied at the University of South Carolina, Florence Darlington Technical College, Walden University and Francis Marion University. She is certified in wound care and diabetic wound care through the National Alliance of Wound Care. Dolford's career began as a CNA (certified nursing assistant), and as she progressed in her education, she attained the LPN (licensed practical nurse) and an RN (registered nurse). Dolford is also an APRN (advanced practice registered nurse), and a board certified FNP (family nurse practitioner), focused on direct patient care. She is WCC (wound care certified), DWC (diabetic wound care certified) and holds a DNP (doctorate in nursing practice).

Dolford's journey has been exciting, long, challenging and filled with unexpected good fortune. She spent 17 years at McLeod Hospital where she worked alongside some of the best medical professionals and received her foundation in health care. Dolford shares this inspiring story. While pursuing her education, as a CNA, the entry level position to the medical field, she worked as a waitress at IHOP. As a testament to how good she is at whatever the task, incredible favor occurred, a customer informed the manager of her incredible

customer service, stating, "it was the best service she'd ever had." Their relationship blossomed from there. That person turned out to be McLeod Hospital's Medical Director Penny Compton, RN. "Favor is Fair," Dolford says. Compton hired her as a CNA. Dolford continued school and became an LPN, then an RN and served in her unit for five years. Dolford went on to become a wound care nurse, which is what got her into foot care. She was recruited to ICU, the Medical Intensive Care Unit, for two years as a patient care supervisor.

Sick patients and grave illnesses pushed her into Hospice, palliative care. A shift came one day when a fellow faith member was actively dying, and Dolford saw the need for her to advance her medical training. It was at this moment that Dolford went back to become an APRN (advanced practical registered nurse), with no idea what field she would pursue. She went back to the hospital to take care of wounds and while in school, her blessings of favor continued when Sandra Stephenson, vice president of Patient Services at McLeod Hospital created a position for her in the Outpatient Wound Center.

While working at McLeod Hospital's Outpatient Wound Center, Dolford further advanced her career by pursuing her doctoral degree. Dolford was in the first graduating class, a member of the inaugural cohort of DNP nurses at FMU. Every day, Dolford was confronted and cared for patients with the common problem of unmanaged foot and nail care. She treated patients with diabetic foot ulcers and/or venous leg ulcers. Looking at feet every day and seeing a need, Dolford developed a quality improvement project, a diabetic foot clinic in the Wound Center, to improve diabetic limb salvage through foot care. She observed that diabetes affects a patient's mortality rate. She found that prevention is key, and during the length of the project, there were no amputations!

Dolford says that the best part of her day is interacting with her patients. At Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa, patients have 24-hour access to Dolford because time is imperative for a diabetic with a foot injury. Dolford is a conduit in the midst of a patient's medical emergency to prevent gangrene, which requires urgent care, from developing. Dolford's services include medical texting and online chatting to ensure patient foot safety and care. Patients can send photos of their foot injury, have a wound evaluation and initial treatment until a patient can be referred.

You may be wondering what the difference is between a podiatrist and services at Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa. A podiatrist is trained in surgical interventions from ankle to the foot. The services at Sweet Feet include the same services but do not include major surgeries. Dolford conducts minor procedures like cyst removal, opening an abscess or the removal of ingrown or complete toenail removal. Additionally, nail technicians in salons are almost always likely to not have a medical provider on staff to look at what's going on with the feet. Dolford physically sees every patient who visits Sweet Feet as a vital part of her service. In addition, all Diabetic Sweet Feet Spa staff are either CNAs, certified medical assistants or licensed nail technicians.

Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa is a private pay medical spa with an initial consultation fee of \$150. Follow up consultation visits based upon need, average \$65 per visit. Sweet Feet patients visit for the



Nyshema Johnson



Brittany Williams



Gracie White



Raelean Garcia

FOOT CARE WITH DR. HILLERY DOLFORD CONT'D

medical aspect however, the spa does provide nail polish services in the absence of fungal nails and no contra indications for wearing nail polish. Dolford emphasizes, "diabetics should be inspecting their feet every day." Sweet Feet sees on average 75-100 patients a week. While they are a private pay medical spa, Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa does maintain electronic medical records and corresponds with other medical professionals. Dolford works closely with a vascular surgeon, a general surgeon, orthopedic surgeon and collaborates with other providers. Dolford receives referrals from the local medical community including McCleod, MUSC, HopeHealth, SC House Calls and local podiatrists.

Initially Sweet Feet's patients were 90 percent diabetic, however today, there are approximately 60 percent diabetic patients with the other 40 percent non-diabetic patients. The Spa sees a lot of couples, elderly, mother/daughter duos, men, particularly young athletes who may injure their feet during sports. Dolford and Sweet Feet's goal is to consistently provide professional medical care for patient's foot health. She shares these basic care practices for diabetic feet:

- Frequent monitoring. Diabetics have poor sensation in the feet and can step on things and not know it. Look at your feet every day for abrasions, blister and callouses.
- Use a mirror if necessary.
- Specialized shoes and custom-made orthotics to keep feet safe.
- Due to the pathophysiology of the disease, diabetes dries the skin therefore, correct moisture of the skin is important for foot care.

Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa also provides mobile foot care services to meet patient needs. Patients who are bed bound, home bound or prefer to have services performed in the privacy of their home find this to be a plus and Dolford's staff meets that need. Appointments are necessary, to ensure every patient receives time for their specific care.

Faith and Favor

Greek philosopher Aristotle said, "He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader." Owner Dolford has exemplified that she can be both. In addition to operating a successful local business, Dolford's spiritual health is as important to her in maintaining a work-life balance. In her faith community, she is an avid believer and worshiper of Christ. Dolford loves the fellowship of the saints and everything about church life, where she spends most of her free time. "It is my life," she says. Grounded and led by faith leaders, Apostle Edward Johnson and Prophetess Patricia Johnson of Morning Star Ministries in Darlington, SC, Dolford is actively involved in leadership roles within the church. At Morning Star Ministries, Dolford is assistant to Prophetess Lady Patricia Johnson, where she helps coordinate and attends the widely popular monthly Pee Dee area outreach ministry, 'Women of Joy Outreach Fellowship.' In addition, she spearheads the support group, 'Gathering of the Young Sisters,' for young women and new parishioners in a relaxed atmosphere. Dolford leads monthly discussions on being a newcomer, and how to be a witness and a worshiper of God.

Dolford is a native and lifelong resident of Florence, SC. She is the daughter of Joann and the late Oscar Carter, Jr. A loving sister to Jarvis Brockington and a proud graduate of Wilson High School. She is also a wife of 25 years to the love of her life and business co-founder, Andre Dolford, Sr., and a mother of two sons, Andre Dolford, Jr., 19, and Carson Dolford, 10.

Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa is located at 2724 W. Palmetto Street, STE 3, Florence, SC 29501. Appointments are required. For more information, visit their website sweetfeetdiabeticspa.com or call 843-638-7530.

Photos by William "Cash" Stukes, AYS Media

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Sweet Feet
DIABETIC FOOT SPA
2724 W. Palmetto St., Ste. 3
Florence, SC 29501



AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH: DIFFERENT, NOT LESS By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Stephanie Turner

COLUMBIA -When parents first hear the words autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a doctor's office, the emotions can be overwhelming—relief at finally having answers, concern about what comes next and a flood of questions about support. In South Carolina, the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs (DDSN) is working to ensure that individuals with autism and their families don't have to navigate this

journey alone.

DDSN is the state agency responsible for planning, developing, coordinating and funding services for individuals with lifelong disabilities, including autism, intellectual disabilities, traumatic brain injuries and spinal cord injuries. The agency serves eligible South Carolinians by ensuring access to high-quality support services.

One of the first and most crucial steps for families seeking assistance is a diagnostic evaluation to determine DDSN eligibility. Once eligible, individuals can access a range of services, including case management, early intervention for young children and long-term support through Medicaid-funded programs.

The Autism Division of DDSN is dedicated to improving the quality of life for individuals with autism by ensuring they receive the support, advocacy and resources they need to thrive. The division focuses on four key areas:

1. Eligibility & Evaluations

- Ensuring timely and accurate eligibility evaluations for children and adults.
- Collaborating with health care professionals, educators and families to identify individuals with autism as early as possible.

2. Advocacy & Awareness

- Promoting inclusion, acceptance and understanding

of autism in the community.

- Partnering with organizations to create sensory-friendly events at places like the SC State Museum, Riverbanks Zoo and Garden and Edventure Children's Museum.

3. Resource Identification

- Connecting individuals and families with therapy, vocational training, respite care and social support networks.
- Helping caregivers access Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waivers, such as:
 - Community Supports Waiver
 - Intellectual Disability/Related Disabilities (ID/RD) Waiver
 - Head and Spinal Cord Injury (HASCI) Waiver

4. Collaboration & Partnerships

- Working with community organizations, nonprofits and advocacy groups to expand available services.
- Sharing resources and best practices to improve outcomes for individuals with autism.

One of DDSN's biggest efforts in spreading awareness and resources is AutismConnect, an annual event bringing together families, professionals and advocates. Mark your calendar for April 2, 2025, at the Brooklyn Banquet and Conference Center to learn more about available services and hear from experts in the autism community.

Whether you're a parent, educator or advocate, there are ways you can support individuals with autism in your community:

- ✓ Attend AutismConnect 2025 to learn about resources.
- ✓ Encourage businesses and organizations to adopt sensory-friendly practices.
- ✓ Educate yourself and others about autism acceptance.

To learn more about DDSN services or to check eligibility, visit ddsn.sc.gov or follow them on social media for updates on events and resources.

"Individuals with autism have unique strengths and abilities. Our goal is to promote acceptance, inclusion and access to opportunities that allow them to thrive," says Stephanie Turner, autism division director at DDSN.

EMBRACING THE JOURNEY By Cynthia O. Ford



Kiondra Bell and family

MULLINS -For Kiondra Bell, motherhood has been a journey of learning, patience and advocacy. When her daughter, Mylee, was diagnosed with autism at just two years old in 2020, Bell was faced with a new reality—one that required her to navigate an unfamiliar world of developmental milestones, educational resources and societal misconceptions. Through it all, she has become a passionate advocate, not only for her daughter but for greater autism awareness and acceptance within her community.

Like many parents, Bell first noticed subtle differences in Mylee's development. "The first thing was when I called her name, and she wouldn't respond," she recalls. "Her

attention span was short unless it was something she was really interested in, like a certain texture or object." She also observed repetitive movements, such as rocking and hand play, which led her to seek an evaluation.

Despite initial doubts about whether it was too early for a diagnosis, Bell soon realized that early intervention would be key to helping Mylee thrive. Since then, her daughter has made incredible progress. "Now, she's reading, expressing her emotions and learning in her own unique way," Bell proudly shares.

One of the biggest challenges Bell faced was accepting the diagnosis.

EMBRACING THE JOURNEY CONT'D

"At first, there was a lot of self-doubt. I questioned whether we should have waited before getting her evaluated," she admits. "We also worried about how others would perceive her and whether she would be treated differently."

However, as time passed, Bell's perspective shifted. "Autism taught me patience in a whole new way," she says. "It gave me a different level of understanding—not just for Mylee, but for people in general. Everyone learns differently, and that's okay."

Breaking Down Misconceptions

Throughout her journey, Bell has encountered many misconceptions about autism. One of the most frustrating, she says, is the assumption that autistic individuals are "slow" or incapable of learning. "They just learn differently, not less," she emphasizes. "People assume you have to break things down letter by letter, but autistic children can grasp concepts just as well as anyone else, sometimes even faster. The key is understanding how they process information."

She also believes that autism should not define a person. "Mylee is more than her diagnosis," she says. "She's an artist, a dancer and a creative spirit. Autism is just one part of who she is, not the whole picture."

While Bell has worked tirelessly to ensure Mylee receives the resources she needs, finding adequate support has not been easy. "Autism services and resources are extremely limited where we live," she explains. "We've had to travel for therapies like occupational and physical therapy, and many local daycare centers lack trained staff to accommodate children with special needs."

She believes schools can do more to support autistic students, starting with regular check-ins and more inclusive programs. "Schools should meet with parents every 30 to 45 days, not just during annual IEP meetings," she suggests. "Parents also need better access to information about their child's rights. Many don't even know what resources are available to them."

Her biggest advice to parents is navigating the education

system. "Advocate for your child. You know their strengths and challenges better than anyone else. Be involved in their IEP, call meetings when necessary and never stop pushing for the support they deserve."

Bell sees autism awareness campaigns as a step in the right direction, but she emphasizes that awareness alone is not enough. "It's great that more people are talking about autism, but we need more action—more resources, more programs and more trained professionals in our communities," she says. She envisions a future where inclusive education, employment and recreational opportunities are the norm. "Imagine if every daycare and after-school program had trained staff for autistic children. Imagine workplaces offering accommodations like quiet workspaces or noise-canceling headphones. Those small changes could make a huge difference."

As Mylee grows, Bell remains hopeful about her future. "I want her to be independent and thrive in whatever career she chooses," she says. "I don't want people to see her autism first—I want them to see her talent, intelligence and creativity."

Mylee already has a strong sense of self. "She loves to draw, dance and even cook," Bell shares. "She's so creative, and I just want her to have the same opportunities as any other child."

For parents who are newly navigating an autism diagnosis, Bell offers these words of wisdom: "Don't be too hard on yourself. Your child is still your child. Learn about autism, but more importantly, learn about your child. Establish a routine—it will be your best friend. Most of all, find support. You are not alone."

She also reminds parents to embrace the journey. "Autism is not an end, it's just a different path. And sometimes, that path leads to the most beautiful destinations."

Through her advocacy, resilience and unwavering love for her daughter, Bell is proving that autism is not a limitation—it's simply another way of seeing the world. With the right support, understanding and acceptance, every autistic child has the potential to shine.

ASD RESOURCE SUPPORT PROGRAM Submitted by Lisa Raison, ASD resource support teacher West Florence High School



Calming Room. This is a quiet place where students go to re-regulate when they are overly anxious, and/or upset. Sometimes they will get overstimulated in the general education classroom by lights, loud noise, etc. and when this happens, they are no longer able to focus on instruction or work.

I manage the ASD Resource Support Program at West Florence High School. This program was put into place for teenagers who need non-traditional special education support in order to be successful in their regular classes. The teens that I teach have autism, ADHD, anxiety disorder and/or depression. All of my students have the ability to earn a regular high school diploma. In fact, a vast majority of my students are in honors classes and some even take AP classes.

These students need support in social emotional skills and executive functioning skills. These are what I like to call life skills. I work on teaching skills such as time management,

organization, planning and prioritizing, emotional regulation, impulsiveness, flexible thinking, communicating and focus. Once they learn some techniques on how to improve in these areas, they really shine at school, clubs and part time jobs.

I also have a Calming Room that students may use when they need a quiet place to re-regulate their emotions or take a test with minimal peer and sensory distractions.

In the ASD Resource Program, we practice skills such as: public speaking, giving presentations, mock job interviews, cooking skills, meal planning, keeping a calendar/agenda, using different techniques when feeling stressed, self-advocacy, budgeting, study skills, reading a college syllabus and finding an organizational system that works for each of them. It is my goal to provide my students with all of the tools necessary to be successful after they graduate high school.

I feel extremely blessed to be given the opportunity to work with my students every day on this unique program. Students who are neurodivergent are not that different from you or me. They want to be accepted for who they are, differences and all. Their challenges are just different from our own. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and we all yearn to be accepted for who we are. I am thankful to Florence One for putting a program in place that meets the needs of our neurodivergent students.

BREAKING THE SILENCE: PLAYING A ROLE IN SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

By Kionnie Epps



Tracey Miller

April is Sexual Assault Prevention Month, a time to raise awareness, challenge misconceptions and equip individuals with the tools to foster safer communities. While this topic can be difficult to discuss, it is essential to acknowledge its impact and commit to prevention. At the forefront of these efforts is the Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Assault, a beacon of hope for survivors and an advocate for education, awareness and change.

A Calling to Make a Difference

Tracey Miller, director of Prevention Programs at Pee Dee Coalition, never imagined she would dedicate her life to this work. But after working in an after-school program and recognizing the warning signs of childhood sexual abuse, she knew she had to do more. "I always share with people that I did not choose this profession, it chose me," she said. Now, with over 20 years of experience in prevention education, Miller continues to fight for a future where children, teens and adults can live free from fear and harm.

Education is the First Line of Defense

The Pee Dee Coalition offers several prevention programs designed to reach all age groups. Their Reducing Our Assault Risk (ROAR) program teaches tweens, teens and young adults about consent, healthy relationships and bystander intervention. For younger children, Talk About Touch provides age-appropriate activities that help them recognize unsafe situations and identify trusted adults they can turn to.

For parents, educators and caregivers, Stewards of Children is a practical training program that enhances child protective behaviors. Women and girls ages 12 and older can also participate in Rape Aggression Defense (RAD), a hands-on self-defense program that builds confidence and personal safety skills.

"No one ever expects to experience sexual violence

but being informed and prepared can make all the difference," Miller emphasized. "These programs aren't just about learning, they're about empowerment." Beyond education, the coalition provides essential support services for survivors, including 24-hour crisis intervention, trauma advocacy, legal assistance and emergency shelter for victims of family violence.

Dispelling Myths, Changing Mindsets

One of the biggest obstacles to preventing sexual assault is misinformation. "A common misconception is that sexual assault is about what a person was wearing or whether they were drinking," Miller said. "The truth is sexual assault is never the survivor's fault. It is a violent act committed by the perpetrator."

Another widespread myth is that sexual assault only happens between strangers. In reality, 80 percent of survivors know their attacker. Additionally, male survivors often face stigma, leading to significant underreporting. By addressing these misconceptions, Pee Dee Coalition hopes to shift public perception and encourage more open conversations.



LAWFUL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Amber Flowers

Over the past 30 years, the response to child sexual abuse and criminal sexual conduct has become increasingly coordinated. Law enforcement, the judicial system, hospitals and child advocacy centers are now working more cohesively to support victims.

Flowers, an investigator with the Florence County Sheriff's Office, focuses on cases involving child sex crimes and sexual assault. She has been with the department since 2018 and says working there was always her goal. Her mother, a longtime employee of the sheriff's office, was skeptical when Amber said as a child that she would one day join the team—but now, the two work in different departments within the same agency.

In her role, Flowers investigates cases involving special victims, which include children, the elderly and women—often members of vulnerable populations who have experienced abuse. She works to gather evidence and help bring offenders to justice.

Child sexual abuse is one of the most prominent crimes against special victims. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, child sexual abuse includes any interaction between a child and an adult—or another child—

used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. This can involve both physical contact and non-contact behaviors. The organization emphasizes the importance of raising public awareness about the impact of child traumatic stress and expanding access to services for affected children and families.

According to South Carolina Child Advocacy Centers (CACs), 13,143 children were served in 2023. Of those, 40 percent reported some form of sexual abuse—the most frequently reported type—while 27 percent reported physical abuse. In Florence County, The CARE House receives referrals from advocates and investigators within the Sheriff's Office. This partnership helps build coordinated plans to apprehend and prosecute offenders while minimizing the retraumatization of victims, especially during interviews or court proceedings.

Flowers said investigators are on rotating shifts, on call 24 hours one week and off the next. When cases are reported by hospitals, she and other investigators work with sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs) to collect evidence and follow up with victims as quickly as possible.

Law enforcement, medical professionals and CARE House staff meet weekly to review cases and streamline communication. This multidisciplinary team helps ensure that no critical information is overlooked. In cases of abuse and assault, victims remain the top priority and collaboration is key to holding offenders accountable.

PROTECTING OUR FUTURE: DURANT'S CHILDREN CENTER By Kionnie Epps



Katy Brown

Child abuse is a topic often left unspoken, yet it remains a pervasive issue affecting thousands of children every year. At the forefront of prevention and intervention efforts in Florence, South Carolina, is Durant's Children Center, a child advocacy organization dedicated to supporting young survivors and educating the community about abuse prevention.

Katy Brown, a program coordinator at Durant's Children Center, has devoted the past 18 years to serving children impacted by abuse. Her journey began unexpectedly while studying at Francis Marion University, where she interned at the center as part of her graduation requirements.

"I didn't plan for this to be my career, but it turned out to be such fulfilling work," Brown said. "After graduation, I applied for a position as an advocate, and I've been here ever since." Now in a prevention role, Brown visits schools and speaks to children about abuse, teaching them how to protect themselves and seek help.

Be Adults Kids Can Trust

Durant's Children Center serves as a safe space for children who have disclosed abuse. The center collaborates with law enforcement and the Department of Social Services to investigate cases. It also provides counseling services to children who have experienced abuse or trauma, even if they are not the direct victims.

"Child abuse is a major issue that isn't talked about enough in our community," Brown said. "Only about one-third of child abuse cases get reported. Kids are afraid, and abusers often tell them to keep it a secret. We have to be the adults they can trust and believe in."

There is no single sign of abuse, but Brown stresses the

importance of being a supportive adult in a child's life. Whether in schools, neighborhoods or recreation centers, adults should remain vigilant and provide a safe space for children to talk and disclose concerns.

Stranger Danger?

With the rise of social media and digital exposure, Brown notes that prevention efforts must evolve. "Kids feel safe behind a screen, but they can be exposed to inappropriate material that impacts them more than they realize," she said. "The biggest misconception is that strangers are the primary threat. In reality, 93 percent of abused children knew their offender."

Early intervention is critical in helping children heal. Many victims do not disclose abuse immediately, which is why fostering open, ongoing conversations is essential. "If we keep the lines of communication open, children will feel safe enough to come forward when they're ready," Brown said.

A Call to Action for the Community

Preventing child abuse is a community-wide responsibility. Brown urges adults to take an active role in ensuring children's safety. "Child abuse prevention is not a child's responsibility, it's an adult issue," she said. "We can educate children about reporting abuse, but if they don't encounter safe adults, they won't get the help they need."

She encourages parents and caregivers to consider who their child's safe adults are, both within and outside the family. "Children might not go to a family member because of fear or family turmoil. That's why we stress the importance of trusted adults like teachers, coaches and even bus drivers," she said.

As Durant's Children Center continues its mission, Brown hopes to see greater community involvement in protecting children. "It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a community to keep them safe," she said.

For more information on how to support child abuse prevention efforts, visit Durant's Children Center or reach out to local advocacy organizations.

BREAKING CYCLES, BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES By Kionnie Epps



Sharon Woodham

life-changing choice.

After graduating, she began volunteering at the Pee Dee Coalition, where her passion and potential were quickly recognized. Since 2006, she has dedicated herself to supporting the organization's mission. "This is not just work for me; it's so much deeper," Woodham said. "My program is nonjudgmental. My parents feel safe, not judged. People are broken, and we need support."

At the heart of Woodham's work is the Parent Education and Parent Support (PEPS) program. This free parenting and skill-building course helps parents strengthen their relationships with their children and create a stable home environment. It offers a space where parents can learn, share and grow in a safe, supportive setting.

The 12-week program includes two-hour classes led by trained facilitators. Some parents attend voluntarily, while others are referred by the Department of Social Services (DSS) as part of the reunification process with their children. Regardless of the reason, participants find the program helpful in breaking generational cycles of trauma and learning healthier parenting techniques. "Your child does not have to be part of the cycle," Woodham emphasized.

With children being exposed to mature content earlier than ever due to social media and digital access, the coalition has adapted its educational and prevention strategies. "We have so many resources here at the coalition to meet parents where they are," Woodham said. "We invite our parents into different practices to help them navigate these new challenges." Parents are encouraged to model good digital habits, perform regular checks on their children's devices, review browsing histories and set clear expectations for online behavior. "Parents are, and always will be, their child's first teacher," she said.

Many parents struggle with discussing topics like consent, boundaries and healthy relationships, often because of their own past experiences. "A lot of parents are uncomfortable with these conversations, which can be a major barrier," Woodham shared. "We also have parents who have stayed in abusive relationships for stability, and sometimes abuse is a learned behavior." Through the coalition's programs, parents gain the awareness and tools needed to make better choices. Research, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, has shown that childhood trauma has long-term effects. However, with the right support, those cycles can be broken. "When you know better, you can do better," Woodham said.

Above all, Woodham wants parents to know they are not alone. The PEPS program is not about judging parenting skills but enhancing them. "Our classes are a safe space," she said. "I encourage parents to try them. Don't look at it like a parenting class—it's more of a support group." Many parents walk away with a renewed perspective. "Parents always say, 'This is more than what I expected it to be. It was more than I could ever imagine,'" Woodham said.

The work of the Pee Dee Coalition is changing lives, one family at a time. By equipping parents with the tools they need, the coalition is building stronger families and creating a safer future for the next generation. For those seeking guidance, support and community, the doors of the Pee Dee Coalition are always open.



HONORING THE STATE'S MOST DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS Submitted by Together SC

Governor Henry McMaster of South Carolina, Together SC, United Way Association of SC and AmeriCorps SC are proud to announce the recipients of the 2025 South Carolina Governor's Volunteer Awards, which celebrate the remarkable contributions of volunteers across the state. These awards recognize individuals and organizations whose service has strengthened communities and improved lives, from disaster relief efforts to youth advocacy, business engagement and nonprofit leadership.

The winners were honored on February 26, 2025, during the SC Nonprofit Summit in Columbia, SC—South Carolina's largest gathering of nonprofit leaders, community champions and corporate partners committed to service and social impact.

"Volunteers are the backbone of strong communities," said Karen Riordan, president & CEO of Together SC. "We are thrilled to recognize these extraordinary individuals and organizations for their leadership and dedication to serving South Carolina."

"Our 2025 Governor's Volunteer Award honorees embody a true service ethic," said Missy Santorum, chairperson of the SC Commission on National and Community Service (AmeriCorps SC). "Each in their own right are inspirational for their profound gift of their time, effort and love for their neighbors and for their fellow Americans."

Lifetime of Service Honoree: Rev. Dr. Reginald Thackston

A lifelong advocate for education, reentry programs and racial reconciliation, Thackston has dedicated his life to building bridges, mentoring youth and supporting communities in need across South Carolina.

Nominated by: Alston Wilkes Society

Legacy Volunteer of the Year: Peter A. Moore

A Spartanburg Regional Hospice volunteer since 2001, Moore has led community support and fundraising efforts to ensure compassionate care for families facing end-of-life challenges.

Nominated by: Spartanburg Regional Foundation

Youth Volunteer of the Year: Kailani Atkinson

As the International Ambassador for Champion Autism Network, Atkinson began her volunteer journey at just five years old, advocating for autism awareness, accessibility and inclusion.

Nominated by: Bryanne Atkinson

Direct Service Volunteer of the Year: Pamela J. Fall, M.D.

Fall has provided critical medical services to uninsured and underserved South Carolinians, ensuring access to quality health care and improving health outcomes statewide.

Nominated by: Community Medical Clinic of Aiken County

Robin Burns Volunteer Administrator of the Year: Angelina Williams

A U.S. military veteran and AmeriCorps SC alum, Williams has mentored dozens of civic leaders and expanded financial

stability programs for vulnerable South Carolinians through Trident United Way.

Nominated by: United Way Association of South Carolina/SC Service Commission



Sabrina Lalaria Samuel

AmeriCorps SC Member of the Year: Sabrina Lalaria Samuel

Samuel has played a key role in screening over 71,400 children across all 46 counties for vision impairments, helping thousands receive critical early intervention care.

Nominated by: Impact America



Joshua Shumak

Community Leader of the Year: Joshua Shumak

Through his role as Native American Affairs Program Coordinator at the SC Commission for Minority Affairs, Shumak has advanced policy and advocacy efforts benefiting South Carolina's 14 recognized tribal entities.

Nominated by: Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians

Community Volunteer Group of the Year: Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County Youth Board



Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County Youth Board

This dedicated youth board has championed mental health awareness and substance abuse prevention programs, empowering young leaders to create lasting change in their communities.

Nominated by: Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County

Business Volunteer Group of the Year: Joye Law Firm

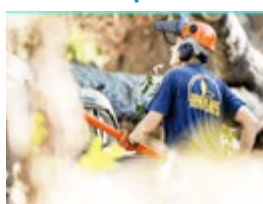


Joye Law Firm

Since 2016, Joye Law Firm has supported Landmarks for Families (formerly Carolina Youth Development Center), hosting an annual End-of-Summer Splash Party to bring joy to foster children in North Charleston.

Nominated by: Landmarks for Families

Disaster Response Volunteer Group of the Year: South Carolina Baptist Disaster Relief - SC Baptist Disaster Relief



SC Baptist Disaster Relief

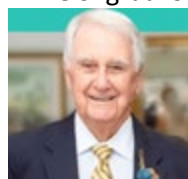
(SCBDR) volunteers played a critical role in the wake of Hurricane Helene, serving over 43,400 meals and assisting 1,300 families with cleanup and recovery efforts.

Nominated by: United Way Association of SC/AmeriCorps SC

Honoring South Carolina's Volunteer Spirit

The Governor's Volunteer Awards recognize the power of service to build a stronger, more connected South Carolina. These awardees embody compassion, leadership and action—values that our nonprofit community celebrate everyday.

For more information on the Governor's Volunteer Awards visit togethersc.org/governors-volunteer-awards.



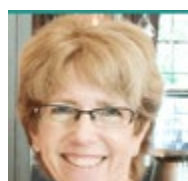
Rev. Dr. Reginald Thackston



Peter A. Moore



Kailani Atkinson



Pamela J. Fall, M.D.



Angelina Williams

MARY ALICE BOWLES HONORED AS VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR AT MCLEOD Submitted by McLeod Health



Mary Alice Bowles, the 2024 Volunteer of the Year, is pictured with Linda Boone, director of volunteer services for McLeod Regional Medical Center.

McLeod Regional Medical Center named Mary Alice Bowles as the Volunteer of the Year for 2024 during the Annual Volunteer Recognition Luncheon held at the Hellenic Center on February 6, 2025.

Bowles is the 37th recipient of the McLeod Volunteer of the Year award. She volunteers in Cardiac Rehabilitation, Oncology and Pastoral Care as well as several other areas where she is called to serve.

In presenting the award to Bowles, Linda Boone, director of Volunteer Services for McLeod, shared, "Mary Alice has volunteered at McLeod for nearly 16 years. She is dedicated to the patients of McLeod and serves quietly with a true servant's heart. Her sweet gentle presence will also put anyone at ease. Even though she is quiet we want her to know we see the difference that she makes during her time at McLeod and that she is appreciated."

"This year, she has completed 370 hours although her cumulative total hours since she started volunteering is more than 4,500. Thank you, Mary Alice, for giving of your time and talent at McLeod Regional Medical Center," added Boone.

In addition to the Volunteer of the Year announcement, Myra Bennett was recognized with the Most Clinical Hours* in 2024, with 405 and Victoria Gimla received the Most Crafting Hours with 1,952 hours.

More than 225 volunteers who contribute outstanding service to McLeod Regional Medical Center were honored for

their service during 2024. These dedicated individuals contributed more than 40,000 volunteer hours to the hospital over the past year.

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

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



TAKING ACTIONS THROUGH VOLUNTEER INITIATIVES Submitted by Ivanah Hourizene



Students of the GSSM NAACP attending the DEI Symposium led by leaders, Gael Valverde Taipe and Dallas Crosby and advisor Antonio de Ridder

HARTSVILLE - At the Governor's School for Science and Mathematics, our NAACP's goal is to work towards civil awareness within Hartsville. We strive to provide an area of community where people can excel and give back to various marginalized identities. We take actions through volunteer initiatives that range from school-wide, local and community based. Some of these activities include our recent celebration for Women of Color in our school's Student Activity

Center, our campaigning for representatives of color like Gerald Malloy, and our volunteer history at a recent DEI Symposium at Hartsville's local Mt Calvary Baptist Church.

Throughout our work with DEI Symposium, we helped provide the proper platform for our guests to have a proper environment to acknowledge community leaders and discuss current issues affecting our diverse communities. To start, we helped set tables to ensure the guests were properly prepared for the event. Members of our branch then greeted individuals at the door, served those in need of food and spread knowledge on societal issues during the convention. Through these interactions, we were able to get to know some of the individuals that our cause is based on and learn more about their experiences. We also engaged in discussions that allowed us to enrich our knowledge on social injustices. These discussions introduced us to new perspectives and helped us gain different understandings

on the issues within our community.

The group leadership includes leadership Gael Valverde Taipe vice president, Dallas Crosby, president and Antonio de Ridder, club advisor. We are driven to help with more events and help spur important discussions that need to happen in the moment. Please feel free to reach out to gvalverde25@governors.school, dcrosby25@governors.school, and deridder@governors.school if you have any local volunteering opportunities, you believe we could help with.



Members of the GSSM NAACP greeting attendees (pictured Truman Seban and Sanai Burris)



Downtown Florence was supported by **1,350 volunteer hours** and **365 volunteers** in 2024! Thank you to all who supported our programs, events, and activities! To get involved, visit our website at www.florencedowntown.com.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS IN DOWNTOWN FLORENCE Submitted by the Florence Downtown Development Office Staff



SC Pecan Music and Food Festival Volunteers. Photo Credit True Light Photography.

One of the key tenets of Main Street work is the organization, activation and management of volunteers. Since 2020, Downtown Florence has grown its volunteer program participation by over 68 percent. In 2024, Downtown Florence was supported by 1,350 volunteer hours from 365 volunteers, valued at \$44,954.21!

Volunteers are critical to Main Street work because they increase the capacity of downtown programs, services and events while offering the local community pathways to plug into redevelopment efforts and increase community connection to our historic places and civic pride overall for Florence. Downtown Florence volunteers primarily work supporting special events, programs and special projects, bringing diverse skill sets such as project management, customer service and project-specific skills to the table.

"My main reason for volunteering was to have an opportunity to interact with the people of Florence. As someone who had witnessed the transformation of downtown, I had a different view and different outlook on what Florence was becoming. Volunteering allowed me to talk about downtown, which many people didn't know much about. It gave me the chance to share the history and the significance of the changes that have occurred," said Stacey Rowell, a six-year volunteer veteran with the Downtown Florence Main Street Program.

Downtown Florence has a long history of working with volunteers—from special event support with tasks ranging from beautification and route support for runners at the SC Pecan Music

and Food Festival to special project committee support and service on the Florence Downtown Development Corp. Board of Directors. Early in revitalization and reactivation efforts, volunteers worked to establish the Downtown Florence Historic District, evaluate property conditions and spearhead local activation efforts. That catalyst work led to the development of the Downtown Florence Main Street Program, a quasi-public partnership between the City of Florence and Florence Downtown Development Corp., which over its twenty-three-year history has positioned itself as a national leader in place-based revitalization work. The program won the Great American Main Street Award in 2023, Main Street America's highest honor, and became South Carolina's only Accredited Program winner and second downtown in the state (Greenville won in 2003) to win the award.

"I grew up in an atmosphere where we were doing and helping and spending time with people, and if people needed help, you just helped them, and that way it was. So that translates for me to just wanting to be in my community doing anything I can to serve the people in whatever form or fashion that is, whether it's just helping them to have a good time, pointing them in the direction of where I know things are and any kind of small thing just to help people enjoy, being a smiling face that can answer a question or whatever, just simple as that. I'm not sure exactly the time frame, but I've been volunteering for a long time—at least since Florence After 5 was in a field behind Hotel Florence," shared Tim Griggs, a longtime program volunteer.

In 2024, Downtown Florence made it even easier for prospective volunteers to plug into the Main Street program and connect to opportunities offered by downtown partner organizations with the launch of Lend a Hand Downtown, an online aggregation of volunteer opportunities downtown wide. The portal offers direct connection to each featured downtown organization's volunteer web pages making it quick and easy to find the variety of opportunities available. The portal can be found at www.florencedowntown.com/lend-a-hand-downtown.

MENTORING FOR SUCCESS By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Tabitha D. James

DILLON-Tabitha D. James, creator of the mentoring organization, SHE is Me, recognizes the importance of volunteers in helping reach a broad sector of young ladies who need assistance. SHE is Me fosters a space for young ladies to grow and holistically thrive in society. The organization is built on scholarship, effectiveness and humanitarianism which encourages future leaders. James said, "SHE is Me offers structured mentoring support"

for young ladies who face barriers to access of programs that empower them. The outreach demographic is primarily young ladies in grades seven-12 from the Pee Dee area of South Carolina. Several members are high achieving scholars and participate in athletics and school organizations.

The program has been funded through participant and family contributions, grants, donations and crowdfunding, ensuring young women in the service areas have access to life-changing opportunities and resources they might not otherwise receive. A safe space is provided for them to explore experiential learning and personal development. For participants without positive role models or examples of successful careers, SHE is Me provides the guidance and support they need. For those who do, the program serves as an added pillar in their village, reinforcing their journey to success. The program encourages participants to explore their personal backgrounds and engage in meaningful conversations with peers about shared experiences. SHE is Me also mentors at the collegiate level, following alumni, scholarship recipients and others through early adulthood.

James herself has a long history of mentoring, as a student and graduate student at Coastal Carolina University and Florida Atlantic University, and before that, as a high school student. Her passion for mentorship grew through her involvement in various organizations, including Girls Like Us, where she remained active until its dissolution in 2017.



Group Session

Retaining the lessons learned from that experience and others, she built SHE is Me with an emphasis on relatability and trust. James describes her connection to mentees as that of a big sister or aunt, believing that to build strong, trusting relationships with young people, one must invest time, actively listen and be patient with individual personalities.

This creative program and much of its success is due to the volunteers who give their time to mentor the young ladies and develop the program. James spotlights Reghan Timmons who since 2020, has immersed herself in supporting the sustainability of the program, especially on the backend. Longtime volunteers Shirice Lesane and Danielle Fladger, both former mentees of James' during college, have remained committed to making meaningful connections with program participants and alumni.

James was happy and somber to share that she appreciated the impact of the mentee turned mentor, Ira'Keeya Dawkins, who was the first graduate of the program. Sadly, Dawkins passed away in 2024, but her impact is long lasting. She overcame obstacles to attend and graduate from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College and was excited to kickstart her career. "She went through the model, and it worked," James expressed. "We consider it a privilege to serve as an extension of the families we support, a part of their village. We take this role with the utmost responsibility and care."



A LEGACY OF VOLUNTEERISM AND COMMUNITY IMPACT By Cynthia O. Ford



The heart of MCCAN's efforts are volunteers from left to right Cynthia Ford, Cynthia Young and Ronette Genwright

The Marion County Collaborative Action Network (MCCAN) has been a pillar of support in Marion County, South Carolina, for over two decades. The program began in 1998, receiving funding from The Duke Endowment in 2002. Though the funding ended in 2007, dedicated volunteers continued serving the community, ensuring critical resources remained accessible to residents.

At the heart of MCCAN's efforts are volunteers like Cynthia Young and Ronette Genwright, who have been actively assisting citizens for over 20 years. Cynthia Ford, another dedicated volunteer, has been serving for 15 years, ensuring local residents receive reliable tax assistance. Through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, they have helped countless residents file their taxes accurately while saving the community thousands of dollars in preparation fees. VITA, an IRS-backed program, provides free tax preparation services to low- and moderate-income individuals, people with disabilities and elderly taxpayers. Their collective efforts have alleviated financial stress for many in Marion County, allowing individuals to keep more of their hard-earned money.

To maintain accuracy and stay updated on tax law changes, MCCAN's VITA volunteers receive annual training and certification through the IRS. This ensures they are equipped to provide the most current and reliable tax preparation assistance. The training covers tax code updates, new deductions and credits and filing procedures, ensuring every return is completed correctly. This ongoing education helps volunteers confidently assist taxpayers while maintaining high

standards of service.

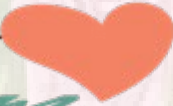
The VITA program in Marion County once operated out of three locations, increasing accessibility for residents across the area. However, due to limited space availability and the need for more volunteers, the program has been consolidated into a single location as of 2025. This transition was made possible thanks to the efforts of Jacqueline Troy-Johnson, who has helped ensure the program continues serving the community efficiently.

The cost of professional tax preparation can be a burden, particularly for families already struggling to make ends meet. MCCAN's volunteers provide a vital service that not only saves money but also ensures tax returns are completed correctly. By maximizing tax refunds and helping filers claim eligible deductions and credits, the program directly contributes to the financial well-being of the community. VITA services are particularly important in rural communities like Marion County, where access to affordable financial assistance can be limited. The dedication of volunteers means residents do not have to travel far or spend excessive amounts on professional tax services.

April is recognized nationally as Volunteer Appreciation Month, a time to highlight the invaluable contributions of individuals who selflessly give their time to help others. In Marion County, this recognition is especially meaningful as volunteers like Young, Genwright and Ford continue to provide essential services that many rely on year after year.

Their commitment extends beyond tax season. These volunteers build relationships with those they serve, fostering trust and a sense of community. Their efforts not only help families but also strengthen the county's overall economic stability.

MCCAN's history proves that impactful initiatives do not have to end when funding runs out. Passionate individuals can sustain meaningful change through commitment and service. More than 25 years after its inception, the network continues making a difference, ensuring residents have access to resources that improve their lives. As Volunteer Appreciation Month unfolds, the community celebrates the dedication of those who give their time to make Marion County a better place. Their work serves as a reminder that a single act of service can have a lasting impact.

Heartfelt 
THANKS
TO OUR VOLUNTEERS!

DUKE ENERGY ENGAGING THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE *By Les Echols*

Andrea Wages

Tuesday, April 22, 2025, marks the 55th anniversary of Earth Day. This year's theme, "Our Power, Our Planet," highlights the importance of global environmental awareness and action. For more than five decades, Earth Day has inspired communities worldwide to advocate for the health of our air, oceans, soil, ecosystems, wildlife and human well-being.

Duke Energy is actively transitioning to increasingly clean energy sources as part of its commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Diversity Works caught up with Andrea Wages, stakeholder engagement principal for Duke Energy in South Carolina. In her role, Wages focuses on advancing Duke Energy's regulated renewable energy portfolio in support of the company's clean energy transformation. This includes developing and delivering engagement strategies for the growing portfolio of solar, battery energy storage and land-based wind projects in the Carolinas.

"My work at Duke Energy is to identify opportunities to engage the communities we serve regarding development to demonstrate respect for our neighbors," Wages said. "This engagement could be related to land use, building ordinances, zoning laws and environmental concerns."

Projects aimed at improving reliability include the development of a utility-scale solar center in Darlington and Chesterfield counties near the Robinson Nuclear Plant. The project will provide fuel-free power to meet the increasing energy needs of the Pee Dee region while supporting the state's transition to cleaner energy.

Duke Energy is also investing in

battery energy storage systems, including one in Ridgeway, as part of its long-term strategy to support sustainable technologies in South Carolina.

"South Carolina continues to develop at a rapid pace, with Duke Energy powering thousands of businesses in the state and working with industry leaders to keep their operations running and achieve their own sustainable energy goals," Wages said. "We do this while also working to keep rates well below the national average for both residential and business customers."

With more than 830,000 retail electric customers in South Carolina, Duke Energy plays a vital role in planning for the region's continued growth.

"We are at a critical point in planning for South Carolina's reliable energy future," Wages said. "Duke Energy needs to build and enable large amounts of new generation quickly to keep up with the success our state is seeing in economic development and growth."

The projects Wages supports will benefit both residents and businesses. In addition to environmental advantages such as zero air emissions and minimal

water use, these developments bring economic benefits by creating construction jobs and increasing the tax base in local communities.

"Finally, I will share that it is truly a joy to work with my team in South Carolina and get to know the communities we serve throughout the state," Wages said. "I am excited every day to share in the growth of new developments that enhance reliability for our customers through new and innovative energy technologies. We ask that the community continue to serve as partners and share ways for us to provide value as a company to our consumers and their loved ones."

Born and raised in Detroit, Wages graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in computer science from Jackson State University. She also earned a professional development certificate in energy innovation and emerging technologies from Stanford University and completed the McKinsey & Company Management Accelerator Cohort in 2023.

Wages and her husband, Ron, live just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, and are the proud parents of three children.

EARTH DAY NATIVE TREE GIVEAWAY

Presented by the City of Florence & Duke Energy in partnership with Keep Florence Beautiful, Naturally Outdoors, and the SC Forestry Commission.

Trees will be given away on a first come, first service basis. The South Carolina Forestry Commission will be present to give information on the trees, planting techniques, and answer any arbor related questions!

Native tree selections will include the following:

- Pin Oak
- Live Oak
- Red Bud
- Magnolia (Jane)
- Allee Elm
- Bald Cypress

**APRIL 22
4 - 7 PM**
*while supplies last

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OF NATURALLY
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BUILDING A SMARTER ENERGY FUTURE®



FMU RECEIVES GRANT FROM DUKE ENERGY FOUNDATION Submitted by FMU



Francis Marion University recently received a grant from Duke Energy Foundation to purchase an additional aquatic research vessel. This vessel will serve multiple purposes and provide new experiences for students.

With the addition of this research vessel, FMU faculty and students will be able to engage in immersive research opportunities including gaining large-scale experiences in water quality sampling, discharge monitoring, contour mapping, hydrological surveys, and substrate sampling.

This grant is a third in a series of grants Francis Marion has received from Duke Energy Foundation aimed at enhancing student learning in environmental studies.

"Duke Energy Foundation has long been a strong supporter of Francis Marion University," said FMU President Fred Carter. "This generous grant will play a pivotal role in providing additional aquatic opportunities for our students, especially those studying biology and environmental science. I am deeply appreciative of the support Duke Energy continues to provide."

In 2019, Duke Energy Foundation also awarded a grant to FMU for the purchase of an electrofishing vessel. This vessel

greatly benefits the university's Biology and Environmental Science and Studies programs. It is used in a variety of courses including Fisheries Science and Management, Vertebrate Zoology, Ichthyology, Ecology, and Aquatic Ecology and provides an immersive experience, not common at most universities, to students each semester. The hands-on training students obtain through their experience with this vessel also makes them in-demand in both the job market and in internships.

Outside of the classroom, undergraduate research students complete projects that would not be possible without this vessel. To date, nine undergraduate presentations at conferences and one publication have resulted from the use of the electrofishing vessel in research. These projects have included the trophic dynamic of the fish community in the Great Pee Dee River, larval fish community assessment in the Great Pee Dee River, juvenile striped bass habitat use and the shape analysis of the longnose gar, among others.

Public outreach initiatives such as STEM Day and World Water Day, and other educational events such as pond management workshops and conferences have benefitted from the use of this vessel as well.

Prior to this most recent grant, the university was also the recipient of a grant funding another student experiential vehicle, a Winnebago, that will be used as a mobile learning lab by FMU students, particularly those in the sciences. This vehicle will enhance onsite experiences including research opportunities for students and faculty.

Duke Energy Foundation is a long-term supporter of FMU. Its contributions through the years have helped FMU expand facilities and grow programs in physics, engineering, education, nursing and biology.

ADVANCES IN MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS *By Susan Carter*

Pee Dee Mental Health Center's Roads of Independence Program. Front Row Left to Right: Ciara Martinez, Nicole Spencer, Adaje Pope Back Row Left to Right: Nisha Murphy, Nikki Farley, Bernard McIntosh

Pee Dee Mental Health Center recently implemented a new program geared to supporting young people ages 16 to 25 on their journey into adulthood. Now in its second year of operation, Pee Dee Roads of Independence (ROI)/Healthy Transitions is an initiative of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). ROI helps build the bridge for youth and young adults to receive support for a successful transition to adulthood through engagement and access to mental health services. Youth with a history of or who are at risk for mental illness, substance abuse or who have foster care or juvenile justice experience are eligible to participate. Young people who have experienced homelessness or difficulty meeting challenges related to adulting also meet criteria to receive ROI services.

PDMHC's vision for the Roads of Independence program is for young adults to receive highly individualized care that is youth-driven, culturally competent and developmentally appropriate. The center aims to ensure that young adults who may have experienced difficulty navigating mental health pathways in the past now have the necessary social support to meet their educational, career and personal goals. ROI provides individual mental health counseling, case management, transitional services, entitlement services, groups, peer support and psychosocial rehabilitation services in Florence, Marion and Darlington counties. The program also serves adults in Lamar, Hartsville, Darlington and Marion. Common concerns include help with independent living skills such as money management, housing and mental health needs, substance misuse treatment and prior or current involvement with the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Department of Social Services (DSS) and the South Carolina Department of Probation and Parole.

The ROI team consists of six PDMHC employees. Nicole Spencer, MS, serves as the program manager, and Adaje Pope, BA, is the lead youth coordinator. As the lead youth coordinator for Roads of Independence, Pope uses her time at the Drop-In Center to build meaningful connections with youth and young adults. Drawing from shared and similar experiences, she demonstrates that change is possible. As a role model, she emphasizes that success starts from within and is enhanced through support, empowerment and healing. She oversees the development and implementation of program curriculum, guiding youth through their transition from institutional care to independent living. Her role includes providing peer support services, addressing mental health challenges and ensuring that all services align with grant requirements. Additionally, she oversees and implements drop-in center activities, focusing on creating a safe, supportive environment in which youth can thrive. She

aims to empower youth to heal, grow and succeed in their journey to independence.

Peer mentor Ciara Martinez, BA, is dedicated to supporting older adolescents and young adults as they transition into adulthood. She draws from her own life experiences and offers a compassionate and understanding presence, helping peers navigate the complexities of life and establish themselves within their communities. Martinez provides more than guidance; she creates a space where young people can find their own voices, discover what they truly want for themselves and take steps toward building a meaningful life. ROI endeavors to foster hope, enable youth to see their potential and the possibilities ahead, regardless of the challenges they face. By offering emotional support, practical life skills and connection to vital resources such as education, employment and mental health services, Martinez helps young people gain the confidence and independence to move forward. Two additional peer mentors will be hired in the future, including one who will collaborate with the Afterschool Alliance program.

Bernard McIntosh serves as the community specialist and transition coordinator. His role is to educate the community about the assistance available to youth and young adults ages 16 to 25. He connects with other agencies, community groups, colleges and universities and churches to relay information about how Pee Dee Mental Health's Roads of Independence program can assist youth in adjusting to adulthood. McIntosh serves on the ROI Advisory Council, a collaboration of agencies and community service groups, to spread the word quarterly about the benefits available through the program. He also works individually with youth in the program, helping them complete their transition plan—a road map to guide them in gaining the skills necessary to reach adulthood successfully.

As Roads of Independence's administrative assistant and engagement specialist, Nisha Murphy works to improve the level of engagement satisfaction and commitment among the youth and young people the program serves. She strategizes to increase interaction, enjoyment and loyalty among participants, ensuring that the young adults feel valued and understood.

Entitlement specialist Nikki Farley assists ROI participants with the application process for insurance or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program nutrition benefits.



HEALING WITH HEART: HOW FAITH AND THERAPY TRANSFORMS LIVES By Ronette Genwright



Laquosha Smith

LORIS - From a young age, Laquosha Smith, who resides in Loris, SC, knew that she wanted to become a therapist because she wanted everyone to feel like they had someone they could talk to. This passion followed her throughout high school and college at the University of South Carolina, where she majored in psychology with a minor in criminal justice. As she began to explore the fields of psychology and mental health, she realized her passion was geared towards therapy itself-not research, but

actual therapy where she could assist people in overcoming their struggles.

This led her to pursue a Masters in Community and Agency Counseling at Winthrop University. Their program was fantastic in setting up a path toward licensure, which she completed after returning home to the Grand Strand area. Smith officially received her National Certified Counselor status in 2010 and completed her licensure supervision in 2019. In June 2021, she took a leap of faith and started, "Faithful Steps Counseling Services," to better serve her community.

Faithful Steps Counseling Services exists to encourage, empower and equip individuals for total wellness in their lives. The mission is simple: If you have faith in taking the first step, we will be there to help guide you through the rest. Growing up, she often felt like she didn't have an unbiased outlet to go to when she needed someone to talk to. This lack of space to express her emotions drove her to become a therapist-to provide that safe judgment-free outlet for others, especially those going through similar struggles. At Faithful Steps, we serve a wide variety of populations, focusing on children, adolescents, adults and families dealing with mental and behavioral health challenges.

Our clients come from different backgrounds, cultures, and walks of life, and we socialize in working with individuals facing issues such as depression, anxiety, trauma, life transitions and behavioral or social struggles. Smith's therapeutic approach is grounded in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which focuses on identifying and changing negative thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to mental health struggles. By helping clients recognize and challenge unhelpful thinking, feelings and actions, we work to develop healthier coping mechanisms and skills for life.

As a Christian, her faith plays an integral role in her life and practice. Smith believes it's important to be upfront with clients about this, ensuring transparency from the start. If appropriate, she might incorporate faith-based principles and encourage clients to explore their own spiritual practices, like prayer, if they feel comfortable doing so. However, she never forces her beliefs onto anyone; her goal is always to provide support in the way that is most meaningful to the individual. Building trust is at the heart of any therapeutic relationship.

Smith dedicates the first few sessions to getting to know her clients and letting them get to know her. Since many of her clients are children, she might engage in fun activities, such as playing basketball or shooting around, to help them to engage. Whether it's with adults or kids, she strives to create a space where clients feel heard, valued and understood. Not all clients are immediately prepared to engage, and that is acceptable. In therapy, patience is key. Smith makes it clear to the clients that she won't give up on them, and she is committed to standing beside them throughout the process.

Smith states "self-care is essential to maintaining balance." She encourages her clients to practice self-care, whether that's through hobbies, exercise or spiritual practices. She personally

finds balance through faith, church activities and connecting with nature. This balance helps her stay grounded, which is crucial in preventing burnout from the emotional demands of her work. Smith's goal for the future of Faithful Steps Counseling Services is to grow and expand to multiple locations, providing more comprehensive services to the community.

Smith believes that faith plays a significant role in overcoming mental health challenges. With God, anything is possible-but faith is the first step toward healing. Do your research and find the provider who feels right for you. Therapy is a partnership, and if you find a therapist who challenges you and encourages growth, stick with it. It's a process, but with faith and perseverance healing is possible.

GAINING SKILLS FOR BETTER DAYS

By Susan Carter



Wanda James

Wanda James manages a team of six school mental health counselors who support students from 4K through high school. She also provides direct counseling to students who attend schools not currently served by her team, including private schools, charter schools and students who are virtual or homebound.

James has worked with Pee Dee Mental Health for 11 years. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in mental health counseling. Her passion for the field began in high school after taking a psychology class that "really sparked my interest."

As a therapist for children and adolescents, James sees a wide range of concerns among the students she serves. "Attention issues, traumatic experiences, depression, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties and substance use" are among the most common, she said.

She credits the "private time and safe space" she shares with students as key to helping them gain understanding, knowledge and coping skills for better days. Her experience in school-based counseling has helped her appreciate "the energy of the students, faculty, and staff" and recognize the everyday challenges students face—challenges that her team embraces daily.

James has also noticed that conversations about mental health are becoming more common. "I think students are more aware of mental health and can easily research their symptoms or conditions online," she said. "They may also use social media to talk about what they're going through."

James has witnessed many success stories. These include a student who was able to return to school in person after receiving treatment for social anxiety, parents who shared that communication had improved at home, and a student whose grades improved after learning strategies to manage attention and complete assignments.

For families who may be hesitant to reach out to a counselor, James offers encouragement. "Think of it like going to a coach or trainer," she said. "A parent may trust a coach to help their child's condition and improve in sports or band. Counseling is similar, except the focus is on the child's mental health and behavioral well-being. Just like in sports, the parent participates by showing up, providing support, and making helpful changes at home." For those considering a career in counseling, James highlights the impact of the work. "School mental health counselors have an amazing opportunity to make a difference in the life of a child," she said. "This role allows me to be part of a team that helps shape a student's future and supports their journey to becoming a successful adult."



Crystal Jackson

SOCIETY HILL - Mental health remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of overall well-being. Despite progress, stigma continues to prevent many from seeking help, leading to long-term struggles that could have been managed with early intervention. Too often, mental illness is met with judgment rather than support, leaving individuals feeling isolated. Addressing this issue requires both awareness and action.

Crystal Jackson, a licensed professional counselor associate and certified mental health advocate, is working to change this narrative. With years of experience in the mental health field, she is dedicated to breaking barriers, educating communities and ensuring access to mental health resources. She shares her insights on advocacy, challenges in mental health care and practical ways to take action.

Jackson's path into mental health advocacy is rooted in her desire to help others. With a bachelor's in sociology from Francis Marion University and a dual master's in mental health counseling and leadership, she pursued certification as a mental health advocate and coach to assist those recovering from mental illness.

Currently, as a school-based therapist at Pee Dee Mental Health Center, Jackson supports children and adolescents. "No day is the same, and I've learned to adapt. Each child's needs differ, and I'm honored to be part of their support system," she says. She firmly believes that early intervention can change the trajectory of a young person's life, giving them the skills and support needed to thrive emotionally and mentally. Despite growing awareness, barriers to mental health care persist. Jackson identifies three major challenges: lack of education, stigma and health care disparities.

"When people are educated on mental health, they are more likely to seek help. Unfortunately, in many Black and Brown communities, mental health issues are dismissed with

phrases like 'just pray it away.' Faith-based communities can help shift this mindset," she explains. "Additionally, financial barriers, lack of health insurance and economic disparities prevent many from accessing care. However, community-based programs and free resources exist and it's important that we spread awareness about these options."

Education alone is not enough — action is essential. Jackson believes breaking the stigma starts at the individual and community level. "Ask, 'How can I help?' We must educate, empower and work together to improve mental health access."

Tangible steps to support mental health include:

- Hosting workshops and sharing mental health literature
- Encouraging workplaces to establish mental health support boards and employee assistance programs
- Schools incorporating social and emotional learning objectives and trauma-informed care initiatives
- Organizing community events like awareness days, walk-a-thons and open discussions on mental health

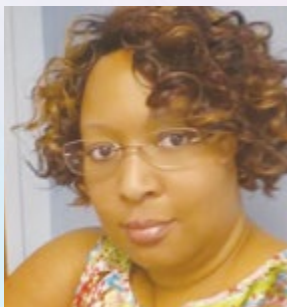
Improving access, especially in marginalized communities, requires systemic change. "Churches should provide resources and we need to engage officials in policy discussions. Advocacy isn't just about speaking up — it is about making sure the right policies and resources reach those who need them most."

Jackson prioritizes mental health by taking breaks, having a self-care day, decluttering, using affirmations, listening to podcasts and journaling. She also encourages individuals to seek out mental health support as part of their overall wellness routine, just as they would for physical health.

Looking ahead, Jackson is optimistic about the expansion of telehealth services, an increase in mental health advocates and holistic wellness approaches. With more accessible online platforms and growing conversations around mental wellness, she believes the future of mental health care is moving in the right direction.

"No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." By fostering empathy, education and action, we can create a world where mental health is valued and accessible to all.

REDUCING STIGMA THROUGH ACCESS TO CARE By Cynthia O. Ford



Allison Glasscho, School Mental Health Counselor and Program Coordinator

MARION - Allison Glasscho supervises Pee Dee Mental Health's Marion County Children's Services program. She began her employment with Pee Dee Mental Health Center in 2001 as a mental health counselor for children, teens and their families.

Glasscho holds a master's degree in counseling and chose this field because she "has an interest in helping people understand themselves more, improve and unlock their full potential."

The issues most commonly challenging students include "getting along with others, bullying, low self-esteem, difficulty focusing on schoolwork, anxiety and depression." To address these concerns, Glasscho teaches assertiveness and positive communication skills, as well as cognitive-behavioral techniques to manage anxiety and depression symptoms. What she enjoys most about working in schools is being able to, "give the students someone they know they can depend

on," and with whom they can, "safely share their feelings."

Although school-based counseling has many benefits, Glasscho notes there are also challenges. These include, "lack of parent involvement, scheduling difficulties during school testing periods and sometimes finding a private space that allows for confidentiality." Still, she acknowledges that the growth of school mental health programs has led to many positive changes in the past decade, including reduced stigma around seeking treatment.

Glasscho has witnessed numerous success stories in her work. Students who were once failing are now "managing their ADHD symptoms more effectively," and those with a history of behavioral outbursts "now have improved relationships with teachers and principals and feel that they have a support system with school authority figures."

Students and parents are encouraged to reach out to a skilled and caring school mental health counselor like Glasscho, who shares this message for those considering it: "I'm here to help you work through challenges you may be facing right now. I'm someone you can talk to about your relationships with yourself and with others, and it remains confidential."

HELPING PATIENTS LEAD FULLER LIVES By Susan Carter



Patrick Nettles

DARLINGTON - Patrick Nettles, a physician assistant with Genesis Healthcare Inc. in Darlington, is helping patients live more fulfilling lives by integrating primary care with behavioral health services. As a behavioral health provider, Nettles offers comprehensive care for adult patients facing a range of mental health challenges.

His responsibilities include diagnosing mental health conditions, prescribing medications, managing treatment plans and coordinating with other healthcare professionals. Nettles works alongside a team that includes a psychiatrist, a social worker, and other providers to ensure patients receive holistic, whole-person care. Genesis Healthcare serves patients across the lifespan, but Nettles focuses on adult populations.

Nettles frequently treats patients dealing with depression, mood disorders, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. As a physician assistant, he is licensed to diagnose and manage these conditions, including prescribing medications such as antidepressants, mood stabilizers, anti-anxiety medications and antipsychotics when appropriate.

Genesis's integrated care model allows patients to address both their physical and mental health needs in one place. Nettles emphasizes the importance of pairing medication management with psychotherapy and lifestyle changes to support long-term mental health. He often recommends cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which teaches individuals how to reframe negative thoughts and replace them with more constructive, realistic ones.

In addition, he encourages his patients to increase physical activity, choose nutrient-rich foods, and prioritize adequate sleep—habits that can improve mood, emotional regulation, and mental clarity.

Nettles earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Francis

Marion University and a Master of Science in physician assistant studies from the University of South Carolina. He also holds a Certificate of Added Qualifications (CAQ) in psychiatry, which reflects advanced expertise in mental health care.

His passion for behavioral health began when he recognized how deeply mental well-being impacts a person's overall health. "I've seen firsthand how mental health issues can affect individuals and families," Nettles said. "I wanted to be part of the solution—helping people lead fuller lives by addressing both their physical and psychological needs."

When asked how communities can better support mental wellness, Nettles pointed to education and awareness as the first steps. "We need to promote mental health literacy in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods to reduce stigma," he said.

He also emphasized the importance of access to care, advocating for the expansion of mental health services through additional community health centers and the integration of mental health support into primary care systems. Lastly, he recommended offering more community-based programs, such as peer support groups and local therapy sessions, where people with shared experiences can connect and heal together.

Recognizing when to seek help—either for yourself or a loved one—is critical to early intervention. Nettles encourages a mental health consultation if any of the following warning signs are present:

- Persistent sadness or feelings of hopelessness
- Dramatic changes in mood, behavior, or personality
- Excessive fear, worry or anxiety
- Withdrawal from friends, family or social activities
- Significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Thoughts or behaviors that interfere with work, family or daily life
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or talking about wanting to die

For more information about Genesis Healthcare Inc., including new patient paperwork, visit www.genesisfghc.org.



Genesis
Healthcare, Inc.

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HELPING STUDENTS MAKE POSITIVE CHANGES

By Susan Carter



Karyn Poston-Suggs, Pee Dee Mental Health School-based Counselor

Karyn Poston-Suggs has served as a school mental health therapist for the past year and a half. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Francis Marion University in 2020 and a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling from Liberty University in 2023.

Poston-Suggs first became interested in psychology in high school and developed a passion for counseling children and families in a school-based setting while completing undergraduate and graduate internships. "I believe that any work done during childhood sets a foundation for that child to be a more successful adult," she said.

She cites depression and anxiety as the most common mental health challenges students face, "specifically negative thoughts related to school and social interactions." To address these issues, Poston-Suggs begins by building a trusting therapeutic relationship. "I try to provide a supportive space that will allow the student to better understand their symptoms and process their thoughts and feelings. Then I help them develop coping skills to deal with these stressful situations."

School-based counseling offers flexibility, especially in accessing students. If a student is absent on the day of their scheduled session, the counselor can meet with another student in need. Being present in the school also gives counselors the opportunity to observe students' interactions, which provides "valuable information that conversation alone might not give you," said Poston-Suggs.

One of the ongoing challenges she faces is consistent parent involvement. "When parents have the mindset that their child is being seen at school, they may not engage in family therapy which is held at the community mental health center," she said.

Still, she believes the accessibility of school-based counseling leads to powerful outcomes for students and families. One of her success stories involves a student who initially struggled with attendance, socializing and academics. "I've gotten to watch her go from barely interacting with others, skipping school daily and barely passing her classes, to forming positive relationships with other students and school staff, almost perfect attendance and A/B honor roll," she said. "It's been amazing to see how she has blossomed by feeling supported and having a space to process her thoughts and feelings."

Poston-Suggs' advice to parents and students who are unsure about seeing a school mental health counselor is simple: yes. "Mental health is just as important as physical health. Counseling doesn't have to be something you utilize only when things get 'really bad.' It can also be preventative and help you learn to deal with stressful situations in advance."

The rewards of this work are clear to Poston-Suggs. While all mental health counseling is impactful, she finds school-based therapy especially fulfilling. "There is nothing like being able to see the student make positive changes for themselves in real time," she said.

"MOORE" CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Dr. Rosalyn Moore

At one time, mental health wasn't considered a necessary part of health care. During routine doctor visits, triage nurses typically asked questions related to physical health. They checked blood pressure, oxygen levels and temperature to determine what care should be provided.

In recent years, however, nurses have also been required to assess patients' mental health by asking about feelings of depression, anxiety, sadness and even suicidal ideation.

Dr. Rosalyn Moore, founder of Moore Care Therapy, believes people should receive holistic care to achieve optimal mental wellness. The motto of Moore Care Therapy is, "The Best Care Is on Your Side." The practice supports the community by combining counseling with a health psychology clinic. Their website lists an array of treatment specialties, including anxiety, depression, trauma, LGBTQ issues, gender diversity, grief and loss, health-related stress and workplace issues or career counseling.

Before becoming a therapist, Moore worked for 13 years in marketing, a field she found stressful and unfulfilling. She said her blood pressure reached dangerously high levels due to the stress. Ultimately, her faith and belief in God led her to step out on faith and pursue her calling.

In 2024, she earned a doctorate in psychology to better understand mental illness and how to help those in need. Moore left her job and launched Moore Care Therapy, located in the Leatherman Center in Florence, South Carolina. The practice offers mental health therapy and medication management.

Moore said she wants patients to understand the connection between mental and physical illness. Treatment is informed by assessments and other cognitive testing. She also has a special focus in geriatric care, recognizing that many seniors experience cognitive decline. Geriatric care management includes comprehensive assessments, medication monitoring and connection to community resources. Moore said involving family members in the care plan is essential to supporting patients in their healing process. "We provide assistance using a nonjudgmental platform," she said.

Moore Care Therapy accepts self-pay, Aetna and Cigna insurance, South Carolina Medicaid and Medicare. The practice has referral partnerships with Practical Purpose Solutions, McLeod Health and Prisma Health. Dr. Moore also receives patient referrals through Psychology Today.

Mental health is no longer seen as separate from overall health. Through Moore Care Therapy, Moore is caring for the community and providing holistic health options that help ensure patients receive outstanding treatment.



RESILIENT WISDOM COUNSELOR AND LIFE COACH By Ronette Genwright



Evonne Young

In the journey of life, a Life of Faith counselor and life coach serves as a guiding light, helping individuals navigate the complexities of spiritual and personal growth. With a deep understanding of faith-based principles and a commitment to empowering others, this type of counselor and coach provides invaluable support and wisdom. They help clients build resilience, find purpose and achieve their goals — all while fostering a

strong foundation of faith. Through personalized guidance and compassionate care, the Life of Faith counselor and coach inspires individuals to live their best lives, grounded in their beliefs and values.

Evonne Young was born in upstate New York to the late Pierce Young and Josephine Jack. She completed her education in the New York public school system, graduating from Corning Painted Post West High School in the Class of 1984. Raised in Friendship Baptist Church by her grandparents, she credits them — especially her grandfather — with shaping her spiritual foundation. She is the sibling of Carolyn Nixon, Pierce Young Jr., Mary Katherine Williamson, Stacy Glen, Shaunna Edward and Michael Joe Jr. Young is also a proud mother of four adult sons — Joseph Primes, Jimmy Primes Jr., Jordan Primes and Jarrett Primes — and grandmother to 20 grandchildren and four bonus grandchildren.

Young has worked in mental health therapy for over 10 years and serves as both a licensed counselor and life coach. She is employed by the South Carolina Department of Mental Health as an Intensive Community Treatment supervisor, covering the tri-county area of Dillon, Bennettsville and Chesterfield. In addition, she owns Creative Life Journeys LLC, a coaching and consulting business.

One of her most challenging experiences involved a client

who was resistant to therapy. Despite considering giving up, Young's supervisor encouraged her to find a way to connect. She often tells her life coaching clients, "I provide the tools, but you must do the work." Through Brief Solution-Focused Therapy, she helped the client begin opening up — and in doing so, she realized their story echoed parts of her own. Choosing to extend grace, she built trust with the client, ultimately learning that empathy and meeting people where they are is essential in any healing journey.

Young primarily uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to help clients understand how their thoughts influence their feelings and behaviors. "I'm committed to CBT, but I'll use Motivational Interviewing when needed," she said. If a client seems stuck, she revisits their goals and helps them find new ways to express themselves. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of her practice. She explains to clients that their information remains private unless there is a risk of self-harm, at which point she is a mandated reporter.

She also maintains clear boundaries between her roles as a therapist and life coach, ensuring each client receives the appropriate form of support. Assessment instruments are used throughout therapy to track progress, with evaluations conducted every 90 days.

To care for her own mental health, Young relies on prayer, mindfulness, affirmations and music — especially Anita Baker's "Sweet Love." She is also the author of Creative Life Therapy, a book she uses as a personal therapeutic tool, particularly during challenging moments like the loss of her father.

Known as Coach Von throughout the Pee Dee area, Young continues to touch countless lives through her faith, compassion and commitment to personal growth. She can be reached at creativelifejourneysllc.com or by phone at 910-390-0515.

Young is a testament to the power of resilience, empathy and spiritual strength. Her lasting impact on the community she serves is built on a legacy of faith and the belief that healing begins with connection.

MEETING KIDS WHERE THEY ARE By Susan Carter



Omeeka Pringle, Pee Dee Mental Health Florence School Mental Health Counselor

Omeeka Pringle is a school-based therapist with Pee Dee Mental Health, serving three elementary schools in Florence County. Based in the Florence office, she has been with the agency for over seven and a half years. Pringle holds a bachelor's degree in social work from Coker College (now Coker University) and a master's degree in mental health counseling from Webster University. She was drawn to the profession by her "interest in understanding people."

As a school-based therapist, Pringle often works with students dealing with relationship struggles and anger directed at their parents or siblings. She uses techniques rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy to help students "become aware of their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs."

What Pringle values most about her role is being physically present in the schools. "I can be there to help when a crisis arises or when someone is struggling with their emotions," she said. One of the more challenging aspects, however, is "trying to help kids whose issues come from their environment."

School mental health counseling has grown significantly over the past decade, shifting from limited access to more readily available, on-site support. Pringle says that parents appreciate this change and frequently reach out with letters and phone calls

expressing gratitude for the positive changes they see in their children.

She encourages families not to wait until things feel unmanageable. "Good mental and behavioral health are possible," she said. Counseling professionals in schools are working to foster open conversations about mental health, reduce stigma, and educate students, teachers and parents about the benefits of therapy and how to access services.

With the need for school mental health professionals at an all-time high, Pringle hopes more people will consider this rewarding field. "It's a deeply meaningful profession where you can make a significant impact on people's lives," she said.



FINDING COMMON GROUND WITH STUDENTS By Susan Carter



Latoria Blake, Pee Dee Mental Health—Lake City Children's Services Supervisor

LAKE CITY – Latoria Blake's role as children's services supervisor at the Lake City office of Pee Dee Mental Health involves ensuring her team of clinicians has the tools and support they need to provide quality care to the children, teens and families they serve. She oversees, trains and coaches clinicians so they are equipped with the skills necessary to improve patients' lives.

Blake has been with Pee Dee Mental Health for 10 years. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in professional counseling. Her love and compassion

for children, along with a desire to help them, led her to pursue this career path. A common thread among the children and teens she works with is family disruption. "Patients don't have the support of their biological parents, and many live with their grandparents," she said. Blake addresses this issue through family therapy, emphasizing the importance of each parent's role in a child's life.

She believes one of the strengths of providing mental health counseling in a school setting is the ability to collaborate directly with teachers to ensure students' needs are met. However,

School-Based Counseling presents unique challenges. "School activities can make it difficult to meet with students, during testing periods," she said. "Another area of difficulty is not always being notified when a student has a meeting regarding their behavior."

Over the past decade, Blake has observed several changes in school mental health services. She notes an increase in the variety of counseling options available. Still, she points out that sometimes students with discipline issues are referred for mental health counseling even when their challenges may not be related to emotional well-being. Despite these challenges, Blake has witnessed many success stories. One student, referred after involvement with the Department of Juvenile Justice, had a history of anger and acting out. Through therapy, he developed coping skills to regulate his emotions, at home and was able to complete probation early due to decreased anger outbursts.

Blake encourages students to consider counseling when they feel unheard or misunderstood, whether at home or school. "Sometimes when you have things that you want to express and you think your teachers or parents don't understand, counseling is a good place to address those issues," she said.

She believes counseling is a rewarding career that allows professionals to support young people through difficult times and help them create positive change. "Meet students where they are and find a common ground to help them change their behavior," she said.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT Submitted by Brandi Johnson



Brandi Johnson

In 2019, I was consumed by trauma, shame, and feelings of abandonment—utterly unloved and unheard. In my darkest moment, I even contemplated suicide. Desperate for healing, I turned to God—and the internet—searching for answers. That search sparked a journey of transformation.

I began to make small but powerful changes: adjusting my diet, starting therapy, journaling and immersing myself in healing books and scripture.

I discovered that healing takes both intentional self-care and access to the right mental health resources. Thankfully, I had the means and support to begin the process—but I knew many others did not. This realization led me to create, A Mind That Matters, a resource hub dedicated to providing affordable mental health support to anyone in need.

Our Programs: Empowering the Journey Toward Healing A Beautiful Mind

This program offers women weekly wellness check-ins, access to mental health resources, and uplifting biblical lessons to help shift their perspectives and strengthen their spiritual foundation.

Faith & Mental Health Webinars

We host webinars for people of faith across the globe, exploring topics like anxiety and depression through a Christian lens.

Florence Healing and Wellness Initiative

In Florence County, we provide six weeks of therapy vouchers and curated wellness packages to promote both mental and physical well-being—helping residents take that critical first step toward healing.

As the founder, I'm honored to be part of a movement that brings hope and healing to others. My greatest prayer is that anyone struggling will be inspired to reclaim their light and take the first step forward.

For more information, I can be reached at brandi.johnson@amindthatmatters.org or 609-506-0151.

FROM HEARING STORIES TO CHANGING LIVES



Nicole Spencer, Roads of Independence Program Manager

Nicole Spencer, MS, provides program oversight for all components of Roads of Independence (ROI), including its social marketing campaign. She ensures alignment with existing programs and initiatives at Pee Dee Mental Health. Among her management responsibilities are facilitating monthly core team meetings and providing reports and updates to the Leadership Coalition and the Joint Council on Children and Adolescents.

Spencer earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications from the University of Pittsburgh in 2003 and a Master of Science degree in applied developmental psychology from the same university in 2006. She joined Pee Dee Mental Health in 2022 as a school-based mental health counselor, providing services at Darlington Middle School and Darlington High School before transitioning into her current role in 2024.

Prior to her work with Pee Dee Mental Health Center, Spencer was employed by the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice, where she conducted psychological evaluations for adjudicated juveniles in the community under the supervision of a licensed clinical psychologist. She also has experience working with youth in a variety of settings, including Youth in Transition and Multisystemic Therapy programs at Greenville Mental Health Center.

Although Spencer originally intended to become a lawyer, she changed her major to communications in order to find employment quickly and support her young daughter. She began working as a long-term substitute teacher at an alternative school. "Hearing the families' stories, seeing how the environment impacted the young people's lives and observing how many families were unaware of resources in the community led me to go back to school and pursue a counseling degree," she said.

Those early experiences continue to inform her approach today, as she helps guide young people toward brighter futures through Roads of Independence.

MORE THAN WAR IN VIETNAM By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Fall 2023 Class of 1973 50th reunion homecoming game: John Benjamin with "Benji" – a Navy goat mascot in training (the goat wasn't full grown yet).

HARTSVILLE—John Benjamin's, United States Navy junior officer, Vietnam experience has no daring exploits, and he was not issued a weapon. His story tells of the beginning of the loss of innocence during a war where many left home for the first time. Benjamin graduated from the United States Naval Academy with the class of 1973. The students there were called midshipmen. Freshmen were called plebes and upon completion of plebe year, sophomores went on their first training cruise.

His training cruise was in the summer of 1970. About half the class (600 young men) went on an Atlantic cruise to Europe on two ships. The other half of the class, which included Benjamin, went west to depart from San Diego for a Pacific cruise. His portion of the class was divided between two ships called Amphibious Transport Docks (LPD). The front half of an LPD looked like most other Navy ships, but the back half was a fairly large flight deck for use by helicopters. Below the flight deck was a huge hold with a large stern gate. The hold could be partially flooded, then the stern gate opened to launch and receive landing craft to carry Marines to and from the shore. He was on the USS Cleveland, LPD-7.

Their Pacific itinerary included stops in Yokosuka, Japan, Hong Kong and Pearl Harbor. After the stop in Hong Kong, they were told there would be an additional stop in Da Nang, Vietnam to load damaged trucks to return to the United States. They were originally told they would go to Da Nang for 24 hours and the midshipmen would be bussed to China Beach while the vehicles were loaded onto the two ships. They would rate the Vietnam Service Medal because of this stop. Benjamin said he was very naïve back then, but he suspected that others on that ship wanted to get their Vietnam Service Medal. They stayed there 72 hours, the correct required time for earning that medal.



Hartsville, SC American Legion Post 53 members celebrating the completed repair of the outside deck at the Post 53 building: Kneeling left to right: Bruce LaDue, Chris Grant; Standing front row: David Haynes, Gregg Dixon, Marcia Jessup-Miller, Matthew Brown, Rick Conner, and Jim Kurtnacker; standing back row: John Benjamin, David Carlton, Dennis Perkins, Ray Schnell, Preston Gainey and C.W. Grant. All those pictured are veterans.

The first day they were taken to China Beach in gray painted school buses with a load of warm beer. They passed the barbed wire fencing and watched towers all along the way. He had a warm beer, lay down on the sand to soak up some rays, fell asleep and woke up just in time to catch the bus back to the ships. When they arrived, they learned they would be in Da Nang two more days (72 hours total). Benjamin's naivete was still unshaken. He searched for the trucks that were on board for souvenirs and all but one of the trucks had been thoroughly cleaned out. In one truck, he found an M16 rifle behind the seats and a live M16 round with a dent in its brass in the glove box. He was smart enough to turn in the rifle, but he kept the dented round.



2025 State of South Carolina American Legion oratorical contest picture: left to right Almus Rose, Almus Rose, Jr., Hazel Rose (the contestant), John Benjamin, and Adrienne Rose. The contestants speak without notes, podium or props about the U.S. Constitution.

While Benjamin searched for the trucks that had been loaded into the hold, those in the hold heard a gunshot. He naively went to see what the action was. He went to a platform at the stern end of the hold and carefully directed his attention toward the sound of the gunshot. He saw two young men in a fourteen-foot boat patrolling the waters around the ships in the harbor. The man in the stern was wearing combat boots, army green shorts, a boonie hat and was operating the outboard motor. The other man in the bow was wearing combat boots, army green shorts, a boonie hat and carried an M16. He had the M16 ready, aiming down at something in the water. Another evening, he witnesses a riverboat firing into the jungle. Benjamin learned that things in Vietnam were vastly different from the United States. He was glad to leave Vietnam and return home to the good old USA. After returning home, Benjamin entered the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Service. He served on Fleet Ballistic Submarine USS Francis Scott Key, SSBN 657. Benjamin is greatly appreciated for his sacrifice for Americans. We salute him for continuing to serve veterans in our state!





William Canery

As we observe National Military Appreciation Month, we take a moment to recognize and honor the courageous men and women who have dedicated their lives to serving in the armed forces. This month is not only about celebrating active-duty personnel but also about paying tribute to veterans who have selflessly defended our country. Among these honored individuals is the late William Canery, a veteran and native of Dillon County, whose service in the United States Army is a testament to the resilience and bravery of those who have worn the uniform.

Canery served during the Korean War with distinction. His commitment to duty was recognized through numerous military decorations, including the National Defense Service Medal, Korean Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal and the Meritorious Unit Accommodation—an award that signifies praise worthiness and esteem. His honorable discharge marked the conclusion of a dedicated military career, but his contributions to his country and community endured beyond his service.

Canery was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1952, a time when the world was still grappling with the aftershocks of World War II and navigating the complexities of the Korean War. His story, like so many others, is one of duty, sacrifice and commitment to his country. Canery recalled traveling overseas by ship—a journey that thousands of soldiers undertook, often filled with uncertainty, yet bound by their collective mission to serve.

During a recent interview before his passing, Canery shared reflections on his life, including his upbringing and the values that shaped him. He spoke fondly about his mother, to whom he was very close. "My mother thought I was going to be a preacher. When I would call home, she would tell me she had a headache. I would hurt at the same time." Though he attended school until the sixth grade, responsibilities called him elsewhere, and he had to balance work and family. After his military service, Canery moved to Pennsylvania in search of better job opportunities. His first car was a 1961 Buick, a symbol of his hard work and independence. Later in life, he returned to Dillon, SC.

The sacrifices of veterans like Canery highlight why National Military Appreciation Month is so significant. It is a time to reflect on the immense contributions of those who have served in every branch of the military, from foot soldiers to high-ranking officials. It is also an opportunity to express gratitude not only to veterans but also to their families, who provide unwavering support and strength behind the scenes. As we honor Canery and countless others who have served, let us take a moment to show appreciation in meaningful ways—whether by thanking a veteran, participating in military support programs or simply reflecting on the freedoms we enjoy due to their sacrifices. The legacy of those who have served continues to inspire and remind us that their commitment to duty is the foundation upon which our nation stands strong. This Military Appreciation Month, we salute William Canery and all veterans for their service, their bravery and their enduring contributions to our great nation.

On March 11, 2025, at the age of 93, Canery passed away, leaving behind his daughters, Dianne and Sharon. He was preceded in death by his beloved wife, Emma, who passed away in 2012. Canery also shared a deep bond with his sister, Lizzie Ford, who is now 97 years old. As we remember his life, we honor not only his contributions to the military but also the lasting impact he had on those who knew and loved him. His memory serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by service members and the deep appreciation owed to them by future generations.

A LEGACY OF SERVICE AND RESILIENCE



Retired First Sgt. Rudolph Ham

Retired First Sergeant Rudolph Ham's military journey began in 1970 during the Vietnam War era. Drafted into the U.S. Army, he served as a military police officer and completed a short tour in Vietnam. After Vietnam, he was stationed in Korea at a nuclear weapon facility, an assignment that presented both environmental and operational challenges. Enduring extreme weather conditions and limited communication, Ham adapted to life in a highly fortified environment known as "The Hell Hole."

Following his service in Korea, Ham was stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama, where he witnessed and intervened in a race riot during the early 1970s. The tension within the military reflected the broader social unrest occurring throughout the United States. During this event, he sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI), which compounded the effects of a previous injury from Vietnam. Despite the hardships, he remained dedicated to his role, often serving as a liaison with the Criminal Investigation Division, working in plain clothes similar to modern-day detectives. After 11 years of service, he was medically discharged at the rank of sergeant first class.

May is Military Appreciation Month, recognizing not only service members but also their families. For Ham, family support was complicated. He initially kept much of his experiences from his mother, who was a worrier. He and his fellow soldiers were told that their nightmares and trauma would eventually fade, but even decades later, he still experiences the effects of combat stress. He notes that many veterans struggle with seeking help, which remains a significant challenge.

Ham found unwavering support in his wife, Bernice Anderson-Ham. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Business



SFC Ham's wife Bernice

A LEGACY OF SERVICE CONT'D



SFC Ham's children Left to right oldest one, Gerald, Aarika, Whitney.

Administration from Francis Marion University, a master's degree in interdisciplinary telecommunications from the University of Colorado and a degree in accounting from the University of Cincinnati. Together, they raised three children, all of whom pursued higher education, reflecting the values of discipline and perseverance that Ham instilled in them.

His military experience shaped his resilience, discipline and adaptability. He acknowledges that, although he did not want to enlist initially, his service transformed him. The rigorous training instilled survival skills that extended beyond combat, equipping him with the ability to navigate any situation. Today, he observes that military standards have evolved, becoming more selective in recruitment and emphasizes the importance of young people preparing themselves academically and physically if they aspire to serve. He encourages students to focus on academics and discipline, as modern enlistment standards require higher qualifications than in previous decades.

Transitioning to civilian life was a challenge for Ham. When he was discharged, there were no transition assistance programs like those available today. Veterans were given minimal guidance, making the adjustment difficult. However, he acknowledges that significant improvements have been made, including employment assistance and counseling services for veterans and their families. He began utilizing VA services in 2013, and now encourages all veterans to take advantage of the benefits they have earned.

He continues to contribute to his community. He serves as a member of the honor guard, co-chairs a crime watch program, participates in the Adopt-a-Highway initiative and serves on the board of directors for the Hugh Leatherman Center, which supports senior citizens. Additionally, he is involved with Top Ladies of Distinction, Incorporated, a service organization dedicated to community enrichment.

Ham's story is one of resilience, service and adaptation. His experiences serve as a testament to the sacrifices made by veterans and the enduring impact of military service. From the battlefields of Vietnam to his ongoing community service, his dedication to leadership and duty continues to inspire those around him.

SACRIFICE FROM THOSE WHO SERVED

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Mr. George Brown

The Vietnam War ended over fifty years ago, but its effects, for many veterans and families, continue. The year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary since the United States withdrew from the Vietnam War. The war was controversial during the late 50s, 60s and early 70s because many felt the U.S. should not have participated in the war. [History.com](https://www.history.com) says, "The Vietnam War was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. More than three million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians."

Mr. George Brown, a native of Florence, SC was drafted into the U.S. Army after graduating high school without knowing information about the war. He said he was surprised to receive the draft notice in 1968, because his post-graduation plans did not involve the military. Brown said he didn't want to reside in Florence because he wanted a different life and felt that he would make more money living in the north. He said receiving the draft notice was awkward because he had recently moved to Washington, DC hoping to find a job in construction and considered barber school. It was also in April 1968, after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, which was a turbulent time.

A 1968 Wilson High School graduate, Brown said after being drafted he went to Ft. Jackson in Columbia, SC for basic training and six months later he was sent to Vietnam. Brown said he didn't know much about what was happening in Vietnam at the time except that a former schoolmate was killed there. Unfortunately, while serving in Vietnam, Brown was wounded in action. "I was on a boat and a rocket hit the boat while we were still docked. I lost my left eye, and I still have shrapnel in my lungs. I have health problems from it, but I'm blessed to be here." Brown had already served eleven months when he was discharged, and he said he was really ready to go home. He stated he was not aware of the political aspect of the war while serving, but he became involved in activism years after he was discharged from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

The veteran care he has received since he served has been challenging. Brown said he received disability years after being discharged, but there was a lot of, "red tape," because of military policies. Today, he is an active member of the Savannah Grove Community Action League, works in his church, Mr. Carmel Baptist Church in Timmonsville, SC and is a part of the iconic gospel group, the Sensational Brown Brothers. Brown is married, and he and his wife have four children. One son succumbed to health issues in 2024, he obtained during the Afghanistan War. He said he appreciates Diversity Works for acknowledging veterans because so many are unknown but sacrificed so much. We salute and appreciate Mr. George Brown.

MILITARY ★★★★★★
APPRECIATION
★★★★★★ **MONTH**

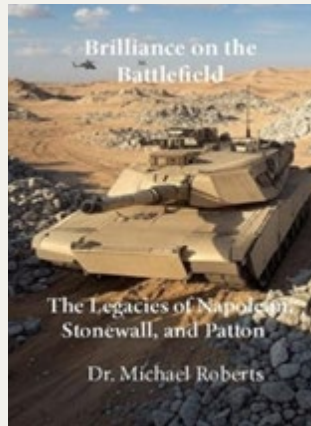
HGTC PROFESSOR DR. MICHAEL ROBERTS DEBUTS NEW BOOK Submitted by HGTC



Dr. Michael Roberts, HGTC professor of English

CONWAY - Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) proudly announces that Dr. Michael Roberts, a distinguished professor of English at the college, has released his latest book, "Brilliance on the Battlefield: The Legacies of Napoleon, Stonewall, and Patton." Within just 24 hours of its release on Amazon, the book debuted at number one, marking an extraordinary achievement for Roberts, an acclaimed author and historian. The book is also available this week at Barnes & Noble.

This compelling work is Roberts' tenth book and his third non-fiction publication. "Brilliance on the Battlefield," explores the lasting impact of three of history's most formidable military leaders—Napoleon Bonaparte, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and George S. Patton. Despite coming from different time periods and utilizing varied tactics, resources and technologies,



Brilliance on the Battlefield by Michael Roberts

these legendary figures are still studied at war colleges worldwide. Their strategic genius continues to influence modern warfare, making their legacies undeniable.

In a show of support for America's veterans, Roberts has committed all author royalties from the book to be donated to Disabled American Veterans (DAV), reinforcing his dedication to those who have served.

"We are incredibly proud of Dr. Roberts' achievement and his contribution to military history and scholarship," said Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, HGTC president. "His work not only educates and inspires but also gives back to those who have sacrificed for our country."

For more information about, "Brilliance on the Battlefield," contact Roberts at michael.roberts@hgtc.edu.

TWO INSPIRING MILITARY VETERANS By Ronette Genwright



Pictured left to right Dominic Pickett and Calvin Lloyd, Jr.

MULLINS—The paths they walked were marked by discipline, courage and a powerful sense of duty. Though their uniforms bore different insignias, the valor in their hearts resonated with a shared purpose. This is the tale of two remarkable veterans, whose journeys through the labyrinthine corridors of military life—one in the Army National Guard, the other in the U.S. Air Force—intersect in profound and unexpected ways. United in service delves into their lives, revealing how their experiences on land, sea and air have shaped their enduring legacies of resilience and honor.

Calvin Lloyd, Jr. was born to Calvin, Sr and Peggy Lloyd in Mullins, SC. He graduated from Mullins High School in 1981. Lloyd, Jr., is married to Pandora Sanders Lloyd, and they have three adult children. He said he had gotten into trouble while in high school and the judge told him he could either go to jail or enlist in the military. After high school, he enlisted in the Army National Guard. In 1994, he completed basic training over three months at Fort Benning, GA.

Lloyd, Jr., stated, "He was a squad leader while in basic training." In 2007, he was on a special mission in Afghanistan when his Humvee was attacked by a suicide bomber. Lloyd, Jr.,

sustained minor injuries from the explosion as he was inside the Humvee. He spent two years in Afghanistan, during which he and three other soldiers received promotions and medals. Lloyd, Jr., stayed in the tower during the next day's attack. He took on the duties of getting supplies, retrieving mail and picking up food.

Upon the completion of his duties, he returned to the United States in 2009. Lloyd, Jr. states that being in the military taught him discipline and he taught his kids that same kind of discipline. He said, "he wished he would have never gotten out of the Army National Guard." He did twenty-five years, and he wished he would have completed thirty. He said the military today has countless stipulations that will not allow you into any branch of the military, not unless you are in decent shape. Lloyd, Jr., said he tried to get both of his sons to join the military, but only one joined. His son had to gain twenty pounds before he could do so.

Lloyd, Jr.'s proudest moment while in the military, was receiving a medal of honor. He said that was his greatest accomplishment during his twenty-five years.

Dominic Pickett was born to Louise Pickett of Mullins, SC. He graduated from Mullins High School in 1981 and decided to leave Mullins. Pickett decided to join the United States Air Force, in which he served from 1981 until 1984. He met and married his wife, Mikko Pickett, who is now the Mayor of Mullins. They have four adult children, Dominic Jr., Darius, Dewayne and Mia Pickett.

Pickett underwent basic training in San Antonio, TX. He completed his entire tour of duty in Bitburg, Germany. Pickett never experienced combat but carried the U.S. flag and served in security. People that hated Americans would take potshots at the American soldiers. Pickett said, "the thing that stuck out about training was being coed with the women, he was not expecting that." Pickett's biggest experience he had with the Air Force was organization, everything must be in order. The proudest accomplishment of his military career was sending stipend checks to his mother, and the biggest lesson he learned from being in the military, was valuing his independence and self-reliance.

HOMEOWNERSHIP ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY GROWTH By Cynthia O. Ford



Lakesha Shannon

MARION - Real estate is more than just buying and selling properties for Lakesha Shannon—it is about changing lives, creating stability and building generational wealth. As a licensed South Carolina real estate agent with Blueprint Real Estate, Shannon has quickly made a name for herself in the industry, providing expert guidance to homebuyers, sellers and investors alike.

With over twenty years of experience in customer service and a background in municipal government, Shannon has honed the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of the housing market. Her work as the city clerk for the City of Marion has allowed her to develop strong communication, problem-solving and leadership abilities, all of which translate seamlessly into her real estate career.

Above all, Shannon is driven by her deep love for family. As a proud mother of two sons, Tasheem and Devante (and his wife Meghan), and a grandmother to five beautiful grandchildren, she understands the importance of home as a foundation for love, security and legacy.

Shannon's journey into real estate was fueled by her passion for helping others achieve their dreams of homeownership. "I've always had a strong interest in real estate, particularly in how homes are more than just physical spaces," she shares. "They represent security, accomplishment and a place where memories are made." Her strong academic background also plays a key role in her success. A graduate of Coker College, Shannon earned a bachelor's degree in business administration before furthering her education at Webster University, where she obtained dual master's degrees in business and management leadership. This solid foundation in business and leadership gives her an analytical edge in real estate, allowing her to offer clients strategic guidance in buying, selling and investing in properties.

Within her first year as a Realtor, Shannon exceeded \$1 million in sales, helping numerous families purchase their first homes, upgrade to their dream homes or sell their properties with confidence. She credits her success to her dedication, patience and commitment to educating her clients about the home-buying process. "I want my clients to feel empowered and confident every step of the way," she says. "That means making sure they understand their financial options, market conditions and the journey ahead before making one of the biggest investments of their lives."

One of Shannon's greatest missions is to break down the barriers that prevent many individuals—especially those in historically marginalized communities—from becoming homeowners. She frequently addresses common misconceptions, such as the belief that a large down payment is required to purchase a home. "Many first-time homebuyers think they need 20 percent down, but there are programs available that allow buyers to secure a mortgage with as little as 3-5 percent down," she explains. "There are also down payment assistance programs that can make homeownership more

attainable." Additionally, Shannon is passionate about fair housing practices and works to ensure her clients are treated fairly throughout the buying process. She acknowledges the lasting effects of historical redlining and discrimination in real estate and is committed to advocating for policies that promote equal opportunities for all buyers.

Beyond real estate transactions, Shannon is dedicated to building stronger communities. She believes that homeownership fosters civic engagement, neighborhood investment and overall economic growth. "When people own their homes, they take pride in their communities," she says. "They're more likely to get involved in local activities, support businesses, and contribute to the well-being of their neighborhoods."

For Shannon, real estate is not just a career—it is a calling. Her goal is to empower individuals and families with the knowledge, resources and confidence to achieve homeownership, ensuring that more people have the opportunity to create a secure and prosperous future.



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Teleaha Rowell

When looking to buy or sell a home, Realtors provide a distinct advantage in finding the best place to call home. Teleaha Rowell, a Realtor based in Florence, South Carolina, has been helping clients find their dwellings since 2002.

"Realtors help sellers competitively price their home and advise them on what needs to be done to prepare the house for the market, such as decluttering, cleaning and staging," Rowell said.

"When a property is marketed

with the help of a Realtor, you don't have to allow strangers into your home."

Realtors market the property to other agents, show homes to prospective buyers and help them submit reasonable offers. They are involved in every step of the buying and selling process, from choosing home inspectors and negotiating the purchase price and repairs to helping clients settle into a new neighborhood. "We're always happy to refer clients to doctors, dentists, veterinarians, beauticians and pet groomers," Rowell added.

According to Rowell, the first thing a buyer should do when considering purchasing a home is meet with a lender

to get prequalified. "They will discuss various loan products the buyer may qualify for and, most importantly, determine how much house they can afford before starting the process," she said.

For interested buyers, researching interest rates is essential to secure the best mortgage. As of March 13, the current average rates are:

- 30-year fixed: 6.375 percent
- 20-year fixed: 6.0 percent
- 15-year fixed: 5.75 percent

The housing market remains tight and competitive, mainly due to low inventory in Florence — especially among existing homes. Rowell emphasized that interest rates aren't the only factor to consider when preparing for homeownership. "Finding a mortgage payment that fits comfortably into your budget is very important," she said. "Home prices will continue to increase. Once rates start coming down, you can refinance to the lower rate. Marry the house; date the rate." With inventory still low, Rowell advises that it remains a seller's market. "If the property shows well and is priced right, it should sell quickly," she said.

With over 22 years in the industry, Rowell said she feels blessed to have reached a point in her career where most of her business comes from repeat clients and referrals from family and friends.

HELPING TO BUILD GENERATIONAL WEALTH

By Les Echols



Xavier Sams

Xavier Sams is an entrepreneur and Realtor licensed in both South Carolina and North Carolina. She is a certified luxury home marketing specialist, and ICON Agent with eXp Realty, Inc. Xavier holds a master's degree in counseling and a background in mental health and education, which she feels gives her a unique perspective when guiding clients through major life decisions. "I'm passionate about real estate education, financial literacy and helping individuals

build generational wealth. With over \$50 million in real estate sales, I pride myself on providing transparency, client confidence and top-tier service," said Sams.

Beyond sales, Sams pioneered one of the first high school real estate curricula in the U.S., approved by the South Carolina Department of Education. The program allows students to obtain their real estate licenses at 18. Her goal in this innovative program is to equip the next generation with the knowledge and tools to enter the real estate industry and build financial independence early. "Through real estate, I can give back to my community in hopes to provide opportunities for the youth that were not available when I was growing up. Real estate is more than just buying and selling—it's about building a legacy. Whether you're a first-time homebuyer, investor or someone looking to create generational wealth, having the right knowledge and support is key. I encourage anyone interested in real estate to stay informed, work with professionals and think long-term. The market will always change, but real estate remains one of the most powerful wealth-building tools available," she explained.

Sams' journey into real estate was rooted in a desire to

create financial freedom and long-term stability. "While I started my career in mental health and education, I quickly realized that real estate was a powerful vehicle for wealth-building." What began as investing in rental properties evolved into Sams obtaining her real estate license and launching a full-fledged real estate career. She found fulfillment in helping others achieve their homeownership and investment goals. Now, she not only helps buyers and sellers navigate the market but also educates aspiring real estate professionals through programs and mentorship.

Sams goes on to explain that the 2025 real estate market continues to evolve with higher interest rates, limited inventory and increasing home prices, making it more competitive for buyers. However, opportunities still exist, especially for those who understand the importance of credit, down payment assistance programs and strategic financing. Sellers are benefiting from strong demand, but pricing strategy and property presentation remain key. As always, real estate is a long-term game, and working with a knowledgeable agent can make all the difference in navigating these conditions.

"Homeownership in 2025 is more challenging due to affordability concerns, but it's still attainable with the right approach. Buyers need to be financially prepared, flexible and educated on mortgage options. While interest rates remain higher than previous years, creative financing solutions, down payment assistance programs and investment strategies like house-hacking can help ease the burden. Homeownership is still one of the most effective ways to build wealth, so despite the challenges, it remains a worthwhile goal," concludes Sams.

Aside from her master's degree in counseling, Sams is a 2004 graduate of Wilson High School in Florence, South Carolina, and received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Francis Marion University.

YOUR ONE-STOP SHOP FOR ALL YOUR REAL ESTATE NEEDS! Submitted by Shakeita Price



Shakeita Price

Tyreese Fox Sells Home and Upgrades to Dream Home

Congratulations to Tyreese Fox on successfully selling her home and upgrading to a new one! With the equity from her home, Fox was able to pay off debt and her vehicle, setting herself and children up for a stronger financial future. The sale was negotiated for top dollar, ensuring she made the most of her investment.

As both a Realtor and Mortgage Loan Officer, I provide seamless support whether you're buying, selling or refinancing. With expert market knowledge and financing experience, I guide you every step of the way—ensuring a smooth, successful journey and a luxurious closing day experience.

Luxurious Closing Day Experiences



Tyreese Fox and Shakeita Price

build generational wealth through real estate is always an honor.

Client Achieves Financial Freedom Through Real Estate



Shakeita Price with Celeste and her family

A heartfelt congratulations to my client, Celeste, on a truly life-changing real estate journey! She successfully sold her home, paid off all debt, upgraded to a brand-new home and still walked away with substantial savings. With the right guidance and team, real estate can transform your financial future.

If you're ready to sell, upgrade, and build wealth, I'll be honored to earn your business.

Elliott Family Becomes First-Time Homeowners

Congratulations to the Elliott family on purchasing their first home! As newlyweds, this marks an exciting new chapter in their journey together. From the moment they saw my listing, they knew it was meant to be—and now, it's officially theirs. Negotiations secured a price reduction and a home warranty, making homeownership even sweeter. Helping young couples

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HAPPY NATIONAL HOMEOWNERSHIP MONTH!

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE HOMEOWNERS.



SMART STRATEGIES TO SAVE WITH INTENTION



(BPT) - Savings can help meet unexpected expenses, fund short-term spending goals and protect against unanticipated life events. At the same time, leaving too much of your money uninvested can jeopardize long-term financial goals like retirement. Set a goal to be more intentional with your savings by getting clear on your savings goals, ensuring your savings earn a competitive return and putting excess cash to work for your long-term financial goals.

Set savings goals

To determine your personal savings goals, consider your ability to withstand savings shocks and potential income loss, as well as any short-term spending goals such as buying a car or taking a vacation.

*** Step 1:** Start by ensuring you have a buffer for unexpected expenses. Aim to have at least \$2,000 or about half a month's household expenses, whichever is greater, set aside in a cash savings account. If you've navigated any changes in the last year that impact your income or spending, it's also worthwhile to revisit that emergency savings goal.

*** Step 2:** You might also have additional short-term financial goals. Perhaps you're planning a home renovation or saving up for a wedding. Money to fund these goals that are a year or two away probably shouldn't be exposed to much risk of loss and may be best kept in a cash savings account.

*** Step 3:** Think about building a more substantial financial safety net that can cover three-to-six months of living expenses. This fund will help you manage financial disruptions, such as job loss or other longer-term income interruptions. This fund might also be used to help with longer-term goals like retirement savings, but such money, however it is invested, should be easily accessible if needed to bridge periods of income loss. Certain accounts like 401(k) or traditional IRA with limited ability for early withdrawals likely won't be the best homes for these funds.

Get specific about why you're saving and create an action plan. Start small and build. Saving something is better than not saving at all, especially when saving in an account with a competitive yield. Yield, or annual competitive yield (APY), indicates how much interest or return you can expect to earn on your savings in a given account over a year. Put simply, the higher the APY, the more your savings can grow.

Earn what you deserve

Many Americans aren't getting the return they deserve on their savings. Whether you're just starting to set aside funds for an emergency, or you already have substantial cash saved, make sure you know how much that cash is "earning." Saving with intention means selecting the best

savings vehicle for your personal savings goals. Consider whether you value FDIC insurance, ease of money movement or if you're simply looking for the highest return on your savings.

The cash you keep easily accessible does not need to sit idly on the sidelines. It can work for you in a high-yielding account. Keeping your hard-earned money in a low-yielding account could mean leaving money for short- and long-term goals on the table.

Build on your savings foundation

A well-funded emergency savings account can prevent you from taking on high-interest debt, tapping into a retirement account or turning to other sources that could slow your long-term financial progress.

While crucial for funding short-term financial goals, an intentional savings plan can also create the foundation for a longer-term financial plan. Once you have a solid savings plan in place, consider whether you can move excess cash - beyond the amount needed to meet your identified savings goals - into higher-earning-potential asset classes like stocks and bonds for long-term goals like retirement.

When you're intentional about your savings goal and seeking out the best home for your savings, even the cash you choose to keep more readily accessible, outside of stock and bond investments, has the opportunity to grow. Whether your savings goal is to start your first rainy-day fund or shop around for higher returns on your well-funded piggybank, ensure you have clear goals and a plan for reaching them.

All investing is subject to risk, including the possible loss of the money you invest.

Investments in bonds are subject to interest rate, credit and inflation risk.



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WHY YOU NEED LIFE INSURANCE — EVEN WITH NO DEPENDENTS



You may think you don't need to worry about life insurance until, or if, you have children. After all, there's no one who relies on you to feed, clothe, and educate them.

Remaining uninsured, however, could prove to be a big financial mistake, even without dependents. Here's why.

Life insurance can shield your surviving loved ones from financial hardships they may face if you pass away unexpectedly.¹ This could apply to anyone who relies on your ability to provide for them financially, including aging parents or a spouse who doesn't work outside the home.

Even if your spouse has a full- or part-time job, consider what would happen if the income you bring in was permanently lost. Would your spouse be able to handle all living expenses — including large bills like mortgage payments? Would he or she be able to continue paying off any debts you share?

Many partners would not be able to cover the expenses of their current lifestyles without two incomes. So considering life insurance to protect each other is a critical financial planning step.

If you decide to look into life insurance, you will have to decide

how much you and your spouse need to protect each other.

There are several ways to determine how much coverage you will need. One method is to multiply your salary by five or 10.2 This may make the most sense, however, when you have minor dependents who will need financial help to see them through college and early adulthood.

If you and your partner simply want to protect each other, you may need coverage that will cover only one to two years of expenses.

Perhaps the most accurate way to measure how much you will require is to consider the amount your surviving spouse would need to handle his or her actual financial needs, whether it's paying off the mortgage, satisfying debts, or providing care to aging parents.

Life insurance can provide you with peace of mind and the knowledge that your surviving loved ones won't face serious financial hardship after you're gone.

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.

Sources:

1 Elizabeth Rivelli, "Life insurance rates by age," Bankrate, February 17, 2021. <https://www.bankrate.com/insurance/life-insurance/rates-by-age/>

2 Georgia Rose, "How Much Life Insurance Do I Need?" NerdWallet, August 19, 2021. <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/insurance/how-much-life-insurance-do-i-need>

AR09318 102023 SMRU5030407 (Exp. 10.04.2025)



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Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



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First Things First: Direct Deposit

Set up direct deposit to your Palmetto First checking or savings account. This improves your chances of loan approval and prepares you for automated payments when bills come due.

Secured Credit: Training Wheels

If you're new to credit, start with a secured card. You'll put down a cash deposit, a hundred dollars for example, which becomes your credit limit. Use it, pay it off on time, and you'll build a solid credit history.

Unsecured Credit: The Next Step

Once you've proven you can handle secured credit, you can move to unsecured credit, which doesn't require a deposit. These often offer better perks but require a good track record.

In a Nutshell:

- Secured: Deposit required; great for beginners.
- Unsecured: No deposit, but you need to show responsibility.
- Keep balance low.
- Pay on time (set reminders).
- Check your credit score occasionally.

Starting credit doesn't have to be hard. With a secured card to start with and a plan to graduate to unsecured credit, you're on the path to financial freedom.

Loans, credit cards, secured vs. unsecured
Starting credit can feel daunting, but don't worry—you've got this.

Credit Union vs. Bank - What's the Difference?

Choosing where to bank matters. At Palmetto First Credit Union—"the perfect place for imperfect people"—we believe in helping you find the best fit.

Member-Owned vs. Shareholder

Owned Banks are for-profit, prioritizing shareholders. Credit unions like Palmetto First are member-owned, focusing on creating value for members rather than profits.

Rates, Fees and Benefits

Credit unions offer competitive loan rates, higher savings rates and lower fees. Earnings are reinvested into better services for members.

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While banks operate nationwide, credit unions like Palmetto First are rooted in the community. We offer personalized guidance, financial education and tailored products to help members thrive.

Which Fits You Best?

If you value personal attention, competitive rates and being more than an account number, a credit union like Palmetto First is your ideal partner.

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At Palmetto First, we're here to answer questions and guide you. With the right approach, you can confidently use checks, knowing your credit union has your back every step of the way.

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AMERICANS CONFIDENT ABOUT FINANCIAL GOALS



from building emergency funds to paying off debt. While each generation faces unique financial challenges, many share a strong sense of optimism about their financial futures.

Key takeaways

* **Optimism prevails:** 60 percent of Americans feel confident about reaching their financial goals, with Millennials leading at 63 percent.

* **Money moves:** Nearly half of Americans (47 percent) have successfully paid off their debts, 40 percent have achieved homeownership, 39 percent have established an emergency fund and 32 percent have started securing retirement savings.

* **Retirement reality check:** Americans aim to retire at 62 but expect they may work until 70. Rising living costs (70 percent), insufficient savings (50 percent), inflation (48 percent), and unexpected financial emergencies (39 percent) are among the common factors contributing to adjusted timelines.

* **Through the ages:** Americans aim to purchase a home by 38, build an emergency fund by 40, pay off debt by 42, achieve financial independence by 46, and accumulate retirement funds by 47.

* **Planning for success:** Nearly half of Americans (49 percent) have a clear financial plan to meet their money goals.

Progressing toward financial goals

Unretired Americans are making headway on key financial goals, with nearly half (47 percent) having paid off debt and 40 percent achieving homeownership. Many are also building a

(BPT) - Retirement is a journey, and every milestone counts: New Empower research shows that Americans across generations are making progress toward retirement,

financial cushion - 39 percent have established an emergency fund, while 32 percent have started securing retirement savings.

For those still working toward these milestones, optimism is high. Sixty percent believe they will reach their goals, with Millennials (63 percent) being the most confident. On average, Americans aim to accomplish their financial milestones at specific ages: purchasing a home by 38, building an emergency fund by 40, paying off debt by 42, achieving financial independence by 46, and securing retirement funds by 47.

Nearly half of Americans (49 percent) have a clear financial plan to meet these targets, including 49 percent of Millennials and 50 percent of Gen Z. Still, 32 percent recognize they need a structured plan, particularly among Gen X (37 percent).

Planning for retirement

Some 73 percent believe they'll retire at the age they envision, although 27 percent still express concerns about timing. This sentiment varies slightly by generation, with Gen Z (28 percent) and Millennials (27 percent) most likely to feel this uncertainty, followed by Gen X (26 percent) and Baby Boomers (11 percent).

To bolster their retirement plans, most Americans (67 percent) are focusing on reducing or eliminating debt, and many (63 percent) are supplementing their income with multiple jobs. Among younger generations, 68 percent of Gen Zers have taken on side hustles to help save for retirement, while 24 percent of both Millennials and Gen Zers are considering job changes for higher salaries.

Almost half of Americans (48 percent) are confident they'll maintain their current lifestyle in retirement, with Gen Z (51 percent) being the most optimistic. Setting realistic goals and making intentional financial decisions - like minimizing debt, pursuing additional income, and securing higher wages - can empower Americans to retire on their own terms and enjoy the lifestyle they envision.

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[To Table of Content ↑](#)

ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK ANNOUNCES VP ROLES IN DEALER SERVICES

Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant



Darrell Campbell

Lambert has been a fundamental asset to Anderson Brothers Bank for over 19 years. His diverse experience includes roles as a loan officer, branch manager, indirect buyer, collector and, most recently, systems administrator for the Defi LOS platform. In his new role, Lambert will oversee the configuration of critical software systems that support daily operations and ensure compliance with state and federal regulations. His extensive expertise positions him well to drive innovation within the department. Lambert also holds several professional certifications and is an active member of the American Financial Services Association, often participating in industry conferences to stay updated on best practices. Additionally, he is dedicated to community service and volunteering with local organizations.

Campbell joined Anderson Brothers Bank in November 2021, bringing over 30 years of experience, where he honed his skills in sales management, risk assessment, and operational strategy. As vice president of operations, Campbell will oversee the daily activities of the sales, underwriting and funding teams, along with risk associates. He will develop and execute lending strategies that align with the bank's objectives, prioritizing operational efficiency

MULLINS— Anderson Brothers Bank is pleased to announce key promotions within its Dealer Services Department. Jody Lambert has been appointed vice president of systems and administration, while Darrell Campbell steps into the role of vice president of operations. These strategic promotions highlight the bank's commitment to innovation, strong leadership and operational excellence.

Lambert has been a fundamental asset to Anderson Brothers Bank for over 19



Jody Lambert

and profitability. Campbell plans to strengthen relationships with front-line employees by conducting field visits across North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, recognizing the value of insights from those directly involved in the lending process. He is known for his collaborative leadership and is passionate about mentoring staff, viewing their professional growth as vital to the bank's success.

As Anderson Brothers Bank continues to evolve and expand, the strengths and expertise, Lambert and Campbell will play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Dealer Services Department. Their commitment to excellence and thorough understanding of the industry positions the bank for ongoing success and enhanced customer relationships. The bank looks forward to their contributions as it seeks to improve its services and build strong partnerships.

About Anderson Brothers Bank

Anderson Brothers Bank is a full-service community bank offering a complete range of competitive loan services and deposit products. Founded in 1933, this family-owned bank blends the elements of traditional personal service, local market awareness and advanced technology to meet the financial needs of its customers. Anderson Brothers Bank offers 25 branches conveniently located in 17 communities throughout the Pee Dee, Coastal and Low Country regions of South Carolina. The bank's main office is located at 101 North Main Street, P.O. Box 310 in Mullins, South Carolina. For additional information about Anderson Brothers Bank, call (843) 464-6271 or visit ABBank.com.

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FIVE WAYS TO TURN EVERYDAY ITEMS INTO EXTRA CASH



(Family Features) Making money from everyday items in your home may be easier than you think. With a growing number of companies simplifying the process, turning unused items into

cash has never been simpler.

These companies are part of the circular economy, where you get to make money from your items and feel good about it at the same time. By reselling items you don't use, you can give these items a second home or repurpose them into something that has practical applications.

For example, unused gold and precious metal jewelry can be given a second home to or repurposed for vital technology sectors like health care. This reduces the need for environmentally taxing mining operations and gives these valuable resources a second purpose.

Whether it's clothing, jewelry or tech, consider these simple ways to make extra cash by selling items online.

Sell Used Clothing

Some newer platforms offer a less hands-on approach to selling used clothing online. Unlike popular online platforms that require you to take pictures or create listings for your items, look for outlets that allow you to simply pack your items and send them out with an insured label. This makes selling clothing online a breeze and reduces the potential headaches of dealing with buyers directly and managing listings.

Sell Unworn Jewelry

For precious metals like gold jewelry or silver jewelry, selling

directly to a trusted buyer can provide a fast, secure way to unlock their value. Consider [TheAlloyMarket.com](https://www.thealloymarket.com), a company featured in trusted outlets like Forbes, NBC and US News & World Report that offers a streamlined process with free, insured shipping and no hidden fees or commissions. Unlike platforms that require complex listings or charge extra fees, you keep 100 percent of the quoted price. On average, customers earn \$1,700 or more for gold jewelry and other precious metal items, offering a straightforward, easy and rewarding way to sell unused valuables.

Sell Designer Bags

If you have any designer bags at home, look for platforms that let you sell handbags directly to them and provide upfront estimates before you ship your items. Some platforms provide free insured shipping and marketplaces where you can buy designer handbags at discounted prices.

Sell Books You've Already Read

While this likely won't make you a fortune, selling used books is a simple way to make some extra cash and help preserve the environment. College students in particular can benefit from upfront estimates and free shipping or the ability to trade in used books for ones they'll need next semester. Plus, some platforms also offer books for purchase at heavily discounted prices.

Sell Tech After Upgrading

If you upgraded phones recently or have a used phone just collecting dust, get an upfront estimate for your phone from a trusted site. Some buyers provide free shipping and, with upfront estimates, you know exactly what you will get for your used phone before sending it in.

To learn more about how you can get a free, no-obligation estimate for gold jewelry or other precious metal items, visit [TheAlloyMarket.com](https://www.thealloymarket.com).

FLORENCE DOCTORS SAVE MAN WHOSE HEART STOPPED FOR A HALF-HOUR

By Helen Adams, MUSC Catalyst News



Jason Bazen

A truck driver from Pamplico, South Carolina, is back behind the wheel after a heart attack that could have killed him. "He's like a miracle. Because this guy's heart stopped at home. It stopped for 31 minutes," said Cardiologist Abdallah Kamouh, M.D. "The chance of survival is less than 10 percent for a patient who dies outside the hospital."

Jason Bazen, 46, survived with the help of his family, emergency medical services responders and the emergency and cardiology teams at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center. But that outcome was far from certain on the day that his heart stopped.

"I had gone out to eat with my family. I came home and I said, 'Hey, I don't feel good.' All week, every time I'd have one of those episodes where I'd feel pressure in my chest, I could sit down and relax, and it would kind of ease off. And this time, I did that and apparently never woke up."

His wife found him unconscious and called his mother, a nurse who lives nearby. She did CPR until an ambulance arrived and rushed him to the Florence Medical Center Emergency Department. A test showed one of Bazen's arteries was closed. Kamouh and his team in the Heart and Vascular Center opened it. Then, they decided to use a procedure called therapeutic hypothermia.

"We decreased his body temperature for 24 hours. Obviously, he was completely unconscious, on sedatives and paralytics, so he didn't feel the extreme cold," Kamouh said.

"The idea is you decrease the temperature to a level where the brain and the rest of the body functions or metabolism decrease. So the body will have low consumption of energy. This preserves some of the brain function and the function of other organs. The purpose is to decrease the metabolism of the body with the aim of decreasing the brain damage."

Then, they rewarmed Bazen. By Wednesday, five days after his heart attack, he was fully aware of his surroundings again. The cardiology team's tactics worked. Bazen's brain function was strong again. But his experience changed him in many ways. "It's given me a whole different outlook on life," Bazen said.

For one thing: "I quit smoking." He thinks the fact that he was unconscious for a few days helped get him past the initial hurdle of quitting. "If you'd asked me if I could quit smoking a year ago, I'd have been like, 'No way.' But I came home from the hospital, and I had no desire for one. I don't want one."

He also changed his diet – not an easy task

for a trucker. "I mean, let's face it – there's nothing healthy on the road. I'm trying to take more fruit with me so I can snack on that."

He shares his experience in hopes of helping others. "Learn the signs and symptoms of heart trouble," Bazen advised.

Signs of a heart attack include:

- Chest discomfort.
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body.
- Shortness of breath.
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat.
- Nausea.
- Breaking out in a cold sweat.
- Feeling unusually tired or lightheaded.

(Source: American Heart Association)



Dr. Abdallah Kamouh

Kamouh, the cardiologist, said it's also important for people to learn how to do CPR. The fact that Bazen's mother knew it made a big difference. The Red Cross has online training options for CPR. MUSC Health offers courses as well.

"And Bazen said people should keep in mind that when it comes to heart health, looks can be deceiving. 'I'm 6-2, 175 pounds. I don't look like a walking heart attack.' That didn't keep him from almost dying."

Now, post-heart attack, Bazen is trying to exercise more. That includes sessions of cardiac rehabilitation. And he's factoring in the future as he makes his choices. "I just hope the changes I made are beneficial and I can just move on and continue to live a long, healthy life. Or at least do my best to."



Jason Bazen at a cardiac rehabilitation session.

“My doc called me a walking miracle.”

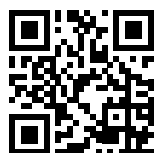


Jason Bazen, Survivor.

A heart attack doesn't wait — and neither do we. When every second counts, our cardiology team is ready with advanced expertise, cutting-edge technology, and compassionate care. Our specialists deliver when it matters most, from rapid diagnosis to life-saving treatment.

Just ask Jason. After suffering a massive heart attack, our team's swift action gave him a second chance at life. Today, he's back doing what he loves and making the most of what matters.

Trust your heart to us.



Watch his story.



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[To Table of Content ↑](#)

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MOVE MORE FOR A HEALTHIER LIFE Submitted by Alan Barrett, PA-C, DPAS, DFAAPA



Alan Barrett, PA-C, DPAS, DFAAPA

One of the most effective goals for overall health is becoming more active. Only one in four adults in the U.S. gets the recommended amount of physical activity. It's important for all Americans to move, especially those who have desk jobs or a sedentary lifestyle. If a person sits, reclines or lies down for eight hours or more a day, their risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, dementia and certain types of cancer increases.

Prolonged sitting is a silent killer that causes aches and pains and lowers mood. The good news is that anyone can find ways to move more, and become fitter, feel better and have more energy!

The human body is designed for movement. Being more physically active promotes blood flow. Being more active improves overall mood, sleep and stress, helps regulate your digestive tract, and can help with certain types of back, shoulder and neck pain.

A total of 150 minutes of moderate activity is recommended each week, with two days of strength training to build muscle. Moderate activities include walking, running, biking, swimming, dancing or activities that increase heart rate and use major muscle groups. Strength training may be as simple as squats or wall push-ups, or using weight machines, body or free weights, or resistance bands and straps. After age 65, balance exercises such as standing on one foot for several seconds without assistance are recommended.

While adding regular physical activity each week is important, it is also vital to take active breaks throughout the day. People who work a desk job may sit too long. People at home may sit too long due to pain, depression or out of habit.

Exercise can help with burnout and stress while improving

focus and mood. Getting up and moving will increase blood flow, help improve certain types of pain and improve mood and energy levels. The following tips can help you explore methods for proper body mechanics when sitting and learn to break the habit:

- Assess your environment.
- Aim for movement breaks every 30-60 minutes for two to five minutes.
- Look for ways to be more active.
- Find physical activities you enjoy.
- Develop a routine.
- Find an accountability partner.
- Focus on good nutrition.

Physical activity, good nutrition, adequate sleep and managing stress are part of a healthy lifestyle. When people move more, they feel better and begin adding health-promoting changes. Building over time can make healthy habits a lifestyle.

Getting up from the desk, chair or bed is the first step of a fitness journey. If you have any chronic medical conditions or are over 40, make sure to discuss exercise safety with your health



care provider. Explore other options by talking to your doctor, friends and family to decide on activity goals for better health. Start today to thrive in 2025!

Barrett is a physician assistant at HopeHealth specializing in Family Medicine. For more information, call 843-667-9414 or visit hopehealth.org.

HOPEHEALTH HOSTED STREATER COMMUNITY CENTER GRAND OPENING

Submitted by Sheridan K. Edwards, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



Photo of the Streater family taken outside the Streater Community Center.

On February 27, HopeHealth and the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce hosted the Grand Opening and Business After Hours event at the Streater Community Center. The event featured food, drinks and networking, and allowed attendees to learn more about HopeHealth's community outreach services.

Located at 301 N. Dargan Street, the Streater building has a rich African American history dating back to 1904. The Streater Community Center is used to strengthen community engagement and decrease barriers to care by enhancing the availability and accessibility of programs focused on

underserved populations such as seniors, veterans and Black men.

At the event, HopeHealth CEO Carl Humphries provided insight into the building's legacy and future. He shared, "HopeHealth was given the opportunity to purchase the building in 2018 and quickly decided to honor its rich history through a restoration and renovation project with financial support from the great state of South Carolina. The Streater Community Center stands as a testament to the vibrant spirit of our community. HopeHealth aims to honor this historic landmark through dynamic engagement, empowerment and wellness offerings to our community and patients."

Close to 20 descendants of Mr. & Mrs. Streater, the original owners of the building, traveled from all over the country for this special event. There was also representation from many elected officials from the local, state and national levels who came to express their support.

On the importance of the event, Carin Spears, director of community health and access, shared, "The grand opening of the Streater Community Center marks a significant step forward in our commitment to community health and well-being. This facility will serve as a hub for education, support and outreach, offering vital resources in an accessible and welcoming space. We look forward to the Streater Community Center becoming a cornerstone for connection, empowerment and improved health outcomes."



Women's Care team at Carolina Pines Medical Group

HARTSVILLE—When you entrust your health to the Women's Care team at Carolina Pines Medical Group (CPMG), you likely won't need to request a special consultation or another provider's opinion — it's already included.

That's because the clinicians at the Medical Group embrace collaboration as a best practice for caring for the thousands of Pee Dee-area women they see each year.

"Patients have the opportunity to meet and build relationships with all of our providers, creating a sense of familiarity and trust," said Scott Daniel, M.D., one of the four obstetrics & gynecology (OBGYN) physicians who lead the Women's Care specialty. "This collaborative environment allows us to tailor care to each individual, ensuring they feel supported and understood at every stage of their health journey."

The Women's Care team sees more than 400 patients each week and thus far in 2024, has delivered nearly 300 babies at Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center.

Their team approach to care produces better patient experiences and outcomes, according to Casey Wadsworth, M.D., now in her second year with the group. "One of the key advantages of having a team of clinicians in women's health is the ability to collaborate closely. We can exchange ideas and insights, allowing us to view patient cases from multiple perspectives. Working as a team ensures that every patient receives comprehensive, high-quality care that draws on the collective expertise of our clinicians."

Drs. Daniel and Wadsworth are part of a dedicated Women's Care team that includes Linda George, certified nurse midwife (CNM); Ashekia Pinckney, M.D.; Leroy F. Robinson, M.D. and Carrie Smith, CNM. The team serves patients at 701 Medical Park Drive, Suite 304, in Hartsville, SC. Wadsworth and George also see patients at the newest location, Carolina Pines Medical Group Pageland at 301 North Van Lingle Mungo Boulevard in Pageland, SC.

The Women's Care team mixes experience with fresh perspectives — OBGYN physician, Robinson began practicing obstetrics and gynecology in Hartsville in 1994. In the spring of 1996, he started the Women's Care practice at Carolina Pines Medical Group and was joined shortly thereafter by Daniel. Pinckney and Wadsworth are relatively new members of the CPMG Women's Care team, both joining within the past 15 months. Of the nurse midwives, George has been with Carolina Pines for 28 years, while Smith is in her first year with the group.

"Each clinician brings a unique perspective and approach to patient care, which allows us to achieve exceptional outcomes for our patients," said Pinckney. "Having a team means we can



Dr. Ashekia Pinckney giving an ultrasound to pregnant patient

collaborate, support one another, and provide comprehensive care that addresses all aspects of our patients' needs. This teamwork ensures that our patients receive the highest level of care and benefit from a wealth of collective expertise."

That collective expertise is especially welcome

because women's bodies have unique medical needs. The Women's Care clinicians are specifically trained to help treat female health needs, from birth control to childbirth, from menopause to hysterectomies, and everything in between.

Services cover all aspects of fertility and reproductive health: menopause management, pelvic and bladder health, breast health including mammograms, well-woman exams and other women's health issues.

"Women face unique health circumstances, as our hormones cycle every month for much of our lives," said Smith. "We also go through major transitions—like puberty, pregnancy, postpartum and menopause—that can impact every part of our lives and our overall quality of life. And now, with women living longer than ever, expert guidance from a women's health provider can be essential to maintaining a good quality of life at every stage."



Dr. Casey Wadsworth with Da Vinci robotic Surgical System

Expert guidance occurs over time as health needs change, which is why continuity is also important to a women's health journey. Daniel said the Carolina Pines team prioritizes consistent follow-up and connection with its patients, from annual wellness visits to checking in with them during hospital stays, and continuing care after discharge through scheduled visits.

"Through a combination of phone calls, text messages, and secure digital platforms, we stay connected with our patients, ensuring they have access to guidance, support, and follow-up care at every step," said Daniel. "This ongoing connection helps us foster a sense of continuity and support, ensuring our patients feel cared for throughout their journey."

Robinson noted that when you have served the same community and so many families for three decades, being connected comes pretty naturally. He estimates that he has delivered between 3,000 to 5,000 babies during the time he has practiced in Hartsville.

"I'm now delivering babies from mothers who were once babies that I delivered," he said. "I stay connected because I'm part of the community. I've attended many baptisms, christenings, birthday parties, weddings and yes, even memorials."

And that patient-clinician connection is just as important to the clinician, noted Pinckney.

"My favorite part of my job is being able to share the experiences with my patients," she said. "Watching a mom overcome all of her worries of pregnancy and deliver a happy and healthy baby. Helping a woman with bleeding issues finally find relief. It's like watching miracles every day."

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

If you don't currently see a women's health practitioner, the Women's Care team at Carolina Pines Medical Group welcomes new patients and accepts most insurance plans. Call 843.383.2764 or visit themedicalgroup.com/womens-care to schedule an appointment and let our team assist you with any questions.



Dr. Scott Daniel with newborn baby

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ARTS IN HEALING PROGRAM HELPS FLORENCE STUDENTS EXPRESS EMOTIONS

By Kristin Merkel, MUSC Office of Communications



Healing in Arts

in Healing offers a wide range of programs, from evidence-based therapeutic interventions to mindful art installations.

According to the Creative Arts Therapy Initiative (CATI) impact report, in the fall of 2021, experts declared a national emergency in children's mental health, urging organizations to employ school-based wellness services to increase access to care. In response, MUSC Arts in Healing developed CATI in partnership with the MUSC Boeing Center for Children's Wellness, which now covers schools and districts statewide.

This past summer, the Florence 1 School District decided to take its student counseling to the next level by incorporating the CATI program. The Superintendent of Florence 1 Schools, Richard O'Malley, Ed.D., saw a need for more mental health support and believed art therapy would be greatly beneficial. After several months of using the program, the Coordinator for Clinical Services at Florence 1 Schools, Krystle Graham, said it's been a great success.

"This has been very impactful because students with social anxiety and depression are able to express themselves through an array of different activities that the clinicians have prepared for them," said Graham. "It has helped the students make it through their day if they've had times when they acted out in class. They look forward to the groups because it is a break in their traditional schedule. It helps them cope with the rest of the day."

Group services for Arts in Healing are now available at Florence

1 Schools, which were expanded to include staff in December. According to the MUSC Health Arts in Healing Program Coordinator, Elizabeth Graham Anderson, who is also a registered art therapist and a Ph.D. candidate, students come in groups of no more than six to these therapy sessions and are asked to create art based on how they're feeling that day. Currently, she works with more than 80 students. Goals within the art therapy program include helping students to cope with anxiety, depression and grief.

"I think the students benefit because the art scaffolds and supports communication. Emotion feels very abstract. We don't always have language for some of those thoughts, and so, to be able to access those parts of the brain that are abstract through imagery sometimes is more powerful," said Graham Anderson. "It supports their thinking and allows them to develop communication skills towards how they're feeling."

According to the 2023 CATI impact report, the program is working.

-94 percent of students said they enjoyed being in art therapy groups.

-89 percent of students said they learned new ways to deal with their feelings in art therapy.

-92 percent of teachers would like to see art therapy continue.

-97 percent of guardians reported the art therapy process gave their children an alternative form of safe expression.

"It's such a need. We can see that reception from the school staff, and some of the feedback was really exciting," said Graham Anderson. "I received feedback yesterday about how some students have been having continuous discipline issues and challenges. Since they had started art therapy, the school support staff said that they haven't had any issues, which is huge. That's really validating that they need this outlet. They need this safe form of expression."

To learn more about the benefits of art therapy and the CATI program, you can visit our Arts in Healing page.

MUSC HOLLINGS CANCER CENTER ANNOUNCES EXPANSION OF NEW FACILITY

By Helen Adams, MUSC Catalyst News



MUSC Health Florence Medical Center Oncology providers, MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers CEO Jay Hinesley, left, stand with MUSC Hollings Cancer Center leaders, right, after announcing plans to build a Hollings Cancer Center facility in Florence. Photo by John Russell.

A rendering of what the Hollings Cancer Network site may look like in Florence.

A new development involving cancer care in the Pee Dee region has the potential to affect a lot of people. An average of 780 patients in Florence County are diagnosed with cancer each year – and that's just one of several counties a new Hollings Cancer Network site on the campus of the MUSC Health Florence Medical Center will serve.

A doctor already caring for cancer patients in the region, Wael Ghalayini, M.D., is thrilled about the announcement. "As the only National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center in South Carolina, Hollings brings a tremendous array of resources – advanced treatments, clinical trials and cutting-edge research – to our local patients."

Hollings Cancer Center Director Dr. Raymond DuBois, MUSC Health Florence Division CEO Jay Hinesley and MUSC Health Oncology Chief Dr. Jason Newman at an event celebrating the announcement of the Florence site.

Jay Hinesley, CEO of the MUSC Health Florence Health Division, said the goal is to work with local doctors and patients to ensure they have access to the best care and treatments available. "By partnering with all health care organizations in the Pee Dee region, we can draw upon MUSC Hollings Cancer Center as a long-trusted resource that exceeds the expectations of South Carolinian patients battling cancer."

That reference to "partnering with all health care organizations" is no accident. Raymond DuBois, M.D., Ph.D., director

of Hollings Cancer Center, said the new facility's team will "work alongside trusted care providers here." The goal, in his words, is to "ease the burden of cancer in South Carolina."

This map shows Hollings' oncology relationships and services across the state.

The Hollings Cancer Network site in Florence will offer multiple options, including:

- Medical oncology, which involves preventing, diagnosing and treating cancer.
- The use of radiation to fight cancer.
- Gynecological oncology, focusing on cancer of women's reproductive systems.
- Surgical specialties, including breast, urology and thoracic surgery.
- Access to clinical trials.

The new site will build on MUSC Health Florence Medical Center's existing cancer care. The hospital already offers surgery, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, radiation therapy, imaging services, pain management, financial counseling and more.

Hinesley said news about the Hollings site in Florence filled him with pride. "This new facility will provide a critical and comprehensive expansion to our community's ability to elevate and expand the level of cancer care close to home."

To Table of Content ↑

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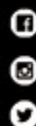
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HOPE AND HEALING FROM PTSD

Submitted by Francheska Russell, [M.Ed., LPC](#)



Francheska Russell, [M.Ed., LPC](#)

It is estimated that seven out of 10 people in America may experience a life-threatening event such as a natural disaster, serious accident, fire, physical or sexual assault/abuse, war, having a loved one die from homicide or suicide or seeing someone be killed or injured. The recent natural disaster and ongoing trauma with Hurricane Helene in South Carolina and other areas have been in everyone's hearts and minds.

Each person is different in how they respond to trauma, but symptoms can include upsetting memories or flashbacks, panic, worry, sleeplessness, nightmares and generally not feeling safe. It may be difficult to go to work or school or interact with others.

While for some, the trauma response lessens over time, others may experience ongoing trauma. Symptoms of trauma can come and go or even resurface months or years later. This type of long-term trauma response is part of a mental health condition called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Risk factors include:

- Being exposed to traumatic experiences, particularly as a child
- Getting hurt, or seeing others getting hurt or killed
- Experiencing an event that caused horror, helplessness or extreme fear
- Having little or no social support after the event
- Having increased stress after the event, such as the loss of a loved one, pain, injury or the loss of a job or your home
- Having a personal or family history of mental illness or substance use

Symptoms of PTSD vary from person to person, but the disorder is typically diagnosed after at least one month of the following symptoms:

At least one triggering symptom. Reliving the event and re-experiencing symptoms can feel very real and scary. Flashbacks, distressing memories or dreams and physical signs of stress such as sweating or a racing heart are common. Seeing, smelling or hearing something can also be trauma reminders or triggers that bring symptoms back.

At least one avoidance symptom. Avoiding things that remind you of the event may include crowds, people, places, or certain situations. Changing habits such as not driving after a car accident, not leaving the house or staying extra busy to not think about the event are all avoidance symptoms.

At least two arousal or reactivity symptoms. Arousal symptoms include being easily startled, feeling tense, on guard or on edge, difficulty concentrating and difficulty falling or staying asleep. Arousal symptoms are often constant and can affect eating, sleeping and concentration. Reactivity symptoms include feeling irritable, having angry or aggressive outbursts or engaging in risky, reckless or destructive behaviors.

At least two cognitive and mood symptoms. These symptoms include not remembering certain aspects of a traumatic event, experiencing ongoing negative thoughts and feelings of blame about one's self or others, losing interest in

HOPE AND HEALING CONT'D



enjoyable activities, feeling socially isolated, experiencing ongoing negative emotions like fear, anger, guilt or shame, or having difficulty feeling positive emotions such as happiness or satisfaction.

If you or anyone you know is dealing with these symptoms and they continue to interfere with daily life, it's important to discuss this with your health care provider as soon as possible.

PTSD also increases the risk for other mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, panic disorder, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts, or may heighten symptoms of existing conditions. Moving on from trauma can't happen until it has been processed in a healthy way. The earlier treatment is started, the quicker a person with PTSD can begin working on strategies to feel better.

The two main treatments for PTSD include psychotherapy with a mental health professional and medications, but one or both may be included depending on the person. Developing a trusting relationship with a primary health care provider is vital to help work through the treatment process. Your primary health care provider can refer you to a behavioral health professional who has experience working with PTSD. Working with a behavioral health professional is critical to help a person process the event and start developing a toolbox of healthy coping skills.

Therapy sessions are individualized for each person's unique needs. Experimentation and homework are typically part of the counseling process and may include paperwork or activities to try and report back on. Depending on the outcome, the strategies may be added to the toolbox, adapted or dropped.

Exposure therapy teaches the individual how to gradually approach fears and feelings around the event and learn that the cues and memories are not dangerous. Cognitive restructuring helps the individual make sense of the event in a realistic way since memories may skew events, and can help lessen fear, anger, guilt, blame and shame.

Grounding techniques are helpful for dealing with discomfort and panic attacks. This means refocusing away from emotions such as fear or panic and using physical exercises to be in the present moment. Examples of grounding techniques include counting slow breaths, naming what you see or hear or telling yourself out loud, "I am safe," while gently rubbing your chest, stroking your forehead or hugging yourself.

Having other fun or enjoyable tools can also help you manage PTSD symptoms. It is important to find enjoyable activities within an individual's means, such as cooking, walking, pickleball, journaling, mindfulness, yoga, music, painting or building things. Experimenting with different options will help you discover what works. Often, it can be as simple as thinking about what you enjoyed as a child or something that makes you smile or feel carefree. It's very helpful to be creative and eliminate barriers. One of my clients loved to paint as a child. Due to severe arthritis, the client could not hold a brush anymore but realized finger painting was a fun outlet.

Experimentation also means not worrying about what doesn't work. The goal is to keep adding the tools and outlets



that do work to the PTSD toolbox.

Other helpful lifestyle strategies include maintaining routines for meals, sleep and movement, spending time in nature, avoiding alcohol and drugs and enjoying time with trusted friends and family. Finding or returning to a faith-based organization can also be very beneficial for many people.

Setting realistic goals and focusing on what can be managed each day is essential. Using tools to manage symptoms that arise can help tremendously with symptoms over time. Expect symptoms to improve gradually as opposed to immediately. Regular visits with your health care provider are important to give updates on the treatment plan and how it's working. Don't ever give up hope! The journey can be long and challenging, but with good support and treatment, individuals can regain a sense of control and lead long, fulfilling lives.

If you're ready to start your journey today, visit hope-health.org/services/behavioral-health-services or call (843) 667-9414 to learn more about HopeHealth's integrated behavioral health counseling services.

Russell is a behavioral health consultant at HopeHealth on Pine Needles Road and is accepting new patients. For more information, call (843) 432-3670 or visit hope-health.org.



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CELEBRATING NATIONAL SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CARE AWARENESS MONTH

Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



HARTSVILLE-CareSouth Carolina is proud to celebrate National School-Based Health Care Awareness Month, recognizing the vital role that school-based health services play in improving student health and academic success.

For many students in rural communities, access to regular medical and dental care can be a challenge. CareSouth Carolina's School-Based Health Services Program helps bridge that gap by bringing high-quality, compassionate care directly to students. Each year, CareSouth Carolina's mobile units visit six school districts in the Pee Dee region, providing annual wellness visits, screenings and dental services to thousands of children.

The school-based care program began in 2015 to address the growing need for accessible health services in rural schools. Initially launched in Chesterfield County, the program has since expanded to Lee, Dillon, Marlboro and Darlington counties. Additionally, CareSouth Carolina's Miles of Smiles Dental Program provides critical oral health services to children across the region, ensuring that students receive the dental care they need to thrive.

Recognizing the need for even more accessible care, CareSouth Carolina launched its School-Based Telehealth Program in 2021. This innovative service allows students who become sick at school to be seen on-site through telehealth, reducing the burden on parents and guardians who may struggle to secure same-day appointments with primary care providers. By providing timely medical care directly in schools, this program helps cut down on unnecessary urgent care visits and emergency room trips for illnesses that can be treated quickly via telehealth.

"As a community-based health care provider, we are committed to ensuring that every child has access to quality health care,

regardless of where they live," said Kaitlin Hughes, director of Mobile and Telehealth Services at CareSouth Carolina. "School-based health programs remove barriers to care, allowing students to stay healthy, focused and ready to learn. By bringing health care into the school setting, including telehealth services, we can address health concerns early and help students reach their full potential both in and out of the classroom."

CareSouth Carolina has a dedicated school-based telehealth provider serving schools in Dillon, Marlboro, Chesterfield and Lee Counties. With state-of-the-art telehealth equipment placed in schools, the provider can easily assess ears, eyes, throat and mouth, as well as listen to heart and lung sounds—replicating the experience of an in-person visit while ensuring students receive the care, they need without having to leave school.

CareSouth Carolina remains dedicated to expanding and enhancing school-based health care programs to serve more students in need. Through these efforts, the organization continues to provide essential health care services that contribute to healthier, stronger communities.

CareSouth Carolina is a private, non-profit community health center delivering patient-centered health and life services in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. CareSouth Carolina operates centers in Bennettsville, Bishopville, Cheraw, Chesterfield, Dillon, Hartsville, Lake View, Latta, McColl and Society Hill.

Services provided by CareSouth Carolina include family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, women's services, OB/GYN, HIV/AIDS primary care, infectious disease primary care, IV therapy, substance abuse prevention, dental, chiropractic services, pharmacy, senior support services, family support services, clinical counseling, laboratory, ultrasound, X-Ray, agricultural worker health services, podiatry and veterans choice provider.

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CARE SOUTH CAROLINA WELCOMES

DR. HEATHER KILPATRICK Articles by CareSouth Carolina



Dr. Heather Kilpatrick, D.M.D.

CareSouth Carolina is excited to announce the addition of its newest provider, Dr. Heather Kilpatrick, D.M.D., who will be bringing her extensive dental expertise to the Miles of Smiles Pediatric Clinic. This Mobile Dental Unit provides comprehensive dental care, including emergency services, to children 18 years old and younger across the Pee Dee Region.

Kilpatrick, who earned her Doctor of Dental Medicine from the Medical College of Georgia School of Dentistry, brings a wealth of experience to her role. With a career spanning over two decades, she has worked in various dental settings across South Carolina, Alabama and Indiana, offering both general and specialized dental care.

What excites Kilpatrick most isn't just the work—it's the opportunity to connect with her young patients.

"I love the kids and the freedom. It's also great to help the kids. I love helping them," she shared. "When you see a kid that has never been before, or they're scared, it's great getting to show them that this is something they can enjoy and it's not something to be scared of."

The Miles of Smiles Pediatric Clinic is designed to make dental care more accessible and less intimidating for children, especially those who may have limited access to traditional dental offices. Kilpatrick's passion for pediatric dentistry and her ability to create a welcoming, comfortable environment for young patients make her an invaluable addition to the CareSouth Carolina family.

Outside of work, she most enjoys studying forensics and spending time with her two dogs.

CARE SOUTH CAROLINA'S BROOKE JACOBS HONORED



Brooke Jacobs

CHESTERFIELD-CareSouth Carolina's Patient Experience Technical Advisor, Brooke Jacobs, has been honored with the Award of Excellence by the South Carolina Primary Health Care Association (SCPHCA) at its annual SEA Retreat.

This distinguished award recognizes individuals who go beyond in their dedication to patient care and service, and Jacobs is a shining example of that commitment.

Jacobs has been an integral part of the CareSouth Carolina team for nearly seven years, beginning her journey as a floater before transitioning into the role of medical office assistant in Chesterfield. Her passion for patient care and team support has led her to her current role, where she plays a vital part in training and ensuring front-office staff are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to provide the best possible care.

Jacobs said she was taken by surprise when she learned she had been selected for the award, expressing deep gratitude for the recognition.

"I was very surprised. I was honored. It means a lot to me that people around me think enough of me to nominate me for something like that," she shared.

Her passion for CareSouth Carolina and its mission shines through in her work every day.

"My CareSouth Carolina family—I've always had a good experience with CareSouth being there," she said. "Being able to help the patients, knowing that we're here for patients that would not get care if we weren't—that's what makes it all worthwhile."

TERESA HENDRIX NAMED FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



Teresa Hendrix

BENNETTSTVILLE-CareSouth Carolina is proud to announce that Teresa Hendrix, medical office assistant at the Bennettsville Women's Services location, has been honored as the Front Office Employee of the Year by the South Carolina Primary Health Care Association (SCPHCA) at the SEA Retreat. This prestigious award recognizes Hendrix's unwavering dedication, exceptional service and commitment to providing outstanding

patient care.

Hendrix, who will celebrate 10 years with CareSouth Carolina this June, has made a lasting impact on both her colleagues and the patients she serves.

"The interaction with the patients is what I enjoy the most," Hendrix shared. "In Women's Services, we see patients as early as eight years old and throughout their lives. Some are nervous about their visit and don't know what to expect when they're coming in and being able to help them feel comfortable and reassured is incredibly rewarding."

She believes that the first impression at the front desk plays a crucial role in a patient's experience.

"The person at the front desk sets the tone for how that entire visit is going to go," she said. "However you come across at that front desk sets the tone."

When Hendrix learned that she had been selected for the award, she was completely shocked.

"I knew that I had been nominated, but I had no idea I would win," she said. "It's very humbling to know that people notice the way I interact with patients. It reminds me that you always need to put your best foot forward because people are always watching. It was a great honor."

CareSouth Carolina is a private, non-profit community health center delivering patient-centered health and life services in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. CareSouth Carolina operates centers in Bennettsville, Bishopville, Cheraw, Chesterfield, Dillon, Hartsville, Lake View, Latta, McColl and Society Hill.

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MITCHELL DRIGGERS' ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY STORY

Submitted by Meike McDonald, Ed.D.



Meike and Mitch shared love at first sight.

Aug. 1, 2020, was the first time we ever laid eyes on each other, but we didn't speak. I was having dinner with my mom and her friend. Mitch was sitting at the bar of the restaurant and asked the bartender if she knew me.

The next day, we ended up at that same restaurant, sat beside each other at the bar, talked and exchanged numbers. Quickly, we became inseparable. Within the first two weeks of being together, Mitch told me it was love at first sight and that he loved me.

Our story is one of love, trials, strength, perseverance, acceptance, tragedy and mustard seed faith.

I am a high school math teacher with 20 years of experience and a doctorate in education. In 2020, I finished my teaching contract and moved from living in Morocco to living with my mom in South Carolina. I had only been back in the United States a month and a half when I met Mitch.

As I got to know him, I learned to love an amazing man.

Growing up in South Carolina, Mitch learned to fish, swim, scuba dive, play football and fix vehicles. He began working in his teenage years. He was proud of his job as a hem saw operator at a steel mill, his house, his commitment to hard work, his knowledge of fixing almost anything, his extensive circle of friends, his love for the outdoors, his skill at fishing, his family and his passion to help others in need.

I rarely saw him nap or sleep on his days off. Mitch enjoyed grilling, visiting friends and family, riding motorcycles, doing lawn work and fixing anything around the house. There wasn't anything not to love about Mitch.

Mitch and I got married by notary public on Oct. 2, 2023—just six and

a half weeks before his motorcycle-versus-car accident on Nov. 17, 2023. In that accident, he sustained a traumatic brain injury, an amputation of his left leg below the knee, multiple blood transfusions, and required a ventilator that transitioned to a tracheostomy for breathing and a feeding tube for eight months.

The brain injury affected both the left temporal lobe and brainstem. After the accident, Mitch spent three weeks in the ICU and three weeks on the surgery floor of our local hospital. During that time, we had to decide which facility Mitch would go to next. As a family, we chose the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, which specializes in treating spinal cord and acquired brain injuries. During his 14-week stay, Mitch received 16 hours of therapy per week and underwent various cognitive tests.

He finally regained consciousness about three to four weeks after the accident but wasn't considered "emerged" until February 2024. After emerging, he had six more weeks of inpatient rehabilitation at Shepherd. He was fitted for a wheelchair and began speaking, drinking, showering and completing simple tasks.

Doctors from both hospitals told us Mitch would never walk and that the outlook was grim.

Mitch returned home April 2, 2024. Once back in South Carolina, we made numerous doctor appointments and began outpatient therapy. We were fortunate to find a certified nurse assistant who cares for Mitch while I work and treats him like a brother.

Mitch needs 24-hour care. With the brain injury on the left side, the right side of his body is contracted and does not move like the left. He does not have full use of his right arm, and his left leg is amputated. He needs assistance with every activity of daily living.

He can feed himself, drink, brush his teeth and wash his body with his left hand. He experiences debilitating headaches, leg tremors and stiff muscles. With physical therapy, he is working on standing using parallel bars and sitting independently.

He cannot walk or drive at this time, and we don't know if he ever will. His speech is altered, but he has progressed from speaking only words to full sentences.

I find myself in a state of anxiety and overwhelm on a frequent basis.

Mitch was once incredibly active, and now he is fully dependent. This is extremely hard on both of us, especially as he has flashbacks of life before the accident.

In the beginning, I mourned. I mourned our life, our future and the outcome. I was in a state of desperation and despair. It was dark and lonely. No one truly knew how I felt, and there were so few resources available to help. I stayed in shock for a long time.

We were told to take things minute by minute. But instead of having faith, I went home and wrote my husband's obituary. I believed others could pray better and harder than me. I enlisted prayers around the world and had his name added to every prayer list I could find.

It wasn't until I brought Mitch home that I realized what a miracle had happened—and how little faith I had shown.

After a few months, I began taking Mitch to the small church I had been attending. I felt the small congregation wouldn't be overstimulating for him. I gave our testimony and used the parable of the mustard seed to illustrate our journey.

I had to make something good come out of this tragedy. I had to show the world how my husband's life was spared. Turning to God is what saved me.

At this stage—a year post-accident—Mitch is progressing. We are learning to be thankful amid the anger and tears. We pray aloud every day, and I have many talks and pleas with God. At the end of the day, it's all I know to do.

Meike is eager and available to speak at churches and groups to share their testimony. She can be contacted at meikemcdonald@yahoo.com.



Meike and Mitch

A PERFECT SUMMER FOR YOUTH, TWEENS AND TEENS

Submitted by the City of Florence



Summer is just around the corner, and the City of Florence is gearing up for a fun-filled season with its summer camps. Offering a variety of programs for children, tweens and teens, these camps are designed to provide a safe, enjoyable and enriching environment for young people to grow, learn and make lasting memories. With exciting activities, nutritious meals and expert supervision, Florence's summer camps are the ideal place for your child to spend the season.

Youth Summer Camp (Ages 6-12)



Dr. Iola Jones Park Playground

For the younger crowd, Florence's Youth Summer Camp provides a fantastic opportunity for kids to engage in sports, arts, crafts and recreational activities while making new friends. Running Monday through Friday from June 2 to July 18, this camp is open to children ages 6 to 12 and offers a full day of fun from 7:45 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

The camp will be hosted at several locations, making it easily accessible to families throughout Florence. Camp locations include Levy Park Youth Center, Maple Park Community Center, Mordecai C. Johnson Community Center, Dr. Iola Jones Park Community Center and Freedom Florence.

At each location, children will enjoy a wide variety of activities, from team sports to arts and crafts, along with recreational games that are both physically active and mentally stimulating. This camp also offers an excellent chance for kids to develop social skills and learn teamwork.

Breakfast and lunch will be provided daily, ensuring kids are fueled for a fun-filled day of learning and play. This is a great opportunity for parents looking for a safe, affordable and engaging way

to keep their children active over the summer months.

Tween Summer Camp (Ages 12-15)



Maple Park Community Center

The transition from childhood to adolescence is an exciting time, and Florence's Tween Summer Camp is here to support that growth. Tailored specifically for youth ages 12 to 15, this camp runs the same dates as the Youth Summer Camp, from June 2 to July 18, with slightly different hours: 7:45 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Held at the Barnes Street Activity Center, the Tween Summer Camp focuses on developing leadership skills, fostering creativity and encouraging participation in sports and outdoor activities. This camp gives tweens a chance to build confidence, try new things and engage in activities that are both fun and educational.

As with the Youth Summer Camp, breakfast and lunch will be provided to help campers stay energized throughout the day. The camp's schedule offers a perfect balance of structured activities and free time, giving tweens opportunities to bond with their peers and explore their interests.

Teen Open Gym (Ages 12-18)

For teens seeking a more relaxed, open-ended summer experience, the Teen Open Gym program is a great choice. Designed for ages 12 to 18, this program takes place at the Barnes Street



Barnes Street Teen Hub – Barnes Street Activity Center

Activity Center Monday through Friday from 2 to 6:30 p.m. and runs from June 2 to July 18.

The Teen Open Gym will feature a variety of sports and recreational activities, including basketball, volleyball and other fun gym games. Dinner is included, giving participants a chance to enjoy a meal and recharge before heading home for the evening.

The program offers flexibility, allowing participants to come and go as their schedules permit, while still enjoying access to organized activities and games. Whether they want to focus on a particular sport or just unwind with some friendly competition, this is a great outlet for teens to stay active and engaged all summer long.

How to Register

Registration for all City of Florence summer camps is now open. To secure your child's spot, visit fltownrec.com. Early registration is encouraged, as space is limited and tends to fill quickly.

The City of Florence summer camps offer a unique blend of structure and fun, creating the perfect summer experience for youth, tweens and teens alike. From exciting recreational activities to building new friendships and skills, these camps are sure to make your child's summer one to remember.

Don't miss out — register today and get ready for an unforgettable summer in Florence. Full Life. Full Forward.



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Youth Summer Camp (Ages 6-12) 7:45 AM to 5:30 PM \$76 BREAKFAST AND LUNCH INCLUDED	Tween Summer Camp (Ages 12-15) 7:45 AM to 2:00 PM \$76 BREAKFAST AND LUNCH INCLUDED	Teen Open Gym (Ages 12-18) 2:00 PM to 6:30 PM \$6 DINNER INCLUDED
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CAMPS WILL RUN FROM JUNE 2ND - JULY 18TH

REGISTER NOW AT [FLOTOWNREC.COM](https://www.flotownrec.com)



LAKE CITY ENTREPRENEURS CREATE COMMUNITY RESOURCE By Mallory Brayboy



Janet Maddox and Virginia Harrell, owners of The Business Hub (left to right)

LAKE CITY – What began as an idea to serve a community need has grown into a trusted local business for printing, packing and shipping services. The Business Hub, located in Lake City, was founded by President Janet Maddox and Vice President Virginia Harrell with a mission to make life more convenient for their hometown's residents.

"We realized people were driving to Florence to ship things because they didn't have a local option. So we looked into it and thought it was something we could accomplish," Maddox said. Harrell added, "We have a lot of elderly people here who don't have transportation to get to Florence. With The Business Hub being right here, they can come in to mail, fax, print or do whatever they need."

The business has recently entered into its third year and the community's response thus far has been overwhelmingly positive. "We've seen a great outpouring," Harrell said. "When people come in, they say they're so glad to know a place like this is here. It feels good knowing we're providing a service that really matters."

While many entrepreneurs face steep challenges, Maddox and Harrell say their journey has been one of divine alignment. "It just seemed like God had His hand on it from day one," Maddox said. "Once we settled on what we wanted to do, everything fell into

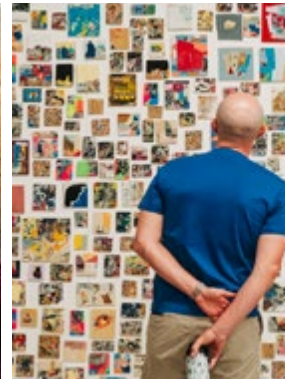
place. We didn't face obstacles getting our license, the building or permits. Everything was just approved."

The main challenge, Maddox noted, was funding. "We didn't have access to grants to help with our startup, but we were still able to accomplish it out of our own pockets," she said. "We were committed and kept the faith." Harrell agreed. "It was just like a cakewalk once we decided to open the business. Putting God first was the most important thing."

The Business Hub's success, according to Maddox, lies in its values and commitment to excellence. "I think the fact that we're women-owned, that we're African American, and that we cater to and respect everyone makes us stand out," she said. "Our customer service, professionalism and clean, welcoming space all play a part. Once you come in, you love us and you come back."

Maddox encourages women to be intentional and strategic in their business pursuits. "Do your research. Find a mentor you can trust. Listen to their advice, but also trust your gut," she said. "Stay true to yourself and don't give up. Reach out for guidance, and don't let anyone talk you out of something you believe in." Harrell added, "You've got to put God first and stay true to how you want to present your business. People may try to talk you out of what you know in your gut is right. Stay the course."

The future is bright for The Business Hub. "We want to continue to grow and hopefully open another location," said Maddox. "We're also committed to giving back through community outreach programs. We want people to know that when they spend their money here, it goes right back into the community." Their long-term vision includes building a legacy that continues for generations. "I hope that even after we've closed our eyes, our family members will pick up the torch and continue to run the business in our honor."



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SPRINGBOARDERS BOOT CAMP – MOVING BEYOND GRIEF By Ronette Genwright



Rita Pressley

Springboarders is, a transformative journey that helps individuals use their grief as a launchpad to pursue a life of purpose. This initiative encourages participants to accept loss, release the past, and focus on their personal calling. Founder Rita Pressley emphasizes that she is “not a grief counselor or clinician.” Instead, her focus is on what comes after grief—rediscovering direction and purpose. Springboarders is rooted in her own experience, guided by her faith. Just four days after relocating to South Carolina from Maryland, her husband passed away. Pressley took a 30-day sabbatical with three goals: to begin the grieving process, transform her new house into a home and seek God’s direction for her future. The result was a beautiful and purposeful new season of life.

Grief often leaves people feeling isolated. While family and friends may offer support, there are moments when it’s just you and your pain. For Pressley, writing became her therapy. She poured her heart out to God—expressing her emotions honestly, asking questions, seeking understanding—and always concluding her reflections with gratitude for God’s grace, mercy and wisdom. She also found strength in connecting with others who had experienced similar losses.

Springboarders has already begun to make a meaningful impact. Pressley shared her book with a recently widowed woman, who said it gave her hope. Just before Thanksgiving, Pressley invited individuals grieving a loss to a breakfast gathering. Despite only two days’ notice, 22 people attended. They shared stories about their loved ones and expressed feeling better afterward. One attendee, new to the group, spoke publicly for the first time about her grief.

The support extended throughout the holiday season. At

Christmas, the group decorated ornaments with their loved ones’ initials and made wishes with Santa for 2025. On New Year’s Day, they created vision boards. Inspired by this progress, Pressley launched the Springboarders Boot Camp—a year-long journey of self-discovery and healing.

Using her book as the guide, she blends her strategic planning expertise and faith-based coaching to help participants express their deepest desires, organize their thoughts and work through guilt. The program empowers individuals to set and pursue personal goals. Notably, Springboarders recognizes that loss isn’t always due to death—it may stem from divorce, estrangement or geographic separation from loved ones. These losses, too, have profound effects on a person’s life. Pressley’s advice: Trust God, and release your loved one—and your future—into His able, stable hands.

Moving forward does not mean forgetting. While friends and family might avoid mentioning a loved one, Springboarders offers a safe space to share memories and find joy in remembering. Pressley envisions past participants returning to mentor new members, continuing their own healing while guiding others.

Future goals for Springboarders include forming partnerships to serve men—who often suppress their grief—and providing resources for children and youth. In today’s climate, young people are frequently exposed to loss and mortality, and many struggle with grief, emotional regulation and conflict resolution.

How to Get Involved:

- Refer grieving individuals who are seeking direction
- Partner with the Springboarders initiative
- Offer financial support or sponsor scholarships
- Purchase the book: *One Widow’s Might*, launched April 5, at FDTC’s Gould Business Incubator, 1951 Pisgah Road, beside the SIMT building.

For more information, visit RitaWasRight.com.

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LEATHERMAN BEHAVIORAL CARE PAVILION

When the MUSC Health Jean and Hugh K. Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion opens this fall, it will represent a fresh approach. “Decades ago, in South Carolina and nationwide, funds for inpatient behavioral health care were cut as a result of a changing philosophy in how we cared for mental health patients,” says Jay Hinesley, CEO of the MUSC Health Florence, Marion and Black River Medical Centers.

“The philosophy was to restore patients’ rights and release them into the community, where they would be treated at outpatient mental health centers. Unfortunately, funding wasn’t adequate, and the strategy wasn’t the right one. A lot of mentally ill patients wound up struggling to find the right services.”

Hinesley says the Leatherman Pavilion is South Carolina’s first state-funded facility to rectify the shift that began 25 years ago. He believes the \$100 million center will show that patients can be cared for compassionately and safely.

He also wants to address misconceptions about such places. “There is a gross misunderstanding of what occurs in behavioral health hospitals,” he says.

“We’re making a concerted effort to include community and church leaders, law enforcement, EMS workers and local government. We want the community to understand that the Leatherman Pavilion will be a well-funded, professionally staffed facility that will give compassionate care to a population that has been significantly neglected.”

Hinesley says the new pavilion will also boost the economic health of the area. “Florence is a thriving community, and the Leatherman Pavilion will be a significant economic investment - one that will bring additional jobs as well as new construction and a pleasing design to a part of our community that has needed some refurbishment. It is one of many projects on Dargan Street to revive downtown Florence.”

Hinesley says the planning, construction, funding and other support for the center exemplify the best of public/private partnerships. The state, the city of Florence and private entities have contributed funds to make the \$100 million facility a reality. Leaders say McLeod Health and HopeHealth have been great partners in developing the facility.

“This is an extremely complicated project, and we needed every dollar we could find, along with the input of local community and health care organizations,” Hinesley says.

“We could not do this without the legislature and Florence’s financial assistance. At the local level, we’re making sure that McLeod Health, HopeHealth, Francis Marion University and the surrounding health care community come together to discuss how to operate in the future.”

Hinesley says he’s pleased that the state selected the Pee Dee. Over the last 25 years, the need for behavioral health care in the area has grown while resources have shrunk. “We believe MUSC will be an example for other regions of the state and build a center that will care for people in crisis.

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