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HGTC



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CITY OF FLORENCE

DIVERSITYWORKS

OCTOBER 2025 VOLUME 15 ISSUE 4

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Website: www.diversityworkssc.comwww.dmmadvertisingandmarketing.comEmail: dmmadworks@aol.com**STAFF:**

Diana M. Murphy-Eaddy	CEO/Publisher
Gregory Eaddy	Production Coordinator
Shawn Jackson	Chief Technology Officer
Glacieria Brown Mason	Editor
Distinctive Design Graphics	Layout & Design
June Avant	Editing
Mallory Brayboy	Contributing Writer/Editing
Susan Carter	Contributing Writer
Les Echols	Contributing Writer
Adalia Ellis	Contributing Writer
Kionne Epps	Contributing Writer
Cynthia Ford	Contributing Writer
Ronette Genwright	Contributing Writer
Jennifer Guiles Robinson	Contributing Writer
Robin L. Lewis	Contributing Writer
Tonita Perry	Contributing Writer
Terry James	Photographer
William "Cash" Stukes	Photographer/Film Maker

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!

Welcome to the fourth quarter edition of 2025! As we forge ahead to the New Year with all of the planning, celebrations of customs and observances typical of a year's end, the Diversity Works Team is thrilled for your continued readership, interest and partnership. Our hope is that you have been informed, enlightened or inspired by the articles found herein. Know that your ongoing interest and support is appreciated.

We hope you've marked your calendar and registered your staff and yourself for the upcoming Sixth Biennial Diversity Focus Training on Thursday, November 6, at the Southeastern Institute of Manufacturing & Technology! With the backdrop of Global Diversity Awareness Month, we're excited to welcome a diverse group of leaders in their respective fields, to elevate the DEIB conversation. They are: Dr. Cynthia James Walters, Dr. Shawn Spann Edwards, Mike Young, Reginald Lyerly, Yolonda Griffin Johnson and Robin Lewis. We look forward to welcoming you! REGISTER TODAY!

The fourth quarter is considered the most important business growth quarter of the year. Read the articles highlighting local small businesses in our community such as Starlee Alexander's State Farm franchise, ADP, McCall Farms, the Law Offices of Linward C. Edwards II, LLC and more. During this season of celebration and festivities, be reminded to continue to shop local. Keep reading and be sure to check out news from the Pee Dee Region of South Carolina, the Florence Downtown Development Corporation and last but not least, the Florence Chamber of Commerce. Be informed of local events and activities in the coming months as we shop, dine and stay in the Pee Dee Region. Take special note of the exciting 2025 Florence Christmas Parade as well as Marion County's beautiful Christmas tree lighting, parade and fireworks spectacular at Withlacoochee Park. Register now to join in the Florence Christmas Parade to win a cash

prize! Deadline – November 25.

We celebrate the the United Way of Florence County's 2024-2025 Board Member of the Year Awardee, Nikkoya Bass. Read the article and learn of her extraordinary commitment in all she does, which makes her an ideal candidate for this honor. We bid a fond farewell and say thank you to retiring Florence Police Chief Allen Heidler. Read Heidler's story and, if you see him, thank him for his decades long service to the city.

The investment in education has many benefits for our local and global economy. In this issue, read the exciting happenings ongoing in school districts and on the collegiate level. As you read about the record-setting effort in the Marion County School District, under the leadership of Superintendent, Dr. Kandace Bethea, share in the joy of the students and faculty who participated in and are the recipients of the largest single backpack distribution (52,000) to Title 1 elementary students, made possible by the David & Nicole Tepper Foundation and the Carolina Panthers. Need more to get excited about? Share with young people, the dual education model which helps students build needed skills to enhance academic success. Speaking about academic success, we congratulate the Governor's School for Science & Mathematics for being named a finalist in the 2025 InnoVision Awards which honors competitive excellence in innovation. Don't put Diversity Works down until you've read the articles of congratulations to our neighbors, instructors and friends in education. Here, you'll find articles on the generosity of Claflin University alumni as they exceed their one million dollar fundraising goal. Additionally, congratulations are offered to Lee County Educator Randy Small, FMU's new Athletics Director Quin Monahan, HGTC's Tim Wall, Regina Thompson, Dr. Jennifer Wilbanks and more for your dedication to our local education system.

It was my pleasure to be among the well wishers to congratulate the 2025 Champion for Youth, Erik Marechal and Legacy of Service recipient Neal Zimmerman of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area, at the recent Champion for Youth event. A wonderful evening was had celebrating the contributions of two dedicated community leaders who support local area youth. Read the article and see the superlatives shared by Dr. Allie Brooks, the 2009 Champion for Youth and from Clyde McGuire, director of organizational development.

Veterans Day is coming, let's remember to be intentional and sincere when thanking veterans and members of the U.S. Armed Forces for their service, sacrifice and commitment in keeping our country safe. Stay informed by reading the article in our lifestyle section and learn ways to support veterans year-round instead of just one day.

Diversity Works' cover story comes from family-owned, local business entrepreneur Ruiz Foods. See their article recognizing over a dozen veteran employees who, after their military career, share their knowledge, skill and ability at Ruiz Foods. Read personal quotes from veteran employees on making the transition, how Ruiz honors veterans and community outreach. If you're a veteran or know of one, let's join Ruiz Foods in celebration of veterans across America.

Important to overall mental and physical happiness is health and wellness. Think about it, everything we do begins and ends with being conscious of our health. In this final edition, our health section brings you informative medical health articles from trusted local health care facilities; CareSouth Carolina, Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center, HopeHealth, McLeod and MUSC.

It's great to have choices in what you read. Here, find information on new providers joining HopeHealth. Breathe easier with must-read articles on lung health and COPD, diabetes, atrial fibrillation, suicide, ADHD for children and adults and much more.

Share the excitement and pride as CareSouth Carolina is recognized with a trio of prestigious National Quality Leader Badges from the Health Resources and Services Administration. This designation says that CareSouth Carolina is in the top 10 percent of all health centers in the country for clinical quality. Read the announcement about the local top performing facility, CareSouth Carolina. Congratulations!

Publisher Eaddy and I were happy to be among community supporters at the widely attended public Grand Opening of the MUSC Health Jean and Hugh Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion. The guided tour of this beautiful state-of-the-art facility was informative. Read about its origin, purpose, services and collaborators who helped make this a reality.

We invite you to read the interesting and thought-provoking articles in our special section. Among the choices, you'll find articles in observation of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Mental Illness Awareness Day, National Bullying Prevention Month, National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Global Diversity Awareness Month and National Caregiving Month. We encourage you to dive deep into the pages and find shared personal stories of strength and resilience, courage and perseverance, attributes we can all relate to.

On behalf of the Diversity Works Team, we wish each of you all the best for a joyous holiday season and a Happy New Year!

Happy Reading!
Glaceria Brown Mason
Editor

FEATURED ARTICLES & CONTENT



Stephanie Gregg
Smile & Reflect LLC



GSSM Robotic Program



Larry Jefferson
DCDSN



Barry Flowers
Life-Changing
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BEYOND DIVERSITY...CREATING LASTING CHANGE Submitted by Diversity Works Magazine



In workplaces, schools and communities across the nation, conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging — often referred to as DEIB — are becoming increasingly common. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each plays a distinct role in shaping environments where people feel valued, respected and empowered.

Experts say the need for intentional DEIB practices has never been greater. Organizations are recognizing that success depends not only on the skills of their people, but also on how well they create spaces where individuals of all backgrounds can thrive.

Defining DEIB

Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a given setting. This can include race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, disability and more. Equity goes a step further, ensuring that everyone has fair access to opportunities and resources. While equality often means treating everyone the same, equity recognizes that some people may need additional support to overcome systemic barriers.

Inclusion involves actively creating environments where diverse individuals are welcomed, heard and respected. Belonging is the outcome — the feeling that people experience when they know their presence and contributions are valued.

“When you stop at diversity, you simply count numbers,” said Dr. Alicia James, a leadership consultant specializing in organizational culture. “Equity ensures fairness, inclusion makes sure voices are heard and belonging is what keeps people engaged.”

Why DEIB Matters

Research consistently shows that organizations prioritizing DEIB benefit in measurable ways. Studies from McKinsey & Company have found that diverse companies outperform their peers in profitability. Other reports show stronger employee retention, higher levels of innovation and greater customer satisfaction when DEIB is a core value.

But beyond the business case, advocates argue that DEIB is fundamentally about fairness and human dignity. Creating equitable opportunities addresses longstanding disparities in education, health care and employment. Inclusive practices reduce discrimination and harassment. Belonging fosters mental well-being and stronger connections among colleagues.

“When people feel seen and respected, they do their best work,” James said. “It’s about building a culture where everyone knows they matter.”

Common Challenges

Despite growing awareness, many organizations struggle to move from conversation to action. One challenge is “checkbox” diversity, where companies focus on hiring a representative workforce but fail to address inequities in advancement, pay or leadership opportunities.

Another obstacle is resistance to change. Some employees may fear that DEIB efforts threaten existing norms or privileges. Others may not understand why equity is different from equality.

“There can be discomfort when people realize that systemic barriers exist,” James said. “But that discomfort is part of growth. It leads to honest conversations about history, access and opportunity.”

Strategies for Progress

Experts recommend several steps for organizations committed to advancing DEIB:

- 1. Leadership Commitment:** Change must start at the top. Leaders who model inclusive behaviors and prioritize equity set the tone for the entire organization.
- 2. Education and Training:** Workshops on unconscious bias, cultural competency and inclusive leadership can build awareness and skills. Training should be ongoing rather than one-time events.
- 3. Policy Review:** Examining recruitment, promotion and pay structures helps identify inequities. Adjustments may include transparent salary bands, mentorship programs and fair hiring practices.
- 4. Employee Resource Groups:** Voluntary, employee-led groups centered on shared identities or experiences can provide support and create platforms for dialogue.
- 5. Accountability:** Progress should be tracked with measurable goals. This might include diversity metrics, employee surveys and public reporting.
- 6. Listening and Feedback:** Creating safe spaces for employees to share experiences builds trust and ensures that strategies reflect real needs.

Measuring Impact

Sustaining DEIB requires more than programs and policies. Experts recommend that organizations regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts. Surveys can measure employee engagement and sense of belonging. Data on promotions, retention and leadership diversity can reveal whether opportunities are equitable.

“Numbers don’t tell the whole story, but they provide a starting point,” James said. “Pairing data with personal feedback ensures that organizations understand both outcomes and lived experiences.”

Organizations can also benchmark progress against industry standards or partner with external evaluators. Transparency matters — sharing results with employees and stakeholders signals accountability and builds trust.

Beyond the Workplace

DEIB principles are not limited to businesses. Schools, nonprofits and community organizations also benefit from inclusive practices. Educators can integrate diverse perspectives into curricula. Health care providers can address disparities in treatment outcomes. Local governments can ensure community engagement reflects all voices, not just the loudest.

Community partnerships can also extend impact. Nonprofits working with businesses, for example, can expand outreach to underserved populations. Libraries, faith groups and civic organizations can host dialogues on equity and inclusion, helping neighbors learn from one another.

Looking Ahead

The work of DEIB is ongoing. Progress requires consistent effort, reflection and adaptation. Experts emphasize that it is not a destination but a journey that evolves with society’s needs.

“The most successful organizations are those that embed DEIB into their culture, not just their policy,” James said. “It’s about shifting from a compliance mindset to a commitment mindset.”

As workplaces and communities become increasingly diverse, the importance of equity, inclusion and belonging will only grow. For many leaders, the question is no longer whether DEIB matters — but how to ensure it is lived out in daily practice.

“When people feel they belong, everyone benefits,” James said. “Innovation grows, trust deepens and organizations flourish.”



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2025 Diversity Focus Training and Luncheon: Advancing Equity, Driving Impact

The 2025 Diversity Focus Training and Luncheon aims to inspire transformational change, promote equity and cultivate accountability by bringing together employees, executives, community leaders and organizations.

The event serves as a platform to elevate

and embed effective diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) practices in the workplace.

The training emphasizes making DEIB efforts actionable, measurable and evidence based. Welcoming diverse perspectives fosters stronger relationships, increases employee engagement and ultimately drives productivity and profitability. DEIB is not a passing initiative or a compliance requirement — it is a business imperative. Successful organizations of the future will not just accommodate differences but will flourish because of them.

The program is designed to help build safer, more equitable workplaces by uncovering hidden biases and addressing inequitable

hiring, promotion and development practices. When DEIB initiatives are fully integrated into company culture, all employees — particularly those from marginalized communities — feel empowered and valued.

The return on this investment includes improved morale, greater innovation, higher performance and long-term growth.

The 2025 training will equip employees at every level with the awareness and tools to work more effectively across diverse identities and backgrounds. The program encourages compassion, inclusion and equity in everyday workplace interactions, fostering a culture where everyone feels respected and valued.

INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING FACILITATOR

Robin Lewis



Guiding Women Toward Healing and Purpose

Robin Lewis is a transformational leader, coach and author whose passion is helping women of faith discover their true identity in Christ and live with bold purpose. As Founder and Director of Awakened Discipleship & Coaching Co., she has guided women in 12 nations through healing, growth and empowerment.

A certified life coach, inner healer, mentor and retreat leader, Lewis has led an international coaching ministry that has reached more than 1,000 women. As a pioneer in her field, she has created transformational programs designed to bring healing, growth and lasting change.

She is the author of, “The Guts & Glory of Forgiveness,” and frequently speaks about the power of forgiveness to release past pain.

Lewis often says, “When you know the steps to take for a complete forgiveness process, God comes alongside you to set you free.”

Her newest program, “Sacred Spaces: A Devotional Journey to God,” invites women into a deeper relationship with God—teaching them how to hear His voice, pray with boldness and create a personal space for meeting with their Heavenly Father.

Lewis and her husband, Jeff, live in Hemingway, South Carolina, where they enjoy time with their four grown children and eight grandchildren. Passionate about unity, she helped establish the first diverse community prayer group in her hometown, bringing together men and women from multiple denominations and both Black and white churches. The group has met weekly for more than nine years and will be honored in October during Global Diversity Awareness Month.

Through her writing, teaching and mentoring, Lewis continues to inspire women to step into the freedom and purpose God designed for them. To learn more, visit her website at www.robinlewislife.com.

INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr. Cynthia J. Walters



Cynthia James Walters, EdD, is a health care professional with 49 years of experience. She retired in 2023 from Prisma Health, where she served as the first director of diversity and inclusion. During her career, she helped strategize and implement a culture of equity, inclusion and belonging for employees, patients and communities.

Walters was also the first director of organization development and learning, as well as director of education for Palmetto Health. She is a fellow of Furman University’s Riley Institute of Diversity and currently serves as staff liaison for the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce. She is the author of, “From Chaos to Serenity: Messages to Encourage and Nourish the Soul,” and her passion is ensuring all people feel visible, valued and respected.

She earned a bachelor of science, a master’s in Community and Occupational Programs in Education and a Doctor of Education from the University of South Carolina. An ordained Baptist preacher, she also completed a Master of Arts in Practical Ministry from Erskine Theological Seminary and serves as an associate minister for the historic Zion Baptist

Church in Columbia, South Carolina. She is first vice president of the Gethsemane Woman’s Auxiliary.

Walters has served on the boards of the James R. Clark Sickle Cell Foundation, Communities in Schools SC (formerly Midlands), the Greater Columbia Community Relations Council, and Women in Philanthropy. She is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Inc., Columbia Alumnae Chapter, for more than 50 years (initiated Iota Chi, University of South Carolina), a former president of Jack and Jill-Columbia, and has received numerous state and local awards.

She and her husband, Otis “Skip” Walters Jr., have been married for more than 45 years. They have three adult children—Payton, Rena and Jarryd—two daughters-in-law, Sherica and Katherine; one grandson, Armon; and two granddaughters, Sydney and Aurora.

Asked to comment on Global Diversity Awareness Month, Walters said, “Having traveled to several continents, I continue to appreciate the wide range of cultures, ethnicities, religions, abilities and experiences that exist within and across societies. Global Diversity Awareness Month offers an opportunity to celebrate and respect everyone’s uniqueness and commonalities. It is a time to be grateful for our similarities and embrace our differences.”

INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING PRESENTER

Yolonda Griffin Johnson



Leading with Vision, Storytelling and Impact

Yolonda Griffin Johnson is a dynamic leader, strategist and storyteller with more than two decades of executive experience in finance operations. As vice president of finance operations, she has spearheaded global transformation initiatives that balance efficiency, innovation and people development—earning recognition for her ability to lead with both precision and empathy.

Beyond the corporate boardroom, Johnson is the founder and CEO of Black Women Own and the Griffin Strategy Lab, where she equips leaders and entrepreneurs to drive growth while remaining authentic to their values. She is also the creative force behind the podcast, “Everybody at the Table,” a platform that sparks bold conversations on equity, leadership and access.

A sought-after speaker and facilitator, Johnson brings a rare blend of corporate expertise, entrepreneurial vision and personal storytelling to every stage. Whether guiding conversations on diversity and the bottom line, exploring the tension between assimilation and authenticity or championing fearless leadership, she inspires audiences to reflect, reimagine and rise.

Johnson holds an MBA and lives in Atlanta, GA. Her work is driven by a simple but profound belief: access creates possibility, and when more voices are at the table, everyone thrives.

In speaking about Global Diversity Awareness Month, Johnson

said:

"October is Global Diversity Awareness Month, and while we pause to recognize it, the truth is that diversity is something we live every day. It shows up in the choices we make, where we live, who we spend time with and even what we eat. Choosing to embrace diversity is an intentional act, not just a celebration once a year.

Food is one of the simplest and richest entry points into diverse lives. Sharing a meal creates space for conversation, connection and understanding. It is why I created my podcast, “Everybody at the Table.” The table is symbolic: no hierarchy, no separation, just people coming together to share and learn from one another.

This month, I encourage you to lean into diversity in new ways. Try a cuisine you have never had before, take a class that stretches your cultural perspective or simply talk with a neighbor whose lived experience is different from yours. Even within our shared identities as Americans, we are shaped by unique cultures, regions, races, ethnicities, genders and orientations.

Global Diversity Awareness Month reminds us that we can choose to broaden our lens. We can choose inclusion. We can choose connection. And when we do, we discover that the richness of life is found in our differences and in the courage to explore them together."



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**THANK YOU
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CELEBRATING INCLUSION AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Submitted by Reginal G. Lyerly, vice president of recruitment, DNA Diversity Executive Search



Every October, people around the world recognize Global Diversity Awareness Month, a time dedicated to appreciating the richness of human differences and the value they bring to our communities, workplaces and schools.

The foundation of Global Diversity Awareness Month traces back to the aftermath of World War II, specifically to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 in Paris. This declaration marked the first global affirmation that all individuals — regardless of nationality, race, gender, language or belief — are inherently entitled to fundamental rights and dignity. It underscored the value of human diversity and laid the groundwork for inclusive principles globally.

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, this observance reminds us that diversity is more than just a concept — it is a strength that fosters innovation, empathy and collaboration.

Why Global Diversity Awareness Matters

Diversity goes beyond visible traits such as race, ethnicity or gender. It includes differences in culture, language, religion, age, abilities, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background and lived experiences. Global Diversity Awareness Month serves as an opportunity to reflect on how these differences can expand our perspectives and help us better understand one another.

When organizations and communities embrace diversity, they create environments where people feel valued, respected and empowered. This not only enhances personal growth but also drives progress by encouraging new ideas and solutions that may not arise in more homogeneous settings.

How It Is Celebrated

Observances of Global Diversity Awareness Month vary, but they often include:

- Educational programs and workshops on cultural competency and unconscious bias
- Storytelling and speaker events where individuals share personal experiences tied to identity and inclusion
- Cultural showcases highlighting traditions, foods, art and music from around the world
- Community service projects that connect people across different backgrounds
- Workplace initiatives such as employee resource group events, diversity panels and inclusion training

These activities provide opportunities to learn, engage and build stronger connections among people of different backgrounds.

The Benefits of Embracing Diversity

Celebrating diversity is not only the right thing to do morally; it also produces tangible benefits. Research consistently shows that diverse teams are more creative, adaptable and effective at solving complex problems. In schools, exposure to diverse perspectives helps students develop critical thinking skills and empathy. On a societal level, embracing diversity builds resilience and unity in the face of global challenges.

Moving Forward

Global Diversity Awareness Month is more than a 31-day observance — it's a call to action. Each of us can play a role in fostering inclusion by listening to others' stories, challenging our own biases and creating spaces where all people feel welcome. By honoring diversity, we build a stronger, more connected world.

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INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING PRESENTER

Mike Young



Mike Young is the executive director of Good Samaritan Clinic and president of the Men's National Community Health Worker Alliance. A trained cultural anthropologist, Young has conducted immersive research with Indigenous communities in Guatemala and holds a master's degree from the University of South Carolina, where he also completed doctoral coursework with a 4.0 GPA.

With deep expertise in health equity,

community engagement and cultural humility, Young has held key leadership roles at the Center for Community Health Alignment and PASOs, where he led statewide efforts to empower Latino communities through capacity building and support for community health workers. He has also served as a consultant specializing in equity, inclusion and workforce development for nonprofits and service organizations.

A Riley Institute Diversity Leaders Initiative fellow, Young is a board member of the South Carolina Free Clinics Association and a sought-after speaker on equity, inclusion and multicultural understanding across the country.

INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING PRESENTER

Dr. Shawn Edwards



Transforming Organizations Through Strategy, Culture and Leadership

As CEO of Solutions by Shawn Edwards, she brings more than two decades of organizational development experience to help companies thrive at critical inflection points. She combines academic expertise as a business professor at the College of Charleston School of Business with practical consulting strategies that deliver measurable results.

Specialized Expertise

Edwards guides cultural transformations that foster sustainable growth through:

- Board Development and Governance: Aligning strategic leadership
- Human Resources Innovation: Designing talent-nurturing systems that drive performance
- Cultural Architecture: Creating inclusive environments where diversity becomes a competitive advantage
- Strategic Process Management: Implementing vision-to-execution frameworks
- Leadership Coaching: Developing visionary, focused, servant leaders

Credentials and Impact

Her evidence-based approach is underpinned by extensive credentials: a Doctor of Business Administration from Temple University, an honorary Doctor of Theology from SOGC, an MBA in human resource management from Walden University and SPHR and SHRM-SCP certifications. She is certified in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI), Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and DISC, and has developed proprietary methodologies integrating core values analysis with team engagement frameworks.

Diverse Client Portfolio

Edwards' consulting spans multiple industries across South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, New York and California. Her clients include nonprofits such as Trident United Way, One80Place and Charleston Promise Neighborhood; cultural institutions including the Charleston Wine & Food Festival, South Carolina Aquarium and Gibbes Museum; and businesses including SC Federal Credit Union, LS3P and Ignite Digital Services.

Community Leadership

Outside of her professional work, Edwards serves on the board of One80Place, is board chair of Together SC, is an active member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. and leads at Christian Praise & Worship Center.

Based in Charleston with her husband, Derrick, she cites her five adult children and two grandchildren as her greatest accomplishments.

"My mission is helping organizations discover their unique potential through strategic alignment of people, purpose and processes."



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INTRODUCING 2025 DIVERSITY FOCUS TRAINING PRESENTER

Reginal G. Lyerly



Reginal G. Lyerly is a retired U.S. Army veteran, advocate, senior recruitment strategist and entrepreneur whose post-military career centers on veteran outreach, cybersecurity talent, business development, private equity and community service. He blends two decades of military leadership with private-sector recruiting, insurance services, entrepreneurship and public speaking to support veterans and small businesses across the Carolinas.

Early Life & Education

Lyerly earned a Bachelor of Metaphysical Science and minister ordination from the University of Metaphysics in 2006, accompanying his work as an ordained metaphysical minister and practitioner. He recently completed coursework for a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration through Ashworth College in Georgia, inspired by his late father, John F. Lyerly, a longtime business owner. He views this achievement as a continuation of his father's legacy.

Military Career

From 1997 to 2020, Lyerly served as a religious affairs noncommissioned officer, deploying with U.S. forces to Iraq, Kuwait and other Middle Eastern theaters. His service is often highlighted in profiles of his community leadership and veteran advocacy.

Civilian Transition & Professional Roles

Since retiring, Lyerly has built a diverse professional portfolio:

- Veteran outreach & executive search: Vice president of cybersecurity recruitment, veteran outreach and government contracting for DNA

Diversity Executive Search, an equity- and inclusion-focused firm based in Ottawa, Ontario.

- Entrepreneurship & insurance: Owner of Keeping Carolina Families Covered, an agency providing life insurance and retirement solutions in the Carolinas and Virginia. He also works in defense and aerospace private equity with Dark Alpha Capital, LLC, and as a business capital consultant nationwide.

- Marketing & events: Sales leader with Discover Brightside Worldwide, earning multiple awards and entrepreneurial challenge wins.

Awards & Community Involvement

Lyerly has received Discover Brightside's, "Veteran Trailblazer Award," multiple times and won the 2022 Brightside Entrepreneurial Challenge. He serves as the Charlotte Region member-at-large for the North Carolina Veteran's Business Association and frequently participates in forums, coffee talks and panels on veteran and small-business development.

Speaking, Writing & Projects

An active public speaker and content creator, Lyerly shares messages on perseverance, purpose and cybersecurity for veterans across social platforms. He co-authored three volumes of, "The Miseducation of Becoming an Adult," anthology and contributes regularly to Diversity Works Magazine. He is also developing a children's book series on neurodiversity, inspired by his cousin Dion, who is autistic.

Public Profile

Lyerly is widely recognized as a mission-driven leader, blending faith, resilience and business expertise to advance veteran success, small-business growth and inclusive workforce development.

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SHOP LOCAL, SHINE BRIGHT THIS HOLIDAY SEASON Submitted by Florence Downtown Development Corp.



Shop South Carolina-made products at Barringer General Store, 138 W. Evans Street.

Putting out pumpkins and preparing for Thanksgiving festivities might seem too early to be thinking about holiday shopping, but the reality is, according to the National Retail Federation, 43 percent of U.S. shoppers start making holiday purchases before November, and that trend continues to ring true in 2025.

This upcoming holiday season, it's more important than ever to keep the cheer here and do as much shopping at locally owned businesses as possible. The benefits of shopping local aren't just as simple as finding something unique or supporting your neighbor.

The multiplier effect of spending your dollars with a locally owned business creates a chain reaction of dollars circulating in our local economy rather than headed to out-of-state corporate entities. The more dollars we keep in our local economy, the more vibrant and diverse our places can be. Local businesses hire local talent, use local services and support local charitable entities with contributions (even the local youth sports teams).

When local businesses thrive, our local community thrives. Over the past 25 years, small businesses across the country have generated more than 12 million new jobs. In downtown Florence alone, in the last five years, small businesses have been responsible for adding more than 300 new jobs to the local economy — just in eight blocks!

So, how can you support our local businesses this holiday season?

- **Learn about the locally owned downtown shops through the Shop Dine Stay directory at www.florencedowntown.com.**
- **Dine in, take out or purchase gift cards from locally owned restaurants.**

- **Visit the City Center Farmers Market and purchase locally grown or raised produce, meats and dairy, or pick up something handmade by a local artist or artisan. Save the date for their Holiday Gift Market on Saturday, Nov. 29.**

- **Shop on Plaid Friday (Nov. 28) or Small Business Saturday (Nov. 29) with a small business or local eatery.**

- **Check out the online South Carolina small business marketplace, www.weshopsc.com, and discover small businesses throughout the state.**

- **Leave a great online or social media review of a small business you like to visit.**

Shopping local this holiday season is more than a simple call to action using a trending hashtag. It's an intentional practice that makes a big difference in our community. Join us in downtown Florence to help keep our places unique, sustainable and vibrant. You'll not only find something for everyone on your list this season, but you'll be part of a much larger movement — and it feels great supporting an entrepreneur's dream. Shop small to shine bright this holiday season!



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NEWS FROM GREATER FLORENCE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE Article submitted by the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce



Get Ready for the 2025 Florence Christmas Parade!

The holiday season in Florence wouldn't be complete without the sparkle and joy of the annual Christmas parade! The Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce invites you to join the fun at the 2025 Florence Christmas Parade on Saturday, Dec. 13, at 11 a.m.

The parade will step off near the intersection of Sunset Drive and Evans Street and make its way down Evans toward Dargan Street. Be sure to grab a spot in front of the Florence City Center, where performances will be judged.

And here's a holiday bonus—cash prizes will be awarded for the best participation entries and top marching bands, chosen by Santa's secret judges!

Marching Band Awards

- 1st Place: \$1,000
- 2nd Place: \$500
- 3rd Place: \$250

Participation Awards

- 1st Place: \$1,000
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- 3rd Place: \$250

Want to be part of the magic? Submit your completed parade application early—space is limited!

In Person or By Mail

Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce
100 W. Evans St., Florence, SC 29501
Attn: Jessica Watts

Email: jwatts@flochamber.com

Deadline to enter: Tuesday, Nov. 25

Mandatory participants' meeting:

Wednesday, Dec. 3

For more information, contact Jessica Watts at (843) 519-0933 or by email. Don't miss your chance to be part of Florence's most festive tradition!

Chamber's Emerging Leaders Summer Institute Celebrates 2025 Graduates

The Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce recently celebrated the bright future of local talent at the 2025 Emerging Leaders Summer Institute graduation, held Aug. 21 at the Chamber offices.

Family, friends and community members gathered to honor the graduates. The evening featured keynote speaker Lisa Justice, director of adult education with Florence 1 Schools,

who shared inspiring words about leadership and growth.

This year's Emerging Leaders class included:

- Teresa Allen, Florence-Darlington Technical College
- Christal Altidoor, Pee Dee Coalition
- Yanasia Cain, HopeHealth
- Sheridan Edwards, HopeHealth
- Tanicia Gilchrist, HopeHealth
- Debra Goodman, ERA Leatherman Realty
- Cynthia Gray, Florence-Darlington Technical College
- Phillip Hobbs, Janney Montgomery Scott LLC
- Genai Laws, Lighthouse Ministries
- Pam McDaniels, Florence 1 Schools
- Priscilla Muldrow, One Love Community Partners
- Vicky Peppin, Florence-Darlington Technical College

The Chamber congratulates these graduates on completing the program and looks forward to the impact they will make in Florence and beyond.



ELSI Graduation

STEPS TO TAKE TOWARD ENTREPRENEURIAL CAREERS



(FamilyFeatures)-Entrepreneurship is a career goal for many working adults. Autonomy and personal satisfaction are just a couple of the benefits of running your own business.

It's a professional path about three in five teens would prefer over a traditional job, according to a survey by Junior Achievement

(JA). Running a successful company depends on multiple factors, including a solid business plan, adequate startup resources and a receptive market, as well as a strong sense of responsibility, work ethic and ability to persevere under pressure.

Shaping the skills and mindset necessary to flourish as an entrepreneur can begin well before entering the workforce. In fact, even students in junior high and high school can start working toward entrepreneurial goals with these tips from JA, a nonprofit that inspires and prepares young people by delivering lessons in financial literacy, work and career readiness.

1. Select electives wisely

Students don't have to wait until they're in college to begin developing business skills and knowledge. If they have the ambition and drive to become an entrepreneur, they may find it helpful to complement the classes needed for graduation requirements with electives that allow them to explore their interest in the business world. Some examples include accounting, marketing, finance, economics, psychology and computer science.

2. Make part-time work meaningful

Many students enter the workforce in high school and start practicing money management and contribute to expenses like gas and car insurance. While most jobs available to students

are service oriented and fall outside the business world, it doesn't hurt to explore options that put students closer to their entrepreneurial ambitions. For example, local small businesses may be willing to hire someone eager to learn.

3. Take part in programs

Kids can challenge themselves by putting their knowledge into practice as real-world entrepreneurs. For example, JA's company program is an immersive program that fosters creativity, critical thinking and business acumen, offering students unique opportunities to explore the world of business and economics by creating real companies. Participants learn to present their business plans and results during competitions that offer learning opportunities.

At the Future Bound competition (made possible through the support of businesses including Chick-fil-A, Delta Air Lines, Pacific Life Foundation and Staples), participants took part in seminars and mentorship. The event featured four programs that empower students with entrepreneurship and financial literacy skills: the Company of the Year National Competition, the Social Innovation Challenge, the Titan National Competition and the National Stock Market Challenge.

4. Seek a strong mentor

Some of the best learning comes from emulating others who are successful in their fields. Meeting regularly with someone who serves as a role model can help students sharpen their vision for the future and learn from the experiences that propelled professionals into their current positions.

5. Define a future vision

Creating an inspiration board can help motivated students compile and organize ideas. This board, whether physical or digital, can serve as a source of inspiration and help motivate students to identify and overcome obstacles while working toward bringing their visions for careers as entrepreneurs to life.



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CITY OF DARLINGTON TO LAUNCH HOUSING INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Submitted by Hunter Thomas, public & community affairs director



City of Darlington
South Carolina

DARLINGTON – The City of Darlington is launching the Housing Incentive Program to encourage residential growth and attract new homeowners.

The initiative that will launch on Oct. 1, 2025, and last until Sept. 30, 2027, is designed to promote the construction of new single-family homes within the city, helping strengthen

neighborhoods, promote development and expand the local tax base.

“The City of Darlington is committed to fostering growth,” said Mayor Curtis Boyd. “Darlington is a beautiful and safe place to live and raise a family. We want to improve housing and welcome new families to our community and with this Housing Incentive Program, builders will have an opportunity to help build Darlington up at a discounted price.”

To qualify for the program, housing must be intended for home ownership and not rental property. The City of Darlington currently has just over 6,000 residents who live within the city limits. The City of Darlington will reimburse the contractor or homeowner for fees, including tap, water, sewer, connection and building permit upon completion of the sale of the property.

Prior to construction, the builder must enter into an application agreement with the City of Darlington. The builder will then have three years to either complete the construction of the new home or have a buyer who will utilize the home as

a primary residence.

The builder must submit the final closing statement to the City of Darlington, and an affidavit must also accompany the closing documents and be signed by both the homeowner and builder stating that the home is only to be used as a primary residence.

Fees received from this program will be deposited into an interest-bearing escrow account in which the city shall be entitled to retain any and all interest earned and may withdraw interest at any time without notice.

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



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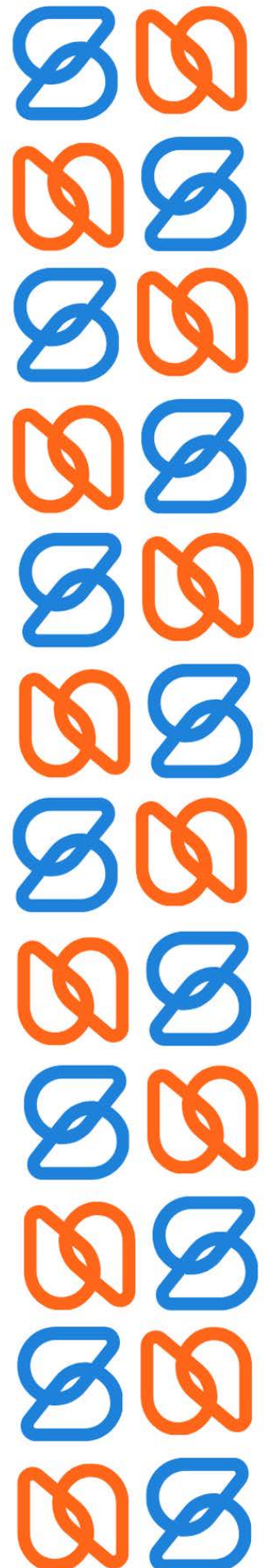
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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND DRIVING BUSINESS SUCCESS AT ADP By Cynthia O. Ford



Victoria Johnson pictured with her husband Brad and son Lucas

Victoria Johnson's career journey began in Virginia, where she earned a bachelor's degree in environmental horticulture from Virginia Tech and later a master's from NC State. After five years in that field, she and her husband relocated to South Carolina. It was here that Johnson sought a career where she could continue building relationships and providing service — goals that led her to ADP.

Today, Johnson serves as an account manager III and team lead on ADP's credit optimization team.

In this role, she works closely with clients who have recently implemented tax credits, guiding them through optimization strategies, reviewing analytics and solving problems that arise. As team lead, she also supports her colleagues, ensuring both clients and staff receive the best possible service.

While many people know ADP as a payroll provider, Johnson is quick to point out that the company offers much more. "ADP can be a one-stop shop for all business needs," she said. "From job posting to tax filing and everything in between, we're here to support businesses at every stage." She added that ADP also helps with employee engagement, compliance and retention strategies, ensuring businesses have the resources needed to strengthen their workforce as well as their finances.

The Florence, South Carolina, branch specializes in tax credits, a vital resource for companies navigating today's financial challenges. Johnson finds particular fulfillment in presenting small businesses with the tax savings they have earned — savings that can mean the difference between stability and closure. "It's rewarding to know that our work helps businesses keep their doors open and employees working," she said.

Johnson emphasizes that ADP's commitment to excellence does not change based on company size. "We support our clients the same, big or small," she said. "Most large companies were once small; we want to be a partner at every step of growth." She acknowledged that many Florence-area businesses face unique challenges in maintaining profitability while keeping pace with compliance requirements. Helping clients navigate those hurdles, she said, is one of the most rewarding aspects of her role.

Beyond technical expertise, Johnson prioritizes authentic connections. Even in virtual settings, she takes time to learn about clients' hobbies, families and personal interests. "Those types of relationships make it less a job and more of a connection to others," she said.

Looking to the future, Johnson sees technology and artificial intelligence as major forces shaping payroll and human resources. She believes AI will streamline data entry, provide quicker answers and ultimately help businesses operate with greater ease. ADP has already embraced innovation, offering integrations and hybrid



Victoria and her son

solutions to meet evolving workplace needs. She also notes that remote and hybrid work arrangements, once rare, are now common. Helping businesses adapt to those changes has been another way ADP remains relevant to today's workforce.

For local companies, Johnson's advice is simple: choose a partner you trust. "ADP has expanded its services based on what our clients need," she said. "Being able to say, 'Oh, you need that? No problem — we offer it,' sets us apart." She encourages businesses to think

beyond payroll and consider how HR and compliance support can help them grow strategically.

Her inspiration comes from her husband and son, who encourage her to be her best in all areas of life. At the same time, she draws strength from her credit optimization team, whom she describes as "wonderful people who provide amazing service to our clients every day."

In her view, the impact of ADP reaches beyond payroll and tax credits. By helping businesses access critical resources, the company fuels local job creation and strengthens the economy. Looking ahead, Johnson hopes to continue growing with ADP while deepening her impact in the Florence business community. For her, success is measured not only in results but in the lasting relationships and community growth that her work helps make possible.



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FORTY YEARS STRONG: SERVICE, LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY By Cynthia O. Ford



Starlee Davis Alexander

Starlee Alexander has spent four decades building a career, a business and a legacy that has touched countless lives. When she began her journey with State Farm in July 1985, she never imagined that 40 years later she would still be thriving as an independent agent and community leader. What has kept her going all these years is not only a love for the work, but also the deep relationships she has built with clients, colleagues and her community.

Her path to entrepreneurship was sparked by an unexpected opportunity. At the time, her husband, Terry, worked in a congressman's office and was asked if he knew anyone interested in self-employment. Alexander stepped forward, interviewed and was ultimately offered the chance to become a State Farm agent. She remembers how the language and opportunities looked different then, yet she persevered and embraced the role. Looking back, she sees it as a blessing from God that changed the course of her life.

Over the years, Alexander has built more than just a business — she has cultivated a team. One employee, Cherry Davis, has been with her for 27 years. Others, including Loretta Williams, and her granddaughter Tori McClain, have joined the team as well. She has trained and mentored many others, providing them with skills and opportunities to grow.

"Your biggest challenge in business is getting the right team," she said.

Alexander is proud that her office can continue to serve clients effectively even when she steps away — a sign of the strength and dedication of those around her.

For Alexander, reaching the 40-year milestone is not just a personal victory. It represents the ability to sustain a business through challenges, economic shifts and changing industry landscapes.

Her accomplishments extend beyond the insurance world. She became the first Black woman to chair her local chamber of commerce board of directors and helped found a networking organization that created workshops and opportunities for other professionals. She has also mentored students and young professionals, offering them guidance that might spark their own breakthroughs. She believes in the power of giving someone a chance, knowing it can be the push they need to succeed.

Her community work has been as impactful as her professional career. She has served on the school board for three years, supported the United Negro College Fund and contributed to initiatives that benefit education and opportunity. As a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., she has participated in countless service projects.

She even pursued her love for fashion by running a women's boutique, Miladies182, with partners Charlene Lowery and Doris Lockhart for eight years — showing that her entrepreneurial spirit extends far beyond one field.

Alexander has also witnessed how the insurance and financial services industry has evolved. She notes that sustaining engagement is a challenge when members do not consistently participate and network. She emphasizes the importance of referrals and visibility, especially for diverse professionals seeking to establish themselves in industries that often lack representation.

Despite those challenges, she continues to believe in the power of mentorship and community support, encouraging young

professionals to find a mentor, network actively and pursue opportunities with perseverance.

Her guiding principles have been rooted in perseverance, financial responsibility and service. She advises entrepreneurs to keep finances in order — separating business, personal and tax funds — to stay prepared for the unexpected. She has also never shied away from hard work or challenges.

"You have to persevere," she said. "You have to go past hurdles."

Those values have carried her through obstacles and allowed her to build trust with clients who return to her office year after year.

Alexander recalls moments when her work made a difference, such as writing a policy that later provided critical support to a family in need. Each policy, she explains, is not just paperwork — it is a promise, a safety net and sometimes a lifeline.

Her proudest contributions include graduating from Florida A&M University and serving on the Board of Trustees at South Carolina State University, where she has supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities and opened doors for the next generation.

Family is also central to her story. She has two children and two granddaughters who inspire her to show them the richness of life through travel and experiences.

Now, at the 40-year mark, she is not focused on retirement or what comes next. Instead, she continues to embrace each milestone as it comes. She takes pride in being her own boss and in the independence that has defined her career.

When asked to sum up her journey in three words, she chose "rewarding, challenging and a blessing."

That sentiment captures the essence of her story — a career filled with trials and triumphs, challenges and victories and ultimately, a legacy of resilience, service and pride.

As clients and colleagues reflect on her impact, they often describe her as friendly, outgoing and attentive. She has built a reputation for listening and for helping others not just with insurance, but with encouragement and guidance. In an industry that has seen many changes, her consistency and presence stand out.

Alexander hopes to be remembered for her positivity, perseverance and unwavering commitment to a mighty God and the people she serves.

Her story is not just about 40 years in business. It is about breaking barriers, lifting others and building a life of meaning.

Alexander's journey shows what is possible when determination meets opportunity — and it reminds us that true success is measured not just in years, but in impact.



Center Agent Starlee Alexander, with team members standing behind her from left to right Cherry Davis, Tori McClain and Loretta Williams

Chris Goss
 Head of Pharmaceutical
 Development Services,
 Florence, SC

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

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

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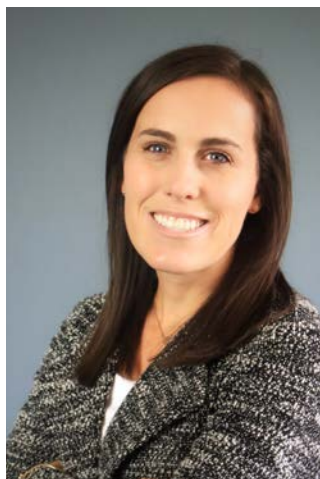


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FIVE CYBERSECURITY PRACTICES EVERY SMALL BUSINESS NEEDS

Submitted by Mallory Wojciechowski, chief executive officer and president of BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH – Cybercrime poses a big threat to businesses. According to Netwrix's 2025 Cybersecurity Trends Report, 51 percent of responding businesses surveyed experienced a security incident in the past 12 months, with 75 percent reporting financial damage from attacks.

Small businesses are particularly susceptible to data breaches and cyberattacks because they are not always equipped with the proper tools and resources to combat these threats.

The good news: BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas is here to provide measures you should

take right away to protect your small business.

Uncertainty drives cybersecurity risks

According to recent research from Accenture, cyber threats are evolving fast. Ninety percent of companies lack the maturity to counter today's AI-enabled threats.

As technology and AI advance and become more interconnected, cyberattacks are becoming harder to defend against, resulting in more small businesses becoming victims of cybercrime.

The only way to protect your small business from cybercrime is to take preventive action. Cybersecurity is no longer optional – it's a necessity. It's time to gather your team and develop a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy for your business.

Five cybersecurity practices every business needs to follow

1. Train all employees in cybersecurity best practices

Educating employees is one of the most critical security measures for small businesses. This ensures employees understand the risks associated with accessing company data and gives them the knowledge and tools to protect themselves from cybercrime.

To educate employees effectively, provide clear cybersecurity policies that outline the risks, defenses in place, and steps they can take to protect themselves. You can also offer formal training programs to ensure they are up to date on the latest threats and solutions.

It is also important to train employees on internal threats. Outline strict computer policies and require staff to change passwords frequently.

2. Implement role-based access control (RBAC)

Role-based access control (RBAC) allows you to assign specific permissions to employees based on their role in the company, controlling who has access to what data.

For example, you can grant some employees access to the company's email system and others access to the digital sales platform. This ensures employees have access only to the systems and data required to do their jobs.

RBAC also prevents employees from accessing sensitive data they do not need, reducing their risk of becoming victims of data theft.

3. Initiate automated remote backup and data recovery

Protecting data is one of the most crucial cybersecurity practices for small businesses. One of the best ways to protect your data from cyberattacks is by initiating automated remote backup and data recovery, which allows you to store an extra

copy of your data offsite in a secure location.

This not only safeguards your data from cyberattacks but also provides the ability to restore it in the event of a breach.

4. Use multi-factor authentication (MFA)

MFA requires users to provide additional information to prove their identity when accessing company data and systems beyond just a username and password. This additional information may include a code texted to a mobile device, a fingerprint, or other verification.

MFA makes it significantly more difficult for cybercriminals to access your data and systems, providing an added layer of security if a password is compromised. While MFA once stopped at two-factor authentication, it now typically involves multiple steps to ensure the person trying to gain access is who they claim to be.

5. Secure your Wi-Fi networks

Finally, small businesses need to properly secure their Wi-Fi networks to ensure employees are connecting to a safe network when they access the internet for work.

You can secure Wi-Fi networks by using a VPN to encrypt internet traffic, a firewall to block cybercriminals, and a host intrusion prevention system (HIPS) to detect and stop cyberattacks.

Prioritize your cybersecurity with help from the BBB

No matter the size of your business, cybersecurity needs to be a priority. The BBB recognizes that small businesses face unique cybersecurity challenges, and we are here to help.

Stay up to date on the latest cybersecurity threats and best practices by visiting bbb.org/bizhq.



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BBB.org/ScamSurvivalKit

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FLORENCE POLICE DEPARTMENT EMBRACES NEW ERA OF LEADERSHIP

Submitted by the City of Florence



Police Chief Allen Heidler

After more than four decades of dedicated service to the City of Florence, Police Chief Allen Heidler is retiring from his role. Heidler began his law enforcement career in the U.S. Army Military Police Corps at Fort Jackson before joining the Florence Police Department in 1983. Originally from Pennsylvania, he moved south in search of warmer weather and quickly found a home in Florence, working his way up from the patrol ranks to become chief of

the Florence Police Department.

Respected for his humility and approachable leadership style, Heidler has earned the admiration of both his officers and the community, establishing a legacy of trust, integrity and dedication that will continue to guide the Florence Police Department for years to come. He has overseen major initiatives in community policing, officer training and departmental operations, helping to modernize the department while maintaining strong connections with the community. For Heidler, building trust is not just a strategy but a daily responsibility. "I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve this community," said Heidler. "As I retire, I am proud of the progress we've made in building trust with the community, advancing our policing practices and supporting our officers. I have full confidence in the department's future and look forward to seeing it continue to grow, innovate and serve the people of Florence with integrity and dedication."

As the Florence Police Department prepares for a new chapter of leadership, Captain Stephen Starling has been appointed interim police chief. With 16 years of service to the department, Starling brings extensive experience, having commanded the Administrative Services Division, where he managed the budget, payroll, records and technology operations, and served as the department's public information officer, overseeing media relations and community communications. He has also played a central role in driving technological innovation within the department, including establishing the Florence Police Drone Team, earning his own certification and training other officers to incorporate drones into daily operations.

"Stepping into this role is both a great honor and responsibility," said Interim Chief Starling. "I am grateful for Chief Heidler's decades of dedicated service and the example he set in building trust with the community. I look forward to continuing his legacy while leading the department into its next chapter."

Among the department's recent advancements is the launch of the Real Time Crime Center (RTCC), introduced in July 2025. The RTCC integrates FLOCK cameras—automated license plate reading cameras—drones and other surveillance systems, enabling rapid, coordinated responses in critical situations and delivering real-time investigative leads to officers on scene, enhancing their ability to respond quickly and effectively.

To further strengthen the RTCC's impact, the department has acquired 36 additional FLOCK cameras, bringing the total throughout Florence to 66. Plans are also underway to purchase two more autonomous drones, enhancing both the Real Time Crime Center's capabilities and the Drone as a First Responder (DFR) Program, which enables rapid deployment to emergency



Interim Police Chief Stephen Starling

scenes and provides officers with critical situational awareness before they arrive. Together, these initiatives represent a significant step forward for public safety in Florence.

While the department continues to adopt new tools and technology, the Florence Police Department remains firmly committed to community policing. Following the example set under Chief Heidler's leadership, officers will continue to build trust and foster relationships throughout the city. Upcoming initiatives that reflect this commitment include the next Unity with the Community event in the spring, where residents can engage with officers in a casual, family-friendly setting. In addition, the department recently launched its latest session of Citizens Police Academy on Oct. 7, offering participants an inside look at police operations with live demonstrations and hands-on activities.

For those looking to make a difference in their community, the Florence Police Department is encouraging individuals to consider a career in law enforcement. The department offers a variety of opportunities, from patrol officers to specialized units, and provides extensive training, professional development and advancement potential. Officers benefit from supportive city leadership, a growing community and the chance to be part of a department that values both innovation and community trust.

"Working for the Florence Police Department means more than just wearing a badge," Starling said. "It's about serving with integrity, protecting our neighbors and making a meaningful impact every day through our work."

Individuals interested in a career with the Florence Police Department are encouraged to visit the City of Florence website at www.cityofflorence.com to learn more about the department and apply for available positions or contact (843) 665-3158.

As Heidler retires and the Florence Police Department advances into a new era of leadership, one constant remains: a steadfast commitment to protecting and serving the people of Florence with dignity, respect and integrity. With a foundation built on community trust and a future strengthened by new technology, the department continues to move boldly ahead while upholding the values that define our city. Full Life. Full Forward.



Unity with the Community Event

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October is Global Diversity Awareness Month



The world's true beauty lies in its diversity.
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NIKKOYA BASS: UNITED WAY BOARD MEMBER OF THE YEAR

Submitted by Julia Fulmer, director of community impact and marketing, United Way of Florence County



Pictured President Cameron Campbell and Nikkoya Bass at the closing of our Awards and Allocation Luncheon.

At United Way of Florence County's Annual Awards and Allocation Luncheon on June 17, the room erupted in applause when the organization's President, Cameron Campbell, announced the surprise recipient of the 2024–2025 Board Member of the Year Award: Nikkoya Bass.

"This award honors a board member who exemplifies the true spirit of leadership through giving, advocating and volunteering," Campbell told the audience. "Nikkoya checks every box and then some."

She went on to describe how Bass has not only revitalized her company's United Way campaign with fresh energy and momentum but also played a key role in the organization's shift to the Collective Impact funding model, serving diligently on the

Collective Impact Task Force. By leading community conversations and engaging stakeholders, she helped ensure strategies for addressing pressing needs in Florence County reflected the voices of those directly affected.

Her presence in the community has been steadfast. From volunteering at United Way's annual Day of Caring to serving on the Community Investment Committee, where she evaluates applications, visits agencies and participates in funding deliberations, Bass has invested her time and expertise in advancing the organization's mission. "All of these activities give Nikkoya a deep understanding and appreciation of our work," Campbell said. "And for that, we're grateful."

Bass's involvement with United Way spans years, including her time as a campaign coordinator. That experience gave her a firsthand look at how workplace campaigns can drive change in the community and inspired her to deepen her engagement as a board member.

Bass currently serves as director of operations and service at Assurant, where she has worked for more than 15 years. Her professional path has been marked by steady growth, leadership and a commitment to excellence. She earned her undergraduate

degree from Francis Marion University and later completed a Master of Science in Psychology, blending business expertise with an understanding of people and human behavior.

Beyond her professional role, Bass is a community leader who wears many hats. At Assurant, she is also an engagement lead, driving employee involvement in volunteerism and community projects. In addition to her work with United Way of Florence County, she serves on the board of Diversity Works.

Despite her busy schedule, Bass prioritizes family and personal fulfillment. She is the proud mother of two children, Nia and Keith, and enjoys gardening, reading and spending time with friends and loved ones.

For her service, generosity and unwavering commitment, Bass embodies the true spirit of leadership. United Way of Florence County's recognition reflects not just her contributions over the past year but the spirit of service she carries into every role she takes on.

As Diversity Works celebrates leaders who champion inclusion, equity and community impact, Bass stands out as a shining example, showing that when passion meets purpose, the results ripple far beyond boardrooms and committee meetings.



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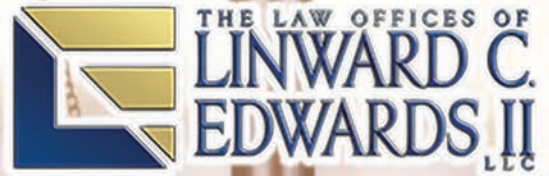


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Submitted by The Law Offices of Linward C. Edwards II, LLC



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The Law Offices of Linward C. Edwards II, LLC is dedicated to helping injury victims like you throughout Florence and Dillon obtain justice and the compensation rightfully owed to you when you have been needlessly injured by another's negligence or recklessness. We perform a proper investigation and develop a strategy tailored to your medical records, the facts of your individual case and the limitations that you may have for the remainder of your life. We will work to bring a swift resolution to your claims. However, we treat every case as if it is going to trial to ensure that you receive the maximum value possible.

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



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

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HOW SMALL BUSINESSES ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



(DWM) For many small business owners, growth can feel like a moving target. From navigating tight budgets to competing with larger companies, the path to expansion is often challenging—but not impossible. With the right strategies, small businesses can increase their visibility, build customer loyalty and boost revenue.

Understand Your Market

A deep understanding of your target market is crucial. Business owners should regularly conduct market research to identify customer needs, preferences and trends. “Knowing who your customers are and what they want helps you tailor products and services effectively,” said Business Consultant Lisa Turner. Tools like surveys, social media polls and customer feedback forms can provide actionable insights.

Invest in Digital Presence

In today’s digital era, having an online presence is no longer optional. Small businesses should invest in a professional website and maintain active social media profiles. Search engine optimization (SEO) and targeted online advertising can help attract new customers. “Even a modest digital investment can significantly increase brand awareness,” Turner added. Email newsletters and blogs can also keep customers engaged and encourage repeat business.

Focus on Customer Experience

Exceptional customer service can set a small business apart. Personalized interactions, responsive communication and a willingness to address complaints can turn first-time buyers into

loyal customers. Loyalty programs, referral incentives and follow-up messages demonstrate appreciation and encourage repeat visits.

Leverage Local Partnerships

Collaborating with other local businesses or organizations can create mutually beneficial opportunities. co-hosting events, cross-promotions or offering bundled services can expand reach without a large marketing budget. Local chambers of commerce and small business associations can also provide networking opportunities and resources for growth.

Manage Finances Wisely

Sustainable growth requires careful financial management. Owners should monitor cash flow, control expenses, and explore financing options such as small business loans or grants. “A solid financial plan allows businesses to invest strategically in marketing, technology and talent without overextending,” said Turner.

Invest in Your Team

A business is only as strong as its team. Training, development opportunities and employee recognition can improve productivity and reduce turnover. Happy employees often translate to better customer experiences, which fuels growth.

Adapt and Innovate

Finally, small businesses must remain flexible and open to change. Market trends, consumer preferences and technology evolve rapidly. Staying informed and willing to innovate ensures businesses remain competitive.

Small business growth is rarely instantaneous, but with clear strategies and consistent effort, owners can build a strong foundation for long-term success. By understanding the market, leveraging digital tools, prioritizing customers, collaborating locally, managing finances, empowering employees and embracing innovation, small businesses can thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape.



HEMINGWAY – You and I were created for more. Not more busyness or striving, but more of God—the peace of His presence combined with the power that flows from that peace. He has more than enough for everything we need.

I was reminded of this truth recently when my sister and I rushed our 87-year-old mother to the ER. She's okay now, but in that moment of not knowing, we jumped into action like a spring-loaded jack-in-the-box. We scrambled, asked questions and tried to make sense of what was happening. My heart was racing, and even though I knew God was near, I felt unsettled and anxious.

That's how quickly life can knock us off balance. One phone call, one diagnosis, one unexpected conflict—and suddenly our peace feels fragile. **When We Feel Disconnected**

Jesus promised, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). But in times of stress, it doesn't always feel that way. It's not God who creates the distance but our own sense of urgency, misplaced focus, overactivity, distractions and misaligned priorities. I'll be honest: in my own life, my daily quiet time with God runs about 94 percent. Some days, things outside my control interrupt my rhythm. But the important part is not perfection—it's returning. As soon as I can, I return to my "Sacred Space"—that intentional time with God where peace and power flow.

Here's the truth: time in God's presence is not optional. It's oxygen for our souls. It's what we were created for, what we thrive in, and the one place we receive the life we were meant to live.

When I skip this sacred space, I feel it. My soul grows restless, my peace wobbles, and I become more vulnerable to the enemy's lies. But when I return, I find what I need most: love, clarity, strength, identity and vitality.

A Story of Sacred Space



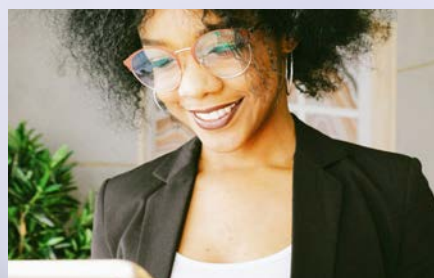
I once had a client, a young woman juggling motherhood, a demanding job and the pressure to keep everyone happy. By the time she sat down with me, she felt completely drained.

"I know I should pray," she admitted, "but I don't even know where to start. I'm so exhausted I can barely form a sentence."

Together, we talked about creating just 10 minutes a day for her own Sacred Space. No pressure to perform, no long checklist—just a few minutes to be still, read a verse, breathe and let God's love wash over her.

Within days, she noticed the difference. Within weeks, her anxiety lifted. She found herself responding to her kids with more patience. Her coworkers even commented on her calmness. She said, "I realized it wasn't about me having the right words—it was about getting still with God and receiving what He had for me all the time."

That's what Sacred Space does: it steadies us, strengthens us and reminds us that we don't walk through life alone.



Five Ways to Reconnect with God

So how do we practically return to God when we feel disconnected? Scripture gives us several pathways:

1. Through His presence – God Himself is our comforter and source of life. When we draw near to Him, His presence brings peace. "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy." – Psalm 16:11

2. Through His Word – Scripture reminds us of His promises and steadies our hearts. "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life." – Psalm 119:50

3. Through prayer – Pouring out our hearts before Him invites His peace and reassurance. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." – 1 Peter 5:7

4. Through the Holy Spirit – The Spirit is our helper, sent to guide, strengthen and remind us of God's truth. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper, to be with you forever." – John 14:16

5. Through His people – Spending time with other believers renews our faith. "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up." – 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Each of these is a pathway back to peace, strength and connection.

An Invitation

This week, I invite you to pause and ask yourself: Where do I most need God's peace and power right now? The answer won't be found in busyness, distraction or overworking—it will be found in your Sacred Space with Him.

If your heart is stirring for more, I'd love for you to join me in a brand-new journey:

Sacred Space: A Five Week Devotional Journey to God

This online community program for women is designed to help you create rhythms of prayer, rest and reflection that bring you into a deeper experience of God's presence. Together, we'll learn how to anchor our souls in His love, receive His peace, and walk in renewed identity and confidence.

Sacred Space begins soon, and spots are limited. Learn more at www.RobinLewisLife.com/sacred-space

The peace and power you need are closer than you think. They're waiting for you—in His presence, in your Sacred Space.

DUAL EDUCATION: BUILDING SKILLS, CONFIDENCE AND CAREERS



(DMW)—Across the United States, dual education programs—which blend classroom instruction with hands-on, career-based learning—are giving students a head start on higher education and the workforce. These programs, often known as dual enrollment or work-study partnerships, allow high school and college students to earn academic credit while also gaining practical experience.

Educators say the dual education model empowers students to reach new levels of academic success and career readiness by bridging the gap between theory and application.

A Head Start on College

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college-level courses for credit, often at a local technical or community college. By the time they graduate, many students have earned transferable credits, saving time and money toward a degree.

For students like Maya Johnson, a senior at a South Carolina high school, the program has been transformative.

“Taking college classes while still in high school gave me confidence,” Johnson said. “I’m going into college already knowing I can handle the workload.”

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to graduate high school, enroll in college and complete a degree.

Industry Partnerships

Beyond college-level courses, dual education programs also connect students directly with industry. Apprenticeships and cooperative education opportunities provide structured training in fields ranging from health care to advanced manufacturing.

At Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), partnerships with regional employers have created pathways for students to work in hospitals, hotels and technology firms while earning academic credit.

“Employers tell us they value students who already know the culture

of the workplace,” said Dr. Marilyn Murphy, dean of workforce development at HGTC. “Dual education creates graduates who are not only educated but also experienced.”

Closing Skills Gaps

One of the strongest arguments for dual education is its ability to address skills gaps. Many industries face shortages of qualified workers, particularly in technical fields. By giving students early exposure to real-world applications, schools can align training with workforce demand.

For example, the health care sector has embraced dual education as a pipeline for future nurses, medical technicians and specialists. Students can shadow professionals, work with patients under supervision and bring those experiences back to the classroom.

“Hands-on practice is vital in health care,” said Regina Thompson, a clinical instructor. “Dual education helps students see the humanside of medicine long before they’re full-time employees.”

Empowering First-Generation Students

Dual enrollment can be especially empowering for first-generation college students. Many enter higher education uncertain about expectations. By experiencing college coursework early, they gain confidence and reduce the intimidation factor.

For some families, the financial benefit is equally important. Dual education can lower the cost of a degree, since credits earned in high school are often discounted or free.

“My parents didn’t go to college, so they were nervous about the cost,” said Carlos Ramirez, who completed 24 credits before graduating high school in North Carolina. “Because of dual enrollment, I’ll finish my degree sooner and with less debt.”

Building Career Confidence

Career-oriented dual education programs also instill confidence in students’ choices. Instead of waiting until after graduation to explore their interests, students can test-drive potential career paths early.

In advanced manufacturing, for instance, students might work alongside engineers and technicians to learn about robotics and production lines. In hospitality, students can rotate through positions in hotels and restaurants to understand operations.

“Students see what the job is really

like,” said Stuart Butler, an executive in the hospitality industry. “That makes them better prepared and more motivated when they graduate.”

Academic and Personal Growth

Educators stress that dual education is about more than academics. The model nurtures independence, responsibility and problem-solving—skills essential in any field. Students often juggle coursework, jobs and family commitments, learning to manage time effectively.

Faculty mentors play an important role in helping students adjust. “We meet them where they are,” said Thompson. “Our goal is not just to teach skills but to help students grow as individuals.”

National Trends

The growth of dual education reflects broader national trends. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 1.4 million high school students participated in dual enrollment courses in 2023, up from fewer than 600,000 two decades earlier.

States are also investing in partnerships between K-12 schools, colleges and employers. Policymakers see the model as a way to strengthen economic development and expand opportunity.

Challenges Remain

Despite its promise, dual education faces challenges. Rural schools may lack access to nearby colleges or industries. Transportation and scheduling can also be barriers, particularly for students with limited resources.

Educators are working to address these obstacles through online courses, flexible scheduling and employer-sponsored support. Advocates stress that continued investment is essential to ensure equity.

Looking Ahead

As dual education expands, students and educators alike see the model as a powerful tool for empowerment.

“Dual education taught me I can set goals and reach them,” said Johnson. “It gave me a vision for my future.”

From boosting confidence to building careers, dual education is transforming the way students learn and prepare for life beyond the classroom. By blending academics with real-world experience, the model offers a pathway to both personal growth and professional success.

BACKPACKS, TEAM SPIRIT AND COMMUNITY: MARION COUNTY SCHOOLS

Submitted by Dr. Kandace Bethea, superintendent



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION- The start of a new school year is always filled with anticipation, excitement and opportunity. This August, our students at the Academy of Early Learning and North Mullins Primary School experienced a kickoff unlike any other when the Carolina Panthers and the David & Nicole Tepper Foundation hosted a spirited pep rally at the Mullins Recreational Gymnasium. More than just a celebration, the event gave our youngest learners the tools and confidence they

need to begin the year on the right foot.

At the center of the event was the distribution of brand-new backpacks filled with essential school supplies. Students also received Carolina Panthers "Read 20" T-shirts to wear proudly during the rally and pom-poms to wave as they cheered, creating an atmosphere of excitement and school spirit. This generous initiative is part of a regional effort that provided more than 52,000 backpacks to Title I elementary students across eight school districts in the Carolinas. Of those, more than 38,000 were funded directly by the David & Nicole Tepper Foundation and the Carolina Panthers, marking the largest single backpack contribution in the history of Classroom Central, the Charlotte-based nonprofit coordinating the initiative.

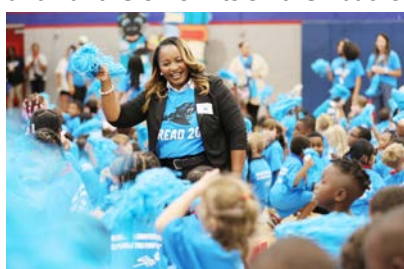
For students in Mullins, the day carried special meaning through the presence of the family of hometown hero Xavier Legette, a Mullins native and the Carolina Panthers' first-round draft pick in 2024. Though Legette could not attend, his family joined the celebration to represent him with pride. His grandmother, Linda Owens-Neal, helped distribute backpacks and shared words of

encouragement. Their involvement brought a powerful sense of family, legacy and inspiration to an already remarkable occasion.

Moments like these highlight the power of community partnerships. The work of the David & Nicole Tepper Foundation, the Carolina Panthers and Classroom Central goes well beyond providing supplies. It shows our students that they are seen, valued and supported — not just by their families and schools but by a broader community committed to their success. When our children walk into classrooms carrying these backpacks, they are carrying more than notebooks and pencils. They are carrying a message of hope, equity and belief in their potential.

As superintendent, I am proud that Marion County School District is part of this record-setting regional effort. Our mission has always been to ensure that every child has access to the resources and opportunities needed to thrive. But we cannot achieve this work alone. Partnerships like these help close gaps, strengthen connections and reaffirm that equity in education begins with meeting students' most basic needs.

This school year, as I think back to the joy on the faces of children — backpacks on their shoulders, pom-poms in their hands and Panthers T-shirts on their backs — I am filled with optimism.



Carolina Panthers Pep Rally

The generosity and commitment of our partners have set the tone for a year of growth, achievement and possibility for our students. With the support of our community, the future of Marion County Schools is brighter than ever. Go Panthers!

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Students work together on a hands-on circuits activity during a STEM Days at GSSM, discovering how collaboration fuels problem-solving.

HARTSVILLE — The promise of education lies not only in what happens inside the classroom, but also in how far a school is willing to extend its reach beyond its walls. At the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM), that promise is thriving through its Outreach Academic Year Programs.

These programs bring high-quality, hands-on STEM learning to students and teachers across the state during the school year. They include campus-based experiences such as INSIDE GSSM and STEM Days at GSSM, traveling initiatives like STEM Days on the Go, after-school programs such as SPARK! and ENGAGE, and participation in community festivals and career days. Together, they ensure students across South Carolina have access to engaging opportunities in science, technology, engineering and math.

In the 2024–25 school year alone, the Outreach Center engaged 10,254 participants across 34 counties, 32 districts and 64 schools. That means GSSM's academic year programs have reached nearly 10,000 students and almost 500 teachers. From hands-on STEM lessons to mentorship programs and large-scale community events, the initiative is reshaping how young South Carolinians — especially those from under-resourced districts — experience STEM.

A Year of Growth and Impact

GSSM's Outreach Center programs are living, growing opportunities designed to meet students where they are. Participation continues to climb, with STEM Days at GSSM growing by 52.7 percent and STEM Days on the Go by 53.5 percent compared to last year. The ENGAGE program, which focuses on deeper mentorship and extended learning, doubled its participation.

"These numbers reflect the growing recognition of how critical STEM education is for students across South Carolina," said Randy LaCross, vice president for outreach at GSSM. "Teachers

want experiences that connect to their students' daily lives and open doors to STEM careers. Our Outreach Center listens closely to those needs and collaborates to create resources that meet them. GSSM's reputation as a statewide resource for outstanding STEM experiences is growing right alongside that demand."

Behind the growth are children who, for perhaps the first time, saw themselves as future scientists, engineers or innovators. Teachers walked away not only with new resources but also with renewed confidence to bring STEM alive in their own classrooms.

As Irene Middleton, outreach director of academic year programs at GSSM, put it, "What stands out most is the spark of excitement. Students see science in a new light. Suddenly it's not just something they read about; it's something they can do."

"Initially teachers often tell me, 'I wish my teachers had made science this fun when I was growing up,'" she said. "They then leave asking, 'How can I bring more hands-on labs into my own classroom?' That shift in perspective to seeing science as approachable, creative and engaging often inspires both students and teachers long after the experience ends."

Hands-On Learning, Real-World Connections

The power of GSSM's Outreach programs lies in its approach: immersive, hands-on learning that links theory to practice. According to teacher surveys, 93 percent agreed that STEM Days increased their students' interest in STEM and their understanding of how it applies to the real world. More than 93 percent also said the activities enhanced students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

For educators, the programs are not a break from instruction but an extension of it. One teacher reflected, "This STEM Day increased my students' understanding of how STEM applies to the real world. The activities connected directly to what



A young participant paints a flowerpot at INSIDE GSSM, one of many GSSM events that spark creativity alongside STEM learning.



Middle school students dive into chemistry during a STEM Days activity, building confidence through inquiry and experimentation.

we were teaching in class, and I was able to use the ideas to strengthen future lessons."

Another educator emphasized the value of professional development, calling the day "such an awesome professional development activity" and noting the ability to observe students in engaging lessons and bring strategies back to the classroom. The ripple effect is undeniable. The Outreach Center equips entire learning communities with tools and inspiration.

Reaching Every Corner of the State

Equity is central to GSSM's mission. The Outreach Center intentionally extends to counties where resources and access are limited, ensuring that geography or school budgets do not dictate opportunity. One teacher from Lee County highlighted the difference these experiences made: "Not only did the students get exposure to places and ideals that are new, but they also get to see what they are capable of and how fun science can be."

Simply stepping foot on GSSM's Hartsville campus proved transformative for many students. "Many of the students did not believe something like GSSM would ever be possible," one teacher reported. Programs like these expand horizons academically and socially, showing young people that higher education and STEM careers are within reach.

Middleton underscored this point, noting how equity drives much of the Outreach Center's work. "Teachers often ask, 'How can we make this kind of opportunity available to more of our students?'" she said. "That question gets to the heart of equity. The Outreach Center's team supports them by helping brainstorm new approaches to teaching science, whether it's reimagining how to use resources they already have or exploring ways to secure additional support through sponsors or grants. These conversations allow teachers to prioritize their students' needs and find creative paths forward so that more

OPENING DOORS TO STEM CONT'D



Focused and determined, students collaborate on how energy is stored and distributed, embodying the spark of curiosity STEM Days is known for.

learners, regardless of background, get access to meaningful, hands-on STEM experiences.”

The Spark That Becomes a Flame

One of the most profound outcomes of the Outreach Center is the way it sparks curiosity that lasts well beyond the event itself. Teachers often describe students returning to class energized, eager to replicate activities and seeing connections between STEM concepts and their daily lives.

A curriculum coach noted, “I also feel

that this experience provides a spark that hopefully becomes a flame later, and one of our students will attend GSSM! Our students love the robotics demonstration. So many want to come back and build their own robots.”

This kind of sustained impact nurtures the next generation of problem-solvers who will contribute to South Carolina’s workforce and beyond.

Teachers as Partners

The Outreach Center’s impact isn’t limited to students. Nearly 500 teachers participated this year, and their voices reinforce the dual benefit of the programs. For many, an Outreach Center learning experience is as much professional development as it is student enrichment.

Educators noted that observing their students in hands-on STEM lessons provides practical models they can adapt while reinforcing knowledge of South Carolina standards. One curriculum coach shared that they can “refer back to strategies and activities we saw together

at GSSM,” strengthening instruction across classrooms.

Why It Matters

GSSM’s Outreach Center programs embody the belief that while talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. By reaching more than 10,000 participants in a single year, the school is working to close that gap across urban, rural and suburban communities.

LaCross emphasized that the experiences developed by the Outreach Center are directly tied to GSSM’s mission of providing a transformative STEM education that cultivates joy in learning and builds confidence. “Our Outreach Center is uniquely positioned to bring these opportunities to young people in communities where access to high-quality STEM learning is limited,” he said. “Whether it’s a virtual SPARK session or a STEM Day on the Go, we’re deepening knowledge and showing families that GSSM can be an educational opportunity for their children.”

GSSM NAMED FINALIST IN TWO CATEGORIES FOR 2025 INNOVISION AWARDS Submitted by GSSM

HARTSVILLE — The South Carolina Governor’s School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) has been named a finalist in two categories for the 2025 InnoVision Awards, South Carolina’s premier recognition for innovation in technology, education and community impact.

The InnoVision Awards honor individuals, organizations and businesses that exemplify excellence in innovation across six competitive categories. This year, GSSM is a finalist in the Community Service and Young Innovators categories.



GSSM students collaborate on robotics design, applying engineering and programming skills as part of the school’s statewide STEM outreach initiatives

Community Service: GSSM’s Robotics Program leads outreach efforts across South Carolina, mentoring new robotics teams—particularly in rural and under-resourced areas—and hosting workshops that broaden access to STEM education. During the 2024–25 academic year alone, GSSM robotics students contributed more than 460 hours of service through

mentorship, public engagement and civic action.

GSSM students collaborate on robotics design, applying engineering and programming skills as part of the school’s statewide STEM outreach initiatives.

GSSM Marine Biology students collecting *Spartina alterniflora* seeds at the Fort Johnson campus of the South Carolina Marine Resources Center in Charleston, December 2024.



*GSSM Marine Biology students collecting *Spartina alterniflora* seeds at the Fort Johnson campus of the South Carolina Marine Resources Center in Charleston, December 2024.*

Young Innovators: The From Seeds to Shoreline initiative integrates environmental restoration into science coursework. In partnership with the S.C. Sea Grant Consortium, students collect, cultivate and transplant *Spartina alterniflora* to restore South Carolina’s salt marsh ecosystems while gaining hands-on experience in ecology, sustainability and scientific research.

“Being named a finalist in two categories is a testament to the passion

and innovation of our students and faculty,” said Dr. Neval Erturk, executive director for research, global and innovation initiatives at GSSM and recipient of the 2018 InnoVision Ibrahim Janajreh Young Innovator Award. “These programs not only elevate STEM education at GSSM but also create ripple effects across the state, expanding access, inspiring young minds and advancing sustainability.”

Finalists were recognized at the InnoVision Meet the Finalists Reception on Aug. 25 in Greenville. Winners will be announced at the InnoVision Awards Ceremony in November.

To learn more about GSSM and its innovative programs, visit www.scgssm.org.

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

The South Carolina Governor’s School for Science & Mathematics is a nationally ranked top 10 public high school that brings world-class STEM education to students across the state. Founded in 1988 by Gov. Carroll Campbell, GSSM is a state resource that offers a variety of programs, including an intensive two-year residential high school, a challenging virtual engineering program, summer camps and in-school experiences for students in third through 12th grades. At GSSM, challenge is viewed as a gateway to opportunity. Learn more at www.scgssm.org.

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HGTC'S JENNIFER WILBANKS NAMED PRESIDENT OF CCTC Submitted by HGTC



Dr. Jennifer Wilbanks

CONWAY— Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) announced Dr. Jennifer Wilbanks, executive vice president for academics and workforce development, has been named the next president of Central Carolina Technical College (CCTC). The CCTC Area Commission confirmed her appointment this week, with her tenure beginning Oct. 20.

Wilbanks, a veteran of higher education with more than 22 years of experience, has served HGTC for the past eight years. During that time, she advanced the college's academic and workforce development initiatives, strengthening partnerships, expanding access and enhancing student success.

"Dr. Wilbanks has been a key leader at HGTC, and we are incredibly grateful for her dedicated service and outstanding contributions to our college community," said Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, HGTC president. "While we are saddened to see her leave, we know she will make an exceptional president at Central Carolina Technical College. Her vision, experience and passion for student success will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the CCTC community."

A South Carolina native, Wilbanks earned a bachelor's degree from the University of South Carolina, a master's in education with an emphasis in counseling and a doctorate in educational leadership, higher education, from Clemson University. She is also a graduate of the Future Presidents Institute through the American Association of Community Colleges and the South Carolina Technical College System

Leadership Academy.

In addition to her professional accomplishments, Wilbanks has been active in the community, serving on the McLeod Loris Seacoast Hospital Board, the Horry County Schools Business Cabinet, and the Commission on Higher Education's dual enrollment subcommittee. She was named Educator of the Year in the administrative category by the South Carolina Technical Education Association in 2023.

Wilbanks will remain with HGTC until October to ensure a smooth transition. HGTC will conduct a national search for its next chief academic officer. In the interim, Dr. Dan Wysong, HGTC assistant vice president and dean, will assist the Academic Affairs Division to provide leadership continuity.

"HGTC has been such a special place to me both professionally and personally," Wilbanks said. "It has been an honor to work alongside such dedicated faculty and staff, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve our students and community. I look forward to beginning this next chapter as president of CCTC and building on its strong legacy of service to the region."



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*HGTC Honors Regina Thompson as 2025 Adjunct Faculty of the Year
Pictured from left to right: Dr. Sheila Locklair, HGTC Department Chair for Practical Nursing, Patient Care Medical Assistant, EKG Technician, Certified Medical Assistant, Certified Nursing Assistant, Phlebotomy, & Medical Terminology; Regina Thompson, HGTC Adjunct Faculty, Nursing Ann Daniels, HGTC Assistant Vice President, Academic Affairs & Dean, Nursing & Health Sciences Dr. Jo Beck, HGTC Department Chair for associate degree Nursing & Advanced Placement LPN/Paramedic to RN Programs*

CONWAY— Horry Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) has named Regina Thompson, MSN, RN, as the 2025 Adjunct Faculty of the Year. Thompson, an adjunct clinical instructor in the nursing program, is recognized for her dedication to student learning, compassionate teaching style and commitment to preparing the next generation of health care professionals.

Thompson, a registered nurse at Tidelands Waccamaw Community Hospital since 2018, brings extensive real-world experience to the classroom and clinical setting. She earned a Master of Science in Nursing Education from Chamberlain University and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Francis Marion University. Her background includes critical care, patient education and precepting new nurses, which she integrates into her teaching.

Since joining HGTC in 2024, Thompson has made a strong impact on her students. She is praised for her professionalism,

open communication and ability to make complex concepts accessible. Students describe her as approachable, encouraging and dedicated to their success in both the classroom and clinical practice.

“Ms. Thompson’s passion for nursing and her commitment to her students embody the very best of what we value at HGTC,” said Dr. Marilyn “Murph” Fore, HGTC president. “She not only prepares our students with the technical skills they need, but she also instills in them confidence, professionalism and a true compassion for patient care. We are honored to recognize her as our 2025 Adjunct Faculty of the Year.”

In addition to her role at HGTC, Thompson continues to provide direct patient care at Georgetown Hospital System, enhancing her ability to bridge theory and practice. Colleagues describe her as a role model who exemplifies excellence in both nursing and teaching.

“Being recognized in this way is incredibly humbling,” Thompson said. “Teaching at HGTC has been such a rewarding experience, and I am grateful for the opportunity to help shape future nurses. My students inspire me every day, and I’m so proud to be part of their journey.”

HGTC congratulates Thompson on this recognition and thanks her for her outstanding contributions to the college and the nursing profession.



HGTC FOUNDATION WELCOMES FOUR NEW MEMBERS TO BOARD OF DIRECTORS



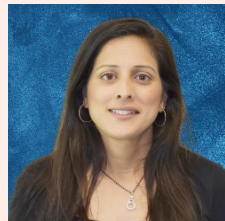
Stuart Butler, president, Visit Myrtle Beach



Phillip “Le” Hendrick, Jr., director of Emergency Management & Safety/fire chief, City of Conway



Alison Hudson, agency manager, My Carolina Insurance



Priya Patel, controller, Southern Crown Partners

MYRTLE BEACH— The Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) Foundation has appointed four new members to its board of directors. Stuart Butler, Phillip “Le” Hendrick Jr., Alison Hudson and Priya Patel began their three-year terms on July 1, 2025.

Butler is president of Visit Myrtle Beach at the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. He brings extensive experience in tourism marketing and community leadership, including service as chair of the Myrtle Beach COVID-19 Task Force.

Hendrick serves the City of Conway as director of emergency management and safety and fire chief. He also holds leadership roles with the Conway

Chamber of Commerce, educational foundations and regional advisory boards. Hudson is agency manager for My Carolina Insurance. She has shown strong community involvement through her leadership in the Grand Strand Walk to End Alzheimer’s and participation in civic, athletic and faith-based organizations.

Patel is controller for Southern Crown Partners, where she oversees operations at 10 locations. She also contributes financial expertise as a member of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber Financial Review Committee.

“We are thrilled to welcome Stuart, Le, Alison and Priya to our board of directors,” said Shannon Detzler, president and CEO of the HGTC Foundation. “Each

brings not only professional expertise but also a deep commitment to our community. Their leadership will be instrumental as we continue to expand opportunities for students, remove financial barriers and strengthen the impact of HGTC across our region.”

Established in 1978, the HGTC Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to advancing the college’s mission through financial management and fundraising. The foundation supports students, bridges funding gaps and ensures local students have access to high-quality education and professional opportunities.

The HGTC Foundation invites businesses, organizations and individuals to support students through scholarships, tuition assistance, book funding and the Student Emergency Fund.

For more information about the HGTC Foundation, call 843-477-2105 or visit the website. For details on applying, enrolling and registering at HGTC, call 843-347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu. Classes begin Aug. 25 with late-start options in September and October.

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY ALUMNI SURPASS \$1 MILLION FUNDRAISING GOAL

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



Claflin University Alumni

ORANGEBURG – “At Claflin University, our alumni are more than graduates; they are champions of excellence, access and transformation,” said Claflin President Dwaun J. Warmack. “This year, your unwavering commitment and generosity have helped us exceed our ambitious \$1 million goal for the fiscal year. You’ve shown the world what it means to be a Claflinite for life. Thank you for your loyalty, your leadership and your love for our university.”

Claflin’s culture of giving is built on legacy, pride and purpose. Over the past five years, alumni have raised more than \$4.8 million to support student scholarships, academic programs and innovative initiatives. This year’s achievement is especially significant, reflecting broad participation across all generations, from the golden reunion classes to young alumni just beginning their philanthropic journeys.

“Claflin alumni are not just passionate about the past—they are actively shaping the future of our university,” said Willie L. Jude II, vice president of institutional advancement. “To see this level of engagement and generosity, particularly among our young alumni, is both humbling and inspiring. It speaks to the trust our alumni place in Claflin’s leadership and their enduring belief in the transformative power of a Claflin education.”

Highlights from the Year in Alumni Giving

Young Alumni Giving

Despite steep national declines in young alumni giving—from about 20 percent in the 1980s to just 7.5 percent today—lifetime giving

by Claflin alumni aged 40 and under has increased 13.8 percent in each of the past two years, signaling a growing culture of early philanthropy and sustained involvement.

Reunion Class Giving

Reunion classes raised more than \$255,000 to support scholarships and student success. The Golden Class of 1975, celebrating its 50th reunion, contributed \$139,514, while the Silver Class of 1999 gave \$10,060. Their generosity underscores how meaningful milestones can be transformed into lasting impact.

Top Alumni Chapters

Alumni chapters of the Claflin University International Alumni Association played a key role in this year’s success. The CSRA-Central Savannah River Area, Spartanburg, Williamsburg and Orangeburg County chapters led the way with dynamic outreach and leadership, serving as catalysts for local giving and engagement.

Top 20 Individual Alumni Donors Contribute Over \$350,000

Claflin’s top alumni donors together contributed more than \$350,000, demonstrating how major gifts and consistent annual support work hand-in-hand to fuel institutional success.

A National Model in Alumni Giving

Claflin continues to lead among Historically Black Colleges and Universities in alumni participation. While the national average for HBCU alumni giving hovers around 10 percent, Claflin has had the highest giving rate among HBCUs for the past 25 years and counting.



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FRANCIS MARION NAMES MONAHAN NEW ATHLETICS DIRECTOR

Submitted by Francis Marion University



Francis Marion University officials announced September second, the appointment of Quin Monahan as the university's new athletics director. Monahan officially began October 13, succeeding retiring AD Murray Hartzler. He is the fourth person to hold the role in FMU's 56-year history.

Monahan comes to FMU after 13 years as athletics director at USC Beaufort, bringing 17 years of experience leading a four-year college athletics program.

"I am truly honored to join Francis Marion University as its next director of athletics," Monahan said. "FMU has a proud tradition of academic and athletic excellence, and I look forward to building upon the strong foundation established by Murray Hartzler and so many others who have invested in Patriot Athletics. Together with the coaches, staff, student-athletes and supporters of Patriot Athletics, we will continue to compete at a high level, develop leaders on and off the field, and strengthen Francis Marion's presence in the community and across the region."

FMU President Fred Carter praised the hire.

"It was hard for me to imagine that we could ever find a suitable successor to Murray Hartzler," Carter said. "But Quin has his own set of very distinctive strengths — dynamic leadership, a fiercely competitive instinct and decades of experience developing successful student-athletes. He will fit in here perfectly and continue our winning tradition."

At USCB, Monahan led the Sand Sharks' transition from the NAIA to full NCAA Division II membership. He expanded sports offerings,

improved facilities, grew staffing and emphasized academic success, with student-athletes maintaining a department-wide GPA above 3.0.

His leadership extended nationally through service on the NACDA Executive Committee and roles with the Conference Carolinas ADA Committee, the NAIA Baseball National Selection Committee, and as president of the NAIA Athletics Directors Association. He was set to chair the Peach Belt Conference AD Committee in 2025-26.

Before USCB, Monahan was athletics director at Belmont Abbey College from 2010 to 2012, overseeing 18 varsity and five junior varsity programs. From 2001 to 2010, he served in multiple roles at the Savannah College of Art and Design, including athletics director, associate director and coordinator of academic advising. He also coached SCAD's women's swimming team to the 2009 NAIA national championship.

Monahan earned an associate degree in secondary education from Kansas City Kansas Community College (1988), a bachelor's in behavioral science from Oklahoma Wesleyan University (1990), and a master's in counseling from Asbury Theological Seminary (1994).

Hartzler, who retires after 25 years leading FMU athletics, endorsed his successor.

"Quin checks all the boxes. With his background and abilities, he will be able to hit the ground running," Hartzler said. "I have known Quin for quite some time and will now look forward to watching him further enhance and improve the Patriot athletic program."

Francis Marion sponsors 17 intercollegiate sports, with 16 competing in NCAA Division II Conference Carolinas and men's golf in NCAA Division I's Big Sky Conference. This past year, seven of 10 teams posted winning records and four advanced to NCAA Tournament play, continuing FMU's streak of postseason appearances every year since 1992. The combined GPA of all teams exceeded 3.1, above the overall student body average.



FMU President Fred Carter

Francis Marion University has officially opened its 56th academic year, welcoming faculty back to campus with announcements on funding, scholarships and the establishment of new International Study Centers (ISC).

During its annual faculty welcome breakfast, FMU President Fred Carter praised the university's faculty for their accomplishments over the past year. FMU faculty collectively published 92 refereed articles, chapters and poems, and

participated in 63 artistic performances, exhibitions, shows and recitals.

Carter also shared significant funding news. This year, the university received \$2.89 million in new recurring state appropriations and \$7.75 million in nonrecurring funds. Of the recurring funds, \$1 million was used to provide all faculty and staff with a three percent pay increase — 50 percent higher than increases received by other state agency employees. FMU has provided salary increases to its employees for 25 consecutive years.

The \$7.75 million in nonrecurring funds will support renovations to the McNair Science Building, Leatherman Science Facility and Hyman Fine Arts Building, as well as the construction of pedestrian crosswalks connecting the main campus to the Griffin Athletic Complex.

Highlighting the university's ongoing commitment to affordability, Carter noted that FMU students are benefiting from record scholarship support.

"Last year, we committed more scholarship funding to our students than ever before. This year, we maintained it," Carter said. "Altogether, our students are recipients of more than \$27 million

in university, foundation, state and federal scholarships. Those are scholarships, not simply loans. No payback is required."

Carter also announced the creation of two new ISCs following the success of FMU's first ISC at Wildsumaco in Ecuador. The new centers will be established at the University of Prince Edward Island and at RPTU University Kaiserslautern-Landau in Germany. These ISCs will supplement traditional exchange sites as they provide a more extensive international travel study opportunity for students. "These ISCs are designed a little differently than other student travel opportunities," Carter said. "Their goal is to provide more consistent and affordable options for students. Ultimately, they will provide a more extensive international opportunity, while easing the financial burden."

During his remarks, Carter also urged the faculty to remain focused on the university's mission and purpose.

"Our job is to teach our students to use their minds to establish their values and form their own belief systems," Carter said. "We do that with meaningful instruction and research, powerful ideas and strong and persuasive voices. That's our prize, and it's one of the most compelling obligations in society. Let's keep our eyes on it."

In addition to Carter's remarks, 12 new faculty members were introduced, and 15 faculty members were recognized for their years of service to the state of South Carolina.

Ten years of service

- Patricia Boatwright
- Jason Marley
- Jennifer Lyles
- Kimberly McCuiston
- Nicole Panza
- Jeremy Rentsch

• David Washington

- Dorie Weaver

Twenty years of service

- Rhonda Brogdon
- Faith Keller
- Padmaja Rao

• Yong Bum Shin

Thirty years of service

- Tammy Pawloski

Forty years of service

- Kay Belanger
- Glen Gourley

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Teacher of the Year

JENNIFER MEAGAN JOHNSON: FLORENCE 1 SCHOOLS TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Jennifer Meagan Johnson is the Florence 1 Schools Teacher of the Year. Johnson is a 19-year teaching veteran who teaches kindergarteners with intellectual disabilities at Royall Elementary School. She believes that her academic training, combined with real-world experience, has equipped her with the tools and perspective needed to meet the diverse needs of her students.

Johnson holds a Bachelor of Arts in Special Education from Clemson University. She began her teaching career serving students at Brockington Elementary, and she has taught at Carver Elementary and at McLaurin Elementary before her hiring at Royall.

Royall Elementary School Principal Chris Rogers said, "I have seen Ms. Johnson go above and beyond to make sure her students and their families are taken care of no matter what she has to do. All of her students' parents feel very comfortable talking to her and calling her in the evenings or on weekends. I would describe Ms. Johnson as dedicated, loving, and determined to make sure her students know she is there to help them be successful in the classroom and life beyond the classroom."

Throughout her career, Johnson has made an impact through her dedication and advocacy for students with disabilities. "All students need to feel loved, respected and connected," said Johnson. "I make this a priority by helping build relationships between my students and their general education peers. Just like the diverse world we live in with people of all abilities and walks of life, our classrooms should also reflect this inclusivity."

As an exceptional education teacher, Johnson provides her students opportunities to learn not only within the school setting but also in the community. "What better way to provide this than through America's pastime, baseball?" asked Johnson. "The sound of laughter, the sight of a player hitting the ball with assistance, the supportive cheers of parents and volunteers – these are just a few things that led me to get involved with

the Miracle League of Florence County," she added.

The Miracle League of Florence County is a modified style of baseball tailored toward participants with physical disabilities. Johnson began at the league as a coach and was later named the Miracle League Volunteer of the Year. Currently, Johnson serves as a member of its Board of Directors. "The joy that I experience on the Miracle League field is not just happiness during the game. It is an affirmation to my students' and every other athlete's right to experience community life," said Johnson.

She takes pride in building strong, lasting relationships with her students and their families, as well as helping each child grown in confidence and independence. "As a teacher and community member, it is important that I continue to advocate for my students, break down barriers, and create spaces where all children can play and learn together. This not only enriches their lives, but our community as a whole.

Special education reminds us that success doesn't look the same for every student. Inclusion, patience and high expectations for all students should be our shared vision."

Johnson was chosen as school teacher of the year last spring at Royall Elementary. The Florence 1 Schools teacher of the year application process required all school teachers of the year to complete an application packet earlier this school year. Teachers whose application packets received the highest ratings became honor teachers. Johnson, along with three other Florence 1 Honor Roll Teachers-----Mykeha Davis, Briggs Elementary; Ashley Dawkins, Lester Elementary; and Amanda Nelson, Wilson High all underwent personal interviews with an outside panel of the year selection committee members.

As the Florence 1 Schools Teacher of the Year, Johnson is eligible to compete for the 2026 State Teacher of the Year by completing the application when the submission window is opened by the South Carolina Department of Education.





JESSIE EICHMAN
LIFE SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT

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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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PEE DEE CHILDCARE GROUP RECEIVES NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Articles submitted by Spencer Scott, executive director



The Florence Marion Family Child Care Network (FMCNA) has received national recognition from the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) for its outstanding leadership in promoting excellence within family childcare services. (Photo Credit: Spencer Scott)

The Florence Marion Family Child Care Network (FMCNA) received recognition from the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) for its leadership in family childcare advancement.

FMCNA was created under the Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps program and is funded by the South Carolina Department of Social Services. The network supports and strengthens family childcare providers by promoting high-quality, home-based early

learning environments across both counties.

"This award is not just for our network—it's for every family childcare provider in South Carolina who shows up with passion, purpose, and professionalism," said Spencer R. Scott, executive director of Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps. "With the continued leadership of our officers, the strength of our members and the steadfast support of Lana Hopkins, family childcare director, we are transforming the future of family childcare in our state."

The Florence Marion Family Child Care Network (FMCNA) has been nationally recognized by the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) for its exceptional leadership in advancing family childcare.

This recognition positions FMCNA as a model of collaboration and community-based excellence, built on local leadership, public investment and the dedication of its providers.

The Florence Marion Family Child Care Network is a professional coalition

of family childcare providers across Florence and Marion counties. Created under Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps and funded by the South Carolina Department of Social Services, the network focuses on expanding access to quality early childhood education in home-based settings.

The National Association for Family Child Care is the nation's leading voice for family childcare, promoting high-quality early care and education through advocacy, accreditation and professional development.



Executive Director Spencer Scott with Texas Senator Royce West

INVESTING IN CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES



Spencer Scott

Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps have announced a partnership with the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS) that has provided more than \$1.3 million in scholarships to strengthen early childhood education and family well-being.

Through this collaboration, scholarships totaling \$1,317,044 were awarded to children and families across both counties. Florence County First Steps received \$634,720, providing scholarships for 80 children to access high-quality early learning experiences. Marion County First

Steps received \$682,324, supporting 86 children with the same opportunity. In total, 166 children have benefited from this joint investment.

This initiative is more than tuition assistance — it is an investment in the future. Early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong learning, school readiness and overall well-being. By making these scholarships possible, SCDSS and the First Steps partnerships are helping children thrive while easing the financial burden for families striving to give their children the best start in life.

"This partnership represents what is possible when we work together for children and families," said Spencer R. Scott, executive director of Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps. "Every scholarship not only gives a child the opportunity to learn and grow but also supports families, strengthens small businesses and builds a stronger community."

SCDSS Director Michele Bowers echoed this commitment, noting her appreciation for the partnership that helps families maintain stability while working, all while ensuring young children receive quality care.

The ripple effects are felt far beyond the classroom. Families benefit from

reliable, affordable childcare, enabling parents and caregivers to remain in the workforce or pursue further education and training. Small businesses, including childcare providers, benefit as well — ensuring they can serve children consistently, sustain operations and retain staff.

"As a member of the boards for both Florence County First Steps and Marion County First Steps, I've seen firsthand how critical this support is for our communities, especially in the Pee Dee, where the majority of households are led by single parents," said Debbie Jones, regional workforce advisor for the Pee Dee Region. "Reliable, high-quality childcare keeps parents working, supports small businesses and drives economic growth. When families have access to these resources, we're not just helping children, we're strengthening our workforce and building a stronger, more resilient community."

The combined investment of more than \$1.3 million underscores a shared commitment to ensuring children in Florence and Marion counties have the tools they need to succeed in school and life. This collaboration demonstrates how collective investment in children leads to long-term impact — for families, schools, businesses and entire communities.

LEE COUNTY EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT:

RANDY EMANUEL SMALL: PASSIONATE EDUCATOR, MENTOR AND COMMUNITY LEADER

Submitted by LCSD



Randy Emanuel Small, recognized for his dedication to students and the community.

BISHOPVILLE — In every great classroom, there is a teacher whose influence extends far beyond the walls of the school. Randy Emanuel Small is one of those teachers. Known for his commitment to education, mentorship and community engagement, Small is making a meaningful impact on the lives of students and families across Lee County.

A proud graduate of Timmonsville High School, Small continued his education at Benedict College, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in child and family studies. His academic background, combined with his passion for supporting youth, led him into the field of education, where he now thrives as a dedicated professional.

Over the past three years, Small has actively pursued professional growth through programs such as Empowering Kings, Carolina CAP and Darkness to Light. His commitment to continuous learning is further demonstrated through participation in J and J Mentorships, First Steps: Culturally Responsive Practices, and professional affiliations including the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Small's excellence in the classroom has not gone unnoticed. He has earned several honors, including being named WTLX Teacher of the Week, receiving perfect attendance for three consecutive years and being recognized as Teacher of the Month for August

2024-25. His recent completion of the rigorous Carolina CAP program marks a significant milestone in his professional development.

Outside the classroom, Small serves as a beacon of service in the community. He volunteers as a coach, assists with voter registration efforts and contributes to the Strengthening Families Program. His involvement in Empowering Kings through J and J Mentorship reflects his dedication to shaping the lives of young men with guidance, structure and positive role modeling.

Small's leadership, compassion and tireless energy makes him a standout figure in Lee County School District. His work not only prepares students academically but also empowers them to become responsible, confident individuals ready for life's challenges.

LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT



2025-2026

DISTRICT TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Lee County School District proudly congratulates
Mr. Randy Emanuel Small, our 2025-2026
District Teacher of the Year! Your unwavering
dedication, inspiring leadership, and passion for
student success exemplify the very best of our
profession. You lead with heart, teach with
purpose, and uplift everyone around you. Thank
you for making a lasting impact on our schools,
our students and our community.

Randy E. Small





Mark Parker

TIMMONSVILLE—Mark Parker grew up in Florence, South Carolina, in a community where faith, family and education shaped his view of the world. After graduating from Hannah Pamplico High School, he built on those values through higher education, earning an associate degree in computer programming technology from Florence-Darlington Technical College and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Coker College. He also became a certified Microsoft administrator, combining his love of problem-solving with his passion for leadership.

Today, Parker serves as director of technology and information systems for Calhoun County Public Schools. While his role may sound technical, to him it's about empowering teachers and supporting students. Every classroom, administrator and learner in the district relies on the systems Parker and his team maintain. For him, the reward lies in knowing that his work quietly impacts every corner of the school system—even when students may not realize the role he plays in their daily learning.

Beyond his career, Parker is deeply committed to service and ministry. He serves as a minister at Pentecostal United Church of Christ in Florence and as president of the Council on Education Organization, which supports youth and adults through academics, Christian education, health and financial literacy. He is also the founder of the Widows Foundation, a nonprofit created to bring comfort and support to widows and widowers. Each role reflects his core belief in lifting others up when they need it most.

That same sense of purpose guides his work as board chair of Timmonsville Charter School, also known as Timmonsville Collegiate Academy. The school's founding idea is simple but powerful: children in Timmonsville deserve greater opportunity and choice in education.

Parker has helped lead the initiative from the ground up. The planning committee has worked with families, educators, faith leaders and community members to design a school that truly belongs to Timmonsville. Listening has been central to the process—parents have shared what they want for their children, students have voiced their hopes, and local organizations have offered ideas and resources. Committees now focus on academics, community engagement and long-term planning, all aimed at building a school that will serve generations to come.

The vision is ambitious yet achievable. Timmonsville Charter is scheduled to open in August 2027, offering dual enrollment programs for college credit and workforce readiness initiatives that connect classroom learning to real-world careers. Partnerships with colleges, businesses and organizations will provide students with mentorship, resources and opportunities to thrive.

For Parker, the project goes far beyond academics. It's about restoring confidence in a community that has endured school closures and limited educational options. Charter schools, which remain tuition-free and open to all, offer flexibility in curriculum and instruction—allowing Timmonsville families to help shape a school designed around their children's needs.

"Education is one of the greatest tools we have for strengthening communities," Parker said. "Timmonsville Charter represents more than a new school. It's an investment in the future of a proud town and its people."

As board chair, Parker envisions a school where students grow academically, emotionally and personally graduating as confident leaders ready to contribute to their community.

In many ways, the charter school mirrors Parker's own journey—rooted in Florence,

devoted to service and focused on creating opportunities for others. Whether through education, ministry or community leadership, he continues to believe in the power of people to uplift one another.

The road to 2027 will require planning, persistence and faith, but Parker remains confident. When the doors open, he hopes families will see more than a new school building—they'll see hope, opportunity and a promise that their children's future is worth every investment.

MILLENNIALS SPENT NEARLY \$400 ON BACK-TO-SCHOOL, RESEARCH SHOWS



(BPT) — With pencils sharpened and backpacks zipped, American families are heading back to school facing higher costs. New research from Empower finds that half of Americans say back-to-school shopping was more expensive this year because of inflation, and 31 percent report feeling stressed

about the expenses.

Stress hits younger generations harder

Nearly one in three Americans (31 percent) report stress over back-to-school costs, the study shows. That number rises among Millennials and Gen Z, with nearly half (43 percent) saying the season brings financial anxiety. Nearly four in 10 respondents (39 percent) cite tariffs as a factor making supplies more expensive.

How families are paying

More than a third of Americans (35 percent) say they are spending more this year than last. On average, families report spending \$188 on back-to-school supplies, with younger generations shouldering most of the cost:

• Millennials: \$394 • Gen Z: \$276 • Gen X: \$178 • Boomers: \$34

To fund these costs, families are relying on a mix of payment methods:

- 37 percent use debit cards or checking accounts
- 23 percent rely on credit cards
- 15 percent dip into personal savings
- Seven percent turn to friends or family
- Five percent choose to buy now, pay later (BNPL)

Nearly one in five Millennials (19 percent) say they use BNPL to cover back-to-school expenses.

What's in the bag?

Back-to-school spending goes beyond notebooks and pencils. Families are spending on:

- School supplies (notebooks, backpacks, etc.): 42 percent
- Clothing and shoes: 41 percent
- Technology: 20 percent
- Transportation (bus passes, gas): 17 percent
- Extracurriculars (sports, clubs): 13 percent
- Child care/afterschool programs: 7 percent

Deals, discounts and digital help

In a tight economy, 74 percent of shoppers say price and discounts are their top priorities, followed by quality (56 percent), brand (30 percent) and loyalty rewards (26 percent). More than 4 in 10 Americans (43 percent) say they wait for a sale before purchasing, with Gen Z (54 percent) and Millennials (52 percent) most likely to hold out for deals.

Tech-savvy shoppers are also turning to artificial intelligence:

- 30 percent of Millennials have used AI to track down the best deals
- 27 percent have used AI to build their shopping lists

Methodology

Empower's "Backpack Economy" study is based on online survey responses from 2,201 Americans ages 18 and older. The survey, conducted June 29–31, 2025, by a third-party panel provider, is weighted to be nationally representative of U.S. adults.



MILITARY VETERANS: A KEY INGREDIENT IN RUIZ FOODS' FLORENCE SUCCESS

Submitted by Ruiz Foods



Several of Ruiz Foods' Veterans pictured above/below. Back Row: Drayton Green, Bryan Yoder, Frank Casey, Roderick Drumgoole, Randy Jones, Wesley Williams, Ben Worthington
Front Row: Jay Amrol, Ricky Reaves, Tammy Johnson-Benjamin, Jerry McClam, Francis Williamson

Over its decade in Florence, Ruiz Foods has discovered an exceptional ingredient that adds something special to everything it produces—and contributes to the Florence plant's overall success:

Military Veterans



Sponsorship of Vietnam Memorial at Florence Veterans Park

Like ingredients in any good recipe, the skills and attributes of the company's veterans, combined with its culture and values, complement one another to create something great.

U.S. Armed Forces veterans have been integral members of the Ruiz Foods team since the Florence plant opened in 2015. Today, about two dozen team members list military service on their work histories, representing

a wide range of positions—from production to IT, logistics, maintenance, waste management and more.

Logistics Manager Frank Casey sees many parallels between military culture and expectations and his nearly three years at Ruiz Foods, following 21 years in the U.S. Marine Corps. He leads a team of 50 hourly team members and supervisors, keeping ingredients flowing through the warehouse and ensuring quality finished products reach customers on time.

"Leadership in the military is about discipline and teamwork," said Casey, who retired as a master sergeant. "My goal is to get my team to understand the vision and work ethic and trust in me for a positive outcome. Here, like in the military, my goal is to address challenges and remove barriers so they can do their jobs successfully." U.S. Army and National Guard veteran Donald Williams agreed. "Any military person carries training, responsibility and pride in their work," he said. "I try to pass that on at Ruiz Foods—to be a valuable employee, not just someone putting in time."

Maintenance Manager Roderick Drumgoole said his military experience instilled discipline, leadership, organizational skills and the drive to get things done.

"Discipline in the workplace is doing what's expected, even when no one is looking, because it's the right thing to do and benefits the organization," said Drumgoole, an Army veteran who oversees 82 team members responsible for maintaining production equipment and other critical assets.

Making the Transition

Williams, a North Carolina native, joined Ruiz Foods in 2015 and is proud to be an original hire. "I wasn't really looking—they saw me and asked if I'd consider joining. It really makes you feel wanted and needed," he said.

On the trash dock, Williams puts his military discipline and attention to detail to work, ensuring waste and recyclables are handled properly and the area remains clean. "We've been successful at that," he said.

IT specialist Jay Amrol draws on military values, discipline and teamwork to ensure technology that supports nearly every aspect of the Florence plant functions reliably.

"I was happy to find the same values were already here," he said. "I found teamwork on the floor that I had for years in the Army."

MILITARY VETERANS CONT'D

Amrol, who joined the plant in 2016, worried that transitioning from nearly 30 combined years of Marine Corps and Army service would be difficult. "I thought I was going to struggle more than I did because people don't always understand military life," he said. "But my boss is a military brat who understands the call of duty and where I was coming from. Everyone made me feel welcome when I stepped through the door."

Honoring Veterans



Ruiz Cares volunteers at the 2024 Wreaths Across America at the Florence National Cemetery.

Veteran recognition has been part of the Florence plant since production began in 2016.

"Throughout the year, we recognize veterans on our team, their family members who have served, members of our community, and those who have given their lives in service to our country," said Krista Meekins, community relations coordinator.

Veterans Day is a highlight. Plant veterans' photos with patriotic backgrounds are posted in hallways, and team members also submit photos of family members who served. Ruiz Foods presents veterans with gifts in appreciation of their service.

"The company calling out veterans is a plus," said Drumgoole. "The recognition and gifts for the veterans on my team are great."

Recognition extends beyond the plant. Ruiz Foods sponsored the Vietnam Memorial at Florence Veterans Park. Team members volunteer each December with Wreaths Across America, which in 2024 placed holiday wreaths on 11,000 veterans' graves at Florence National Cemetery.

Serving the Community



Ruiz Cares volunteers participate in military care packages project.

While veterans appreciate recognition, the company's commitment to the community resonates deeply.

"One thing I love about Ruiz Foods is they take care of our veterans and our community. I appreciate the leadership," said Casey.

"I help out in the community here, like I did in the military,"

added Amrol.

The veterans cited programs such as Ruiz 4 Kids student scholarships, mini grants for teachers and other local giving and volunteer efforts. Ruiz Cares also partnered with Joint Base Charleston to assemble care packages for deployed units.

"They do a lot of things, like making tied blankets and donating food," said Williams. "They're always trying to help the local community."

"It makes a difference as veterans and as team members," said Drumgoole. "I am a huge fan of my company. If it's not the best company I've worked for, it's right up there."

Amrol agreed. "They take the military with open arms and carry the same values we have. They support you post-military. And they make good food!"

Mini Profiles

Jay Amrol, IT Specialist

- Joined Ruiz Foods in 2015.
- Grew up in Concord, N.H. Served six years in the Marine Corps in telecommunications and later 24 years in Army artillery, retiring as a sergeant (E-7). Served two Middle East tours and assignments in 26 countries, including Germany, Japan, Australia and the Philippines.

Frank Casey, Logistics Manager

- Joined Ruiz Foods in January 2023.
- From Springfield, Ohio. Served 21 years in the Marine Corps with service at 29 Palms, Calif., Okinawa and nine years as a recruiter in Maryland and Missouri. Retired as a master sergeant (E-8).

Roderick Drumgoole, Maintenance Manager

- Joined Ruiz Foods in March 2023.
- From Lake Charles, La. Served more than a decade in Army aviation on Apache attack helicopters, departing as a sergeant first class (E-7). Has worked in industrial maintenance leadership roles for nearly 30 years.

Donald Williams, Trash Dock Team

- Joined Ruiz Foods in 2015 as an original plant team member.
- From North Carolina. Served more than seven years in Army aviation on Apache and Cobra helicopters, later five years with the South Carolina National Guard as a captain in Civil Affairs.

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EMBRACING U: TURNING PAIN INTO PURPOSE Articles by Cynthia O. Ford



Founders from left to right: Cynthia Smalls-Middleton, Odessah Mackey, Sonya Simmons

CHARLESTON — Smalls-Middleton knows firsthand the power of survivorship. A two-time breast cancer survivor, diagnosed first in December 2008 and again in April 2013, she turned her personal journey into a mission of service. What began as private conversations with fellow survivors Odessah W. Mackey and Sonya W. Simmons became the foundation of Embracing U, a nonprofit dedicated to walking alongside women before, during and after breast cancer.

The organization was formally established as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit on Sept. 28, 2010. From its earliest days, the mission has been to embrace, educate and empower individuals facing breast cancer. Smalls-Middleton recalls that she and her co-founders felt called to break the silence surrounding the disease. Too many women were suffering alone, and they believed there needed to be a safe, supportive community where survivors could share their stories, and newly diagnosed patients could find guidance. “We felt like it was our purpose,” she said, noting that while none of them would have chosen cancer, they saw their journey as an opportunity to help others.

Over the last 15 years, Embracing U has grown from a small grassroots effort into a respected regional support system. The organization’s outreach extends across Charleston, Berkeley and Dorchester Counties, as well as neighboring communities like Georgetown, Awendaw, Walterboro, McClellanville and St. Stephens. Partnerships with institutions such as MUSC Hollings Cancer Center, Roper St. Francis Breast Cancer Nurse Navigators and ALALA Inc. have allowed the group to provide tangible assistance, from mammograms and prosthetic bras to compression sleeves for lymphedema.

Financial and emotional support remain at the heart of Embracing U. The Breast Cancer Breast Health Assistance Program provides uninsured or underinsured individuals with funding for mammograms, procedures and prosthetic devices. Referrals come from hospitals, vendors, patient advocate organizations, family members and survivors themselves. Meanwhile, the Embracing U Giving Award addresses personal needs that often go overlooked. For those undergoing treatment who may lose work hours or face unexpected costs, the award provides direct support for essentials like household expenses or travel to appointments. The current minimum is \$350 per recipient, with a long-term goal of increasing that amount to \$500.

Beyond financial assistance, the group creates spaces of hope and connection. Survivors are honored at signature events like luncheons, where attendees hear from medical professionals, community leaders and fellow survivors. These gatherings give women at every stage of the journey a chance to see that thriving beyond cancer is possible. Smalls-Middleton often reminds participants that they are living miracles. “The journey will not be easy — it is emotional, spiritual and mental,” she said. “But seeing women evolve and begin sharing their own stories is a joy.”

Education is also central to Embracing U’s mission. Volunteers participate in health fairs, community events and church programs to spread awareness about breast health and the importance of early detection. Myths are confronted directly, especially the belief that a lack of family history means someone is safe from diagnosis. Smalls-Middleton knows this personally, as her second diagnosis came only months after completing a half marathon. She stresses the importance of regular self-exams and screenings regardless of family history.

Running a small nonprofit comes with challenges. Funding is a constant concern, and awareness efforts must compete with the flood of messages that surface each October during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Yet Embracing U has endured thanks to a core group of volunteers, donors and community partners who believe in the mission. For Smalls-

Middleton, the motivation comes from the people she serves. A handwritten note, a thank-you card or an email from a survivor is enough to remind her that the work matters.

Looking forward, Embracing U hopes to expand its outreach, build new partnerships



Anna Lonon, founder of The Lonon Foundation

and reach families beyond the Lowcountry. Smalls-Middleton encourages individuals and organizations alike to get involved, whether by hosting awareness events, inviting survivors to speak or starting conversations about family health history. “Awareness begins with those closest to you,” she said. “Talk with the women in your family. Know your risks. Early detection saves lives.”

Her advice to women currently navigating breast cancer is grounded in resilience. “Surround yourself with a good support system. Become knowledgeable about your diagnosis. Continue to live,” she said. Smalls-Middleton often quotes the line from “The Shawshank Redemption,” “You can get busy living or get busy dying.” For her and for Embracing U, the choice is clear — live fully, find peace and embrace the journey with strength and hope.

EARLY DETECTION SAVED MY LIFE: ALLYSON FLOYD’S JOURNEY



Allyson Floyd

CONWAY — Allyson Floyd’s life has been defined by storytelling. After spending nearly three decades in broadcast journalism, she transitioned into part-time media work at Conway Medical Center, where she found herself on the other side of the camera. In February 2022, a routine workplace conversation about mammograms led to a decision that ultimately saved her life. Floyd had

delayed her screening by a few months, but thanks to the hospital’s mobile 3D imaging unit, she agreed to an on-the-spot mammogram. The results came back as ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), an early form of breast cancer that had not yet spread.

Initially, Floyd thought her treatment would involve only surgery and radiation. Yet further testing revealed

EARLY DETECTION CONT'D



Allyson Floyd

her cancer was invasive and triple positive — an aggressive form that feeds on hormones and is also HER2 positive. “Without treatment, triple positive can be fatal,” she said. Instead of despairing, she faced 12 rounds of chemotherapy, 20 sessions of radiation, a year of targeted infusion therapy, and the prospect of a decade of hormone therapy. Today, she is considered cancer-free, returning regularly for scans that have so far shown no recurrence.

Her first thoughts after diagnosis were not about herself but about her family. “I was worried about the reaction of my husband and children,” she said. A veteran journalist, Floyd began researching obsessively to learn every detail about her condition. Her family, especially her husband, became her anchor. He drove her to appointments, cared for her on difficult days and encouraged her to keep walking daily even when fatigue pressed in. The support of her family and friends created a network of strength that carried her through the darkest days.

Despite her optimism, the journey was not easy. Floyd lost nearly all her hair and endured multiple rounds of losing her eyelashes. She suffered nosebleeds and nausea, though she pushed herself to stay active. She found comfort in connecting with other women in treatment, building friendships that continue through group texts and words of encouragement. The shared experiences reminded her that breast cancer affects each woman differently yet support and empathy unite survivors across those differences.

Floyd’s why — the reason she endured grueling treatments — was rooted in faith and family. She cites her mother, a 35-year breast cancer survivor, as inspiration. More than anything, she believes early detection saved her life, and she now uses her platform to emphasize its importance. “Get those mammograms and screenings because early detection saves lives,” she said. On social media and in interviews, Floyd speaks openly about her journey to remind others of the power of vigilance and self-advocacy.

The experience has reshaped how she sees life. “It literally changes everything about you,” Floyd said. She now appreciates small moments more deeply, whether sitting at home or spending quiet time with family. Maintaining health requires deliberate effort, from building muscle strength lost during treatment to keeping every medical appointment. She has also learned to give herself grace, recognizing that the fears and thoughts she once felt alone in are, in fact, normal.

Floyd continues to give back by supporting organizations such as the American Cancer Society, Susan G. Komen Foundation and the Conway Medical Center Foundation, which helps uninsured women receive mammograms. She has participated in breast cancer walks and shares her story widely. “Supporting research and treatment programs is so important. The science saved me,” she said.

For those newly diagnosed, her advice is simple but profound: take one day, one hour, even one minute at a time. “If I can get through today, tomorrow might not be as terrible,” she said. Survivorship, for Floyd, is about gratitude, advocacy and living fully. Her story is a testament to resilience, the power of early detection and the importance of never losing hope.

“MY WHY” IS FIGHTING FOR MY FAMILY By Jennifer Robinson



Tasha Void

GREENSBORO, N.C. — For those battling breast cancer, the motivation is not just that you survive, but how you survive. Patients endure many challenges on the journey to healing, and it is important to understand why anyone would persevere through something so painful and unpredictable.

The theme of Breast Cancer Awareness Month 2025 is “My Why.” That “why” often drives patients to push through the ordeals of

symptoms and treatments. For Tasha Void, a 21-year breast cancer survivor, her “why” is her family.

Void was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 after a routine exam. During the exam, her doctor discovered nodules in her breast and ordered an immediate mammogram, which led to a fine needle biopsy. She was diagnosed with stage 3A breast cancer, a “locally advanced” cancer involving tumors or lymph nodes. Unlike later stages of cancer — there are four stages in total — stage 3A has not yet spread to distant organs.

According to the American Cancer Society, the five-year relative survival rate is over 99 percent for breast cancer diagnosed at a localized stage, when treatment is typically more effective and less extensive. That rate drops to 87 percent for the regional stage and 32 percent for distant-stage disease.

While battling cancer, Void was raising three children, maintaining a loving and supportive marriage and keeping her career afloat. She underwent various forms of chemotherapy

from November 2004 to spring 2006 and participated in the initial Herceptin trial, a 52-week infusion treatment for HER2-positive breast cancer. Afterward, she had a mastectomy followed by a TRAM flap breast reconstruction procedure.

Void was hospitalized three times and treated with new technologies and medicines. She credits part of her recovery to Dr. Lloyd Gayles at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and a diverse team of surgeons and oncologists. But the team she leaned on most was her family—her husband, her mother-in-law, her mother, her sister and her children. Void and her husband worked hard to ensure their children-maintained stability and a sense of normalcy while she underwent treatment.

Because she endured so much as a patient turned survivor, Void now focuses on sharing her story to encourage others who may be fighting the same disease. She participates in Breast Cancer Awareness Walks, Pink Out events, American Cancer Society activities and organizes breast cancer awareness events at the school where she teaches seventh grade. She encourages students and teachers from fifth through eighth grades to participate in events that support survivors and honor the memories of those who have died.

Void said her “why” is the reason she is still here. She was determined to survive and wants others to understand the importance of never giving up.

“The storm will pass,” Void exclaimed.

To her, Breast Cancer Awareness Month is motivation to keep going. She wants people to know that breast cancer is not an “old person’s” disease — and it is not a death sentence.

“You can’t wait until it’s too late to check your health,” she said. “Go get checked soon.”

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH WITH GENESIS HEALTH CARE INC. Submitted by Genesis Health Care Inc.



DARLINGTON — At Genesis Health Care, we believe access to quality health care is vital to the well-being of the communities we serve. This October, we are shining a spotlight on Breast Cancer

Awareness Month, reminding women across South Carolina about the importance of prevention, early detection and treatment.

Breast cancer remains one of the most common cancers affecting women, with nearly one in eight diagnosed during their lifetime. According to the South Carolina Department of Public Health, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women in the state. While a breast cancer diagnosis can be life-altering, early detection through regular screenings significantly increases the chances of successful treatment. Access to health care can help lead to quicker diagnoses.

Early Detection Saves Lives

At Genesis Health Care, we are committed to providing affordable, accessible and comprehensive health care, including women's health services. Annual breast exams with your health care provider, along with monthly breast self-exams, are crucial steps toward early detection.

We encourage women over age 40 — or those with a family history of breast cancer — to talk with their health care provider about scheduling a mammogram.

"In 2016, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. If it had not been detected by a mammogram, it may have been too late. Get your mammograms!" — Dr. Priscilla Welch, chief medical director at Olanta Family Care

Our team is here to answer your questions, provide guidance and ensure you have the resources you need.

Reduce Your Risk

While certain risk factors such as family history cannot be changed, there are steps you can take to help reduce your risk of developing breast cancer:

- Maintain a healthy weight: Obesity has been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer, particularly after menopause.
- Stay active: Regular exercise helps regulate hormones and may lower your risk.
- Limit alcohol: Excessive alcohol consumption has been shown to increase the risk of breast cancer.
- Know your family history: Share your family medical history with your health care provider to assess your personal risk.

Find a Partner in Prevention

We understand the unique challenges faced by women in Colleton County and throughout South Carolina. Factors such as scheduling and finances can make it difficult to prioritize regular checkups. That is why Genesis Health Care is here to provide compassionate, affordable care that meets your needs.

We accept many different insurance plans and can serve those who do not have insurance. Our upgraded Walterboro Family Care and Pediatrics facility offers general primary medical care and preventive services to residents of Colleton County and the surrounding area.

Take Action This October

If you have noticed signs or symptoms, or have questions about breast cancer prevention, now is the time to take charge of your health. Schedule an appointment with your Genesis Health Care provider today, and let us help you navigate your health care journey.

Visit genesishqhc.org or call 843-781-7428 to reach Walterboro Family Care and Pediatrics.

Together, we can fight breast cancer and build healthier communities — one woman at a time. Your health is our priority, this October and every month.



Genesis Healthcare of Darlington

115 Exchange Street
Darlington, SC 29532
Phone: (843) 393-9421

Genesis Healthcare Florence

1523 Heritage Lane
Florence, SC 29505
Phone: (843) 673-9992

Pee Dee Health Care

201 Cashua Street
Darlington, SC 29532
Phone: (843) 393-7452

Lamar Family Care

301 W. Main Street
Lamar, SC 29069
Phone: (843) 395-8400

Lowcountry Pediatrics

99 Bridgetown Road
Goose Creek, SC 29445
Phone: (843) 572-3300

Olanta Family Care

211 South Jones Road
Olanta, SC 29114
Phone: (843) 396-9730

Prof. Pharmacy of Darlington

201 Cashua Street
Darlington, SC 29532
Phone: (843) 393-6591

Walterboro Family Care & Pediatrics

830 Robertson Boulevard
Walterboro, SC 29488
Phone: (843) 781-7428

Prof. Pharmacy of Olanta

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FAITH OVER FEAR By Ronette Genwright



April Bridwell

GREENVILLE — Cancer is a life-altering diagnosis that affects people on physical, emotional and social levels. Through personal stories, the medical and psychological journey becomes tangible. This is the story of one survivor — her experience from initial diagnosis to remission and the changes that reshaped her outlook and relationships.

April Bridwell was born and raised in the Upstate and is one of four siblings, the middle child. She graduated from Blue Ridge High School and attended Greenville Technical College. She has been married to her high school sweetheart, Jason, since February 1997. The couple has spent 31 years together, including 28 years of marriage, and they have two children: Autumn and Brock.

Autumn, a nurse, is married to Bo, and they are parents to a daughter, Ellie. Brock is a senior at USC Upstate and will graduate in December.

Bridwell's cancer diagnosis came on Sept. 16, 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. She said the news felt like time had stopped, and the reality of the situation hit with overwhelming emotional intensity. Despite the difficulties of the pandemic, her care team provided strong support, making challenging days more manageable. She recognized the fight ahead as the hardest battle of her life.

Treatment began quickly. Her first surgery to remove a mass took place on Sept. 9, 2021. Cancer was confirmed on Sept. 16, and a double mastectomy followed in February 2022. Four additional surgeries were needed to complete reconstruction, with the final procedure in June 2024.

Bridwell now takes tamoxifen, an estrogen blocker prescribed for five years because her cancer was hormone positive. She has about one and a half ½ years of treatment remaining. Her doctors declared her cancer-free in February 2022.

She said the double mastectomy and reconstruction proved to be the most difficult part of her journey. The procedure deeply affected her sense of identity and brought



April and her husband

an emotional response similar to grief. Processing the loss meant working through emotional stages and learning to accept the changes.

Multiple surgeries left visible scars, which have been emotionally challenging. Although most are hidden from view, they serve as daily reminders of what she endured. The loss of her natural breasts remains a significant emotional hurdle. Over time, however, she reframed her scars as symbols of survival and strength — a perspective she credits to her faith.

Determined to maintain a sense of normalcy, Bridwell stayed active during treatment. She deals with ongoing side effects from medication, including fatigue, joint pain, hot flashes and insomnia. To promote wellness, she incorporated walking, biking and yoga into her routine. She also began taking regular naps and switched household products — including cleaners, detergents, makeup and deodorants — to toxin-free alternatives.

Relationships shifted as a result of her experience. She strengthened some connections, gained new friendships and lost others. Her main source of support has been Jason and their immediate family, including their children and son-in-law. A close-knit group of friends and supportive coworkers also played an important role in her recovery.

Faith has been the cornerstone of her resilience, with the motto, "Faith Over Fear," guiding her since diagnosis. She said trusting God gave her strength during the toughest times. Family and faith remain the driving forces behind her perseverance. Prayer, faith, family and friends — which she calls the three F's — form the foundation of her resilience.

To those just beginning their own cancer journey, Bridwell offers encouragement: "This diagnosis is a chapter, not your whole story." She advises others to pray, choose the best care team, stay positive and build a supportive network.

"Faith is the key to overcoming fear," she said. "The journey is hard, but it's possible with God."

THE RICHARD M. SCHULZE FAMILY FOUNDATION HOPE LODGE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Kelsey Ray

CHARLESTON — When Margot Freudenberg established the Charleston Hope Lodge in 1970, she wanted to share her values of service, giving and grace with those families affected by cancer. Upon visiting Australia and New Zealand with President Eisenhower's People to People Program, she saw a facility that was similar to what would later become housing for future cancer patients and their caregivers. Freudenberg's family was touched by cancer, and from this and other

related experiences, 31 Hope Lodge facilities were started around the United States and Puerto Rico.

Kelsey Ray, general manager of the Charleston Hope Lodge

in Charleston, South Carolina, has committed to keeping the integrity of Freudenberg's legacy living and active. Ray's years of experience in hospitality was the optimal segue into her leading the staff and volunteers of the Charleston Hope Lodge for the past eight years. She said, "It was a tangible way to give cancer patients and their caregivers resources, and after being a caregiver for my mom who is a two-time, 30-year survivor of breast cancer." She said the most rewarding part about working at the Charleston Hope Lodge is showing guests their rooms and welcoming them, knowing they appreciate being safe and loved. Ray said she could see the stress float away and the physical burden being lifted from their shoulders.

The Charleston Hope Lodge, also known as the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation Hope Lodge, offers 18 free guest homes in close proximity to treatment centers in the area. The homes offer private guest rooms and bathrooms, free laundry rooms with supplies, safe outdoor spaces for meditation and reflection and resource rooms. One patient and one caregiver

THE RICHARD M. SCHULZE FAMILY CONT'D



Hope Lodge

can be housed and can expect service that will be a home away from home. The dedicated volunteers help the guests by providing meals and ensuring their stay is comfortable, safe and nurturing. They remain committed to the legacy of Freudenberg, who volunteered until she was 105 years old. The relationship between the Charleston Hope Lodge volunteers and caregivers is pertinent to the care of the guests. Ray said, "We show caregivers appreciation by holding a Caregivers Tea every other Thursday." It is a special space to share their experiences while eating refreshments provided by the lodge.

"The Charleston Lodge is a part of the American Cancer Society and receives funding from event donations, private endowments and direct donations into the lodge," Ray stated. It is also through this partnership that they share awareness information about cancer, with emphasis on breast cancer in

the month of October.

During the month of October, health care hospitality goes beyond housing by increasing education about breast cancer. EverYou is a program that provides resources such as mastectomy products, catalogs and wigs. Ray said during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, guests with breast cancer receive makeovers, treat bags and seatbelt guards. The guards make it comfortable for those who have breast tenderness to wear seatbelts. The ACS Empower Program is focused on the holistic well-being of each client. The seven core areas of the program are:

- **Engage:** Providing support groups to encourage peer interaction.
- **Move:** Clients can participate in walking and stretching for exercise.
- **Play:** They can have fun with entertainment, interactive games and other activities.
- **Optimize:** Clients learn to manage symptoms and side effects.
- **Wake:** To elevate their consciousness, clients are encouraged to meditate and journal.
- **Enrich:** There are programs to educate on using food as medicine and massage therapy.
- **Resources:** Includes the importance of knowing medical patients' rights.

At the heart of this sanctuary is the legacy of love left by Freudenberg. The parlor of the Charleston Hope Lodge is named Margot's Parlor in her honor and as a welcoming space for all guests. As she was a dedicated volunteer, others have and can share in her care for cancer patients. Interested volunteers or donors can visit www.cancer.org/hopelodgecharleston.



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BREAST CANCER SCREENINGS SAVE LIVES

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in South Carolina, but it is also highly treatable when found early. That is why regular screenings are so important. If you are 40 or older, talk with your doctor about getting a mammogram. If you have a family history, you may need to start earlier. Do not wait.

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ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH STAGE IV CANCER By Ronette Genwright



Virginia Ellerbe

This article chronicles the journey of a resilient woman diagnosed with stage IV cancer in 2004. Through faith, family and community support, she navigated the challenges of treatment and survivorship. Her story offers hope, practical advice and a testament to the power of positivity.

In 2004, a routine doctor's visit changed the course of Virginia Ellerbe's life. Married to her husband, Ronnie, she is the mother of three

daughters — Casandra, Sharhonda and Carol — and the grandmother of seven boys and one girl. She has built her life around family, faith and service. A graduate of Coker College with a degree in social work, she was no stranger to helping others. But when she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer, she suddenly found herself on the receiving end of care, love and support.

Born to Willy and Nancy Smith, Ellerbe grew up in a close-knit family. She graduated from Mullins High School in 1975 and later earned her bachelor's degree in social work from Coker College in 2005 — completing her final year of studies while undergoing cancer treatment.

Ellerbe's journey began with shortness of breath and persistent pain. A gynecologist ordered a biopsy in early May 2004. By the end of the month, the results confirmed cancer.

"It was hard," she recalled, noting that she had lost her oldest sister in 1997. "All I could think about was my mom."

During the biopsy, doctors also discovered fluid in her lung. Initially, they reassured her that fluid often signaled a noncancerous condition. The final diagnosis, however, revealed stage IV cancer. She was referred to a cancer specialist at McLeod in Florence, South Carolina, where she began chemotherapy and radiation.

Ellerbe participated in a clinical trial that combined standard chemotherapy drugs into a "cocktail" treatment. The

regimen lasted about two months, and she remained in the study for 10 years.

"I have not had any cancer since," she said, though she carries a scar as a reminder of the battle.

The side effects were challenging — fatigue, nausea, loss of taste and smell and hair loss.

"I didn't like wigs, so I mostly wore hats," she said. "I just went with the flow."

Ellerbe's family, church and friends formed the backbone of her support system. Her daughters and her mother, Marion Atkinson, went with her to every appointment and even to her college classes. Friends made sure she stayed socially engaged, while her church community provided constant prayer.

Two individuals stood out. Roosevelt, a high school classmate and nurse, encouraged her to stay positive and "not think negative." A professor who had survived three different cancers advised her to, "feed it like a cold" by eating small snacks throughout treatment, even when she didn't have an appetite.

"Survivorship means a lot," Ellerbe reflected. "Not every day is easy. Sometimes I get a pain and wonder if it is coming back. But I trust God to keep me."

She also finds strength in connecting with others who have faced cancer, such as her friend Wanda Legette, who was diagnosed after her and stays active in community support efforts.

Her message is clear: Do not give up, trust God, stay positive and seek support. She offers herself as a resource to others, willing to talk, pray and help however she can. She also warns against misinformation.

"I always heard that cancer does not hurt, but I had pain," she said. "If your body feels different, get checked out."

Sharing her story is part of her healing.

"I want to be helpful to someone, like people were helpful to me," she said. "You are not going to have good days every day, especially during chemo or radiation, but push yourself to do things."

VOLUNTEER DRIVERS HELP PATIENTS LEAVE CANCER IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

Submitted by Melanie McCullough, director, Regional Integrated Marketing

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — When Melissa Swirski was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2019, her personal road to recovery included two surgeries, 16 rounds of chemotherapy and countless medical appointments. Once she was healthy and retired from her full-time job, she knew she wanted to help others become cancer survivors, too.

"I wanted to find a way to help people with cancer," Swirski said. "Now, as a volunteer, I drive people to their appointments. They're getting the ride, but I'm getting the lift. It's very uplifting to help someone."

Last year, volunteers like Swirski provided more than 71,500 rides to appointments for cancer patients nationwide — patients who often would not have made it to their treatments without this volunteer lifeline.

"I completed radiation last summer. I would not have been able to do that without the volunteers who took me to 30 treatments," said Rachel Capps, a breast cancer survivor who received rides through the American Cancer Society's Road To Recovery program.

Capps said there were days when she didn't feel like getting up and going to her appointments, but she thought about the compassion and dedication of the Road To Recovery volunteers.

"I figured if they could do all that for me, then I could get up

and get dressed and go for me," she said. Swirski understands.

"There are so many appointments. There's chemotherapy, there's radiation, there are visits to the doctor," she said. "They're not always convenient. That's where we come in as volunteers. We will take you as a cancer patient to the doctor when you need it."

"It's all about impact. It's one patient, one ride to one appointment on that road to recovery. It's a journey, and we want to get them over that line. We need more survivors. We want them to have cancer in that rearview mirror."



Reno Fuhrman

Reno Fuhrman, a three-time cancer survivor, started volunteering with the Road To Recovery program in 2018 after recovering from esophageal cancer.

"This is the most rewarding volunteer experience I've ever been involved in," said Fuhrman, who has also survived colon and prostate cancer. "I have driven a lot of patients over the years. I establish that relationship with them.

Once they find out I'm a cancer survivor, I think in some ways it relaxes them. It makes them somewhat at ease, and they feel

VOLUNTEER DRIVERS CONT'D

more comfortable talking with me because they know I'm somebody who's been through it."

"Patients are very anxious. They're fighting for their lives. This is one less thing they have to worry about."



Larry Hudson

Larry Hudson also became a Road To Recovery volunteer after finishing treatment for tonsil cancer.

"I started feeling better, and I'm not really one to sit around," Hudson said. "I kept thinking, 'What the heck do people do who don't have somebody who can drive them to treatment every

day?'"

"My wife drove me to my treatments. I went to the American Cancer Society website and started searching for volunteering. For some reason, I was interested in the driving — probably because I realized what a challenge it would have been for me."



Lorrie Pate

Lorrie Pate joined the program after three of her friends were diagnosed with breast cancer within the same month last year.

"Road To Recovery satisfies much of what is important to me in volunteering," Pate said. "First, it meets a very important need. Not being able to get to treatment

is something I had not thought of before discovering Road To Recovery."

"Second, it allows interaction with those I am supporting. It fills my heart and my life with the connections. Third, it is flexible. Being able to pick up rides that meet my schedule needs is just perfect."

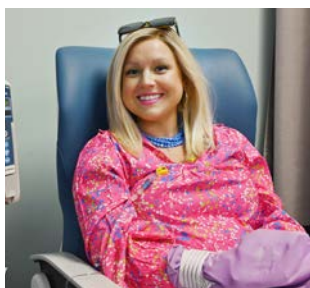
Road To Recovery volunteers are lifting spirits and saving lives — but there is still work to be done. The American Cancer Society is unable to provide all the rides being requested. Transportation is the number one barrier to treatment, and more volunteers are needed.

"At the end of the day, we all want a cure for cancer," Swirski said. "But between now and then, we need to get people to treatments. We can do that, one patient at a time."

To learn more about the American Cancer Society's Road To Recovery program, visit cancer.org/drive.

FLORENCE COUNTY MOM FINDS STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY

Submitted by Kristin Merkel



Lauren Kennedy

Getting diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age with two children at home is the last thing anyone imagines. But for 33-year-old Pamplico resident Lauren Kennedy, that unthinkable diagnosis became her reality.

On April 7, Kennedy learned she had breast cancer at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center after discovering a lump in her

breast. The hardest part, she said, wasn't the cancer itself but how it began weaving its way into her family's everyday life.



MUSC Health cancer patient Lauren Kennedy undergoes a chemotherapy treatment at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center. Her friend and fellow elementary school teacher, Jennie Haire, kept her company and helped her put on cooling mittens and footies to help with Kennedy's neuropathy she experiences during treatment. Photo credit /MUSC Health Pee Dee

"The thing that punched me in the gut after I got diagnosed was when I took my son to the doctor for his yearly checkup, they had to put in his chart that his mom has cancer," Kennedy said. "And for some reason, it just knocked the wind out of me."

Kennedy was referred to general surgeon Amy Murrell, M.D., director of the MUSC Health Comprehensive Breast

Program, Pee Dee Division, who guided her through evaluation and diagnosis. Her case was reviewed by the breast tumor board, which recommended neoadjuvant chemotherapy.

She began treatments at the MUSC Hollings Cancer Network Infusion Center in Florence — a place that some find overwhelming at the start of their cancer journeys, but that Kennedy now considers a home away from home.

"I feel like I'm in really good hands at the infusion center," she said. "Every single person there is just so kind and so compassionate. They don't make it feel scary. It's not at all like I imagined."

Kennedy even found herself comforting another new patient.

"I said, 'Oh my gosh, you're gonna love it.' She looked at me, confused, and I was like, 'I don't mean the cancer part, but if you have to have cancer and have to get treatment, that is where I would want to be — hands down,'" she said.

Along with her positive experience at the infusion center, Kennedy said Murrell has supported her both physically and emotionally.

"She's the perfect combination of seriousness and getting down to business — but also compassionate," Kennedy said. "She has given me a hug at the end of every appointment, and obviously, that first day I saw her, it was like I'd been hit by a tornado. She just has a way of making me feel like it's going to be okay."

Murrell said offering compassionate, high-quality care close to home is a priority for MUSC Health.

"Lauren is getting the same state-of-the-art care in Florence that she would receive at MUSC in Charleston or if she were at another major breast center elsewhere," Murrell said. "Patients want to receive their care closer to home if possible. Lauren has a family, so while she's going through this cancer treatment, she is still living her life. She is taking care of her children and her family and everything else. So, it's important to be able to offer great care close to home. I think MUSC certainly has prioritized that."

Once Kennedy completes her chemotherapy treatments, Murrell will perform a bilateral mastectomy and reconstruction in the same operation, scheduled for October. This combination procedure will help Kennedy return to her normal life as soon as possible.

Murrell said Kennedy's story and upbeat attitude are inspiring.

"I feel so blessed, and I've always been a positive person, but I feel like I'm even more positive now because I don't want my children to see me scared," Kennedy said. "I don't want my parents to worry about me either. I just appreciate everything a little bit more, and I don't sweat the small stuff anymore."

For more information about the MUSC Hollings Cancer Network-Florence Medical Center's Comprehensive Breast Program or to make an appointment, call 843-674-2778.



Melanie McCullough

CHARLESTON — Melanie McCullough has always been drawn to meaningful work. Early in her career, she realized that most of our waking hours are spent working, and she wanted to invest that time in something that mattered. While at another nonprofit, she discovered an opening at the American Cancer Society. Having personally witnessed the impact of cancer, she was eager to serve in a role that allowed her to contribute to an organization dedicated to ending the disease. She accepted the position and began her journey with ACS, where she now serves as director of regional integrated marketing.

Her daily responsibilities are far from routine. She collaborates with development teams to coordinate fundraising events, partners with patient support teams that engage health care centers and volunteers, and designs marketing strategies across both traditional and digital platforms. At the heart of her work is storytelling. McCullough views stories as a bridge connecting survivors, caregivers and communities. She treasures the privilege of sharing deeply personal accounts of strength, resilience and hope, believing these stories keep the organization grounded in its mission to end cancer as we know it.

The services of the American Cancer Society are critical for families navigating breast cancer in South Carolina. Its 24/7 toll-free helpline offers guidance and

answers at any time, a lifeline for patients and caregivers facing uncertainty during treatment. Transportation is one of the greatest barriers for patients, particularly those who need daily appointments over extended periods. Through the Road to Recovery program, volunteer drivers provided more than 1,200 rides to treatment in South Carolina last year. The organization also invested \$111,000 in transportation grants to health systems. For patients traveling longer distances, the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation Hope Lodge in Charleston offers free lodging, saving families thousands of dollars while creating a community of support.

McCullough emphasizes that collaboration with hospitals, clinics and community partners is vital. By working with patient navigators and social workers, ACS ensures patients are aware of resources such as the helpline, website, transportation services and lodging assistance. Partnerships allow ACS to fill critical gaps for patients who might otherwise struggle to access care.

This year's Breast Cancer Awareness Month theme, "My Why," holds profound meaning for McCullough. Her "why" began with a high school friend diagnosed at 32 and evolved as cancer touched the lives of her best friend's mother and, most significantly, her sister, Kristy. Watching her sister's journey from fear to resilience left an indelible mark. Kristy's courage during surgeries and radiation treatments not only inspired McCullough but strengthened her resolve to serve others through her work.

The stories of survivors and caregivers fuel McCullough's passion. She describes how individuals often transform personal battles into missions that uplift others. One South Carolina woman who began participating in Making Strides Against Breast Cancer in memory of her mother later faced her own diagnosis. Today, she leads a team that has raised more than \$1.6 million, mentors survivors and runs a nonprofit providing free screenings in Jamaica. For McCullough, these examples demonstrate the extraordinary power of community and shared purpose.

Awareness, she notes, plays a central role in prevention and early detection. Since the establishment of Breast Cancer Awareness Month 40 years ago, breast cancer death rates have declined 44 percent. Awareness campaigns encourage women to schedule screenings and emphasize the importance of mammograms, ultimately saving lives through early detection. Still, challenges



Regina (L) and Tara (R) are both long-time survivors who shared their stories of hope and resilience with one-year Survivor, Jonathan.

persist, especially regarding equitable access to treatment and screenings. Transportation remains a significant obstacle, which ACS continues to address through programs and advocacy. Current legislative efforts also aim to ensure private insurers cover follow-up diagnostic tests after concerning mammograms.

McCullough stresses that businesses, schools and community groups can support ACS by turning awareness into action. Encouraging employees and members to schedule screenings, volunteering as drivers and participating in fundraising events such as Making Strides Against Breast Cancer directly advance the mission. Contributions to research are also critical. Since 1946, ACS has invested more than \$5.6 billion in cancer research, with \$4.71 million currently dedicated to projects in South Carolina. This investment has contributed to improved treatments, greater access and declining death rates.

Asked to reflect on her most impactful experiences at ACS, McCullough points not to specific campaigns but to the people whose lives have been touched. She recalls patients and families who found hope and survival through advances in research, access to care and community support. For her, the reward lies in witnessing individuals transform fear into courage, despair into hope and personal hardship into a mission to uplift others.

Looking to the future, McCullough remains optimistic. She acknowledges progress over the last four decades yet recognizes the need for continued advocacy, funding and awareness. She envisions a future where more lives are saved, more survivors thrive and communities work together to eliminate barriers to care. Her message is simple but powerful: When you see pink, associate it with action. Every mammogram scheduled, every ride provided, and every dollar donated strengthens the fight against breast cancer. Through individual and collective efforts, progress is not only possible—it is inevitable.



Melanie and family pictured at a Making Strides Walk

NAVIGATING THE HEALING PROCESS By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Christina Howell

MYRTLE BEACH — During Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the spotlight shines on a vital role in health care that guides patients through their healing journeys. The breast care navigator position was established at Grand Strand Medical Center in Myrtle Beach to support cancer patients from the moment they are recommended for a biopsy through their treatments.

For about 15 years, Christina Howell has served as the breast cancer navigator at Grand Strand Medical Center. She began her career there as a mammography technician 30 years ago and worked her way up from quality assurance to supervisor. Her growing interest in breast cancer patient care eventually led her to her current role.

As a Navigator, Howell guides patients from the time they are recommended for a biopsy—whether after a mammogram or an ultrasound—through receiving their results. If a biopsy is positive for breast cancer, she coordinates referrals to breast surgeons and oncologists. Over the years, she has seen how advancements in health care have made her role more efficient and patient centered.

“When I first started,” Howell said, “if we found any type of abnormality on a mammogram or ultrasound, the patient would go for an excisional biopsy. They had to see the surgeon, go to the operating room and have the entire area removed. The operation would leave a fairly large scar.”

Today, patients typically undergo a needle biopsy, a minimally invasive procedure guided by mammography or ultrasound. Only a few tissue samples are collected, and

afterward a small bandage and ice pack are applied to the site. The samples are sent directly to pathology, and results—often benign—are returned quickly.

Howell noted that mammography technology has also advanced. Machines that once offered only 2D imaging now provide 3D imaging, which detects cancer earlier. “The goal was to shorten the time from diagnosis to results,” Howell said. “It used to take weeks. Now, patients are notified within 48 to 72 hours.”

If biopsy results are benign, no further contact is needed. For those diagnosed with malignancies, the Breast Tumor Board steps in to develop a comprehensive treatment plan.

“The Breast Tumor Board is a multidisciplinary conference that brings together physicians from multiple specialties,” Howell explained. “Trained surgeons, radiation oncologists, medical oncologists, radiologists, pathologists and plastic surgeons collaborate on treatment plans based on the latest practices to optimize patient outcomes.”

Howell also emphasized the importance of family support throughout treatment. She encourages families to be involved in their loved ones’ care. For patients without family support, she provides her contact information to ensure they feel supported.

Beyond her work at Grand Strand Medical Center, Howell educates the Myrtle Beach community about breast cancer, breast health and available treatments. She believes that information is key to prevention and early detection.

Breast care navigation has become an essential part of modern patient care. The growing need for individualized attention has made it vital for navigators to assist patients throughout nearly every aspect of treatment. For many, this guidance helps transform a daunting medical journey into one filled with comfort, clarity and hope.



Helping Patients Navigate Through The Cancer Journey



CONCERNS OVER SIDE EFFECTS HINDER TREATMENT FOR DEPRESSION, ANXIETY



(BPT) - Lisa Roberts has raised a family, reached an impressively high level in her career and been an anchor for her mother and other family members. Suddenly, within a very short period, her brother and son were diagnosed with chronic illness, and her mother passed away after a too-

brief illness, leaving her feeling unmoored. She found herself wondering why she was not grieving, and why she was not feeling much at all. She no longer enjoyed her job or even got out of bed in the morning.

"My problems were not going away, and I found myself wishing I could just not be here," said Roberts.

She made an appointment to see Dr. Whitnee Brown, a psychiatric nurse practitioner and doctor of nursing practice in nearby Birmingham, Alabama. Brown worked with Roberts on exercises to help her accept her grief, and they did help. Yet they both acknowledged that Roberts needed more. Together, they agreed to try a medication treatment plan.

"But I was concerned," Roberts noted, "as I did not want to experience side effects; I needed relief."

Roberts is not alone in her trepidation. For many Americans, concerns about potential side effects remain a significant barrier. In fact, despite nearly nine out of 10 Americans (89 percent) diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety believing that mental health medications are somewhat or very effective, more than half of those who have never been on mental health medication (52 percent) say they would not take medication because of possible side effects. That's according to the latest GeneSight® Mental Health Monitor*, a nationwide survey from Myriad Genetics, Inc., a leader in molecular diagnostics testing and precision medicine.

In the survey, a majority of these patients (54 percent) agree that genetic testing for mental health medications (known as pharmacogenomic or PGx testing) could reduce these concerns.

Brown uses just such a tool in her practice. The GeneSight test from Myriad Genetics is a pharmacogenomic test that analyzes how a patient's genes may affect medication outcomes. The GeneSight test looks at clinically important genetic variations in DNA providing results that may inform health care providers how a patient may break down or respond

to certain medications commonly used for depression, anxiety, ADHD and other psychiatric conditions.

Brown recommended the GeneSight test for Roberts and used the results, along with her medical history, to help inform her mental health medication prescription.

"The GeneSight test gives me insights and takes out some of the guesswork associated with prescribing mental health medications."

The GeneSight test includes more than 60 FDA-approved medications commonly prescribed for depression, anxiety, ADHD and other psychiatric conditions. Insights from the test can help your clinician understand if you may need dose adjustments, if certain medications may be less likely to work or if they may have an increased risk of side effects based on your genetics.

Is genetic testing right for you?

Today, Roberts is on a medication that works for her.

"I'm here!" exclaimed Roberts. "I am able to help my family members, taking them to appointments, going to my job - in fact, I was just promoted - without wanting to just run away!"

If a mental health medication has failed you in the past, if your current medication is not working or if your medication is causing unwanted side effects, the GeneSight test may help. If you think genetic testing could help you or a loved one, find better mental health treatment options, contact your health care provider or learn more at [GeneSight.com](https://www.genesight.com).

* The GeneSight Mental Health Monitor is a nationwide survey conducted online by ACUPOLL Precision Research, Inc. between January 24 - February 10, 2025, among a representative sample (n=1089) of U.S. adults age 18+. The margin of error in survey results for the total base population at a 95 percent confidence interval is +/- three percent. A nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 years or older was recruited and balanced to match U.S. Census quotas across five primary metrics (i.e., age, gender, income, region, ethnicity). In addition to the nationally representative sample, a statistically reliable sample was desired of respondents who were self-reported as being diagnosed by a medical professional with depression or anxiety. The study also used mental health screening instruments, the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) for depression and the General Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2) for anxiety, to better understand this population. ACUPOLL has more than 30 years of experience conducting statistically valid research through careful recruiting and quality control measures.

PUTTING MENTAL HEALTH AT THE HEART OF FLORENCE COUNTY

Submitted by Julia Fulmer, director of community impact and marketing, United Way of Florence County



When you think about your workplace—whether it's an office, hospital, classroom, restaurant or even your own home—how often does mental health come to mind? For most of

us, not nearly enough. Yet it shapes our community every day, and the numbers tell a difficult story.

The CDC's PLACES survey reports that one in five adults in Florence County has been diagnosed with depression.

In 2024, the South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office recorded 407 emergency room visits in Florence County for suicide ideations and attempts, and more than half of those visits came from people under 30. On top of that, data from Just Plain Killers shows that between 2019 and 2021, overdose deaths rose 147 percent, prompting the South Carolina Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services to list Florence County among the state's highest-risk counties.

Figures like these can feel abstract, but they're anything but. Every number has a name, a story, a face.

PUTTING MENTAL HEALTH CONT'D

A co-worker struggling to show up, a student carrying more than books in their backpack, a parent just trying to hold it all together. These aren't statistics on a page—they're people in our neighborhoods, workplaces and families.

A Community Coming Together

At United Way of Florence County, we know the most significant challenges can only be solved when we face them together. That's why we transitioned to our Collective Impact model, bringing nonprofits, companies and individuals together to create real, lasting change for our community. Out of five focus areas identified in our community needs assessment, mental health stood out as one of the most urgent.

Our goals are simple but crucial:

- Fewer suicides and suicide attempts.
- Fewer overdose deaths.
- More people know where to turn for counseling, treatment and support in recovery.

Turning Goals into Action

Of course, goals mean little without action. That's why during our first investment cycle under the new model; we directed significant resources into three programs making a real difference:

Circle Park Behavioral Health Services – helping people prevent, treat and recover from substance use disorders.

Tenacious Grace Ministries' Five Sparrows Recovery Program – giving women a safe place to rebuild their lives after addiction.

CARE House of the Pee Dee's Hope and Healing Counseling Program – providing children who have endured abuse with trauma-informed care, setting them on a healthier path for life.

These programs don't just address symptoms—they address root causes and provide people with the tools to heal.

Why Workplaces Matter

This is where employers come in. Workplaces play a powerful role in shaping mental health. By creating safe spaces for conversation, setting realistic workloads, offering flexibility and ensuring access to care, employers aren't just supporting employees—they're strengthening the whole community. Policies protecting against harassment and discrimination, peer support networks and manager training are all part of creating cultures where people feel safe to bring their whole selves to work.

Employers can also make an impact by connecting employees with United Way of Florence County programs, such as our 211 helpline, Barriers to Employment program, or VITA service. And through workplace campaigns, businesses give employees the chance to give back, which not only fuels programs like these but also boosts morale and fosters a sense of belonging.

Even small gestures matter: a kind word, checking in on a colleague or encouraging someone to take a break. At United Way of Florence County, we strive to model this by keeping our doors open and encouraging time to recharge when needed. These simple actions build a culture where people feel valued, and that support doesn't stop at the office door. It ripples outward into families, friendships and neighborhoods.

This year's World Mental Health Day reminds us it is time to prioritize mental health in the workplace. By embedding compassion, balance and support into our organizations, we are building a healthier, more resilient Florence County. Together, we can change the story and show what's possible when our community leads.

For more information on how United Way of Florence County is working with our neighbors to overcome the most pressing issues for our community, visit [uwflorence.org/community-game-plan](https://www.uwflorence.org/community-game-plan).

PERSISTENCE IS THE KEY TO RECOVERY: RICARDO POWELL'S STORY By Susan Carter, LPC



Ricardo Powell

Ricardo Powell's mental health challenges began during adolescence. At 20, he started experiencing puzzling symptoms of depression and anxiety, which he tried to mask with alcohol and drugs. At first, Powell appeared to be managing the stresses of young adulthood. He graduated from high school and completed some college, but he continued surrounding himself with negative peer influences and was soon "sucked into party life" at school.

After leaving college, Powell faced increasing conflict with his parents, along with financial and social struggles. His efforts to cope with overwhelming feelings led to years of instability, frequent hospitalizations, placements in residential treatment facilities and even legal trouble.

Today, at 40, Powell's life has taken a dramatic turn for the better. He has a stable home, has held steady employment for the past five years, is active in his church and has been sober for 12 years. He has rebuilt a close relationship with his family and formed supportive, healthy friendships.

Powell's turning point came during his last hospitalization, when he was offered the chance to move into an independent living apartment complex operated by Pee Dee Mental Health. "I might never get this chance to start over again," he remembers thinking. He accepted the placement and immediately began making lifestyle changes, including participating in individual and group therapy at Pee Dee Community Mental Health Center. He credits the center's peer support program with

helping him develop a positive outlook on life.

"It's all about perspective," Powell said. "Life will throw you a curveball. Positivity takes you down a whole other path."

Powell draws strength from sharing his struggles and listening to how others in the group manage their stress. "Peer support is an outlet where you can discuss things you can't talk with your doctor or others about because the group members have experienced things similar to me," he said.

Along with support from peers and counselors, Powell acknowledges the role medication has played in his recovery. As a young man, he wasn't always consistent about taking his prescribed medication. Now, he recognizes its effectiveness when taken daily — and the importance of not mixing it with drugs or alcohol.

"You can't expect to get better if you're not taking your medicine as prescribed," he said. His advice to others struggling with mental health challenges: "Take the time. Be patient with yourself. Listen to the advice of your doctors and counselors. Perseverance is very important when you're trying to fix a problem."

Powell believes acceptance is the first step on the path to recovery. He says mental health professionals and the broader community can help people feel more comfortable seeking help by highlighting role models who show that it's possible — even "cool" — to live well while managing a mental health condition. Once people engage in treatment, Powell said, they must understand the importance of sticking with it, even when progress feels slow. "Recovery is like ironing clothes," he said. "You've got to keep on until you get all the wrinkles out."



Johnny Richardson

find strength and seek support.

Richardson's struggle with mental health began early. Growing up without a strong male figure, he often felt left to interpret life on his own. That lack of guidance led to years of inner conflict, hopelessness and destructive thoughts. More than once, he considered ending his life. "I was in a mental struggle with myself," he recalled. Only after receiving professional help at a critical moment did his life begin to turn. Therapy gave him tools to cope and a framework to rebuild. With support, he discovered survival was possible, and his pain could become purpose.

His sister, already a mental health advocate, encouraged him to open up. Through their conversations, Richardson realized his voice could reach others. Combining his creative background in music and performance with his testimony, he began sharing poems and stories. When coworkers and community members asked him to speak to their loved ones, he saw the impact of being vulnerable. "Once I shared in my creative way and saw the response, it gave me faith that this was something I should do," he said.

Richardson believes stigma remains one of the greatest barriers to progress. He grew up in an environment where mental health was never discussed, a silence that often-masked trauma. Workplaces and churches, he noted, still struggle to embrace the conversation. In some faith settings, Scripture is used to dismiss mental health needs instead of paired with professional care. Generational divides also complicate matters. Younger people tend to be more open, while older groups may resist change, making the workplace a critical arena for progress.

Access is another challenge. Richardson did not know about certain resources until he was referred to a therapist. Unlike physical health services, mental health support is not widely promoted, leaving many unaware of what is available. He argues that employers and schools can change this by embedding support into daily culture: offering check-ins, normalizing mental health days and making Employee Assistance Programs visible and approachable.

Modern life and social media also weigh heavily. The constant flow of information and pressure to keep pace with others can erode mental wellness. Burnout is common, with people pulled in multiple directions and left depleted. Richardson believes workplaces must recognize these realities and respond with flexibility, safe spaces for conversation and training for managers so employees feel supported, not isolated.

If given the chance to implement change, Richardson said he would call on state leaders to visit schools and churches to speak openly about mental health. "If the head had to be aware, it would trickle down," he said. Leadership at the top, he believes, sets the tone for communities. His advice to those struggling silently is to take courage and not give up. "Don't be afraid to get help. There's always someone who can show you there's some sun on the other side of the storm. But we will never see it if we

quit."

Richardson does not measure impact by numbers. If his story reaches one person, he considers it worthwhile. He knows what it means for one voice to change a life because someone once did the same for him. On this World Mental Health Day, as the workplace becomes part of the global conversation, Richardson's willingness to share his journey is both timely and transformative. His story is a reminder that progress is possible, stigma can be broken, and no one has to walk the path alone.

SUDDEN GRIEF AND UNEXPECTED SUPPORT

By Susan Carter, LPC



Robyn McCown

Seven years ago, Robyn McCown was living what seemed like one of the happiest periods of her life. She had a fulfilling career as a home health professional, was happily married and expecting her first child. Then, her mother died suddenly — and everything changed.

The loss left McCown devastated. Once confident and capable, she began experiencing panic attacks, intense fear and overwhelming sadness. She grew terrified of crowds, avoided friends and family, and rarely left home. The vibrant young woman who had once embraced life now felt it was not worth living without her mother.

At that point, her husband, Antonio McCown, intervened. "I think something is wrong," he gently told her. He encouraged her to attend a Pee Dee Mental Health peer support group for individuals living with mental health challenges. Initially, McCown resisted. Aware of the stigma surrounding mental illness, she replied, "I'll give it to God," even though she was not actively practicing her faith at the time. She withdrew from her once close extended family, believing they would not understand her behavior.

As her symptoms persisted, McCown began self-medicating with alcohol and drugs. Antonio McCown, still concerned, continued urging her to join the peer support group. He even asked the group's leader to visit their home to discuss the program with her. Eventually, McCown agreed to attend, realizing that her young daughter would suffer if she did not get help.

At first, she said, she was, "standoffish." She soon experienced a breakthrough when she learned, "it's OK not to be OK." She saw that others could become reliable sources of support. McCown also joined Florence Baptist Temple and was amazed at how allowing people into her life became instrumental in "getting my life back together." She replaced cigarettes and alcohol with healthier habits like taking walks. McCown has been sober for 12 years, quitting "cold turkey," and credits her faith with giving her the strength to stop.

Mental health counseling helped her build on that success. Peer support and community mental health counselors taught McCown ways to manage her anxiety and improve her physical as well as mental health. McCown, who also manages diabetes, said, "They took me shopping for nutritious food, helped me get used to crowds and helped me learn how to deal with people without getting angry or upset." An avid reader, she especially enjoyed the "encouragement books" counselors

SUDDEN GRIEF CONT'D



Robyn and her daughter Summer

introduced to her, which she says help her stay focused.

Because depression can make even basic housekeeping overwhelming, McCown found it helpful when Pee Dee Mental Health counselors assisted her in organizing her home. That support, she said, significantly reduced her stress and anxiety.

Medication has also been part of McCown's recovery. All patients at Pee Dee Mental Health receive assessments from a psychiatrist, who recommends treatment based on their symptoms. For McCown, medication has helped keep her anxiety and depression manageable and allowed her to sleep peacefully again. She no longer experiences the distressing nightmares that haunted her after her mother's death.

Today, McCown is working again — this time as a certified peer support counselor. She has reconnected with her

extended family, enjoying regular phone calls with her "auntie," her mother's only surviving sibling, and she is even considering planning a family reunion for the holidays.

Her closest connection, however, is with her daughter, Summer, now a thriving second grader with numerous academic awards. McCown said the parenting skills she learned from her church and mental health support systems have been invaluable in strengthening their relationship. "My support systems have helped me become stronger and more grounded," she said. "I have learned to trust and believe that everyone is not bad and that counselors can help and encourage me."

She hopes to model these positive attitudes and coping strategies for Summer as she grows up.

Asked how she would advise others facing paralyzing anxiety and depression, McCown replied without hesitation:

"Keep in mind who you are. Never let anyone put you down or make you feel less than. Find positive people to encourage you. Develop a great support system and get the help you need. Don't be ashamed to walk through the doors of your community mental health center."

HEART TO HEART, HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT By Cynthia O. Ford



Carisa Gerald

Carisa Gerald founded Heart to Heart Counseling Empowerment Services, LLC, in June 2019, with a mission that still guides her practice today: healing hearts, empowering minds and restoring relationships one conversation at a time.

She brings 25 years of experience in social and human services to her role as a licensed clinician serving children, teens and adults through counseling and targeted case management. Her specialty areas include depression, grief, adjustment concerns, self-esteem, communication challenges and trauma—needs she tailors to each individual, so care feels personal and safe. Gerald is clear about what sets her apart. She shows up as her authentic self so clients can do the same, which is the foundation of trust therapy requires.

Gerald's path to licensure reflects persistence and purpose. After years in case management, she realized a glass ceiling stood between her and the impact she wanted to make. Earning her license on the first attempt confirmed what she already sensed—that direct clinical work was her calling. She completed a second master's in human resources but chose not to move behind the scenes. She wanted to keep working face to face with people because that is where change takes root.

In recent years Gerald has seen a surge of stress, anxiety and secondary trauma in the workplace. Through her Employee Assistance Program work with McLeod Health and MUSC—where she serves as the sole EAP clinician for the Pee Dee region, she meets employees where they are and offers brief, stigma-free support that connects them to ongoing care if needed. She notes a hopeful shift in the African American community, with more men seeking counseling and more families normalizing mental health care as part of overall wellness.

Gerald emphasizes that prioritizing mental health at work means treating it like physical health. If someone is overwhelmed or burned out, they need timely support without hurdles. She points to flexible scheduling, mental health days,

morale-building activities and professional development focused on stress as practical steps any organization can adopt. Even with no budget, leaders can promote limited EAP sessions, carve out protected time for appointments and communicate clearly that therapy records are confidential and not shared with employers. Many employees hesitate because they fear exposure. Clear messaging reduces that fear and increases use of available benefits.

Managers often miss early warning signs because they look small at first. Gerald encourages leaders to watch for changes in personality, patience, accuracy or passion for the work. A shift in appearance or engagement can also be a signal. When a high performer starts to slip, the right move is not to pry. Offer support, name available resources and normalize help-seeking as a strength. Leaders should hand employees concrete information about EAP access and follow up with care, not pressure.

She also sees how fear of being judged keeps people silent. Gerald advises organizations to build psychologically safe cultures where concerns can be raised without penalty, and where policies—reporting pathways, anti-bullying norms, mediation options—are clear and consistently enforced. Beyond the workplace, she serves families across the Pee Dee through an office in Florence and statewide telehealth. She is licensed in South Carolina and North Carolina, and she follows the developing interstate compact that will make cross-state care even easier.

Gerald urges readers to try a simple self-check. Ask how you are sleeping, whether emotions feel fleeting or frequent, if daily responsibilities feel unmanageable and whether you have coping strategies that work. Note difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts, increased substance use or any thoughts of self-harm. If safety is a concern, call or text 988 for immediate support.

Faith underscores Gerald's view of healing. She believes spirituality and counseling can work together, and that caring for the mind honors the whole person. If readers do only one thing after this article, she says, let it be this: Prioritize yourself and make the self-check a habit. Small steps add up, and the sooner we treat mental health as health, the sooner workplaces and families across the Pee Dee will thrive.

MUSC HEALTH CUTS RIBBON ON NEW BEHAVIORAL CARE FACILITY IN FLORENCE

Submitted by John Russell, marketing manager—media relations, MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers



MUSC Health Behavioral Care Facility

MUSC Health and its partners officially cut the ribbon on the MUSC Health Jean and Hugh K. Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion, marking a major step in expanding access to behavioral health care across the Pee Dee region.

The ceremony drew state and local leaders, including Gov. Henry McMaster, Florence city officials, legislators and community partners, who toured the state-of-the-art facility and celebrated its potential to shape the future of behavioral health care in the region.

“We are proud to celebrate the completion and opening of the MUSC Health Jean and Hugh K. Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion, a milestone made possible through unprecedented collaboration and shared vision,” said Jay Hinesley, CEO of MUSC Health—Pee Dee Division. “This innovative facility represents a vital step forward in addressing the mental health needs of our region, providing accessible, compassionate care when and where it’s needed most.”

Serving as a regional behavioral care hub, the new facility is designed to meet growing mental health needs through an integrated network of services, including:

- **Rapid Access Center:** A walk-in triage and assessment center offering immediate support and seamless transitions into care.
- **Telepsychiatry services:** Expanding access to psychiatric care across the region through virtual consultations.
- **Crisis stabilization beds:** Sixteen adult and four adolescent beds providing short-term stabilization and treatment.
- **Outpatient clinics:** Dedicated behavioral health clinics for both adult and pediatric patients.
- **Inpatient psychiatric unit:** A 63-bed acute care unit, which includes the transfer of 23 beds from McLeod Behavioral Health Center in Darlington.

The project was made possible through years of collaboration and funding efforts led by the late South Carolina Sen. Hugh K. Leatherman, for whom the facility is named. Construction began in 2024.

“This facility represents a bold step forward in our shared commitment to transforming behavioral health care, starting with improving access, continuity of care and outcomes for families across the Pee Dee region and the state,” said David J. Cole, M.D., FACS, president of MUSC.

The facility is the result of a collaboration between MUSC Health, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the South Carolina Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities Office of Mental Health, McLeod Health, Francis Marion University and HopeHealth. The project reflects a combined investment of up to \$100 million appropriated to SCDHHS by the South Carolina General Assembly and a five-million-dollar commitment from the City of Florence — believed to be the first municipal investment in a behavioral health facility in the state.

Common WARNING SIGNS of Mental Illness

Diagnosing mental illness isn’t a straightforward science. We can’t test for it the same way we can test blood sugar levels for diabetes. Each condition has its own set of unique symptoms, though symptoms often overlap. Common signs and/or symptoms can include:

- ! **Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks**
- ! **Trying to harm or end one’s life or making plans to do so**
- ! **Severe, out-of-control, risk-taking behavior that causes harm to self or others**
- ! **Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or difficulty breathing**
- ! **Significant weight loss or gain**



- ! **Seeing, hearing or believing things that aren’t real***
- ! **Excessive use of alcohol or drugs**
- ! **Drastic changes in mood, behavior, personality or sleeping habits**
- ! **Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still**
- ! **Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities**

*Various communities and backgrounds might view this sign differently based on their beliefs and experiences. Some people within these communities and cultures may not interpret hearing voices as unusual.



Amy's mental health challenges began at age 13 and worsened after she moved from the Northeast to South Carolina. Recently divorced, she left her family, friends and a thriving jewelry business to follow a man she met on "rebound." As their relationship continued, problems emerged, leaving Amy isolated and "utterly depressed." With no close friends or family to support her, she was unsure what to do next. On impulse, she bought a house in a small town, hoping it would improve her mood and stability.

Her depression, however, deepened, even though she made one friend—"my angel"—who offered her a job. She accepted the minimally paying position "to get out of the house." At home, Amy continued to feel lonely and unhappy, eventually going to the emergency room with suicidal thoughts. "I was ready to kill myself. I didn't see any way out," she said. She described her toxic relationship as damaging her self-esteem, confidence and self-worth. "I was trapped in a relationship of distrust, constant criticism and control. I was not allowed to grow—I felt like a caged animal, trapped and destined to live this way forever." Ironically, this low point marked the start of her recovery.

After discharge from the emergency room, without additional services in place, Amy sought treatment through internet searches, initially with little success. She eventually discovered a program she thought could help: Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). DBT combines cognitive and behavioral strategies to help people regulate emotions, tolerate distress, improve interpersonal relationships and practice mindfulness. Typically offered in private therapy and hospital settings, Amy was pleasantly surprised that a community mental health center near her home provided the program.

While therapy proved valuable, Amy said her bond with her counselor was just as important. Upon meeting her counselor, she admitted warily, "You are my last-ditch effort." Amy had seen counselors on and off since age 13, some helpful, most not. "My counselor impressed me from day one. I really felt she was listening and truly cared," she said.

Through DBT and counseling, Amy gradually made the changes she needed to "make a life worth living." She realized she had been living in crisis mode "every single day." Using the DBT skill of weighing pros and cons, she decided ending her relationship was necessary for her well-being. She describes herself at the start of therapy as "a shell of who I am today." Now, Amy embraces her freedom, free from criticism or shame. She has reconnected with her family, made new friends, excels at her job and practices healthy coping skills: spending time in nature, mindfulness, exercising, caring for her dogs and maintaining a nutritious diet.

For Amy, mental health treatment, especially DBT, has given her freedom. "Freedom from self-torture over things I can't change, the willingness to accept the past and the strength and

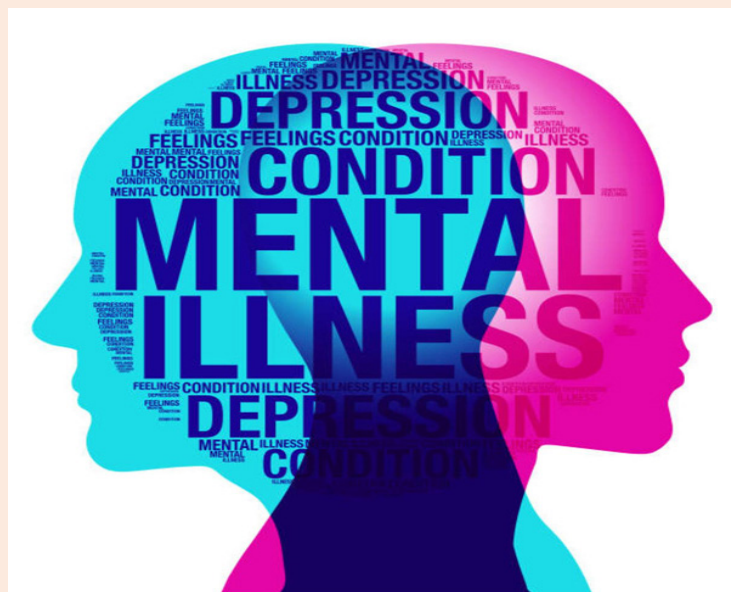
courage to embrace the future. Without group and one-on-one counseling, I don't think I would be creating my new path. I wouldn't be here to share this." She credits her counselor for "helping me, teaching me skills and believing in me. She guided me to make my own decisions that aligned with my goals, self-respect and a true honoring of who I am. She did not tell me what to do. I found the answers to my problems using the DBT skills I had learned." Instead of feeling trapped, Amy now sees herself as "a bird that just learned how to fly."

Amy also credits medications and the treatment-team approach at her community mental health center for her recovery. Psychiatrists and nurses monitor her medications and adjust as needed. "I'm not right if I don't take them," she said. Medicine, combined with DBT skills, helps her regulate emotions. "I have learned that I don't have to act out whatever emotion I'm having. Instead, I experience it and talk myself through it." Therapy increased her self-awareness: "I understand myself now better than I ever have."

Amy enjoys her independence and is "having fun making my own way." She has made friends who share her artistic interests and has resumed making jewelry, some of which will be displayed at a local craft marketplace.

Amy acknowledges her journey was not easy and notes areas where the community and mental health system could improve access. "DBT is effective, but it is hard to locate and often too expensive for those who need it most." She was fortunate to find a community mental health center with affordable services, though the program was not widely advertised.

Other factors in her success include persistence and trust in her counselor, close friend and family. She advises those seeking help: "Stick with it until you find the counselor who is right for you. Reach out to the community mental health center for resources. If you find a tiny spark of hope, go with it. Whether it is a person, place or activity, go with the spark of light and try to keep adding to it each day. In time, it grows bright, and the darkness fades away." Connecting with those who want the best for you is perhaps the most important healing agent. Amy found strength in her family and a trustworthy friend who listened nonjudgmentally and helped with tasks that she felt too overwhelmed to complete. At times, simply sitting quietly with this friend was enough to help her feel cared for and have strength to continue. Amy explains this in her characteristically artistic style: "People become your ladder and help you climb out of despair."



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: BYPASS BEING A BYSTANDER

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



The theme for Domestic Violence Awareness Month 2025 is #Every1KnowsSome1, a message that resonates strongly within the advocacy community.

Rozlyn Ford, executive director of The Naomi Project in Florence, brings extensive experience to her new leadership role. The Naomi Project's primary mission is to provide long-term transitional housing and comprehensive life- and career-building services for victims of domestic abuse who have experienced financial hardship after leaving their homes and resources.

Ford emphasizes that effective leadership involves not only advocacy but also the ongoing management of programs dedicated to ensuring survivor safety and independence.

Despite her many responsibilities, Ford said her foremost priority is to cultivate a supportive and empowering environment for the women and children served by the organization. The Naomi Project continues to build on the legacy of its founder, Joyce Gillespie Ford, who was known for her motto, "You never leave a person hungry — literally or figuratively."

Joyce G. Ford is remembered as a passionate advocate who gave selflessly to anyone in need. The organization remains steadfast in upholding her values, working to ensure survivors receive the safety, stability, support and opportunities necessary to live independently.

The #Every1KnowsSome1 theme underscores that everyone is connected to someone who is or has been in an abusive relationship — even if they are not aware of it. Ford noted that silence can allow domestic abuse to persist, leaving many survivors feeling isolated and misunderstood.

By emphasizing the prevalence of domestic violence, this year's theme encourages open dialogue and awareness, reassuring individuals that they are seen and supported. Joyce G. Ford's tireless commitment to empowering survivors, restoring their dignity, educating the public and raising awareness throughout the Pee Dee region continues to guide The Naomi Project's mission.

Interest in supporting organizations like The Naomi Project is often strong, but many prospective advocates do not fully realize the demanding nature of this work or the limited funding available. Ford noted there is a collaboration of only five homeless organizations, serving all seven counties of the Pee Dee region compared to 10 animal shelters and rescues.

The Naomi Project recognizes the critical need for increased financial support to maintain safe transitional housing for survivors. Individuals interested in learning more about upcoming events, donations or volunteer opportunities can visit www.naomiproject.com, find the organization on Facebook at naomiproject06 or call (843) 615-1548.



Volunteers work at the annual Naomi Project Luncheon Sale held in September.

THE FIGHT AFTER DOMESTIC ABUSE

Submitted by The Naomi Project



I never thought I would find myself in a domestic abuse situation, let alone face the tragic losses that came because of it. I don't know when I lost myself — my safety, my happiness, my joy. Today, I find myself lost and confused, not only about how I ended up in this mess but how to get out.

This cycle started with isolated incidents of name-calling, a slap, demeaning and hurtful words. I didn't know this was laying the groundwork for the horrible progression of things to come. What compounded my quick descent into victimization is the fact that I am truly alone in this world. No mother, father or family — or none willing or able to help. Just a few girlfriends. My lack of family and friend connections made it easier to isolate me. One of my biggest fears was being killed in that house and no one realizing it until I started to smell. I had few resources and nowhere to turn. I never imagined that someone who claimed to love me one minute could become so heartless and mean the next. I learned about the mental process of narcissistic people quite by accident, and I am fortunate to have made it out of this situation with my mind and body intact. I believe in my heart of hearts that the only reason I was not as physically abused as he would have

liked — and was capable of — is because of his job in law enforcement. That is another story.

I was asked to write this story, and I was not prepared for the feelings and memories it would bring. As I sit at my desk, I am angry that I allowed myself to be played with and hurt mentally like this — all in the name of love. The shame and emotional toll are difficult to climb out of. Questions go around in my head: What did I do to deserve this kind of treatment when all I wanted was someone to spend my life with, to grow with, to prosper and live a happy existence? What I was met with was hurt, confusion, disrespect and a lot of pain and misery.

Living with and loving a violent person is difficult on so many levels. I was raised in an environment where people loved each other, showed love and were kind and respectful. Things like this just didn't happen. Maybe that's why it took me so long to realize what, in the name of God, I had gotten myself into. The terror. The feeling of inadequacy. The fear. I had nowhere to go — who would want me there anyway? How would I live in this world with no one to care? I am learning now that the cycle of abuse makes this line of thought feel normal — it truly cannot grow without it. In this state, there are very few resources to help people who experience domestic violence, and that is a sad commentary. South Carolina is high on the list of domestic violence, with high levels of lethality. That means we die. And very few resources exist to address this serious issue. The few resources

THE FIGHT AFTER CONT'D

available are stretched way beyond their capacity. Where is our law enforcement? Our government officials who manage funding for the agencies that fight the good fight — safe housing, medical care referrals — on a daily basis? Why are they left to fight this battle alone?

I am fortunate to have been directed to The Naomi Project and granted admission into their program. It's a struggle on a daily basis, but I am starting to see what normal looks like again. Small things — sitting at the dinner table and talking about our day, laughing and sometimes shedding a few tears. I'm so grateful to be here. The work ahead of me will be long and most assuredly hard, but I am

starting to believe in me again. That I am worthy. That I do deserve love. That I am appreciated for just being. I don't know where I lost myself, not really even sure when I lost her. But I know I want her back — or a new, improved version of myself. I truly wish that I could put together a fluid, coherent version of thoughts and feelings to fully convey the life and times of me. With the help of the good Lord, Naomi and the caring souls I have been aligned with since coming here, maybe I will be able to one day get past the horror and write a truly happy ending to this story. Until then, I will take this opportunity to learn and grow into the happy, successful woman I was meant to be.

ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROGRAM

Submitted by Director Allen McBride, ATV Program



Allen McBride

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Pee Dee Coalition's Alternatives to Violence (ATV) Program, we reflect on nearly three decades of shaping attitudes and beliefs to help individuals think clearly in times of conflict.

It is often said that what dwells in the heart eventually manifests in character. Unfortunately, too many people carry anger and violence within, and this often surfaces in their relationships. No one wants to be around someone who cannot control their temper or who resorts

to physical violence to solve problems. The ATV program's greatest challenge has been helping participants replace patterns of anger and abuse with healthier habits that build trust and encourage supportive partnerships.

According to World Population Review, South Carolina currently ranks sixth in the nation for domestic violence cases and deaths. From April 2024 to April 2025, 42 percent of women and 29 percent of men in the state experienced some form of intimate partner violence. While South Carolina has dropped from 11th in 2018 to sixth nationally in the rate of women killed by men, according to the Violence Policy Center, there is still much work to be done.

The ATV Program was launched in 1995 by the Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Assault to proactively address domestic violence and reduce recurring behaviors that lead to abuse and, in some cases, death. The program helps participants find alternatives to anger, rage, fear, frustration, isolation and desperation—emotions that often fuel abusive relationships.

The program is open to both men and women. Of the 295 participants enrolled in 2024, 44 were women. Most referrals come from the courts, the Pretrial Intervention Office and the Department of Social Services (DSS). Clients referred by DSS are often required to follow safety plans, and noncompliance may result in children being placed in foster care until the parent completes the ATV program. Success rates in these cases are about 80 percent.

Although some clients enroll voluntarily, most are court-ordered. The program runs 26 weeks, with one session per week offered in person, virtually or by phone for those with limited internet access. The cost is \$690. If an offender refuses to participate, they may face a \$5,000 fine or 90 days in jail. Probationary clients must also comply with program protocols.

Every relationship has disagreements, but not every relationship includes abuse or violence. Abuse can be emotional or verbal, while violence is always illegal. ATV focuses on psychoeducational counseling, teaching participants how to take responsibility for their actions, manage emotions and choose healthier responses.

Upon completion, referral sources are notified, and clients receive a certificate.

Success Stories

Richard's Story

Richard, a 63-year-old Marine veteran, entered the ATV Program through Pretrial Intervention after being charged with domestic violence of a high and aggravated nature for pointing an assault rifle at his wife. Initially resistant and combative, he gradually engaged with the program and completed it with consistency.

"I didn't think I would get out of this program what I did," he said upon completion. "I look at things in my marriage with more calmness than before. You guys have a good thing going—keep it up."

Denzel's Story

"Denzel," a military sergeant, was referred through the Solicitor's Office after being charged with second-degree domestic violence for grabbing his girlfriend by the hair. Initially hesitant to participate, he eventually opened up in group discussions.

Before the program, Denzel admitted he considered a man "weak" if he walked away from conflict. "Now, I'm convinced it takes a real man to walk away to avoid conflict," he said. "This program showed me there are alternatives to violence."

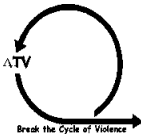
Client Testimonies

- "This class has helped me become a better man. I realized my major problem was alcohol and how it fueled my behavior. I've learned to stop, think, walk away and calm down before reacting. I am currently alcohol-free and seeking help to stay clean. I will use what I learned here to rebuild trust and respect."
- "The biggest lesson I learned was that it's not worth it. Anger is the biggest weapon we use against ourselves. Stress was my trigger, but now I use prayer, breathing and patience. The more you participate in class, the more you gain. I'm thankful for this program and my facilitator."
- "I have learned a multitude of lessons. This experience cost me my career, custody of my daughter and many relationships—but it also gave me perspective. I've become a better listener, teacher, mentor and mother. My faith has grown stronger, and I am determined not to let anger control me again. The program gave me tools to build a better future."

Moving Forward

Anyone can benefit from the Alternatives to Violence Program. Violence and abusive behavior can be changed, but only when individuals take responsibility for their actions. Apologies are not enough—lasting change requires learning new ways to process emotions and choosing healthier responses.

For more information, contact:
Alternatives to Violence Program
234 S. Dargan St., Florence, SC
Phone: 843-673-2008



Alternatives To Violence Program Summary

PURPOSE: Pee Dee Coalition is a nonprofit, volunteer organization dedicated to the reduction of sexual assault, family violence, and child abuse and to the needs of victims. The Coalition, whose governing body is a volunteer Board of Directors representing the seven-county service area, was incorporated in 1986. The organization is staffed by over 70 full and part time employees working across the Pee Dee Region.

FUNDING: The Coalition is funded through local, state, and federal dollars while relying heavily on both financial and in-kind contributions from private sources. The organization is a member of United Way or similar funding agencies.

VISION: Through the efforts of Pee Dee Coalition in its entirety, the region will be a safer, more compassionate community



WHAT IS ATV?

- ❖ ATV is a domestic violence offender intervention program that teaches alternatives to the anger, rage, frustration, fear, isolation and desperation that are part of the abusive relationship.
- ❖ Every relationship may have conflict and arguments, but not every relationship has abuse.
- ❖ ATV teaches alternative ways of dealing with emotions without the use of violence.
- ❖ ATV is dedicated to reducing domestic violence through case tracking, information and referrals, community education and training for professionals.
- ❖ Psychoeducational group sessions for domestic violence offenders are based on the Duluth Model of Power and Control.

INTERVIEW, CLASSES AND FEE INFORMATION

- ❖ If an individual is court-referred, a time limit is placed on the individual during which they have to contact the ATV program. You may also enter voluntarily.
- ❖ The initial interview/assessment fee of \$40 is due at the time of the interview.
- ❖ Participants are required to meet weekly for 90 minutes for 26 weeks. The session fee is \$25 per week.
- ❖ Groups meet in all seven counties of the Pee Dee Region. Participants may also be accepted from other counties upon referral. The delivery of services is multidimensional. This includes telephone conferences for those who are in low broadcast areas, meetings via a web-based platform for those who are not in close proximity and have tight schedules, and the in-person sessions for those who are near the meeting locations.

CARING DADS™

- ❖ Caring Dads™ is a FREE, evidence-based 17-week national program for men
- ❖ Eligibility: Fathers seeking to take accountability for past harm, including physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or exposing their children to domestic violence.
- ❖ Focus: Helping fathers take responsibility, challenge harmful attitudes, and foster safe, supportive relationships with their children and the child's mother.

ANY VIOLENCE IN A DOMESTIC RELATIONSHIP IS TOO MUCH!!



David Mandel

When child welfare workers, courts and family service providers face cases of domestic violence, the stakes are high. Every decision can shape the future of a child and either strengthen or weaken a family. Yet traditional approaches have not always centered around children's safety or given survivors the support needed. That is where the Safe & Together Institute has made its impact.

More than 20 years ago, David Mandel, a domestic violence practitioner with decades of experience, saw how systems were falling short. Survivors, often mothers, were being blamed for circumstances beyond their control, while children's safety was sometimes overlooked. Mandel recognized that the system needed to change. From that recognition, the Safe & Together Institute was founded.

Mandel's expertise is both academic and practical. He studied government at Wesleyan University before earning a master's degree in counseling and psychology from Goddard College. But what truly shaped his vision was his time in the field, listening to survivors, observing how agencies responded and identifying gaps. His mission from the beginning was clear: build a framework that keeps children safe, supports parents and holds perpetrators accountable.

Central to that mission is the Safe & Together Model, a globally recognized framework for working with families impacted by domestic violence. The model rests on three principles. The first is keeping children safe and together with their protective parent. The second is partnering with survivors, rather than blaming them for the harm they have endured. The third is intervening with perpetrators as parents and ensuring they are held accountable.

This approach has transformed practice worldwide. The Safe & Together Model emphasizes that men must be safe, nurturing and responsible in their role as fathers. By reframing domestic violence as a parenting choice, the Institute has changed how professionals across agencies understand and respond. It is no longer seen as simply conflict between adults but as a direct issue of child safety and family well-being.

What sets the Safe & Together Institute apart is its focus on systemic change. Instead of providing direct services to families, the Institute equips organizations and systems to work smarter, safer and more effectively. It does this through training programs, long-term partnerships, online learning and international conferences. Each year, as many as 10,000 professionals benefit from the Institute's expertise.

The scale of this work is especially notable given the Institute's staff of about 20. Through a network of more than 500 certified trainers and over 100 partner agencies, the Safe & Together Model is adapted to local needs and sustained in communities worldwide. This ensures the work does not end with a single training session but continues to shape policies and practices long term.

Mandel also extends his reach through writing and public dialogue. His book, "Stop Blaming Mothers and Ignoring Fathers: How to Transform the Way We Keep Children Safe from Domestic Violence," challenges harmful myths and offers practical tools for professionals and survivors. By combining research, case studies and actionable strategies, the book

reframes how systems can respond more effectively.

Together with his wife Ruth, herself a survivor of domestic violence, Mandel co-hosts the, "Partnered with a Survivor," podcast. The platform combines professional expertise with lived experience, offering conversations that highlight both challenges and opportunities for change. Their collaboration reflects the Institute's belief that survivor voices are not only valuable but essential to building stronger responses.

The Institute's influence extends far beyond the United States. More than half of its work now takes place internationally, with active projects in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Regardless of location, the outcomes are consistent. Children are better protected, survivors are supported instead of blamed and systems begin to collaborate rather than work in silos. Each training, policy revision or organizational shift represents meaningful progress toward safer families.

For Mandel and the Safe & Together Institute, success is not measured by numbers alone. While the organization is proud to train thousands of professionals each year, its true measure of progress is found in safer children, stronger families and systems that no longer unintentionally cause harm. By rethinking how institutions respond to domestic violence, the Safe & Together Institute has inspired a global movement that continues to grow and create lasting change. For more information about the Safe & Together Institute, visit www.safeandtogetherinstitute.com or call (860) 319-0966.

A link to Mandel's book, "Stop Blaming Mothers and Ignoring Fathers," can be found at <https://mybook.to/mK39V>.

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30TH ANNIVERSARY OF
ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE
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KEYNOTE SPEAKER
DAVID MANDEL
FOUNDER & CEO, THE SAFE & TOGETHER INSTITUTE



BRIDGING THE GAP: EMPOWERING DIFFERENTLY ABLED ADULTS TO THRIVE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Bridging the Gap Participant Larry Jefferson and Supervisor Titus Bracey

DARLINGTON—Being differently abled does not mean being limited — because the human spirit knows no bounds. When people believe in their own abilities, they are often more capable than many who claim “normalcy.”

The Darlington County Disabilities and Special Needs Board offers an adult day program called Bridging the Gap Enterprises. Launched in 1999, the program helps individuals who are differently abled gain the skills and confidence to live and work independently. Participants can choose from supported employment, enclaves, mobile work crews and center-based services. Everyone who works earns at least minimum wage, said Executive Director Ruth Blocker.

The board also provides residential, day and case management services, including two intermediate care facilities — one serving eight women and one serving eight men — as well as eight Community Training Homes (CTH-II) and one CTH-I home. Most of these residences were built in the 1990s and serve adults.

“Our mission is to enhance lives, develop abilities, and promote independence,” Blocker said. “Each individual receives an assessment of their abilities to determine functionality. They can then choose to pursue career preparation or join a work crew.”

Bridging the Gap’s day program offers a variety of opportunities, including janitorial services for several Hartsville churches, baling cardboard and bottles for PolyQuest and OceanaGold and partnerships with Nucor/Vulcraft and Sonoco. A lawn crew maintains a long-standing contract with the City of Darlington, and participants also wash vehicles for the Darlington Council on Aging. About 69 individuals are currently enrolled, though not all work on the baling crew. Center-based services include shredding, and all participants earn at least minimum wage.



Larry Jefferson

A Shining Star: Larry Jefferson

One of the program’s most spirited participants is Larry Jefferson, who embodies the values and goals of Bridging the Gap. Known for his infectious smile and strong work ethic, Jefferson takes pride in every assignment. He and his teammates wear protective gear and work together to complete their tasks. Participants attend the facility five days a week from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

When they are not working, they enjoy activities such as basketball and puzzles. The program provides transportation to and from the facility, and supervisors foster close relationships with participants. They often eat together at local restaurants, strengthening their bonds.

Jefferson said he gets along with everyone and loves all the staff and fellow participants. Outside the program, he enjoys going to Walmart, hanging out with friends and cooking — especially Hamburger Helper. His mother said he is also a great help at home with cleaning and laundry.

Building Skills and Confidence

Titus Bracey, direct support professional supervisor of the day program, oversees the baling and vehicle washing crews, including Jefferson’s team.

“The day program helps individuals develop social skills, learn communication and become independent,” Bracey said. “We teach them how to complete tasks so they can eventually do them on their own, with support if needed. They are assigned responsibilities and stay focused until their work is done.”

Bracey said the staff strives to provide the best possible services with professionalism and compassion.

“We are fortunate to have Executive Director Ruth Blocker, who is supportive, patient and dedicated to strengthening the skills and positive behavior of our consumers,” he said.

Bridging the Gap continues to show that being differently abled is not a limitation — it is simply another way of being, full of potential and promise.

HONORING NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH



(DWM)—Every October, workplaces across the United States recognize National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Established to celebrate the contributions of workers with disabilities

and to educate about the value of a workforce inclusive of their skills and talents, NDEAM underscores a vital truth: America’s strength lies in the diversity and ingenuity of its people.

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) leads the annual observance, selecting a theme each year that highlights the power of inclusion and innovation. While the observance lasts just one month, its message carries relevance all year long: When people with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate, businesses and communities thrive.

A Legacy of Inclusion

The roots of NDEAM trace back to 1945, when

Congress enacted a law declaring the first week of October as “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of people with all types of disabilities. By 1988, the observance expanded to a full month and was renamed National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

This evolution mirrors the nation’s shifting attitudes about disability—from viewing it through a lens of limitation to recognizing the capabilities, potential and innovation that people with disabilities bring to the workplace. It is also a testament to decades of advocacy by disability rights leaders who helped secure landmark legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including employment.

“National Disability Employment Awareness Month is about celebrating the contributions of America’s workers with disabilities and educating about the value of a workforce inclusive of their skills and talents,” said ODEP Assistant Secretary Taryn M. Williams. “We know

CELEBRATING INGENUITY CONT'D

that when workplaces are inclusive, they are stronger, more innovative and more successful.”

Contributions That Drive Innovation

People with disabilities contribute to the workforce in countless ways—often bringing unique problem-solving skills, creativity and adaptability shaped by their lived experiences. Research consistently shows that organizations embracing disability inclusion enjoy higher employee engagement, lower turnover and stronger performance.

For example, employees who are deaf or hard of hearing often pioneer new communication tools or processes that benefit entire teams. Workers with mobility impairments may inspire universal design improvements that make spaces and products more accessible for everyone. Neurodivergent employees frequently excel in fields such as information technology, data analysis and creative design, offering fresh perspectives that drive innovation.

Major companies have taken notice. Global firms like Microsoft, Google and Walgreens have implemented robust disability hiring initiatives, recognizing that diversity—including disability diversity—is a competitive advantage. Smaller businesses, too, are discovering that inclusive practices broaden their talent pools and deepen community ties.

“When people with disabilities are included in the workplace, everyone benefits,” said Kathy Martinez, president and CEO of Disability:IN, a nonprofit that works with companies to advance disability inclusion. “We see increased innovation, stronger morale and greater representation of the communities companies serve.”

Building Inclusive Workplaces

Despite progress, barriers remain. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the employment-population ratio for people with disabilities was 23.1 percent in 2023, compared to 65.8 percent for people without disabilities. Many still face attitudinal barriers, inaccessible technology, and a lack of workplace accommodations or career advancement opportunities.

NDEAM encourages employers to take action to close these gaps. Creating an inclusive workplace starts with leadership commitment and a culture that values diversity. It also involves practical steps such as:

- **Recruitment and Outreach:** Partnering with vocational rehabilitation agencies, disability-focused job boards, and community organizations to reach talented candidates with disabilities.
- **Accessible Hiring Practices:** Ensuring application systems, interviews and assessments are accessible to all.
- **Reasonable Accommodations:** Providing modifications—such as adaptive technology, flexible schedules or modified duties—that enable employees with disabilities to perform their jobs effectively.
- **Training and Education:** Offering disability awareness and inclusion training for managers and staff to build understanding and reduce stigma.
- **Career Development:** Creating mentorship, leadership and professional growth opportunities for employees with disabilities.

These actions not only help employers comply with federal disability employment laws but also enhance organizational culture and performance.

Celebrating Success Stories

Countless workplaces have seen transformative impacts from embracing disability inclusion.

In South Carolina, a manufacturing company partnered with a local disability services agency to employ workers with

intellectual and developmental disabilities on its assembly line. The employees quickly became some of the company’s most reliable and productive team members. Their success prompted the company to expand its hiring initiative and adapt training programs for broader accessibility.

In California, a tech firm launched a neurodiversity hiring program aimed at recruiting individuals on the autism spectrum for roles in software testing and data analysis. The program not only improved quality assurance outcomes but also inspired new problem-solving approaches across teams.

These stories illustrate a powerful truth: When people with disabilities are given the opportunity to contribute, they elevate workplaces in ways that benefit everyone.

A Shared Responsibility

While employers play a central role in fostering inclusion, building a disability-inclusive workforce is a shared responsibility that involves policymakers, educators, community organizations and individuals.

Schools and colleges can expand pathways to employment through accessible career counseling, internships and vocational training programs for students with disabilities. Workforce development agencies can prioritize inclusive apprenticeships and job placement support. Community organizations can connect job seekers with resources and advocate for accessibility improvements.

Individuals can also champion inclusion in their own spheres—by challenging stereotypes, supporting disability-owned businesses or mentoring young people with disabilities as they pursue career goals.

“National Disability Employment Awareness Month reminds us that inclusion is not just a workplace issue—it’s a community issue,” said Williams of ODEP. “Each of us has a role to play in ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to opportunity.”

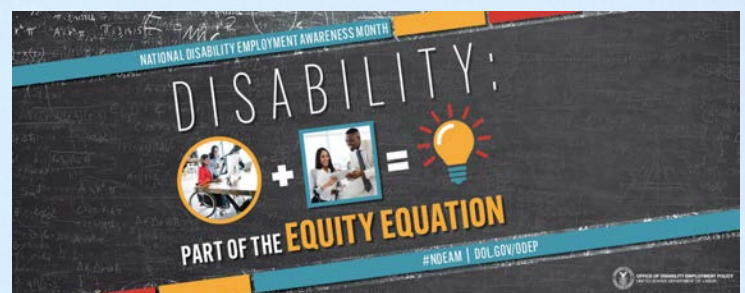
Looking Forward

As the nation observes National Disability Employment Awareness Month, it is important to recognize the progress made—and the work still to be done. Disability inclusion is not a one-time initiative but an ongoing commitment to equity, accessibility and opportunity.

That commitment benefits not only individuals with disabilities but also workplaces and communities as a whole. Inclusive workforces are more innovative, resilient and reflective of the diverse world they serve.

“People with disabilities are talented, driven and creative,” said Martinez of Disability:IN. “When they are included, businesses unlock an incredible source of ingenuity. That’s something to celebrate—not just in October, but every day.”

National Disability Employment Awareness Month serves as both a celebration and a call to action: to recognize the contributions of workers with disabilities and to ensure that all people have the chance to bring their full talents to the workplace. When every voice is heard and every ability valued, America’s workplaces—and its future—grow stronger.



NURTURING SAFETY: HOW SCHOOLS CAN FOSTER SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

By Ronette Genwright



Latonya Yates

Latonya Yates, an educator, author, proud mother and grandmother, has built her journey on a deep commitment to nurturing young minds. With a BBA in accounting from Francis Marion University and dual master's degrees in instructional technology and educational leadership from Coastal Carolina University, she has spent her

career creating environments where children feel safe, seen and supported.

Today, as principal of Savannah Grove Elementary School, she leads with empathy and vigilance — especially when it comes to bullying prevention.

Bullying is more than conflict — it is a repeated, intentional act of aggression rooted in a power imbalance. Whether physical, verbal, social or digital, it leaves lasting emotional scars. Yates has found that students who are being bullied often withdraw. They become quiet, reserved and hesitant to speak up. They may isolate themselves during lunch or group activities, choosing solitude over social interaction. These subtle behaviors are red flags that demand attention.

Being present is key. Yates makes it a priority to greet students in the car line and hallways each morning. These moments allow her to spot those who may be struggling before the day begins. Throughout the school, trusted adults are stationed at key checkpoints to ensure safety and connection.

When bullying is reported — whether by the victim or a witness — adults act swiftly. Students are invited to speak privately with Yates or the school counselor, and a supportive adult is assigned to follow up daily in the cafeteria, classroom or playground.

Respect is not just taught — it is practiced. Each morning, students recite the Gator Chant, a daily affirmation of pride and respect. Teachers use accountable talk scripts to guide respectful disagreement and foster inclusive dialogue. Every child is reminded that their voice matters and that laughter at someone's expense will not be tolerated.

The district equips faculty and staff with Vector training focused on bullying prevention. Staff members hold regular team meetings to discuss subtle forms of bullying and closely watch student interactions. When incidents arise, Yates addresses them at once, speaking with students and parents to reinforce the district's zero-tolerance policy. Often, what appears to be bullying may stem from mutual conflict, which staff resolve through restorative practices.

Students are encouraged to report anything that makes them feel unsafe. They can write notes to Yates or any trusted adult. During grade-level town hall meetings, every student receives a sticky note to share concerns anonymously. Yates and the counselor read each note, find students in need and follow up with compassion and clarity. They meet with both victims and alleged bullies to reinforce expectations and offer support.

After an incident, staff members meet with each student individually to hear their perspective. If both parties feel comfortable, staff bring them together for a restorative conversation. These discussions are powerful — they foster understanding, rebuild trust and affirm that every student deserves dignity and respect. Students' willingness to engage speaks volumes about the relationships they have cultivated.

Every reported incident is documented in the school's management system, detailing the event and steps taken. When bullying is confirmed, staff issue an office discipline referral, which may trigger district-level consequences. This data helps identify high-risk areas in the school, train new staff and refine prevention strategies.

Staff spotlight students who show empathy and compassion during morning announcements, awarding ClassDojo points and Kiwanis Terrific Kid certificates. These recognitions feed into the monthly Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports celebrations. While they are not perfect, they strive every day to build a school culture rooted in kindness, safety and support.

At Savannah Grove Elementary, they believe every child deserves to feel safe, valued and empowered. Through vigilance, compassion and community, they are shaping a generation that stands up, speaks out and lifts each other higher.



October is

National Bullying Prevention Month

Together we can create a world without bullying

HOW TO FIND RESILIENCE AND JOY AS A FAMILY CAREGIVER



(BPT) — Nearly one in four American adults is a family caregiver, according to a study from the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP. One-third of those caregivers are also members of the “sandwich generation,” caring for an adult and a child under 18 at the same time.

Family caregivers help with daily activities, transportation, advocating during medical appointments, companionship and much more. For those caring for a parent with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, the challenges can be especially demanding — yet deeply rewarding.

A recent National Day of Joy survey by Talker Research, on behalf of Comfort Keepers — a leading provider of in-home care for adults — found that nearly three in four caregivers (74 percent) say the role is one of the most rewarding of their lives. Nearly all (91percent) say caregiving deepens their bond with the senior in their care.

“Caregiving for an older loved one is a role most of us will play, and the connection you make with your loved one can be incredibly meaningful,” said Sherri Snelling, gerontologist and Comfort Keepers spokesperson. “The key is to remember to care for yourself and focus on the joyful moments.”

To help provide care for your loved one with compassion and

resilience, keep these strategies in mind.

You Don’t Have to Go It Alone

For caregivers who want to ensure everything is done right, it’s easy to fall into the trap of doing everything yourself.

“I didn’t trust other people to give my father care or understand him like I did,” said Joni. “But that led to exhaustion, so I couldn’t be my best when we were together.”

Building a care team can help you provide consistent support. This team may include family members, neighbors, friends, community groups and other resources. Ask your loved one’s health care provider about services in your area.

Comfort Keepers also offers nationwide caregiving support. Its caregivers use an interactive caregiving approach that involves seniors in daily tasks and activities while providing trusted respite care when you need it.

Self-Care Isn’t Selfish

While your loved one relies on you, it’s crucial to take care of yourself. Prioritize your own well-being — get restorative sleep, eat well, take a short walk or simply do something you love.

“When I stopped doing things that made me happy so I could care for my mom, I got easily irritated by little annoyances that might not have bothered me before,” said Bryan. “After I resumed my hobbies just once a week, I felt more positive. I needed to fill my cup so I could have the physical and mental strength to give to her.”

Self-care looks different for everyone. Ask yourself what you need to bring your best self to caregiving, especially if you’re part

of the sandwich generation with kids at home. A Comfort Keepers caregiver can give you peace of mind and the time you need to recharge. Find Moments of Joy and Gratitude As you spend time caring for your loved one, notice the moments when you laugh together, share a special memory or simply enjoy a sunny day.

“Some days feel ordinary, then something breaks through: My dad tells a story I’ve never heard before or smiles when the family’s cat hops on his lap,” said Saudia. “Those are the moments I’ll remember.”

Caregiving involves a commitment rooted in love and belonging — a fundamental part of being human.

“Many caregivers call caregiving a blessing,” Snelling said. “When people care for aging loved ones, they also get something back — deep emotional rewards, personal growth and joy.”

Caring for Loved Ones With Dementia or Alzheimer’s

Comfort Keepers understands the challenges of helping a senior with Alzheimer’s or dementia live safely at home. Families who choose Comfort Keepers can access:

- Specially trained caregivers
- Family education to better understand dementia
- Care plans with tasks tailored to each senior’s interests to engage them physically, mentally and emotionally
- In-home services including personal care, companionship, medication reminders and respite care
- SafetyChoice® in-home safety technologies such as medical alert systems and motion detectors

Learn more about caring for your loved one at ComfortKeepers.com.



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MORE THAN JUST CARE: WHY FAMILIES CHOOSE OPEN HANDS NURSING AGENCY

When it comes to the care of your loved ones, nothing is more important than ensuring they receive the best possible support tailored to their individual needs. Open Hands Nursing Agency stands out as a leading provider of in-home care services, committed to making a positive difference in the lives of those we serve. Our mission is rooted in compassion, personalization, and the belief that every individual deserves to maintain their dignity, independence, and quality of life in the comfort of their own home. If you're considering in-home care for yourself or a family member, here are several reasons why Open Hands Nursing Agency is the perfect choice.

A MODERN OFFICE FOR ENHANCED CARE

With our recent move to a new, office, Open Hands Nursing Agency is better equipped than ever to provide top-notch care. This upgrade allows us to offer even more resources and support, ensuring our clients have access to the best services available. The new space reflects our ongoing commitment to innovation and growth, allowing us to continue meeting the needs of our clients with the highest level of care.

COMPASSIONATE CARE WITH A PERSONAL TOUCH

At the heart of Open Hands Nursing Agency is our deep commitment to compassionate care. Founded by James Holmes, whose passion for helping people and serving the community drives our mission, we take pride in offering more than just assistance with daily tasks. We provide emotional support and companionship, fostering genuine connections that make a meaningful impact on the lives of our clients.



QUANTEICHIA GREEN

Agency Director

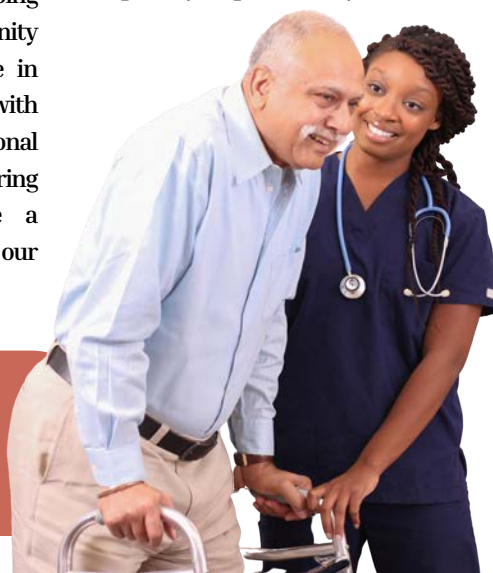


TAMEIKA DURHAM

Administrator Coordinator

CONTACT US FOR CARE

Our caregivers are more than just service providers—they become trusted companions, helping clients maintain their independence and dignity. From medication reminders to personal hygiene support and mobility assistance, if you're ready to provide your loved ones with the compassionate, personalized care they deserve, don't hesitate to reach out to us. Contact Open Hands Nursing Agency today to learn more about how we can support you and your family. Visit us at 2147 Suite B Hoffmeyer Rd, Florence, SC 29501, give us a call at 843-944-0019, or explore our services online at www.openhandsnursing.com. We're here to help every step of the way!



JAMES HOLMES

CEO & Founder

HEART OF CARE: MARIE PAUL'S MISSION TO EMPOWER SENIORS

By Les Echols



Marie Paul

HARTSVILLE—Marie Paul believes caregiving is not just about tasks—it's about compassion, connection and respect. She lives that belief every day as owner and general manager of Seniors Helping Seniors Pee Dee, an organization built on a simple but powerful idea: seniors helping other seniors. Under her leadership, caregivers do more than provide support. They become companions and friends, helping seniors

live independently while giving families peace of mind that their loved ones are treated with dignity.

Paul has lived in the United States for 28 years, beginning in Florida, where her mother still resides. She later moved to Indiana before settling in the Carolinas. Ten years ago, a visit to friends became a turning point when she fell in love with the area and decided to make it home. Her career spans more than two decades in hospital mid-revenue cycle management. Along the way, she earned a bachelor's degree in health information management from Florida International University and a master's in business administration from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Starting her first job at 16 instilled a strong work ethic that guides her to this day.

Founded in 1998, Seniors Helping Seniors offers a unique approach to senior care. Rather than focusing on what older adults can no longer do, the program highlights what they can contribute: their skills, experience, compassion and time. It builds relationships that benefit both the senior providing care and the one receiving it.

Paul often points to her mother as her inspiration. At 70, her mother still works the same job she has held for more than two decades. "She taught me that just because someone reaches a certain age doesn't mean they should step aside," Paul said. "At Seniors Helping Seniors, we give seniors the opportunity to continue contributing in meaningful ways while helping others remain independent."

The program's peer-to-peer model sets it apart. Caregivers are seniors themselves, which creates a bond that goes beyond traditional caregiving. "Our caregivers give compassionate care, peace of mind to families and relief to family caregivers,"

Paul said. "They are the heart of what we do. Their dedication determines our success."

Caregivers extend lives, ease family stress and enable seniors to remain in their homes surrounded by comfort and familiarity. Paul recalls a recent example that illustrates this commitment. A client living alone had fallen and could not get up. Even though it was late at night, caregivers rushed to her side. They ensured she received medical attention, stayed with her through the night and continued caring for her until she was safely discharged from the hospital. Her family, who lives out of state, never had to worry because she was never alone.

"That's the kind of care we believe in," Paul said. "It's about making sure our clients feel supported, and their families feel secure."

Paul also sees many families unprepared for the realities of senior care. She often hears that families assume home care services are automatically covered, without understanding the difference between home health services, which are medical and prescribed by a doctor, and nonmedical home care, which is just as important for maintaining independence.

Many families have never explored long-term care insurance or confuse it with life insurance. Without preparation, they can face unexpected challenges when caregiving becomes necessary. "Too often," Paul said, "families realize the value of a professional home care agency only after struggling to hire a caregiver on their own." Seniors Helping Seniors not only provides trusted care but also educates families so they can make informed decisions for their loved ones.

Seniors Helping Seniors Pee Dee serves clients in Darlington, Florence, Marlboro, Chesterfield and parts of Kershaw Counties. For Paul, it is more than a business—it is a mission to strengthen communities, support families and ensure seniors are respected and cared for.

"At the end of the day, it's about relationships," Paul said. "For us, it's not just providing a service—it's being a friend helping a friend."

Seniors Helping Seniors can be reached at 843-942-0200 or online at shspeedee.com.



IN THEIR HANDS, WE HEAL

By Ronette Genwright



Tanya M. Hodge

LATTA—Tanya M. Hodge's life is a testament to resilience, service and the transformative power of caregiving. Born and raised in Philadelphia, PA, Hodge later relocated to South Carolina, and in 2021, founded the first home health agency in Latta, SC, Seven Day In-Home Care Agency LLC. The agency serves veterans and Medicaid-qualified individuals, reflecting Hodge's deep commitment to vulnerable populations.

Her personal life is rich with family and legacy. She is the mother of two sons, DaJuan and DaJón Hodge, who live in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her four grandchildren—Mariah, Hayden, Santana and Ava Roux—bring joy and purpose to her days. Hodge's family also includes her siblings, Vanessa R. Russell and Van T. Hodge II, and her father, Van T. Hodge Sr., of Mullins, South Carolina. Her mother, Gwendolyn, has passed, but her memory continues to inspire Hodge's work and values.

Hodge's academic journey is equally impressive. She earned a bachelor's degree in business administration with a minor in sociology, followed by dual master's degrees in human resources and management leadership. She is currently three classes away from completing a third master's in rehabilitation counseling, demonstrating a lifelong dedication to education and professional growth.

Caregiving, as Hodge defines it, is a multifaceted role demanding emotional strength, practical skill and unwavering patience. Caregivers assist individuals who cannot fully care for themselves because of age, illness or disability. Responsibilities range from personal care, medical support and emotional companionship to household management, safety supervision and advocacy. Hodge emphasizes that caregivers must stay organized and communicative while protecting their own well-being to avoid burnout.

Professional caregivers differ from family caregivers in training, compensation and scope of responsibility. While family members often provide round-the-clock support out of love or necessity, professionals work within structured care

IN THEIR HANDS CONT'D

plans and operate under legal and ethical standards. Hodge's agency employs a variety of professionals, including personal care aides, home health aides, certified nursing assistants and licensed nurses, each with distinct roles and certifications.

Training for professional caregivers is rigorous. In South Carolina, certified nursing assistants must complete 100 to 110 hours of classroom and clinical instruction. Annual training requirements cover topics such as infection control, elder abuse, HIPAA compliance and emergency response. Many agencies also require additional certifications, including CPR and dementia care, ensuring caregivers are prepared for complex situations.

The impact of caregiving on caregivers themselves can be profound. Physically, it may cause chronic fatigue or health issues; emotionally, it can lead to burnout, depression or isolation. Financially, many face out-of-pocket costs or reduced income from cutting work hours. Hodge advocates for support systems, self-care routines and financial planning to help caregivers sustain their roles without sacrificing their own health.

Effective caregiving also involves coordination with health care professionals and community services. Hodge encourages caregivers to maintain detailed records, communicate clearly with medical teams and use technology such as care apps and telehealth platforms. Ethical caregiving, she says, requires respect for autonomy, beneficence and substituted judgment, especially when caring for individuals who lack decision-making capacity.

Challenges such as grief, guilt and inadequate training are common among caregivers. Hodge recommends strategies including joining support groups, seeking professional counseling and continuing education. She reminds caregivers that they cannot pour from an empty cup and that prioritizing their own health is essential to providing quality care.

Tanya M. Hodge's story is not just one of professional success. It is a story of heart, perseverance and the belief that caregiving is both a calling and a craft. Her journey inspires others to see caregiving not as a burden, but as a profound opportunity to serve, connect and uplift.

THE HEART OF A CAREGIVER By Glaciera Brown Mason



Sara Cooper

One of the many challenges of long-term care is the increased demand of an aging population. "Who will care for our loved ones," is among the top questions pondered. As we observe National Caregiving Month this November, we sought insight into the role of a caregiver and put a face to the professionals who indiscriminately provide the service of caring for others every day. Whether in a health care

facility, or in-home care, caregivers play an important role in supporting families.

To care for others takes a special kind of human, who at a minimum, possesses compassion, patience and reliability. The AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving report an estimated 63 million caregivers in the U.S. provide care to families. In addition to the minimum skills required, communication, time management, empathy, respect of client and adaptability all rank high on the list, to ensure safety and well-being. Caregiving can be emotionally and physically challenging. It includes assisting with necessary basic personal tasks like bathing, dressing, transportation to

and from medical appointments or support to accomplish the activities of daily living (ADL).

One such caregiver in our community is Sara Cooper, a Florence County resident who became a caregiver post-retirement. After retiring in 2011, Cooper worked for other caregiving services and independently. She served as a nurse's aide at Florence General Hospital, now, MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, for seven years and, "loved it." Today, she is employed by Divinity Care, LLC in Florence, SC, a home care service provider, owned by Natasha Page, RN, which allows seniors to remain in their homes while receiving medical care and assistance. She serves as office manager/caregiver where she performs internal managerial duties to include taking applications, administering drug tests to caregiving applicants, managing worker schedules and communicating with clients, families and staff. With 21 years of experience in health care, when needed in the field, Cooper is qualified, able, willing and happy to fill in. Of the work, Cooper says, "In caregiving, you do whatever is needed to assist the client; taking care of their ADLS (activities of daily living skills), be it bathing the client or assisting with preparing meals, doing light housekeeping, taking them to appointments, whatever is needed."

Born in Andrews, SC, Cooper's parents moved to Florence in 1971. She attended Carver High School, formerly Lake City Colored Elementary and High School, in Lake City, SC. Cooper experienced historic school integration in her last year. Determined to persevere, Cooper married, raised her son, had a career and after which, began college when she was 49 years of age. She attended FDTC every summer and continued her educational pursuit, earning a bachelor's degree in 1999 from Francis Marion University, proving it's never too late.

To work in caregiving, also requires a strong faith. Cooper is a devoted member of the Pentecostal United Apostolic Church of Christ where she draws strength, and her faith sustains her. When asked if she enjoys her work, Cooper responded, "Yes, I love people, and I love helping and meeting new people." Admittedly, she says, "the work is sometimes hard." With long hours and the emotional commitment of the work, managing self-care is important. Cooper maintains her work/life balance by being intentional about self-care. She says, "Sometimes you have to take a step back. You have to take a break from work and chill, play a little, go to the beach, on a trip. Do some relaxing things, read a book, pray, go to church and sometimes you have to do nothing."

Diversity Works salutes local and national caregivers for their amazing commitment and we thank you for your service of caring for others.



NATIONAL FAMILY CAREGIVER APPRECIATION MONTH

Thank you for all you do!

AMERICANS SPEND NEARLY FOUR HOURS A DAY THINKING ABOUT MONEY



(BPT) — Money is on the mind: Americans are spending nearly four hours a day thinking about money, according to new research from Empower, a financial services company. That's the equivalent of a part-time job, but nearly half (45 percent) say it motivates them to take action to reach their long-term goals.

Time spent thinking about money by generation

- Gen Z: 4.82 hours a day
- Millennials: 4.73 hours a day
- Gen X: 3.74 hours a day
- Boomers: 2.4 hours a day

More than half (54 percent) say they're thinking about money more often than they did last year.

What are people thinking about? For most, it's quality-of-life considerations: bills (57 percent), inflation and rising prices (51 percent), housing costs (34 percent), debt (30 percent), tariffs (28 percent) and retirement savings (24 percent).

In fact, a majority (55 percent) of Americans say they think about their retirement weekly, or daily (27 percent). One in four (22 percent) high-income earners have retirement on their minds multiple times a day.

Checking in — and in

People are not just thinking about finances — they're checking in, and in. Nearly one-fifth of the population (17 percent) checks their financial accounts, including credit cards and investments, multiple times per day, and a quarter (24 percent) checks their bank account daily. Keeping a close eye is more common among younger adults: 24 percent of Gen Z and 21 percent of millennials monitor accounts several times a day, compared to just 10 percent of boomers.

In an era of 24/7 economic headlines, it's no surprise that money is dominating daily thoughts. But here's the silver lining: We're seeing a real shift from passive worry to proactive behavior. People are motivated. They're looking for tools, information and advice to turn that energy into progress.

The time-of-day matters, too. Gen Z is most likely to think about money in the late afternoon, between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., while millennials and Gen X report an uptick in financial thoughts between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m., when the day slows down.

When money keeps Americans up at night

Over a third of Americans (36 percent) say they lose sleep over financial worries, and for millennials, that number jumps to 44 percent. Boomers report sleeping better: Just 24 percent say money keeps them up at night.

Even during the day, 38 percent say money-related thoughts interfere with their ability to focus, and close to two in five say it strains relationships with friends and family (38 percent). In fact, over half (53 percent) say

they're feeling financial stress more acutely than ever (62 percent Gen X, 41 percent baby boomers).

But there's a flip side: Motivation

One-third (33 percent) are thinking about how to grow their money, and how to achieve long-term security (30 percent). Some 35 percent say they actively work to improve their financial situation when these thoughts arise, with millennials among the most proactive (40 percent).

These actions are paying off. One in five (20 percent) respondents report significantly improving their credit score. Another 20 percent have paid off meaningful debt, created a successful budget (19 percent) or spending plan (19 percent).

Seeking information and advice

With money top of mind, Americans are searching for insights they can trust. About one in five people seek out financial news multiple times a week, and nearly half say trusted financial information helps them make smarter decisions (41 percent). High-income earners report they seek out financial news and insights at least once per day (31 percent). A third of respondents say talking with a financial adviser helps clarify their thinking around money and financial goals (33 percent).

Notably, younger adults are leading the way in financial curiosity. Millennials, in particular, value financial education — 52 percent say they place high importance on financial insights and news (46 percent overall). More than half say they follow financial news to stay informed. Inflation and cost of living (49 percent) are the top topics people are researching, followed closely by budgeting (35 percent), saving (35 percent) and broader economic forecasts (27 percent).

What would help ease the pressure?

When asked what would reduce their financial stress, nearly half said a higher income (47 percent) would ease their worries, while 45 percent pointed to lower living expenses. Broader economic improvements (29 percent), debt elimination (28 percent) and a larger emergency fund (24 percent) were also top responses. Notably, almost one in five (18 percent) said a detailed financial plan would go a long way toward helping them feel better about their finances (25 percent Gen Z, 23 percent millennials).

To keep up with rising costs and financial anxiety, Americans are cutting back: 53 percent have reduced dining out; 46 percent are buying fewer nonessentials; 40 percent are scaling back entertainment; 39 percent are postponing travel or vacations; 33 percent are canceling subscription services; and 29 percent are passing on social activities with friends.

Nearly one in four adjust their spending habits every month due to financial concerns, and 17 percent recalibrate weekly.

Money mindset: Focus on the future

Americans can't stop thinking about their finances, but for many, it's because they are dreaming of a bright future. Nearly half of Americans (47 percent) say they feel confident they will reach their financial goals.

Methodology

Empower's "Money on the Mind" study is based on online survey responses from 2,206 Americans ages 18 and older, fielded by a third-party panel provider from June 10-12, 2025. The survey is weighted to be nationally representative of U.S. adults.



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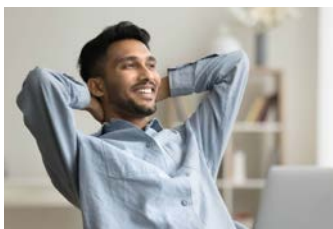
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Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



On a scale of one to screaming at the top of your lungs, how stressed are you right now? In today's fast-paced world, stress is a constant companion. Demanding jobs, family obligations and the pressures of modern life take a toll on our mental and physical health.

Sometimes it's all we can do to drag ourselves to bed at the end of the day. Sometimes we even find ourselves stressing about the amount of stress we're feeling.

The good news: relaxation doesn't have to mean a weekend getaway or spa retreat. You can practice quick, effective stress-relief techniques wherever you are.

1. Deep breathing

One of the fastest ways to calm your body and mind is deep breathing. Try the four-seven-eight method: inhale through your nose for four seconds, hold for seven, then exhale slowly through your mouth for eight. This activates your body's relaxation response, lowers your heart rate and shifts your focus away from stress.

2. Mindfulness meditation

Many people have the wrong idea about meditation. Meditation doesn't require hours in silence. Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, anytime. Take a few minutes to notice your breath, your surroundings or how your body feels in the moment. Even short sessions can help center your mind.

3. Progressive muscle relaxation

Stress often shows up as tension. Progressive muscle relaxation helps release it by tensing and then relaxing muscle groups one at a time. Start by clenching your fists for a few seconds, then

release. Move through your shoulders, neck and legs for a full body reset.

4. Visualization

When stress builds, take a quick mental escape. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a calming place — a beach, forest or meadow. Visualization can transport your mind from a hectic setting to a peaceful one in seconds.

5. Mini mindfulness breaks

Instead of scrolling your phone during breaks, slow down and savor the moment. Notice the warmth, taste and aroma of your coffee. Pay attention to your surroundings on a short walk. These tiny moments of presence can create pockets of calm throughout the day.

6. Laughter Yoga

Laughter truly is good medicine. Laughter yoga combines breathing with playful, intentional laughter — even if it feels forced at first. Often, it turns genuine, releasing endorphins and melting stress. Try it solo or with others for an instant lift.

Stress relief doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming. No one is immune to feeling overwhelmed, but weaving these simple practices into your routine can make a big difference. Your mind and body will thank you.

We're Here to Help

At Palmetto First, we're here to answer your questions and guide you as you build financial confidence. With the right mindset and tools, you've got everything it takes to win the real-world money game. Your credit union has your back every step of the way, contact us today.

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ESTATE PLANNING FOR BUSINESS OWNERS



All business owners can benefit from some level of estate planning. Building protection into your business plan is one of the most important decisions you can make to safeguard your partners, your employees and your family. Here, we will discuss the four key components of estate planning to help make sure you are well set up for success.

The most fundamental estate planning tool is a will. A properly executed will, gives clear direction to your executor about how to manage or distribute your assets when you pass away.

Then, a somewhat more complex component of an estate plan is a revocable trust—this is a legal entity created to hold your assets while

you're alive. Among the many benefits is that your appointed trustee can take over management of your assets if you're incapacitated. A revocable trust streamlines the transfer of your assets by helping avoid potentially lengthy legal proceedings and costly court fees. A trust may also provide creditor protection for the beneficiaries.

Next are powers of attorney. Naming a healthcare power of attorney means your representative can make crucial medical decisions on your behalf should you be unable to, while a financial power of attorney can pay your bills and manage your finances until you get back on your feet.

Finally, a buy-sell agreement is a powerful estate planning tool. A buy-sell agreement is a way to help ensure a smooth transition of your business and ensure your family's financial goals are met after you're no longer around to take care of them. A buy-sell is often funded with life insurance and can also outline the terms of succession among the remaining partners, so that all terms are agreed upon in advance.

Some basic estate planning may be done using self-guided online tools, but typically you should use a licensed and

experienced attorney to help you draft and execute documents for your estate plan. The best way to go about it is to make sure that your attorney, financial advisor, and insurance agent are working together to help you manage and plan for your business and personal estate.

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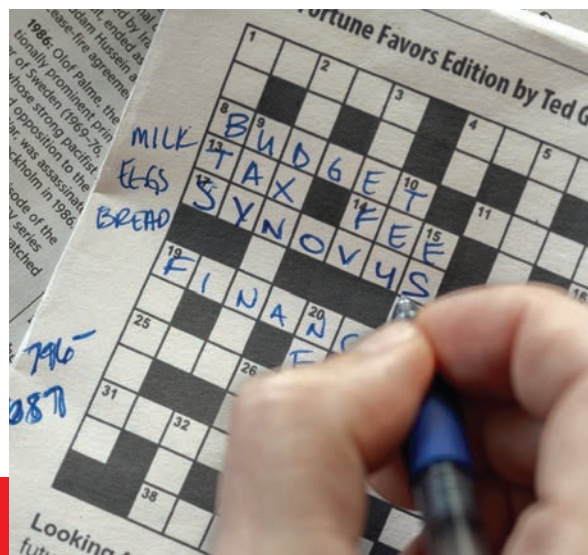
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ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK ANNOUNCES NEW PROMOTIONS

Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant

MULLINS – Anderson Brothers Bank is pleased to announce the promotions of Rebecca Cooper, Brooke Squires, Samantha Strickland, Constance Jackson and Jaclyn Bost.



Rebecca Cooper

Rebecca Cooper has been promoted to loan officer at the Aynor branch, located at 617 Eighth Ave., Aynor, SC 29511.

Cooper has built a strong career in banking, bringing more than eight years of industry experience. For the past two years, she has been a dedicated member of the Anderson Brothers Bank team, recognized for her commitment to customer service and active involvement in the

community.

In her new role as loan officer, Cooper will be responsible for assisting customers with a wide range of lending needs. She will work closely with individuals and businesses to provide personalized financial solutions, guide customers through the loan process, help them achieve their financial goals, continue to build strong relationships within the Aynor community and ensure that Anderson Brothers Bank remains a trusted partner for both current and future customers.

A North Myrtle Beach High School graduate, Cooper is currently a participant in Leadership Conway, Class 33, and will graduate in November 2025. She also began her studies at the South Carolina Bankers School this year, successfully completing her first year of the three-year program.

“Rebecca’s strong commitment to her customers and her

community truly highlights her as an outstanding fit for this position,” said Jason Hucks, branch manager of Anderson Brothers Bank in Aynor. “We are excited to see her transition into this new chapter of her career, and we are confident that she will continue to make valuable contributions to her community and our organization.”

Cooper is passionate about building relationships and helping others achieve their financial goals. She looks forward to continuing to serve the Aynor community and providing trusted guidance to customers.



Brooke Squires

Brooke Squires has been promoted to branch operations coordinator at the Aynor branch, located at 617 Eighth Ave., Aynor, SC.

Squires has established a successful career in the banking industry over the past nine years. During her time at Anderson Brothers Bank, she has actively participated in the bank’s book clubs, where she continues to enhance her knowledge and strengthen her banking skills. Known

for her dedication, professionalism and customer-first approach, Squires is well-equipped to excel in her new role.

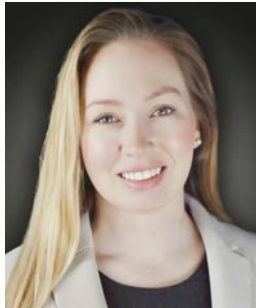
As the branch operations coordinator, Squires will oversee the daily operations of the Aynor branch, support team development and ensure that customers receive the highest level of service. Her commitment to teamwork makes her a valuable leader for both her colleagues and customers.

A graduate of Aynor High School, Squires is also the proud

ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK CONT'D

mother of two children who inspire her every day.

"Anderson Brothers Bank is excited to celebrate Brooke's promotion," said Hucks. "Her strong work ethic, leadership skills, personality and customer-first approach will have a positive impact in her new role. We are proud to see her continue to grow with the ABB family."



Samantha Strickland

Samantha Strickland has been promoted to digital marketing and reporting coordinator within the marketing department located at 144 N. Main St., Mullins, SC 29574.

In this new role, Strickland will oversee the bank's website, ensuring accessibility and optimizing SEO performance. She will also manage marketing expense reporting and provide analysis to support key strategic decisions.

Strickland began her career with Anderson Brothers Bank in January 2022. She joined the marketing department later in 2022 as marketing coordinator, and her dedication and commitment to her own professional growth are reflected in this newest promotion.

A graduate of Lake View High School, Strickland studied accounting at Florence-Darlington Technical College. She also holds professional certifications in Google Analytics and electronic spreadsheet fundamentals.

"Samantha has gone above and beyond, showing true dedication and a willingness to put in the extra time and effort to learn," said Susan Grant, VP CFMP marketing director. "She doesn't just step into new responsibilities — she takes them to the next level. Her hard-working commitment has brought real value to our team and the experiences we've created. This promotion to digital marketing and reporting coordinator is a well-deserved recognition of her impact."



Constance Jackson

Constance Jackson has been promoted to assistant branch manager at the Loris Main Street Branch, located at 4230 E. Main Street, P.O. Box 187, Loris, SC 29569.

In this new role, Jackson will support the branch team in achieving goals, maintain operational excellence and continue fostering a welcoming, customer-focused environment. She officially stepped into the position on September 1, 2025.

Jackson is a graduate of Green Sea Floyds High and holds professional certifications as an ABA Universal Banker, ABA Residential Mortgage Lender and TRID Certified Lender. Since joining Anderson Brothers Bank in August 2010, she has advanced through positions in collections, consumer lending and mortgage lending. Her career growth reflects her dedication, professionalism and commitment to serving customers and the community.

Outside of work, Jackson has been happily married for 16 years and is the proud mother of two sons: Hunter, who serves in the U.S. Army and James Wyatt.

Her supervisor, Carolyn Allred, branch manager, shared: "I want to congratulate Constance on her well-deserved promotion. Her hard work, dedication and leadership have made her an invaluable part of our branch. I have every confidence in her continued success and in the positive impact she will have on our team."



Jaclyn Bost

Jaclyn Bost's promotion to loan officer in our Conway Church Street office. Bost has been with Anderson Brothers Bank since 2023 and has shown a strong commitment to customer service and community outreach. She has assisted both individuals and businesses in achieving their financial goals. In her new role, she will continue to provide personalized lending solutions and build trusted relationships throughout

the Conway community.

Bost is a native of Charlotte, NC, with over seven years of banking experience and over 10 years of leading a sales team through customer service and coaching as a retail sales manager prior to banking. She is currently a participant in the 2025 Class of Leadership Conway and currently serves on the board of directors for the Conway Chamber of Commerce. Additionally, she enjoys participating in volunteer work with several organizations in Horry County and Horry County Schools, and loves that ABB fosters a culture and environment that allows her to do so.

"Since joining ABB in 2023, Jackie has consistently put our core values on display through her customer-first approach and community involvement. I look forward to seeing the value Jackie will add to her teammates, our customers, and the communities we serve as she continues to grow," stated Bradley Moore, branch manager.

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](https://www.abbank.com).

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HOME EQUITY LOANS



(BPT) – If you have large or unexpected expenses, you may have access to an untapped resource: your home. Depending on your equity and how you use it, borrowing against your home can help you reach financial goals.

What is a home equity loan?

A home equity loan is money borrowed using your home as collateral. Your home's equity is how much of its value you actually own, excluding your mortgage balance. These loans often have lower interest rates than other loans, making them useful for consolidating high-interest debt or funding large home projects. Online calculators can help estimate your equity and loan payments.

Types of home equity loans

Fixed-rate equity loan: You receive a lump sum and repay it monthly at a fixed rate. These loans are often used for home improvements, debt consolidation, large purchases, or life events.

Home equity line of credit (HELOC): This is a revolving line of credit secured by your home. Borrow only what you need up to a set limit, and repay the funds borrowed. HELOCs are often used for home improvements, emergencies, medical expenses, or debt consolidation.

The best use of these loans is for projects that increase your home's value, as this continues building equity. There may also be tax benefits for home improvements—consult a tax professional.

When not to use home equity

Because your home is collateral, it's important to stay on track with repayments. Experts advise against using home equity for:

- A car purchase: Auto loans are usually simpler and comparable in interest, with fewer fees.
- Vacations or consumer goods: These don't offer financial return.
- College: Consider federal loans,

scholarships, grants, or private student loans first. Home equity might make sense if mortgage rates are much lower than student loan rates, but you lose access to income-driven repayment and forgiveness programs.

- Starting a business: Business loans or SBA programs are safer. A failed business could put your home at risk.
- Recurring expenses: Using home equity for everyday bills is risky. Missed payments can lead to foreclosure.

Make a smart plan

Home equity can be a valuable financial resource. Plan ahead, understand repayment responsibilities and borrow strategically to make the most of a home equity loan or HELOC.

For more information and to explore your options, talk with a financial institution today.



EARLY ALZHEIMER'S DETECTION: A COMMUNITY'S IMPACT



(BPT) — Sponsored by Eisai Inc. and Biogen. Patient information is accurate as of March 2025

After decades spent supporting his community, Rev. Dan Gartland had a newfound appreciation for the tight-knit circle he cultivated as they stepped up to support him when he needed them most. An associate pastor and teacher, Gartland often shared his knowledge, wisdom, guidance and support with his parishioners — not knowing just how crucial they would become when he began experiencing subtle changes in his memory. In fact, they noticed the changes long before he was aware and voiced their concerns when it mattered most.

Gartland was becoming forgetful: accidentally setting off the church alarm by opening the wrong door, unable to answer questions he'd easily addressed in the past. Instead, he would simply say, "I don't have an answer to that." Gartland also started noticing he was feeling "fuzzy" and wasn't sleeping well.

After observing these changes in Gartland, his congregation became increasingly worried for his well-being and spoke with Gartland's friend and colleague, who then reached out to his family about their concerns. Together, they decided that he should see a neurologist.

Gartland shared his symptoms with his neurologist, who recommended he undergo testing. The testing included a series of cognitive exams and a cerebrospinal fluid test, which ultimately confirmed Gartland's diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) due to Alzheimer's disease (AD) — he was just 67 years old.

What to look for

Common symptoms of MCI, or early AD, include:

- Forgetting names or information you just learned.
- Confusion, such as asking the same question repeatedly.
- Struggling to find the right word.

- Difficulty concentrating and keeping track of bills.

Aging can bring some memory loss, but with AD, the symptoms tend to worsen over time. It's recommended to talk to your doctor if you have any concerns, as it's crucial to get an early diagnosis. Some treatment options for AD are available only during its early stages.

Learning to face the future

Being diagnosed with early AD wasn't a shock for Gartland, who knew something was wrong, but it was devastating. Gartland soon learned that he would be able to continue counseling and teaching his students, for which he was grateful. The community he helped lead, which thrived on care and support for one another, was there for him in return — offering rides to his medical appointments, helping sort his medications and providing emotional support such as positive encouragement around his role as a beloved teacher.

Because AD is a progressive disease, Gartland recognized the importance of beginning treatment early. He learned about treatment options to slow the progression of AD for certain people who are diagnosed early, and his neurologist prescribed LEQEMBI (lecanemab-irmb, 100 mg/mL, injection for intravenous use). Although it is not possible to stop AD from getting worse, Gartland could take steps to slow how fast it progresses.

A treatment option for early stages of AD

LEQEMBI is a prescription medicine used to treat people with early AD, which includes MCI or mild dementia due to the disease. LEQEMBI is a U.S. FDA-approved anti-amyloid AD treatment given by an intravenous (IV) infusion shown to slow disease progression and cognitive and functional decline over 18 months compared with a placebo in adults with early AD.

LEQEMBI fights AD in two ways: rapidly clearing amyloid-beta plaque and continuously clearing highly toxic proteins, known as protofibrils, that continue to harm and kill brain neurons

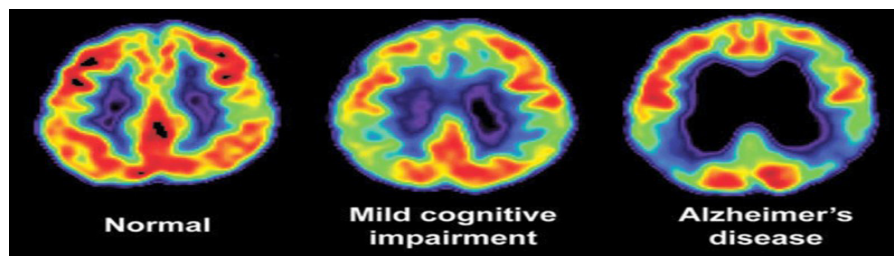
even after the amyloid-beta plaque has been cleared from the brain. Ongoing treatment can slow AD progression and prolong the benefit of therapy, with the goal of helping people like Gartland maintain who they are for longer.

The FDA also approved an IV maintenance dosing regimen of LEQEMBI that allows patients who have completed 18 months of a once-every-two-weeks IV initiation phase of therapy to transition to the maintenance dosing regimen of 10 mg/kg once every four weeks. The monthly IV dosing regimen was developed to offer patients and care partners an option to continue treatment for early AD that may be easier than dosing once every two weeks.

LEQEMBI can cause serious side effects, including amyloid-related imaging abnormalities (ARIA), serious allergic reactions and infusion-related reactions. ARIA is a side effect that does not usually cause any symptoms, but serious symptoms can occur. ARIA can be fatal. Some people may have small spots of bleeding in or on the surface of the brain; sometimes larger areas of bleeding have occurred. Patients who may be eligible for treatment with LEQEMBI should ask their doctor about testing for a genetic risk factor that may cause an increased risk for ARIA. It is important they also tell their doctor about all the medicines they take, including medications to reduce blood clots from forming such as antithrombotic medicines like aspirin. Some medicines can increase the risk for larger areas of bleeding in the brain. Most common side effects include infusion-related reactions, ARIA and headaches. These are not all the possible side effects of LEQEMBI. Please see full safety information below.

Moving forward

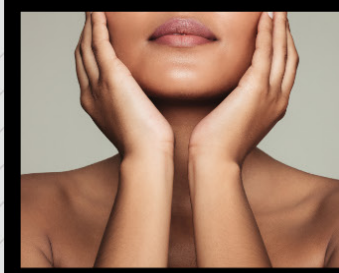
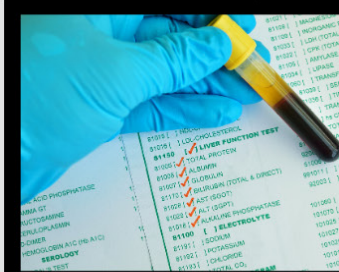
While adjusting to his new routine, Gartland has relied on his faith, his family and his community. His advice? "As soon as you find out, do something, because it's not going to go away," he said. "I relish each day I can continue my calling, and I know acting quickly played a large role in treating my AD."





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RAISING AWARENESS, INSPIRING ACTION



(DWM)-Every November, communities across the country unite to observe National Diabetes Awareness Month, a time dedicated to shining a light on one of the most prevalent and challenging chronic health conditions. Diabetes affects

more than 38 million Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and an estimated 97 million U.S. adults have prediabetes — a condition that often leads to type 2 diabetes if left unmanaged.

This annual observance is more than a health campaign. It is a powerful reminder that education, early detection and lifestyle changes can prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes and improve the quality of life for people living with all forms of the disease.

Understanding Diabetes

Diabetes occurs when the body either does not make enough insulin or cannot use the insulin it produces effectively. Insulin is a hormone that regulates blood sugar, which fuels our cells. Without proper regulation, high blood sugar can damage organs and systems throughout the body.

There are several types of diabetes. Type 1 is an autoimmune condition usually diagnosed in childhood or young adulthood. It requires lifelong insulin therapy. Type 2, the most common form, is often linked to lifestyle factors such as physical inactivity, excess weight and poor nutrition, though genetics also play a significant role. Gestational diabetes can develop during pregnancy and increase the risk of developing type 2 later in life.

Recognizing the Signs

Early detection is crucial. Warning signs can include frequent

urination, increased thirst, extreme fatigue, unexplained weight loss, blurred vision and slow-healing wounds. However, type 2 diabetes can develop gradually, and many people have no symptoms. This is why regular screenings and routine checkups are so important, especially for individuals with risk factors such as family history, being over age 45 or living with obesity.

The Power of Prevention

The good news is that type 2 diabetes can often be prevented or delayed through lifestyle changes. The CDC's National Diabetes Prevention Program shows that losing just five to seven percent of body weight and engaging in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week can significantly reduce risk. Eating a balanced diet rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and healthy fats also helps maintain blood sugar levels.

For those already diagnosed, managing diabetes requires a comprehensive approach that includes monitoring blood sugar, taking medications as prescribed, staying physically active and making healthy food choices. Support from health care providers, diabetes educators and community groups can make these changes more achievable.

A Call to Action

National Diabetes Awareness Month is a time to share stories, offer encouragement and advocate for better access to diabetes care and resources. It is also a moment to reach out to loved ones who may be at risk, encouraging them to get screened and make small but meaningful changes to their daily habits.

Raising awareness is not only about statistics — it is about people. Every conversation sparked, every screening completed, and every healthy choice made brings us one step closer to reducing the burden of diabetes in our communities. This November let's honor the spirit of the month by empowering ourselves and others to take charge of our health.



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LIFE-CHANGING BARIATRIC SURGERY HELPS FLORENCE MAN RECLAIM HIS FUTURE

Submitted by John Russell, marketing manager/media relations, MUSC Health Florence/Marion/Black River Medical Centers



Barry Flowers, staying active playing golf

Since childhood, Florence County resident Barry Flowers has struggled with his weight. Over the years, he lost hundreds of pounds—but could never keep the weight off.

At 55, Flowers decided it was time to make a lasting change—not just for himself, but so he could keep working at the company he loves and continue providing for his family.

“I’ve lost over 100 pounds several times, and it’s just always the yo-yo effect. It’s almost impossible to consistently live on a strict diet,” Flowers said. “I realized that if I didn’t lose the weight, I wasn’t going to be able to work in the next 10 years at 400 pounds at 65 years old. So I knew if I didn’t do something, I’d lose the ability to feed my family.”

That’s when Flowers decided to take his life back—and determined that weight-loss surgery was his best option. He turned to general bariatric and foregut surgeon Dr. Aftab Jafri at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, who performed a robotic-assisted sleeve gastrectomy.

The procedure removes about 60 percent to 80 percent of the stomach, creating a long sleeve shape. By reducing the size of the stomach, patients eat less because the smaller stomach cannot hold as much food, Jafri explained.

“It was clear to me that he was genuinely committed to making a meaningful change in his life,” Jafri said. “He wasn’t just focused on physical appearance but his future. He was looking forward to staying active, spending quality time with his family and embracing a healthy lifestyle. I believe his decision to receive the robotic sleeve gastrectomy was entirely driven by a desire to be healthier and keep doing the things he loves.”

Flowers said he had no complications after the surgery and

everything went smoothly. Since his procedure last November, he has gone from 370 pounds to 275 pounds. Now he eats about half as much as he used to and can once again do the things he loves—all while staying committed to a healthier lifestyle.

“I play golf two or three times a week. I was not able to do that before I had the surgery,” Flowers said. “I was outside last weekend chasing one of my grand youngins, and we raced back to the house. I used to not even be able to jog through the living room.”

For Jafri, patients like Flowers are the reason he became a bariatric surgeon. Seeing patients live their lives to the fullest is the most rewarding part of his job, he said, and he credits the invaluable support of his physician assistant, Taylor Schram, and bariatric coordinator, Rilla Hemmingsen.

“The reason I became a surgeon was because I wanted to make a change in people’s lives,” Jafri said. “Patients like Barry—and bariatric surgery in general—give me the opportunity to really make a change and improve someone’s future. This is why I do this. If they enjoy a happy lifestyle, that is the biggest achievement for me.”

Now, Flowers is able to live the life he always wanted, thanks to the bariatric services at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center.

“Without this kind of care close to home, I would have never gotten a procedure like this done,” he said.

For those ready to make a change, Flowers said weight-loss surgery can be a life-changing option.

“If you’re looking to really change your life and you’re ready to go down that road—while putting in the work to maintain the weight loss—then I would definitely suggest this for you,” he said.

For more information about the Bariatrics Program at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, visit muschealth.org/locations/florence-medical-center/services/florence-bariatric or call 843-674-5891.



Barry pictured with his wife

ADVANCED HEART CARE REACHES RURAL SOUTH CAROLINA

Submitted By Kristin Merkel



For the last decade, Pamplico, South Carolina, resident Ricky Poston struggled with atrial fibrillation (A-fib), a heart condition in which the heart's upper chambers beat irregularly and often rapidly, causing abnormal blood flow and an increased risk of stroke. But in January, things took a turn when a case of the flu made his A-fib worse.

“When I got the flu, it just went crazy, and from there, my A-fib got worse. That led me to get an ablation,” said Poston.

Poston was referred to cardiac electrophysiologist Parinita Anil Dherange, M.D., at MUSC Health Cardiology-Florence Medical Pavilion, where she and her team performed the hospital’s first pulsed field ablation (PFA) procedure on him.

PFA is a novel, non-thermal ablation technique used to treat atrial fibrillation. Unlike traditional radiofrequency or cryoablation, which use heat or extreme cold to destroy problematic cardiac tissue, PFA uses short high-voltage electrical pulses to target and disrupt heart cells that are causing the arrhythmia. The key advantage is its tissue selectivity: It affects cardiac cells without damaging surrounding structures like the esophagus or phrenic nerve, improving safety and potentially reducing complications.

“This case was a significant milestone for MUSC Health Florence Medical Center as it marked the introduction of next-generation ablation technology to our electrophysiology program. It demonstrates our commitment to providing state-of-the-art cardiac care locally, reducing the need for patients to travel for advanced procedures,” said Dherange.

After the successful procedure, Poston began recovery, which he said has been going really well.

“My strength is returning,” he said. “I’m still gaining it back week by week, but I

can tell a difference.”

Since Poston’s ablation, PFA has become MUSC Health Florence Medical Center’s go-to procedure for most atrial fibrillation cases, due to its safety and effectiveness. Dherange believes it supports MUSC’s mission to extend high-quality care to all corners of South Carolina, especially in underserved or rural communities. “By bringing leading-edge technologies like PFA to Florence, MUSC is strengthening its commitment to health equity, regional access and clinical excellence in this region of the state,” she said.

With his health back on track, Poston is once again working alongside his son at the business he owns – Rick’s Excavating Services. He emphasized the difference the ablation procedure made to his daily life on the job.

“My son was pretty much taking the business over since I had been sick with the flu. I just wasn’t able to do the chores that I needed to do,” said Poston. “Now, since the ablation surgery, I have really improved on that. I can finally start getting back to work with my son.”

HOPEHEALTH HOSTS THE HEALTHY HUDDLE WITH LANORRIS SELLERS

Submitted by HopeHealth



Healthy Huddle- Back to School with LaNorris Sellers

FLORENCE — On July 19, 2025, HopeHealth hosted The Healthy Huddle: Back to School with LaNorris Sellers in the Meditation Garden on the HopeHealth Medical Plaza campus. The event allowed HopeHealth pediatric patients and their families to interact with Sellers and prepare for the school year.

Attendees participated in a dynamic exercise routine led by Deon Edwards, director of sports performance at Francis Marion University. They also enjoyed games, healthy snacks and back-to-school supply giveaways, as well as autographs and photos with Sellers.

The event provided an opportunity for Sellers to highlight the importance of healthy habits and their impact on and off the field. "Eating nutritious food and exercising both directly affect your performance. Sleep is another super important thing," he said.

HopeHealth pediatrician Michael K. Foxworth II, MD, FAAP, was also in attendance, leading participants in a mindfulness exercise. Foxworth was Sellers' pediatric provider, making his involvement especially meaningful.

"Dr. Foxworth was my provider until I was 18, and the same goes for my two younger brothers. I've known him for a while and still talk to him. My new provider at HopeHealth is Dr. Hoyle, and I have a good relationship with him as well," Sellers said.

The event was part of a collaboration between Sellers and HopeHealth. On the importance of this partnership, he said, "I've been coming to HopeHealth since I was five or six years old. They have always welcomed me in, and I still have good relationships with many people who work here. It means a lot."

When asked what advice he would give the kids at the event who were heading back to school, Sellers said, "Don't get behind on work! Start early."

HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

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



Julissa Frias, LPC

Julissa Frias, LPC, is a behavioral health consultant at HopeHealth at Francis Marion. Her clinical interests are helping clients improve emotional safety, emotional regulation and relational intimacy. She specializes in treating anxiety and trauma-related disorders with a focus on posttraumatic growth, resilience and empowerment.



Eugene Jones Jr., PharmD

Eugene Jones Jr., PharmD, provides clinical pharmacy services to patients at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. His clinical interests are infectious disease, heart failure and diabetes. He is a member of the American Pharmacists Association and the Rho Chi Pharmacy Honor Society. From Marion, South Carolina, Jones serves as a deacon at Reedy Creek Baptist Church.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit leader in providing affordable, expert health care and infectious diseases services for all ages in Aiken, Florence, Clarendon, Orangeburg and Williamsburg Counties. Our federally qualified health centers are the primary care providers of choice for nearly 60,000 patients. To become a patient, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.



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HOPEHEALTH HOSTED FAMILY NIGHT WITH LANORRIS SELLERS Submitted by HopeHealth



Brinner Event - pictured HopeHealth CEO Carl Humphries, legendary Gamecocks women's basketball coach Dawn Staley and University of South Carolina (USC) quarterback LaNorris Sellers

DARLINGTON— On June 5, 2025, HopeHealth hosted Family Night & Brinner at Cornerstone Baptist Church, a community event focused on family, leadership and giving back. The evening featured University of South Carolina quarterback LaNorris Sellers, legendary Gamecocks women's basketball coach Dawn Staley, and USC wide receiver Jayden Sellers.

The event began with a private VIP hour for sponsors, including photo opportunities with all three special guests. Attendees then enjoyed a "brinner" (breakfast for dinner) followed by two Q&A panels moderated by HopeHealth CEO Carl Humphries.

The first panel featured Sellers and Staley, who shared stories and insights on leadership, communication and discovering one's authentic voice.

"I like for our players to be not only great communicators, but also to get to know their authentic selves," Staley said. "When you're able to know who you are, your communication speaks to that. I hope they all find their voice, find who they are, and stay true to who they are."

LaNorris reflected on his family's influence, especially his father's guidance as a coach and role model:

"I learned a lot about the football aspect from my dad... He just told me to be myself. At the end of the day, that's the most important thing."

The second panel brought together brothers LaNorris and Jayden Sellers, who spoke about sportsmanship, sibling dynamics and staying grounded through their shared journey. Humphries highlighted the Sellers family's commitment to the community:

"LaNorris and his family, from the very beginning, said, 'What can I do to help you?' Tonight, what you're experiencing is an opportunity for us to raise money for our patients in need. I just want to say thank you."

LaNorris, a longtime HopeHealth patient said, "I've been here all my life, and people did stuff for me, so I just always like to give back."

He also recognized his HopeHealth providers, Dr. Joseph

Hoyle and Dr. Michael K. Foxworth II, underscoring his connection to the organization.

The program highlighted HopeHealth's ongoing partnership with the Sellers family and Staley. In August 2024, Staley's nonprofit INNERSOLE worked with HopeHealth and Williamsburg Pharmacy to provide more than 100 students in Williamsburg County with new athletic shoes. INNERSOLE aims to combat the effects of poverty on children and boost self-esteem.

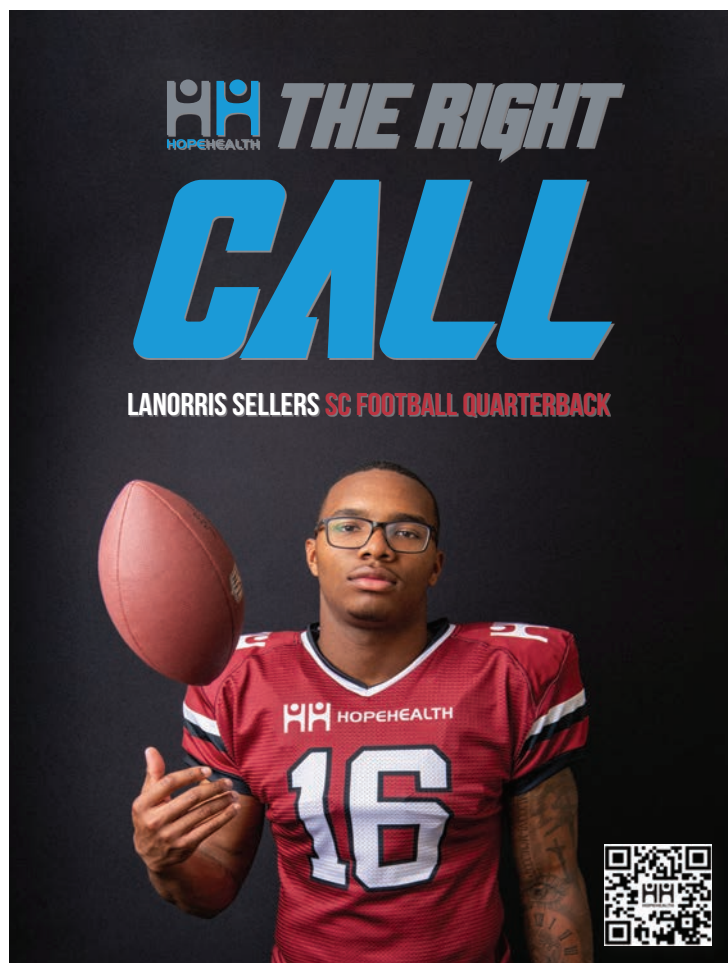
"We give new sneakers—the latest ones—to homeless children and children in need... It's all to help them be better students and better people," Staley said.

Guests also received a copy of Staley's new book, "Uncommon Favor: Basketball, North Philly, My Mother, and the Life Lessons I Learned from All Three."

The evening concluded with a meet-and-greet with LaNorris and Jayden Sellers. Proceeds from the event supported unmet patient needs, including preventive health screenings, emergency assistance and other services.

Family Night & Brinner was made possible in part by presenting sponsor MUSC Pee Dee Division. Additional sponsors included McLeod Health, Chronic Care Staffing, Jennifer McKay, Jebaily Law Firm, King & Love Attorneys at Law, Clarke & Company – A HUB International Company, the Humphries/Yeates Family and Carrington Wingard.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit leader in providing affordable primary and specialty health care for all ages in Florence, Aiken (Infectious Diseases), Clarendon, Orangeburg and Williamsburg counties. It's federally qualified health centers serve nearly 85,000 patients. To become a patient, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.



YOU BROUGHT LIFESAVING CARE CLOSER TO HOME Submitted by McLeod Health Foundation



Taron Dixon, RN and Caitlin Cox, RN prepare William Culver for a dialysis treatment at McLeod Health Cheraw.

Nearly 786,000 Americans live with end-stage kidney disease, and for patients in rural communities like Dillon and Cheraw, this often meant leaving everything familiar behind. Families faced an impossible choice: travel long distances for lifesaving dialysis treatment or go without care close to home.

Donors like you have helped change that.

Before your support, patients in these communities endured exhausting three-hour round trips to Florence for each treatment. Some delayed care rather than make the difficult

journey. Others relocated entirely, leaving behind jobs, family connections and the communities they loved.

Your generosity supported the funding of portable dialysis equipment that brings this critical care directly to local hospitals.

The new machines transform rural health care. Small enough to move where patients need them most, they require only basic utilities that any hospital can provide. Whether treating someone in the Intensive Care Unit or providing scheduled dialysis sessions, the equipment delivers the same lifesaving care patients would receive in larger medical centers.

"In-house dialysis' is essential for critically ill patients, providing timely, monitored dialysis therapy in a hospital setting," says Kasey Bustamante, chief nursing officer at McLeod Health Dillon. "It reduces complications and improves patient outcomes."

Your support means patients can now receive treatment minutes from home instead of hours away. They stay connected to family, maintain their routines, and avoid the physical and financial strain of constant travel. Local businesses keep valued employees, and communities stay strong.

For rural families who once faced the heartbreak of choosing between health and home, donors like you provide something invaluable: excellent medical care without having to leave the people and places they cherish.

Your generosity proves that quality health care should never depend on your zip code.

MCLEOD HEALTH FOUNDATION AWARDED DUKE ENDOWMENT GRANTS Submitted by McLeod Health

McLeod Health

The Choice for Medical Excellence

The McLeod Health Foundation has received two grants totaling \$1,145,000 from The Duke Endowment to expand the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program and support staffing costs for the new Pediatric Behavioral Health Crisis Stabilization Unit.

The first grant of \$565,000 will expand the SANE program to McLeod Health's rural hospitals. Emergency department staff will be trained to conduct forensic medical examinations, with remote support from McLeod SANE nurses using high-quality equipment. This will ensure evidence collection meets the same standards as in-person exams at McLeod Regional Medical Center and McLeod Health Carolina Forest. The initiative is the first of its kind in the Carolinas and one of only a few nationwide.

The second grant of \$580,000 will help cover staffing costs for the Pediatric Behavioral Health Crisis Stabilization Unit at McLeod Children's Hospital during its first two years. The unit follows the EmpATH model—Emergency Psychiatric Assessment, Treatment and Healing—

which emphasizes stabilization and rapid improvement. With a calming environment, open design and low staff-to-patient ratios, the pediatric unit is among the few of its kind in South Carolina.

"We are grateful for The Duke Endowment's trust and continued support of our initiatives at McLeod Health," said Elizabeth Jones, executive director of the McLeod Health Foundation. "This grant funding will allow our teams to care for patients at the most vulnerable moments in their lives."

"The Duke Endowment is proud to partner with the McLeod Health Foundation to support these two initiatives," said Lin Hollowell, director of health care at The Duke Endowment. "Ensuring access to timely and appropriate care is critical to reducing disparities and improving outcomes for the people McLeod Health serves across the Carolinas."

The McLeod Health Foundation supports McLeod Health's mission to

improve the health and well-being of people in South Carolina and eastern North Carolina by providing excellence in health care.

About The Duke Endowment

Based in Charlotte and established in 1924 by industrialist and philanthropist James B. Duke, The Duke Endowment is a private foundation that strengthens communities in North Carolina and South Carolina by nurturing children, promoting health, educating minds and enriching spirits. Since its founding, it has distributed more than \$5 billion in grants. The endowment shares a name with Duke University and Duke Energy but operates independently.

About McLeod Health Foundation

Founded in 1986, the McLeod Health Foundation is an independent, nonprofit charitable organization dedicated to generating community support for McLeod Health. With more than \$100 million raised, the foundation has funded programs such as McLeod Children's Hospital, The Guest House at McLeod, McLeod Hospice, the McLeod Center for Cancer Treatment and Research, McLeod Heart and Vascular Institute and McLeod Diabetes Services. Governed by a voluntary board of trustees, the foundation ensures 100 percent of every gift goes directly to the designated area of care.

ONE SCREENING.

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Early detection of lung cancer can be life-saving. Many patients show no symptoms in the initial stages, often going years undiagnosed. The McLeod Health Lung Cancer Screening Program focuses on high-risk individuals with a history of smoking, using Low-Dose CT scans to identify cancer sooner. This early intervention greatly increases survival chances, preserving precious time with loved ones.



SCREENING CRITERIA:

Any individual between the ages of 50 to 80 who:

- Has a smoking history of at least 1 pack a day for 20 years or 2 packs a day for 10 years
- Still smokes or has this history but stopped smoking in the last 15 years
- Does not currently exhibit any symptoms of lung cancer

Medicare and most private insurance companies cover the cost of the Low-Dose CT scan if you meet the criteria for a lung cancer screening.

**FOR INFORMATION ON
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McLeod Health
www.McLeodHealthyLungs.org



HARTSVILLE— CareSouth Carolina has earned three top honors from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

These recognitions include the National Quality Leader Gold Badge, the

National Quality Leader Heart Health Badge and the Advancing Health Information Technology (HIT) for Quality Badge — a trio of distinctions that place CareSouth Carolina among the nation's top-performing health centers.

"CareSouth Carolina is extremely proud to have been recognized by HRSA with a Gold Health Center Quality Leader Badge, a National Quality Leader in Heart Health Badge and the Advancing IT for Quality Badge," the organization said. "These badges recognize the continued hard work from our clinical staff, offering the highest quality health care in our service areas. Patients who see us for their health care can be assured that CareSouth is working to improve the lives of the people in the Pee Dee area. CareSouth Carolina is very proud of these recognitions."

National Quality Leader — Gold Badge

The Gold Badge is the highest tier available under the Health Center Quality Leader (HCQL) awards. This recognition is reserved for health centers that rank in the top 10 percent nationally for clinical quality measure (CQM) performance, based on the Uniform Data System (UDS) data.

To achieve this level of excellence, CareSouth Carolina had to report outstanding performance across numerous clinical metrics. HRSA calculates average adjusted quartile

rankings (AQRs) to determine eligibility, and Gold status is only awarded to organizations in the top tier.

Heart Health Badge

The Heart Health Badge specifically recognizes exceptional performance in cardiovascular care. To qualify, health centers must meet or exceed at least three of four key targets aligned with the Million Hearts initiative:

- Tobacco use screening and cessation intervention: ≥80 percent
- Ischemic vascular disease — aspirin or antiplatelet use: ≥80 percent
- Statin therapy for cardiovascular disease: ≥80 percent
- Controlling high blood pressure: ≥80 percent

CareSouth Carolina not only met but exceeded the requirements in this category, showcasing its effectiveness in both prevention and management of heart disease across its patient population.

Advancing Health Information Technology (HIT) for Quality Badge

In an era where digital access to health care is more critical than ever, CareSouth Carolina earned the Advancing HIT for Quality Badge by demonstrating leadership in the use of technology to support patient care.

This badge honors health centers that:

- Provide telehealth services
- Exchange clinical data with providers electronically
- Engage patients through health IT platforms
- Collect and utilize data on social determinants of health

CareSouth Carolina continues to expand its use of health technology tools to ensure its communities receive connected, informed and accessible care.

Convenient Locations:

Bennettsville Center 999 Cheraw Street Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.479.2341	Dillon Center 1016 Old Latta Highway Dillon, SC 29536 843.774.4337
Bennettsville Pediatric Center 210 W. Main Street Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.479.1200	Hartsville Center 1268 S. Fourth Street Hartsville, SC 29550 843.332.3422 843.339.5520 Chiropractic
Bennettsville Women's Center 1076 Marlboro Way Rd., Suite 1 Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.454.2294	Lake View Center 103 N. Kemper Street Lake View, SC 29563 843.759.2189
Bishopville Center 545 Sumter Highway Bishopville, SC 29010 803.484.5317	Latta Center 122 Latimer Street Latta, SC 29565 843.627.6252
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Cheraw Center 812 State Road Cheraw, SC 29520 843.537.0961 843.921.6711 Foot Care	Society Hill Center 737 S. Main Street Society Hill, SC 29593 843.378.4501
Chesterfield Center 204 Perry Wiley Way Chesterfield, SC 29709 843.623.5080	

Pharmacy Locations:

HARTSVILLE 1280 S. Fourth Street 843.339.5530	BISHOPVILLE 545 Sumter Hwy 803.588.7960	BENNETTSVILLE 999 Cheraw Street 843.456.7777
SOCIETY HILL 737 S. Main Street 843.378.4148	CHERAW 812 State Road 843.865.4080	DILLON 1016 Old Latta Highway 842.627.7154
LATTA 122 Latimer Street 843.627.6261	CHESTERFIELD 204 Perry Wiley Way 843.927.1030	MCCOLL 3080 Highway 15-401 E 843.523.6212

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AMERICAN DIABETES MONTH: DIABETES SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Submitted by Padigar S. Tantry, MD, Office of Communications and Marketing



Padigar S. Tantry, MD

About 34 million adults in the U.S. have diabetes. That's 11.6 percent of the total population. According to the American Diabetes Association, of the 34 million adults with diabetes, 8.7 million are undiagnosed. Diabetes can lead to serious health problems over time if left untreated. It is essential to notice warning signs early to decrease your risk of complications from uncontrolled diabetes.

Diabetes mainly comes in two forms: type 1 and type 2. Each has its own indicators and features.

Type 1 diabetes occurs when your immune system attacks the beta cells in your pancreas that produce insulin. With little or no insulin in the body, blood glucose levels may become elevated (hyperglycemia). This disrupts the normal physiological balance and can cause diabetes-related complications if not detected early. Type 1 diabetes usually occurs in children and young adults, but it is possible to develop it at any age. The onset of symptoms can be sudden, escalating from mild to severe within weeks.

Some common signs of high blood sugar levels present in both type 1 and type 2 diabetes include excessive urination and thirst, weight loss, fatigue, numbness in the hands and feet, and blurry vision. It is crucial to inform your health care provider if you have any of these symptoms so you can get tested and started on treatment right away.

People with type 2 diabetes produce insulin but become insulin-resistant over time. This is usually due to a combination of poor diet, sedentary lifestyle and genetic factors. Many people with type 2 diabetes have mild symptoms that go unnoticed for a long time. As a result, these individuals may not notice their symptoms until their blood sugar levels are very high. Because of this, it is critical to be screened for diabetes if you have lifestyle indicators or a genetic predisposition.

Additionally, about one in three Americans has prediabetes, blood sugar levels that are higher than normal but not yet high enough to be classified as type 2 diabetes. According to the CDC, more than 80 percent of people with prediabetes are unaware they have it. Prediabetes, if left untreated, can lead to diabetes and increase the risk of stroke and heart disease.

Prediabetes often doesn't have symptoms. However, some possible signs may include skin tags, darkened skin on parts of the body such as the armpits or neck, and similar symptoms to diabetes.

Prediabetes can be reversed by adopting a healthier lifestyle and losing weight to return your blood sugar levels to a normal range.

If you are overweight, lead a sedentary lifestyle, are experiencing any of the aforementioned symptoms, and/or have a parent or sibling with diabetes, you should contact your health care provider. Your provider can run blood tests to help determine if you have diabetes or prediabetes and begin implementing treatment for blood sugar control.

HopeHealth provides diabetes education, prevention and treatment resources through The Diabetes Institute. To learn more, visit our website or call (843) 432-3717.

Dr. Tantry serves endocrinology patients at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. He earned a doctorate from Tbilisi State Medical University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He completed an internal medicine residency at the USF Morsani College of Medicine/HCA West Florida Consortium in Brandon, Florida, and an endocrinology fellowship at the USF Morsani College of Medicine in Tampa, Florida. Board-certified in internal medicine and endocrinology, Dr. Tantry speaks English, Hindi, Oriya and Kannada.

COPD AWARENESS MONTH: STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND MANAGE COPD

Submitted by Amanda Cieluch, AGNP



Amanda Cieluch, AGNP

COPD, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, is a serious lung condition affecting more than 15 million Americans—many of whom may not know they have it. In people with COPD, the airways, or tubes carrying air in and out of the lungs, are partially blocked, making breathing difficult.

The two common types of COPD are emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Emphysema damages the air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs, making it harder to absorb oxygen and causing shortness of breath and fatigue. Bronchitis is inflammation of the bronchial tubes, producing a wet cough, mucus, shortness of breath and fatigue. Symptoms recurring over two years or more may develop into chronic bronchitis and COPD.

COPD is the sixth-leading cause of death in the U.S. and raises the risk of heart disease and cancer. It is usually diagnosed after age 40. Research shows more women live with and die from COPD than men. While cases among men are decreasing, women's cases have increased, likely due to greater lung susceptibility to smoking-related damage.

Symptoms of COPD develop slowly and vary by person. They include shortness of breath and fatigue during activities such as walking or climbing stairs, frequent coughing (often called a "smoker's cough"), wheezing, trouble taking deep breaths and excess mucus. If you notice these symptoms, consult your health care provider.

Smoking is the leading risk factor for COPD. One in four people with COPD have never smoked. Other risks include secondhand smoke, workplace exposure to chemicals, dust, fumes, gases and vapors, childhood respiratory infections, asthma and a genetic condition called alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency.

Prevention and treatment are key. If you smoke, quitting is essential. While past damage cannot be reversed, stopping smoking can prevent further harm. Talk to your provider about quitting strategies. Adults 50 and older with a 20-year smoking history should have an annual CT lung screening. Limit exposure to secondhand smoke and workplace pollutants and use protective equipment when necessary.

Early diagnosis allows treatment to improve and control symptoms, slow disease progression, and manage flare-ups. COPD can be diagnosed in-office with spirometry or pulmonary function testing. Treatments include oral medications or inhalers to open airways, reduce mucus, and manage infections. Oxygen therapy may be added as needed.

To manage shortness of breath, try two simple techniques: tripod position breathing and pursed-lip breathing.

Tripod position: Sit or stand with arms slightly bent, hands braced on knees, a table, or a pillow. Lean forward at a 45-degree angle with a straight back and take slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm.

Pursed-lip breathing: Close your mouth and inhale slowly through the nose. Exhale through pursed lips, as if blowing through a straw.

Regular physical activity improves oxygen intake, strength and endurance. Ask your provider about exercise or pulmonary rehab, which teaches safe exercise and provides peer support. Managing stress and getting adequate sleep also supports overall health.

Good nutrition supports energy and health. Include lean meat, poultry, seafood, whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Eat smaller, more frequent meals to avoid feeling overly full. Limit sugar, sweet

COPD AWARENESS MONTH CONT'D

drinks and highly processed foods to reduce shortness of breath.

Many people with COPD are sensitive to allergens and irritants. Wear an N-95 mask during cleaning or have someone else do it. Avoid fumes from bleach, strong cleaners or sprays in unventilated areas. Use mild solutions like baking soda, vinegar or soap and water. Choose unscented soaps, lotions, and hygiene products. Use HEPA filters in air systems and vacuums and reduce humidity with air conditioners, dehumidifiers and fans.

Dust mites can trigger symptoms. Replace carpets with hard floors, wash bedding and rugs regularly, and vacuum often. Groom pets and keep them out of bedrooms. Watch for mold in kitchens and bathrooms, and limit outdoor exposure during pollen season.

Monitor your symptoms daily and contact your provider if they worsen. Increased coughing, fatigue, fever above 100.5°F, trouble breathing, greater oxygen or medication needs or increased mucus production all warrant a call.

Seek emergency care for difficulty breathing at rest, confusion, unusual sleepiness, medication not relieving symptoms or bluish lips, fingers or toes.

Discuss your care plan with family, including daily management, when to call a provider and when to seek emergency help. COPD is manageable with a plan to minimize symptoms, maintain health and know when to ask for help.

Amanda Cieluch is an adult geriatric nurse practitioner at HopeHealth Medical Plaza and is accepting new patients. Visit hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.

UNDERSTANDING ADHD IN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Submitted by Amanda Burnette, MD



Amanda Burnette, MD

Learn more about the challenges of ADHD in children and adults and how treatment can improve performance at school, work and home.

ADHD is one of the most misunderstood disorders today. Along with other behavioral health conditions, its symptoms are often mistaken for character flaws, when in reality they reflect a neurodevelopmental disorder. ADHD causes dysregulation in multiple areas, affecting performance in school, work and relationships. Despite being criticized as misbehaving, disorganized or lazy, people with ADHD constantly navigate challenges created by their brain chemistry in a neurotypical world.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is marked by a persistent pattern of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with daily life. It affects an estimated three to four percent of the population. ADHD stems from a dopamine deficiency, a neurotransmitter crucial for motivation, attention, mood, movement, learning and emotions. This deficiency drives dopamine-seeking behaviors that can disrupt daily life. While children and adults share ADHD symptoms, adults often “mask” their disorder despite ongoing difficulties.

ADHD in Children

ADHD is usually diagnosed in childhood, though some are not identified until adulthood. Symptoms typically appear before age 12 and are classified as predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive or combined.

Children with predominantly inattentive ADHD may struggle to pay attention, follow instructions and organize tasks. They

are often forgetful, easily distracted and prone to losing things. According to Medical News Today, children with inattentive ADHD account for only 25 percent of kids receiving treatment at mental health centers. They may be overlooked because their behavior is less disruptive than children with hyperactive-impulsive ADHD. Children with predominantly hyperactive-impulsive ADHD may have difficulty sitting still, waiting their turn and controlling impulses. They may talk excessively, interrupt others and take risks. Motor coordination issues increase their likelihood of accidents and injuries.

Children with combined ADHD show symptoms of both inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity.

ADHD often becomes evident through school-related challenges, where children must sit, concentrate, follow instructions and take turns.

Forty to 60 percent of children with ADHD continue to have symptoms into adulthood. ADHD can share traits with depression and anxiety, such as poor concentration and restlessness, making diagnosis complex.

ADHD in Adults

Many adults with ADHD were not diagnosed in childhood. Symptoms can include difficulty managing time, organizing tasks, completing work, focusing, remembering appointments, regulating emotions and maintaining relationships. Adults may also face employment or financial challenges.

While hyperactivity may be less obvious, adults may fidget, shift frequently, or struggle to sit still. Impulsivity can lead to higher rates of risk-taking, traffic violations, and workplace accidents. Adults with ADHD are also more likely to have mood disorders, anxiety, or substance use disorders.

Diagnosing ADHD

ADHD is diagnosed through a comprehensive evaluation of symptoms, medical history and current functioning. A diagnosis requires persistent symptoms of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that impair functioning and are not explained by another condition.

In children, a pediatrician, family physician, psychiatrist or behavioral health professional may make the diagnosis. In adults, a primary care physician, psychiatrist or psychologist typically evaluates symptoms through interviews, rating scales and behavioral assessments. ADHD has a genetic component: children with a parent or sibling with ADHD are two to eight times more likely to have the disorder.

Treating ADHD

Treatment often combines medication and behavioral interventions. Medications increase neurotransmitters like dopamine to improve attention, impulse control and hyperactivity.

Behavioral interventions include parent training and therapy. Parent programs teach strategies for managing behavior and improving communication. Behavioral therapy helps individuals manage symptoms, organize tasks, improve time management, and reduce impulsivity.

If you suspect that you or your child may have ADHD or need help managing it, contact HopeHealth to schedule an appointment with a primary care or behavioral health provider. HopeHealth offers integrated care to improve overall quality of life, including mental well-being.

About the Author

Amanda Burnette, MD, serves patients at HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the College of Charleston and a medical degree from the Medical University of South Carolina. She completed her residency at AnMed Health Family Medicine in Anderson. She is a member of the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Family Physicians.

THE SURPRISING LINK BETWEEN EXERCISE AND LUNG HEALTH

Submitted by Deana Freeman, AGNP



Deana Freeman, AGNP

Most Americans know regular physical activity benefits the heart and circulatory system and helps prevent and manage other medical conditions. But did you know improving your fitness levels also benefits your lungs and increases lung capacity, the maximum amount of air the lungs can hold? Exercise also helps increase oxygen in the blood to boost strength and endurance.

Improving lung health through physical activity also helps those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), bronchitis, asthma and other lung conditions. Exercise decreases lung inflammation and benefits overall lung health, which can help manage respiratory symptoms and improve quality of life.

Physical activity increases the heart rate to supply the lungs with more oxygen while allowing muscles to do more work. Over time, regular exercise strengthens the lung muscles, including the diaphragm and intercostal muscles, to improve lung capacity and oxygen levels. The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle between the chest and abdomen that contracts and relaxes to allow air in and out. The intercostal muscles, between each rib, help the ribcage expand and shrink as you breathe.

Only one in four Americans meet guidelines for aerobic and strength training exercise, so if you aren't active, start by meeting with your health care provider to find out what types of exercises are safe and best for you.

Three types of exercises can help the lungs: cardiovascular or aerobic exercise, strength training and breathwork.

Regular aerobic exercise, such as walking, running, biking, swimming and dancing, increases heart rate and lung efficiency by building more blood vessels in the lungs. This improves lung capacity and function. As your lung function improves, you recover from being out of breath faster and won't get winded as quickly. The general recommendation is 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Adding strength training exercises like lifting weights, using machines or bands, doing squats and pushups helps tone the lung muscles while strengthening other muscles, improving posture and optimizing lung function. Strength training also improves balance and coordination and decreases the risk of falls. Aim to do muscle-strengthening exercises two times a week, focusing on all major muscle groups.

Using breathing exercises or "breathwork" can also benefit your lungs. Regular breathing doesn't use your lungs to their full capacity. Diaphragmatic or "belly" breathing uses the abdominal muscles to help take longer, slower and fuller breaths. Regular breathwork can strengthen your diaphragm, improve lung capacity, slow your breathing rate, and use less effort to breathe while promoting relaxation.

Individuals can learn to be more active, even with medical conditions and physical challenges. A gym membership isn't necessary. Start where you can—five to 15 minutes of activity depending on your health. If moving is difficult, start with just three to five minutes. Walking to the mailbox, around the block or finding easy walking or chair exercise videos can help you start. Add more minutes each week. Build over time to 30 minutes a session and five days a week. If that isn't realistic, do what you can. Anything is better than nothing.

Some may find sticking with a routine challenging. First, decide why you want to be active—whether it's to feel better,



keep up with kids or grandkids or build endurance. Explore what type of activity you enjoy. Motivation boosters include finding a buddy, starting a new class, keeping an exercise diary or setting up rewards. Start slow and build over time. Remember your "why" when you don't feel like exercising. Most people feel better afterward, which can increase motivation.

Increasing activity levels can also help decrease joint and back pain, build strength

and balance and improve mood and overall quality of life. Movement also boosts your immune system and decreases inflammation. Listen to your body and push more on days you feel strong and do less when energy is lower. Consistency without overdoing it is the key to reaping benefits without burning out.

Other lifestyle habits can also affect lung health. Adequate hydration helps keep the lining of your lungs moist and thin, prevents infections and makes breathing easier. A general guideline is eight to 10 glasses (64 to 80 ounces) of water daily.

Eating more whole foods, such as fruits and vegetables, and fewer processed foods also helps protect the lungs. Nitrites in processed meats, along with additives and preservatives, are linked with lung inflammation, while fruits and vegetables help reduce it.

Not using tobacco products also preserves and improves lung function. If you smoke, plan to quit. Explore resources such as the South Carolina Tobacco Quitline at quitnowsc.org.

Adding more movement and improving lifestyle habits takes time. Being realistic, not doing too much too fast and making slow, steady progress help prevent burnout and the urge to give up. Setbacks are normal. The key is to return to healthy habits as soon as you can.

Physical activity helps your body get stronger, improving lung function and overall health. If you already have a routine, congratulations and keep up the good work. If you don't, take the first step to talk to your provider and start moving more today.

Deana Freeman is an adult nurse practitioner at HopeHealth on Pine Needles Road. She treats patients ranging from adolescents to adults and into advanced age. Her passion is women's health and wellness, including chronic illness. For more information, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

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THE POWER OF BALANCE: TRAINER ALESHIA SCOTT'S PATH TO WELLNESS

By Les Echols



Aleshia Scott

When you walk into Fitness World Gyms in Florence, the atmosphere hits you before you even step onto the floor. The music is pumping, weights are clanging and voices are filled with encouragement. Yet there is something more that makes the energy unique. Much of it comes from Trainer and Sports Nutritionist Aleshia Scott, whose presence fills the room with warmth, focus and motivation. She has built a reputation not just as a fitness coach but as a mentor, educator

and source of inspiration for the community she serves.

Scott's path into health and fitness was not a straight line. Like many who devote their lives to wellness, her story began with her own transformation. "I've always believed in pushing myself," she said. "But there was a time when I didn't fully understand how to care for my body. Learning about nutrition, movement and balance changed everything for me. Now I get to share that with others."

Her ability to connect with clients comes from both experience and empathy. She knows what it feels like to struggle, to doubt yourself and to feel stuck. She also knows what it feels like to break through those barriers and discover strength you didn't realize you had. That perspective allows her to meet people where they are and help them take the next step forward.

At Fitness World, Scott works with clients of all ages and fitness levels. As a certified sports nutritionist, she emphasizes the role of food. For her, fitness is not just about the hours spent in the gym but how you fuel your body outside of it. "So many people think they need to starve themselves to get healthy," she said. "The truth is your body needs fuel. When you understand nutrition, you unlock your real potential."

Her training extends beyond individual coaching. She leads high-energy boot camps that have become favorites for many members. These classes are about more than calorie burn. They are about community. "We sweat together, we push each other and we celebrate the small victories," she said. "That group energy reminds people they're not alone on this journey."

Clients often describe her style as encouraging but firm. She pushes people past their comfort zones but does it in a way that feels supportive. She celebrates "non-scale victories" as much as the obvious ones. For some, that means better sleep. For others, it is stronger posture, more stamina or even the confidence to walk into a room with their head held high.

Her influence doesn't stop at the gym. Scott is passionate about outreach and often speaks at schools, community groups and wellness events. She believes education is the key to healthier communities. "If I can reach even one person and help them see health differently, that ripple spreads to families and neighborhoods," she said.

Balance is at the heart of her philosophy. She doesn't believe in perfection and admits she enjoys a good cheat meal. What matters most to her is consistency. "Motivation is great, but it comes and goes. Habits are what keep you going. That's what I try to teach my

clients—build the habits that carry you even on the days you don't feel motivated."

Discipline shows up in Scott's own life every day. From early morning workouts, to meal planning, to the care she gives her clients, she models the lifestyle she teaches. But so does joy. You'll find it in the way she laughs with her boot camp groups, the encouraging texts she sends to clients after tough days and the pride in her voice when someone accomplishes a goal, they once thought impossible.

For Scott, coaching is never just about fitness. She knows her clients come in carrying more than a workout plan. Some are rebuilding confidence; others are fighting stress, and many are simply trying to prove to themselves that they can do it. She understands and supports each journey, no matter how small or large the goal may seem.

Looking ahead, Scott hopes to expand her reach through online coaching, workshops and possibly her own fitness brand. But no matter how her career grows, her mission remains steady. She wants people to believe in themselves. "Fitness isn't just about the body," she said with a smile. "It's about the mind, the spirit and the way you show up in life. When you take care of your health, you show up differently for your work, your family and yourself."

That holistic view is what sets her apart. In an industry often filled with shortcuts and trends, she reminds people that real progress comes from knowledge, patience and heart.

If you step into Fitness World in Florence and feel the atmosphere shift, chances are Scott is in the room. She is not just leading workouts. She is building strength, confidence and community, one client at a time.

Scott can be reached at 843-453-8960 or by email at trainwithlellc@gmail.com. She is also on social media:

Facebook: Trainwithle

TikTok: Trainwithle

Instagram: Trainwithle



A SILENT THREAT: FELICIA ATKINSON'S SURVIVAL STORY Submitted by Hanna Caddell, marketing and communications coordinator



Felicia Atkinson and the Carolina Pines team that was involved in her care.

HARTSVILLE – Felicia Atkinson never imagined that a simple urinary tract infection (UTI) could nearly take her life. One evening, she felt unusually fatigued and was experiencing persistent back pain, symptoms she dismissed as minor. She decided to try a warm bath to ease her discomfort but afterward found herself too weak to get out. “That’s when I knew something was really off,” she recalls. With the urging of her mother, boyfriend and her son, she made the life-saving decision to go to the emergency room at Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center (CPRMC).

What Atkinson didn’t realize at the time was that she was experiencing the early stages of sepsis — a life-threatening medical condition that occurs when the body’s response to an infection becomes widespread and spirals out of control. Sepsis can lead to tissue damage, organ failure and even death if not treated promptly. Common early warning signs include fever, chills, rapid breathing, confusion, extreme fatigue and a fast heart rate. Without immediate medical intervention, sepsis can escalate rapidly — something Atkinson learned firsthand.

By the time Atkinson arrived at CPRMC, her body was already in crisis. “At first, it felt minor, but it quickly got worse and worse,” she explains. “By the time I was in the ER, I truly thought I was going to die.”

Fortunately, the emergency medical team at CPRMC recognized the symptoms of sepsis immediately — a critical factor in survival. “The ER doctor knew right away what was happening, and they intervened so fast,” Atkinson recalls. Rapid treatment can mean the difference between life and death in sepsis cases.

But Atkinson’s condition was more severe than she realized. Shortly after arriving at the ER, Atkinson’s condition quickly deteriorated, and the unthinkable happened — cardiac arrest. “Surreal to say that I took my last breath,” she recalls. Atkinson’s heart stopped and the ER team began to resuscitate her. “They spent 30 minutes resuscitating me and had to shock me three times — I’m forever grateful for them working so long on me.” Her survival was nothing short of a miracle, thanks to the swift action of CPRMC’s medical team.

Once Atkinson was stabilized, the focus shifted to managing her recovery and preventing further complications. “Sepsis affects the whole body, so we monitored her closely to

ensure she was responding to treatment and regaining strength,” says Dr. William Martin, attending hospitalist at CPRMC and a primary care provider with the affiliated Carolina Pines Medical Group Primary Care. “It was crucial to manage her condition every step of the way as she began the recovery process.”

Dr. Abraham Areephanthu,

Atkinson’s primary care physician and one of the hospitalists involved in her care at CPRMC, further emphasizes the importance of the follow-up care after such a severe illness. “Discharging a patient after severe sepsis is just the beginning of recovery,” explains Areephanthu. “Because I was part of her treatment team in the hospital and her ongoing provider at Carolina Pines Medical Group Primary Care, I was able to ensure a seamless transition back home, closely monitoring her progress through follow-up visits and helping her regain her strength.”

Areephanthu — better known as Dr. A — also emphasizes how CPRMC’s hybrid model enhances patient care. In this unique approach, many primary care providers at Carolina Pines Medical Group also serve as hospitalists at Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center, ensuring seamless care between the hospital and the clinic. “This means the same doctor who cares for you in the hospital can continue your treatment in our office,” Dr. A explains. “That continuity makes a huge difference, especially for serious conditions like sepsis, where recovery extends well beyond discharge. Knowing our patients’ full medical history helps us provide more personalized, long-term care.”

Atkinson’s experience changed her outlook on health forever. “I take things more seriously now,” she admits. “I don’t ignore symptoms anymore. I’m quicker to go to the doctor instead of being passive about my health.”

Before her ordeal, Atkinson had heard of sepsis but never realized how fast and deadly it could be. Now, she urges others to be aware of the warning signs:

- Extreme fatigue or weakness
- Fever, chills or very low body temperature
- Rapid breathing or shortness of breath
- Confusion or disorientation
- Rapid heart rate or low blood pressure
- Severe pain or discomfort

“Sepsis is so common and truly life-threatening,” she warns. “If you feel like there’s even a slight chance something is wrong, don’t wait. Get to the hospital quickly — it’s always better to be safe than sorry.”



Faith Kelley, sepsis coordinator with the first SC hospital Sepsis Certification from The Joint Commission

In November 2024, Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center achieved a historic milestone, becoming the first hospital in South Carolina to earn The Sepsis Certification from The Joint Commission. This prestigious recognition underscores CPRMC’s commitment to providing exceptional, life-saving care for patients facing sepsis. The certification reflects the hospital’s dedication to improving patient outcomes through rapid diagnosis, timely intervention and comprehensive education.

“Sepsis is the number one cause of death in U.S. hospitals, taking more lives globally each year than cancer — close to 11 million actually,” said Faith Kelley, sepsis coordinator at Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center. “Leading the effort to achieve this certification was an incredible journey, and it’s a reflection of our team’s dedication to identifying sepsis early, treating it fast and ultimately saving lives. We’re proud to set the standard for sepsis care in South Carolina.”

Atkinson’s story is a powerful reminder of why early detection and treatment are essential. By continuing to lead in sepsis care, CPRMC remains steadfast in its mission to provide life-saving treatment when it matters most. Through survivors like Atkinson, the message is clear: awareness saves lives.



Atkinson with her Primary Care Provider, Dr. Areephanthu

CHAMPIONS RECOGNIZED FOR DEDICATION TO HELPING YOUTH

Submitted by Lisa Bailey, director of philanthropy



Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area Executive Director Neal Zimmerman stands with Erik Marechal, the organization's 20th Champion for Youth and longtime supporter and board member.

Two men of distinction were recognized by the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area in September for lifetimes of dedication to youth: Erik Marechal and Neal Zimmerman.

The 20th Champion for Youth: Erik Marechal

Since joining the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area Board of Directors in 2006, Erik Marechal has devoted his time, energy and leadership to ensuring

children in the Pee Dee region have every opportunity to reach their full potential. Professionally, he is the president, CEO and majority owner of Accountable Insurance Partners, and a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute.

"He fits the 10 qualities of a champion," said Dr. Allie Brooks, the 2009 Champion for Youth who presented the award to Marechal. Brooks described those qualities as excellence, overcoming adversity, leadership, discipline, commitment, teamwork, conviction, sacrifice, perseverance and faith.

With gratitude and humility, Marechal accepted the award and reflected on the collective impact of the Club.

"We support kids, and their lives aren't always so easy. If these families are living in the hotel room of the hotel room, those kids need a place too. You provide that. Kids should not have to live in some situations that they are," he said. "But we see them, and we love them. And they know us. And we're the place to come where it's OK."

For 91 percent of Boys & Girls Club members, the Club is the only place they have to go; no other youth organization serves them.

"Who's that one person that really helped you as a child? Encouraged you, picked you up when you were down, had a difficult situation, challenged you, encouraged you to become better?" Marechal asked the audience of more than 200. "You see, the Club is that person, that team, that mentor for a thousand kids a day. That's why I have served as a board member for 19 years and will continue doing so."

Family Legacy: Neal Zimmerman

Named the Champions Champion, Neal Zimmerman was recognized along with his family's legacy of service and commitment to Boys & Girls Clubs.

That legacy began with Neal's father, who gave 31 years of his life to Boys & Girls Clubs in Orlando, Florida, and Cleveland, Tennessee.

"He made things better for children, and Zimmerman replicates that in everything he does," said Clyde McGuire, director of organizational development for Boys & Girls Clubs of America, whose connection to the Clubs began in Tennessee as a Club member and Neal's friend.

Zimmerman's mother, Helen, also worked in the Clubs for 28 years.

"When you walked in the Club, she knew your name.



Longtime Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area Board Member Erik Marechal stands with his family after receiving the Champion for Youth Award on September 17 at SiMT. A huge crowd filled the lobby at the SiMT to recognize longtime Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area Board Member Erik Marechal at this year's Champion for Youth.

That's important to children," McGuire said. "She made you feel welcome."

A remarkable young man who excelled at everything, Zimmerman decided in 1972 that he would make Boys & Girls Clubs his career. He started as a part-time employee working in programming, eventually became full-time, and learned every aspect of running a Boys & Girls Club. In 1995, he came to Florence as executive director for the Pee Dee organization and never looked back.

All told, with Zimmerman's 53 years of service, his family has given 111 years to Boys & Girls Clubs.

"Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do on behalf of the children," McGuire said.

The recognition included the announcement of the Zimmerman Family Fund in honor of his late wife, Nancy, Zimmerman's spouse of 38 years, who lost her battle with cancer in June. The two met through Boys & Girls Clubs, as Nancy, a single mom of three at the time, needed help with one of her sons.

"Nancy encouraged and supported Zimmerman and contributed so much to the life of the Club," Marechal said.

Marechal, several past champions and other friends of the Club collected \$173,326 for the fund to present at the event. These dollars will serve kids who need the Club the most and continue the Zimmerman family legacy.

"Words can't do justice to what this means. It's definitely an honor for me and my wife. Florence is a great community for Boys & Girls Clubs," Neal said.

Contributions to the Zimmerman Family Fund can be made through Eastern Carolina Community Foundation or Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area.



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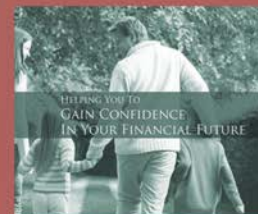
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Stay Connected:



CAPTURING LIFE AND ART By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Stephanie Gregg

Photography once meant waiting for film to be processed and developed before seeing the captured moments. Cameras were instruments that preserved memories the human mind could not always hold. Photos became still markers of life—family reunions, professional headshots and joyful wedding vows.

But for some, capturing moments is more than just, "snapping a pic." For artists, it's about subjects and how they are viewed through the lens. Photographers search for meaningful, impactful images that tell stories. Artists such as Gordon Parks (1912–2006) historically captured photos that influenced generations. His images of African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s documented a pivotal era that might otherwise have been lost. They tell stories of the time, allowing people to piece together narratives about what life was like then.

Stephanie Gregg received her first camera one Christmas and was instantly hooked. In 2020, she took the leap and became a professional photographer.

"At the time, I was working 10-hour shifts, seven days on and seven days off," she recalled. "I realized I needed more time with my family—especially during such uncertain times. That's when I decided to turn my passion for photography into something real."

Part of photography's appeal comes from how accessible it has become.

"Photography is adored by so many because it's how we measure time," Gregg said. "A single image can bring tears, spark a conversation or kick off a whole session of reminiscing. When we lose someone, we love, the photos become our most treasured keepsakes. It's true—the only photos you'll ever regret are the ones you didn't take."

To Gregg, photography as art is not just a profession—it is a way to tell stories and allow people to define those images for themselves.

"When you think of art, you should think of freezing time," she said. "There's something magical about capturing an emotion in a single frame—it simply can't be duplicated. No matter how hard you try to reenact a moment, once it's gone, that's it. That's why photography is so powerful: it lets us hold onto those real, unrepeatable moments forever."

"Photography should be about bringing people together, not exploiting them. When we use the camera to highlight what connects us—our stories, emotions and shared experiences—it becomes a powerful tool for unity. I believe in working with people, not just photographing them, and making sure everyone feels respected and seen. By focusing on real connection, ethical storytelling and giving people a say in how they're represented, photography can help us build empathy and understanding, one image at a time."

Although photography may not be offered in some intermediate schools, classes are widely available online and through technical schools. Aspiring artists can develop their appreciation for photography by studying the work of past and current photographers.

"Photography can be taught to future generations as a way to uplift their communities by encouraging them to use their cameras to tell real, meaningful stories," Gregg said. "When young people learn to focus on what connects us—showcasing the beauty, strength and everyday moments in their neighborhoods—they help build pride and understanding. It's about teaching them to work with their subjects, respect everyone's story, and use their art to highlight what makes their community special."

Capturing images has been Gregg's passion since childhood. That passion became her profession, but she continues to revere the art of photography. She hopes to be an example for other young girls who want to pursue photography. With tools such as smartphones and platforms like social media, young people can expand photography beyond their immediate communities.

"When photography is rooted in empathy and authenticity, it becomes a tool for positive change and unity," she said.

CITY OF MARION TREE LIGHTING

Submitted by Cindy B. Rogers, executive director, Marion Chamber of Commerce



Ra Photos from previous years of the Tree Lighting ita Pressley

MARION — The City of Marion will once again usher in the holiday season with its annual tree lighting on the first Sunday in December, a cherished tradition now in its 36th year.

The tree at the heart of the celebration is a stately magnolia planted decades ago on Marion's historic public square, directly across from the Marion County Courthouse. With streets lined by ancient oaks and elms and a spacious square that evokes the charm of an old Southern garden, Marion has long taken pride in preserving its natural beauty. The magnolia tree, standing as a symbol of that legacy, provides the perfect centerpiece for the city's holiday festivities.

What began as a simple lighting ceremony 36 years ago has grown into one of Marion's most anticipated community events. To mark the occasion, the city moved its annual Christmas parade from Saturday to Sunday so it would coincide with the tree lighting.

The celebration begins at 5 p.m. with the parade, which travels south down Main Street from the School District Office and ends at the courthouse. The procession features commercial floats, beauty queens, local businesses with decorated cars, trucks and trailers, and a variety of other creative entries, all decked out in dazzling holiday displays. The festive decorations that adorn downtown further add to the seasonal spirit.

Following the parade, the community gathers on the courthouse steps for a holiday program filled with music, dance performances and a live nativity reenactment. Children delight in a special visit from Santa Claus. As darkness falls, anticipation builds until the moment the magnolia tree is illuminated, casting a warm glow over the square and officially signaling the start of the holiday season.

The evening concludes with a spectacular fireworks show at Withlacoochee Park, where families gather to watch the colorful display light up the night sky.

Over the years, the Marion tree lighting has grown into one of the city's largest and most beloved events, drawing residents and visitors alike. It serves as both a kickoff to the Christmas season and a reminder of the joy, unity and spirit of giving that define the holidays.

City of Marion

Annual Holiday Prelude & Community Tree Lighting Celebration

Wednesday, November 26th

Music Festival

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Main Street Commons

7pm-10pm

Saturday, November 29th

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Main Street Commons

10am-3pm

Sunday, December 7th

Marion Christmas Parade

5:00pm

Annual City Tree Lighting Celebration

Marion County Courthouse

6pm

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Feel the thrill

Darlington County is pure adrenaline. The "Track Too Tough to Tame" at Darlington Raceway draws racing fans from around the world. Beyond the roar of engines, the countryside slows the pace with farms, trails and warm welcomes.

Roadside charm and hidden escapes

In Dillon County, South of the Border is a roadside icon. Step off the beaten path and you'll find peaceful lakes, quiet landscapes and the kind of Southern hospitality that makes travelers stay longer than planned.

Culture at the center

Florence County is the region's cultural heartbeat. A revitalized downtown brims with art galleries, live music, chef-driven dining and festivals that fill the streets with energy year-round.

Authentic and rooted

Lee County is farming country at its finest. Cotton fields meet country roads, and visitors can soak in authentic small-town life — slow-paced, genuine and rich with South Carolina tradition.

History in every step

Marion County carries the stories of generations. Walk historic districts and explore sites tied to both the Revolutionary War and Civil War. History feels alive here.

Heritage and reinvention

In Marlboro County, heritage and creativity go hand in hand. Once tobacco

country, today it thrives with museums, music and a growing arts community that keeps its story vibrant.

Wild and untamed

Williamsburg County is for explorers. With sprawling swamps, pristine rivers and abundant wildlife, it's a natural playground for fishing, hunting, paddling or simply escaping into the quiet.

The Pee Dee promise

Together, these seven counties create a region as diverse as it is inviting. Whether you're chasing speed, savoring local flavors, paddling blackwater streams or exploring history, the Pee Dee offers experiences you'll carry long after you leave.

Visit the Pee Dee Region of South Carolina. Experience the beauty. Discover the difference.

A large scenic image of a river flowing through a dense forest of tall, thin trees. Several kayakers are visible on the river. Overlaid on the image is the text "Visit THE PEE DEE REGION OF SOUTH CAROLINA" in a large, stylized font. Below this is a circular logo for "PEE DEE TOURISM" featuring a map of the seven counties and the text "EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY". At the bottom, contact information is provided: "2513 W LUCAS ST • FLORENCE, SC 29501", "(843) 669-0950 • PEEDEETOURISM.COM", and social media handles for Facebook and Instagram: "PEEDEETOURISMSC". The "DISCOVER South Carolina" logo is in the bottom right corner.



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