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DIVERSITY WORKS

JANUARY 2026 VOLUME 16 ISSUE 1

"For All of Us"



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MISSION AND VISION

OUR MISSION

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

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

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

OUR VISION

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

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FROM THE EDITOR'S HEART



Glacia Brown Mason
Editor

Greetings and Happy New Year to all Diversity Works Readers!

The Diversity Works team warmly welcomes you to the new year and extends our gratitude to Pee Dee area businesses (see our Advertiser & Partner Index) for your continued support and collaboration. We look forward to building our successful partnerships throughout the year.

It's our pleasure to share with you the first-quarter edition of Diversity Works Magazine. For those resolving to read more this year, you've made an excellent choice! We're confident you'll find valuable insights into business, education, finance, health and much more. Thanks to Distinctive Design Graphics, every page is beautifully crafted, so you'll stay informed about everything from January through March. Get your calendars ready and dive into the latest news and features with Diversity Works Magazine!

Our table of contents is systematically organized by section, providing a comprehensive listing of articles for each quarter. We encourage you to review the contents, identify topics of particular interest, and explore the information provided. This edition features contributions from local businesses such as Honda, McCall Farms, BBB and MPD, among others. As you engage with these articles, we are confident you will appreciate the noteworthy developments taking place in and around the Pee Dee.

This issue also includes updates on PRET Advanced Materials, LLC's expansion, an overview of Goodwill's ongoing mission and information about the new partnership between Together SC Nonprofit Network and Grantlytics. These business-related articles and more can be found herein.

Our Diversity in Spirituality section, Author Robin Lewis, offers insightful perspectives on establishing a strong foundation for 2026. We trust these reflections will contribute meaningfully to

your personal spiritual growth throughout the year.

With more than two million educators across the nation, we are fortunate that those in the Pee Dee region are still dedicated to excellence, shaping students' minds from early education through college. Diversity Works joins the Marion County School District's Salute to Educators. Don't miss the feature on Publisher P.J. Browning of the, "Post and Courier," who received an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from Francis Marion University. Mark your calendar and sign up for FMU's spring evening classes. Let's also congratulate Central Carolina Technical College for earning a silver Medallion Award recognizing their success in event marketing and engagement! Be sure to see details about upcoming open houses hosted by GSSM and FMU, where you can learn even more.

As editor, I've had the opportunity to meet remarkable individuals to bring news to the Pee Dee. The last quarter of 2025 was full of notable events in Florence and its surrounding area. I had the privilege of spending time with living history legends, Dr. Joseph Hewyard (Order of the Palmetto recipient), renowned Photojournalist Cecil Williams and Judge Clifton B. Newman from the State v. Alexander Murdaugh trial. I appreciate the time they shared with me. Be sure to check out the articles!

Cecil Williams, a celebrated photographer, author and inventor as well as a Claflin University alumnus, delivered the December commencement keynote. Williams' collection of civil rights photographs taken between 1950 and 1970 is currently showcased at the Florence County Museum, located at 111 West Cheves Street in Florence, SC, through May 17, 2026. Make a point to visit and experience, "Unforgettable: The Civil Rights Photography of Cecil Williams." You can explore this story along with other engaging education news in this section.

Pain management is a critical component in enhancing quality of life. In this issue, our cover story features the new Pain and Spine Center at Carolina Pines Medical Group, an affiliate of Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center in Hartsville, SC. Readers will find detailed information regarding the opening of this advanced facility, which offers comprehensive technology and a skilled team dedicated to delivering personalized health care.

The health care section continues to provide valuable resources for informed decision-making and navigating personal wellness. This edition includes contributions from professionals such as Erica Buffkin of Circle Park Behavioral Health Services and Registered Dietitian Kitty Finklea, alongside other medical experts offering guidance for achieving better health outcomes. Topics

addressed include managing pre-diabetes and diabetes, female-specific cancers, oral health and foot care. Additionally, there are introductions to new medical providers in the Pee Dee region, including Dr. Valarian Bruce at CareSouth Carolina and Angela Oduro, PA-C, and Carson Lee, LPCA, recently welcomed by HopeHealth at the Medical Plaza in Florence. These profiles allow readers to make empowered choices in their health care journey. As one of the most comprehensive sections, this quarter's health section also features national recognition for outstanding medical facilities in the Pee Dee area, with highlights on HopeHealth, MUSC and McLeod Health.

During the first quarter of 2026, Diversity Works Magazine features a special section dedicated to national observances. The nation celebrates several significant milestones: the 97th birthday of the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the 100th anniversary of National Black History Month and Women's History Month.

The King holiday, established as a federal holiday by President Ronald Reagan on November 2, 1983, honors Dr. King's leadership in the civil rights movement. This year's theme, "Mission Possible II: Building Community, Uniting a Nation the Nonviolent Way," includes articles focused on the idea of a 'Beloved Community,' where injustice is addressed, violence gives way to compassion and unity is fostered through love.

National Black History Month, founded by Carter G. Woodson, PhD, marks its 100th year of celebrating the rich heritage, historical achievements and lasting influence of African Americans. This edition highlights the importance of preserving history, participating actively in civic life and education. Featured stories include rising star Daniel James II, interviews with Order of the Palmetto recipient Dr. Joseph Heyward and Judge Clifton Newman, all of whom emphasize the significance of historical awareness and service.

Women's History Month, observed each March, recognizes the vital contributions and accomplishments of women throughout history. The theme, "Leading the Change: Women Shaping a Sustainable Future," showcases local Pee Dee women who are driving positive change in their professions and communities.

Additionally, our financial section offers informative articles with practical tips for goal setting, renewal and improving personal finances, supporting readers in reaching their objectives for 2026.

The Diversity Works staff wishes you a successful and rewarding 2026!

Happy Reading,
Glacia Brown Mason
Editor

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DIVERSITY CONVERSATIONS REMAIN RELEVANT (EVEN IN 2026)

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



Reginal G. Lyerly

CONWAY - The November 2025 biennial Diversity Works Training was a tremendous success. The event brought professionals from various industries together for impactful workshops and a keynote speaker. It was truly a community effort, and bringing people together for a common purpose will make any community stronger.

Attitudes toward diversity can be a polarizing factor within organizations and workplaces. If this continues, there remains a need to educate and share the value of working together while leveraging differences.

Let's look at why continued dialogue about diversity in the workplace is necessary. Below are recent statistics about diversity in the government sector:

- In the United States federal government workforce, about 61 percent identify as white, about 18 percent to 19 percent as Black or African American.
- Other groups: about 6.9 percent to 7.1 percent are Asian (higher than their share of the civilian labor force) when the Postal Service is excluded.
- Hispanic and Latino representation in the federal workforce (about 10.5 percent as of 2024 data from one source) remains lower than their share of the overall U.S. workforce.
- On gender: one recent source (2023) says the federal workforce is about 55 percent male and 45 percent female.
- Educational attainment tends to be higher in the federal workforce compared with the overall civilian workforce: about 31.5 percent of federal employees hold a bachelor's degree (versus 27.7 percent among all employed Americans), and a larger share hold advanced degrees.
- Regarding benefits and job protections: workers in government roles often enjoy greater union coverage, more robust retirement plans, and, in some cases, higher pay compared with equivalent private-sector jobs.
- Representation at senior and executive levels in many agencies remains less diverse. For instance, non-White employees, though well-represented at lower pay and grade levels, are underrepresented in higher pay bands and the Senior Executive Service.

Below are statistics about the private sector:

- Among all U.S. civilian workers: as of recent data, 60 percent are white, about 19 percent Hispanic, about seven percent Asian, and about 12 percent to 13 percent Black or African American.
- Gender distribution across the broader workforce tends to be closer to even, though exact breakdowns vary by source and industry.
- Many private-sector organizations show wide variation by industry. For some sectors, representation of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups is far lower than national averages.
- Reports indicate ongoing issues. For example, in some workplaces, a substantial percentage of Black employees report racial or ethnic discrimination.
- In aggregate, the private sector's racial and ethnic composition often shows a "majority White, with minority representation roughly matching or sometimes underrepresenting demographics of the general population," with large variability depending on industry, company size and region.

Why are diversity conversations still important in today's workplace?

Diversity conversations remain vitally important in 2026 because the world of work, demographics, technology, and

social expectations are changing faster than ever. Diversity is no longer a, "nice-to-have," value statement; it is a core driver of competitiveness, innovation, talent attraction and organizational legitimacy.

Let's examine this more closely:

Adaptability: The U.S. workforce is more racially, ethnically and generationally diverse than at any time in history. Younger generations, millennials and Generation Z, are the most diverse ever, and they expect employers to reflect and respect that diversity. Organizations that do not adapt will struggle to hire, retain and engage the next generation of workers.

Workplace conditions: Today's employees want psychological safety, belonging, respect for identity, leaders who recognize systemic inequities, and inclusive communication and opportunity. This is not political; it is personnel retention. People will leave organizations that ignore these issues, costing employers talent, innovation and money.

Innovation: Companies with diverse teams outperform those without diverse perspectives. Diverse teams solve complex problems faster. Cross-cultural collaboration fosters creativity, and better decision-making emerges when different lived experiences collide. In a knowledge-based economy, sameness is a liability.

Strategy: Global markets, distributed workforces, and cross-cultural business relationships mean leaders must understand cultural intelligence. Without diversity competence, miscommunication increases, customer trust erodes, and market opportunities are lost. Diversity is not just internal; it is external, strategic positioning.

Gaps: Despite progress, gaps persist in leadership representation, pay equity, accessibility and disability inclusion, neurodiversity awareness, and the presence of women and people of color in STEM, finance and executive roles. You cannot close a gap you refuse to measure, and diversity conversations keep systems accountable.

Technology: In 2026, hiring platforms use artificial intelligence, surveillance and productivity tools to track performance, and algorithms influence who receives opportunities. Without a diverse lens, technology reinforces bias at scale. Diverse teams and leaders are essential to ethical AI and fair digital systems.

Tensions: Some groups feel DEI has gone too far; others feel it has not gone far enough. That tension proves why the conversation matters. When diversity is not discussed, misunderstanding grows and workplaces become battlegrounds instead of bridges.

Reputation management: Consumers, investors and boards ask the following questions:

- Who is in leadership?
- Who benefits from your business?
- Do you reflect the communities you serve?

Trust and credibility are now tied to transparency and inclusion.

Preparation: Organizations that invest in diversity are not being "woke." They are being future-ready. The future workforce is diverse. The future market is diverse. The future world is interconnected. Ignoring diversity is not neutral; it is strategic negligence.

In conclusion, the diversity conversation is still important



in 2026 for many reasons. The nation is experiencing a demographic, technological, and cultural transformation. Organizations that talk about diversity, and act on it, will thrive. Those that do not will be left behind.

TOGETHER SC PARTNERS WITH GRANTLYTICS TO EXPAND GRANT ACCESS

Submitted by Brooke Robertson, director of Strategic Communications and Member Experience, Together SC



COLUMBIA — Together SC, the state's network for nonprofit leadership, has announced a new partnership with Grantlytics, an AI-driven grant discovery and management platform designed to help nonprofits find, apply for and manage grant funding more efficiently.

Through the partnership, Together SC members will receive an exclusive 20 percent discount on the Grantlytics 12-month Starter Version, an AI-powered software platform that streamlines identifying funding opportunities, crafting competitive proposals and tracking grant activity throughout the lifecycle of an award.

"By listening to our nonprofit members, we knew we needed to offer new products and services around grantmaking," said Karen Riordan, president and CEO of Together SC. "At a time when nonprofits are being asked to do more with less, we want to equip our members with tools that genuinely increase their capacity. Grantlytics offers an accessible, intuitive and powerful way to strengthen grant

discovery efforts across South Carolina's nonprofit sector."

Grantlytics uses artificial intelligence to reduce the administrative burden associated with grant management, one of the sector's most time-consuming challenges. The platform includes:

- AI-powered grant discovery and matching
- Proposal drafting support and guided writing tools
- Deadline, document and compliance tracking
- Full grant lifecycle management in a centralized dashboard

South Carolina nonprofits can access the member discount through a new interest form on the Together SC member portal. Once the form is submitted, Grantlytics will follow up directly to activate the 20 percent discount and assist with onboarding.

"Our mission at Grantlytics is to improve access to funding by making grants easier to find and simpler to manage," said Abdirahman Guleed, Harvard Entrepreneurial fellow and CEO and founder of Grantlytics. "We're excited to partner with Together SC to support South Carolina nonprofits with tools that

help them secure the resources needed to drive meaningful change."

To introduce the platform, Together SC will host an introductory webinar Tuesday, Dec. 17, from 10 - 11 a.m. The session will include a live demonstration, an overview of grant discovery and proposal development features and step-by-step instructions on accessing the member discount. The webinar is free and open exclusively to Together SC members.

Registration and additional information are available through the Together SC website.

About Grantlytics

Grantlytics is an AI-powered grant discovery and management platform designed to help nonprofits identify funding opportunities, build stronger proposals and manage reporting, deadlines, documents and awarded grants.

About Together SC

Together SC is the statewide association for South Carolina's nonprofit and philanthropic network. Through advocacy, capacity building, professional development and peer networking, the organization equips mission-driven leaders with the tools and connections needed to strengthen communities across the state.

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Juniors: Experience Washington, D.C., with hundreds of students from across South Carolina and the country, meeting lawmakers and touring all the sights. Your electric co-op will cover your round-trip plane ticket, tours and meals. In other words, it's all free!

Sophomores: Experience South Carolina's capital like never before. Tour the Statehouse, meet lawmakers and see how co-ops are preparing for our state's energy future. Plus, there's plenty of fun with visits to popular Columbia attractions like the South Carolina State Museum. Your electric co-op will cover all your expenses.

We've made it easy to apply for either FREE trip. Apply today!



Washington Youth Tour: June 14-19, 2026



Cooperative Youth Summit: July 13-16, 2026



Applications available: santee.org/youth
Application deadline: February 20, 2026



PRET ADVANCED MATERIALS, LLC EXPANDS FLORENCE COUNTY OPERATIONS Original submitted by SC Commerce

COLUMBIA – PRET Advanced Materials, LLC (PRET), a leading advanced materials company, today announced it is expanding its Florence County operations. The company's \$18.5 million investment will create 74 new jobs.

Headquartered in Johnsonville, PRET is one of the leading compounders and suppliers of thermoplastic resins in North America. The company's South Carolina facility has operated continuously since 1955.

PRET is adding new equipment and making improvements to its facility, located at 520 Kingsburg Highway in Johnsonville, to meet demand for new products.

Operations are expected to be online by 2027. Individuals interested in joining the PRET team should contact Stephanie Wisnom at 843-386-8261.

The Coordinating Council for Economic Development awarded a \$50,000 set-aside grant to Florence County to assist with road improvement costs.

QUOTES

"PRET Advanced Materials is proud to announce the expansion of its capabilities at our Johnsonville facility. This continued strong growth reflects PRET's confidence in both our people and our long-standing relationship with Florence County and the state of South Carolina."

— PRET Advanced Materials CEO Alex Zhou

"PRET Advanced Materials' \$18.5 million investment is a testament to the company's commitment to South Carolina. We are grateful for the new opportunities this expansion will create in the Florence County community and look forward to strengthening our partnership with PRET in the years ahead."

— Gov. Henry McMaster

"With an expansion that will create 74 new jobs, PRET

Advanced Materials continues having a strong impact in the Florence County community. We are thrilled to see a company with such a longstanding legacy in our state continuing to find success. Congratulations on this exciting announcement."

— Secretary of Commerce Harry M. Lightsey III

"PRET's facility in Florence County has a long history of providing jobs and opportunities to our community. Under PRET's leadership, this expansion adds 74 new jobs and further demonstrates the success existing industry finds operating in northeastern South Carolina's strong business environment. Congratulations to PRET and Florence County on this expansion."

— NESAC Executive Committee Chairman Yancey McGill

"We are pleased to acknowledge the value that PRET Advanced Materials brings to our community. This \$18.5 million investment is projected to create 74 new jobs in southern Florence County. We commend the company's commitment to both its customers and workforce. Florence County is delighted to have PRET's compounding facility and state-of-the-art research and development center located in Johnsonville, South Carolina."

— William Schofield, chairman, Florence County Council

"The new investment at PRET Advanced Materials' compounding facility and R&D center is a testament to the business environment we've cultivated in Florence County. This new project represents 74 new jobs, a substantial boost to our economic landscape, and underscores the company's belief in our county. We look forward to a long and successful partnership with PRET Advanced Materials as it innovates and grows right here in Johnsonville."

— Joe W. "Rocky" Pearce Jr., chairman, Florence County Economic Development Partnership

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BUILDING SUCCESS: FLORENCE MOVING FULL LIFE. FULL FORWARD. Submitted by the City of Florence

2025 has been a year of momentum and meaningful progress for the City of Florence. Through collaboration, innovation, and community pride, Florence has continued to build upon its strong foundation while preparing for an even brighter future. From public safety advancements and infrastructure

public surveillance systems to enhance response times and situational awareness for officers. In its first six months of operation, the center supported more than 40 investigations, contributing to the capture of fugitives, recovery of stolen vehicles and firearms, and the location of missing persons.

The City of Florence made significant strides toward long-term reliability and efficiency through the adoption of comprehensive Master Plans for its water, sewer and stormwater systems. Developed in partnership with AECOM, these 20-year plans provide a roadmap for infrastructure upgrades and future growth, reinforcing the city's commitment to sustainability, resilience and responsible development. To support these improvements, the city issued a \$138 million bond in November 2025 to help fund the projects outlined in the plans. All Master Plans are available to the public online at www.cityofflorencesc.gov.



Police Drone

improvements to new recreational activities and events, the City's dedication to enhancing quality of life for all residents has remained steadfast.

Public safety continues to be a cornerstone of Florence's mission to serve and protect its residents. The City of Florence Police Department's Real-Time Crime Center (RTCC) has proven to be a major advancement in technology-driven policing, combining modern tools such as drones, FLOCK license plate readers, and

The Florence Fire Department also strengthened its capabilities in 2025, expanding its fleet with three new state-of-the-art firetrucks—Engines 151 and 161, and Ladder 114. These new vehicles not only support emergency operations but also help maintain the City's ISO Class 1 rating, the highest possible designation for fire protection, which in turn contributes to lower property insurance premiums for both residents and business owners.

That same commitment to sustainability and quality of life was reflected in the expansion of the City's Rail Trail, which now links more than 20 miles of existing pathways to an additional 2.5 miles of trails at the Florence Soccer Complex. This new extension enhances accessibility for walking, running and cycling while encouraging outdoor activity, neighborhood connectivity and environmental stewardship. The trail can be accessed from the back of the Florence Soccer Complex or from the trailhead at the EMS Station on Ebenezer Road. That momentum continues at High Hill Creek

BUILDING SUCCESS CONT'D

Mountain Bike and Run Park, where new trails are nearly doubling the size of the park, with the extension nearing completion and a grand opening planned for spring.

Community spirit was on full display this past July when approximately 6,000 residents and visitors gathered to celebrate Fireworks Over Florence. Despite challenging weather, the skies cleared just in time for a spectacular display that brought families and friends together in a shared celebration of unity and pride. Planning for next year's event is already underway, with expectations for an even bigger and brighter show.

The City of Florence Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism Department also launched a brand-new concert series, Sounds of the Pee Dee, designed to highlight local talent and bring live music to the city's parks. The first two concerts,



June 2025 Council Meeting - Tree City USA

held at Timrod Park and Dr. Iola Jones Park, were a great success, showcasing community connection and Florence's rich artistic talent. The series will continue in 2026, expanding to additional city parks.

Addressing housing needs remained a top priority in 2025. The city partnered with Bowen National Research to conduct a comprehensive Housing Needs Assessment, examining housing availability, affordability and demand throughout Florence. Once adopted by City Council, the findings will be made available on the city of Florence's website, www.cityofflorencesc.gov, and will guide future housing strategies to help ensure that all residents have access to safe, affordable homes.

Also in 2025, the City of Florence proudly celebrated 45 consecutive years as a Tree City USA, recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation. This recognition affirms Florence's dedication to maintaining a healthy, sustainable urban forest that enhances quality of life, improves air quality and beautifies public spaces. The city also received its 18th

Tree City USA Growth Award, the most of any municipality in South Carolina, acknowledging its innovative approach to tree care, community education and partnerships.

Investing in the next generation continues to be a key focus for the City. As an initiative of the Mayor's Five-Point Crime Plan, the Florence Police Department brought back Camp FEVER as Camp Carraway, a two-day mentorship program for young men renamed in honor of Sergeant Terrence Carraway. The camp focused on leadership, life skills and positive engagement with law enforcement, helping participants build confidence, make responsible decisions and strengthen trust within the community. The camp will be held annually in the summer, with plans to offer a similar program for young women.

The city also expanded its City

Carolina Theatre in Downtown Florence is nearing completion, with its grand reopening on track for spring 2026. This restoration not only preserves a treasured cultural and historic landmark but also brings renewed energy to the heart of downtown. Once reopened, the Carolina Theatre will serve as a versatile venue for concerts, conferences, movies and live performances, creating new opportunities for community engagement, tourism and downtown revitalization.

The Levy Park Reimagination Project is taking shape, with plans to break ground in 2026. With an \$18 million budget, this robust project will transform an already beloved community hub into an even more vibrant and accessible space for residents of all ages. The renovation and expansion will feature reconfigured sports fields and courts, multi-use walkways, inclusive playgrounds, fitness equipment, enhanced landscaping and upgraded parking facilities, among other improvements. Once complete, Levy Park will provide expanded recreational opportunities, encourage outdoor activity and reinforce its role as a central gathering place for the East Florence community.

Another major project set to break ground in 2026 is the expansion of the Frank E. Willis Pee Dee River Regional Water Treatment Plant. From the city's current \$138 million bond issuance, \$57 million has been dedicated to the capital rehabilitation and long-term maintenance of the surface water treatment facility. These improvements will extend the plant's useful life by approximately twenty years and increase its potable water production capacity from 10 million gallons per day (MGD) to 15 MGD, pending permit expansion approval from the state regulatory agency. Once completed, the project will strengthen the city's ability to provide safe, clean and reliable water for residents and businesses while supporting long-term sustainability and economic growth throughout the Florence region. Construction is projected to reach substantial completion in early 2029.



Surface Water



On Nov. 6 at SIMT, Diversity Works Initiatives, the nonprofit arm of DMM Advertising and Marketing, hosted its biennial Diversity Focus Training and Luncheon. The event was led by industry experts and attended by more than 150 local employees for professional development and networking.

The training sessions featured interactive workshops addressing topics such as current trends, allyship, inclusive leadership, unconscious bias and strategic workforce planning. Participants reported increased confidence in applying newly acquired skills within their professional roles, leading to stronger collaboration and greater equity in the workplace.

The Diversity Focus Training also provided meaningful networking opportunities, allowing participants to engage with colleagues across industries and exchange perspectives aimed at advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace. Participant feedback emphasized the importance of continuous education and collaboration in fostering a work culture where all

voices are acknowledged and respected.

Diversity Works Initiatives remains committed to promoting diversity and inclusion through ongoing educational opportunities and future programming. Participants were invited to share ideas for upcoming initiatives that advance collective goals. By working together, the organization will continue building on the success of this year's training to help create a stronger, more inclusive workforce.

The dedication and enthusiasm demonstrated by attendees played a key role in the success of the training. Active participation enhanced the quality of discussions and reinforced a shared commitment to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion across organizational levels. Continued engagement remains vital to sustaining these conversations and addressing the evolving needs of today's workforce.

Industry professionals led the training, creating a welcoming environment where participants felt comfortable sharing ideas and experiences. Diversity Works Initiatives extends gratitude to its Platinum Sponsor, Ruiz Foods; Gold Sponsor HopeHealth Inc. and Spherion Staffing & Recruiting; Silver Sponsors BBB, Duke Energy, MUSC Health of the Pee Dee and Synergi Partners; and Corporate Sponsors the City of Florence and McDonalds/James Futures Inc., along with table sponsors and supporters for their continued commitment to this important networking and information-sharing opportunity.

Special thanks are extended to all who helped organize and execute the biennial event, including Florence Mayor Lethonia Barnes; Florence County Administrator Kevin Yokim; Brian Harrelson, associate operations manager at Ruiz Foods; Facilitator Robin Lewis; Kennon Feaster-Eytchison, Pee Dee Equality director; Chinel Boateng, senior development manager

at the American Cancer Society; Doris Lockhart, owner of Spherion Staffing & Recruiting LLC; Nikkoya Bass, director of Operations and Service at Assurant of Florence; and workshop presenters Yolonda Griffin Johnson, MBA, vice president of Business Services at Randstad NA in Atlanta; Mike Young, executive director of Good Samaritan Clinic and president of the Men's National Community Health Worker Alliance; Reginal G. Lyerly, vice president of recruitment at DNA Diversity Executive Search; Dr. Shawn Edwards, CEO and principal facilitator of Solutions by Shawn Edwards; Keynote Speaker and Leadership Strategist Dr. Cynthia J. Walters and, most importantly, the professional student participants for their engagement and contributions.

In honor of six years of Diversity Focus Training, special recognition was given to six organizations that have been loyal partners of Diversity Works Magazine and sponsors of the training since its inception: the City of Florence, Duke Energy, HopeHealth Inc., USC Health of the Pee Dee, Ruiz Foods and Spherion Staffing & Recruiting.

These organizations were proudly recognized as Diversity Champions—entities that believe in, support and actively advocate for diversity, inclusion and equity in the workplace. Their commitment fosters positive work environments, strengthens team relationships and enhances organizational culture.

Diversity Works Initiatives, along with Diversity Works Magazine, will continue to honor and uplift its Diversity Champions. Together, they remain committed to planting seeds of growth, inclusion and hope—one conversation at a time.

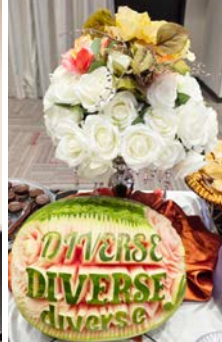
Thank you to all who participated and engaged, and for recognizing that workplace diversity is a valuable asset to business, community and society as a whole.

Photos from the 2025 Diversity Focus Training & Luncheon. Looking Forward to November 2027





**DIVERSITY IS
A STRENGTH,
NOT A THREAT.**



GOODWILL'S PERPETUAL MISSION By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Tammy Poston

Goodwill is more than an organization that sells clothes. It is more than a place where you can drop off unwanted items and receive a receipt for annual tax deductions. Goodwill's mantra of offering a, "hand up, not a handout," has guided its mission since 1902. It continues to provide opportunities for people in need. Best known for its retail operation, many people remain unaware of the employment programs Goodwill offers. The job search process can be intimidating, but with help from organizations like

Palmetto Goodwill, finding employment can be less stressful.

Goodwill's mission includes assisting job seekers with placement and preparation. The organization offers resources through its Career Opportunity Center, which helps make applying for jobs less stressful. Located on Second Loop Road in Florence, South Carolina, it is the only Career Opportunity Center in the area where Tammy Poston serves as success coach. A successful coach guides job seekers through resume building, job searching and developing other skills needed to secure employment. Poston is also responsible for outreaching businesses to gather information on job openings. The center has four computers with free internet access for seekers who want to search and sharpen computer skills. Use is by appointment only because time limits are enforced for fairness to all. At the center, visitors can find flyers from local businesses. Hiring events are also held where company representatives interact directly with job seekers. Poston said she builds rapport to make the process manageable. Her goal is to develop trust through conversation, confidence-building and encouragement. Because applicants are diverse, several employment programs are designed to fit specific demographics.

The I-Can program is a 12-week paid program for individuals with justice-involved backgrounds seeking work and training. Services include case management, career navigation, support services, job preparation, placement assistance and follow-up services. The Palmetto Warrior Connection serves veterans, active-duty service members and military spouses with employment support. The Senior Community Service Employment Program, for clients 55 and older, is scheduled to launch in January 2026. The program will offer paid subsidized training, no-cost digital instruction, career coaching and access to community resources. Some seniors must return

to the workforce unexpectedly and may struggle in today's digital world. People experiencing homelessness are also welcome at the Career Opportunity Center. Without home or internet access, searching for jobs or housing, food and clothing assistance can be especially challenging.

Poston said clients view the

center as a no-judgment zone and often return to offer thanks after they secure employment. She said she enjoys seeing how far they have come. She emphasized that the program's success depends on relationships with area businesses. The center shares information and calendars with employers and encourages additional partnerships. Strong connections are also maintained with SC Works and Vocational Rehabilitation. Staff members routinely look for posted hiring signs and follow up to share available opportunities with center visitors.

Goodwill's mantra is, "changing lives," and through retail and employment services, Poston's success coaching remains vital in helping individuals find work. Career Opportunity Centers through Palmetto Goodwill prepare job seekers for meaningful employment and strengthen communities by making essential resources accessible. From housing to health services, Goodwill remains connected and committed to serving the community.



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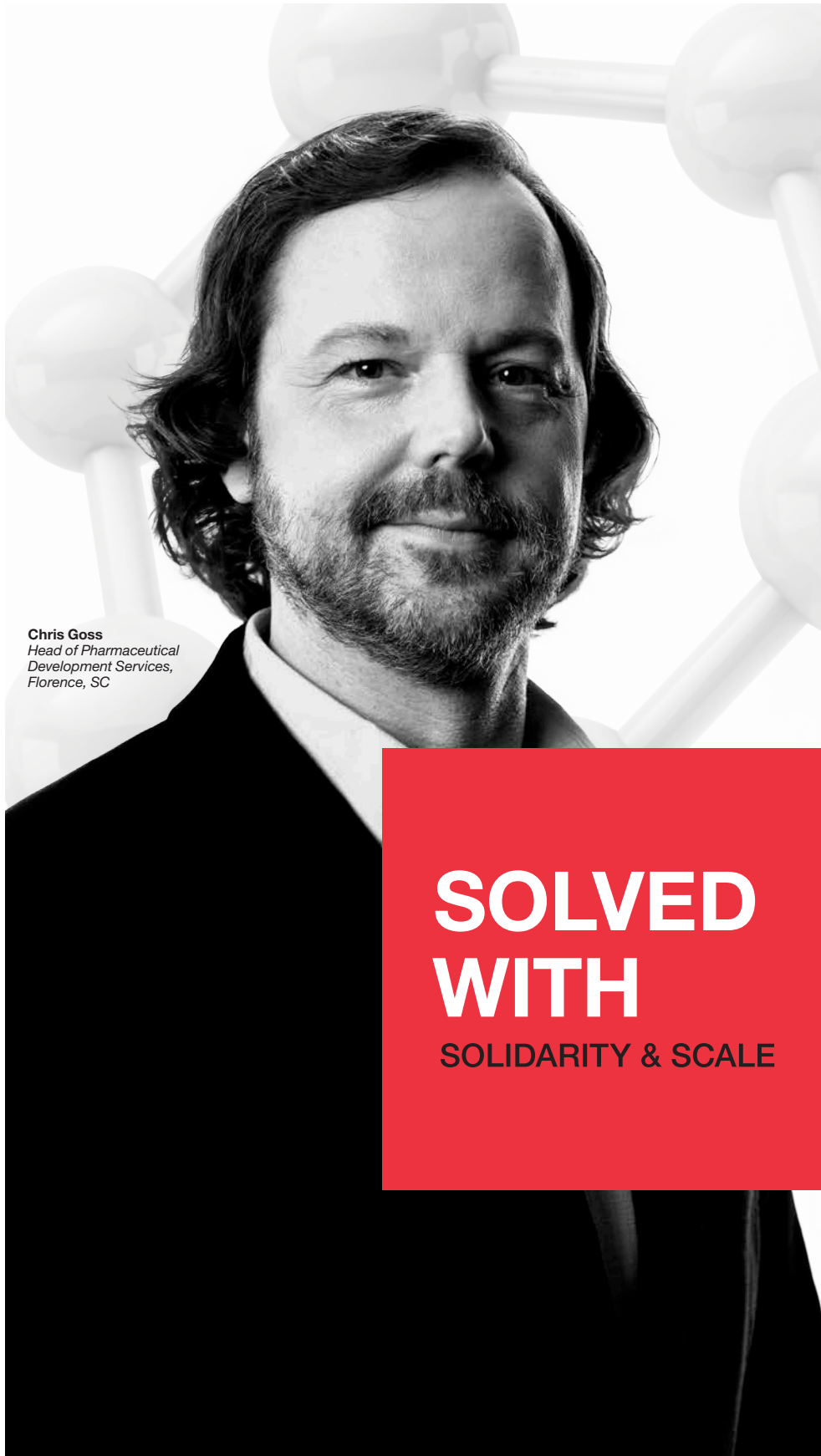
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**HOW A SMALL NON-PROFIT
TEAMED UP WITH A GLOBAL
MANUFACTURER TO BRING THEIR
ALS DRUG TO CLINICAL TRIALS**

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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MPD SHARES JOY THROUGH OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD Submitted by Katie W. Wilcox, CCC, Marketing & Communications



During the holiday season, employees of MPD Electric Cooperative, with the generous support of MPD members, came together to make a meaningful difference through participation in Operation Christmas Child, a global outreach project of Samaritan's Purse. The annual campaign delivers gift-filled shoeboxes to children in need, offering hope, encouragement and practical necessities to young recipients around the world.

According to Samaritan's Purse, Operation Christmas Child "delivers great joy and the Good News of Jesus Christ to children in need around the world through shoebox gifts." For many children, the brightly wrapped boxes are the first present they have ever received, providing not only toys and supplies, but also a powerful reminder that they are seen, loved and not forgotten.

MPD employees and members worked together to collect toys, hygiene items and school supplies to carefully pack more than 60 shoeboxes. Employees volunteered to fill shoeboxes individually and as teams, while MPD members contributed donated items that were collected at the cooperative's Florence and Bennettsville office lobbies throughout the holiday season.

Each shoebox included personal touches such as handwritten notes, encouraging messages and small surprises to create a unique and meaningful gift experience. Employees took extra care in selecting items appropriate for each age group, from stuffed animals and games to notebooks, toothbrushes and socks.

"This project truly reflects the heart of our cooperative," said an MPD representative. "Our employees and members are passionate about giving back, and this initiative allows us to reach well beyond our local communities to impact children across the globe."

Through an extensive international network of volunteers, churches and nonprofit partners, Samaritan's Purse distributes shoebox gifts in more than 100 countries. The deliveries are often part of larger outreach events that include games, activities and opportunities for continued educational support. Local pastors and community leaders personally distribute the boxes, offering encouragement and building relationships within underserved areas.

Founded in 1970, Samaritan's Purse is a Christian organization providing disaster relief, medical support and humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations worldwide. The organization's mission is rooted in the biblical story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), which underscores the call to help those in crisis regardless of boundaries or circumstance.

"Samaritan's Purse exists to bring hope where there is suffering," said Franklin Graham, CEO of the organization. "God has called us to go into the world to care for those that are suffering. It's just what we do. We run to the fire. We don't run away from it."

MPD Electric Cooperative extends gratitude to every employee and member who contributed time, donations or effort to this project. Their compassion is helping brighten the holidays for children and families who face daily challenges far greater than many can imagine.

Thanks to this collective effort, children around the world will experience joy, encouragement and the spirit of giving this season — one shoebox at a time.



Shoeboxes were delivered by employees to a local participating church.



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MPD ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE PROVIDES \$183,114 INVESTMENT

Submitted by Katie W. Wilcox, CCC marketing and communications



From L to R: Representative Lucas Atkinson, JS; Jeff Singletary, Chief Business Development Officer, MPD Electric; Johnny Atkinson, Vice-Chairman Marion County Council; Senator Kent Williams, Marion County Deputy Administrator

MARION — MPD Electric Cooperative announced today that it has awarded \$183,114 to Marion County to support qualifying community and economic development projects aimed at strengthening local opportunity and improving the quality of life for residents.

The South Carolina Rural Development Act of 1996 allows MPD

Electric a credit against its annual state license fee. This utility tax credit can then be provided to qualifying projects that benefit the area. These donations to MPD's allies underscore the cooperative's ongoing commitment to supporting the communities it serves. The county then allocates the funds to an eligible project that aligns with state and federal guidelines, specifically those that enhance local infrastructure, foster economic growth or improve community services.

"We are proud to invest in Marion County and help boost projects that provide lasting value to the people who live and work here," said William L. Fleming Jr., president and CEO of MPD Electric Cooperative. "As a member-owned cooperative, our mission extends beyond providing reliable electric service; we are dedicated to supporting economic growth and community well-being."

Marion County officials expressed appreciation for the cooperative's continued partnership and support. "This contribution from MPD Electric Cooperative will allow us to move forward on meaningful improvements for our community," said South Carolina Sen.

Kent Williams. "We are grateful for MPD's commitment to our county and their dedication to building stronger, more vibrant rural communities." The selected project receiving the funding will be announced once planning and compliance steps are finalized.

MPD Electric Cooperative was formed in 2020 through the merger of Marlboro Electric Cooperative and Pee Dee Electric Cooperative with the goal of creating joint economic benefits, long-term efficiencies and improved service for members residing in Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Lee, Marion and Marlboro counties.



BBB: HOW THE LOCAL FACTOR GIVES YOUR BUSINESS A COMPETITIVE EDGE

Submitted by Mallory Wojciechowski, CEO and president, BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH—For small, local businesses — especially those competing with national brands — their biggest advantage is simple: being local.

While large corporations rely on scale, brand recognition and cost savings, small businesses win by being personal and deeply connected to their communities. When consumers shop locally, they're investing in the place they live, supporting everything from public schools and parks to roads and first responders through local sales tax.

After years of economic uncertainty, the value of being a local business has never been clearer. As more consumers choose local, Better Business Bureau Serving Eastern Carolinas has tips to ensure small business owners lean into this local advantage to drive long-term success.

1. Get neighborly with your customer service

Whether it's a text message or face-to-face interaction, small businesses resonate on a deeper level by being neighborly and more accommodating. For example, if a house painter was scheduling a visit to give you a quote, which message would you want to receive:

Message 1:

Thank you for reaching out to us. We've confirmed your appointment on March 9, to learn more about the project. Please visit our website or call us with any questions.

Message 2:

Thanks for considering us for your painting needs. Our painter Heather will visit your home on March 9 and is excited to hear about your project. She's tackled various indoor and exterior paint projects with us and is detail-oriented in her work. Give us a call if you have any questions!

The second response makes it seem like you're working with a person and not a faceless company. These subtle adjustments in tone can make a big difference in creating trust. Small businesses can leverage personal interactions like these where larger operations can't.

2. Encourage reviews from locals

Online reviews should be a top priority for local businesses — because that's where customers are looking. In 2024, 32 percent of consumers searched online for information about local businesses every day, according to SOCi. With that kind of visibility, reviews are just as important as word of mouth.

After working with customers, ask them to leave a review and share details about their experience, including a shout-out to the team member who helped them. These testimonials can be powerful tools on platforms like [BBB.org](https://www.bbb.org) and Google.

Just as important, respond to reviews thoughtfully. Thank customers, be friendly and avoid generic replies. Personal responses help build trust and give your business a competitive edge.

3. Market locally

You have the opportunity to target your marketing to local customers in a variety of ways; here are six recommendations:

- Diversify your local ad placement: Look into local advertising opportunities with billboards, local news outlets and publications, and chambers of commerce.
- Tailor your promotions to local events: Book a booth or look into sponsorships for community events like conventions, trade shows and festivals. Bring awareness to your business with special offers or giveaways for attendees.
- Use the power of social media locally: Use local geographic hashtags, reach out to local influencers, join local Facebook groups and run giveaways to reach your local audience.
- Set up a referral program: Word of mouth can have a big impact

on creating new leads and creating awareness.

- Increase the use of your phone number: If you've got staff to take the calls, advertise your local phone number and show your willingness to connect with customers.

4. Be a community leader

As a small business owner, you can positively impact your community by more directly taking part in community decisions. Your expertise can inform local community initiatives, building projects, events and, in some cases, even local legislation.

By being an active member of local leadership, you're doubling down on both the future of the place you live and your reputation as a trusted thought leader. Try getting involved with public forums, small business association meetings, advisory committees or serving on a local board of directors.

5. Support a local charity or cause

When you donate time, money or resources, you're demonstrating that you want to be part of something that enriches your community for years to come.

Get started by researching the causes in your area to see if there's one that aligns with your business's values. To take it a step further, consider doing this with your employees to bring the team together.

6. Look to your local employees

You can't get any more local than your employees. They're on the front lines, interacting with customers, making sales and providing services. You can't be tapped into your community's local needs without them, so look for ways to strengthen these important relationships as you work toward your goals as a team.

Not only can putting your employees first have a big impact on the long-term success of your business, but it can also create a ripple effect with your community when word spreads about your reputation as an employer.

7. Buy local

Just like some restaurants source locally, many businesses can do the same. Buying local parts, supplies, services and goods means you're stimulating your local economy, including supporting local jobs. In other words, you're investing in your people, some of whom may be your customers. Plus, there could be the added advantage of cost savings in shipping and storage.

8. Lean on BBB

BBB is a trusted resource for millions of local consumers every year. If you haven't already, get listed with BBB today for free at [BBB.org/get-listed](https://www.bbb.org/get-listed).

And, if you're a business that values a marketplace built on trust, apply for BBB Accreditation today. Visit [BBB.org/get-accredited](https://www.bbb.org/get-accredited) to learn how trust, honesty and integrity can be integral to your business's success.

About BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas

Better Business Bureau Serving Eastern Carolinas is a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit corporation serving 48 counties in North and South Carolina. The organization is funded primarily by BBB Accredited Business fees from more than 5,200 local businesses and professional firms. BBB promotes integrity, consumer confidence and business ethics through business self-regulation in the local marketplace. Services provided by BBB include reports on companies and charitable organizations, general monitoring of advertising in the marketplace, consumer and business education programs and dispute resolution services. All services are provided at no cost to the public, with the occasional exception of mediation and arbitration. Visit [BBB.org](https://www.bbb.org).



JILL NAME'S KEYS TO SUCCESS AT ADP By Susan Carter



Jill Name

10 years and later managed a diagnostic center.

After relocating to Florence, S.C., an employment agency placed her at ADP, where she quickly mastered her responsibilities and was hired as a permanent, full-time employee six months later.

It did not take long for Name to be offered a team lead position, which she has held for nearly 15 years. She attributes her rapid advancement to strong people skills and curiosity. From the start of her employment, and especially as a supervisor of 25 employees, she focused on getting to know her colleagues and listening to the history of the organization's processes. Understanding what ADP has done in the past, she said, helps resolve system issues. Knowing how problems were previously addressed — including what worked and what did not — allows her team to arrive at new solutions and become more self-reliant. "Being able to know where in the system we need to go to correct the problem" enables employees to resolve more issues independently, increasing pride and job satisfaction. As a result, staff turnover at ADP remains low.

"Acting like an owner," is Name's work philosophy. "I'm proud of where I work, and I don't want anyone tarnishing our integrity," she said. She encourages her team to put its best foot forward every day and models the behavior she expects. Name is a hands-on leader who believes she manages best by fully understanding daily processes and completing them herself when necessary. "I need to know what is going on so that I can help the staff," she said.

She regularly asks team members what they like and dislike about their jobs to better understand their strengths and challenges. Her goal is to determine what can be done to make employees' work more manageable and fulfilling. In addition to understanding processes, Name seeks to uncover the reasons behind company practices. Knowing the, "why," she said, provides a clearer picture of operations and leads to better decision-making and better-trained staff.

An early test of Name's resilience occurred shortly after she accepted her promotion to team lead. After her first day, she admitted to her husband that she was having second thoughts due to the steep learning curve of managing more than 60 employees and their team leads while learning the manual entry processes used to prepare clients for grant

approval. He encouraged her to give it a week. By the end of the second day, she felt more confident, and by the end of the first week, she was assured of her ability to lead.

Name credits a co-worker for offering a pivotal insight into ADP's operations. "It's like a wheel; our department never stops," the colleague told her. Once she understood this concept, the entire process made sense. "I now know the core," she said, and she shares that understanding with all trainees. While some leaders hesitate to share knowledge, Name believes that the depth of understanding across the department reflects her leadership and ensures success through cross-training.

A significant leadership challenge arose in 2019 with the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost overnight, ADP transitioned to a remote work model reliant on Zoom technology to maintain connectivity. Recognizing the importance of relationships to morale and productivity, Name introduced creative ways to help her team adapt. To reduce anxiety around virtual meetings, she made early sessions lighthearted, incorporating theme days such as wearing blue to encourage camera use.

She also organized a parade in which team members drove past their director's home to interact safely. Additional initiatives included a, "Secret Friend," program, Bingo games and a Zoom-assisted virtual break room where small groups met briefly to check in with one another. Employees with sick family members received care packages from colleagues.

Change in the workplace, whether driven by evolving processes or global events, is constant. Name's ability to navigate uncertainty through strong relationships, hands-on leadership and a commitment to understanding the purpose behind policies has positioned her as a standout leader for ADP and the Pee Dee region.



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VOLUNTEERING FOR GOOD AT MCCALL FARMS Submitted by Cortney Huggins, HR specialist



McCall Farms team members join together to support the cause.

EFFINGHAM—For generations, McCall Farms has been more than just a food producer; it has been a committed community partner. Volunteerism and community engagement reflect a philosophy that values people and purpose as much as products. Through longstanding partnerships, charitable giving, employee volunteerism and participation in local events, McCall Farms strives to make a meaningful difference across the region. Much of this effort is guided by the human resources team, which coordinates, plans and supports community initiatives each month.

One of the company's most anticipated volunteer efforts is the annual Heart Walk, held every October in support of the lifesaving mission of the American Heart Association. Rain or shine, McCall Farms employees step up—literally and figuratively—to support this important cause. This year, the company organized seven teams, each led by employees from different departments. Teams raised funds and promoted heart-health awareness through creative efforts

such as bake sales, raffles and other activities. Their energy and generosity not only met but exceeded the company's fundraising goals. On the day of the walk, more than 100 employees proudly participated, demonstrating the unity and compassion that define the McCall Farms culture.

McCall Farms also partners with organizations that serve the senior community. In November, members of the human resources team volunteered at the Eastern Carolina Agriculture Fairgrounds to support a large community luncheon giving local senior citizens a day at the fair. The company donated Peanut Patch boiled peanuts to feed the 500-plus attendees. From preparing food to serving meals, the McCall Farms team worked side by side to ensure every guest felt welcomed, appreciated and cared for. It was a powerful reminder of how small acts of service have a significant impact.

Community engagement extends beyond public events, especially during the holiday season. This year, employees joined together to

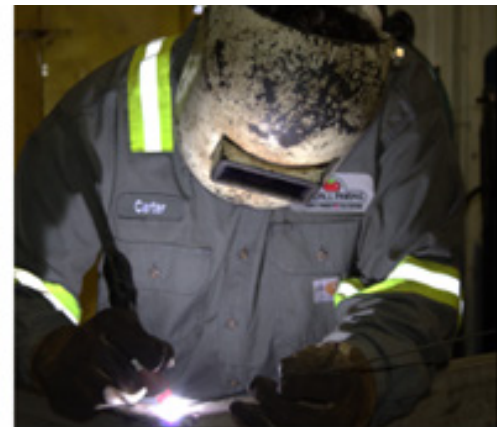
support families in need through the Angel Tree program. Team members adopted individual children's wish lists—ranging from warm clothing and essential items to toys—and made sure every tag was fulfilled. The collective effort ensured that children in the community received gifts that would brighten their holiday.

At McCall Farms, we recognize that none of these efforts would be possible without the dedication of our employees. To show appreciation, the company hosts celebrations and holiday meals that bring employees together and honor their contributions. Most recently, the company held a Thanksgiving celebration where managers from across the organization volunteered to serve every employee. It was a day filled with gratitude, unity and plenty of delicious food, reflecting the family-like bond shared across the company.

Our employees are more than team members; they are valued members of the extended McCall Farms family. Their compassion, commitment and willingness to serve continue to shape not only our company, but the communities we proudly call home.



Managers and Human Resource members volunteer to serve employees with their Thanksgiving meal- Kelly Bogan, Janette Ignacio, Claudia Soto, Travis McClinton, Van Powers, Brent Walker & Ralphine White



TOGETHER



WE CAN!

McCall Farms is a family-owned company in Effingham, SC, known for bringing Real Southern Style cooking to tables across the country. With more than 100 years of growth, we take pride in delivering delicious, high-quality products enjoyed across the country. Our expanding family of brands includes Margaret Holmes, Glory, Peanut Patch, Allens, Veg-All, Popeye Spinach, and Bruce's.

Come Grow With Us at McCall Farms!

Whether you're beginning your career or bringing years of experience, you'll find opportunity, support, and a sense of belonging here. Our team values hard work, respect and working together to make something great.

Interested in joining us? Visit McCallfarms.com or call **843-662-2223**.

We offer competitive benefits including paid time off, medical insurance, 401(k), and education assistance.

FINDING A PASSION AND A FAMILY AT RUIZ FOODS Submitted by Ruiz Foods



Opal Jones

As a young adult, Opal Jones envisioned a career as an attorney. She never dreamed she would find her true calling in human resources and a strong workplace family at America's No. 1 frozen Mexican foods business.

"Ruiz Foods is a place where, if you choose to, you can grow, develop and have a future," says Jones, human resources manager at the Ruiz Foods Florence plant.

Krista Meekins, the Florence plant's community relations coordinator, says Jones' story is a great example of how someone can make the most of the company's culture of providing growth opportunities for team members who want to stretch.

At age 19, Jones left her native Jamaica for travel adventures, first to Canada, Europe and other countries, and then to the United States. She remained focused on the future as a lawyer when she found herself living in Florida and took her first human resources job with Walt Disney World. Suddenly, everything clicked.

"I just fell in love with HR and have come to realize it has a lot in common with being a lawyer when it comes to the need to understand laws and rules," Jones says, adding that HR also includes the important human element that meets her natural desire to connect with and support people.

Her initial position at Disney World marked the beginning of more than two decades of experience in every aspect of HR, from benefits to payroll to direct, people-focused roles, first for a variety of local governments and later for companies in the

food production industry. During this time, she also earned her bachelor's and master's degrees and became a U.S. citizen.

Nearly five years ago, LaSonja Jackson, a colleague and friend from another South Carolina company, joined Ruiz Foods in Florence and soon encouraged Jones to join her. Initially reluctant to take on a 60- to 90-minute daily commute each way from Columbia, Jones became a second-shift HR supervisor for Ruiz Foods in 2022 and was promoted in 2024 to the HR manager role.

"I'm grateful to her. It has been worth it, really wonderful," Jones says. "Certainly, this kind of job is not for everyone. You have to love dealing with people because sometimes what you think will be a conversation about a work situation ends up being about a life situation.

"You really have to show empathy. If you want people to give 100 percent, they have to feel 100 percent."



Opal and her HR team at the 2025 Annual Fiesta Family Day

On Jones' long list of what makes Ruiz Foods special are the opportunities available for those who want to pursue a career path. She cites the example of a current colleague who started in an entry-level position, moved into three additional roles and is now an HR generalist.

"We've also had quite a few supervisors who started in entry-level roles and have been promoted to leads and supervisors," Jones says. "We see growth potential and help people build careers."

While she loves HR work, it is the culture that makes Ruiz Foods especially meaningful to Jones. She notes that while it is a serious business, we do put some laughter and humor into our days. In some ways, it's like being in the ministry because no two days are alike.

"We're really diverse in every way. We have French, English and Spanish speakers;



Opal and her HR team with their Best Pink Out Group 2024 awards

introverts and extroverts; and people who are willing to help others along," she says. "It's a buffet of people who are just wonderful. There's room for everyone."

Culture is key for Jones as well, with a commitment to integrity, teamwork and safety leading the way. A favorite recent memory is the annual Christmas luncheon.

"It's a great, great place. We don't just sit in a corner and operate our business. We're out there," Jones says. "It's wonderful how involved we are in the community. We support teachers and children, distribute hams and turkeys, and do so much more."

For example, she says the Saturday following the holiday lunch, Ruiz Foods volunteers once again participated in the Wreaths Across America program, laying wreaths at veterans' graves at Florence National Cemetery.

She also notes that it does not hurt that Ruiz Foods makes "amazing products."

"I see the process from start to finish. The end result is just delicious."

With deeply mixed emotions, Jones will begin her next chapter this month, a move intended to eliminate her long commute, which has become weary. Leaving behind deep relationships at Ruiz Foods is difficult, she says. Her colleague and friend Jackson will return from Texas to assume the HR manager role in Florence.

"This is my family. If I didn't have the commute, they'd have to drag me out of here with a tow truck," she says. "I always tell new team members when they come in that we 'hire to retire.' I will stay in touch with this family, and I am really going to miss the group."



Photos are of Opal Jones and her Team competing for Best Group to Pink Out for our Pink Out Day 2024 and 2025. Our annual Pink Out Day supports The McLeod Center for Cancer Treatment & Research.

AT RUIZ FOODS, WE HAVE A LEGACY OF
MAKING GREAT FOOD AND A PASSION
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Ruiz Foods is committed to giving back to the communities
where our team members live and work.

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HONDA SPOTLIGHTS CAREERS DURING MANUFACTURING DAY Submitted by Honda South Carolina Manufacturing



Honda hosts nearly 2,000 students and teachers from more than 60 schools across ten of its U.S. production facilities in conjunction with National Manufacturing Day this year. Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette and State Senator Mike Reichenbach joined Honda South Carolina Manufacturing (SCM) in Timmonsville SCM for their Manufacturing Day activities while students assembled model side-by-side vehicles, took a ride on a side-by-side simulator, competed with peers in a drill bot board competition and explored 3D printing technology.

TIMMONSVILLE-Honda hosted nearly 2,000 students and teachers from more than 60 schools across 10 U.S. production facilities in conjunction with National Manufacturing Day. The annual event reflects the company's continued commitment to preparing a future-ready workforce for careers in American manufacturing.

This year's National Manufacturing Day was Oct. 3, with events held throughout the month to unite the manufacturing industry and build awareness about career opportunities. Honda facilities in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Ohio, North Carolina and South Carolina participated in Manufacturing Day with the goal of strengthening the local talent pipeline and supporting advanced manufacturing in the U.S.

"With more than 45 years of

manufacturing in America, Honda has a proud tradition of celebrating Manufacturing Day by opening our doors to students and allowing our associates to share their passion for manufacturing careers," said Meredith Reffey, workforce partnerships leader at American Honda Motor Co. Inc. "These events give students a real look at modern manufacturing and make these careers feel attainable and exciting."

Each participating location offered hands-on activities unique to the facility and the products it manufactures. Students assembled model side-by-side vehicles, took a ride on a side-by-side simulator, competed with peers in a drill bot board competition and explored 3D printing technology at Honda South Carolina Manufacturing (SCM) in Timmonsville, the exclusive global source for the Honda Pioneer and Talon vehicles.

Additionally, a new initiative called, "What's Your E?" highlighted the different entry points into a manufacturing career. Students learned more about enrolling in postsecondary education, enlisting in the military or entering the workforce after high school, while connecting with Honda associates who followed the same path.

Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette and State Senator Mike Reichenbach joined SCM for their Manufacturing Day activities along with Butler Academy of Hartsville, Aynor High School, the Academy for Technology and Academics, the Academy for the Arts, Science and Technology: A STEM School and the Palmetto Academy for Learning Motorsports (PALM).

Learn more about Honda manufacturing in America at hondainamerica.com. For more information about National Manufacturing Day, visit mfgday.com.



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DOWNTOWN FLORENCE CELEBRATES 2025 GROWTH Submitted by the Florence Downtown Development Office



Pine Street Townhomes

Downtown Florence added five new businesses in 2025. Downtown Florence's Main Street Program supports entrepreneurs from idea to opening, and many of these new additions took advantage of programs, training and other services offered by the office to bring their vision of a brick-and-mortar location to life.

Congratulations to these entrepreneurs for their hard work. Here's who was welcomed in 2025:

Bojangles (130 S. Irby St.) – A first-of-its-kind concept, this regionally owned franchise adaptively reused an existing downtown space to create a friendly dine-in and takeout experience featuring exclusive menu items such as milkshakes, salads and Bojangles' famous strips and biscuits.

El Venue (157 W. Evans St.) – Florence's newest event venue, this newly renovated storefront space is ideal for hosting your next reception, business meeting or party. It also features an updated bridal lounge.

Florence Nutrition (292 W. Evans St.) – Visitors love the tea

bombs, juices, acai bowls and smoothies offered at this new healthy spot and delivery is available.

Funky Flow Fitness (167 N. Dargan St.) – Brazilian jiu-jitsu has a new home in downtown Florence with this women-owned duo teaching a variety of classes, from beginners to competition-level participants. Wrestling and youth classes are also offered.

Lucky Dog Re-tail Thrift (236 W. Evans St.) – From the team at Lucky Dog Animal Rescue, this volunteer-led thrift store has become a downtown gem for secondhand items, pet supplies and more.

Interested in opening a business? Visit www.florencedowntown.com and make an appointment with the team today. The Downtown Florence Main Street Program is nationally recognized for its work cultivating inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Staff and partners work one-on-one with small businesses to help them grow from idea to opening and provide supportive services throughout the life cycle of a small-business operation. In 2026, the organization will open its first retail accelerator program, offering online-only or pop-up businesses an opportunity to test products in a brick-and-mortar setting supported by 12 months of wraparound services.

Downtown is also growing residentially, celebrating the completion of the Pine Street Townhomes (Dargan/Pine streets), construction of 3 Oaks Townhomes (Evans/Warley streets), redevelopment of the Warley/Evans Street townhomes, and the groundbreaking for The Gamble Apartments at Urban Square and The Sarah Townhomes on Baroody Street. In total, these developments are delivering 138 new housing units to downtown Florence.



5 New Small Businesses in 2025. BIG Downtown Impact.

We're celebrating small business in Downtown Florence! Congratulations to these new small business owners who chose to open in Downtown Florence in 2025: Bojangles, El Venue, Florence Nutrition, Funky Flow Fitness, and Lucky Dog Re-Tail Thrift. Learn more about our award-winning Main Street Program. www.florencedowntown.com.

LET'S FIX THE CRACKS IN YOUR FOUNDATION By Robin Lewis



HEMINGWAY — They will tell you that building a house is wrought with problems. It will test your patience, your budget and your perseverance. We had to visit the job site nearly every day until our new home was finished. I was pregnant with our second child at the time, and apparently that granted me special authority. The workers were afraid of me — in the nicest possible way. When I spoke, it was like the old E.F. Hutton TV commercials. Everyone stopped. Everyone listened. Doors were moved, steps were relocated, and anything broken was immediately fixed. It was a beautiful moment of power I have never quite replicated.

We drew the floor plan, chose brick, paint, flooring and wallpaper (this was 1987, so think blue and mauve everywhere), but what amazed me most was the foundation work. They cut trees, dug for days, hauled off mountains of dirt and created what looked like a crater behind our property. Our contractor explained that the foundation had to be sound — every rock, root and soft patch removed — or the house could shift and crack.

Growing up, we sang the old hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation,” often. Its theology still rings true today:

The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord...

Not only is Jesus the foundation of the church, but He must be the foundation of our personal lives as well.



Going Back to Your Foundations

Do you know what your foundation is? Your beliefs? Your convictions? And

more importantly — are you living them? We are living in a time when Christian beliefs stir offense, tension and misunderstandings. More than ever, we need to know what we believe and why.

Just as roots, rocks and debris can weaken a house, unresolved internal debris in our hearts can destabilize our spiritual lives. Old relationships, unhealed trauma and incorrect beliefs act like buried obstacles. They may be invisible at first glance, but they influence everything built on top of them.



What we were taught growing up, what we experienced and what we believed before we came to Christ all contribute to the layers of our foundation — some strong, some cracked, some in desperate need of excavation. When we step into a relationship with Jesus, He begins revealing those weak places. Not to shame us, but to heal us. He digs out the fear, the lies and the misguided thinking and replaces them with truth. The freedom that comes with that process is relief and joy.

Jesus made a bold statement in John 14:12:

“The person who follows me in faith ... will do the same mighty miracles that I do, and even greater ...”

Miracles? Yes. That is part of your design. But a miracle-producing life requires a miracle-ready foundation. First, He changes us — then He works through us.

Building on a Solid Foundation

The inner work Jesus does in our hearts must be paired with intentional discipleship — the basics of the faith that are not basic at all. They are life-giving. They are stabilizing. They are transformational.

The challenge is that many believers today receive little to no discipleship. Church attendance is good, but simply sitting in a pew does not build spiritual strength. Jesus gathered a circle of disciples who learned through teaching, conversation and practice. We need that same kind of intentional growth.

As Jesus becomes Lord in every area — not just the “church” areas — we become free from overcommitment, people-pleasing and pressures that were never ours to carry. That freedom strengthens the foundation.

Every believer should grow in:

- Intimacy with God
- Grace, acceptance and love
- Identity in Christ
- Discerning God’s voice
- Prayer and intercession

These are not optional extras. Without growth in these areas, we never discover what our faith is actually capable of producing — in our lives or in the lives of others.

Your New Year’s Assignment

Before you rush into January with fresh resolutions and the determination to join a gym you may or may not enter, pause to examine your foundation.

1. What experiences and beliefs about God, myself or others shaped me this past year?
2. Where do I sense cracks in my foundation — repeated struggles, discouragement or patterns that do not match who I am in Christ?
3. What have I been avoiding that Jesus may be inviting me to bring into the light?
4. Am I intentionally growing in my walk with God — or hoping spiritual maturity happens naturally, like my hydrangea?

Conclusion

Strong foundations are not glamorous. Nobody compliments a basement wall. Yet everything rests on it. In the same way, your spiritual foundation determines the strength, stability and fruitfulness of your entire life.

As you step into a new year, let Jesus do the deep work and remove the old roots. Let Him reinforce weak places. Let Him build something in you that can carry His presence, His peace and His purpose. Because if the foundation is strong, your life can stand tall — unshaken and aligned with who He created you to be.

And if you would like a simple tool to strengthen that foundation each day, grab my free Daily Faith Declarations at www.robinlewislife.com. They will help you speak truth, renew your mind and start building stronger — one day at a time.

GSSM IS EXPANDING ACCESS AND OPENING DOORS TO STEM

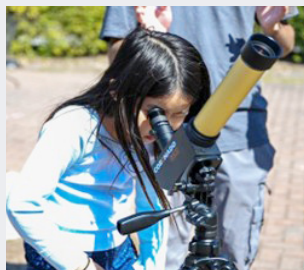
HARTSVILLE— At the South Carolina Governor’s School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM), STEM access does not begin or end in the classroom. It lives in hands-on experiences, community connections and programs designed to reach students wherever they are.

That approach comes to life each year through three initiatives at the heart of GSSM’s statewide mission: Inside GSSM, SPARK! and ENGAGE. Together, the programs form a pathway that introduces students to STEM, nurtures curiosity and gives families from all backgrounds the opportunity to explore what is possible.

Each program is led by Irene Middleton, outreach director of academic year programs at GSSM, who oversees the school’s statewide outreach efforts. Her goal is simple but powerful: remove barriers and create meaningful opportunities for students to engage in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

“Inside GSSM, SPARK! and ENGAGE all support the same vision,” Middleton said. “We want students to see themselves in STEM and know these opportunities are within reach.”

Inside GSSM: A Statewide Celebration of Curiosity and Community



A young visitor explores the solar surface through a specialized telescope during Inside GSSM, one of the many hands-on activities that introduce families to real-world science.

students, faculty and staff.

Activities include liquid nitrogen ice cream, slime making, rockets, archaeology, soap-bubble science, DNA extraction and virtual reality. Many activities are taught by GSSM students, giving younger visitors a chance to meet, “Govies,” who once stood where they stand today.

“Popular activities like our ice cream lab and bubble demonstrations are fun, but they also show real-world applications of science,” Middleton said. “Families leave excited about learning and inspired to explore STEM together.”

Attendance is free, and registration is encouraged but not required.

SPARK!: Virtual Learning That Meets Students Where They Are



Students experience the science behind bubbles at Inside GSSM, where hands-on demonstrations help connect STEM concepts to everyday wonder.

student in a rural district can log in from home and experience high-quality STEM learning.”

Inside GSSM is the school’s signature community event. Families travel from across South Carolina each year to spend a day immersed in interactive activities designed to make STEM approachable and exciting.

On Saturday, March 7, 2026, the GSSM campus will open its doors from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., welcoming visitors to explore hands-on stations led by

Spring sessions run from February through April 2026 from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Courses are free, offered once per semester and limited to 25 students each. Registration opens in early December and remains open until classes are filled.

Each session introduces advanced topics in a way that builds confidence and encourages exploration.

ENGAGE: Deeper Exploration for Future Innovators



Middle school students collaborate on a coding challenge during an ENGAGE session, GSSM’s in-person after-school program that introduces learners to programming and game design.

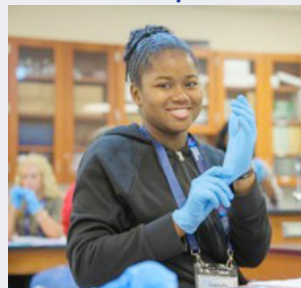
ENGAGE is designed for middle school students ready for a deeper dive into STEM. The in-person program guides students through eight weeks of creative problem-solving and project-based learning.

The 2026 program focuses on game design using Lua, a programming language similar to Python, and the PICO-8 virtual game platform.

“ENGAGE gives students a chance to see how coding, design and engineering work together,” Middleton said. “They develop critical thinking and creativity while learning skills that will grow with them.”

Sessions meet Mondays from Feb. 2 through March 23, 2026, from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. on the GSSM campus in Hartsville. The program is free and limited to 20 students. Attendance at all sessions is required. Registration opens in early December.

A Statewide Impact



A student suits up for a hands-on lab activity, part of GSSM’s commitment to making advanced STEM learning accessible to students across South Carolina.

Inside GSSM, SPARK! and ENGAGE are part of GSSM’s Academic Year Outreach Programs, which deliver hands-on STEM experiences statewide.

During the 2024–25 school year, these efforts reached 10,254 participants across 34 counties, 32 districts and 64 schools. Nearly 500 teachers also participated, gaining classroom-ready strategies to support instruction.

The impact extends far beyond attendance numbers.

“Students discover that science is something they can do,” Middleton said. “That moment stays with them.”

Teachers report increased student engagement, stronger problem-solving skills and a growing interest in STEM careers. In many under-resourced communities, these free programs eliminate cost and travel barriers that often limit opportunity.

A Pathway Into STEM for South Carolina Families

Together, Inside GSSM, SPARK! and ENGAGE form a bridge into science and technology education across South Carolina. Some families attend Inside GSSM and later enroll in SPARK! or ENGAGE. Others begin virtually and eventually visit the Hartsville campus. The pathway is flexible, welcoming and designed to grow with each student.

“We hope every family leaves with a sense of possibility,” Middleton said. “Whether they attend one event or several programs, our goal is for them to feel inspired to keep exploring STEM.”

Registration for all three programs opens in early December 2025 and remains open until each offering is filled.

To learn more about GSSM’s after-school programs, visit scgssm.org/AfterschoolPrograms.

Details for Inside GSSM are available at scgssm.org/InsideGSSM.

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SATURDAY
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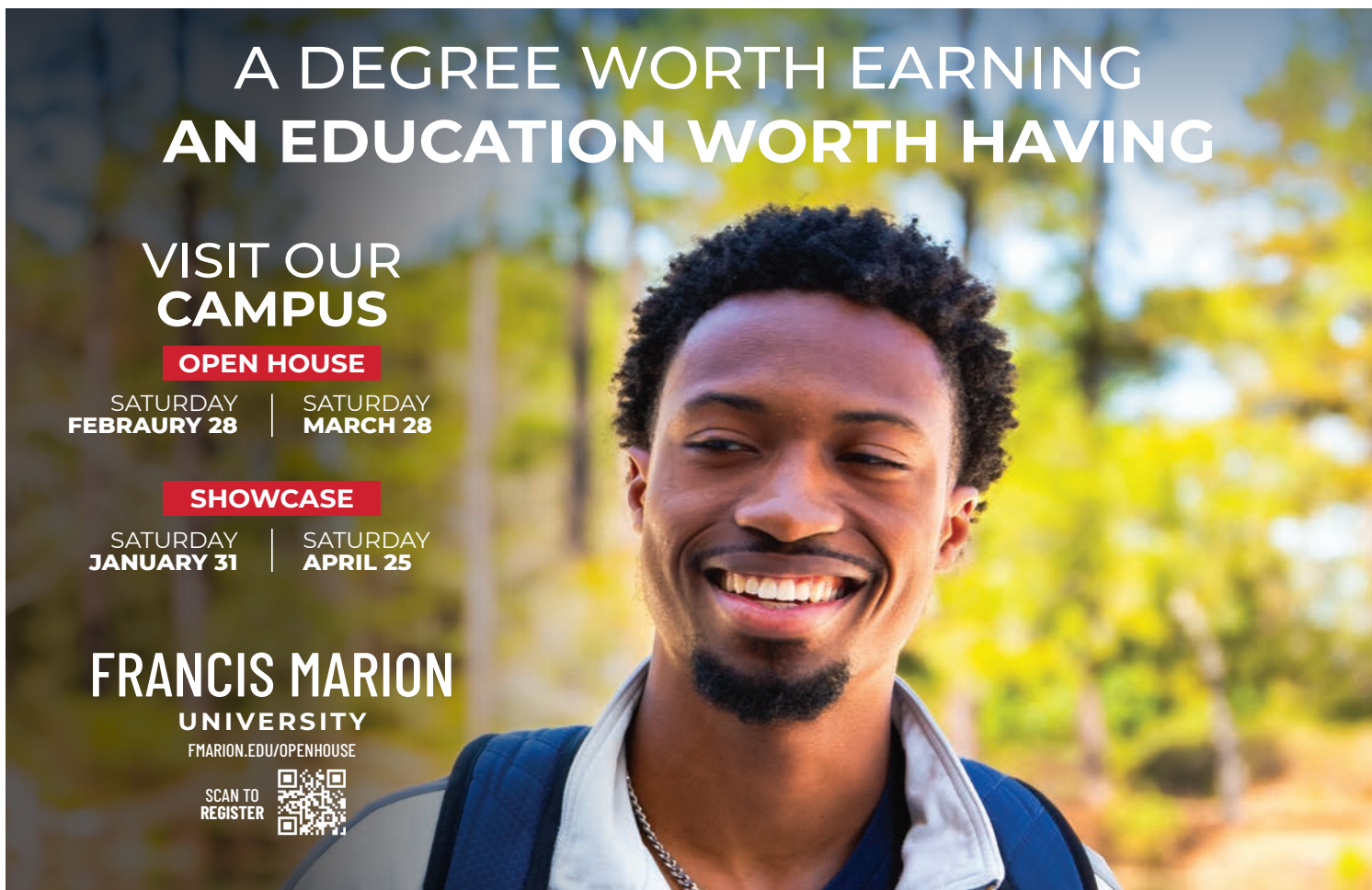
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JANUARY 31

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KATIE KEMP'S PATH TO EXCELLENCE Submitted by FMU



Katie Kemp

When Plano, Texas, native Katie Kemp arrived at Francis Marion University (FMU), she expected volleyball to define her college experience. What she did not anticipate were the many other opportunities — study abroad, FMU Honors, Model United Nations and work in the Writing Center — that would ultimately shape her into the scholar, leader and future attorney she is today.

A political science major with a minor in environmental studies and collaterals in

Spanish and economics, Kemp has made her mark both on and off the court. She began playing volleyball at age eight and was recruited by FMU during high school. She joined the Patriots her freshman year, an experience she simply calls, “a great opportunity.”

Kemp’s college search originally focused on large universities, but everything changed once she visited FMU.

“I decided on FMU first because of volleyball, but once my parents and I visited campus, I knew for sure it was for me,” she says. “There were so many benefits I didn’t even think to consider in the college application process. My parents were big fans of the small class sizes.”

Despite her independent nature and desire to study far from home, the distance was not always easy. This year, however, her parents made an extraordinary gesture, temporarily relocating to Camden, S.C., so they could attend her final season of volleyball games. “It has been really nice to have them close,” Kemp says.

A summa cum laude graduate, Kemp’s academic journey has been defined by challenging, hands-on learning experiences.

“I applied for FMU Honors before I was even accepted to the university. I really admired the Honors Center building,” she says.

“I took some really cool classes through Honors, like, ‘Plants That Change the World.’ It was so fun. I love nature and hope to go into environmental law. Our lab was in the greenhouse. How cool is that?”

FMU Honors also opened doors to travel-study opportunities, something Kemp encourages all students to pursue. She studied abroad twice — first in Burgos, Spain, at the Universidad de Burgos, and later in Germany at RPTU during a Maymester trip.

“Before FMU, I had never traveled out of the country,” she says. She praises the structure and safety of the programs and values the friendships she formed along the way.

Her involvement with Model United Nations further enriched her college experience. Kemp traveled to New York twice, once as a delegate and once as head delegate. Dr. Jennifer Titanski-Hooper, vice president for research and community services and adviser to the Model UN program, whom Kemp calls “the heart and soul of Model UN,” became a key mentor and role model.

“The Model UN experience was fully immersive,” Kemp says. “You do a lot of prep work researching your topics, and our professors were so helpful. You meet with people, advocate for your country and make legislation. It’s really nice for students who want to make a difference to have that opportunity in college.”

In addition to FMU Honors, study abroad and Model UN, Kemp conducted research with political science professor Dr. Kyle Morgan. After taking his course, “The Right to Privacy,” which broadened her understanding of constitutional law in the digital age, she completed a summer research project with him on the same topic.

Kemp also speaks fondly of the professors who shaped her FMU experience, including Dr. Titanski-Hooper, Dr. Morgan, Dr. Rebecca Flanagan and Dr. Jason Doll. Each encouraged her to push beyond limits she did not know she had, strengthening her academically and expanding her worldview.

PATH TO EXCELLENCE CONT'D

Another group Kemp holds dear is her volleyball team. Far from home, her teammates and coach became a second family. Head coach Lauren Baufield helped shape her into not only a strong athlete, but also a strong person.

Beyond the classroom and the court, Kemp is the longest-serving tutor in the Writing Center, a role she says strengthened her writing skills and challenged her to continue learning.

Graduating a semester early, Kemp plans to return to Texas for the spring, where she looks forward to spending time with her family and staying involved in volleyball through coaching. She plans to attend law school in the future, hopefully in South Carolina, a place she now considers her second home.

Reflecting on an FMU experience defined by connection, support and growth, Kemp credits the university with helping her become the confident, motivated woman she is today.

"Everywhere you look, there is a perk at FMU," Kemp says. "You are given specialized attention and held to a higher standard. The faculty cares so much. I've been able to explore so many opportunities academically and athletically because I chose Francis Marion."

BROWNING DELIVERED FMU COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Articles submitted by FMU



P.J. Browning

P.J. Browning, chief executive officer of Evening Post Publishing and president and publisher of The Post and Courier, delivered the commencement address and received an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree at Francis Marion University's Fall 2025 commencement ceremony. The event was held at 10 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 13, in the Smith University Center.

Students from the College of Liberal Arts and the schools of Business, Education and Health Sciences received their degrees during the ceremony. Each graduate had eight guests, and a ticket was required for entry. Guests without tickets was able to watch the livestream in Chapman Auditorium. The ceremony was also streamed online at www.fmarion.edu and on the FMU YouTube channel.

Browning has built a distinguished career serving communities through journalism. She began her career at the News-Leader in Springfield, Missouri, after graduating from Missouri State University and has since held leadership roles across the country, including serving as president and publisher of The Sun News in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and The Telegraph in Macon, Georgia.

In 2013, she joined The Post and Courier, South Carolina's oldest daily newspaper, as publisher and president. During her tenure, the newspaper has adapted to the evolving media landscape, expanding its digital presence, launching podcasts and opening new bureaus across the state, including The Post and Courier Pee Dee, which employs FMU student interns in both the newsroom and business operations.

Under Browning's leadership, The Post and Courier received the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Public Service for its series, "Till Death Do Us Part," which exposed the high rate of domestic violence in South Carolina and spurred legislative reform.

Her contributions to journalism have earned numerous honors, including Publisher of the Year by Editor & Publisher in 2019 and Executive of the Year by the Inter American Press Association in 2023. Browning has devoted her time to a number of professional and community organizations, including the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, America's Newspaper Foundation, the South Carolina Press Association and Trident United Way.

FMU CELEBRATES SEASON OF GIVING WITH ANNUAL HOLIDAY TRADITIONS



Annual FMU Children's Holiday Party

Francis Marion University (FMU) continued one of its most cherished traditions when it welcomes families to its annual Children's Holiday Party. For nearly three decades, FMU has celebrated the season by bringing together faculty and staff and their families with members of the community for a series of holiday events—none more beloved than the Children's Party.

Hosted at the university's Freshwater Ecology Center,

the celebration will treat children to a magical afternoon of gingerbread house making, pony rides, ornament making, festive treats and photos with Santa. Along with the children of FMU faculty and staff, mothers and children from local shelters are invited to share in the holiday cheer.

This tradition reflects FMU's dedication not only to its campus community, but also to families throughout the region who may not otherwise participate in holiday events.

"When Fred and I first came to FMU, it was important to us to include the community in the university's holiday celebrations," said FMU First Lady Folly Carter. "What better way to do this than by hosting a Children's Party each year?"

The event, now in its twenty-seventh year, remains one of FMU's most joyful traditions, offering a moment of wonder, warmth and connection for all.

FMU TO OFFER EIGHT EVENING COLLEGE COURSES THIS SPRING



Francis Marion will offer eight courses as part of its Spring 2026 Evening College program. Now in its eighth semester, Evening College offers courses for professional and personal development.

Spring offerings include:

- Genealogy: Walking with Ancestors taught by Dr. Erica Johnson
- C'est la Vie Française: French Language and Culture Oui-k by Oui-k taught by Melanie McMillan
- Curtain Up! A Journey Through

American Musical Theatre taught by Glen Gourley

- True Crime in a Southern Clime: Florida's Most Foul taught by Dr. Rebecca Flannagan
- The Art of Acrylics: Beginner and Intermediate taught by Brittany Gilbert
- Exploring Watercolor for Beginners taught by Jane Jackson
- Level Up Your Layers: Intermediate Watercolor taught by Jane Jackson
- There's a New Stitch in Town: Beginning Sewing Techniques taught by Clair Hummel

Evening College credits are not applicable to degree programs. The eleven-week program, taught by experts in each field, begins the week of January 20 and is only \$200 per course.

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

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GRIT AND GREATNESS: MARION COUNTY TEACHERS LEAD Submitted by Dr. Kandace Bethea, superintendent



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION — Across Marion County, we are witnessing a powerful story unfold — one where dedicated educators are transforming classrooms, closing learning gaps and helping students reach heights once believed out of reach. That story took center stage recently as three outstanding teachers from Johnakin Middle School were honored for their exceptional impact through the South Carolina Department of Education’s Strategic Compensation Pilot Program. Their achievements reflect not

only personal excellence but also the tremendous promise of what can happen when teachers are supported, encouraged and recognized for the profound difference they make.

On Nov. 3, representatives from the Marion County School District surprised these educators with performance-based bonuses totaling more than \$49,000. These awards, funded through a state initiative, celebrate teachers who have demonstrated extraordinary levels of student academic growth in English, language arts and math. Unlike traditional measures that focus solely on proficiency, the program recognizes progress — rewarding educators who move every learner forward, no matter where they begin. It is a model that values effort, growth and instructional impact, offering well-deserved recognition to educators who help students achieve meaningful and measurable gains.

I am incredibly proud that MCSD is part of this innovative effort. When we applied to participate in the Strategic Compensation Pilot Program, our goal was clear: uplift and support teachers who are moving the needle for students. Johnakin Middle School was selected by the state based on rigorous criteria, and this year eligible teachers had the opportunity to earn between \$2,500 and \$25,920 depending on their documented student growth. This opportunity underscores our commitment to celebrating educators who excel in ways that truly matter for student learning.

Among this year’s honorees, Ms. Nadata Pryce achieved one of the highest student-growth metrics recorded in the state. She is joined by her colleagues, Ms. Shemoi Thompson and Ms. Marion Blanks

— each exemplifying the talent, resilience and passion that defines MCSD educators. Their recognition affirms what we already know: when teachers feel valued, supported and celebrated, student success follows.

This program, now benefiting teachers at 37 schools across South Carolina, reflects a statewide commitment to honoring educators who inspire students, spark curiosity and refuse to let challenges hinder academic progress. As Superintendent Ellen Weaver noted, behind every growth metric is a teacher who encouraged a struggling student, persevered through obstacles and nurtured a love of learning.

For me, witnessing the impact of this program has been both inspiring and affirming. Our teachers give their best every day to ensure every child in Marion County grows. Seeing their dedication recognized at the state level reinforces the importance of investing in educators who consistently go above and beyond. I am eager to continue our partnership with SCDE and hope to see this program expand so that even more educators can benefit from this meaningful recognition.

As a district, we remain committed to uplifting and supporting the individuals who make student success possible. When teachers thrive, students do too — and we proudly celebrate the educators who are helping every child reach new heights. Their achievements reflect the heart of MCSD: a community that believes in growth, values dedication and champions excellence.



Pictured Nadata Pryce and Marion Blanks from Johnakin Middle School are recognized for their outstanding contributions to education as they receive their Excellence in Teaching checks during a special presentation hosted by Marion County School District.

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CLAFLIN ALUMNUS DELIVERS FALL 2025 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Submitted by Claflin University



Cecil J. Williams

ORANGEBURG-Cecil J. Williams, whose photographs and numerous publications chronicled the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina and beyond, was the featured speaker for Claflin University's Fall 2025 Commencement Convocation on Friday, December 12, at 10 a.m. in the Jonas T. Kennedy Health and Wellness Complex. Claflin will confer bachelor's and master's degrees to more than 170 scholars. The

University also honored 36 Leal and Loyal alumni from the, "Silver Class," of 2000 during this year's commencement. The convocation was a ticketed event. However, the ceremony was live streamed on the University's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ClaflinUniversity1869.

Williams earned a bachelor's degree in 1960 at Claflin. The historic image of Williams drinking from a "White's Only" water fountain inspired a collaboration between Williams and Actively Black founder Lanny Smith. The apparel company is now producing stylish "athleisure wear," including a hoodie that highlights the iconic photograph. Williams owned the stage when he modeled the hoodie on the runway during New York Fashion Week in September 2025.

Williams, a native of Orangeburg, S.C., is internationally recognized for his powerful photographic documentation of the American Civil Rights Movement, particularly across South Carolina and the Deep South. His images have become some of the most important visual records of the movement.

"Cecil J. Williams is not only a distinguished son of Orangeburg, Claflin University and South Carolina, but he is also a towering chronicler of our nation's long march toward justice," said Claflin University President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack. "His life's work captures the courage, sacrifice and determination of generations of activists—many of whom walked the very grounds our graduates walk today. We were deeply honored that he shared his wisdom, experience and insightful perspectives with the Class of 2025."

As a teenager, Williams became one of the youngest photographers working for Jet Magazine and other national outlets. His photographs documented pivotal events in South Carolina's civil rights history, including the Briggs v. Elliott case, one of the cases that formed the basis of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended legal segregation in public schools. His work also captured the protests and aftermath surrounding the Orangeburg Massacre, when in 1968, three students were killed, and many others were injured during a civil rights demonstration.

His numerous honors include multiple awards from the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission. In 2017, Governor Henry McMaster presented him with the state's highest civilian honor, the Order of the Palmetto.

Williams and James Bennett, executive vice president and director of external affairs for First Citizens Bank, was awarded the Doctorate of Humane Letters during the commencement convocation. In addition to his distinguished career in the banking industry, Bennett was a member and a former chair of Claflin's Board of Trustees.

"James Bennett's tenure on the Board of Trustees was

CLAFLIN ALUMNUS CONT'D



James Bennett

marked by exemplary leadership, thoughtful governance and an unwavering commitment to the institution's mission," said Warmack. "Under his leadership, the Board set a high standard for integrity, collaboration and forward-thinking stewardship."

As Executive Vice President and Director of External Affairs for First Citizens Bank, Bennett is responsible for nationwide

community engagement and strengthening relationships with state and federal government officials, members of Congress, trade groups and other policy stakeholders.

His previous executive-level positions with First Citizens Bank include serving as Mid-South Area Executive (2015-2023), during which he led branch, business and commercial banking teams to provide outstanding client service. He had responsibility for portions of South Carolina and Georgia, comprising over \$2

billion in deposits and \$1 billion in loans. He was also executive vice president and director of public affairs, and head of the Community Banking Group division at First Citizens Bank. Bennett was also president and CEO at South Carolina Community Bank and president at Victory Savings Bank.

Bennett earned a bachelor's degree in political science at the University of South Carolina, and he is also a graduate of the South Carolina Bankers School. He received an Honorary Doctorate in Business Administration from the University of South Carolina at Aiken.

Bennett was born in Washington, D.C., and moved to Cheraw, South Carolina, shortly thereafter. He has been a South Carolina resident for more than 50 years.

Bennett's numerous awards and honors include being named United Way of the Midlands Humanitarian of the Year (2022) and the first African American Chairman of the South Carolina Bankers Association (2020). He received Claflin's Thaddeus Bythewood Award in 2018. He was the first African American to receive the Outstanding Young Banker Award from the South Carolina Bankers Association (1998).

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY SETS GIVING TUESDAY RECORD IN 2025 Submitted by Claflin University

ORANGEBURG-Claflin University is pleased to announce that this year's Giving Tuesday campaign raised \$140,640 from 187 generous donors, marking the most successful Giving Tuesday effort in the institution's history.

This year's total represents a 26 percent increase over the previous record of \$111,301 set in 2024, and underscores Claflin's longstanding commitment to providing private support for students in financial need.

President Dwaun J. Warmack expressed his deep gratitude for the broad community that came together this year. "I am humbled by the way Claflin's friends, families, alumni and colleagues from other HBCUs rallied together to support our students and each other," Warmack said. "This collective purpose reminds us that when we lift each other up, we all rise."

"The purpose of this year's campaign resonated deeply with our donors," said Willie Jude II, Vice President for

Institutional Advancement at Claflin. "For many of our first-generation students, paying for college is a constant worry. According to a recent national survey, nearly one in four first-generation college students said they weren't sure how they would pay for the next semester. This kind of uncertainty affects not just a student's finances — it can jeopardize their path to a degree and beyond. Clearly, our donors want to change that."

As a historically Black institution committed to nurturing talent and ambition, Claflin knows that each scholarship awarded can transform a student's life — and, by extension, their family's future. The funds raised this year will directly support talented, low-income and first-generation students, helping them stay on track toward graduation and achieve upward social mobility.

Claflin University thanks every donor — from longstanding alumni to recent graduates, from friends of the institution to first-time contributors — for investing in the next generation of leaders, scholars and changemakers.

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CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP

Submitted by Lee County School District



BISHOPVILLE—Each October, National Principals Month provides an important opportunity to recognize visionary school leaders whose daily commitment shapes the success, well-being and futures of students and educators. This year, Lee County School District proudly celebrates three exceptional principals: LaToya Boyd of Lee Central Elementary School, Dr. John C. Kennedy of

Lee Central Middle School and Kevin D. Wilson of Lee Central High School.

Collectively, these distinguished leaders represent more than 75 years of instructional expertise, operational excellence and a steadfast belief that students come first. Their leadership anchors the district's mission and elevates educational outcomes across every level — from early childhood through high school graduation.

LaToya Boyd, Principal, Lee Central Elementary School



*LaToya Boyd,
Principal, Lee Central
Elementary School*

A Bishopville native and respected instructional leader, LaToya Boyd brings 25 years of rich educational experience to her role as principal of the new, state-of-the-art Lee Central Elementary School — a consolidated campus serving approximately 690 students across 4K through fifth grade.

A proud salutatorian of Bishopville High School's Class of 1996, Boyd holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Clemson University, a master's degree in early childhood education from Piedmont College and an educational specialist degree from Georgia State University. Known for her results-driven leadership style, she has excelled as an assistant principal, literacy coach, EIP team leader and teacher.

Her experience in Gwinnett County Public Schools' renowned principal preparation program equipped her with a strong foundation in data-driven decision-making, coaching and cultivating positive school culture. Superintendent Bernard McDaniel Sr. has expressed deep confidence in her ability to lead the elementary school into a new era of unity, innovation and excellence.

Boyd leads with heart, high expectations and a commitment to building a school community grounded in collaboration. As the inaugural principal of the new consolidated elementary school, her leadership sets the tone for the future of early learning in Lee County.

Dr. John C. Kennedy, Principal, Lee Central Middle School



*Dr. John C. Kennedy,
Principal, Lee Central
Middle School*

At Lee Central Middle School, transformational leadership is demonstrated daily through the work of John C. Kennedy, a seasoned educator and administrator who embodies the qualities of an instructional leader devoted to student growth, staff empowerment and community engagement.

Kennedy's tenure in Lee County School District has been marked by innovative academic programming, strengthened teacher support systems and a relentless focus on the middle grades as a pivotal stage in adolescent development. His leadership style promotes accountability, meaningful relationships, positive school culture and an unwavering

commitment to preparing students for high school success.

Under Kennedy's guidance, Lee Central Middle School continues to make strides in student achievement, restorative practices and strategic interventions — demonstrating his deep understanding of what middle school learners need to thrive.

Kevin D. Wilson, Principal, Lee Central High School



*Kevin D. Wilson,
Principal, Lee Central
High School*

Named principal of Lee Central High School in July 2023, Kevin D. Wilson is a results-driven educator with 22 years of experience marked by instructional expertise, a commitment to student outcomes and a deep passion for professional growth.

A Hartsville native, Wilson earned multiple degrees from the University of South Carolina, including a bachelor's degree in mathematics, a master's degree in teaching secondary mathematics, and a master's degree in educational administration. His certifications span middle-level mathematics, secondary mathematics and secondary principal.

Throughout his career, Wilson has served as a mathematics teacher, Teacher of the Year and assistant principal at three schools, including 10 years at Lower Richland High School. He has completed both Richland School District One's Leadership and Development Program and the South Carolina Department of Education's Developing Aspiring Principals Program.

McDaniel praised Wilson upon his appointment, noting his goal-oriented and student-centered leadership style. Today, Wilson continues to strengthen Lee Central High School through high expectations, instructional quality and a clear vision for academic excellence and postsecondary readiness.

A District United by Exceptional Leadership

Although each principal leads a unique school community, Boyd, Kennedy and Wilson share a common purpose: to cultivate safe, supportive and academically rigorous environments where students can grow, achieve and dream beyond the classroom.

Their leadership directly impacts:

- Instructional quality and teacher development
- School climate and culture
- Family and community partnerships
- Student performance, attendance and engagement
- Long-term college, career and life success

In Lee County School District, principals do far more than manage buildings — they inspire transformation, anchor school communities and lead with compassion, wisdom and integrity.

Honoring Principals During National Principals Month

LaToya Boyd

A visionary leader shaping the foundational years of education at the new Lee Central Elementary School.

John C. Kennedy

A steadfast middle-level leader who empowers students and staff while cultivating a culture of growth.

Kevin D. Wilson

A dynamic high school principal committed to preparing graduates for success in college, careers and beyond.

Their contributions strengthen every corner of the district and ensure students receive the very best educational experience possible.

CCTC RECEIVES REGIONAL MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AWARD

Submitted by Nicole O. Miles, director of marketing and communications



SUMTER— Central Carolina Technical College is proud to announce its Marketing and Communications Department has earned a regional marketing and public relations award for outstanding work in event marketing and engagement. At the recent National Council for Marketing and Public Relations District 2 Conference, CCTC received a silver Medallion Award in recognition of its Pit Stop with a Pro campaign, marking the college's first award from NCMPR and a significant milestone for the department.

The 2025 NCMPR Medallion Awards honor excellence in marketing and communications among community and technical colleges across the southeastern United States and beyond. The competition drew more than 400 entries in District 2, highlighting strong regional participation and the prestige of the recognition.

CCTC earned second-place silver in the College Event/Campaign Wild Card category for Pit Stop with a Pro: NASCAR driver Kyle Weatherman campus experience.

This recognition adds to a strong record of achievement for the department. Over the last five years, CCTC's Marketing and Communications team has earned nearly 20 marketing, advertising and public relations awards from regional and

national industry competitions.

"This award is an exciting recognition for our team and the creativity behind Pit Stop with a Pro," said Nicole Miles, CCTC executive director of marketing and communications. "We created a hands-on event that inspired future Titans, connected technical programs to real career pathways and delivered an unforgettable experience for our students and community."

Pit Stop with a Pro brought NASCAR driver Kyle Weatherman to campus and turned Central Carolina into a high-energy, motorsports-themed career exploration event. Students, families and prospective learners met industry professionals, interacted with faculty, experienced hands-on demonstrations and learned how CCTC programs connect directly to real-world careers in fields such as transportation, manufacturing, engineering technologies and health care. The event blended excitement, community engagement and career readiness to inspire future Titans.

NCMPR District 2 includes community and technical colleges in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia, as well as international locations including Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands and the Bahamas. The Medallion Awards exclusively recognize excellence in two-year college marketing and communications and represent a notable achievement within the field.

The District 2 Conference took place in October in Virginia Beach, Va. Following this recognition, CCTC plans to submit the Pit Stop with a Pro campaign for national consideration in the upcoming NCMPR Paragon Awards.



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PEE DEE PATHWAYS: LINKING EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY

Submitted by Bridgette P. Coates, MPA, GCDF, workforce development director



The Pee Dee region is taking a major step toward building a stronger talent pipeline with the launch of Pee Dee Pathways, a new hands-on career exploration event for eighth graders across

the region.

The first regional event of its kind, Pee Dee Pathways brings together education, business and community leaders to help students connect classroom learning to real-world career opportunities. Through interactive exhibits and demonstrations, students explore high-demand fields such as health care, manufacturing, technology and skilled trades, while meeting the local professionals who make these careers possible.

The event's logo was designed by Jamison (JT) Johnson, a student at Darlington High School, showcasing creativity and talent within the region's schools.

"Eighth grade is a pivotal year," said Debbie Jones, the Pee Dee regional workforce advisor for the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce. "This is when students begin making choices about high school courses and career pathways. Pee Dee Pathways helps them see what's possible and understand that great opportunities exist right here at home."

Business and Industry Partners Encouraged to Participate

Local employers are invited to participate by setting up interactive, hands-on exhibits that introduce students to the skills, tools and technology used in their industries. Businesses may also serve as sponsors or volunteers to support the event.

"Economic growth depends on having a ready and informed workforce," said Lynn Wilson, director of community and workforce development at the Florence County Economic Development Partnership. "By connecting eighth graders to local career options early, Pee Dee Pathways helps ensure the next generation of talent is developed right here in our community."

Ingrid Cherry, HR manager for workforce development at McLeod Health, said health care offers many career paths.

"From clinical roles to technology, logistics and support services, Pee Dee Pathways gives students a chance to explore those opportunities in a meaningful, hands-on way and imagine themselves in a health care career," Cherry said.

Robbie Smith, director of the Darlington

County Institute of Technology, said experiential learning strengthens career and technical education programs.

"CTE programs thrive when students can see and experience what they're learning about," Smith said. "Pee Dee Pathways bridges that connection, helping students make informed choices even before they enter high school."

A Regional Collaboration for Long-Term Impact

Pee Dee Pathways is led by the Pee Dee Pathways Committee in partnership with local school districts, higher education institutions, industry leaders and community organizations, with 501(c)(3) support from the Eastern Carolina Community Foundation and guidance from the Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments.

"Investing in Pee Dee Pathways means investing in the future of our region," said Belle Zeigler, executive director of the Eastern Carolina Community Foundation.

"As the fiscal partner, we are proud to support an effort that connects students, educators and employers in ways that strengthen communities and expand opportunity for generations to come."

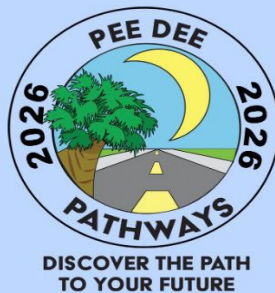
Joette Dukes, executive director of the Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments, said the initiative reflects the organization's mission.

"When students can see real career possibilities right here at home, we all benefit — our schools, industries and local economy," Dukes said.

The event is designed to create lasting connections between education and industry, helping students visualize their futures while allowing employers to strengthen their workforce pipeline.

Businesses interested in sponsoring, participating or volunteering may contact Debbie Jones at djones@dew.sc.gov.

Together, we're helping students see their future right here at home.



Logo by JT Jamison, Darlington High School

Build Your Future Workforce, Right Here!

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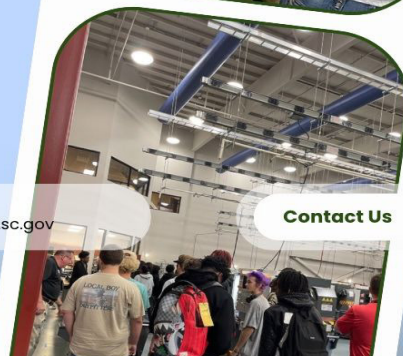
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HOW SCHOOL MEALS LIFT STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS



(Family Features) Food insecurity among children in the United States is a critical but often silent crisis that affects millions of young lives. In fact, one in five children face hunger or food insecurity, according to the U.S. Department of

Agriculture, and data from Feeding America show more than 13 million children in the United States live in “food-insecure” homes.

Among the factors fueling this epidemic of child hunger are rising food prices and economic instability, which continue to strain families nationwide. Lack of nutritious food is also a major reason students miss school or struggle to remain engaged in class.

“Child hunger is more than a nutrition issue — it’s a quiet crisis that robs children of their ability to focus, learn and thrive in the classroom,” said Ann Marie Krauthem, CEO of GENYOUth. “Every child deserves to be nourished, supported and ready to succeed, and the solution starts with a commitment to our nation’s schools.”

American adults agree, according to GENYOUth’s second annual, “Youth Hunger & School Meals,” survey. Nearly nine in 10 respondents (86 percent) believe going to school hungry severely hinders a child’s ability to concentrate in the classroom. Nearly all respondents (97 percent) recognize the broader impact of food insecurity on a student’s overall school experience, including low energy or fatigue (84 percent), difficulty concentrating (78 percent) and declining academic performance (62 percent).

What’s more, they connect food insecurity with a range of physical and emotional challenges, including frequent complaints such as headaches and stomachaches (68 percent), as well as heightened anxiety and stress and lower self-esteem.

School Meals Are Critical to Learning

American adults overwhelmingly believe the solution to hunger in the classroom begins with access to healthy school meals. More than nine in 10 agree, students who eat breakfast regularly perform better in school, while most recognize starting the day with a full stomach gives students an academic edge, including improved attendance and classroom participation.

There is also strong support for making school breakfast a standard part of the school day rather than an optional add-on. For nearly seven in 10, this represents a top priority.

Rallying Support to Ensure All Children Thrive

School meals relied upon by 30 million students for a significant portion of their daily nutrition, according to the School Nutrition Association, provide the milk, whole grains, fruits, vegetables and lean protein children need to thrive.

Nutrition security emphasizes both food quality and quantity, highlighting the importance of consistent access to healthy options. Innovative approaches such as Grab and Go, Breakfast in the Classroom and Second Chance Breakfast have proven effective in expanding access to and participation in nutritious school meals.

“It is encouraging to see so many Americans recognize the connection between school meals and student success,” Krauthem said. “To unlock every child’s ability to learn and thrive, we must elevate school meals through innovation and rally support from parents and community leaders. Together, we can ensure every child is nourished and ready to succeed.”



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RESTORING MOVEMENT, RELIEVING PAIN: THE NEW PAIN AND SPINE CENTER AT CAROLINA PINES MEDICAL GROUP

Submitted by Hanna Caddell, marketing and communications coordinator, CPRMG



CPMG Pain & Spine Team pictured left to right: Spine Surgeon, Dr. Michael Mills; Pain Management Physician, Dr. Sushruth Moku; Neurosurgeon, Dr. Douglas Stofko and Nurse Practitioner, Hallie King

HARTSVILLE—For many people, back or neck pain is more than an inconvenience — it’s a daily challenge that affects work, relationships and quality of life. Until recently, patients in Hartsville and the surrounding Pee Dee region often had to travel long distances for advanced spine and pain management care. That is now changing.

Carolina Pines Medical Group, an affiliate of Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center, has opened a comprehensive Pain and Spine Center designed to bring state-of-the-art technology, multidisciplinary expertise and compassionate care together under one roof. The center is transforming how spine and pain conditions are diagnosed and treated — offering patients new hope, closer to home.

As the only facility in the Pee Dee region equipped with the advanced Globus robotic system, Carolina Pines is leading the way in precision spine surgery. This technology allows for highly accurate, minimally invasive procedures that can reduce recovery time and improve outcomes for patients with chronic back

and neck pain.

“This is an exciting moment for our hospital and our community,” said Dr. Brian Sponseller, CEO of Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center. “People no longer have to travel to Columbia or Charleston for specialized spine and pain care. We now have an exceptional team right here in Hartsville offering cutting-edge treatments with compassionate, patient-centered care.”

The new Pain and Spine Center will be located in downtown Hartsville at 206 Swift Creek Road.

A Team Built on Expertise and Compassion

At the heart of the Pain and Spine Center is a collaborative team of specialists dedicated to improving lives through innovative care. The center features Spine Surgeon Dr. Michael Mills, Neurosurgeon Dr. Douglas Stofko, Pain Management Physician Dr. Sushruth Moku and Physician Assistant Hallie King. Together, they provide a full spectrum of services — from non-surgical treatments and image-guided pain procedures to minimally invasive and robotic-assisted spine surgeries.

Each provider brings unique expertise to the team.

Mills has extensive experience in advanced spine procedures and is passionate about helping patients return to full, active lives.

Stofko, a neurosurgeon with experience in robotic-assisted spine surgery, specializes in integrating cutting-edge technology with precision medicine to improve outcomes.

Moku, a fellowship-trained pain management physician, focuses on interventional therapies that



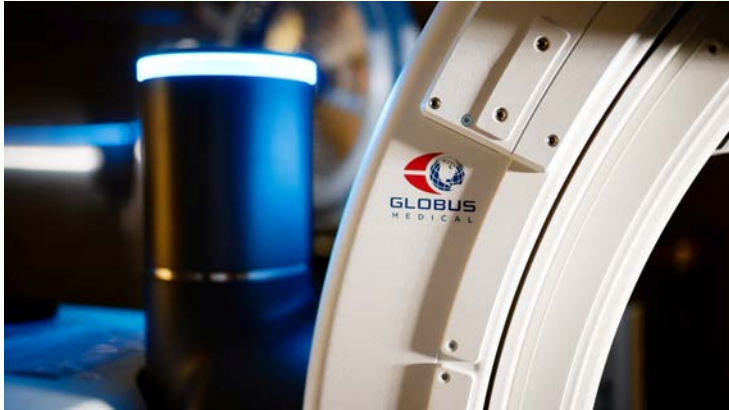
Spine Surgeon Dr. Michael Mills working with Globus ExcelsiusGPS® robotic system

relieve pain, enhance mobility and reduce the need for long-term opioid use.

King, a nurse practitioner, ensures continuity of care for every patient, assisting in both clinic and surgical settings to provide ongoing support throughout the recovery process.

Together, this team offers a truly integrated approach to pain and spine care — something rarely available in smaller communities.

Advanced Technology, Exceptional Precision



Globus ExcelsiusGPS® robotic system

One of the most exciting aspects of the new center is the use of robotic-assisted technology, including the Globus ExcelsiusGPS system. This platform allows surgeons to plan and perform spine procedures with exceptional accuracy. Using advanced imaging and real-time navigation, the system guides instrumentation placement with pinpoint precision, reducing variability and enhancing safety.

“Robotic-assisted surgery has truly changed the landscape of spine care,” Stofko said. “It allows us to be more precise, minimize tissue disruption and give our patients a faster, smoother recovery.”

This commitment to technological excellence ensures that patients in Hartsville receive the same advanced surgical options found at major academic centers — without leaving the community they call home.

“Having a dedicated Pain and Spine Center allows us to take a truly comprehensive approach to care,” Mills said.



Pain Management Physician Dr. Sushruth Moku with patient

“By combining advanced technology like the Globus robotic system with on-site pain management and rehabilitation services, we’re able to diagnose, treat and support patients all in one place.”

Personalized, Patient-Centered Care

Every patient’s journey begins with a thorough evaluation to identify the underlying cause of pain. The team at the Pain and Spine Center believes in treating the whole person, not just the symptoms. Treatment plans are tailored to each patient’s needs and may include physical therapy, targeted injections, minimally invasive procedures or surgical options when necessary.

“Chronic pain can affect every aspect of a person’s life,” Moku said. “Our goal is to restore function, relieve pain and help patients return to the activities they enjoy.”

With the combined expertise of multiple specialists, patients benefit from collaborative decision-making and a streamlined experience — no unnecessary referrals, no fragmented care and no long waits for answers.

Improving Quality of Life, Strengthening Community Health

The opening of the Pain and Spine Center is part of Carolina Pines’ broader mission to expand access to specialty care and improve community health across the Pee Dee region. By keeping advanced services local, patients save travel time, reduce costs and experience the comfort of receiving care close to home, surrounded by family and support networks.

In addition to direct care, the center will serve as a hub for education and prevention, offering resources on back health, posture, injury prevention and lifestyle changes that promote long-term wellness.

Excellence in Care, Right Here in Hartsville

The new Pain and Spine Center is more than a medical facility — it is a symbol of Carolina Pines’ ongoing investment in the health and well-being of the community. Through innovation, expertise and compassion, the center stands as a beacon of healing for patients suffering from chronic pain or spine conditions.

Whether through advanced robotic-assisted spine surgery, precision pain management techniques or personalized rehabilitation, the team at Carolina Pines is leading the way toward better outcomes and brighter futures for patients across the region.



BUILDING BRIDGES AND BRINGING JOY THROUGH INCLUSION By Susan Carter



Rabbi Lauren Cohn, RJE

Florence's Beth Israel Congregation, the only synagogue in the Pee Dee, welcomed Rabbi Lauren Cohn, RJE in July 2025, as its first full-time rabbi in 14 years. Cohn's mission is to build bridges in the community by sharing her faith, and educating the broader Florence community and leadership, about Judaism. She has spoken to the Kiwanis Club and Rotary Club and welcomes opportunities to explain Jewish beliefs and practices to anyone,

encouraging and responding to questions from restaurant workers, Coker University students, members of other churches and anyone who inquires. Cohn hopes these casual encounters with community members will allay their concerns about possibly being disrespectful because they are unfamiliar with Judaism and its rituals and encourage people to be open to learning about the ways that we are all more similar than different.

Living and working in a smaller city like Florence appeals to Cohn as she is able to get to know more of the community leaders and appreciates that, "everyone is working toward a greater good." She is on the Community Engagement Committee of the Eastern Carolina Community Foundation. She is encouraged by the fact that her congregation of around 60 families is growing, and more people regularly attend Shabbat services.

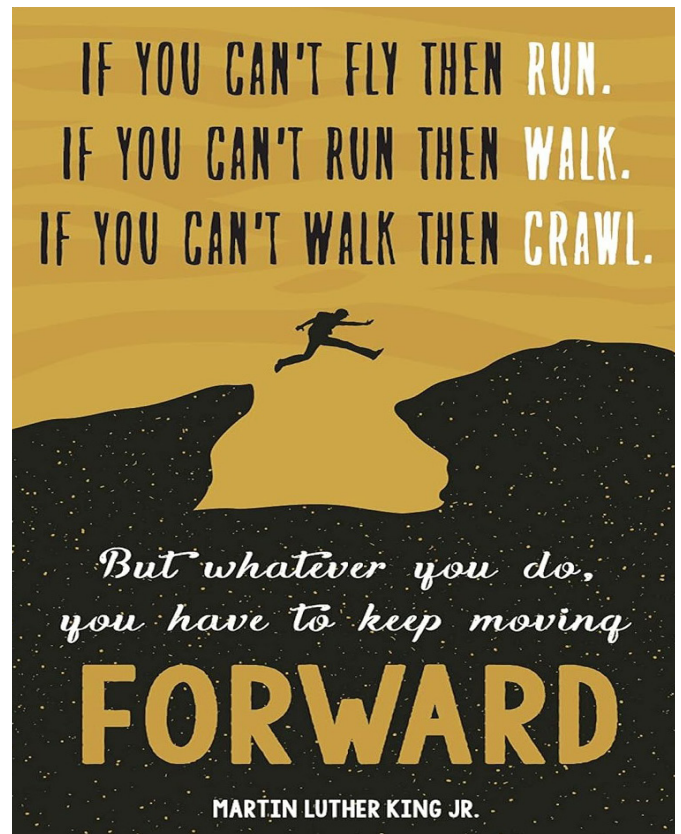
Cohn began her rabbinic career as a rabbi/religious educator, with her primary goal being to teach about Judaism and why it is crucial for every Jewish person to define the depth of one's connection to our heritage and to God. Because of this, she feels fortunate to have been able to teach the very young to the very old and everything in between. When she was a preschool educator to four-year-olds, she was struck by how some of her students already had developed a, "sense of justice," and readily accepted and understood the idea of an abstract God. One of the highlights of being a rabbi was when she guided and taught an 88-year-old man to become a bar mitzvah. After being a rabbi/educator for several years, she began considering moving to the more extroverted profession of being a congregational rabbi. She was first inspired to become a rabbi when a female rabbi joined her childhood congregation when she was 10 years old. Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Social Work in 1992, she began to understand that Reform Judaism, the most modern of the Jewish movements, was, "rational, reasonable, lovely." She especially enjoys that Judaism understands the ebbs and flows of life.

Cohn attributes her effectiveness as a bridge builder across cultural and religious lines to her laid-back, approachable leadership style. She is more, "focused on being on the right team than on being right." Being nonjudgmental is the cornerstone of her belief. "If I don't teach, and demonstrate myself, that everyone is created in the image of God — and deserves kindness, compassion, dignity and access, I'm not doing my job." She encourages her congregants to exemplify this by engaging in social justice; in Hebrew, "tzedakah" is anything and everything we do to right the world's wrongs and make the world better for generations to come. "Our congregation cares deeply for the greater Florence community. Most recently, we have helped provide winter coats, gloves and hats and Christmas presents

to a new immigrant family from the Congo of 20 people, with 10 children." Another example of faith in action occurred when Cohn and her congregation provided financial assistance to a neighbor who was on the verge of eviction. The grateful neighbor revealed that, "you are the only one who responded," to their need. Unlike many who have become skeptical of requests for money or redirected those in need to other resources that require time-consuming paperwork, Cohn believes that part of being a rabbi is, "giving people the benefit of the doubt and extending grace."

Guided by Cohn's vision, Beth Israel's Social Action Committee contributes to a different local charity each month. The local animal shelter and Harvest Hope have received food donations. One month is dedicated to Buddy Ball, in which the synagogue partners with an organization to help kids with physical and mental challenges. She also reaches out to local churches and speaks to groups whenever invited, because this gives her an opportunity to build relationships with the larger community. Cohn believes that "the shortest distance between two people is a story." Similarly, she believes, "small talk and eye contact," help us see the humanity in each other. In this way, she gets to know people within and outside of the Jewish community, so that she can build relationships that are, "deep, genuine and authentic."

Strong, positive relationships are important when facing adversity, and Cohn is thankful for her husband and two adult children who provide love and emotional support daily. She is proud of the impact that she has made on others through her work and the long-standing connections she forms. For example, this year she will officiate at the wedding of a former ninth-grade student, who is now 32. Cohn appreciates the bond that she has formed with many of her congregants and that they, "genuinely want a relationship with me." Florence and the Pee Dee region are fortunate to have Cohn's inclusive perspective impacting individuals and communities in our region.



EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH LEGACY AND LEADERSHIP Articles by Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Zyniah McClam

LAKE CITY—Proper placement and application of information are important in how younger generations obtain knowledge from various social media outlets. Input from around the world is delivered to handheld devices that are viewed hundreds of times per day. Unfortunately, some information may not be conveyed accurately due to opinions disguised as facts and, in some instances, distorted truths. However, the messages that should be transmitted are those of empowerment and uplift.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a conveyor of truth and hope for his time and for the world today. He left numerous writings and recordings for people to learn from his teachings on nonviolence and equality. Those teachings were, and still are, for people who need direction on how to live peacefully with one another.

Dramatic Coffee Beans (DCB) has adopted much of King's blueprint for action by empowering youth in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. It is part of the foundation for developing programs that lead to educational and lifelong success. Founded in 2012, Dramatic Coffee Beans is, "a comprehensive youth development organization designed to educate students on the social dilemmas they may face in today's society. DCB provides life skills that enable them to make positive choices. Dramatic Coffee Beans Inc. is widely known for its innovative programs and events, use of applied drama, improvisation and youth leadership development. Graduates of the program leave equipped to make positive choices and become effective change agents."

Zyniah McClam is a recent graduate of the program and is

currently a student at the University of South Carolina. She recalled her time with Dramatic Coffee Beans as helping her learn time management and leadership skills. Socially, McClam said she faced some adversity as a Black student at a predominantly white school. McClam said what she learned from DCB has helped her both as a student and in her current position with Vector Marketing as an assistant manager. Her plans for the summer are to return to Florence County to give students the opportunity to work with her. She stated, "Helping the younger students as a mentor helped me appreciate the same mentorship I had in DCB from Mrs. Carla and other teen advisers."

Another student who has benefited from Dramatic Coffee Beans is Jackson Sherard. He is a high school senior at Lake City High School and has been accepted to Claflin University in Orangeburg, SC. Sherard said DCB has afforded him opportunities to develop relationships as a new resident of Lake City. Sometimes coming to a new place can be socially awkward, but meeting others has been helpful. Jackson said he has met people from different backgrounds and appreciates the relationships he has



Jackson Sherard

developed. These connections are what he will carry with him into college, along with his leadership skills. Sherard said he has grown from being a participant in the program to assuming a leadership role. Building that confidence has helped him achieve other leadership positions in high school and in his community. Both students said they will carry on the legacy of King, by helping others and reaching across cultures to build strong communities.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE DREAM OF NONVIOLENCE



Cierra and Janare Fletcher

DILLON—The people of Cierra Fletcher's community would have benefited from adopting Dr. King's philosophy on nonviolence had they learned it before tragedy came into the family. Her 15-year-old son, Janare Fletcher, was murdered June 1, 2022. He was an ambitious youth at that time who was out for summer break, looking for a job and preparing for life after high school graduation. Fletcher's world was rocked when she learned from the other gunshot victim's mother that day that her son had been shot. Her co-worker rushed her to the hospital, where she was met by family members wanting to support her. Fletcher was taken to the chapel at the hospital, where she prayed for him. Unfortunately, doctors entered

the chapel to inform her that her son had died.

Her grief was more than overwhelming; it sparked action to work to prevent senseless violence from happening to another family. Fletcher said her family previously experienced loss by violence when her nephew was murdered a few years prior to losing her son. Those incidents affected their family and the community.

Gun violence in Dillon, SC, where the Fletchers reside, has the highest rate in the state of South Carolina at 118.58 percent. With the rate as large as it is in that area and in the state, the pause for concern should be greater, but unfortunately, Fletcher said, learning of someone dying due to gun violence has not prevented more occurrences. She created a Stop the Violence rally against gun violence in August, in honor of her son, following his death. She said the rally was in partnership with the Dillon Police Department and her church, Believers Worship Center. Though it garnered attention at that time and was supported by local law enforcement and other organizations, gun violence has gotten worse, Fletcher stated. "There has to be a change of heart and mindset. People cannot keep using weapons for violence." Though it is discouraging, she said she plans to get back to raising

awareness so other families do not have to endure the pain she has suffered since losing her son.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a proponent against militarism—crimes against humanity. Among the six principles of his philosophy of nonviolence, King believed, "Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is not a method for cowards; it does resist. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil. It is aggressive spiritually, mentally and emotionally." Communities must unify to learn the needs of their neighbors and then rally to meet those needs. The issue seems to be that many people are not willing to overcome their superficial differences in order to combat the real enemy, which is violence.

Fletcher said justice still has not been served in Janare's murder case. There has been no trial and very few updates from the solicitor's office regarding her case. She said she stays faithful through prayer, the support of her church, and she talks with other mothers who are victims of gun violence. Fletcher says her faith sustains her, but the hope is that her son's killers will be brought to justice in the very near future. King said of justice, "The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win. Nonviolence believes that God is a God of justice."

A LEGACY OF ECUMENICAL FAITH AND RELIGION By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Pastor Lou Perez

HEMINGWAY-Acknowledging the basic civil rights of all people is not about encouraging privilege, but about teaching that every person matters just as much as the next. And for faith leaders such as Pastor Lou Perez, this belief reflects that all people are equal in the eyes of God. Perez, pastor of Hemingway First Methodist Church in Hemingway, SC, chose ministry to become the change he wanted to see in the world. His goal is to carry the message that equality crosses cultures and is not limited to any one group of people.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spent much of the 13 years he led the civil rights movement teaching equality, dismantling segregation and speaking out against violence and brutality. Perez witnessed some of the crimes against people of color as a teenager in Mobile, Ala., during the 1960s. Being present during that historic time shaped his perspective and influenced how he would later work toward social change. He said, "I see changes in the world where most people don't see any."

Perez spent many years in law enforcement in Virginia and Washington, D.C., where he witnessed racism and discrimination. Now a retired homicide detective, he uses those

experiences to view race from another vantage point. He said he believes diversity has become distorted because of how often the word is used and how the meaning has become cliché. "It is a frustrating process to have dialogue about race in faith communities," he said, "but there has been movement." As pastor within the Global Methodist Church, he said accepting other cultures even within the church remains a challenge, but continued conversation can lead to greater understanding. At Hemingway First Methodist Church, Perez said people of all backgrounds are welcomed. "An important finding from the district superintendent's survey was this: Forty percent of clergy were willing to serve in cross-cultural congregations,



Providing rocking chairs for an assisted living facility

but out of 66 congregations, only two were willing to accept a cross-cultural pastor. That is a sad commentary on clergy versus laity when it comes to race. The question we must ask ourselves is, how long must this continue?" Perez also created a monthly faith leaders' breakfast to build relationships among community leaders and encourage conversations about race. Although attendance has declined, he said he plans to rebuild participation. His hope is to bring people of different faiths together for open and respectful dialogue.



Working on fund-raising project for local food bank

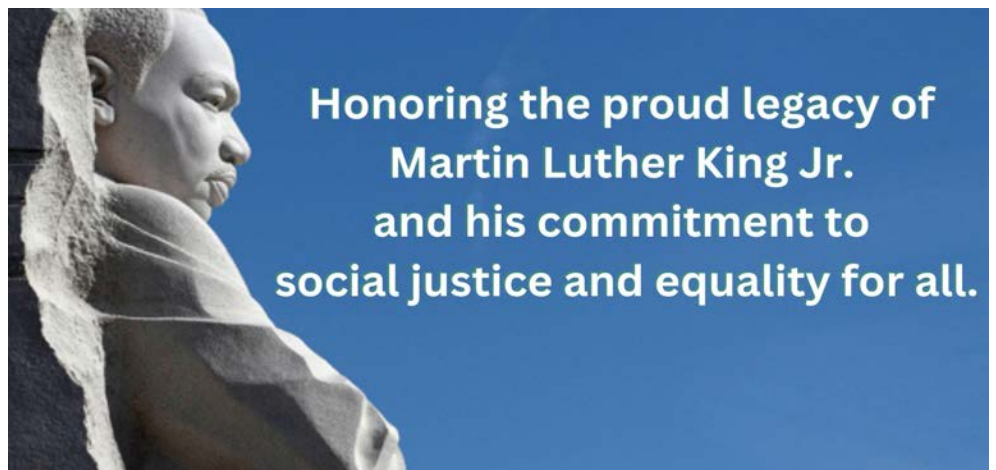
Perez is of German and Mexican descent. Although he identifies as White, he said his last name has at times subjected him to prejudice. That dual background shaped his understanding of discrimination. Perez said he reflects often and shares those insights with his congregation. He has also preached sermons on, "DEI," and "woke," to explain what those terms mean beyond public perception. Being sensitive to identity, he said, is a starting point for unity.

Perez has also voiced concern about violence in the Black community. He said crime within the same race is not imagined but well documented. He believes research on those cases should be shared publicly for a clearer understanding of the justice system and meaningful reform. Perez continues to educate and serve across racial lines. He said his role, as former law enforcement and now as pastor, has always been to "find the truth, wherever it leads."

"There have been significant gains since the Civil Rights Act, but its promise has not been fully realized," Perez said. "Both sides bear responsibility for ongoing division instead of unity. Each must acknowledge its role and be willing to change. Martin Luther King Jr. brought us this far, and it is now up to us to continue moving his work forward."



Members beautifying exterior of an assisted living facility



**Honoring the proud legacy of
Martin Luther King Jr.
and his commitment to
social justice and equality for all.**



Mr. M. Butch Kennedy and Mrs. Alicia Rahiem Kennedy

Alicia Rahiem Kennedy, who discovered they shared a calling to help others rebuild their lives.

Alicia's introduction to advocacy came through heartbreak. After serving in the Army as military police and studying criminal justice, she experienced a devastating loss in 1998 when her nephew, a college student, was killed. Her family received little guidance in the aftermath. As she tried to understand what resources should have been available, she realized many families face trauma with no roadmap. That experience pushed her into victim advocacy, where she later focused on domestic and gun violence, becoming a steady presence for those navigating grief and uncertainty.

Around the same time, Butch was on his own path to community work. He served in the Air Force and is an engineer by trade. He recalled concerns from his mother in Columbia, who often heard gunfire near her home. Motivated by those fears, he helped initiate a peace movement addressing rising neighborhood violence. The effort led to law enforcement making 70 arrests in one week. Soon after, children were playing outside again. That moment changed him. He wanted to understand what pushed young men toward violence and what could redirect their paths. His search led him to the story of Carolyn Thomas, a survivor who was shot by her boyfriend in an attack that claimed her mother's life. Determined to learn more, he traveled across the state meeting survivors and advocates. Those conversations reshaped his understanding of violence and revealed the power of listening to those directly affected.

When Butch and Alicia met, their missions aligned naturally. He believed men needed to be part of the solution to domestic violence. She believed no victim should face trauma alone. Their shared values brought together his earlier initiatives, Real Men Against Domestic Violence and Project Unity, with the work she had already been doing, forming what became Palmetto Hope Network. Together, they opened a navigation center serving families in the North Charleston area, including Hanahan, with expansion plans that include a safe house in Georgetown County. Today, their work extends far beyond crisis response. It represents healing, education, empowerment and the belief that communities can change when people unite with intention.

The Kennedys describe their partnership as a blessing. They work side by side, support one another's strengths and approach challenges as a unified team. Alicia says they problem-solve together, even during difficult moments. Their offices sit next to each other, and they often move between serious work and shared laughter. Their relationship is woven into the organization's identity because they model what it means to build, heal and lead together.

Palmetto Hope Network focuses on supporting families who often arrive confused, grieving or overwhelmed. Many survivors miss phone calls or forget critical information because

CHARLESTON-Palmetto Hope Network began long before the organization had a name. It was shaped by the lived experiences of two people who understood pain, service and the deep need for healing after violence. Today, the nonprofit supports families across South Carolina, but its roots lie in the personal journeys of its founders, Mr. M. Butch Kennedy and Mrs.

trauma clouds everything. The Kennedys guide them through each step, from filing orders of protection to navigating the court system. They help families access therapy, understand their rights and rebuild stability after violence disrupts every part of life. Some families remain connected for years. Others grow strong enough to advocate for others. They shared the story of one grandmother raising seven grandchildren after her daughter was killed. This spring, the third grandchild will enter college. The Kennedys have celebrated birthdays, holidays and milestones alongside them because relationships do not end when a case closes. Survivors become extended family.

Their youth programming is equally impactful. Camp Hope teaches children conflict resolution and healthy communication. The Boys to Men program hosts weekly virtual sessions and monthly outings, exposing boys to mentors from diverse backgrounds. Butch brings professionals into the program because many young men have never been told they can pursue careers beyond sports or entertainment. Domestic violence fatality reviews allow the organization to learn from past tragedies, and referrals from hospitals and law enforcement reflect the trust placed in their work.

Nonviolence is not a theory for the Kennedys. It is personal. Alicia shared that when she learned her nephew had been shot, her instinct was to grab a gun. She is grateful she did not, knowing that acting out of anger would have made her no different from those who caused her pain. That moment shapes her message to youth. Butch teaches similar lessons, emphasizing that calm leadership and emotional discipline can save lives. Both believe Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy still holds the power to transform communities when people refuse to answer violence with violence.

Partnerships remain central to their success. State Rep. Wendell Gilliard has supported their work for years. They collaborate with Roslin Fields of Youth Empowerment Services, host of the Dreamgirls Conference and Ronald Smith of Positive Vibes, who lost his daughter to gun violence. Their board members provide guidance and strength.

Looking ahead, Palmetto Hope Network plans to host a community gala, expand Boys to Men, hire a bilingual advocate and open another safe house. They remain committed to advocating for stronger hate crime protections and addressing systemic gaps that leave victims without long-term support. What motivates them most is seeing survivors regain their strength or complete the judicial process with confidence. Butch says he is inspired by Alicia and cannot imagine letting her carry this work alone. They believe that when you give freely and with purpose, God returns that generosity in meaningful ways.

Their message reflects King's legacy: Dream. Work toward the dream. Even if you do not live to see the outcome, your role in the process still changes the world.



Palmetto Hope Network Team helping survivors rebuild after violence



Dr. Brenda C. Murphy

COLUMBIA - The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has long stood as a beacon of advocacy, unity and resilience in the pursuit of civil rights and social justice. The organization's leadership, exemplified by figures such as Dr. Brenda C. Murphy, reflects a commitment to inclusivity, empowerment and adaptive strategies that continue to shape the future of advocacy in America.

Murphy's journey into advocacy began with a personal experience that ignited her passion for justice. Supported by the NAACP during a discriminatory incident, she was inspired to join and serve the organization, drawing on her background as a nurse advocate. Her progression from grassroots involvement to advising youth and college divisions underscores a leadership style focused on empowering communities facing civil rights and social justice challenges.

Leadership within the NAACP is defined not only by guidance and decision-making, but by active advocacy and inclusivity. True advocacy, as described by Murphy, involves steadfast support and collaborative efforts to achieve the best possible outcomes for civil rights and social justice. This approach ensures every voice is heard and valued, fostering unity and shared purpose within the organization.

Bringing diverse communities together under a shared vision of unity requires direct engagement. Murphy emphasizes the importance of working hands-on with communities affected by civil rights and social justice issues. Building trust, understanding unique needs and fostering meaningful relationships are essential. By listening to concerns and collaborating on solutions, leaders create shared ownership and purpose, making the movement for justice more inclusive and effective.

Empowering individuals, especially younger generations, remains a cornerstone of the NAACP's mission. Youth councils and college chapters work alongside adult units statewide, preparing young people as future leaders. Their contributions are vital to advancing the organization's goals and ensuring continuity of advocacy efforts. By involving youth in meaningful ways, the NAACP fosters a new generation of advocates committed to peaceful change.

Challenges persist in the realms of democracy, health care, economic sustainability and criminal justice. Navigating these obstacles while remaining true to the values of nonviolent advocacy requires effective communication. Communities must be engaged directly and informed about potential risks ahead. Advocacy's impact may not be immediately apparent, but persistent efforts and transparent dialogue help build resilience and understanding.

Building bridges between groups with differing perspectives is another hallmark of successful advocacy. The NAACP's collaboration with other organizations to promote Black history education for children exemplifies this effort. Through open discussion, both state involvement and community-led initiatives were accepted, resulting in a mutually beneficial solution that advanced education and unity.

Peaceful advocacy today often takes the form of mediation rather than direct actions such as boycotts, rallies or marches. However, Murphy acknowledges that direct action may still be necessary given current challenges. The evolution of advocacy reflects a commitment to adapting strategies while maintaining

core principles of nonviolence and collaboration.

Role models in leadership have played a significant role in shaping Murphy's approach. Many were nurses, whose daily work involved directing care, advocating for patients and employing the assess-plan-implement-evaluate cycle to achieve positive results. These principles translate effectively to advocacy, emphasizing assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation in achieving social justice goals.

Looking ahead, the vision for the NAACP remains steadfast. The organization is viewed as essential in protecting citizens' rights and advancing social justice. Murphy's message to the community is clear: the work continues, and support is needed, especially during times when funding is less accessible due to the political climate. Sponsorships and involvement help advance the mission, and all are invited to join in the pursuit of unity, empowerment and peaceful advocacy.

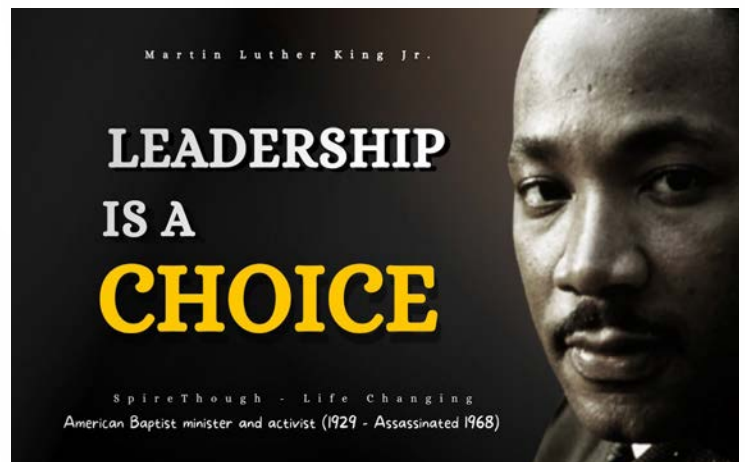
Murphy's professional experience includes nursing administration, education, therapy and faculty appointments at several universities. Her career highlights mentoring and teaching students the importance of cultural sensitivity and compassion. She served in the U.S. Army Reserves Nurse Corps, attaining the rank of major and retired from the Department of Veterans Affairs after a distinguished career.

Her leadership and advocacy have been recognized with numerous awards, including the NAACP Juanita Jackson Mitchell Award for Legal Activism, inclusion in the, "50 Most Influential People," list for three consecutive years and induction into the, "Most Influential Hall of Fame." She also has received honors from the U.S. Department of Justice, Columbia Urban League, Racial Justice Network and other organizations for exemplary leadership and service.

Murphy's involvement extends to organizations such as United Way of South Carolina, the South Carolina Unitarian Universalist Justice Alliance and the American Red Cross Regional Committee. She is also active in the Prince Hall Masonic family and serves nationally as imperial directress for the NAACP Imperial Court Daughters.

As the first female president of the NAACP South Carolina State Conference, Murphy's advocacy journey spans more than 30 years. Her leadership continues to inspire and empower communities, ensuring the NAACP remains a vital force for civil rights and social justice.

In summary, the NAACP's leadership embodies inclusivity, resilience and commitment to empowering communities. Through direct engagement, mentorship and adaptive advocacy strategies, the organization continues to influence the advancement of civil rights and social justice across the United States.



OUR FOREVER SONS By Cynthia O. Ford



Harry and Beverly Charles sons left to right Christopher Gibson (19) and Khalil Ross (14).

For Harry and Beverly Charles of Florence, South Carolina, gun violence is not a distant headline or an abstract issue. It is a lived reality that forever altered their family and reshaped their purpose. As parents who have endured the unimaginable loss of two sons, they now speak not only from a place of grief but from a deep commitment to faith, healing and nonviolence.

Their youngest son, Khalil Ross, was 14 years old when he was killed in the early hours leading into Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 17, 2022. Just more than two years earlier, the family also lost their 19-year-old son, Christopher Gibson, to gun violence on Dec. 28, 2019. The pain of losing one child is overwhelming. Losing two is something no parent expects to survive. Yet the Charles' continue to stand, guided by faith and a determination to protect other families from similar loss.

Both Gibson and Ross are remembered by their parents as loving, respectful and God-fearing young men with their whole lives ahead of them. Gibson was intelligent, humble and creative. Music was his passion, and through it he connected with people far beyond his immediate circle. His parents recall his laid-back spirit, his kind words and a charming smile that left a lasting impression on everyone he met. When he passed, the overwhelming response from the community reflected the depth of his influence.

Ross was joyful and fearless, a young man who loved his family deeply and believed in his own strength. He was still growing, still discovering who he was and still dreaming about the future. Basketball brought him joy and discipline. After losing his older brother, Ross matured quickly, carrying emotional weight far beyond his years. His parents remember his mesmerizing eyes and the way his presence drew

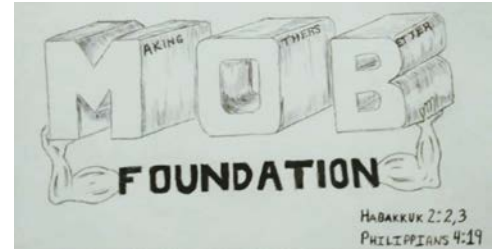
people in with warmth and sincerity.

In the midst of profound loss, the Charles' turned to their faith as their foundation. They believe healing begins with placing God at the center of life and trusting Him to order each step forward. Grief, they say, has no due date. It does not end when time passes or when the world moves on. Instead, they have made a conscious decision to choose joy each day, not as denial of pain but as a source of strength and endurance. Their faith reminds them to be grateful for the time they had with their sons and to trust God's will even when answers are hard to understand.

As parents, they also feel a responsibility to speak out. Youth gun violence continues to rise, and they believe it will not change unless daily interaction with young people becomes a priority. They stress the importance of building resilience, accountability and decision-making skills in youth, especially those who have already experienced violence or loss. Without consistent guidance and purposeful programs, cycles of harm repeat themselves.

Out of their pain came purpose. In honor of their sons, the Charles' founded the Making Others Better Foundation. Through the organization, they provide counseling services, Saturday brunch gatherings, Sunday morning services and summertime feeding programs using their food truck. These efforts are designed to meet young people where they are, offering nourishment, mentorship and a sense of belonging. Their work reflects the belief that prevention begins with presence and that caring for youth requires more than words.

Despite their commitment, the Charles family acknowledges the challenges they face. Funding remains limited without broader support from the state and the community. Still, they



continue doing what they can with what they have, feeding children during the summer and ministering to youth who cross their path. Their message is clear. They cannot do this work alone. It takes a village to protect children and to create environments where nonviolence is taught, modeled and sustained.

As the nation honors Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., their story echoes his call for collective responsibility and moral courage. King believed nonviolence was not passive but powerful, requiring intentional action and community unity. The Charles' carry that message forward, reminding others that violence affects everyone and that silence allows it to continue. What happened to their family could happen to any family.

Their plea is not rooted in fear but in love and urgency. They ask communities to come together, to prioritize youth and to intervene before another life is lost. Through faith, advocacy and service, the Charles family has transformed personal tragedy into a mission that honors their sons' lives and protects future generations.

Gibson and Ross are their forever sons. Through the work of the Making Others Better Foundation and the voices of their parents, their legacy continues, calling communities to choose peace, choose action and stop the violence.

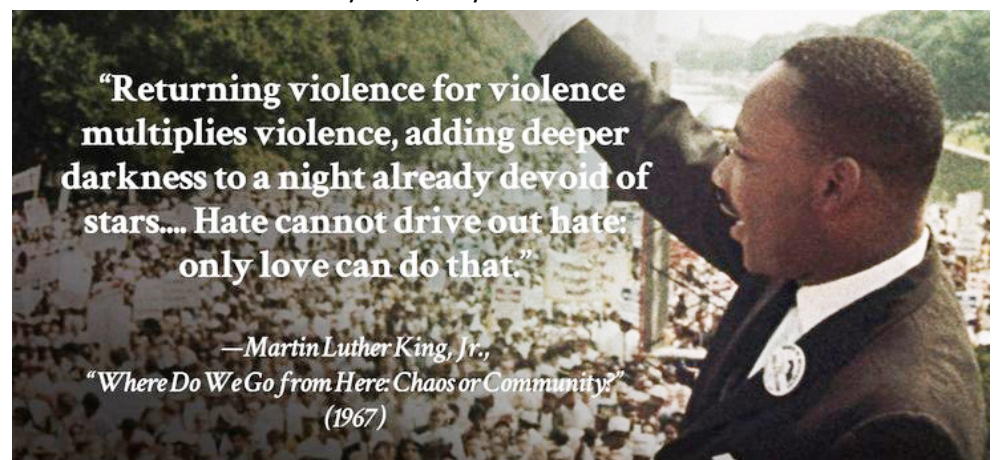
Making Others Better Foundation

Cash App: \$mobf2wcp1lc

Website: hcharles1974.wixsite.com/mobf

Mobile: 843-250-6086

Email: hcharles1974@gmail.com



SERVICE ABOVE SELF *By Cynthia O. Ford*



Dr. Joseph E. Heyward

Dr. Joseph E. Heyward, a native of Florence, South Carolina, has dedicated his life to education, leadership and service above self. His journey reflects not only personal achievement but also a commitment to opening doors for others and ensuring that progress is never taken for granted. As Black History Month is observed, his life's work stands as a testament to

perseverance, humility and the power of purposeful leadership.

Heyward was educated in the public schools of Florence and graduated from Wilson Senior High School with recognition for academic excellence and leadership ability. He continued his education at Hampton University, then Hampton Institute, where he earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics with a minor in physics in 1963. He later received a master's degree in mathematics from Morgan State University in 1972 and a doctorate in student personnel administration from the University of South Carolina in 1987. His academic journey also included additional studies in physics at Wake Forest University. In December 2006, Francis Marion University honored him with an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree in recognition of his contributions to education and public service.

Throughout his career, Heyward often found himself in positions where he was the first African American to serve. These roles included assistant superintendent for instruction in Florence One Schools, vice president for student affairs at Francis Marion University and the first African American inducted into the Florence Rotary Club. These experiences strengthened his ability to navigate complex environments where he was frequently the only minority voice at the table. Rather than viewing these moments as barriers, he saw them as opportunities to grow, lead and influence systems from within.

Heyward's career path reflects steady progression and a willingness to serve wherever needed. Following graduation from Hampton University, he served two years in Europe as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He then returned to Florence, where his work in education spanned roles as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, instructor, career counselor, director of the University Center at Francis Marion University, area representative for U.S. Sen. Ernest "Fritz" Hollings, assistant superintendent for instruction in Florence One Schools and vice president for student affairs at Francis Marion University. On three occasions, he also served as vice president for academic affairs before retiring from higher education leadership.

When Heyward learned he would receive the highest award given by the state of South Carolina, he was filled with humility. He viewed the recognition not as a source of pride but as an opportunity for reflection and self-awareness. Professionally, the award represented validation of decades of hard work, dedication and service aimed at improving the lives of others. Among the many honors he has received, the Order of the Palmetto stands as a meaningful acknowledgment of his lifelong

contributions.

Family and faith played central roles in shaping his values. Although neither of his parents attended college, they instilled in him and his siblings the importance of education and self-sufficiency. His involvement in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., an organization rooted in scholarship and service, further reinforced his commitment to helping others. He describes himself as someone who has always found it difficult to say no when asked to serve, a trait that guided his professional and civic life.

Heyward's impact extends beyond education. He devoted 26 years to cancer research through service on the McLeod Institutional Review Board and spent 19 years on the Greenwood Genetic Center Board, which focuses on studying abnormal defects in children. He is especially proud of an endowed scholarship established in his name that supports students attending Francis Marion University. His leadership also includes serving as conference lay leader in the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, reflecting his commitment to faith-based service.

As Black History Month is celebrated, Heyward emphasizes the importance of preserving and sharing history. He believes history must not be shelved or forgotten, especially by younger generations who may not fully understand the sacrifices that created today's opportunities. He stresses the importance of education, participation in the voting process, service to those less fortunate and understanding how systems operate in order to effect change.

He also offers a candid assessment of African American leadership in South Carolina, noting that progress remains slow and that opportunities to elect African American leaders have not always been fully embraced. He believes development of young leaders must be strengthened and supported across multiple sectors.

For young people seeking to make an impact, Heyward offers clear guidance. Leadership, he said, requires passion, confidence, resilience and a willingness to take risks. It demands the courage to speak up when injustice is observed and the discipline to remain committed even when progress is difficult. He reminds future leaders that nothing will be handed to them and that meaningful change requires hard work and sustained effort.

Dr. Joseph E. Heyward's legacy is one of service, courage and unwavering dedication to others. His life reflects the values that Black History Month seeks to honor, and his story continues to inspire those who follow.



ORDINARILY EXTRAORDINARY: THE RISING LEADERSHIP OF DANIEL JAMES II By Cynthia O. Ford



Daniel James II

community leaders. Yet James remains grounded in the values learned in his church, his family home and the communities that raised him.

He credits much of his purpose to his mother, Angela Crosland, a communicator, journalist and public advocate who modeled service throughout his childhood. Raised in a single-parent home, he absorbed her passion for people long before he understood that communication and public relations would become part of his calling. "My mother is my major inspiration and mentor," he said. "Every gift I have was cultivated in the house of God."

His leadership began at Door of Hope Christian Church, where he served as a youth leader, junior usher and member of the media team. At age twelve, he attempted his first interview with his pastor and learned quickly that scripted conversations were not for him. He later recorded radio segments on WJAY and developed a communication style rooted in authenticity and service.

James' academic excellence carried him far beyond South Carolina. After attending school in Florence, he earned a full scholarship at age fourteen to study at Andover in Massachusetts. "When you switch ponds, things come out of you that you did not know were there," he said. "For me, it was leadership." He later attended Cornell University, majoring in industrial and labor relations with a minor in law and society. The events of 2020, including the pandemic and the death of George Floyd, deepened his interest in advocacy and digital storytelling. He created online segments that moved from highlighting trauma to uplifting Black excellence.

Before graduate studies, James interned with the South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs, where he helped create its first content strategy and interviewed education and business leaders for, "The Culture Connect." His global education continued in Beijing, China, where he earned a master's degree in global affairs. His thesis explored how China perceived the death of George Floyd and what those perceptions revealed about the international view of the United States. "It called out both the United States and China to do better," he said.

After returning home, James completed twenty-eight rounds of interviews before receiving an appointment as a special assistant for public engagement in the Biden-Harris administration with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. There, he advised leaders on communication related to technology, engaged with more than one thousand stakeholders and produced two documentaries that became defining pieces of the agency's narrative. His appointment ended in January 2025, and he began working the same month

for the Progressive Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he now helps shape the messaging of ninety-five members through original content and strategic communication.

Despite his national impact, James' heart remains grounded in his church and community. He often speaks of mentors who shaped him, including Bishop Michael and Pastor Malinda Blue, Bishop Eric Freeman, Bishop Gerald Wyatt, Shireese Bell and educators who recognized his gifts early. His grandparents, David and Sarah Crosland, also shaped him deeply through their wisdom and personal stories. "I am because they are," he shared. "Someone poured into me, so no matter where I am I carry my hometown with me."

James believes many young people today experience an identity crisis because they lack consistent guidance. "Identity begins with parents and mentors," he said. "Our generations do not have the same number of elders guiding us." He remains intentional in his roles as a brother, uncle and mentor, pouring into his family and community with consistency, discipline and care.

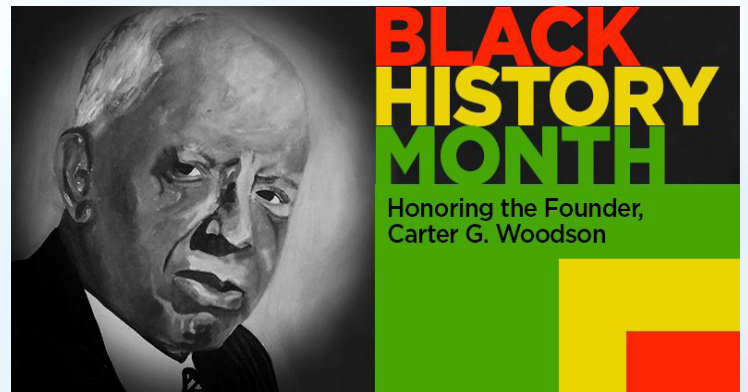
Black History Month holds significance for him because much of his learning came through family storytelling. "We lack opportunities to learn the truth without filtering," he said. "We have lost elders who passed down knowledge freely." He believes cultural preservation must start at home and extend into schools and churches.

When discussing violence prevention and empowerment, James emphasizes storytelling paired with character building. "Every purpose we have is to serve," he said. He imagines youth programs that help young people understand their stories, values and community responsibilities. "Storytelling turns into advocacy," he explained. "We need to finish the work others did not get to finish."

Looking ahead, James plans to attend law school or pursue a doctorate in international relations. He hopes to work in diplomacy and strengthen relationships across countries. Inspired by his mother's achievements, he also hopes to earn APR certification. Faith remains at the center of his life. "My core is my relationship with God," he said. "Prayer and surrounding myself with purpose-driven people keep me grounded."

James hopes his journey inspires young people to embrace growth. "Regardless of flaws and where you come from you can grow out of the weeds," he said. "You see problems because you are part of the answer. Do what makes you anxious and fearful because you cannot do it by yourself."

To him, being a young Black changemaker means walking in humility, being creative and committing to solutions rather than only naming problems. "I want to inspire a generation of changemakers," he said. "I am called to lead in a way that creates other leaders. That is how I want to be remembered."





Dr. Erica Johnson

Dr. Erica Johnson is an associate professor of history and co-director of African American studies at Francis Marion University (FMU), where she teaches students how to understand the past with honesty and depth. Johnson has dedicated her career to researching, preserving and teaching Black history with care and integrity. Her commitment began long before her arrival in South Carolina. She grew up in rural Oklahoma in a predominantly white community. Most of what she learned came from television, and she did not realize how much she was missing until she left home for college.

"I came from a place where I was naive. In grad school, my world changed. I had wonderful professors who helped me understand where the people I study fit into the wider historical story," she said. She began to see how many histories were silenced or dismissed, and she felt called to help bridge that gap. "They are not my stories, but I can be a voice and a bridge to share them."

Johnson's research focuses on the Haitian Revolution, which she continues to study and write about. During the pandemic, she expanded into local history, examining cemeteries, markers and family names that many descendants no longer recognized. Her book explores philanthropy, race and historical memory and is available through the FMU library. One of the works that shaped her as a scholar is, "Silencing the Past," by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. "It laid out what I was seeing in beautiful terms. It talked about what was saved and discarded," she said. She also credits Dr. Matt Childs as a mentor and noted that they will present together at an upcoming conference.

For her, Black History Month is a necessary corrective. She recalled a conversation when someone

questioned why Black history needed its own month. She explained that society must talk about race until it no longer has to, because it is still not woven into everything that is taught. Until that day comes, Black stories must be centered so young students can see themselves reflected and valued. "How are young Black people to see it celebrated or know it matters when everything else is saying it does not," she said. She reminds her students that Black History Month began as a week, expanded and still serves as a reminder of the work left to do and the lives that shaped the nation culturally, socially and economically.

She has watched the teaching of Black history shift over the past decade. What was once rare in college curricula is now more common, supported by community groups and educators who create public resources so accurate history can reach more people. When asked about misconceptions, she said K-12 education often reduces Black



Dr. Johnson receiving the SC Humanities Akers Prize

history brings national narratives closer and helps students connect what they learn to their own communities. "It becomes more difficult for them to keep a distance," she said. Understanding where local families came from allows students to see how their influence extended across the country.

She believes all students benefit from learning African American history. FMU's student body is 39 percent minority, and she and her colleagues emphasize that knowing one another's history helps students become better colleagues, employees and citizens. She often reflects on her own upbringing. "How can you be a part of something you do not know anything about." Honest teaching allows students to develop empathy and participate meaningfully in society.

Her greatest hope comes from students. After a reflective writing assignment, she noticed a theme. "Students are hungry for mentors and need guidance," she said. She allows students to choose how to present their end-of-the-year project. She recalled a student who excelled in creating a documentary even though he may not have done as well with a paper. "Give grace and guidance," she said.



Dr. Johnson at League of Women Voters event for Mary McLeod Bethune.

history to slavery and civil rights, reinforced by films that present narrow narratives. "There is this idea that it was one singular experience. That is not true," she said. She uses figures like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois to help students understand the diversity of Black intellectual traditions.

Her work in the Pee Dee region has revealed how rich and undocumented local history remains. She has uncovered headstones, family names and stories that few residents recognized. "There is a treasure trove here. Cemeteries need to be documented and registered so we can celebrate achievements and leaders in these communities like we do with everyone else," she said. Local





Retired SC Circuit Court Judge Clifton Newman

COLUMBIA—In 1912, Carter G. Woodson, Ph.D., became the second African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University. He sparked a movement in 1926 by founding Negro History Week, which celebrated the history, heritage and accomplishments of African Americans. This initiative laid the groundwork for what is now National Black History Month.

As the nation marks the centennial of this commemoration in 2026, Woodson's vision and the founding of the Association for

the Study of Negro Life and History (ASALH) are honored. Diversity Works Magazine had the distinct opportunity to interview Judge Clifton Newman, gaining insights into how a hundred years of Black history observances have shaped identity, inspired progress and upheld truth amid contemporary challenges of historical erasure.

Judge Newman was unanimously elected to the Circuit Court in 2000 and subsequently reelected through his retirement in December 2023. He is well respected for his oversight of both civil and criminal proceedings—including the notable, “State v. Richard Alexander Murdaugh.” His extensive legal background positions him as an exceptional mentor to emerging legal professionals.

Throughout his distinguished career, Newman served as a civil and defense attorney, solicitor, a judge hearing civil, criminal and business court cases and currently as a mediator, arbitrator and neutral evaluator.

Judge Newman's personal journey offers profound lessons and reflections, making him a fitting contributor to the national centennial recognition of Black History Month. Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he emphasized, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” underscoring the importance

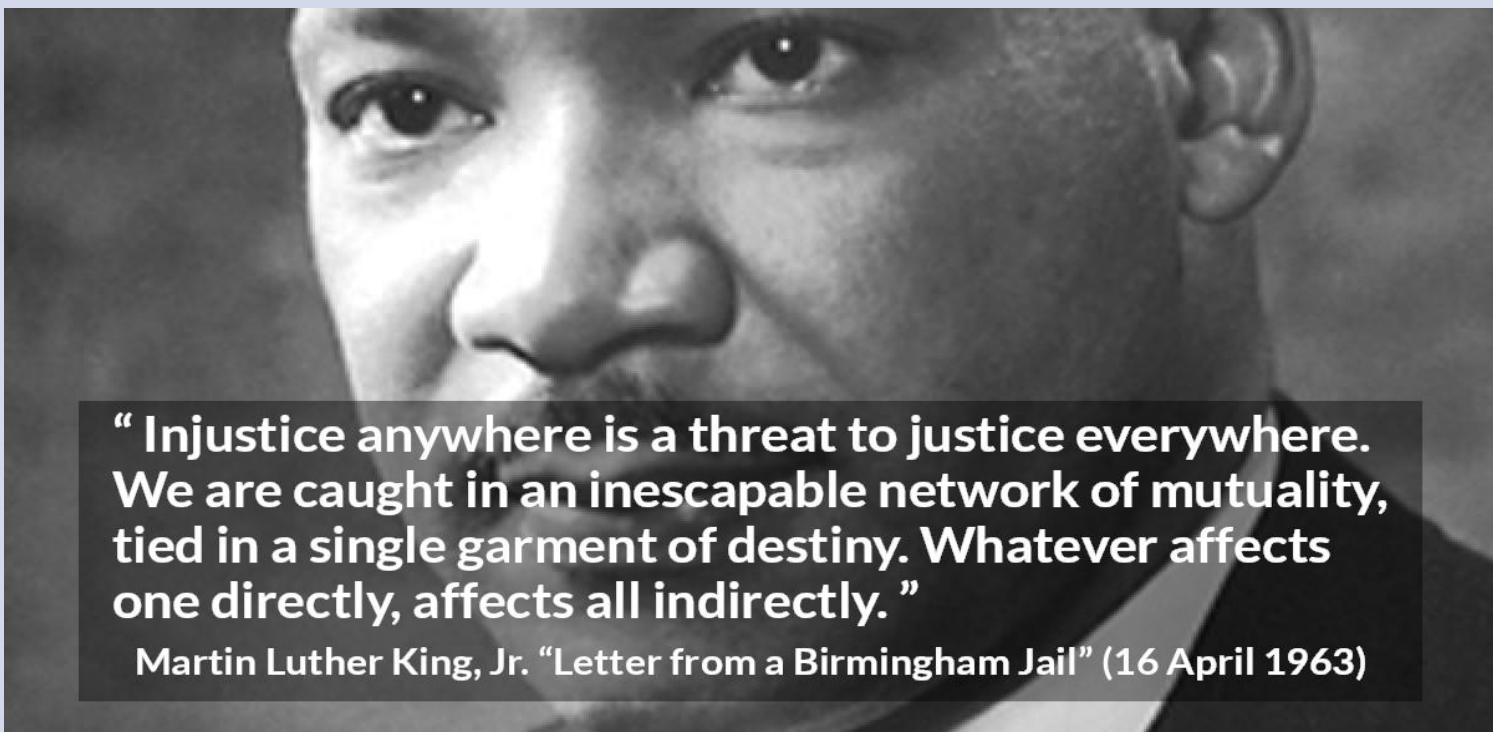
of justice for all.

His family heritage includes the late Isaiah DeQuincey Newman, a distinguished Civil Rights Activist, Methodist Pastor and the first African American elected to the South Carolina State Senate after Reconstruction, which afforded him early exposure to civic leadership. Like his uncle, Newman is esteemed for his composure, professionalism, sound judgment, and balanced approach to legal matters. He reflects, “In the past, Negro History Week was a day or a week when a few historical Black figures were recognized. Otherwise, we were invisible,” highlighting the contrast with the present era's increased recognition and advocacy of African American history and culture. These early commemorations had a profound impact on him, shaping his awareness of racial disparities within the justice system.

The undeniable achievements, impact and resilience of African Americans highlight why Black History observances remain essential. Newman advises young people, “You must know the past to understand the present and prepare for the future.” He also notes recent shifts, observing that national celebrations have sometimes been cancelled, discouraged or suppressed—unlike earlier decades that championed Black success and encouraged both youth and Black society at large.

Reflecting on the struggles caused by racism and injustice, Newman urges dedication to reinforcing and celebrating the vital contributions of Black Americans for generations to come. Whether drawing wisdom from elder experience or new perspectives from younger voices, these insights deserve attention.

Born in Greeleyville, South Carolina, Newman graduated from C.E. Murray High School, Cleveland State University and Cleveland State University Law School. He resides in Columbia, SC with his wife and they are the parents of four adult children (one deceased). Continuing his family's legacy, one daughter, Jocelyn Newman, serves as a judge on the SC Circuit Court. His youngest son, Brian, was also an attorney and a Columbia City Councilman. Judge Newman is also an active charter member of the I. DeQuincey United Methodist Church in Columbia, SC.



“ Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. ”

Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (16 April 1963)

A LEGACY OF PURPOSE, LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE By Les Echols



James T. McLawhorn Jr.

Columbia- When James T. McLawhorn Jr. became president of the Columbia Urban League in 1979, he stepped into a role defined by responsibility, expectation and urgency. He never viewed the position as a stepping stone. Instead, he saw it as necessary work that mattered to the community and the future of South Carolina. More than four decades later, that conviction has shaped a career that left a lasting imprint on the state's civic, economic and social landscape.

McLawhorn's journey began at North Carolina A&T State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science through a Veterans Administration scholarship. He later received a Ford Foundation Fellowship, allowing him to continue his education and earn a master's degree in city and regional planning. The blend of policy, planning and people-centered leadership would define his professional path.

While studying at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, McLawhorn was named the most outstanding student in his class and received the American Institute of Certified Planners Award. He began his career as a city planner with the Charlotte Model Cities Program during a period marked by rapid growth, redevelopment and deep inequality. He later served as an adjunct professor and became deputy director of the Charlotte Workforce Development Program, gaining hands-on experience in economic development and public service.

After seven years with the City of Charlotte, McLawhorn received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to attend the University of Miami, where he earned a master's degree in business administration. During that time, he continued teaching as an adjunct professor at Florida Memorial University, maintaining close ties to education and mentorship.

His career later expanded into banking, where he worked as a commercial loan analyst for First Union National Bank in North Carolina. Throughout his professional journey, McLawhorn was influenced by mentors such as Harvey Gantt and former U.S. Sen. Rowe Motley, leaders who reinforced his belief in principled leadership and service to community.

In 1970, McLawhorn married Barbara Campbell, whom he met while both were students at North Carolina A&T. A Marion native, Campbell served as a licensed guidance counselor with Richland One School District before becoming a publisher and author of, "The Saga of Danny Jones." Together, they raised three children and built a family grounded in education, faith and service.

McLawhorn's most defining chapter began in Columbia, where he accepted the role of president of the Columbia Urban League. Under his leadership, the organization became a consistent and respected voice on employment, education and economic mobility. Through advocacy, media engagement and the publication of, "The State of Black South Carolina," the Urban League helped shape public dialogue and policy discussions across the state.

One of his most enduring contributions is the Martin Luther King Jr., Keeping the Legacy Alive Breakfast, launched in 1998. McLawhorn believed many in the business community failed to fully understand how King's work to dismantle legal



segregation helped create the foundation for economic growth throughout the South. The breakfast was designed to connect history with responsibility.

Over time, the event evolved into one of the region's most respected civic gatherings, bringing together leaders from business, government and nonprofit sectors. Its emphasis on civility, servant leadership and shared responsibility transformed it from an annual observance into a call for continued action.

Youth development remained central to McLawhorn's vision for long-term change. Under his leadership, the Columbia Urban League expanded programs focused on character education, early intervention and career readiness. Initiatives such as Project Ready, Saving Our Sons, paid summer employment, internships and apprenticeships opened doors to opportunity for thousands of young people.

McLawhorn's work has earned recognition at the highest levels. He received the 2010 FBI Director's Community Leadership Award for South Carolina and is a two-time recipient of the Order of the Palmetto. He has been inducted into the South Carolina Black Hall of Fame and is a two-time recipient of the National Urban League's Whitney M. Young Jr. Race Relations and Equity Award. He is also an Eagle Scout.

Today, McLawhorn serves on the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce Board and the South Carolina Medicaid Advisory Board. He previously chaired the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission, continuing a lifetime of service beyond the Urban League.

Founded in 1910, the National Urban League was created to help African Americans gain access to employment and economic opportunity. Under McLawhorn's leadership, its Columbia affiliate not only stayed true to that mission but evolved to meet the demands of a changing economy and society.

McLawhorn's legacy reflects Black history not as a moment in time, but as a living, evolving force. His work bridges civil rights, economic empowerment, education and civic engagement — the very pillars that define progress in Black America. Through steady leadership, institution-building and commitment to unity, he demonstrated how local action can produce statewide impact.

As communities continue to grapple with inequality, workforce development and social responsibility, McLawhorn's career offers a blueprint rooted in integrity, collaboration and service. His influence extends beyond programs and awards; it lives in opportunities created, conversations elevated and generations prepared for leadership.

Dr. James T. McLawhorn Jr. stands as a powerful and deserving figure for inclusion, representing a legacy of purpose that continues to shape South Carolina and beyond.



A COMMUNITY CHAMPION AND AWARD-WINNING CIVIC LEADER By Susan Carter



Michelle Brandt

BLYTHEWOOD—Michelle Brandt, faith and young adult outreach director for the South Carolina Forum, became interested in politics after attending a county council meeting. She noticed there were only two women serving on council at the time and grew frustrated by some of the dialogue surrounding affordable housing. Brandt reached out to one of the members and

requested a meeting over coffee. They discussed what it was like to run for office and her experience on council, and Brandt became convinced that local politics offered a meaningful way to be more involved in her community.

Brandt's background in environmental science provides a technical and analytical lens that allows her to champion evidence-based policies, particularly those related to coastal resilience and flood mitigation in Charleston. This foundation enables her to apply systems thinking to local government, recognizing how green space, infrastructure and public health are deeply interconnected.

Family life fuels her passion for her role as the current vice chair of the Charleston City Parks Commission. "My family is the heartbeat of my public service. As a mother of three young children, I am a daily user of our parks, seeing firsthand how these spaces provide the foundation for community, health and joy. This personal connection drives my commitment to ensuring every family in Charleston County—regardless of their ZIP code—has access to the same high-quality recreational opportunities. Ultimately, I serve because I want to leave behind a resilient and equitable community where my children, and all children, can truly thrive."

Extensive volunteer work in food distribution and with the Charleston Animal Society is another passion that reflects Brandt's commitment to her community. "My dedication to community service is driven by a desire to provide direct, hands-on support to South Carolina residents. From organizing food distributions to volunteering with the Charleston Animal Society, I prioritize work that addresses the immediate needs of families and our local environment. My commitment to public safety and civic health is further reflected in my completion of the North Charleston Police Academy and my leadership as a co-facilitator for the Chamber of Mothers. These efforts, which earned me the 2022 Presidential Volunteer Service Award, reflect my belief that true leadership begins with a servant's heart and a willingness to show up for your neighbors every single day." The award marked a year dedicated to grassroots service in Charleston County, during which she logged hundreds of hours working directly with local nonprofits and neighbors. "It was a moment of reflection for me—acknowledging that while my work in policy and on commissions is vital, it must always be rooted in the tangible, everyday needs of the community. My immediate response was one of profound gratitude, not just for the recognition, but for the community that allows me to serve."

As co-facilitator of the Charleston chapter of the Chamber of Mothers, Brandt leads grassroots advocacy

efforts supporting mothers and families across the community. Her responsibilities include organizing monthly meetings and mobilizing members to address critical gaps in child care, maternal health and paid family leave. She bridges the gap between local families and policy change by collaborating with community experts and directly advocating to elected leaders for a more supportive and equitable South Carolina.

Along the way, Brandt encountered obstacles and worked to overcome them. "The primary barrier I've faced is a political and civic structure that wasn't designed with young mothers in mind, from the lack of child care support during meetings to the resilience required to stay engaged after two difficult election losses. I overcome these challenges by treating every setback as a data point for growth. I've learned to communicate better with my husband, and we have found ways to manage child care and home responsibilities alongside my activism. My persistence is rooted in the belief that my perspective as a mom is exactly what's missing from the table, and that makes the effort worth it."

Brandt's current goals center on ensuring South Carolina's families and children have the structural support they need to lead healthy, stable lives. Her recent appointment to the South Carolina Foster Care Review Board is a key part of that mission. In this role, she advocates for the safety and permanency of children in the system, working to remove barriers that prevent them from finding loving, permanent homes. Beyond this appointment, she remains committed to a lifelong path of public service, with the ultimate goal of serving in an elected capacity at the local level. "I believe that by combining my experience in appointed office with the direct accountability of an elected role, I can more effectively champion policies—from expanded child care to equitable community resources—that will allow every family in our state to truly thrive."

On a lighter note, Brandt's leadership journey also intersects with her passion for pageantry. "Serving as Mrs. Charleston America 2020, Mrs. South Carolina Cosmos 2022 and International United Ms. South Carolina 2023 provided me with an incredible platform to hone my public speaking and advocacy skills. While I took a brief hiatus to welcome my son, Arthur, I am excited to return to the stage. For me, pageantry isn't just a hobby; it's another way to celebrate the multifaceted roles of modern women—showing you can be a dedicated public servant, a mother of three and a confident advocate in a crown all at the same time."



DRIVEN BY EQUITY: DR. AMALIA LUXARDO'S LEADERSHIP AT SC WREN By Susan Carter



Dr. Amalia Luxardo

COLUMBIA—Dr. Amalia Luxardo's commitment to women's rights, racial equity and social justice has been shaped by both personal and professional experiences. She grew up witnessing how systems too often fail women, families and communities of color. Those early experiences stayed with her and guided her academic and professional path. Over time, her work in public policy and philanthropy reinforced what she already knew to be true: Equity is not abstract.

It shows up in whether someone can access health care, earn a living wage or feel safe and valued in their community. That understanding continues to ground her leadership today.

Prior to moving to South Carolina, Luxardo established herself as an advocate for women and racial equity in Arizona as CEO of the Women's Foundation for the State of Arizona. She led work that strengthened the economic security and well-being of women and girls statewide. Her team expanded its grantmaking to better reach grassroots organizations, deepened policy advocacy to advance paid leave and workplace protections and built strong cross-sector partnerships with business and community leaders. Under her leadership, the foundation elevated data-driven storytelling to influence policymakers and the public, ensuring that women's lived experiences were reflected in Arizona policy.

These achievements required persistence and resilience in overcoming barriers to social change. Like many leaders working for systemic change, Luxardo faced deeply entrenched political resistance and limited resources. Advancing equity often means challenging long-standing power structures, which can be uncomfortable for institutions and decision-makers. Navigating polarized political environments while maintaining momentum requires persistence, coalition-building and a clear focus on mission. They also had to be innovative while ensuring that the communities most impacted remained at the center of their work.

In February 2024, Luxardo joined South Carolina's Women's Rights and Empowerment Network, WREN SC. "It has been an honor to serve alongside such a dedicated team, board and network of advocates." She applied to become CEO of WREN "because of its unapologetic commitment to gender justice and its strong reputation for pairing rigorous policy advocacy with community engagement. South Carolina sits at the intersection of many urgent issues—reproductive rights, economic inequality and health care access—and WREN has long been a trusted voice addressing those challenges. The opportunity to lead an organization that is both bold and deeply rooted in community felt like a natural next step for me."

Under Luxardo's leadership, WREN has fought against discriminatory legislation and encouraged reproductive rights for women and economic growth for women and minority populations. Her organization engages directly in the legislative process, tracking bills, providing testimony, mobilizing advocates and holding lawmakers accountable. "We oppose discriminatory policies that threaten bodily autonomy, economic security and civil rights, while advancing legislation that supports paid leave, workplace fairness and family well-being. At the same time, we invest in public education and advocacy tools so individuals across South Carolina can effectively engage in policy decisions that impact their lives."

WREN has been a leading voice in protecting and expanding health care access, particularly reproductive health care. The organization advocates for policies that safeguard access to contraception, pregnancy care and abortion, while also addressing broader health care inequities that disproportionately impact women and communities of color. Through research, coalition

work and storytelling, Luxardo and WREN elevated the real-world consequences of restrictive health care policies and push for solutions rooted in dignity and evidence.

Significant political and social barriers that interfere with WREN's goals include political polarization, misinformation and legislative efforts that roll back long-standing rights. "In South Carolina, we are navigating an environment where extremist policies often move quickly, leaving communities little time to respond." Social stigmas around reproductive health and gender equity also remain a challenge. Despite this, WREN continues to build power through coalition-building, education and sustained advocacy.

Individuals and businesses can support WREN by investing in its work through donations, partnerships and advocacy. Businesses can champion equitable workplace policies and use their platforms to speak out for gender justice. Individuals can stay informed, engage with their elected officials and support organizations doing the hard work of systemic change. Every action, no matter the size, helps build a more equitable South Carolina.

South Carolina is fortunate to have Luxardo's passion for and commitment to gender justice advocacy, economic equity and communal empowerment, all critical factors in achieving better outcomes for everyone. She credits her team and community for her success: "I believe deeply in the power of collective action. No single organization or leader can create lasting change alone, but together, we can. I am continually inspired by the advocates, partners and community members who refuse to accept inequality as inevitable. That shared commitment is what gives me hope and fuels my work every day."

PRESERVING IDENTITY, LAND AND COMMUNITY IN THE GULLAH CULTURE By Ronette Genwright



Luana Graves Sellars

BEAUFORT—The story of Gullah culture is one of resilience, identity and preservation. For cultural advocate Luana Graves Sellars, the journey began with family traditions deeply rooted in foodways and storytelling. Growing up on Long Island, she recalls her grandmother — now 101 years old — insisting on Carolina rice at every meal. Alongside dishes like okra and sweet potato poon, these traditions quietly carried the essence of Gullah heritage into her childhood.

It was not until adulthood, however, while freelancing for a South Carolina magazine, that Sellars realized she was writing about her own culture. With dual degrees in journalism and Black history, she began documenting Gullah traditions, uncovering a heritage that had always been present but unnamed. Her work evolved into a mission of cultural preservation, grounded in the belief that identity cannot be fully protected without safeguarding the land that sustains it.

Through nonprofit initiatives, Sellars has helped build organizations that both tell the story of Gullah culture and protect land for future generations. This dual approach reflects her belief that cultural justice is inseparable from economic stability. She emphasizes that leadership in this work requires listening to the community, gathering oral histories and respecting the wisdom passed down from elders. For Sellars, journalism's discipline of fact-checking and sourcing translates into a responsibility to, "get it right," ensuring the narratives she preserves are accurate and enduring.

The challenges facing Gullah families today are formidable.

PRESERVING IDENTITY CONT'D

Land once dismissed as, “garbage,” has become some of the most expensive property in the country, particularly along the South Carolina coast. Rising taxes, gentrification and heirs property issues threaten families’ ability to hold on to ancestral land. Without proper documentation, descendants often find themselves unable to build homes, secure mortgages or access disaster relief funds. Her foundation addresses these barriers by offering free wills, estate planning workshops and connections to legal resources, including the Center for Heirs Property and Lowcountry Legal Volunteers.

By bridging gaps in education and access, the foundation empowers families to break cycles of no documentation and protect their inheritance. Engaging younger generations is another cornerstone of the work. Many have left the land, disconnected from its history and economic potential. Sellars notes that traditionally, elders managed land matters without involving children, creating a generational gap in knowledge. When crises arise, families often discover too late the importance of succession planning.

Sellars’ efforts focus on educating young people about the cultural and economic significance of land ownership, ensuring they understand the sacrifices of ancestors who recognized land as power, sustenance and security. She reminds communities that the blood, sweat and tears of enslaved ancestors are embedded in the soil, and that their legacy must not be casually discarded. The global resonance of Gullah culture underscores its importance

beyond the Lowcountry.

Students from Russia, Sweden and Asia have reached out to learn about Gullah traditions, reflecting worldwide interest in this Indigenous American culture. Everyday practices — such as painting porch ceilings blue or weaving sweetgrass baskets — carry Gullah origins, even among those unaware of the connection. Sellars emphasizes that nearly 89 percent of African Americans descended from enslaved people along the East Coast are likely of Gullah heritage, though many do not realize it.

For Sellars, the mission is clear: to help people embrace and understand who they are, transforming cultural disconnect into pride and identity. Looking ahead, she envisions a legacy in which millions of African Americans recognize their Gullah roots. She hopes her work will inspire communities to reclaim their heritage, preserve their land and honor the sacrifices of ancestors who understood that land meant survival and prosperity.

As Sellars reflects, the Gullah were not random captives, but skilled, capable people chosen for their expertise. That knowledge, passed through generations, remains a source of pride and resilience. Her advocacy ensures the story of Gullah culture is not only remembered but lived, offering future generations a foundation of identity, empowerment and continuity.

For more information, visit lowcountrygullah.com and lowcountrygullahfoundation.org, where the foundation continues to share resources, stories and a podcast dedicated to preserving and celebrating Gullah heritage.

SHAPING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN THE PEE DEE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Belle Zeigler

Eastern Carolina Community Foundation is the public community foundation serving the seven-county Pee Dee region of South Carolina. Its mission is to improve quality of life across the region through inspired philanthropy and innovative community programming. The foundation embraces the diverse nature of its communities to better serve the region. According to its website, “Eastern Carolina Community Foundation (ECCF) is a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace and organization where all employees and volunteers, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation or identity, education or ability, feel valued and respected.” The statement highlights various demographics, but one of the most visible within the organization is women. As a grant maker, a large percentage of the organizations ECCF supports are women-focused or women-led.

Belle Zeigler is the executive director of ECCF and has been with the foundation for five and a half years. Her role includes donor and fund development, nonprofit support, board relations and foundation operations. She is recognized for her leadership in Florence, South Carolina, through her work with the foundation. She is encouraged by the role women play in shaping the future of the Pee Dee region. Zeigler believes society should focus on ensuring women are paid and valued equally. She also believes women are being recognized for their efforts more now than ever before. She appreciates Diversity Works for its efforts in uplifting women in the community. Zeigler noted the foundation’s newly elected board members represent women from many backgrounds. The region ECCF serves is diverse; therefore, the board should reflect all areas. That representation is important to the mission’s focus and strengthens the organization.

Zeigler’s role as executive director demonstrates how women in positions of power contribute to sustainability. She works with nonprofit staff members who provide critical resources

throughout the community. She is also proud of the work and investments of the foundation’s Giving Circle Fund, Women in Philanthropy. According to, “Candid,” women in the nonprofit sector are underpaid, underrepresented and underfunded, but gaps are closing and progress is being made. Despite being the dominant gender in the nonprofit workforce, women continue to face gender bias and challenges. “Nearly seven in 10 nonprofit workers identify as women, yet they’re underrepresented among leaders and receive unequal pay.”

Even with workforce changes, women have become increasingly successful yet often remain hesitant to discuss their achievements for various reasons. Zeigler said she is grateful Diversity Works provides a platform for women to share and celebrate success. She also believes programs, policies and practices must be implemented to ensure women on the path to success are supported long term, which requires taking risks. Risk is necessary for sustainability. More women now serve in executive leadership roles rather than as observers. Today, women are thriving in positions of power politically and economically. Women are actively shaping their own blueprints for success. Zeigler said she sees many women participating in CEO roundtables and believes representation must continue to grow.

As ECCF approaches its 20th year serving the Pee Dee, Zeigler expressed pride in the foundation’s growth in assets and grantmaking and in contributing to the progress of the organizations it supports. She wants the community to know ECCF is making a difference and appreciates the tremendous support for its work. Each day, the foundation strives to build a more sustainable community.





Regina Nesmith-Dimery

KINGSTREE—In the heart of South Carolina’s Pee Dee region, one woman’s decades-long commitment to rural health has transformed communities and inspired generations. Regina Nesmith-Dimery, MS, community engagement manager at the South Carolina Department of Public Health, has been named a 2025 Community Star — an honor that recognizes her unwavering dedication to equity, compassion and grassroots leadership.

Raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Nesmith-Dimery’s journey was shaped by family values of resilience and service in both urban and rural settings. With a master’s degree and more than 30 years of public health experience, she has become a trusted voice for rural communities. Her education and personal background gave her both the technical expertise, and the empathy needed to connect deeply with the people she serves.

For Nesmith-Dimery, being named a Community Star is both personal and professional validation. “It affirms the sacrifices, the long nights and the countless community meetings. But more importantly, it shines a light on the voices of rural residents who deserve to be heard,” she reflects. Her passion for rural health was ignited early in her career when she witnessed firsthand the disparities faced by families in underserved areas.

That moment became a lifelong mission: to ensure that rural communities are not left behind in matters of health, wellness and opportunity. From Williamsburg to Lee and Florence counties, Nesmith-Dimery has spearheaded initiatives that address pressing needs. Among her proudest accomplishments is leading coalitions that expanded access to fresh food and advanced maternal and child health advocacy. These grassroots efforts have not only improved health outcomes but also strengthened community bonds.

Expanding access to fresh foods was no easy task. Nesmith-Dimery faced challenges ranging from limited infrastructure to funding gaps. Yet, through partnerships with schools, businesses and faith-based organizations, she helped establish food pantries and farmers markets. During the pandemic, one pantry grew into a vital hub offering food, diapers, formula and clothing — meeting families where they were with dignity and care.

Her advocacy has also led to measurable improvements in maternal and child health. Prenatal education programs have expanded resources for young mothers, and community-driven support networks have reduced disparities. Still, she acknowledges that more work lies ahead, particularly in addressing systemic barriers and ensuring sustainable access to care. Nesmith-Dimery embodies servant leadership by leading with humility and example.

Whether facilitating a coalition meeting or mentoring young professionals, she prioritizes listening, collaboration and empowerment. “It’s about amplifying rural voices and mobilizing local assets so every resident can thrive,” she explains. Her impact has been magnified through partnerships with organizations like Wholespire, SCORH and local coalitions.

Together, they have tackled challenges such as walkability in Lane, South Carolina, and prediabetes among seniors in Williamsburg County. These collaborations demonstrate the power of collective action in addressing complex health issues. To those aspiring to make a difference in rural health, Nesmith-Dimery offers simple but profound guidance: “Listen first. Build trust and never underestimate the strength of community-driven

solutions.”

Looking back, Nesmith-Dimery points to the pandemic-era food pantry expansion as one of her most rewarding accomplishments. Seeing families not only fed but supported with essential resources reaffirmed her belief in the power of grassroots action. As she looks ahead, Nesmith-Dimery envisions a South Carolina where rural communities have equitable access to health care, nutritious food and safe environments.

Her dream extends beyond state lines: a future where rural health is prioritized nationally, and every resident — regardless of ZIP code — has the opportunity to thrive. Nesmith-Dimery’s story is one of resilience, compassion and servant leadership. Her recognition as a 2025 Community Star is not just a personal accolade — it is a testament to the transformative power of grassroots engagement and the enduring spirit of rural South Carolina.

Nesmith-Dimery is the wife of Alvin L. Dimery Sr., licensed funeral director and embalmer and owner and manager of Dimery and Rogers Funeral Home LLC (Williamsburg and Florence counties). She is a member of Bethesda United Methodist Church, Lake City; Kingstree-Lake City Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.; Worthy Matron of Good Hope Chapter No. 269, Order of the Eastern Star (PHA); King Solomon Assembly No. 331, Order of the Golden Circle; and Nesmith Branch NAACP.

LEADING WITH PURPOSE: A WOMAN DRIVING COMMUNITY CHANGE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Michelle Byers Brown

HARTSVILLE — Leading change is a task many people would hesitate to attempt because of the inherent risks, but it requires strength, commitment and determination. During Women’s History Month, women who contribute to their communities are recognized, and their work is highlighted to honor their achievements.

Michelle Byers Brown works to encourage women both in and outside her workplace. She is featured for her leadership abilities, vision, passion and heart — qualities that together create meaningful impact, advance economic opportunity, foster system change and strengthen community connections. Brown serves as director of tourism, communication, Main Street Hartsville and public information officer for the city of Hartsville, where she oversees city communications, the Hartsville Museum, special events, venue rentals and marketing. In her three and a half years with the city, Brown has made significant strides and continues to highlight the growth and development of Hartsville. “We do a lot of work, but there’s nothing more satisfying than walking down the street after an event, smiling and knowing the community enjoyed each other,” she said. “I think the world has somehow missed this in lots of places.”

Brown is also a leader in community organizing. She is an active member of the Hartsville Rotary Club and a long-term member of the Wildwood Garden Club. Through Rotary, she helps with initiatives such as the Foster Children’s Christmas Dinner, trash pickup days and other events that support the community. Brown is resilient in both her professional and personal life as a wife, mother of three adult children and grandmother to one.

One of her hopes is that the world does not negatively impact her granddaughter’s social development, as society often marginalizes women. Brown said she has, “watched the bright

LEADING WITH PURPOSE CONT'D

light and innocence of women be squashed,” and wants younger women to be who they are. “We should be celebrated for the way we look, the way we sound, our shapes, our eye colors and our skin color,” she said. She also wants women to love and appreciate each other’s uniqueness. The world discriminates against women and working together to elevate one another can bring more resources and access to opportunities that build equality. Brown emphasized women’s empowerment and wants to see more women collaborate to improve advancement opportunities for others.

Women have the ability to forge holistic change across a range of overlapping global challenges. In leadership roles, women have and will continue to shape change in the world. The power to educate, access education, advocate against health disparities and gain access to resources has increased over the past 50 years. Women once depended on male partners or authorities to achieve independence. Although there have been great strides toward equality, women still face inequality, violence and discrimination.

Brown has worked diligently to establish herself as a leader shaping the future for other women. She said she is honored to be recognized during Women’s History Month but emphasized that her achievements are a team effort. Volunteers, staff members from every department and her family are all part of her success. “We are all better together,” Brown said.

A LEGACY CARRIED WITH GRACE By Cynthia O. Ford



Jacqueline Jackson McGill

MARION — For nearly a century, the Jackson name has carried quiet strength through Marion, South Carolina. Today, that legacy lives through Jacqueline Jackson McGill, a woman whose poise, knowledge and unwavering commitment to her community have made her one of the region’s most enduring business leaders. Her story is one of inheritance and history, but also of resilience, restoration and determination — an unyielding refusal to let a family legacy fade.

McGill was born into funeral service. Her father, the late Henry L. Jackson, established the family funeral home in 1928, during a time when Black families had limited access to compassionate and dignified care. He became the first Black embalmer in Marion County, setting a standard for professionalism and respect that would shape generations. He raised three daughters in the home that still serves as the Jackson-McGill Funeral Home, teaching them how to carry themselves with honor in a world that often scrutinized them. His guiding belief was simple: If you wanted respect, you had to be respectful first. That principle shaped McGill’s life and leadership.

She attended college with plans to enter education or social work, but life redirected her path. In 1967, she married her late husband, the Rev. Henry McGill, former pastor of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. The following year, her father died, and her stepmother struggled to keep the business operating. Within two years, the funeral home faced foreclosure. Watching her father’s legacy fall into financial danger was heartbreaking, but it also ignited resolve. She and her husband were determined to save what remained.

When the property went up for sale, she prayed for a miracle. The winning bid fell their way. With that moment, the Jackson name was restored, and a vital community institution was

preserved. It marked a turning point — one that would define the rest of her life.

From there, McGill learned the business from the ground up. She researched industry laws and regulations, studied every document and made sure she understood every detail. She served families with compassion, knowing grief could not be rushed or minimized. Her promise was simple, “We will make this transition as smooth as possible.” She carried forward what she learned from her father, offering dignity, care and professionalism to every family she served.

She and her husband operated the funeral home for more than 50 years until his death in 2016. Their partnership was built on discipline, faith and shared purpose. McGill, a gifted pianist since childhood, played at Mt. Pisgah and became a pillar of strength in both spiritual and community spaces. Over time, the funeral home expanded, adding a chapel and modernizing the original home where she was raised. The walls still carry memories of childhood, ministry, marriage and generations of families served.

As a woman leading in a historically male-dominated field, challenges were inevitable. Some doors closed before she reached them, but her reputation, knowledge and the weight of the Jackson legacy opened others. She believes deeply in knowing your craft. “If you want to be up there, know how to get there. Know what you know so no one can take it from you,” McGill said. She emphasizes that success requires understanding your business, not shortcuts. Her path was shaped by study, observation and consistency. Her advice to young women is clear: Choose a field you can excel in, stay in your lane, build from the bottom and never make decisions in the dark.



Pictured with Mrs. Jacqueline McGill, is her daughter Poiette McGill who is also a funeral director with Jackson-McGill Funeral Home.

Decades later, the Marion community has changed, but the Jackson-McGill Funeral Home remains constant. Families return because they trust the name and remember how they were treated. McGill has watched generations pass through her doors. She has done nearly everything in the business except embalm and dig graves and still

plays an active role today. Her greatest joy comes when families tell her they remember how she made them feel during their hardest moments. You may not find joy in grief, she said, but you can always be thankful for the opportunity to serve well.

When asked what legacy means to her, McGill speaks of carrying her father’s foundation forward and keeping the name alive with integrity. She stands firmly on what he built and hopes the same for the next generation. Her life is a lesson in stewardship, sacrifice and strength. For Women’s History Month, her message is unmistakable: Be bold, be prepared, be knowledgeable and step forward with confidence, because no one can take away what you truly know.

McGill is grateful to those who have supported the funeral home over the years and believes in giving credit where it is due. She acknowledges those who work beside her with appreciation and dignity. For her, funeral service is not simply a profession — it is a ministry of compassion and presence.

As Women’s History Month highlights trailblazers across the nation, McGill stands as a local icon of resilience and leadership. She reminds us that strong women do not always seek the spotlight. Sometimes their influence is carried quietly into the lives they touch, the families they serve and the communities they strengthen through decades of excellence.

HOW TO BENEFIT FROM FINANCIAL PLANNING AT ANY LIFE STAGE



(BPT) — No matter your stage in life's journey, it's never too early or too late to make financial plans. For military families especially, planning helps you withstand major transitions and provides confidence about the future. From your first Permanent Change of Station to deployment and separation, you'll face many decisions and high-priority items on your to-do list, including managing your finances.

Financial Planning Month is the perfect time to focus on setting goals for your financial future. Here are tips to help you get started.

Begin with the basics: Savings

Developing a savings plan is a great place to start. Even when you're just beginning your career, building the habit of setting money aside from each paycheck can help you create an emergency fund for unexpected events. One approach is to open a separate savings account and automatically deposit a small portion of each paycheck, so saving becomes effortless.

How much should you aim to save for an emergency fund? Many experts recommend saving three to six months of living expenses to provide a cushion in case of job loss, unanticipated repairs or other unexpected needs.

The amount of money needed to maintain financial security can vary widely based on individual circumstances, making it essential to assess your personal financial situation. If possible, consistently set aside a portion of each paycheck and try to save more when you can to build a stronger safety net.

If you're unsure what goal is best

for you, financial institutions offer free online calculators to help determine how much emergency funding you'll need, along with tips for building the fund and reaching your goals.

You can also explore options that help your savings work harder than a traditional savings account, such as money market savings accounts or certificates, which typically offer higher interest rates.

Household budgeting

While it may sound intimidating, budgeting simply means knowing how much money is coming in and how much is going out. A strong budget begins with understanding the difference between necessary expenses — such as rent and utilities, insurance, groceries and transportation — and discretionary spending like entertainment, dining out and vacations. It's also important to remember that some necessary expenses, such as utilities, can fluctuate throughout the year.

Financial institutions often offer online tools to make budgeting and expense management easier. My MakingCents, for example, is a free tool that allows members to see all their accounts in one place, track spending by category, build custom budgets and manage subscription services. The goal is to simplify budgeting, especially for expenses like subscriptions that are easy to overlook or overspend on.

As you review expenses, be sure to include debt repayment as a necessary cost. Reducing debt now can save money on interest in the long run. You may find it necessary to cut back on discretionary spending or identify ways to increase household income so you can continue saving and paying down debt.

Budgeting starts with knowing your numbers, and flexibility is key. Your budget should work with your life, not against it.

Start with essentials by tracking fixed costs such as rent or mortgage payments, car payments and insurance. Then review past spending to determine realistic averages for variable expenses like groceries, dining out and gas. That's where adjustments are often easiest to make. One helpful tip is to treat savings like a bill and pay yourself first every month. Even small amounts add up over time and build financial confidence.

Retirement planning

Whether retirement is years away or just around the corner, starting to save early can help you feel more confident when you reach that milestone. Each type of retirement plan offers different benefits that can help strengthen your overall savings strategy.

Both traditional and Roth individual retirement accounts allow you to diversify your retirement savings and contribute up to annual limits while earning income.

A traditional IRA may be ideal if you expect to be in the same or a lower tax bracket at retirement, as contributions may be tax-deductible and grow tax-deferred until withdrawal. A Roth IRA works well for those who anticipate being in a higher tax bracket later and don't need an immediate tax deduction, allowing for tax-free withdrawals in retirement.

Estate planning

Planning for your loved ones' future is important for protecting your assets, minimizing taxes for heirs and ensuring your wishes are honored. A well-crafted estate plan can reduce time, stress and financial burden if the unexpected occurs.

Common estate planning documents include wills, trusts, guardianship designations, financial powers of attorney and advance directives for medical decisions, often referred to as living wills. Together, these tools provide clarity and control over how your assets and care are managed.

Expert personalized guidance

No matter what stage of life you're in, it's natural to have questions about next steps. To remove the guesswork from financial planning, investment services can help turn your vision into reality through digital investor tools or meetings with financial advisers.

Whether transitioning to civilian life, getting married, starting a family, saving for college or preparing for retirement, developing a concrete financial plan can make all the difference.

Financial goals evolve over time, and what feels like a major accomplishment today may change as circumstances shift. Maintaining a relationship with a trusted financial adviser or institution helps ensure your financial strategy adapts with you, allowing you to make the most of your money at every stage of life.

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FINANCIAL STRATEGIES SMALL BUSINESSES NEED TO SUCCEED IN 2026



(DWM) - As 2026 approaches, small businesses face a rapidly evolving financial landscape shaped by rising costs, shifting consumer behavior and advancing technology. While uncertainty remains, proactive financial planning can help business owners protect their operations, strengthen cash flow and position themselves for long-term growth.

One of the most important steps for small businesses in 2026 is prioritizing cash flow management. Inflationary pressures and supply chain fluctuations continue to affect operating expenses, making it essential to maintain adequate cash reserves. Business owners should regularly review accounts receivable, shorten payment cycles when possible and negotiate flexible terms with vendors. Consistent cash flow forecasting allows leaders to anticipate shortfalls and make informed decisions before challenges

escalate.

Diversifying revenue streams will also be critical in the year ahead. Relying heavily on a single product, service or client increases financial risk. Small businesses can reduce vulnerability by expanding offerings, exploring e-commerce opportunities or targeting new markets. Even modest diversification can create stability and protect against unexpected downturns.

Technology investments remain a key financial consideration for 2026. While adopting new tools may require upfront costs, automation and digital platforms often deliver long-term savings. Accounting software, payroll systems and inventory management tools can reduce administrative expenses and improve accuracy. Businesses should evaluate return on investment carefully and focus on technology that enhances efficiency rather than adding complexity.

Tax planning is another area where preparation can yield significant benefits. With potential changes to tax regulations on the horizon, small business owners should consult with financial advisors or tax professionals early. Strategic planning around deductions, credits and entity structure can reduce tax liability and

improve year-end outcomes. Staying informed and proactive helps avoid costly surprises during filing season.

Access to capital will continue to shape small business growth in 2026. Traditional loans, lines of credit and alternative financing options each serve different needs. Business owners should review their credit profiles, update financial statements and build relationships with lenders before funding is urgently required. Having financing in place provides flexibility to respond to opportunities or emergencies.

Risk management and insurance coverage deserve renewed attention as well. Rising cyber threats, climate-related disruptions and workforce challenges make comprehensive coverage essential. Reviewing policies annually ensures adequate protection and prevents gaps that could result in financial loss.

Finally, investing in people remains one of the most impactful financial decisions a small business can make. Competitive compensation, professional development and employee retention strategies help control turnover costs and build a resilient workforce. Engaged employees contribute directly to productivity and customer satisfaction.



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ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK ANNOUNCES NEW PROMOTIONS Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant

MULLINS-Anderson Brothers Bank announced the promotions of Bryan Lenertz, Richard Carroll and Rivers Anderson.



Bryan Lenertz

Lenertz, currently serving as regional executive, has been promoted to executive vice president and chief banking officer. In this expanded leadership role, he will oversee the bank's growth strategy and organizational objectives while providing guidance and support to key divisions, including regional executives, mortgage lending and marketing. With more than 20 years of banking experience, Lenertz's leadership will continue to strengthen the bank's market presence and enhance customer and community engagement across all regions.

Lenertz brings a diverse and accomplished background to the executive team. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in accounting from Randolph-Macon College in Virginia. He is also a licensed real estate broker-in-charge with additional experience in residential construction, providing a unique perspective and extensive expertise in the financial, housing and real estate sectors.

CEO David Anderson said, "Bryan's dedication and vision have been critical in shaping Anderson Brothers Bank into the institution it is today. This appointment not only honors his contributions but also solidifies the foundation for continued advancement and success."



Richard Carroll

Carroll, currently serving as regional executive, has been promoted to executive vice president and chief credit officer. In this role, Carroll will be based at the bank's administrative building at 424 Main St., in Conway.

As executive vice president and chief credit officer, Carroll will serve as a key member of

the bank's senior leadership team, guiding strategic decisions while overseeing all aspects of credit administration. His responsibilities include developing and enforcing credit policies, managing credit risk, maintaining loan portfolio quality and ensuring regulatory compliance. Carroll will also support lending teams across all regions, provide oversight on complex loan approvals and collaborate with executive leadership to promote sound, sustainable growth.

With more than 21 years of banking experience, Carroll brings extensive knowledge and proven leadership to the position. He holds a bachelor's degree in accounting and finance from Coastal Carolina University and an MBA from Winthrop University. His executive background is complemented by long-standing involvement in civic groups and community organizations throughout the Conway area. CEO David Anderson said, "Richard has been indispensable in building Anderson Brothers Bank into the leading institution it is today. These well-deserved appointments acknowledge their contributions and solidify our foundation for continued growth and success."



Rivers Anderson

Anderson, currently serving as chief credit officer, has been promoted to chief operating officer. He will continue to be based at 424 Main St. in Conway, where he will oversee daily operations, execute operational strategies, improve efficiency across departments and ensure coordination among business units. A graduate of Coastal Carolina University, Anderson earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree and joined Anderson Brothers Bank in 2010. He has built a distinguished career with experience in credit analysis, special asset management, branch management and commercial lending, consistently demonstrating strong leadership and a commitment to operational excellence.

HOW TO MAKE A BUDGET YOU'LL ACTUALLY STICK WITH



It's one of the oldest pieces of advice out there, but it's one of the hardest to actually follow: Make a budget—and stick to it.

Only 44% of Americans say they could cover a \$1,000 emergency with savings, and just 22% have enough to last six months without income. Meanwhile, 57% still report feeling uncomfortable with their emergency savings, highlighting the importance of building and sticking to a realistic budget.¹ The good news? Putting together a simple budget is not difficult. Here are some tips:

Step 1: Gather the numbers

To create a budget you can live with, examine your habits. Think of yourself like a business. Essentially, you're trying to figure out how much you have left over—your “profit” so to speak—once you add up everything that comes in and goes out.

Use your pay stub to calculate how much you take home after subtracting out health insurance, your 401(k), and taxes. That number will tell you how much money you have to cover your expenses (and put together some savings) in any given year.

Next, determine your expenses. Think through how much you spend on housing, food, your daily commute, and other recurring costs, like a monthly gym fee.

Now, subtract those recurring costs from your take-home pay. This is the amount you have for Step 2.

Step 2: Figure out your biggest unpredictable costs and set a limit

Now that you have your recurring costs, be honest with yourself—figure out how much you usually spend on extra things like going out to eat, traveling, or on entertainment. Go over your credit card statements to identify as many of these costs as possible. Now, how much do you have left of that number you tallied at the

end of Step 1?

Are you seeing lots of your favorite coffee charges on there? Or are you racking up bills at your favorite cosmetic shop? Chances are, you'll find a pattern of small purchases that really add up at the end of the month. Your budget is where you will map that out.

Here's the key: Once you know how much you are spending on average, it's time to set a limit.

A successful budget works directly with your current habits to set reasonable limits of what you can spend each month.

To stay with the coffee example, imagine you set a budget of \$70 a month for coffee. Divide \$70 by the cost of your favorite cup to determine how many coffees you can have per month.

Step 3: Prioritize

Once you know your spending limits, you will need to prioritize. If you absolutely must have a coffee each day, that's fine. Perhaps you can find other places to cut back or look for cheaper options, like a regular coffee instead of a latte, or carrying your own in a thermos.

It's one thing to know that it's important to save money and quite another to make room in your budget to do it. We tend to think saving is hard because it means giving up things we love. But if you've accurately mapped out your costs and your assets, you know exactly how much is left to save—and what's left over for you to enjoy.

It's all in the budget.

This educational, third-party article is provided as a courtesy by Julie A Cord, Agent, New York Life Insurance Company. To learn more about the information or topics discussed, please contact Julie A Cord at 317.289.3010 or jacord@ft.newyorklife.com.

¹Bankrate, “2024 Emergency Savings Report,” <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/savings/emergency-savings-report>

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GAINING CONTROL OF YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE IN THE NEW YEAR

Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



A new year brings a fresh start. It is an opportunity to pause, reflect and reset. At Palmetto First Credit Union, we believe every member deserves the confidence and tools to build a strong financial future. Whether you hope to reduce debt, save more or simply feel more in control of your money, the start of the year is the perfect moment to

take meaningful steps forward.

Here's how to create a financial reset that works for you.

1. Start with a clear picture of where you stand

A healthy financial future begins with awareness. Review your monthly income, fixed expenses, debt payments and discretionary spending. Knowing your numbers helps you set realistic goals and identify immediate opportunities for improvement. Do you have a realistic written budget? If not, start today.

2. Build (or rebuild) your safety net

Unexpected expenses happen, and they are much easier to manage when you have savings set aside. Even starting with \$10 to \$20 a week can create positive momentum.

If you have not started an emergency savings account yet, now is the ideal time. Palmetto First offers member-friendly accounts designed to help you grow your emergency fund at your pace.

3. Strategize your debt payoff plan

Debt does not have to hold you back. Start by organizing what you owe and choosing a payoff strategy that fits your personality: Snowball method: Pay off the smallest balances first for quick

wins.

Avalanche method: Pay off debts with the highest rate first to save money long term.

Our team is always here to help you find the most cost-effective and empowering plan.

4. Simplify decisions with a realistic budget

Budgets are not about restriction. They are a tool for freedom. A simple 50/30/20 structure works for many people:

50 percent needs

30 percent wants

20 percent savings or debt repayment

Even small adjustments can create big change over the course of a year.

5. Set goals that inspire you

Whether it is buying your first car, saving for a big purchase, repairing credit or preparing for homeownership, write down your goals and track your progress monthly.

And remember, you do not have to navigate these goals alone. We are here to help you succeed.

6. Lean on financial partners who put you first

When you are ready to take the next step — opening an account, refinancing a loan or getting personalized financial guidance — our team at Palmetto First Credit Union is by your side.

If you are reading this and wondering whether you qualify for membership, here is some good news: If you live, work, worship, volunteer or attend school in Florence County — or if you have a relative who does — you can join Palmetto First Credit Union. Your fresh financial start is closer than you think.

Ready to reset? Let's make 2026 your strongest financial year yet.



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45 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP: CARESOUTH CAROLINA SALUTES ANN LEWIS

Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Chief Executive Officer Ann Lewis

commitment to the communities she has served.

Lewis joined what was then a small clinic in the early 1980s and helped guide its transformation into CareSouth Carolina, now a nationally recognized community health organization serving thousands of patients across the Pee Dee region. Throughout her career, Lewis has led through expansion, financial uncertainty, natural disasters and a global pandemic, never losing sight of the organization's mission to enhance the health and well-being of everyone.

During a special recognition, colleagues, board members and longtime partners shared reflections on Lewis' leadership and lasting impact.

Joy Gandy, chief of project development at CareSouth Carolina, shared that she interviewed with Lewis in 1981 for a position and recalled the intention Lewis brought to leadership from the very beginning.

"That interview was personal and intentional. Ann didn't just want someone who could do the job — she wanted someone who would treat every patient like a human being, not a number. And that expectation has never changed," Gandy said.

Gandy reflected on the organization's early days, when resources were limited and staff wore many hats, noting that Lewis was never content to stop at what already existed.

"Even back then, what we had wasn't enough for her," she said. "She always saw what CareSouth Carolina could be. She led through budget cuts, hurricanes, snowstorms, personal hardship and even a global pandemic — and nothing ever stopped her from leading."

She added, "I truly believe CareSouth Carolina would not be what it is today without her vision and perseverance. If leadership were an Olympic sport, she would have won gold several times by now."

Lathan J. Woodard, former CEO of the South Carolina Primary Health Care Association, spoke about her deep personal and professional bond with Lewis, describing her as a leader rooted in integrity and service.

"Ann always stood her ground and stood in her truth. She understood that real leadership is servitude. She knows people by name. She checks on people. She cares," Woodard said.

Woodard emphasized Lewis' approach to conflict and decision-making.

"If someone came to her and said, 'So-and-so said this,' Ann's response was always, 'I'm going to that person and ask them.' She never moved on hearsay. That taught me so much about leadership," she said.

She continued, "When I was going through hard times, she didn't come to me as a CEO or a board chair — she came to me as a woman. She protected me. She supported me. And that meant everything. She has been passionate about this for many years, and that's because you are doing God's work."

Dr. Vicki M. Young, who currently serves as CEO,

HARTSVILLE — CareSouth Carolina is celebrating a historic milestone as Chief Executive Officer Ann Lewis marks 45 years with the organization, a tenure defined by growth, resilience and an unwavering

highlighted Lewis' role as a mentor and champion to emerging leaders.

"She was always the cheerleader — the one saying, 'We're going to do this.' Not because it benefited her, but because of her why. Her why has always been the patients and the community," Young said.

Young credited Lewis' longevity to a combination of compassion and curiosity.

"She is always learning. Just last week she told me, 'Put it in ChatGPT.' And I thought — here's someone 45 years in, still evolving, still growing," Young said.

She added, "That genuine heart is what keeps her going, and what keeps this movement growing — not just here, but across the state and the nation."

Dr. Flossie Bartell-Jackson, treasurer and longtime CareSouth Carolina board member, shared how Lewis reshaped her understanding of community health.

"When Ann brings something to the board, we know she has already put in the thought and the research. We trust her," Bartell-Jackson said.

She praised Lewis' clarity and transparency.

"This is the only board I've served on where, most of the time, you don't even need to ask questions. And if you do, she takes the time to explain — no matter how long it takes," she said.

Bartell-Jackson concluded, "I am honored to serve on this board with her, and I have no intentions of stepping away."

Board Chair Jay Hodge reflected on Lewis' ability to lead through challenge and purpose.

"In our darkest moments, Ann has always helped us see the light. What we have here isn't just an organization — it's a cause," Hodge said.

He added, "She still has fight in her. And as long as she does, this cause will keep moving forward."

As CareSouth Carolina honors Lewis' 45 years of service, the voices of those who know her best tell a clear story of a leader who never lost sight of why the work mattered and whose legacy is woven into every patient served, every staff member supported and every community strengthened.

Even after 45 years, Lewis continues to lead the charge of the community health center movement. She remains a pioneer in her field and a guiding light in the community.

"It is an honor and a privilege that God has given me every single day," Lewis said. "I love CareSouth Carolina, and I love our communities. Let's keep doing it."



Past History Photos of Ann Lewis



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A FRESH START: HEALTHIER DRINKING IN THE NEW YEAR

Submitted by Erica Buffkin, prevention coordinator, Circle Park Behavioral Health Services



Erica Buffkin

As we step into a brand-new year, many people in our community look forward to a fresh start — another chance to set goals that help them live healthier, stronger and more balanced lives. This season often brings a renewed focus on well-being, especially as people juggle careers, family responsibilities, commitments and the day-to-day demands that come with life.

While popular resolutions often center around eating better or returning to the gym, there is another powerful step that can make a major difference in health: cutting back on alcohol or taking a break from drinking altogether.

Why Reducing Alcohol Matters — Especially Now

In recent years, one of the most common New Year's resolutions has been reducing alcohol use. And for good reason. Drinking less does far more than help people avoid hangovers or risky situations — it can truly improve quality of life.

Cutting back can help people:

- Sleep more soundly
- Wake up with more energy to manage work, family and community activities
- Save money — because drinks add up quickly
- Lose a few post-holiday pounds
- Lower the risk of liver disease, heart disease and certain cancers

Most importantly, drinking less can strengthen emotional wellness, helping people handle everyday stress with greater clarity and resilience.

Understanding What “Moderation” Really Means

To set realistic goals, it helps to know what counts as a “standard drink.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 12 oz. beer (five percent alcohol by volume)
- 8 oz. malt liquor (seven percent alcohol by volume)
- 5 oz. wine (12 percent alcohol by volume)
- 1.5 oz. liquor (40 percent alcohol by volume)

Drinking more than this within a short period is considered binge drinking, and regularly exceeding weekly limits — more than eight drinks per week for women or 15 for men — is considered heavy drinking.

However, as many know, the initial excitement of setting

New Year's resolutions is often the easy part. Maintaining those goals over the long term can feel overwhelming, causing many to falter along the way. Fortunately, there are strategies to increase the chances of success, especially when it comes to reducing alcohol use.

Setting a Plan You Can Stick To

Making the resolution is the easy part. Sticking to it, that takes intention. Here are a few tips to increase the chances of success:

- Create a clear plan. Choose a start date or outline how much to cut back each week.
- Tell someone trustworthy. Sharing goals helps create accountability.
- Talk to a doctor. If drinking heavily for years, receiving medical guidance is important.
- Choose alcohol-free alternatives. Whether at a cookout, Sunday dinner or social event, having a nonalcoholic option helps people participate without feeling excluded.
- Know personal triggers. Stress, loneliness or certain social circles can make drinking more tempting. Recognizing those moments is key to staying in control.

Stay Encouraged — Progress Isn't Perfect

If people slip and drink more than planned, they should not let that derail a resolution. Setbacks happen. What matters is how people respond the next day — with self-compassion and renewed commitment.

Every step forward counts.

You Don't Have To Do This Alone

Support makes the difference, whether it comes from a trusted friend, a support group, a church community or a trained professional.

For those looking for structured help, Circle Park Behavioral Health offers a variety of services — peer support, group therapy, individual counseling and medication-assisted treatment — to help people stay on track with goals.

The organization remains committed to supporting the citizens of Florence and Williamsburg Counties through effective, evidence-based treatment and prevention services. Most importantly, services are about you, for you and without judgment.

For more information, contact Circle Park at 843-665-9349, stop by one of the offices in Florence, Lake City or Hemingway, or visit the website at circlepark.com.

Here's to a healthy, hopeful and empowered New Year — one decision at a time.

The Difference Between Casual Drinking, Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism



SCREEN FOR CANCER TODAY. PROTECT WHAT MATTERS MOST.



From mammograms and colonoscopies to low-dose lung CT scans, we offer a full range of cancer screenings designed to detect cancer early—when it's most treatable. Take charge of your health today to protect your tomorrow.

EARLY DETECTION SAVES LIVES. SCHEDULE YOUR SCREENING TODAY.



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Lung Cancer
Low-dose CT scans
for high-risk patients



Prostate Cancer
Exam and PSA Test as
recommended by your provider



Scan Code to Learn More about Cancer Screenings.

McLeod Health

HUNDREDS GATHER FOR 40TH ANNUAL MCLEOD HOSPICE TREE LIGHTING

Articles submitted by McLeod Health



The family of Kaye Floyd-Parris representing all the families served this year by McLeod Hospice, lit the trees.

McLeod Hospice celebrated its 40th Annual "A Light for Someone You Love" Tree Lighting Ceremony, presented by Signature Wealth Strategies, on Thursday, December 4, at McLeod Regional Medical Center. Hundreds attended the event which raised more than \$149,000 to support programs and services provided by McLeod Hospice.

During the ceremony, the family of Kaye Floyd-Parris, representing all the families served this year by McLeod Hospice, lit the trees. The Masterworks Choir also performed a new annual tradition song "All Will Be Well" by Terre Johnson – a song commissioned specifically in honor of the 40th McLeod

Hospice Tree Lighting.

Crystal Orphan, Administrator of McLeod Hospice and Palliative Care, presented the Spirit of Hospice award to M.B. Godbold during the event. "A volunteer with McLeod Hospice in Cheraw since 2017, M.B. visits with hospice patients, provides caregiver and bereavement support and joins in with vigils," said Orphan. "He is also a member of the McLeod Hospice Advisory Board. Additionally, M.B. and his wife generously provided a donation to the McLeod Health Foundation for the purpose of transforming a hospital room at McLeod Health Cheraw into a special hospice inpatient room."

Godbold was the 25th recipient of the award.

"A Light for Someone You Love" is sponsored by the McLeod Health Foundation to directly fund items needed for the McLeod Hospice House, to help patients remain comfortable in their homes and to provide bereavement care for families being served.

McLeod Hospice serves patients in Florence, Darlington, Dillon, Chesterfield, Marlboro, Horry, Lee, Sumter, Marion, Clarendon and Williamsburg counties.

While the lighted trees will brighten the community this season, the gifts they represent will help bring the light of hope to McLeod Hospice patients and their families.



Crystal Orphan, Administrator of McLeod Hospice and Palliative Care, presented the Spirit of Hospice award to M.B. Godbold during the event.

MCLEOD SPECIALTY PHARMACY ACHIEVES ACCREDITATION WITH ACHC



Pictured are members of the McLeod Pharmacy Team who worked to achieve the accreditation of the McLeod Choice Specialty Pharmacy, from left to right, Morgan Pierce, PharmD, MBA; Jenna Swindler, PharmD, BCPS; Blake Hicks, PharmD, MS, MBA; Jessica Crowe, PharmD and Eric Chmielewski, PharmD, MS, BCOP.

McLeod Health is pleased to announce that its outpatient pharmacy, McLeod Choice Pharmacy, has achieved specialty pharmacy accreditation through the Accreditation Commission for Health Care (ACHC). McLeod Choice Pharmacy's specialty program is the first and only accredited Specialty Pharmacy by ACHC in Florence County.

Jenna Swindler, Vice President of Pharmacy Services for McLeod Health, said, "This accreditation provides expansion of access for patients and providers to evidence-based medication treatments for many common, chronic diseases, such as asthma and Crohn's disease, and further enhances the care we deliver to our cancer patients.

"These highly effective medications require more intricate care coordination, including specific monitoring, dose adjustments, specialized delivery or storage, patient

education, and complex insurance authorizations. Our pharmacy team works with providers to manage this process and offer quality access to advanced drug therapies locally within our community."

Services are offered for various specialties including, but not limited to:

- Oncology
- Hematology
- Infectious Diseases
- Neurology
- Pulmonology
- Gastroenterology
- Rheumatology

McLeod Choice Pharmacy also offers a chronic care program for patients on medications for GI conditions, asthma, migraine, weight loss, COPD, diabetes and heart failure as well as other conditions. The chronic care program includes a variety of benefits and services such as clinical review and new start education, refill reminders and management, mail order delivery, and financial assistance review for manufacturer assistance programs, grants and coupon cards.

Accreditation is a process through which healthcare organizations demonstrate compliance with national standards. Accreditation by ACHC reflects McLeod's dedication and commitment to meeting standards that facilitate a higher level of performance and patient care.

ACHC is a nonprofit organization that is ISO 9001:2015 certified and has stood as a symbol of quality and excellence since 1986.

For more information on the McLeod Choice Specialty Pharmacy, please call (833) 494-3459.



KNOW THE RISK. GET SCREENED. PROTECT YOUR FUTURE.

CERVICAL CANCER IS PREVENTABLE

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers, yet too many women still face barriers to screening and care. The SC Cancer Alliance works statewide to increase access to cervical cancer education, screening, and prevention services, with a focus on reaching underserved communities and reducing health disparities.

Through partnerships with healthcare providers, community organizations, and advocates, we help ensure women have the information and resources they need to take charge of their health.

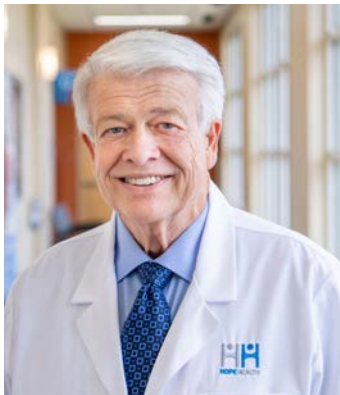
Early detection saves lives. Prevention saves futures.

www.SCCancer.org



TWO IMPORTANT STEPS FOR CERVICAL CANCER PREVENTION

Submitted by Charles Webb, M.D.



Charles Webb, M.D.

Cancer screenings are a vital part of a woman's reproductive and overall health. While breast cancer is the most common reproductive cancer in women, cervical cancer is the third most common type of gynecologic cancer, following endometrial and ovarian cancer.

This type of cancer begins in the cells of the cervix, the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. In the United States, about 13,000 new cases of cervical cancer

are diagnosed each year, and about 4,000 women die from the disease annually.

Cervical cancer is most frequently diagnosed in women ages 35 to 44, with an average diagnosis age of 50. It rarely develops in women younger than 20. Many older women do not realize they are still at risk of developing cervical cancer as they age. In fact, the risk of diagnosis increases with age. More than 20 percent of cervical cancers are found in women older than 65. However, these cancers rarely occur in women who received regular cervical cancer screenings before age 65.

If caught early, cervical cancer can be treated and often cured. However, the disease typically causes no symptoms in its early stages. Without regular screenings, precancerous cells can become cancerous over time. Without symptoms, cancer cells may not be detected until later stages, making

treatment more challenging. Cervical cancer screenings and following vaccination guidelines for human papillomavirus are two important prevention steps that greatly reduce the risk of cervical cancer.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Nine out of 10 cases of cervical cancer are caused by human papillomavirus, or HPV. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States and is often transmitted soon after a person becomes sexually active. The risk of transmission also increases with new or multiple sexual partners.

There are more than 200 strains of HPV, and many infections clear on their own through the immune system. Some types may cause warts in various areas of the body, including the mouth and genitals, but do not lead to cancer. Certain high-risk strains can be passed through sexual or skin-to-skin contact and may take 20 years or longer to develop into cervical cancer. HPV is also linked to cancers of the vagina, penis, anus, head and neck.

The HPV vaccine became available in 2006 and is widely accessible. While vaccination does not eliminate the risk of cervical cancer, it is highly effective and may prevent more than 90 percent of cancers caused by high-risk HPV strains. The vaccine is most effective when given before an individual becomes sexually active.

Current guidelines recommend children, both boys and girls, receive the two-dose vaccination series between ages 11 and 14, though the vaccine may be given as early as age nine. A three-dose series is recommended for patients ages 15 to 27 who were not vaccinated earlier or did not complete the series. Parents are encouraged to discuss HPV vaccination with

TWO IMPORTANT STEPS CONT'D



their child's pediatrician.

For adults ages 27 to 45 who have not received the vaccine, it is recommended they talk with their health care provider about risks and benefits. Vaccination is not recommended for individuals older than 45 because most have already been exposed to

the virus, and the immune response may be reduced. Those who are pregnant or have allergies related to the vaccine should not receive it.

Since the vaccine's introduction, HPV infections and cervical precancers (abnormal cells that may lead to cancer) have decreased by more than 80 percent in teen girls and young women, with an overall 40 percent decline among vaccinated women.

Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines

Screening may include a Pap test, HPV testing or both. In both tests, cells are collected from the cervix and sent for laboratory evaluation. Pap tests detect abnormal cells, while HPV tests identify the presence of high-risk virus strains.

Younger than 21

No screening is needed.

Ages 21–29

- Pap test every three years
- HPV testing may be considered for women ages 25 to 29, but Pap testing is preferred

Ages 30–65 (choose one):

- Pap test and HPV test every five years (co-testing)
- Pap test alone every three years
- HPV test alone every five years

Ages 65 and older

Screening is not necessary if there is no history of cervical changes in the past 10 years and with appropriate test history, including:

- Three consecutive negative Pap tests
- Two consecutive negative HPV tests
- Two negative co-test results within the past 10 years

Women who have received the HPV vaccine still need routine screening. Women who have had a hysterectomy and retained their cervix should continue cervical cancer screening as well.

The annual women's wellness visit is also essential for preventive care. It includes a review of symptoms, as well as breast and pelvic exams, screenings and laboratory tests as needed. Schedule an appointment with your provider or gynecologist immediately if you notice abnormal symptoms such as prolonged or heavy periods, unexpected vaginal bleeding, breast changes or pelvic pain.

It is important to discuss both vaccination and screening guidelines with your health care provider to determine what is right for you. Staying proactive with prevention significantly lowers your long-term risk of cervical cancer and protects your future health.

Dr. Charles Webb is an OB-GYN providing women's health services at HopeHealth Medical Plaza. For more information, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

Cervical Cancer

Four Pillars of Prevention

Screening

Vaccination

Safe Practices &
Early Treatment

CARE SOUTH CAROLINA WELCOMES DR. VALARIAN BRUCE Articles submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Dr. Valarian Bruce

HARTSVILLE — CareSouth Carolina has welcomed Dr. Valarian Bruce to Suite A at its Hartsville office.

Bruce, whose credentials include MD, MHS, BS-PT, MRO-C and FAFP, brings years of medical experience and a strong commitment to patient care, along with a passion for community service.

Bruce's approach aligns with CareSouth Carolina's mission as a federally qualified health center (FQHC).

He focuses on removing barriers to care and empowering patients through education and informed decision-making.

"The mission of CareSouth Carolina as an FQHC gives us the opportunity to provide quality care to individuals who

might not otherwise have access," Bruce said. "One of my biggest goals is to educate patients about their health so they can make informed decisions."

He emphasizes shared decision-making, ensuring patients feel respected and supported throughout their care.

"I like to give individuals information on recommended options," Bruce said. "People should have the ability to make decisions for themselves. I work with them in a shared decision-making fashion so they can feel confident in their care."

Outside the clinic, Bruce is active in the community and volunteers with several organizations, including Special Olympics South Carolina, Adopt-A-Street, Manna House, the Boys & Girls Club and the Regeneration Center Christian Men's Home. He also enjoys spending time with his wife and children.

CSC PARTNERSHIP EXPANDS MILES OF SMILES



Dental Professional assists child to appointment.

HARTSVILLE-CareSouth Carolina announced a new partnership between its Dental Department, BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina and the Medical University of South Carolina aimed at expanding access to early childhood oral health care.

Through the initiative, funding will support the expansion of CareSouth Carolina's Miles of Smiles program into local Head Start facilities. The effort will allow dental professionals to reach children at earlier ages, providing oral health education and preventive care beginning with a child's very first tooth.

"This grant allows us to reach children sooner and make a lasting impact on their oral health," said Dr. Travis Russell, dental director at CareSouth Carolina. "We are passionate about helping children maintain healthy smiles that build confidence and support lifelong wellness."

The expansion also includes outreach to parents and caregivers, who will receive practical tools and education to help families establish strong oral health habits early in a child's life. By emphasizing prevention in early childhood, the program aims to significantly reduce dental decay among elementary school-aged children.



Dr. Russell works with a child patient.

Miles of Smiles is dedicated to improving oral health outcomes in the community through education, preventive services and compassionate care. The new partnership strengthens that commitment and expands access to essential dental resources for families from the earliest stages of development.

ROSA LEE GERALD OFFICE BRINGS CHEER TO FAMILIES



CareSouth Carolina's Rosa Lee Gerald staff

HARTSVILLE—CareSouth Carolina's Rosa Lee Gerald office is always looking to spread cheer, especially during the holiday season.

As part of an annual tradition, CareSouth Carolina's Rosa Lee Gerald office came together to support patients and their families in meaningful and personal ways.

For the past six years, staff at the Rosa Lee Gerald office have made it a priority to give back during the holidays. This year, the team randomly selected three patients from their population and worked collectively to support and, "adopt," their households. Each patient shared a list of family members and specific needs, allowing staff members to personally contribute and purchase gifts that brought comfort and relief during the season.

"Let our family take care of your family," said Barbara A. Wright, FNP-C. "It's inclusive through all seasons of the year."

The initiative focused on more than holiday gifts. Staff members aimed to meet emotional, physical and financial needs, recognizing that the holidays can be a difficult time for many families.

"Our staff works incredibly hard and cooperatively," Wright added. "We've always done what we can for our patients, whether it's the holidays or not. If we find out they need something, we want to do what we can to help."



Presents brought for the patients by the staff.

CareSouth Carolina remains committed to caring for the whole person, especially during the holiday season—by enhancing the health and well-being of everyone.

Convenient Locations:

Bennettsville Center 999 Cheraw Street Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.479.4334	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 843.434.2294	Lake View Center 103 N. Kemper Street Lake View, SC 29563 843.759.2189
Bishopville Center 345 Sumter Highway Bishopville, SC 29010 803.484.3317	Latta Center 122 Latimer Street Latta, SC 29565 843.627.6252
Bishopville Pediatric Dental 101 Harris Street Bishopville, SC 29010 866.815.9845	McColl Health & Wellness Center 3080 Highway 15, 401 E McColl, SC 29570 843.523.3791
Cheraw Center 812 State Road Cheraw, SC 29520 843.337.0961 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 843.623.3080	

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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Welcome HOME TO BETTER HEALTH



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CARESOUTH CAROLINA DRIVES \$191M ECONOMIC IMPACT IN 2024

Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



HARTSVILLE — CareSouth Carolina contributed an estimated \$191.3 million to the local economy, driven by job creation, direct spending, health care savings and expanded support for

underserved populations, according to a comprehensive assessment conducted by Capital Link.

A Major Economic Impact for the Pee Dee Region

The report shows CareSouth Carolina's operations supported 1,128 total jobs, including 596 direct health center positions and 532 additional jobs created through indirect and induced economic activity. These roles span clinical services, administrative support and jobs within the broader community that benefit from the center's presence.

CareSouth Carolina's economic contributions for 2024 include:

- \$104.8 million in direct health center spending
- \$86.5 million in community spending
- \$21.9 million in total annual tax revenue
- \$4.1 million in state and local tax revenue
- \$17.8 million in federal tax revenue

Significant Health Care Savings for South Carolina

The 2024 analysis also highlights the substantial savings CareSouth Carolina provides to Medicaid and the broader health care system. This year, the center helped generate:

- 24 percent lower costs for Medicaid patients who received care at a community health center
- \$30.1 million in Medicaid savings
- \$61.6 million in overall health system savings

These savings stem from increased access to primary and preventive care, fewer emergency room visits and improved long-term patient outcomes.

Providing Care to Vulnerable Populations

CareSouth Carolina continues to serve as a vital access point for individuals who face significant barriers to health care. In 2024, the organization reported:

- 230,878 total visits, including 193,602 clinic visits and 37,276 virtual visits
- 37,617 patients served
- 74.4 percent of patients identified as low income
- 61.5 percent identified as an ethnic or racial minority
- Support for 2,598 agricultural workers, 1,219 veterans and 867 individuals experiencing homelessness

Strengthening Community Health and Local Economies

Beyond statistics, the report underscores how CareSouth Carolina strengthens both community health and economic stability. Every dollar invested in the health center generates additional economic activity, supports local businesses and contributes to a healthier population.

This year's findings align with national trends demonstrating the value of Federally Qualified Health Centers in delivering cost-effective care while easing long-term burdens on public health systems.

CareSouth Carolina is a private, nonprofit community health center delivering patient-centered health and life services throughout the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. The organization operates centers in Bennettsville, Bishopville, Cheraw, Chesterfield, Dillon, Hartsville, Lake View, Latta, McColl and Society Hill.



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HopeHealth has **pharmacy locations** to serve **Florence, Williamsburg, and Clarendon Counties!** With features like the Rx Local App “Rx Ready” text messaging, mobile refill requests, medication listing, medication assistance for qualifying patients, and more, HopeHealth Pharmacy is here to serve you!

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Pine Needles

3380 Pine Needles Road
(843) 620-3042

Williamsburg Pharmacy

411 Thurgood Marshall Hwy., Kingstree, SC
(843) 355-3300

Greeleyville

215 Varner Avenue, Greeleyville, SC
(843) 426-2170

Manning

12 W. South Street, Manning, SC
(803) 825-4113



hope-health.org/pharmacy

HOPEHEALTH ACHIEVES RENEWED GOLD STATUS

Articles submitted by HopeHealth



HopeHealth has again been named a Gold-level Advocacy Center of Excellence by the National Association of Community Health Centers, one of only three community health centers in South Carolina to earn this status.

HopeHealth has been an Advocacy Center of Excellence since 2016 and has earned and maintained Gold-level status since 2018. HopeHealth was the first community health center in South Carolina to achieve ACE status and the 22nd center in the country to achieve Gold status.

The ACE program recognizes and rewards community health centers that demonstrate excellence in formalizing their advocacy programs to make them an integral, institutional part of their health center operations. These community health centers create a culture of advocacy to ensure policymakers at all levels of government commit to investing in the affordable, equitable and innovative care they provide.

To achieve Gold ACE status, organizations must earn at least 75 points by completing advocacy-related initiatives. These include securing 100 percent staff and board participation as health center advocates, participating in civic engagement efforts and establishing an advocacy committee.

In a letter notifying HopeHealth of its renewed Gold status, Kyu Rhee, MD, MPP, president and CEO of NACHC, stated, “Earning Gold ACE status requires serious dedication and prioritization of advocacy at your health center. Your organization is now part of an elite group that serves as an example to other community health centers striving to achieve advocacy excellence. The amount of effort and time needed to achieve this requires hardworking, engaged staff and supportive leadership — two pieces of the puzzle necessary for a successful and robust advocacy program — both of which you have demonstrated.”

HopeHealth’s mission relies on strong support from communities and elected officials. Visit hcadvocacy.org to sign up to become a health center advocate.

HOPEHEALTH RECEIVES HRSA RECOGNITION

HopeHealth received two Community Health Quality Recognition (CHQR) awards from the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA).

HopeHealth earned the Health Center Quality Leader Gold badge for the second consecutive year and also received the National Quality Leader – Heart Health badge.

Health Center Quality Leader – Gold

HopeHealth retained its gold designation for achieving among the best overall clinical quality measure performances of all health centers nationwide. Gold represents the top 10 percent of all centers for overall quality performance. Silver represents the top 11 percent–20 percent, and bronze represents the top 21 percent–30 percent.

National Quality Leader – Heart Health

HopeHealth earned this award by meeting or exceeding three of four national targets for cardiovascular care. Measures include:

- Tobacco use screening and cessation intervention
- Ischemic vascular disease: use of aspirin or another antiplatelet medication
- Statin therapy for prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease
- Hypertension control for high blood pressure

Community health centers annually report standardized data through the Uniform Data System (UDS), including information on patient demographics, services, clinical processes, outcomes, staffing, costs and revenues. Additional details are available at data.hrsa.gov.





Anna Rhoads Tyner,
MS, RD, LD, CDCES

Diabetes is a health epidemic in the United States. In 2021, more than 10 percent of Americans, or about 38 million people, had diabetes, and more than 97 million had prediabetes. The rate of diabetes continues to rise, and research indicates the number of people with Type 2 diabetes — the most common form — will double by 2050.

Nutrition and healthy lifestyle choices play a key role in prevention and treatment for people with diabetes and prediabetes. A common myth is that

people with diabetes must eat, “special foods.” While treatment plans differ, for Type 1 diabetes, Type 2 diabetes and prediabetes, no special foods are required. Following a healthy eating plan is a mainstay of treatment.

Diabetes is a chronic condition that affects how the body uses glucose, or blood sugar, for energy. When food is eaten, carbohydrates such as starches, fruit, sugar and many processed foods are broken down into glucose and absorbed into the bloodstream. To move glucose into the cells for energy, the body needs insulin, a hormone produced by the pancreas. Insulin allows glucose to enter the cells and be used for fuel.

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease that occurs when the immune system destroys insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. As a result, the pancreas produces little or no insulin and must be supported by injections or an insulin pump. In people with Type 2 diabetes, the body may not make enough insulin or may not use insulin properly. Prediabetes occurs when blood sugar levels are elevated but not high enough for a diabetes diagnosis.

A balanced meal plan that includes whole, high-fiber carbohydrates, lean proteins and healthy fats is recommended for people with Type 1 diabetes, Type 2 diabetes and prediabetes. In some cases, healthy lifestyle changes can even reverse prediabetes and Type 2 diabetes.

Carbohydrates and diabetes

The type and amount of carbohydrates a person eats affects blood sugar. Carbohydrates are the body’s preferred source of energy and are classified as either simple or complex.

Complex carbohydrates are found mainly in plant foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains such as oats, quinoa, brown rice and whole wheat bread, as well as beans, peas and potatoes. These foods are packed with fiber, vitamins and minerals and digest more slowly, which helps regulate blood sugar. Milk products also contain carbohydrates.

Simple carbohydrates include sugars, sweetened drinks and refined grains made from white flour or white rice, as well as many processed snack foods. These foods are often low in nutrients and fiber and raise blood sugar quickly. Many highly processed foods are also linked to obesity, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.

Eating more complex carbohydrates and limiting simple carbohydrates improves overall health and helps manage blood sugar. People with diabetes can benefit from learning carbohydrate counting to understand how different foods affect blood sugar levels.

Practical tips for managing diabetes

Use the plate method. Fill half your plate with vegetables, one-quarter with lean protein and one-quarter with whole-grain carbohydrates.

Choose high-fiber foods. Aim for 25-35 grams of fiber daily. Choose fruits and vegetables with edible skins, beans, peas, nuts,

seeds, whole grains such as oats and whole wheat, brown rice and popcorn. A cupped hand equals about one to two servings of carbohydrates.

Eat more vegetables. Nonstarchy vegetables like leafy greens, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower and zucchini are low in carbohydrates and high in fiber.

Limit added sugar and processed foods. Read nutrition labels and limit added sugar to 25 grams or less per day. Avoid sugary drinks, candy, pastries, chips and sweetened cereals.

Focus on lean protein. Choose poultry without skin, seafood, eggs, beans, tofu, lean beef and pork, nut butter and low-fat cheese. A palm-sized portion is an appropriate serving of meat.

Choose healthy fats. Limit fried and high-fat foods. Instead, grill, bake or air-fry and use olive oil. Choose oil-based dressings and use portions in moderation.

Stay hydrated. Drink nine to 11 glasses of water daily and more if you are physically active. Pale yellow urine is a sign of good hydration.

Read nutrition labels. Look for ingredient lists you recognize and evaluate carbohydrate, fiber and sugar content.

Plan meals and snacks. Prepare simple balanced meals such as eggs with fruit and whole wheat toast for breakfast, turkey sandwiches with salad for lunch, and chicken with brown rice and broccoli for dinner. Healthy snacks include apples with peanut butter or popcorn with nuts.

Regular physical activity, adequate sleep and stress management are also essential for diabetes prevention and management. Maintaining routine checkups and a strong relationship with your health care provider improves early detection and long-term outcomes.

Talk with your provider about lifestyle changes, medications

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and education programs that fit your needs. Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian nutritionist or certified diabetes care and education specialist. These professionals offer valuable guidance on meal planning, blood sugar monitoring and managing diabetes.

As part of The Diabetes Institute, HopeHealth offers the National Diabetes Prevention Program, provided

by trained specialists at no cost for people with prediabetes.

Anna Rhoads Tyner is a registered dietitian nutritionist and certified diabetes care and education specialist at the Medical Plaza in Florence and HopeHealth in Manning. For more information, call 843-667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

NATIONAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST WEEK

Submitted by Kitty Finklea, RDN



Kitty Finklea, RDN

With school back in session, it's a great time to fine-tune meal and snack options to help fuel kids throughout the day. Planning ahead and involving children in food choices shows them that good nutrition can support learning, focus and overall success.

Breakfast provides an important opportunity for kids and adults to consume protein, fiber, vitamins and minerals. A nutritious breakfast supports brain function and energy levels while

helping reduce stress and anxiety at the start of the day. Studies show that eating breakfast improves memory, concentration and problem-solving skills and is associated with better academic performance.

A balanced breakfast also improves mood, encourages positive behavior and helps manage appetite throughout the day, which supports healthy weight management. Ensuring kids have quality food options from morning through afternoon activities helps keep them energized and ready to learn.

To maximize nutrition, aim for meals and snacks that include lean protein, complex carbohydrates and healthy fats.

Protein

Protein provides staying power for meals and snacks. It supports focus and concentration, helps regulate blood sugar and promotes muscle growth. Good options include eggs and egg whites, cheese, turkey bacon or sausage, beans, nuts, seeds, nut and seed butters, Greek yogurt, tofu, tempeh and protein bars or shakes.

Complex carbohydrates

Complex carbohydrates fuel the body and brain with energy, fiber and essential nutrients. Choices include whole grains such as bread, cereal, waffles, pancakes, muffins, oatmeal and stone-ground grits, as well as fruits, vegetables and milk.

Healthy fats

Healthy fats help kids feel full longer, especially when paired with protein. They also support hormone production and cell repair. Options include extra-virgin olive oil, avocado, nuts and seeds.

Meal Ideas

Breakfast:

A simple breakfast includes scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, whole wheat toast and fruit. Easy options include whole-grain cereal with milk and nuts or homemade smoothies. Save time by preparing hard-boiled eggs, egg muffins, overnight oats or yogurt

parfaits ahead of time. For rushed mornings, a protein bar with fruit works well. Nontraditional choices, such as leftovers or a turkey or peanut butter sandwich with fruit, are also acceptable.

Lunch:

Pack a balanced lunch or review weekly school menus with your child. Aim for lean protein, whole grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy. Once nutritious options are included, it's fine to add small treats. Lunch ideas include sandwiches or wraps with turkey, ham or roast beef, whole-grain crackers with cheese or nut butter, fruit, vegetables and yogurt. Leftovers, soups or stews in a thermos work well during cooler months. Use ice packs or insulated containers to keep foods safe.

Snacks:

Pack snacks for the school day and after-school activities. Options include granola or protein bars, trail mix, popcorn, pretzels, whole-grain crackers with nut butter and fruit or vegetable pouches. Always include water. Limit highly processed foods such as soda and candy, which can increase long-term health risks when eaten frequently.

Building Healthy Habits

Involving kids in meal planning and preparation builds interest and independence. Ask for input, teach children to read labels and keep a list of go-to meals and snacks. Family meals without screens strengthen connections and are linked to healthier behaviors.

Parents set the example. When healthy eating is a priority at home, kids are more likely to follow. Start small by adding one healthy habit at a time and celebrate progress. Flexibility and consistency help nutrition habits last a lifetime.

Kitty Finklea is a registered dietitian nutritionist and health writer for HopeHealth. For more information, visit hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.

HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

Submitted by Sheridan K. Edwards, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



Angela Oduro, PA-C

Angela Oduro is a physician assistant at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. She earned a Bachelor of Science in biology, magna cum laude, from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in Dartmouth, Massachusetts and a Master of Science in physician assistant studies from Bay Path University in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. Her clinical interests include hypertension, diabetes and acne. She is fluent in English and Akan.



Carson Lee, LPCA

Carson Lee, LPCA, a behavioral health consultant at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence.

She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and a Master of Science degree in clinical psychology from Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina.

Her clinical interests are trauma-focused therapy and assisting patients with their goals.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit leader in providing affordable, expert health care and infectious disease services for all ages in Aiken, Florence, Clarendon, Orangeburg and Williamsburg Counties. Its 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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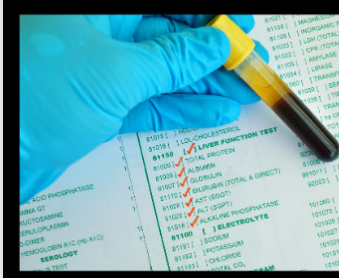
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MUSC HEALTH MARION RECOGNIZED FOR QUALITY AND SAFETY IN 2025

Articles submitted by John Russell, marketing manager/Media Relations



Marion Top Rural Hospital Award Group

MARION — Recognized for nationally ranked performance in patient safety and quality, MUSC Health Marion Medical Center has been named a 2025 Top Rural Hospital by The Leapfrog Group. The distinction underscores the hospital's continued commitment to patient safety, clinical excellence and transparency while serving Marion County and surrounding rural communities.

The Leapfrog Top Hospital Awards are among the most competitive honors U.S. hospitals can receive. Of more than 2,400 hospitals evaluated, only 156 nationwide earned the designation. Rural hospitals accounted for just 16 of the honorees, along with 73 teaching hospitals, 52 general hospitals and 15 children's hospitals across the country.

"This award reflects the dedication and teamwork demonstrated daily by our entire MUSC Health Marion Medical Center staff," said

Jay Hinesley, CEO of the MUSC Health Pee Dee Division. "We are honored to be recognized for delivering high-quality care close to home for our rural communities."

Hospitals are evaluated using 46 measures from the 2025 Leapfrog Hospital Survey to determine Top Hospital status. Assessments are based on performance metrics relevant to the specific services each hospital provides.

"Earning this recognition for the first time highlights our unwavering focus on patient safety and quality," said Shametra Swaringer, executive director of MUSC Health Marion Medical Center. "We are proud to serve our community with excellence every day."

The Leapfrog Group is a national nonprofit watchdog organization that rates hospitals and ambulatory surgical centers on how effectively they protect patients from preventable harm, including accidents, injuries and infections. Leapfrog Top Hospital awards are presented to teaching, general, rural and children's hospitals that publicly report performance data through the Leapfrog Hospital Survey and meet the organization's rigorous standards. Measures include infection rates, maternity care and a hospital's ability to prevent medication errors, among others.

"MUSC Health Marion Medical Center has distinguished itself through a steadfast commitment to safety and quality, earning a place on this year's Top Hospitals list," said Leah Binder, president and CEO of The Leapfrog Group. "This honor reflects a culture of transparency and continuous improvement embraced across the organization. We congratulate the entire team at MUSC Health Marion Medical Center on this outstanding achievement."

A complete list of 2025 Top Hospitals is available at leapfroggroup.org/tophospitals.

MUSC HEALTH PEE DEE EARNS 2025 ZERO HARM AWARDS



The MUSC Health Pee Dee Division, which includes MUSC Health Florence, Marion and Black River medical centers, has earned 20 Certified Zero Harm Awards for 2025 from the South Carolina

Hospital Association. The awards recognize health care facilities that have successfully eliminated some of the most common medical errors, demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to patient safety and high-reliability care.

"We are honored to receive this recognition from the South Carolina Hospital Association," said Jay Hinesley, CEO of the MUSC Health Pee Dee Division. "Our commitment to patient safety is built on strong systems and processes, and every day we uphold a deep responsibility to deliver the highest-quality care to every patient."

The Zero Harm program launched in 2013 in partnership with The Duke Endowment and The Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare. The initiative supports statewide efforts to reduce preventable harm. Through programs such as the South Carolina Safe Care Commitment and Safe Surgery 2015, SCHA and the Zero Harm program have helped hospitals implement proven safety practices across the continuum of care.

"SCHA's Zero Harm Award winners are an inspiration to hospitals across the state," said Thornton Kirby, president and CEO of SCHA. "Achieving zero patient harm requires a strong culture of teamwork and high reliability."

As a result of these efforts, hospitals across South Carolina frequently eliminate common areas of patient harm, including surgical site infections and central-line-associated bloodstream infections, or CLABSI. The awards are independently validated

through a collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Public Health, reinforcing the state's commitment to patient safety.

"The Zero Harm program shows how public- and private-sector partnerships improve the quality of life in South Carolina," said Melanie Matney, chief operating officer of SCHA and president of the SCHA Foundation. "As medical errors continue to be a major concern nationwide, South Carolina has developed a blueprint for reducing avoidable harm in health care facilities that other states can follow."

MUSC Health Pee Dee Division MUSC Health Florence Medical Center earned awards for:

- SSI hip replacement.
- SSI abdominal hysterectomy.
- CLABSI: PCU.
- CLABSI: CVICU.
- CLABSI: SICU.
- CLABSI: Eighth Floor.
- CLABSI: Ninth Floor – Rehab.
- Drive to Zero Suicide.
- Drive to Zero Workplace Violence.

SSI stands for surgical site infection.

MUSC Health Women's Pavilion earned awards for:

- Hospital-onset C. diff.
 - Hospital-onset MRSA.
- C. diff refers to Clostridioides difficile, a highly contagious bacterium.

MRSA stands for methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, a type of staph bacteria.

MUSC Health Marion Medical Center earned awards for:

- Hospital-onset MRSA.
- CLABSI: hospital wide.
- Drive to Zero Suicide.
- Drive to Zero Workplace Violence.

MUSC Health Black River Medical Center earned awards for:

- Hospital-onset MRSA.
- SSI knee replacement.
- Pressure injury.
- Drive to Zero Suicide.
- Drive to Zero Workplace Violence.

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CONTINUING TO ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE IN 2026

(DWM)-Well-being and quality of life are shaped by the services and support systems available within a community. In the Pee Dee region, locally owned health-focused businesses are playing an important role in helping residents manage chronic conditions and maintain independence. One such business is Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa, a provider-owned and operated practice that specializes in medical-grade pedicures designed specifically for diabetic patients.

For individuals living with diabetes, proper foot care is not a luxury but a critical part of overall health. Diabetes can reduce circulation and sensation in the feet, increasing the risk of infections, ulcers and more serious complications if routine care is neglected. Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa addresses this need by offering specialized pedicure services that go beyond cosmetic care, focusing on safety, prevention and comfort.

As a provider-owned business, Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa brings a clinical perspective to a traditional non-medical service. Treatments are performed with medical-grade tools, strict sanitation standards and a clear understanding of diabetic foot health. This approach provides peace of mind for patients who may be hesitant to visit traditional nail salons due to concerns about infection or injury.

The spa's services contribute directly to improved quality of life. Regular, professional foot care can help reduce pain, improve mobility and support early detection of potential issues. When patients are able to walk comfortably and confidently, they are more likely to stay active, maintain social connections and engage in daily routines that support both physical and mental well-being.

Beyond individual care, Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa

reflects a broader commitment to community health. By focusing on preventive services, the business helps reduce avoidable complications that can lead to emergency care or hospitalization. This preventive approach aligns with regional efforts to promote wellness, manage chronic disease and support aging in place.

The welcoming, spa-like environment also plays an important role in emotional well-being. Many patients with chronic conditions experience stress or anxiety related to ongoing medical appointments. Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa blends clinical expertise with a calming atmosphere, allowing patients to receive essential care in a setting that promotes relaxation and dignity.

As communities continue to prioritize well-being and quality of life for all, businesses like Sweet Feet Diabetic Foot Spa demonstrate the impact of specialized, locally driven care. By addressing a specific health need with professionalism and compassion, the spa helps residents live healthier, more comfortable lives while strengthening the overall fabric of community wellness. Give us a call and make your appointment today. See our ad below.



SHINING A LIGHT ON THE WORKING FAMILIES BEHIND OUR COMMUNITY

Submitted by Julia Fulmer, director of community impact and marketing



UNITED WAY Florence County

As the sun rises over Florence County, a mother begins her day by getting her children off to school before driving across town for a full workday. At lunch, she scrolls through her banking app, checking whether her paycheck will clear before rent is due and trying not to dwell on the check engine light that came on the day before.

Her story — and countless others like it — reflects the reality of ALICE households (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). These families earn above the federal poverty level, yet their paychecks do not stretch far enough to cover the modern cost of living. ALICE households include retail workers, waiters and waitresses, janitors, teachers, personal care aides, registered nurses and many others who keep Florence County running. United Way of Florence County partners with United for ALICE to bring this nationally reported data to the local level, helping the community better understand and advocate for these often-overlooked families who are essential to the local economy.

According to the latest ALICE Report, 32 percent of households in Florence County fall into the ALICE category — four percentage points higher than the statewide average. When combined with the 17 percent of households living below the poverty line, nearly half of local families are navigating tight budgets and difficult choices each month. A single adult now needs \$28,236 a year to afford basic expenses in Florence County. A family of four requires \$63,876, and for households with young children in paid child care, the survival threshold rises to nearly \$74,796. These figures do not account for savings, emergencies or unexpected setbacks; they reflect life at the bare minimum.

Single parents, especially single mothers, experience the greatest financial strain. Young adults entering the workforce and senior citizens living on fixed incomes also face heightened hardship. Unpredictable work hours and rising costs for child care, housing and medical care all contribute to the challenge.



Understanding ALICE helps explain why United Way of Florence County created its Barriers to Employment Program. The initiative is designed specifically for individuals living below the ALICE threshold — people who are ready to work or advance in their careers but are held back by a financial obstacle. Sometimes it is the cost of a screening test, a uniform, nonslip shoes, a new set of tires or certification fees that stand between someone and a better-paying job. By covering these one-time expenses, the program helps ALICE individuals accept job offers or maintain employment, putting them on a path toward long-term financial stability.

Addressing ALICE, however, is not the work of one organization alone; it is a responsibility the entire community can share.

One meaningful step is simply sharing what is learned. When more residents understand who ALICE families are and what they face, it shapes conversations and influences local decision-making. Advocacy does not require a formal title — only a willingness to speak up.

Another powerful action is encouraging nonprofits and community organizations to reexamine eligibility criteria. Many ALICE households earn too much to qualify for assistance, even though they continue to struggle financially. Expanding eligibility or offering sliding-scale support can help close the gap between poverty and stability.

The ALICE reality is more than economic data. It represents the lived experiences of tens of thousands of Florence County residents and calls on the community to envision a future where every resident has the opportunity to achieve financial stability. ALICE data shows that in many cases hard work is not the problem. The true challenge is the growing gap between wages and the cost of living.



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2026

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1 Serving | 1 minute



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- 2 oz. Rye Whiskey
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- ¼ oz. Honey Syrup
- ¼ oz. Yellow Chartreuse
- 1 Dash Aromatic Bitters
- Rosemary Sprig & Expressed Lemon Peel for garnish

Directions:

Add all the ingredients to a mixing glass with ice. Stir until well chilled and properly diluted. Strain over a large ice cube in a double Old Fashioned glass. Garnish and enjoy!





South Carolina's Pee Dee Region is where adventure meets tradition. Seven counties — Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Lee, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg — come together to create one unforgettable destination.

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.

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HOW GEN ZERS ARE PARENTING DIFFERENTLY FROM THEIR PARENTS



(BPT) — With access to more news and social media than generations past, Gen Z parents face more options than ever when it comes to raising their children. A new Kiddie Academy survey of 2,000 parents of children ages zero to

them. Survey findings also show these younger parents rely on their own intuition (47 percent) slightly more than they follow their parents' advice (46 percent).

Gen Z parents confront generational trauma

Although Gen Z is the first generation raised with, “gentle parenting,” in mind, only 32 percent use this approach themselves. Instead, many lean toward, “cycle-breaking parenting” (41 percent), which focuses on healing generational trauma by identifying and addressing negative family patterns. This style requires self-awareness, empathy and the courage to confront unresolved issues and uncomfortable emotions.

Gen Zers tailor parenting to each child

Most Gen Z parents choose parenting styles based on what each individual child needs rather than forcing a preferred approach to fit every personality. They also adapt their style to match different circumstances. In fact, 84 percent of parents surveyed say their parenting style has evolved as their children have grown.

Because they tend to have fewer children than past generations and delay parenthood until achieving financial stability, Gen Z parents plan to be less traditional. They have a strong desire to make the world better and model that mindset for their children. As a result, they use a mix of styles that emphasize real-world consequences, healing generational trauma and treating each child as unique — all while remaining flexible enough to adjust as their children grow.

“What’s true across generations is that parents are learning to parent as they go,” said Joy Turner, vice president of education at Kiddie Academy. “Creating a nurturing environment where children feel safe, supported and loved is ultimately the most important thing we can do for our little ones.”

six found that more than four in five (85 percent) agree there is no, “one-size-fits-all,” approach to parenting, as they blend an average of three different parenting styles.

According to, “The Bump,” parenting priorities often reflect the environments each generation grew up in. Millennials who came of age in the ‘90s have seen a growing cultural focus on mental health, while Gen Zers, who came of age during a challenging post-COVID job market, tend to prioritize being, “practical, resilient and future-ready.”

Here are three ways Gen Zers parent differently from their parents:

Tough love over warm-and-fuzzy

Gen Z parents prioritize preparing their children for the real world (54 percent). When asked how similar their parenting styles were to how they were raised, 40 percent said their approach was, “somewhat,” to, “very different,” from their parents’. This shift reflects Gen Z’s real-world focus compared to previous generations, including their own parents. It’s more “actions have consequences” than “trophies for everyone.” There is a deliberate emphasis on preparing children for life’s inevitable disappointments instead of shielding them from

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