

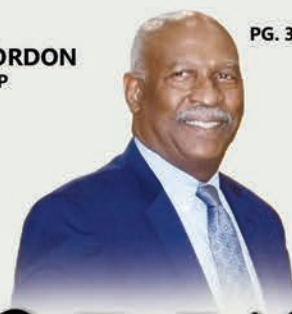
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DIVERSITYWORKS

APRIL 2026 VOLUME 16 ISSUE 2

"For All of Us"



COVER STORY: PGS. 38 & 39
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MISSION AND VISION

OUR MISSION

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

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

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

OUR VISION

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

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FROM THE EDITOR'S HEART



Glaceria Brown Mason
Editor

Happy Spring Diversity Works Readers!

Welcome to this vibrant spring edition! With allergy meds in hand and all the things occurring in life today, we're glad you're joining us this quarter.

A 2025 study by the American Time Use Survey found that Americans daily reading for pleasure declined by over 40 percent in the last 20 years. Therefore, congratulations on being among the 16 percent of Americans who allow reading to challenge preconceived notions, reduce ignorance and broaden knowledge!

Our dedicated community partners continue to share timely news and information that help shape best practices every day. During this quarter, along with our staple sections on Business, Diversity in Spirituality, Education, Financial, Health and Lifestyle, Diversity Works shares engaging articles on specific topics. There's something for everyone in Diversity Works Magazine! We invite you to dive into interesting stories which honor and/or raises awareness on alcohol misuse, autism, child abuse prevention, diversity and inclusion, financial literacy, mental health, military appreciation, sexual assault and so much more. We hope you find teachable moments; news you can use; inspiration and valuable insights as well as enjoyable events for the entire family as you read on.

Through strong partnerships, you'll find recognition for outstanding accomplishments by friends, neighbors, students, business colleagues, devoted volunteers and our military veterans, all, who tirelessly serve the Pee Dee Region. We appreciate them and the positive impacts made. Having celebrated National Women's History Month, last quarter, the Florence Police Department welcomes its first-ever female and African American Police Chief, Angela M. Greene. Discover her story and join in holding a good thought for our new Chief Greene!

April brings more than spring, it's Diversity Month, a time to appreciate cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Explore articles that highlight how diversity strengthens communities. You'll also learn how MPD supports the Marlboro County Council on Aging, discover Duke Energy's investment in SC Emergency Readiness and more business-related stories of the area.

In education, read the remarkable

achievements from elementary through college in the Pee Dee region. Look for articles from the Governor's School for Science and Mathematics (GSSM) in Hartsville, showcasing their progress in STEM and robotics.

The passage from the book of Hosea reminds us, "we perish for lack of knowledge." For those with curious young minds at home, check out GSSM's article on upcoming STEM Summer Camps. Mark your calendars for hands-on, immersive learning opportunities in technology, engineering and math—available both live and online. See the article and register today!

With many education schools and institutions in the region, we celebrate student and educator achievements at every opportunity. As you read the education section, you'll see Blakely Roof has been named FMU's Sheheen Leadership Award recipient and the honor FMU Trustees bestowed by naming the D. Keith Best, Black Box Theatre, located inside the FMU PAC building in Downtown Florence. Find these honors, awards and recognitions and many more on the pages of our education section.

Congratulations are also extended to Superintendent Dr. Kandace Bethea on her upcoming retirement from the Marion County School District. Thank you for your leadership and dedication. Wishing you continued success in your next chapter.

The 35th U.S. President, the late John F. Kennedy said, "Physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body, it is the basic of dynamic and creative intellectual activity." Agree or disagree, but the World Health Organization confirms that, better health is directly linked to exercise and movement. In our health section, among other articles, see the practical and thought-provoking article penned by Dr. Alan Barrett, a licensed certified Doctor of Physician's Assistant Studies and a distinguished fellow of the AAPA at HopeHealth, on finding physical movements you enjoy.

This section also welcomes new providers at Carolina Pines Medical Group, HopeHealth, MUSC Health as well as announces Dr. Tarek Bishara, a 24-year member of McLeod Health medical team as the new Chairman of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees.

As one of the largest regular sections contributing to Diversity Works, our health section also features partner stories on managing stress, HIV testing, GLP-1's and bariatric surgery, heart attack detection, keys to avoiding dementia and more. We encourage you to read and share important news and information for you, your family and friends.

Did you know that April is recognized in the U.S. as National Financial Literacy Month? It's designated as a time for consumers to grow in their knowledge of all things pertaining to their money. In this season that impacts our financial stability, you owe it to yourself to increase your knowledge of budgeting, saving and investing. In this section, read submitted articles about planning for tomorrow, steps toward your financial safety and new leadership appointments at Anderson Brothers Bank. Stay aware of the importance of your financial health. Read archived issues of Diversity Works' financial sections or contact partner banks to help you achieve your money goals. The more you know,

the better equipped you become.

Our cover story features Susan C. McGill, Esq., a local attorney at Finklea, Hendrick & Blake, LLC, Attorneys and Counselors at Law. McGill shares her upbringing as a native of Marion County, her strong faith, extraordinary legal background and in-depth volunteerism with local schools and students. McGill is a candidate for the position of Florence and Marion County Solicitor for the 12th Judicial Circuit in the upcoming election. Capable, educated, transparent, fair and qualified. Read the article, do your research and choose on election day.

Much like McGill's selfless commitment to volunteerism, this edition highlights community heroes who continually add to the fabric of what makes the Pee Dee region standout. Volunteers are our neighbors, friends and family members who find joy in giving back and caring for others. Their service helps local businesses, hospitals and school districts accomplish the mission at the end of the day. Sheila Generette from Johnsonville, a weekly volunteer with Lydia's Nest said it best when she quoted the second greatest commandment, the foundation of Christian ethics, found in both the old and new testaments, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

As you read, you'll find a plethora of great stories about local volunteers and how they assist with their dedication of time and commitment. You'll also see the story of McLeod Health's volunteer of the year, Alvin Leach, dedicating nearly 1,000 hours and making a difference with patients and staff. Read the articles and be inspired by Florence's Habitat for Humanity's Annual Board Volunteer Day, dedicating their time and skill to completing a new home, the volunteerism of Patricia Parr, Esq., and Chelsea Anderson at The Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee and Lake City. The actions of volunteers clearly show that our actions demonstrate our faith.

As I always say, Diversity Works is full of interesting reads, and this highlight barely does it justice. I encourage you to do what you do best and read, read, read. Be sure to mark your calendars as appropriate to ensure you don't miss any deadlines to apply, Lake City's ArtFields Festival as well as Darlington's Community Concert Series.

We cannot end this quarter without acknowledging Military Appreciation Month with a resounding thank you to U.S. service members for their bravery, commitment and service to the nation. We remember and thank them for protecting our freedom.

From leadership appointments, team awards for excellence, new physicians and teachers and more, Diversity Works congratulates the local community and those making a difference here in the Pee Dee region. Remember to support our partner organizations, large and small, who believe in the collective power of diversity in all segments - employment, education, health and more which enrich our communities and make them better.

Share your copy of Diversity Works when finished or visit us online for current and/or archived issues at www.diversityworkssc.com.

Happy Reading!

Glaceria Brown Mason
Editor

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SMALL BUSINESS AND DEI TODAY



challenges and political headwinds that have forced many large companies to reframe, scale back or even eliminate formal DEI programs. Yet amid this shift, small businesses are charting a different path — many maintain strong commitments to DEI practices and see them not just as ethical goals but as strategic business advantages.

Why DEI Still Matters for Small Businesses

For small and micro businesses, DEI isn't just about ticking boxes — it can directly impact performance and culture. Research and expert guidance consistently show that inclusive workplaces tend to be more engaged, creative and resilient. When employees feel seen, heard and respected, team morale tends to improve and talent retention increases — a particularly important advantage in competitive labor markets where small firms often struggle to attract and keep skilled workers.

Beyond internal culture, DEI can help small businesses develop stronger connections with their communities and customer bases. Diverse workplace perspectives often lead to better problem solving and broader market insight, while inclusivity can enhance customer trust and loyalty — especially among increasingly socially conscious consumers.

Small Businesses Embracing DEI Practices

Contrary to some corporate trends, small businesses are largely sticking with DEI principles and often report tangible benefits. A 2025 survey of U.S. small business owners showed that more than half reported implementing DEI practices — including inclusive hiring policies, community engagement and workplace culture initiatives — even as larger corporations scaled back similar programs.

These small business leaders shared positive results from their DEI efforts:

- Improved workplace culture, often cited by around 70 percent of those surveyed.
- Better ability to attract and retain qualified employees in a tight labor market.
- Higher employee satisfaction and productivity, as workplaces became more inclusive and equitable.
- Enhanced business performance overall, according to many owners who tied DEI efforts to success metrics.

Interestingly, younger entrepreneurs (ages 18-34) were more likely to view DEI as a strategic business advantage rather than just a moral or cultural imperative, suggesting that DEI commitments could become more deeply embedded as new generations of leaders take charge.

The Broader Political and Cultural Landscape

Despite these positive signs in the small business sphere, the broader national context for DEI is contentious. In the U.S., political pressure has reshaped how many organizations — particularly large companies — approach diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some corporations have eliminated DEI departments, rebranded roles to emphasize “inclusion and belonging,” or quietly scaled back programs under pressure from political discourse and legal changes.

At the policy level, some government programs designed to help underrepresented entrepreneurs — such as state contracting diversity initiatives — have been suspended or legally challenged, raising concerns about reduced opportunities for historically disadvantaged small business owners seeking public contracts and funding.

(DWM) In 2026, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the business world finds itself at a crossroads. After years of increased focus on DEI within corporate America and beyond, this movement now faces backlash, legal

A recent Gallup survey shows that while a majority of Americans still consider DEI important for businesses, fewer now see it as a top business priority compared to past years, reflecting a cultural shift that has nuanced implications for companies of all sizes.

Challenges to Meaningful DEI Implementation

While small businesses may embrace DEI in principle, meaningful implementation is not without challenges.

Resource constraints are a common issue: small firms often lack dedicated HR departments or the funds to invest in training, advisory support or comprehensive diversity strategies. DEI work that lacks clarity can end up being seen as costly or irrelevant if the business doesn't tie it to measurable performance or clear objectives.

Legal and compliance complexities also matter. In the changing regulatory environment, some small businesses have been advised to pivot away from quota based DEI goals and instead use data driven, objective strategies focused on removing barriers and expanding opportunities rather than explicit identity based preferences. This approach is often recommended to ensure legal defensibility and alignment with employment law.

Moreover, experts caution that surface level DEI efforts — for example, training sessions without structural change — can sometimes be counterproductive. Genuine inclusion requires building psychological safety, adjusting leadership behaviors and embedding equity into core business practices — not just promoting diversity for its own sake.

Balancing Authenticity With Practical Impact

One of the persistent debates in the DEI conversation is between performative efforts and authentic, impactful practice. Plenty of organizations — small and large alike — have launched well intentioned initiatives that fade once external attention wanes or economic pressures rise. For small businesses, this can be particularly risky, as superficial DEI may drain limited resources without yielding real cultural or financial benefits.

However, when DEI is integrated thoughtfully — embedded in hiring processes, talent development, customer engagement and mission statements — it becomes part of a business's competitive strategy rather than a symbolic gesture. Businesses that measure the impact of their DEI investments, solicit employee feedback, and build inclusive leadership practices are more likely to see lasting benefits.

Looking Ahead: The Future of DEI in Small Business

As we progress through 2026, the future of DEI in small business appears resilient but evolving. While national trends and corporate pullbacks dominate headlines, the small business sector continues to view DEI through a pragmatic lens — one rooted in growth, innovation and sustainable workplace culture. Several forces will likely shape small business DEI in the near term:

1. Generational shifts in leadership, with younger entrepreneurs prioritizing inclusivity as integral to business success.
2. Economic pressures that force small firms to be strategic about how DEI is implemented, ensuring it aligns with core goals.
3. Community and customer expectations, as consumers increasingly value businesses that reflect their own diversity and social values.
4. Policy and legal changes, which will continue to influence how small businesses design equity initiatives to be both effective and compliant.

Ultimately, DEI for small business today isn't a slogan — it's a dynamic, business critical practice that, when executed thoughtfully, can fuel innovation, strengthen workplace culture, attract talent and build meaningful community ties. And even as larger institutions grapple with backlash and retrenchment, Main Street enterprises show that inclusive, equitable practice remains a vital part of what makes small businesses resilient and relevant in a changing world.

GREENVILLE — The Duke Energy Foundation is investing \$500,000 in South Carolina communities through its Helping Emergency Response Organizations (HERO) grant program to strengthen emergency preparedness and response to severe weather across the state.

Now in its fifth year, the program provides microgrants that help local governments and nonprofit organizations improve readiness, response and recovery efforts during major weather events.

Earlier this year, communities across South Carolina experienced severe weather, including areas heavily affected by Hurricane Helene. As extreme weather events grow more frequent and intense, emergency responders are looking for additional ways to strengthen resilience and better prepare for future storms.

The HERO grants are designed to help first responders address gaps that arise when disasters create overlapping emergencies. Funding can be used for training, equipment and resources that improve a community's ability to respond quickly and effectively.

Beginning March 19, South Carolina government agencies and qualified nonprofits can apply for grants of up to \$20,000. The funding may be used for storm preparedness training, emergency materials and kits, shelters, specialized first responder training and equipment needed for severe weather rescues and response operations. Applications close April 25.

Since launching the program in 2022, Duke Energy has awarded 137 HERO microgrants across South Carolina. This year's funding brings the program's total investment in the state to \$2.5 million.

"When severe weather impacts communities across our state, we work alongside first responders and understand the challenges they face to restore life back to normal," said Tim Pearson, Duke Energy's South Carolina president. "This year's HERO grants continue to help fill gaps in storm response identified by severe weather events and help provide additional tools and training to

our fellow first responders."

Local officials say the grants have already made a meaningful difference in emergency response efforts.

Joshua Hawkins, director of Anderson County Emergency Management, said a recent grant helped provide essential equipment during winter storms.

"Thanks to the Duke Energy HERO Grant, we were able to deploy a traffic trailer with 300 cones to our local volunteer fire departments during the recent winter storms," Hawkins said. "This may have been a simple purchase, but it makes a big impact countywide."

In the city of Sumter, a grant-funded piece of equipment helped crews respond more effectively to a rare snowfall earlier this year.

"The SaltDogg spreader we purchased through the grant significantly enhanced our ability to respond to the winter weather events we experienced in February," said Richard Pring, director of public works for the city of Sumter. "The new spreader allowed us to double our treatment capacity and manage more than three inches of snowfall across the city."

In Oconee County, the funding supported expanded shelter capabilities during severe weather.

"The investment that Duke Energy continues to place in emergency preparedness and response is essential to bolstering our local capabilities," said V. Aaron Smith, coordinator for Oconee County Emergency Services. "Having a second shelter trailer allowed us to open two simultaneous shelters with capacity for 25 people each, including one able to accommodate special medical needs."

The Duke Energy Foundation provides more than \$30 million annually in philanthropic support to communities where Duke Energy customers live and work. The foundation is funded by Duke Energy shareholders.

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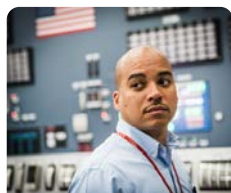
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Downtown Florence was supported by **1,007 volunteer hours** and **328 volunteers** in 2025! Thank you to all who supported our programs, events, and activities! To get involved, visit our website at www.florencedowntown.com.

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

One of the key tenets of Main Street work is organizing, activating and managing volunteers. Since 2020, Downtown Florence has increased volunteer participation by more than 68 percent. In 2025, 328 volunteers contributed 1,007 hours of service, valued at \$35,411.94.

Volunteers play a critical role in Main Street initiatives by expanding the capacity of downtown programs, services and events. They also give community members opportunities to participate in redevelopment efforts and strengthen connections to Florence's historic places while building civic pride.

Downtown Florence volunteers most often support special events, programs and community projects. They bring a range of skills, including project management, customer service and specialized expertise that helps strengthen downtown initiatives.

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

Downtown Florence has a long history of volunteer involvement. Community members assist with a wide range of activities, from beautification projects to event support at the South Carolina Pecan Music and Food Festival, where volunteers help with logistics and route assistance for runners. Volunteers also serve on committees and contribute leadership through the Florence Downtown Development Corp. Board of Directors.

In the early stages of downtown revitalization, volunteers helped establish the Downtown Florence Historic District, evaluate property conditions and launch community activation efforts. Those early

initiatives led to the creation of the Downtown Florence Main Street Program, a partnership between the City of Florence and the Florence Downtown Development Corp.

Over its 24-year history, the program has gained national recognition for its work in place-based revitalization. In 2023, Downtown Florence received the Great American Main Street Award, the highest honor presented by Main Street America. The recognition made Downtown Florence South Carolina's only Accredited Program to win the award and just the second downtown in the state to receive the honor, following Greenville in 2003.

For many volunteers, service is simply a way to give back to their community.

"I grew up in an atmosphere where we helped people whenever they needed it," said longtime volunteer Tim Griggs. "That translates into wanting to be in my community and doing anything I can to serve people — whether it's helping them have a good time, pointing them in the right direction or simply being a smiling face who can answer a question."

Griggs said he has volunteered for many years, dating back to the early days of Florence After 5 when the event was held in a field behind Hotel Florence.

To make volunteering even easier, Downtown Florence launched the, "Lend a Hand Downtown," portal in 2024. The online platform aggregates volunteer opportunities from downtown organizations and provides direct links to each group's volunteer information.

The portal allows residents to quickly explore a variety of opportunities and connect with organizations seeking help for events, programs and community initiatives. More information is available at florencedowntown.com/lend-hand-downtown.

Through the continued dedication of volunteers, Downtown Florence's programs, events and revitalization efforts remain a community-driven success.

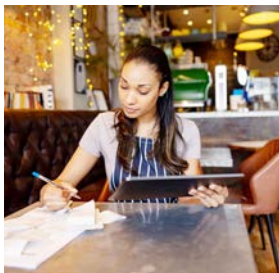


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HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AGENTS HELP THE “FORTUNE 5 MILLION” THRIVE



(BPT) — While today’s Fortune 500 companies have largely automated their operations, smaller businesses — the so-called “Fortune 5 million” — often remain stuck with manual workflows. For the millions of small and midsize businesses (SMBs) that power the U.S. economy, routine back-office tasks such as validating W-9s, reconciling receipts and onboarding

users can slow growth and limit success.

To tackle these challenges, intelligent financial operations platform BILL is introducing artificial intelligence (AI) agents designed to power touchless transactions. The suite of AI-driven tools automates critical workflows, allowing SMBs to eliminate manual processes that previously held them back.

Highly Trained AI Agents

BILL’s AI has accelerated billions in payments and processed more than 1.3 billion documents. Since early 2025, the company’s solutions have increased fully automated bill processing by over 80 percent and stopped eight million fraud attempts in the fiscal year alone. BILL serves nearly half a million businesses and 9,000 accounting firms, establishing itself as a trusted AI solution for SMBs.

“The Fortune 5 million deserve the same power and precision as the Fortune 500,” said René Lacerte, CEO and founder of BILL. “With data from trillions of dollars in transactions and a network of millions of businesses and accounting firms, we are uniquely positioned to deliver AI at a scale unmatched in our category. The future of fintech is touchless B2B transactions, and BILL is leading the way for SMBs.”

Streamlined Processes With AI Agents

Many business leaders face trade-offs between managing back-office operations and growing their companies. BILL’s AI agents automate essential financial workflows, handling routine tasks accurately so leaders can focus on strategic priorities.

Some ways BILL’s AI agents streamline formerly manual workflows include:

- **BILL W-9 Agent:** Collecting W-9 forms is one of the most time-consuming aspects of tax compliance. BILL’s W-9 agent autonomously requests and pre-validates forms from vendors, eliminating more than 80 percent of manual steps. Available to over 170,000 businesses, the agent can handle up to three million W-9s and is estimated to save customers 650,000 hours annually.
- **BILL Reconciliation Agent:** This touchless receipts agent automatically codes transactions so receipts reconcile themselves while maintaining full expense visibility. In early rollouts, fully AI-processed transactions increased 533 percent with 92 percent accuracy. Within six months, the agent is expected to serve more than 40,000 businesses, managing over 72 million receipts annually, with the goal of making receipts fully touchless.
- **Agentic-Powered Onboarding:** BILL’s new agentic-powered user onboarding simplifies setup for Spend & Expense users. Tailored to each business, the onboarding process ensures employees can spend compliantly from day one. The BILL Assistant also provides personalized, instant answers, intelligent recommendations and can complete tasks on behalf of SMBs, reducing back-office management time.

BILL is also introducing other AI-powered features, including the BILL Assistant, aimed at delivering instant, personalized business support.

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CHAMBER OUTLOOK LUNCHEON DRAWS CROWD, CELEBRATES COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Submitted by the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce



Chief Mark Keel

The Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce held its Annual Outlook Luncheon on March 18, at the Florence Center, drawing nearly 500 business and community leaders from across the Pee Dee.

The annual event provides an opportunity for business, civic and government leaders to gather, exchange ideas and hear updates on key issues affecting the region and the state.

Keynote speaker Chief Mark Keel of the S.C. Law Enforcement Division (SLED) delivered remarks focused on public safety across South Carolina. Keel addressed a range of topics, including human trafficking, illegal drug activity and the increasing presence of firearms among younger populations. He emphasized the challenges law enforcement agencies face in addressing these issues and the importance of collaboration among agencies, schools, families and community organizations.

Keel has served as chief of SLED since July 1, 2011. He returned to the agency after serving as director of the S.C. Department of Public Safety from June 17, 2008, to June 30, 2011.



Pictured Jeff and Carrie McKay with FMU President Dr. Fred Carter

In addition to the keynote address, the Chamber recognized several individuals for their contributions to the community. Luke Wilcox

of Wilcox Office Works was named the Chamber's Small Businessperson of the Year. The award, sponsored by Dedicated Community Bank, was presented by the bank's CEO, Jim Ivey.

Jeff McKay of the Northeastern Strategic Alliance received the Chamber's Public Servant of the Year award, presented by Francis Marion University President Dr. Fred Carter. During the presentation, Carter also recognized Jeff and Carrie McKay with a special Parents of the Decade honor.



Luke Wilcox with Jim Ivey, president and CEO of Dedicated Community Bank

Chamber President Michael Miller said this year's award recipients exemplify leadership and service. "Recognizing Luke Wilcox and the longstanding community support of the Wilcox family business reflects the true spirit of the Small Businessperson of the Year award,"

Miller said.

Regarding McKay's recognition, Miller added, "Jeff McKay embodies the intent of the Public Servant of the Year award through his outstanding dedication to community service and commitment to improving the region."

Also recognized during the program was Alex Dusky of Community Broadcasters, who was named the Chamber's Ambassador of the Year.

The Chamber hosts two signature luncheons each year — the Membership Luncheon in the fall and the Outlook Luncheon in the spring — both of which consistently draw strong attendance from business and community leaders throughout the area. (Photos by Phillip Guyton)



Florence County Council

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

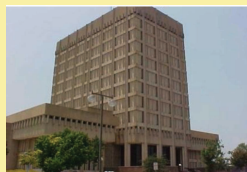
Florence County provides services consistent with the needs of its citizens in a cost-effective, efficient, and customer friendly manner. We are people serving people. County government assumes a proactive leadership role in determining the future direction of the county. County government exists to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

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Andrew T. Rodgers, Jr., District 2
Dr. Alphonso Bradley, District 3
Jerry W. Yarborough, Jr., Chairman - District 4

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CELEBRATE DIVERSITY MONTH





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DIVERSITY MONTH CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

(DWM) April is recognized as Diversity Month, a time dedicated to celebrating the rich variety of cultures, backgrounds and perspectives that shape communities across the United States. The observance encourages individuals, organizations and institutions to reflect on the importance of inclusion while promoting understanding and respect among people of all walks of life.

Diversity Month highlights the value of embracing differences — including race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, ability and socioeconomic background — as strengths rather than barriers. In today's interconnected world, fostering an inclusive environment is not only a moral responsibility but also a key driver of innovation, collaboration and growth.

The origins of Diversity Month date back to 2004, when it was first established to recognize and honor the diverse voices that contribute to society. Since then, it has grown into a nationwide effort embraced by schools, businesses, nonprofits and government agencies. Throughout April, many organizations host workshops, cultural events, panel discussions and training sessions aimed at promoting awareness, equity and meaningful dialogue.

For businesses, Diversity Month serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusive workplace practices. Research has shown that diverse teams are often more creative and better equipped to solve complex problems. Employers are encouraged to evaluate hiring practices, invest in diversity and inclusion training and create environments where employees feel respected, valued and heard.

Educational institutions also play a vital role in observing Diversity Month. Schools frequently incorporate lessons and activities that celebrate cultural heritage while encouraging students to explore perspectives beyond their own. These experiences help build empathy, reduce bias and prepare young people to thrive in a diverse and ever-changing society.

Community leaders emphasize that recognizing diversity goes beyond a single month. While April provides an opportunity to spotlight these efforts, true inclusion requires ongoing commitment and intentional action. Advocates encourage individuals to engage in meaningful conversations, challenge stereotypes and support initiatives that promote equality

throughout the year.

“Diversity is about more than representation; it’s about belonging,” many leaders note. Creating spaces where individuals feel seen, respected and empowered can lead to stronger, more resilient communities.

Local organizations often use the month to highlight the contributions of underrepresented groups while also addressing disparities that still exist. By acknowledging both progress and challenges, communities can work collectively toward more equitable outcomes for all.

As Diversity Month is observed across the country, individuals are encouraged to participate in both large and small ways, attending events, supporting diverse businesses, learning about different cultures or simply listening to others’ experiences.

Ultimately, April’s recognition as Diversity Month serves as a reminder that differences should be celebrated, not feared. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusion, communities can build a future rooted in understanding, opportunity and unity for generations to come.



Katie Gordon

Workforce management, payroll compliance and human resources systems have become increasingly complex as businesses navigate changing regulations, economic pressures and new technologies. For Katie Gordon, a leader at ADP, helping organizations manage those challenges has become both a career focus and a way to support long-term business success.

Gordon's journey to corporate leadership began in Florence, South Carolina, where she was raised. After graduating from the College of Charleston, she later earned her law degree from the University of South Carolina.

Her early career included a move to Washington, D.C., where she spent six years working with an environmental nonprofit organization focused on regulatory compliance and advocacy. During that time, she gained experience in project coordination, event planning and navigating complex organizational systems.

After returning home, Gordon practiced law alongside her father, working in areas such as domestic law and estate planning. Although the legal field offered valuable experience, she eventually found an opportunity that would shift her career in a new direction.

Ten years ago, Gordon joined ADP, one of the world's largest payroll and workforce management companies, as a project manager within the credit optimization team. In that role, she helped onboard new clients and train them in systems designed to help businesses identify and claim employment tax credits. Within four years, she was promoted to manager and later moved into the Compliance Solutions Division, where her responsibilities continued to expand.

Eventually, she became director of client service, leading several teams that helped businesses secure more than \$1 billion in tax credits within a three-year period. Recently, Gordon was promoted to service executive, where she now oversees multiple service teams supporting ADP clients.

"When people hear ADP, they often think only about payroll," she said. "But we offer a much broader range of services that help businesses manage employees, compliance and workforce processes."

Those services include employment tax credits, unemployment claims management, wage garnishment administration, Affordable Care Act compliance, employment verification and tax credit services. ADP works with organizations of all sizes, from small businesses to Fortune 200 companies operating globally.

Although the services provided may be similar across clients, Gordon noted that the needs of each business can vary significantly depending on size and industry. Our goal is to tailor services, so each organization gets the support it needs."

Economic conditions have also influenced how businesses approach workforce management. Inflation and shifts in hiring trends have increased the importance of tax credits and other financial incentives that help businesses manage labor costs.

"Right now, many companies are paying closer attention to employment tax credits because they can make a meaningful difference in operating costs," Gordon said. "Programs may change or expire legislatively, so it is important to stay informed about opportunities at both the federal and state levels."

Technology has also transformed how organizations manage payroll and HR systems. According to Gordon, advancements in

automation and artificial intelligence are improving efficiency while also providing deeper data insights for businesses.

"Ten or fifteen years ago, many HR processes were still paper based," she said. "Today most of those systems are digital and integrated with other business tools."

Artificial intelligence now helps analyze large amounts of workforce data, identify eligibility for tax credit programs and streamline compliance processes. However, Gordon believes technology works best when paired with human expertise.

"AI can help gather information and highlight patterns, but human knowledge is still critical when it comes to interpreting regulations and ensuring businesses remain compliant," she said.

As workforce management becomes more technology-driven, Gordon advises business owners to build strong systems early in their company's development. Payroll errors, compliance issues and mismanaged HR processes can create significant legal and financial consequences if not handled properly.

"Many businesses assume they can manage payroll and compliance themselves indefinitely," she said. "But regulations can be complex, and mistakes can lead to penalties or legal issues. Having professional systems in place can protect businesses in the long run."

For entrepreneurs hiring their first employees, Gordon believes hiring decisions should focus not only on work history but also on attitude and adaptability.

"You want to find someone whose skills align with the position and who has a positive mindset," she said. "You can train someone on technical skills, but you cannot teach attitude."

Leadership has also played an important role in Gordon's career development. Although she did not initially plan to move into management, guiding teams and helping employees reach their potential has become one of the most rewarding aspects of her work.

"A good leader listens, teaches and guides," she said. "My goal is to help my team feel valued while making sure we provide the best experience for our clients."



Katie pictured with her family

Outside of business operations, ADP also encourages community engagement. Associates receive volunteer hours each year to support causes they care about, and many teams participate in community service events across the county.

For Gordon, connecting professional work with community impact is essential.

"Businesses do not operate in isolation," she said. "When professionals stay connected to their communities, it strengthens both the workforce and the local economy."

Looking ahead, Gordon believes the future of workforce management will continue to evolve as technology advances and businesses adapt to changing economic conditions. While artificial intelligence will likely reshape many systems, she remains confident that human expertise will remain essential.

"Technology can help businesses operate more efficiently," she said. "But human insight, creativity and judgment will always be necessary."

Her advice to business leaders is simple but practical. "Running a business today involves many compliance and workforce challenges," Gordon said. "Partnering with the right solutions provider can help organizations navigate those challenges and focus on growth."

Chris Goss
 Head of Pharmaceutical
 Development Services,
 Florence, SC

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

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

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CONSUMERS LOSE MORE THAN \$2 MILLION TO TOP SCAMS OF 2025

Submitted by Mallory Wojciechowski, president and CEO, Better Business Bureau of Eastern Carolinas



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH —

The Better Business Bureau of Eastern Carolinas received more than 2,600 scam reports in 2025, with losses totaling \$2,077,950.44. Data collected through BBB Scam Tracker identified the most common and costly scams impacting consumers across the organization's 48-county service area.

As 2026 begins, BBB officials are encouraging residents to stay informed and vigilant. Understanding how these

scams operate — and recognizing warning signs — can help individuals avoid becoming victims.

Top Scams by Number of Reports

Online purchase scams were the most frequently reported, accounting for more than 28% of cases. These scams often involve fraudulent websites, misleading ads or sellers who never deliver goods. In some cases, consumers reported compromised financial information after transactions.

BBB recommends researching sellers, reading reviews and checking for complaints on [BBB.org](https://www.bbb.org). Consumers should also verify websites are secure and review return policies before purchasing.

Phishing scams were the second most reported, with 514 cases. These scams often appear as emails or text messages designed to capture sensitive information, but may also occur through phone calls or mail.

Consumers are urged to avoid clicking unexpected links and to be cautious of urgent messages requesting personal information. When in doubt, contact organizations directly using verified information.

Employment scams accounted for 18% of reports, highlighting risks for job seekers. Scammers may impersonate legitimate companies, conduct fake interviews and issue fraudulent job offers. Victims may be asked for personal information or payments for equipment or onboarding.

BBB advises verifying companies and searching online for complaints before engaging further.

Credit card scams appeared 113 times in reports, with scammers posing as financial institution representatives to obtain account information. Consumers should avoid responding to unsolicited messages and instead contact their financial institution directly.

Advance fee loan scams rounded out the top five, involving offers of guaranteed loans in exchange for upfront payments. BBB warns legitimate lenders do not guarantee approval or request payment before issuing loans.

Top Scams by Money Lost

Some scams occur less frequently but result in higher losses.

Investment scams caused the greatest financial damage in 2025, totaling \$576,517.28, with a median loss of nearly \$8,000. These schemes often promise high returns with little risk and may involve cryptocurrency or complex financial language.

Consumers should verify investment opportunities through the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and remain skeptical of guarantees or pressure to act quickly.

Employment scams ranked second in losses at \$398,493.79, sometimes involving payments for fake training or equipment.

Online purchase scams resulted in \$292,172.47 in losses, reinforcing their impact as both widespread and costly.

Romance scams led to \$195,107.96 in losses. These

scams often begin on dating platforms or social media, where scammers build trust before requesting money for emergencies or travel.

BBB encourages individuals to verify identities and remain cautious when forming online relationships.

Phishing scams accounted for \$166,040.30 in losses, demonstrating that even common scams can have significant financial consequences.

Staying Protected

BBB officials emphasize that many scams share common warning signs, including requests for personal information, pressure to act quickly, promises of guaranteed outcomes and demands for unconventional payment methods.

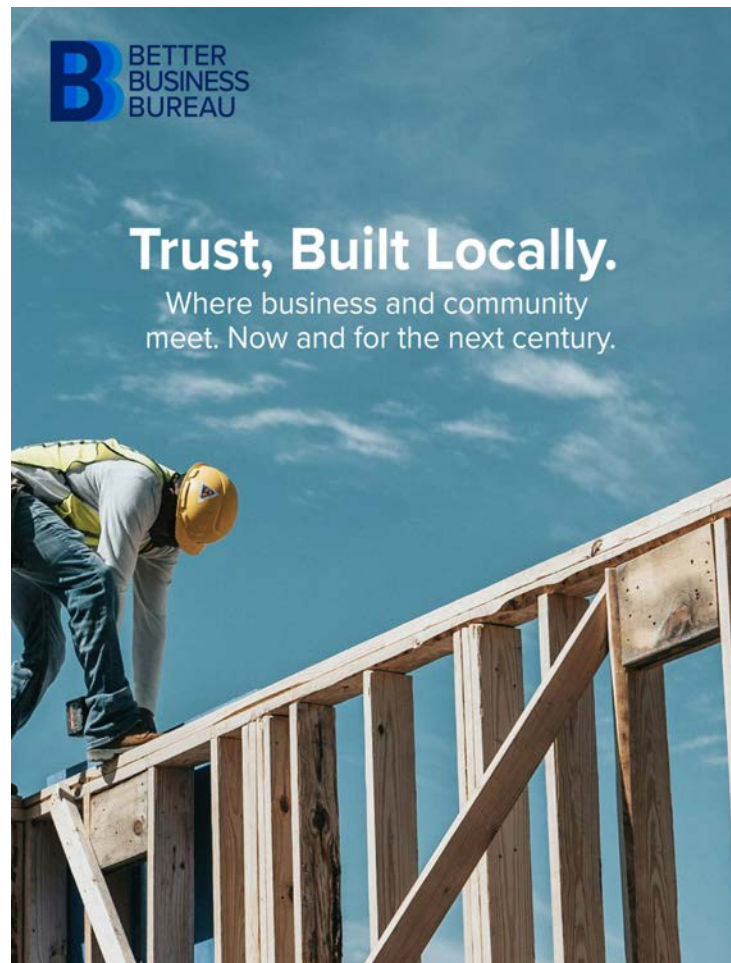
Consumers are encouraged to research businesses, verify communications and consult trusted individuals before acting. Monitoring financial statements and credit reports can also help detect unauthorized activity early.

Reporting Scams

Consumers who encounter or fall victim to scams are encouraged to report incidents through BBB Scam Tracker. These reports help track trends and protect others in the community.

About the BBB of Eastern Carolinas

The Better Business Bureau serving Eastern Carolinas is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit representing 48 counties in North and South Carolina. Funded primarily by more than 5,200 accredited businesses, BBB promotes marketplace trust through self-regulation, education and dispute resolution services. Most services are provided at no cost to the public, with limited exceptions for mediation and arbitration.



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MPD ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE TRUST TO MARLBORO COUNTY COUNCIL ON AGING

Submitted by Katie W. Wilcox, CCC marketing and communications



MPD Trust Advisor Katie Wilcox and MPD Trust Board Director Earl Hood present a \$5,000 Operation Round-Up donation to Marlboro County Council on Aging Executive Director Lisa Therrell-Perkins and Assistant Director Erica Freeman in Bennettsville on March 4, 2026. The funds will support meal programs and essential services for seniors in Marlboro County.

BENNETTSVILLE — The Trust of MPD Electric Cooperative has awarded a \$5,000 donation to the Marlboro County Council on Aging to support programs that help local seniors maintain independence, dignity and quality of life.

The Marlboro County Council on Aging provides essential services to county residents aged 60 and older.

Programs include group and home-delivered meals, social and recreational activities, transportation to meal sites and local medical appointments, health screenings and information and referrals to additional community resources that support healthy and active aging.

“These funds are instrumental in helping us provide daily meals to seniors throughout our community,” said Lisa Therrell-Perkins, executive director of the Marlboro County Council on Aging. “Support like this ensures that we can continue meeting the growing needs of our seniors in Marlboro County while helping them remain active and engaged.”

Katie Wilcox, MPD Trust advisor said, the cooperative values opportunities to support organizations that directly impact the well-being of local residents.

“Supporting organizations like the Marlboro County Council on Aging is at the heart of what we do,” Wilcox said. “While we are committed to powering the seven counties we serve, we are equally dedicated to strengthening the communities we call home.”

The gift is made possible through

MPD Electric Cooperative’s Trust Operation Round-Up® program. Through the initiative, cooperative members voluntarily round up their monthly electric bills to the nearest dollar, with the extra change supporting charitable projects and nonprofit organizations throughout the Pee Dee region.

Since its creation, Operation Round-Up has provided financial assistance to numerous community programs, helping local organizations address critical needs and improve quality of life for residents across the region.



Seniors participate in activities, enjoying themselves.

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Manually adjust your thermostat so your HVAC system runs less during peak hours. Pre-cool or pre-heat your home before peak hours (when energy costs less) to reduce usage later. A programmable or smart thermostat can automate this for you.



Limit hot water use during peak hours. Consider installing a timer switch on your water heater to shift its energy use to off-peak hours, when energy costs are lower. You'll still have hot water during peak times, but the heater itself won't be running.



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FROM CONVERSATION TO STRATEGY: DIVERSITY IN BUSINESS IN 2026

Submitted by Reginal G. Lyerly, chief operating officer, Keeping Carolina Families Covered



Reginal G. Lyerly

CONWAY—In 2026, diversity in business has evolved from a widely discussed concept into a measurable strategy. Across industries, companies are shifting their focus from simply promoting diversity to demonstrating how inclusive practices contribute to organizational performance, workforce stability and long-term growth.

For many business leaders, diversity is no longer framed solely as a social responsibility initiative. Instead, it is increasingly recognized as a strategic advantage that influences innovation, employee engagement and a company's ability to compete in a rapidly changing global marketplace.

The Strategic Advantage

Workplace diversity includes individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. These differences may involve race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability status, socioeconomic background, education, military service and professional experience.

Organizations that prioritize diversity often benefit from stronger decision-making and broader market awareness. Teams with varied perspectives are more likely to challenge assumptions, identify emerging opportunities and develop creative solutions to complex problems.

In 2026, companies increasingly recognize that diverse leadership teams and inclusive organizational cultures often correlate with stronger business outcomes. As a result, diversity is becoming a core component of corporate strategy rather than a standalone initiative managed solely by human resources departments.

Holding Leadership Accountable

One of the most notable shifts this year is the growing emphasis on leadership accountability. Many organizations now incorporate diversity metrics into executive performance evaluations and leadership development programs.

This shift reflects a broader understanding that diversity initiatives must be supported by senior leadership to produce meaningful change. Policies and programs alone are not enough. Leaders must demonstrate commitment through hiring decisions, mentorship opportunities and organizational transparency.

Equally important is the development of inclusive workplace cultures. Hiring a diverse workforce is only the first step. Employees must also feel valued, respected and empowered to contribute their perspectives. Organizations that cultivate inclusive environments often experience higher levels of employee engagement and collaboration.

An Expanding Definition of Diversity

Another emerging trend is the broader recognition of diversity through professional background and life experience. Companies are increasingly acknowledging the value of individuals whose career paths differ from traditional corporate trajectories.

Military veterans, for example, are gaining greater attention for the leadership, adaptability and operational expertise they bring to the workplace. Many organizations are strengthening recruitment partnerships with veteran transition programs and veteran-owned businesses.

Businesses are also expanding their commitment to supplier diversity by working with minority-owned, women-owned and veteran-owned enterprises. These partnerships support economic inclusion while introducing new perspectives and innovative approaches into business ecosystems.

Measuring Progress

A defining feature of diversity initiatives in 2026 is the growing reliance on data. Organizations are using workforce analytics to evaluate representation, promotion rates, pay equity and employee

engagement.

This data-driven approach helps companies identify barriers to advancement and implement targeted solutions. Transparency has also become essential. Employees, investors and consumers increasingly expect organizations to report measurable progress rather than rely on symbolic commitments.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite meaningful progress, challenges remain. Leadership representation continues to be an area where many organizations are working to improve. While entry-level hiring has become more diverse in many industries, executive leadership teams often do not yet fully reflect the diversity of the broader workforce.

Some companies also face the challenge of sustaining momentum. Diversity initiatives launched earlier in the decade must now transition into long-term strategies supported by consistent leadership engagement and organizational investment.

Looking Ahead

As businesses move through 2026, diversity will remain a defining factor in organizational success. Companies that cultivate inclusive cultures, develop diverse leadership pipelines and measure progress transparently will be better positioned to navigate economic uncertainty and shifting workforce expectations.

The future of business increasingly depends on the ability to leverage diverse perspectives, experiences and talents. Organizations that recognize this reality—and act on it—will strengthen their workplace cultures while enhancing their capacity for innovation and sustainable growth.

For business leaders and professionals alike, the message is clear: diversity is no longer just part of the conversation. It is a cornerstone of modern organizational leadership.

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Starlee B. Alexander
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CITY OF FLORENCE WELCOMES NEW POLICE CHIEF Submitted by the City of Florence



Florence Police Chief, Angela M. Greene

The City of Florence is pleased to announce Angela M. Greene as its new police chief. Greene brings more than 20 years of law enforcement experience in Virginia and is widely recognized for strengthening police agencies, reducing crime and building trust through community engagement and teamwork. Her leadership emphasizes collaboration with residents, local organizations and city officials to create safer, more connected communities.

Greene began her law enforcement career in 2001 with the Richmond Police Department, advancing through the ranks to captain. In this role, she led operational units and gained extensive experience in patrol, investigations and strategic crime-reduction efforts. Her ability to develop innovative strategies and mentor officers quickly distinguished her among peers.

In 2016, Greene was appointed assistant chief of police for the Portsmouth Police Department, overseeing uniform patrol and special operations, including SWAT, civil disturbance, traffic, street crimes, school resource officers, K-9, mounted patrol, marine patrol, auxiliary officers and chaplains. She managed complex operations while fostering teamwork and accountability across multiple units.

Greene later served as chief of police in Portsmouth, leading 259 sworn officers, 20 auxiliary officers and 75 civilian personnel. She implemented targeted crime-reduction strategies and expanded community engagement initiatives, strengthening partnerships between the police department and the public. Her focus on proactive policing and problem-solving contributed to improved public safety and greater community trust.

In 2021, Greene became chief of police in Lexington, Virginia. She emphasized transparency, accountability and collaboration with community stakeholders, local government and higher education

institutions. Under her leadership, the department enhanced officer training, professional standards and community confidence.

Following her tenure in Lexington, Greene served as director of organized retail crime for the Virginia Attorney General's Office. She coordinated statewide efforts among law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and private-sector partners to dismantle organized retail theft networks. Greene successfully developed multi-agency task forces and public awareness programs that improved law enforcement effectiveness across the state.

Greene holds a bachelor's degree in pre-law and political science from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a master's in public administration from Old Dominion University. She is pursuing a doctorate in public administration at Liberty University and is a graduate of the FBI National Command Course. In 2025, she received the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police Presidential Award for her leadership and contributions to law enforcement.

She has served in several professional leadership roles, including an appointment to the Virginia Maternal Mortality Review Team, third vice president of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police, commissioner on the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission and vice chair of the Cardinal Criminal Justice Regional Training Academy.

The Florence Police Department (FPD) has built a strong foundation through community policing and maintaining agency accreditation since 2004. FPD was nationally accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies from 2004 to 2010 and has maintained certification through the South Carolina Law Enforcement Accreditation (SCLEA) program since 2011. The department recently completed SCLEA recertification and received certification on March 6, 2026, in Columbia, SC.

With Greene's extensive experience, the City of Florence is confident she will strengthen the department's ongoing efforts while creating new opportunities for success, enhancing community relationships and fostering a culture of professionalism and accountability.

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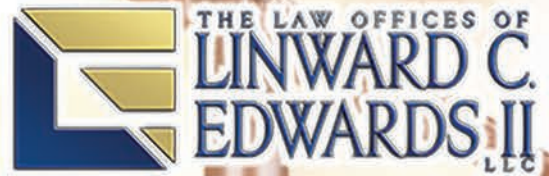
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HEMINGWAY — Have you ever prayed for a breakthrough while unknowingly standing in its way?

Sometimes the delays in our lives are not obstacles meant to stop us, but invitations from God to slow down, grow and trust His timing. Learning that lesson often begins in the most ordinary moments.

Once a week, I ride with my husband to Florence for work. I drop him off and then take the car to visit my mom or run errands. The early morning traffic coming into Florence from Pamplico is often stop-and-go — mostly stop — as people head to work or school.

You can always spot the impatient drivers. Maybe they left home late, so they ride the bumper of the car ahead of them, eager for the congestion to clear. Unfortunately, impatience often causes accidents that slow traffic even more. In their frustration to move forward, they sometimes create the very delay they hoped to avoid.

Sometimes the delays in our lives aren't the obstacle — the real obstacle is our impatience to move ahead of God.

Have you ever been in your own way? I certainly have. Sometimes we sense the importance of our calling from the Lord and see it so clearly that we move ahead before the timing is right, allowing impatience to push us forward.

Just like the heavy traffic in the mornings, we must learn patience during delays and continue to trust

the Lord's timing and plans for us. If you tend to learn the hard way, you may experience crashes or setbacks that could have been avoided.

If you've been in a waiting season that seems to have no end, consider a few questions that may help clear the fog:

1. Could God be teaching you something so valuable that moving forward without it could harm your future?
2. Could He be growing and maturing you, so you are able to handle what lies ahead?
3. Could He be strengthening your daily walk with Him because He knows you will need it to fulfill your calling?

In **1 Corinthians 13:9** we read, "We know in part and we prophesy in part." These words remind us to acknowledge our limitations. We simply cannot see everything God sees.

It is fitting that this verse appears in what many call the "love chapter." Sometimes God's love is expressed by not revealing everything at once.

Even when believers receive the Holy Spirit, our knowledge and understanding continue to grow. Scripture repeatedly reminds us of this truth. In **Deuteronomy 29:29**, Moses declares, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever."

God promises to reveal what we need to know when we need to know it. Our part is to remain humble and surrendered, willing to follow where He leads rather than rushing ahead.

Things that can block your breakthrough — things you can control — include:

- Feeling ready while still needing growth and maturity
- Refusing to slow down long enough to seek God's direction
- Allowing impatience or emotion to justify moving forward prematurely

The people of Israel experienced a moment like this when they escaped Egypt after 400 years of slavery. Soon

they found themselves trapped between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea.

Why would God lead them into a



corner? Because He wanted them to discover who He truly was for them and what He could do.

We often need our own "Red Sea moments." They remind us that breakthrough doesn't come from forcing our way forward but from trusting the God who leads us.

What God Might Be Doing While You Wait

- Teaching you to discern His voice
- Helping you enjoy quiet time with Him
- Guiding you to remain submitted to His Lordship

What are you currently waiting for? Have you taken it to God in prayer? Have you brought Him your thoughts and feelings — and then taken time to be still and listen?

Don't get in God's way by trying to force your own.

The Father's love for His children is constant. He is always guiding, providing and protecting us. Like a shepherd watching over his sheep, He sees the path far ahead of where we stand.

When we slow down enough to listen to His voice, spend time with Him and trust His leadership, something remarkable happens. The life He leads us into is often far better than the one we were trying to rush toward.

Breakthrough often begins the moment we stop rushing ahead of God.

About the Author

Robin Lewis is the founder of "Awakened Discipleship & Coaching Co.," in Hemingway, where she and her team mentor women to grow in faith, identity and purpose through biblical coaching and discipleship. Learn more at www.Awakened-Discipleship.com.



INGREDIENTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS Submitted by Ruiz Foods

Ruiz Foods, America's No. 1 frozen Mexican foods company is recognized for providing a key ingredient that helps Florence area student's futures possible.

As senior recognition around Florence approaches this spring, Ruiz Foods will once again present Ruiz 4 Kids scholarships to help graduates achieve their dreams.

"These can be life-changing," says Letitia Plowden, a counselor at Florence's Wilson High School. Founded in 1866, Wilson High was one of the original freedmen schools established after slavery. Today its 1,200 students have access to opportunities ranging from the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and dual college credit courses to a two-year barber program that allows them to graduate with a professional certificate. For Plowden, her students' futures are the priority.

"Some of our young people are first-generation college students whose parents are trying to figure out how to handle the cost of education. A \$1,000 scholarship is an amazing amount to help them," she says.

Ruiz 4 Kids is an independent nonprofit whose board consists of Ruiz Foods volunteers. Its mission provides opportunities and inspires hope and change in children's lives. Annually, it awards scholarships to seniors and community college transfer students near Florence and three company locations in Texas and California. In 2025, Ruiz 4 Kids distributed \$99,000 in scholarships to students from Florence-area high schools. The program is funded through the annual Louis F. Ruiz Golf Invitational.

Krista Meekins, office and community relations coordinator at the Florence plant, serves on the Ruiz 4 Kids board and acts as liaison to area schools. Soon after its opening of 2014, the Florence plant began participating in Ruiz 4 Kids.

"This is certainly one of the most rewarding parts of my job," Meekins says. "It's inspiring to learn these students' stories and to know we've helped make a real difference for them, their families and their futures."

Adam Lowe, a counselor at 1,000-student Darlington High School, which has a rural population with many needs, says, "The Ruiz scholarship is a godsend for a lot of our students."

The Ruiz 4 Kids scholarship criteria allow a larger pool of applicants beyond the top five percent of their class and include students pursuing community college, Lowe adds. The program's user-friendly online application process is also a plus. Darlington High's curriculum includes college preparatory courses,

Junior ROTC and Jobs for America's Graduates, a South Carolina program that helps students reach economic and academic success.

Nan Carmichael has more than four decades of experience in education, first as a counselor and now as principal of Latta High School, northeast of Florence. Latta offers IB courses, college preparatory courses, strong athletic programs, fine arts options and a variety of extracurricular clubs and activities.

Over her career, she's repeatedly seen the value of scholarships that meet a range of student aspirations and needs.

"We tell our students there are a lot of opportunities and to look for scholarships that are a match," she says. "Education is costly, and we look at the overall package of what it takes to go to the school of your choice. Scholarships can make the difference between borrowing or not, even if you're eligible for grants."

"It really warms my heart that companies and programs like Ruiz 4 Kids — and even individual families — care enough to create scholarships to support our students," Carmichael notes.

Carmichael is encouraged when graduates are successful and achieving their dreams. "I've been at medical facilities where I saw a couple of my former students as nurses. And some come back and are now teaching in our district."

Plowden recalls a recent Ruiz 4 Kids

scholarship recipient from a single-parent household who wanted a career in athletic training and sports medicine. His mother had started college but couldn't finish due to financial constraints.

"Giving her son the opportunity to go to college was important to her. He was a Ruiz 4 Kids scholarship recipient and he's doing amazing at the University of South Carolina. He's a young man who needed the help, and this put him in the game to go to school," she says.

Several years ago, Plowden's daughter, Janiya, "did the work and completed the application" and was awarded a Ruiz 4 Kids scholarship. Today, she has achieved her goal of becoming a physician assistant specializing in neurosurgery.

Lowe is keeping up with a sophomore at Florence's Francis Marion University who aspires to teach math.

"He comes from a large family, so money has to go far. In the spring of his senior year, he committed to applying for as many scholarships as possible," Lowe says. "He won multiple scholarships, and Ruiz was by far one of the largest. I'm truly excited for him; he's a bright kid. I told him to get used to hearing the word 'mister' in front of his name. We could be colleagues someday!"

With the end of the school year on the horizon, Ruiz Foods plant team members will again attend scholarship presentation events throughout the Florence area.





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HGTC PRESIDENT DR. MARILYN FORE RECEIVES 2026 MARTHA KIME PIPER AWARD

Articles submitted by Nicole Hyman, chief PR and communications officer



Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), holding the Martha Kime Piper Award

CONWAY — Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), has been named the recipient of the 2026 Martha Kime Piper Award, presented at the annual conference of South Carolina Women in Higher Education (SCWHE).

The Martha Kime Piper Award, named for the first woman president of a public higher education institution in South Carolina, is presented biennially to a woman who has demonstrated a distinguished record of advancing and supporting women in higher education and the education of

women across the state.

Fore was recognized for her visionary leadership, advocacy for student success and mentorship of emerging female leaders throughout the South Carolina Technical College System and beyond. Under her leadership, HGTC has expanded academic opportunities, strengthened workforce partnerships and cultivated a culture that supports professional growth for faculty, staff and students.

"I am deeply honored to receive an award that carries the name and legacy of Martha Kime Piper," Fore said. "Throughout my career, I have been inspired by strong women leaders who opened doors

for others. I remain committed to creating pathways that empower the next generation of women to lead with confidence, integrity and purpose."

The mission of South Carolina Women in Higher Education is to provide encouragement, empowerment and professional development to faculty, staff and students who work or study in higher education institutions across South Carolina. SCWHE seeks to increase the number of women in leadership positions throughout higher education systems statewide.

The organization is affiliated with the American Council on Education's Women's Network and collaborates with partners to foster an educational, social and political environment in which women gain a greater voice.

Fore's selection for the honor reflects her dedication to building inclusive leadership structures, advocating for access to education and championing opportunities that transform lives and strengthen communities across South Carolina.

"Horry-Georgetown Technical College is proud to celebrate this well-deserved recognition," said Nicole Hyman, chief public relations and communications officer. "Dr. Fore's leadership continues to positively impact not only our college community but also women across our state who are called to lead and serve in higher education."

For more information about Horry-Georgetown Technical College, visit www.hgtc.edu.

HGTC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NAMED SCRLA HOSPITALITY EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR



Joseph Bonaparte

CONWAY — The South Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association has recognized Joseph Bonaparte, executive director of the International Culinary Institute at Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC), as the 2026 Hospitality Educator of the Year during the organization's 73rd annual Stars of the Hospitality Industry Awards Gala.

The prestigious ceremony was held at the Hilton Columbia Center and brought together hoteliers and restaurateurs from across the state to celebrate excellence in South

Carolina's hospitality and tourism industry. Presented by Sysco, the gala honored 18 award recipients among nearly 200 attendees.

The South Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association represents more than 2,400-member restaurant and lodging companies, along with industry-related service providers. Collectively, these businesses make hospitality South Carolina's second-largest employer and one of the state's most active public service industries.

The Stars of the Hospitality Industry Awards recognize individuals whose professionalism, commitment and service elevate South Carolina's \$31 billion hospitality industry. From front-of-house professionals to executive leaders and educators, the honorees represent excellence throughout the workforce pipeline.

"We are incredibly proud of Chef Bonaparte and the impact he has made on our students and the broader hospitality community," said Marilyn Fore, president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College. "This recognition reflects his dedication to excellence, leadership within the culinary field and commitment to preparing the next generation of hospitality professionals who will strengthen South Carolina's workforce."

Under Bonaparte's leadership, HGTC's International Culinary Institute has expanded partnerships with industry leaders, enhanced hands-on learning opportunities and graduated highly skilled professionals prepared to meet the evolving demands of the hospitality sector.

The association's annual gala celebrates the spirit of hospitality and honors the individuals who drive one of the state's most vital economic engines. Bonaparte's recognition as Hospitality Educator

of the Year highlights HGTC's continued commitment to workforce development and industry excellence across the region and state.

HGTC CELEBRATES LOCAL TALENT AT AUTHOR SHOWCASE



College leaders and local authors celebrate reading and writing during an event at Horry-Georgetown Technical College on the Conway campus. Pictured from left are Lisa Heartman, Dr. Michael Roberts, Caleb Wygal, Maegwen Salley-Massie, Angela Barnes and T.I. Lowe.

CONWAY — Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) hosted an Author Showcase on Wednesday, Feb. 25, on the Conway campus. The event featured seven local professional authors and highlighted the college's commitment to encouraging student talent while enriching campus culture.

Students, faculty, staff and community members

gathered to promote reading and writing across campus. Attendees explored published works, engaged with authors and gained insight into the writing process. Participating authors shared personal experiences and practical advice, offering inspiration to students interested in pursuing their own writing.

The program was organized by Dr. Michael Roberts, professor of English and writer-in-residence at HGTC.

Roberts said the event was designed to build confidence and inspire students while celebrating the power of storytelling. College leaders hope the showcase will lead to additional programming that connects the college and the broader community through literature and the arts.

"This celebration of creativity is invaluable to the future of literacy at our college and in our community," said Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College. "The event reflects our commitment to professional and creative growth in the literary arts and the continued development of our students' talents."

For more information about future HGTC events, visit <https://www.hgtc.edu/events/>.



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HGTC FOUNDATION RECEIVES \$10,000 SPONSORSHIP FOR SOUTHWEST SPLENDOR

Submitted by Nicole Hyman, chief PR and communications officer



The HGTC Foundation receives a \$10,000 check from presenting sponsor Anderson Brothers Bank for the 2026 Southwest Splendor event. Pictured from left are Bradley Moore, senior vice president and regional executive at Anderson Brothers Bank; Bryan Lenertz, executive vice president and chief banking officer at Anderson Brothers Bank; Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, HGTC president; Shannon Detzler, HGTC Foundation president and CEO and Harold Hawley, HGTC vice president for finance and administration.

CONWAY — The Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) Foundation hosted its 2026 signature special event, Southwest Splendor, presented by Anderson Brothers Bank. The upscale Southwestern-themed dinner took place Friday, March 7, 2026, at the International Culinary Institute of Myrtle Beach on the HGTC Grand Strand Campus.

Anderson Brothers Bank served as the presenting sponsor at the \$10,000 donor level. HGTC Foundation leaders recently joined bank executives for a check presentation celebrating the partnership and the bank's continued investment in

student success.

Southwest Splendor highlighted the culinary talents of HGTC students and faculty while showcasing the hands-on learning experiences offered through the International Culinary Institute. Guests enjoyed an evening featuring upscale Southwestern-inspired cuisine paired with curated beverages.

Attendees embraced the event's theme by wearing boots, jeans and cowboy hats, creating a distinctive dining experience that blended creativity, culture and craftsmanship.

All proceeds from Southwest Splendor benefited student scholarships and the HGTC Foundation Emergency Fund, which helps students overcome unexpected financial challenges and continue their educational journeys.

"We are incredibly grateful to Anderson Brothers Bank for serving as the presenting sponsor of Southwest Splendor," said Shannon Detzler, president and CEO of the HGTC Foundation. "Their generosity directly supports our students and strengthens the Foundation's mission to remove barriers to education."

The HGTC Foundation welcomed community members, business leaders and supporters to participate in the evening of

dining while making a meaningful impact on the lives of HGTC students.

The purpose of the HGTC Foundation is to raise funds to support the programs, services and activities of Horry-Georgetown Technical College, its students and employees, while strengthening positive relationships between the college and the community.

About the HGTC Foundation

HGTC Foundation Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that qualifies as a charitable organization. Donations to the HGTC Foundation are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

About HGTC

HGTC offers college transfer and skilled associate degree programs in more than 80 fields of study, many of which include online class options. Nearly all programs feature internships that lead to employment. Ninety-one percent of students either transfer to earn advanced degrees or begin careers in their respective fields of study. Horry-Georgetown Technical College prohibits discrimination against students and employees. For discrimination or accessibility concerns, contact the Office of Student Affairs at (843) 349-5228.

For additional information about HGTC, call (843) 347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu.

GSSM CELEBRATES GOOGLE Submitted by Dave Matthews, interim director of marketing and communications



Officials and community leaders gather outside the South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics in Hartsville, SC, posing with a Google sign to celebrate new efforts supporting education and technology initiatives.

HARTSVILLE — The South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) highlighted its growing partnership with Google during Inside GSSM Family Day on Saturday, March 7, welcoming more than 100 attendees for a featured announcement spotlighting the Google–GSSM AI Grant. The moment celebrated a multiyear collaboration expanding access to artificial intelligence (AI) education for students and educators across South Carolina while strengthening the state's future technology workforce.

During the event, families, educators and community partners — including Hartsville Mayor Dan Askins, Sen. J.D. Chaplin, Rep. Robert Williams, Hartsville City Manager Dan Moore and Lily Hester, Google's head of external affairs for the Southeast — learned more about how Google's investment is helping position GSSM as a statewide leader in AI literacy through the GSSM AI Faculty Fellows Program and the AI Educator Development Summer Institute.

These initiatives equip teachers with tools, curriculum and training to integrate artificial intelligence into classrooms while preparing students with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving digital economy.

GSSM President Danny Dorsel emphasized the significance of the partnership and the impact it will have on students and educators across the state.

"Google has long been a landing place for many GSSM alumni," Dorsel said. "This initiative represents a significant investment in GSSM and in the future of South Carolina's students and educators, highlighting the critical role GSSM plays in driving the state's education and innovation economy."

The announcement also underscored how the collaboration aligns with Google's Data Centers Community Investment Program, which supports STEM education, AI literacy and economic growth

in communities across South Carolina. Together, GSSM and Google are advancing a shared commitment to innovation, access and opportunity for South Carolinians.

Inside GSSM, Family Day served as an ideal backdrop for celebrating the partnership, bringing together families, educators and community stakeholders to see firsthand how collaborative investments in education can shape the future of learning across the state.

Jackie Weber, director of the GSSM Center for Science Education & Outreach, highlighted how Google's support will expand opportunities for educators and students to engage with emerging technologies.

"We are so grateful to Google for supporting our efforts to bring artificial intelligence and data science to students across the state," Weber said. "We are honoring educators by offering high-quality professional development opportunities like the AI Summer Institute, happening this July, along with a no-cost curriculum resource bank that provides lesson materials."

She added that the partnership reflects a broader commitment to preparing students for future careers.

"Every industry in South Carolina — from manufacturing to farming to Google's own data centers and AI infrastructure — will be powered by the students of South Carolina today, and our teachers make that happen," Weber said.

GSSM is a two-year public residential high school that provides students with a rigorous academic program in a diverse, inclusive and supportive environment. The GSSM Center for Science Education & Outreach extends the school's mission by creating opportunities for younger students to engage in STEM education and prepare for advanced studies and careers.

To learn more about the GSSM and Google collaboration, visit scgssm.org.

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

The South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) is a nationally ranked top 10 public high school dedicated to providing world-class STEM education to students across the state. Founded in 1988 by Gov. Carroll Campbell, GSSM serves as a statewide resource offering a variety of programs, including an intensive two-year residential high school, online courses, summer camps and in-school experiences for students in third through 12th grades. At GSSM, challenge is viewed as a gateway to opportunity. Learn more at www.scgssm.org.

GSSM SUMMER CAMPS BRING STEM TO STUDENTS ACROSS SOUTH CAROLINA

By Jennifer Furlong, director of marketing and communications



Camp participants at the Midlands Technical College Day Camp perform a dissection.

HARTSVILLE — Access to high-quality STEM education shouldn't depend on a student's zip code. That belief drives the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics' (GSSM) 2026 GoSciTech Summer Camps, which bring hands-on science, technology, engineering and math experiences to students across the state.

With residential, day and virtual options, GSSM is expanding access to inclusive STEM learning environments where students can explore their interests, build confidence and discover that it really is

cool to be smart.

GoSciTech Summer Camp Options

Residential Camp (Hartsville campus)

- For rising eighth- through 10th-graders
- June 14–19, June 21–26, July 5–10

Students live on campus for a week-long immersive STEM experience, engaging in advanced coursework, labs and collaborative challenges.

Virtual Camp (Live online)

- For rising sixth - through 10th-graders
- June 15–19, June 22–26

These interactive, real-time classes remove geographic barriers, allowing students to participate from anywhere.

Day Camp at Technical Colleges Across South Carolina

- For rising sixth - through eighth graders

Hosted at 16 technical college campuses statewide, this model ensures students can access high-quality STEM learning close to home.

Locations and dates include:

- Aiken Technical College – June 22–25
- Central Carolina Technical College, Sumter – June 15–18
- Denmark Technical College – June 8–11
- Florence-Darlington Technical College, Florence – June 22–25
- Greenville Technical College, Barton Campus – June 8–11

GSSM SUMMER CAMPS CONT'D



A day camp student learns to calibrate a lab instrument.

- Horry-Georgetown Technical College, Conway – June 15–18
- Midlands Technical College, Northeast Campus, Columbia – July 6–9
- Northeastern Technical College, Bennettsville – June 8–11
- Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College – June 15–18
- Piedmont Technical College, Greenwood – June 22–25

- Spartanburg Community College, Giles Campus – June 15–18
- Technical College of the Lowcountry, Beaufort – July 6–9
- Tri-County Technical College, Pendleton – July 6–9
- Trident Technical College, North Charleston – June 8–11
- Williamsburg Technical College, Kingstree – July 6–9
- York Technical College, Rock Hill – June 22–25

A Commitment to Belonging and Inclusion

“We are intentionally creating spaces where students from every community in South Carolina can see themselves in STEM,” said Randy LaCross, GSSM vice president of outreach. “For many students, this will be the first time they’re surrounded by peers who share their curiosity and enthusiasm for science and technology. That sense of belonging matters.”



Summer camp also offers opportunities for students to develop coding skills.

For participants, camp is where curiosity deepens and confidence grows. Surrounded by supportive instructors and motivated peers,



Summer camp students practice teamwork as they work together on robotics components.

students are encouraged to explore new ideas and stretch their thinking.

“We want students to leave camp more confident, more curious and more connected,” LaCross said. “When students realize they’re not alone in their interests, it changes how they see themselves and their future.”

Removing Barriers to Opportunity

GSSM recognizes that financial and travel barriers can limit access to enrichment programs. Need-based financial aid is available, and hosting camps at 16 statewide locations reduces travel burdens for families.

By meeting students in their communities, GoSciTech strengthens South Carolina’s STEM pipeline in ways that are equitable and sustainable.

Shaping the Future of STEM

GSSM’s summer programs serve as entry points into advanced academic pathways, confidence-building experiences and long-term STEM career interests.

As GoSciTech grows, its mission remains clear: to inspire, educate and empower the next generation of innovators by ensuring every student, regardless of background, geography or income, has access to transformative STEM experiences.

Applications opened March 2. Early bird discounts are available through April 15, with priority consideration through May 15. Acceptance after May 15 is on a space-available basis.

Learn more at www.scgssm.org/summercamps.

GSSM ROBOTICS TEAMS WIN TOP AWARDS, ADVANCE TO STATE

Submitted by Jennifer Furlong, director of marketing and communications



Excalibur, Team 22972, holds medals after winning the Inspire Award, the top honor at FTC competitions.

HARTSVILLE — Robotics teams from the South Carolina Governor’s School for Science & Mathematics (GSSM) earned top honors at the FIRST Tech Challenge (FTC) Upstate Qualifier, with Team Excalibur advancing to the state championships after receiving the event’s highest award.

Excalibur, Team 22972, captured the Inspire Award, the top honor at FTC competitions. The award recognizes overall excellence in robot design, performance and community engagement.

With the win, Excalibur qualified for the South Carolina FTC State Championship, set

for Feb. 27–28 in Columbia. The team stood out for the quality of its robot and the extensive testing and design iterations completed throughout the season.

“Every late night, redesign and repair taught us something new and winning the Inspire Award makes all of that hard work feel truly recognized,” said Ansh Dwivedi of Team Excalibur.

The Function Machine, Team 22534, earned the Think Award, the competition’s second-highest honor. The award recognizes excellence in engineering design and documentation. Their 15-page portfolio detailed their technical process and outreach efforts, which included connections with robotics communities in Australia, Romania, the United Kingdom and Vietnam, as well as support for GSSM STEM Days and library demonstrations across South Carolina.

“As a team of rookies, we are so honored to receive this award! After spending a year finding ourselves within robotics, we can say that FIRST is not only a community for us, but for everyone. We do this for the love of the game. Thank you to Dr. Parshall and everyone who supported us along the way this year,” said Kieran Hall of The Function Machine.

“I was pleased and surprised that

Excalibur won the Inspire Award,” said Dr. Elaine Parshall, GSSM robotics instructor. “I’ve been working with many of these students for the past year and a half, and it’s exciting to see what they’ve accomplished. After using Bodnard’s class robot for two scrimmages because their competition robot was not ready, they completed a working robot just before the qualifiers. It’s been an ongoing conversation with these teams about how they define ‘working.’ They pursued a challenging custom metal-plate design, and their comprehensive design process was recognized by the judges. Support from Duke Energy and the GSSM Foundation has enabled three of our teams to build custom designs this year using our new laser CNC cutter, for which we are very thankful.”

GSSM students and recent graduates also represented approximately one-third of the event’s volunteers, supporting competition operations throughout the qualifier.

Results from the FTC Midlands Qualifier are expected this week as teams prepare for the state championships.

More information about GSSM’s robotics program is available at scgssm.org/robotics.

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GROWING EDUCATORS FROM WITHIN: HOW LEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT IS BUILDING A DIVERSE, SUSTAINABLE TEACHING WORKFORCE

Submitted by Lee County School District



Across the nation, school districts continue to grapple with educator shortages, certification barriers, and the urgent need to diversify the teaching workforce. In Lee County, South Carolina, one district is demonstrating how intentional partnerships, community investment, and structured support can transform these challenges into opportunities.

At its February 26, 2026 Board of Trustees meeting, Lee County School District celebrated a milestone moment—recognizing educators who have achieved certification success through alternative pathways while spotlighting a powerful “grow-your-own” model that centers access, equity, and long-term sustainability

Expanding Access Through Alternative Certification Pathways

Lee County School District has strategically partnered with CarolinaCAP, Voorhees EPIC, Columbia College (SC CREATE), PACE, and Teachers of Tomorrow to expand access to the teaching profession. These alternative certification programs are designed to remove traditional barriers by blending rigorous coursework with real-world classroom experience, structured coaching, mentorship, and targeted Praxis exam preparation.

The results speak for themselves. As of February 26, 2026, eight of the twelve alternative route educators hired during the 2025–2026 school year earned passing scores on their required Praxis examinations—an important step toward full certification and long-term retention.

Notably, three of those educators—Teyshaun Goodman, Ty’Keith Mickens, and Tysheria Green—are Lee County natives and graduates of Lee Central High School. Their success reflects the district’s commitment to reinvesting in local talent and cultivating educators who already understand and reflect the communities they serve.

Strengthening Representation Through Local Talent

The district’s focus on homegrown educators extends beyond the current school year. During the 2024–2025 school year, Lee County natives LaTonya Hickmon, Trinity Boney, Lashawna Henry, Ny’Asia Henry, Fabian Small, and Paigelyn Thomas earned passing Praxis scores and now serve as Teachers of Record.

Additionally, Lee County natives and Lee Central High School graduates Moeshia Slater, Toniya Stuckey, and Quayvis Cotton are currently serving as Resident and Apprentice Teachers—further strengthening the pipeline of educators who bring cultural awareness, lived experience, and long-term commitment to the district.

Removing Financial Barriers to the Profession

One of the most transformative components of Lee County’s approach is its partnership with the Voorhees EPIC Apprenticeship Program. At the February Board meeting, apprentices Wanda Addison, Charity Days, Devin Ford, and Tyliya Moses were recognized for their dedication and perseverance.

Currently, the district has seven Voorhees EPIC participants. Of those, four are earning their bachelor’s degrees from Voorhees University at no cost—fully funded through the apprenticeship program. This investment directly addresses one of the most significant barriers to educator diversity: the financial burden of earning a degree and certification.

Celebrating Excellence and Readiness

The Board meeting also recognized Mrs. Yolanda Holmes, a CarolinaCAP

Resident Teacher at Lee Central Elementary School, for an exceptional achievement. Mrs. Holmes earned a passing score on the Praxis 5025 Early Childhood Education exam before beginning her role as a resident teacher—demonstrating both readiness and commitment to the profession.

Coaching, Mentorship, and Statewide Recognition

Lee County School District’s success is deeply rooted in its coaching and mentorship infrastructure. The district’s intentional implementation of the CarolinaCAP Coaching Model has earned statewide recognition, with Lee County selected as an exemplar site.

District leaders and educators were invited to present at the 49th South Carolina Association for Middle Level Educators (SC-AMLE) Conference, sharing best practices on how structured coaching and administrative leadership support certification success and educator retention. The presentation—“The Power of Coaching: Supporting Teacher Growth in the CarolinaCAP Pathway”—featured teachers, mentors, and principals from both middle and high school levels.

Incentivizing Progress and Celebrating Achievement

To further support certification success, the district implemented a Praxis Incentive Program to recognize alternative route educators who earn passing scores. During the Board meeting, educators including Wanda Addison, Teyshaun Goodman, Ayesha Simmons, Nyeisha Lyde, Ty’Keith Mickens, Kimberly Barringer, and Tysheria Green were honored for their achievements.

The evening concluded with two short videos highlighting residents and apprentices across the district—bringing the stories behind the data to life. Produced by district educators, the videos underscored the power of community, mentorship, and opportunity.

A Model for Workforce Diversity and Sustainability

Superintendent Bernard McDaniel, Sr. summed up the evening by emphasizing that these achievements reflect “the dedication of our educators, the strength of our partnerships, and the high-quality work taking place in our schools to support developing teachers.”

As districts nationwide search for solutions to educator shortages and workforce diversity gaps, Lee County School District offers a compelling model—one that proves investing in people, partnerships, and pathways can create meaningful, lasting change.



BISHOPVILLE-Superintendent Bernard McDaniel Sr. and Principal Kevin D. Wilson have been recognized by the South Carolina Athletic Administrators Association (SCAAA), for their outstanding leadership and commitment to student success, earning top honors that highlight the strength of leadership within the Lee County School District.



Superintendent Bernard McDaniel Sr.

Superintendent Bernard McDaniel Sr. was named the SCAAA Class 3A/2A/1A Superintendent of the Year for 2025–26, an honor that reflects his dedication to educational excellence and his steadfast support for student-athletes. Initially recognized at the regional level, he advanced to earn top statewide honors among leaders representing more than 66 schools across South Carolina.

He was selected for his commitment, service and leadership in promoting education-based interscholastic programs. Under his direction, Lee County schools have prioritized opportunities that strengthen both academic and athletic experiences, ensuring that students benefit from a well-rounded education. His leadership emphasizes high expectations, with a focus on accountability, growth and achievement for all students.

McDaniel's approach centers on creating an environment where students are supported, challenged and inspired to reach their full potential. By encouraging collaboration among educators, coaches and administrators, he has helped build programs that not only compete at high levels but also reinforce the importance of academics. His leadership has contributed to a culture where student-athletes are expected to excel in the classroom as well as in competition.

Beyond the district, McDaniel's influence continues to grow as he advocates for programs across South Carolina that positively impact young people. His work highlights the critical role athletics play in building discipline, teamwork and character, preparing students for success beyond high school. Colleagues across the state recognize his ability to balance vision with practical leadership, ensuring that initiatives translate into meaningful opportunities for students.



Mr. Kevin D. Wilson

Mr. Kevin D. Wilson was named the SCAAA Class 1A Principal of the Year for 2025–26, recognizing his leadership and dedication to student and student-athlete achievement. Like McDaniel, he was first honored at the regional level before advancing to earn top statewide recognition among his peers.

As principal of Lee Central High School, Wilson has championed athletics as an extension of the classroom. He has worked

to align athletic programs with the school's academic mission, reinforcing the idea that participation in sports should enhance, not compete with, educational goals. His leadership has helped programs thrive, creating opportunities for students to grow through competition while reinforcing values such as teamwork, discipline and responsibility.

Wilson is also known for fostering strong relationships within the school community. By engaging students, staff and families, he has helped create a supportive environment where student-athletes feel encouraged to succeed. His emphasis on mentorship and personal development ensures that students are prepared not only for athletic competition but also for life beyond graduation.

His impact extends beyond Lee Central High School, influencing

interscholastic programs throughout the state. Through collaboration with other administrators and participation in professional organizations, Wilson continues to contribute to the advancement of education-based athletics in South Carolina.

Together, McDaniel and Wilson have made lasting contributions to the Lee County School District. Their recognition by the SCAAA underscores their continued dedication to serving students and strengthening education through leadership, vision and service. Their achievements reflect a shared commitment to excellence and a belief in the power of education and athletics to transform lives, setting a standard for others to follow across the state.

EDUCATION, PAY AND PURPOSE FUEL SOUTH CAROLINA'S RISE



(DWM) — South Carolina is experiencing renewed growth, attracting new residents, businesses and investment at a pace not seen in decades. Once known for tourism, manufacturing and agriculture, the state is emerging as a hub where education, rising wages and quality of life are reshaping its economy.

Population growth is a major factor. Between 2024 and 2025, South Carolina's population grew by about 1.5 percent, adding nearly 80,000 residents. Much of that increase comes from people relocating from other states, highlighting its growing appeal.

Education plays a central role in this transformation. Colleges and universities are not only preparing students but also driving economic activity. The University of South Carolina system generates an estimated \$7.4 billion annually and supports more than 61,000 jobs. Additionally, more than 80 percent of college freshmen stay in-state, strengthening the local workforce.

Workforce development efforts are increasingly aligned with industry needs, particularly in health care, engineering and advanced manufacturing. These programs help ensure students can transition directly into available jobs.

Wages and job opportunities are also improving. Personal income in the state has risen about six percent year over year, while employment grew by 2.4 percent between 2024 and 2025, adding more than 55,000 jobs. Growth spans multiple sectors, including education, health care, construction and professional services.

Economic gains are reaching beyond major cities. Rural communities are seeing increased investment and job creation. In 2025, the state secured more than nine billion dollars in capital investment and created over 8,000 jobs, many outside urban centers.

Quality of life is another key driver. Lower living costs, shorter commutes and access to coastal and rural areas offer a balance that attracts both individuals and families. Small businesses, which make up more than 99 percent of businesses in the state, contribute to local economies and community connections.

Purpose-driven work is also shaping decisions. Expanding fields such as health care and education provide stable careers with meaningful impact. Health care alone contributes more than \$19 billion to the state's economy and is expected to continue growing. Challenges remain, including lower-than-average educational attainment, infrastructure demands and uneven wage growth. However, South Carolina's combination of opportunity and livability continues to draw attention.

As education, pay and purpose align, the state is increasingly seen as not just a place to visit, but a place to build a future.

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI HONORED AT FMU'S ANNUAL ALUMNI AWARDS CEREMONY

Submitted by Anna Todd, VP, Communications



Francis Marion University (FMU) honored six distinguished alumni during its annual Alumni Awards ceremony on Thursday, March 5, at the FMU Performing Arts Center in downtown Florence.

This year's honorees included:

- Paul Reardon '89 - 2026 Outstanding Alumnus
- Stephanie Grosick '16, '21 - Benjamin Wall Ingram III Young Alumnus
- Glenn Godfrey '92 - Professional Industry Award for Business and Industry
- Latoya Lane-Milo '17, '19 - Professional Industry Award for Medical and Health
- Tyra McBride '11 - Professional Industry Award for Public Service and Law
- Phillip Guyton '05 - Volunteer of the Year

FMU President Fred Carter congratulated the honorees and praised their professional accomplishments and service to others.

"The alumni honored tonight do extraordinary work in a variety of fields," said Carter. "Their contributions are widely respected, and all of them have earned this recognition. They are not being honored simply because they are alumni, but because of these accomplishments and the many people they have helped along the way. The commitment to serving others is one of the qualities that distinguishes an FMU graduate."



Paul Reardon

Paul Reardon ('89) was recognized as the 2026 Outstanding Alumnus. Reardon earned a Bachelor of Business Administration from FMU and spent ten years working in healthcare administration before becoming a founding partner of a healthcare receivables organization that was later sold to a private equity firm in 2019.

While a student at FMU, Reardon was an accomplished athlete, competing on both the cross country and track teams. In 2024, he was inducted into the FMU Athletic Hall of Fame.

Reardon currently serves on several non-profit boards, including the Education Foundation at FMU, and is a deacon at Mt. Elon Baptist Church. He and his wife, Ashley, are passionate advocates for FMU education and athletics and are dedicated supporters of philanthropic efforts throughout the community.



Stephanie Grosick

Stephanie Grosick ('16, '21) received the Benjamin Wall Ingram III Young Alumnus Award. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Master of Business Administration from FMU. She also completed a Certificate in International Business Management during a study abroad semester in Poitiers, France.

Grosick currently serves as the Vice President of Business Development for the Florence County Economic Development Partnership, where she has supported numerous project announcements involving both new industry recruitment and the expansion of existing industry.

She is an active member of several professional and community organizations, including Young Professionals of Florence, the FMU Alumni Advisory Board, the FMU School of Business Advisory Board, and the SC Economic Developers' Association Emerging Leaders Committee.



Glenn Godfrey

Glenn Godfrey ('92) was the recipient of the Professional Industry Award for Business and Industry. A graduate of FMU with a Bachelor of Business Administration, Godfrey serves as President and CEO of QAT, Inc., an automotive and petroleum equipment distributor and installer with operations in Florence, Raleigh, and Atlanta.

He also serves as President and CEO of Pee Dee Tank, an above-ground storage tank manufacturer he acquired with his brother, Jason, in 2006. Godfrey is passionate about investing in people and regularly mentors young professionals on topics including financial stewardship, family, leadership, and character. His guiding mission is to build people as intentionally as he builds businesses.



Latoya Lane-Milo

Latoya Lane-Milo ('17, '19) received the Professional Industry Award for Medical and Health. She earned both her Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Master of Science in Nursing - Family Nurse Practitioner from FMU.

Lane-Milo began her nursing career as a nurse practitioner in the emergency department. Today, she is the owner of Gold Star Urgent Care, where she provides care to a broad patient population while also mentoring future healthcare professionals. She is also the founder of the Gold Star Cares Foundation, which provides free healthcare services to both sheltered and unsheltered populations.



Tyra McBride

Tyra McBride ('11) was honored with the Professional Industry Award for Public Service and Law. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Political Science from FMU and later received her Juris Doctor from the University of South Carolina School of Law.

She currently serves as Deputy Legal Counsel and Director of Appointments in the Office of Governor Henry Dargan McMaster, overseeing gubernatorial appointments to agency leadership, judicial positions and boards and commissions across the state. In this role, she provides legal guidance on appointments, ethics, statutory compliance, and confirmation processes while leading modernization efforts within the office's centralized appointments system.

McBride is also a member of the South Carolina Black Lawyers Association and the Richland County Bar Association and serves on the Board of Girls on the Run in Columbia.



Phillip Guyton

Phillip Guyton ('05) received the inaugural Volunteer of the Year Award, which recognizes alumni who demonstrate exceptional dedication in advancing university initiatives and strengthening alumni engagement.

Guyton earned a degree in Information Systems from FMU and has spent 21 years with ACS Technologies. He also operates Florence Unlocked, a digital platform that highlights small businesses, festivals, and cultural events across the Pee Dee region.

In addition, Guyton owns True Light Photography, where he regularly documents events and initiatives for dozens of nonprofits throughout the region. Beyond his support of FMU, his volunteer efforts include work with the Farrah Turner Foundation, The Jonathan Foundation, Harvest Hope, and both the Florence and Darlington Humane Societies.

BLAKELY ROOF RECEIVES FMU'S 2026 SHEHEEN LEADERSHIP AWARD

Submitted by Georgia Allen, communications, marketing & membership intern, Together SC



Blakely Roof

Francis Marion University's Fred R. Sheheen Nonprofit Leadership Institute (FMU NPLI) and Together SC have named Blakely Roof the 2026 recipient of the Fred R. Sheheen Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership. Named in honor of Fred R. Sheheen, the award recognizes a nonprofit professional who demonstrates exceptional leadership, innovation and impact within the sector.

Roof has served as president and CEO of United Way of Horry County since 2019, bringing a strong commitment to community building and collaboration. Originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, she moved to Myrtle Beach in 2006, after graduating from Clemson University with a Bachelor of Science in Marketing.

Roof's career along the Grand Strand includes leadership roles with the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, Conway Medical Center and Habitat for Humanity of Horry County. Through this work, she has helped advance initiatives focused on access to health care, food security, housing stability and family self-sufficiency.

Under her leadership, United Way of Horry County adopted a collective impact agenda centered on improving access to mental health resources, increasing kindergarten readiness and supporting financially stable households. Her collaborative approach has strengthened partnerships across the region and positioned the organization as a catalyst for measurable community change.

"Blakely Roof exemplifies the collaborative and forward-thinking leadership this award celebrates," said Chuck MacNeil of

Francis Marion University. "Her ability to unite partners around shared goals and deliver meaningful results has elevated the nonprofit sector in South Carolina."

A graduate of multiple regional and statewide leadership programs, Roof serves on several local boards, including Coast RTA, the Horry County Community Land Trust and the Santee Cooper Advisory Council. She also serves as president of the Conway Chamber of Commerce.

As the 2026 award recipient, Roof will receive:

- A \$500 cash award from Francis Marion University
- A distinguished award plaque
- Complimentary registration to the FMU NPLI Alumni Gathering in spring 2026
- Complimentary registration to the 2026 SC Nonprofit Summit, hosted by Together SC
- Statewide recognition through FMU and Together SC communications
- Recognition on Together SC and FMU websites

Outside of her professional work, Roof enjoys cheering on the Clemson Tigers and the Tennessee Volunteers and spending time with her husband, Barry, and their two children, Reed and Callie.

About the Fred R. Sheheen Nonprofit Leadership Institute

The FMU NPLI was established to support and train nonprofit leaders across South Carolina and continues to honor the legacy of Fred R. Sheheen by fostering strong, effective leadership within the nonprofit sector.

About Together SC

Together SC is South Carolina's network of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations dedicated to strengthening and elevating the sector through education, advocacy and collaboration.

RELEVANCE AND RIGOR



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Ralph Davis



LaTasha Ford



Lauren Stanton



Anna Todd

At Francis Marion University (FMU), senior leadership increasingly reflects the university's own success story.

Four of the university's 10 vice presidents are graduates of FMU, a milestone that underscores both the institution's growth and the value of the education it provides.

These leaders once walked the campus as students and now help guide the university's strategic direction and oversee key operations. They include:

- Ralph Davis (Class of 1983), vice president of construction and facilities
- LaTasha Ford (Class of 2002), vice president of student life
- Lauren Stanton (Classes of 2009, 2013), vice president of institutional advancement and executive director of the FMU Education Foundation
- Anna Todd (Classes of 2006, 2008), vice

president of university communications

According to FMU President Fred Carter, this development reflects a significant shift over the past quarter-century.

"When I arrived at Francis Marion 27 years ago, none of the vice presidents were graduates of this university," Carter said. "Today, nearly half have earned at least one degree from FMU. This is a powerful statement about how much this institution has grown and matured."

Carter said the presence of alumni in senior leadership positions is a hallmark of a strong university.

"One of the characteristics of a truly great university is that it hires, develops and promotes its own graduates," he said.

"When our graduates return to serve in leadership roles, they bring a deep understanding of the university's mission

and culture," he said. "They know what Francis Marion means to our students, faculty and community because they have experienced it themselves."

Each of the alumni vice presidents followed different paths after graduating, building careers outside the university before returning to serve their alma mater.

"Our students can see people who once sat in the same classrooms they sit in today leading the university," Carter said. "That's a powerful example of what is possible with tenacity and a strong education."

FMU has produced more than 26,000 alumni who have built successful careers and served their communities across the state and beyond. Approximately 82 percent remain in South Carolina.

"It is always gratifying to see our graduates succeed," Carter said. "But it is especially meaningful when they choose to come back and invest their talents in the future of this university."



FMU BOARD OF TRUSTEES NAMES FACILITY FOR LONGTIME FACULTY MEMBER



FMU Professor D. Keith Best

The Francis Marion University Board of Trustees held its quarterly meeting at The Cottage on FMU's main campus. During the meeting, trustees approved naming a facility in the FMU Performing Arts Center in honor of a longtime faculty member.

The D. Keith Best Black Box Theatre, located inside the FMU Performing Arts Center in downtown Florence, is named for former FMU Professor D. Keith Best.

Best served in the Department of Fine Arts for 32 years and held multiple roles, including department chair, associate provost, associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts, chair of the faculty and secretary of the faculty.

Throughout his career, Best shaped the lives of thousands of students through teaching and mentoring. He also played a significant role in state and regional arts organizations through leadership, advocacy and support for actors and the theater profession.

"Best was close to everyone on campus. There were simply no strangers in his life," said FMU President Fred Carter. "He earned every conceivable award available to faculty, and we all took pride in celebrating each achievement. His dignity, charm and generosity won him accolades throughout the state, but being a trusted colleague and a good friend were the attributes he valued the most. We can never replace Keith Best, but we can be appreciative of the years he spent here. We can also savor all of the memories he left our students, faculty and

staff."

Trustees also approved a resolution authorizing funds to develop two pedestrian crosswalks across Highway 327, connecting FMU's main campus with the west campus. The west campus includes the Griffin Athletic Complex, FMU Education Foundation Building and the under-construction Forestry and Environmental Sciences Building, as well as the Pee Dee field offices for the Department of Natural Resources and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division. The crosswalks will provide safer passage for students, faculty and staff.

Carter also noted that the FMU Education Foundation is considering purchasing roughly 21 acres at the Wildsumaco Biological Station in Ecuador. The land would complement existing environmental science programs and provide space for additional facilities. Located in the Ecuadorian Andes, Wildsumaco is one of the university's most popular study abroad programs.

Carter concluded by announcing recipients of honorary degrees and commencement speakers for the university's spring ceremonies May 8–9.

Dr. Harry Lesesne, executive director of the Darla Moore Foundation, will receive an honorary Doctorate of Humanities and serve as the commencement speaker.

Dr. Mariah Whitehead, senior vice president of land at the Open Space Institute and Michael Hawkins, associate athletic director for media relations at FMU, will receive honorary Doctorates of Humanities. Whitehead will deliver the commencement address.

NATEISHA TAYLOR NAMED DCSD DIRECTOR OF STUDENT SERVICES AND FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Articles submitted by Christopher McKagen, communications manager



Nateisha Taylor

DARLINGTON — Darlington County School District announced that Nateisha Taylor will become the district's new director of Student Services and Federal Programs. Taylor brings more than 24 years of experience in education, including more than 20 years with Darlington County School District.

"Nateisha Taylor has dedicated her career to serving the students and families of Darlington County, and she brings a deep understanding of our schools and our community to this role," said Superintendent Dr. Matthew Ferguson. "Her experience across the classroom, school leadership and district administration positions her well to ensure our federal programs and student services are implemented with purpose and impact. Most importantly, she understands that every program, every resource and every decision must ultimately support student success."

Taylor will assume leadership of the district's Office of Federal Programs beginning in mid-April. The director of Student Services

and Federal Programs provides district-level leadership to ensure student services and federally funded programs are implemented effectively and with measurable impact.

Reporting to the chief academic officer, Taylor will oversee the design, coordination and continuous improvement of programs that support academic achievement, student well-being and access to high-quality educational opportunities.

Taylor began her career in education in 2001, as an English language arts teacher at Lamar High School. After nearly a decade in the classroom, she became a coordinating teacher at Spaulding Middle School. In 2016, she moved to district administration as coordinator of assessment and accountability and later served as the district's literacy coordinator. Most recently, she served as provost at Butler Academy.

She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Education from Claflin University and a Master of Education in Integrated Studies from Cambridge College.

In her new role, Taylor will work with district leaders and school teams to ensure federal resources and student support services are aligned with the district's mission of providing excellence in teaching and learning for each child, every day.

DCSD SIGNS 77 STUDENTS TO SPRING INTERNSHIPS



Lamar High - DCSD Spring Intern Signing Day 2026



Mayo High - DCSD Spring Intern Signing Day 2026



Darlington High - DCSD Spring Intern Signing Day 2026



Hartsville High - DCSD Spring Intern Signing Day 2026

DARLINGTON— Nearly 80 Darlington County School District (DCSD) students committed to paid internships during the district's Spring Intern Signing Day at the Conference Center of Mayo High School for Math, Science and Technology.

Fifty-two business partners from across Darlington County and the Pee Dee pledged to hire and guide student interns in fields ranging from health care and public service to welding and mortuary science. The 12-week paid internships are part of DCSD's Key to Career program, designed to prepare students for the workforce immediately after graduation while strengthening partnerships with the local business community.

This semester, 77 students signed internship pledges with 52 organizations, including nine new partners. Twelve students are returning for a second internship with some of these businesses.

"These internships give students the opportunity to step beyond the classroom and see what their future careers can truly look like," said Dr. Shannon Flowers, DCSD's business engagement

coordinator, who oversees the Key to Career program. "Our business partners provide not only employment but mentorship and guidance that help students build confidence, develop skills and gain a clearer vision for life after graduation. This is an incredible accomplishment for our students, schools and community and one worth celebrating."

As part of the program, interns completed soft skills training and official job interviews. They will now begin three-month placements that include ongoing training, workplace observations and performance assessments.

DCSD is still seeking business partners to provide opportunities for students who want internships. Interested organizations can contact Flowers at shannon.flowers@darlington.k12.sc.us.

Since its launch in 2019, the Key to Career program has helped interns earn roughly \$647,000 in wages through thousands of hours of work with local businesses and industries.

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A LEGACY OF PURPOSE, PROGRESS AND POSSIBILITY

Submitted by MCSD Superintendent Dr. Kandace Bethea



Dr. Kandace Bethea

MARION - As I prepare to retire at the end of the school year, I find myself reflecting with deep gratitude on a journey in education that has spanned more than 29 years. It has been a path filled with purpose, challenges, growth and immeasurable joy. Serving as an educator, whether as a classroom teacher, school administrator, district administrator or superintendent—has never simply been a profession for me; it has been a calling rooted in a steadfast belief that education has the power to transform lives, families and entire communities.

Throughout my career in Marion,

Sumter, Richland 2 and Lexington 2 school districts, I have remained guided by a singular vision: that every child, regardless of background or circumstance, deserves access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to succeed. I have always believed that our responsibility extends far beyond academics—we are charged with nurturing the whole child, fostering resilience, igniting curiosity and building character.

During my time as Superintendent of Marion County School District, I have been proud to work alongside dedicated educators, staff, families and community partners to bring that vision to life. Together, we have implemented transformative initiatives designed to expand opportunity and ensure equity across all schools. The establishment of the Academy of Early Learning allowed us to unify and strengthen our 4K programs, giving our youngest learners a strong and supportive start. The creation of Creek Bridge STEM Academy introduced innovative, theme-based instruction, while the continued growth of the Academy of Careers and Technology has provided students with meaningful pathways into high-demand careers, including the upcoming launch of an aviation program.

We also implemented an Early College

program and expanded opportunities in Montessori programming, ensuring that students could engage in learning experiences tailored to their interests, strengths and future goals. These initiatives were never just about programs—they were about opening doors, raising expectations and ensuring that opportunity is not limited to a few, but available to all.

Equally important to me has been the culture we have built within our district. I have always believed that strong schools are built by strong people, which is why I have prioritized creating an environment where educators feel supported, valued and empowered. Through meaningful professional development, mentorship and shared leadership, we have cultivated a culture rooted in collaboration and innovation. Watching our teachers grow as leaders and seeing staff morale strengthen has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my career.

In addition, we have remained intentional about providing tangible support for our educators. One example is the launch of The DEN—Dedicated Educators' Nest—a three-unit teacher housing complex that stands as a flagship initiative for teacher recruitment and retention.

Beyond the district, I have been honored to serve in various leadership

A LEGACY OF PURPOSE CONT'D

roles at the state and national levels. These experiences have allowed me to advocate for students and educators on a broader scale, while also bringing valuable partnerships and opportunities back to our community. Building strong relationships with higher education institutions, civic organizations and industry leaders has been essential in expanding what is possible for our students.

One of the most humbling moments of my career was being inducted into the NAACP Hall of Fame as the first African American female superintendent in Marion County. This recognition is not just a personal milestone—it represents progress, perseverance and the importance of representation in leadership. I carry that honor with deep responsibility and pride.

As I look back, I do not measure success solely by programs implemented, the positive financial health of the district or titles held, but by the lives touched and the futures shaped. I think of the students who discovered their potential, the teachers who found their voice and the community that came together to support their schools. That is the true legacy of this work.

Education is, and always will be, about hope for a brighter future, hope for opportunity and hope for lasting change. It has been the greatest privilege of my life to serve in this field and to be part of that hope for so many.

While my time as superintendent comes to a close, my belief in the power of education remains as strong as ever. I leave this role confident in the foundation we have built and inspired by the possibilities that lie ahead for the students and educators of Marion County.

I would like to take a moment to sincerely thank Diversity

Works Magazine for providing me with a platform over the years to share my voice, highlight the work of our district and offer perspective on important education issues throughout my tenure as superintendent.

Your publication has served as an invaluable resource for the people of the Pee Dee region, consistently informing, uplifting and amplifying voices that matter. I am truly grateful that I've had the opportunity to contribute and to be part of that meaningful work.

With a full heart and enduring gratitude, I thank this community for allowing me to serve.

"With a grateful heart, I close this chapter knowing every step has been a blessing—shaped by the lives I've touched and forever changed by those who have touched mine."



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LEGAL TRAILBLAZER AND COMMUNITY CHAMPION

HOW ONE ATTORNEY BALANCES LAW, FAITH, SERVICE AND ADVENTURE

By Glacéria Brown Mason



Susan C. McGill

Strategic thinking, fairness, strong communication skills, discipline, mental fortitude, a resilient mindset, integrity, competency, analytical, emotional intelligence, ethical standards, thoroughness, dedication and patience are just some of the overlapping characteristics it takes to perform as a seasoned lawyer and an extreme sportswoman! These qualities and traits are desirous of anyone advocating for the residents of a community.

Meet Susan C. McGill, attorney and advocate at Finklea, Hendrick & Blake, LLC, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, located in Florence, SC.

Rooted in Family and Community Values

Born, raised and educated in Marion, SC, McGill is a daughter, sister and wife. She is married to Jonathan Pressley, vice president of finance for a global tool manufacturer, and they reside in Florence, SC. She is the daughter of Sam McGill and the late Doris Williams McGill. McGill grew up in a household where learning was important, and her parents instilled the value of education and community service. Recalling that time, McGill reflects, "They took pride in their children doing well in school. That lent itself tremendously to the things I've been able to accomplish."

Exercising the Law

McGill has been a member of Finklea, Hendrick & Blake, LLC since 2019. McGill is proud to be among the seven dedicated professionals who advocate daily for the residents of Florence County and the surrounding area. As the only female and African American female at the firm, McGill manages legal strategy, advises clients

and represents in the courtroom in the areas of personal injury, worker's compensation, divorce and child custody. The firm provides a plethora of services to assist clients, notably, an online portal through Clio, where clients can submit inquiries and receive a response directly from their attorney. Finklea, Hendrick & Blake, LLC, also offers bilingual services for Spanish-speaking clients, with a dedicated bilingual paralegal on staff to assist with mediation, depositions, client interviews and other needs.

Faith as a Foundation

McGill's parents laid a strong Christian foundation for she and her brother. She says, "the most important thing my parents taught my brother and me is about Jesus. Our relationship with Christ and our faith has been the center of our family. There is nothing more important to us than our relationship with Jesus and our faith." A life-long member of Lambs Chapel Christian Center in Florence, SC, McGill has attended since its inception and actively contributes to the ministry through outreach and service as a deaconess and lead usher.

Academic and Professional Achievements

This dynamic woman is a graduate of Marion High School. She continued her education earning a Bachelor of Science in Criminology and Criminal Justice, from the University of South Carolina and a Juris Doctor (JD) from the Charlotte School of Law. McGill has passed the bar exam in two states and is authorized and licensed to offer legal services in both North and South Carolina.

McGill holds positions in professional and social organizations. As a stakeholder in Florence and Marion Counties, she is a member of the Marion County Bar Association, Florence County Bar Association, SC Women Lawyers Association and the SC Black Lawyers Association. She is a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated and an active board member of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area and the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. McGill successfully served as president of the Florence County Bar Association and was the recipient of the 2024 Sister of the Year Award from Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and the 2023 Star of the Quarter Award from the South Carolina Bar Association.

Community Service

In his 1844 essay, 'Gifts,' American

Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The only true gift is a portion of thyself."

McGill is deeply committed to supporting education. One of her greatest joys is to give back to schools where she engages through her affiliations with her church, law firm and sorority. An eager participant, McGill joins reading circles with students and participates in career development days. She was recently invited to serve as a celebrity judge for the Williams Middle School Spelling Bee and has participated in mock trial programs throughout the area. At Wilson High School, which boasts a strong mock trial program, McGill has contributed by judging students in preparation for competition. In Darlington County, she has also served as a witness in mock trials, dedicating her free time to teaching, training and inspiring future law students.

McGill regularly volunteers in her hometown, at food banks, outreach programs through Lamb's Chapel, as well as opportunities to make a difference in the lives of local children, supporting her sorority in coat and back-to-school drives, food distribution, tutoring and mentoring programs.

Through her experience and passion, McGill offers guidance and inspiration to the next generation planning to pursue a career in law. She encourages them to work diligently, focus on becoming a skilled writer and hone your public speaking abilities. "Strong writing and communication skills are essential for excelling as a litigator and advocating effectively for clients," McGill adds, "If you're ever facing a challenging decision and feel hesitant about pursuing a new opportunity, remember, Do It Afraid. Taking risks is necessary to seize the opportunities before you. You have what it takes!"

Pursuing Life's Passions

When not advocating for clients, volunteering in the community and building relationships, McGill's interests include extreme sports, exercise, retail therapy, self-care and as a lover of coffee, she is a proclaimed coffee aficionado. McGill and her husband are avid Gamecocks! As fellow USC alums and season ticket holders, they attend most, if not all USC sporting events. McGill is also a fan of, enjoys and is an active weightlifter and boxer. For her, "boxing is the most fun activity for stress relief and cardio."

LEGAL TRAILBLAZER CONT'D

Solicitor for the 12th Judicial Circuit

In the coming election, the position of 12th Circuit Solicitor will appear on the ballot in Florence and Marion Counties.

What is a solicitor? The position of solicitor is equivalent to the position of District Attorney or D.A. It is the chief prosecutor, representing the people of Florence and Marion Counties and is elected every four years. The responsibilities cover prosecuting felony cases, overseeing juvenile matters in Family Court, managing negotiations, conducting trials, supervising assistant solicitors, running diversion programs and other related tasks.

McGill is confident in her ability to perform the duties of the 12th Circuit Solicitor. With over a decade of experience as an attorney, her past work and life knowledge increases her qualification for the position. Having served as a prosecutor and a defense attorney, McGill is able to draw on both perspectives to protect victim's and defendant's rights and ensure robust protection mechanisms are in place.

As a former assistant solicitor in the 12th Circuit Solicitor's Office, McGill is well acquainted with the responsibilities and demands of the role. During her tenure as assistant solicitor, McGill gained exposure that equipped her with a strong understanding of the inner workings of the

office. Prior to law school, she worked as a victim's advocate for the 12th Circuit Solicitor's Office. After law school, McGill served as law clerk to retired 12th Circuit Court Judge Thomas A. Russo. Through her exposure and experience, she developed crucial knowledge and skills for success, deepening her passion for advocating on behalf of victims. McGill is guided by her faith, professionalism and ethics—qualities that inspire her pursuit of office with a strong commitment to serving the people of Florence and Marion Counties.

McGill collaborates regularly with area law enforcement, building and maintaining strong professional relationships. She believes it is essential to strengthen our law enforcement by providing training and proper preparation for trial. This will impact on how law enforcement interacts with victims and witnesses and will ensure everyone is working toward the shared goal of maintaining community safety, reducing violent crime, optimizing case resolution and ensuring accountability and transparency.

Inspired to pursue law from a young age, McGill's interest began after participating in a mock trial as a fifth grader. Initially reserved and hesitant, that experience challenged her and sparked her ambition. Through continued exposure and a love of reading, her path became clear. During high school,

she demonstrated leadership as a member of student government, captain of the cheerleading squad and president of various organizations. McGill's passion for advocacy was evident early, and she recognized that becoming an attorney would empower her to advocate for others in court.

She describes herself as a people person and finds great satisfaction in working directly with clients. The highlight of her career has been, "helping people who are underserved, advocating for them in court and striving for positive outcomes on their behalf." The most rewarding part of McGill's day is the expressions of gratitude received from victims and her clients. McGill shared, "moments that make work meaningful and fulfilling are most rewarding."

Statewide Primary Elections will take place June 9, 2026, for Florence and Marion Counties; and the General Election will take place November 3, 2026.

Susan C. McGill, Esq., can be reached at Finklea, Hendrick & Blake, LLC, Attorneys and Counselors at Law. Hours of operation are, Monday - Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with three locations to serve you: main office at 814 W. Evans Street, Florence, SC 29501; the Marion satellite office at 2554 US-76 East, Marion, SC 29571 and 101 S. Main Street, Hemingway, SC 29554. Contact them at 843-317-4900 or FinkleaLaw.com.



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- 1031 Exchange
- Mobile Homes
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CRIMINAL LAW

SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY



Top row(L to R): Chase B. Holbrooks, III; Gary I. Finklea; Susan C. McGill
Bottom row (L to R): Patrick B. Ford; William J. Edwards; Charlie J. Blake, Jr.; J. Greg Hendrick

CIVIL LITIGATION

- Contract Disputes - Fraud
- Insurance Claims
- Boundary Lines/Land Disputes
- Quiet Title Actions
- Construction Defects
- Mechanic's Lien
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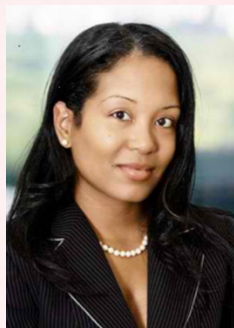
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A MOTHER'S JOURNEY: FROM EARLY SIGNS TO FINDING HOPE AND COMMUNITY

Submitted by Renee A. Byer



Renee A. Byer

My son, Taylor, was two years old when the teacher at daycare said, "Your son plays differently than the other kids: he plays adjacent to them, not with them. He also does not like to change between activities; he's very resistant to it." I was immediately hurt to be told that he was behaving somehow outside of the "norm" and confused not knowing what this behavior truly meant.

The teacher's assessment stayed with me for many years. She never offered any insight or guidance on his behavior, so I constantly wondered what was 'wrong' with my son. And if something were wrong, then maybe I could, 'fix' it. These thoughts persisted and caused me to fixate on all his social interactions with a mind to correct him if I saw something amiss. My corrections at times caused him to feel sad and become even more withdrawn. I began to feel like I was making things worse. Something was off, but I wasn't sure what.

When Taylor was six, during the pandemic while he was being schooled remotely, I observed additional behaviors. I noted that he was exhibiting behaviors of what I later learned is called "stimming," writing in the air, murmuring and laughing to himself. "Ok, this is new, why didn't his teachers tell me about this?" I began to wonder what this could mean. Was he distracted? Bored? I couldn't quite tell. The teachers likely overlooked this behavior, because Taylor continued to make good grades and was never disruptive. He understood the work, so I can't say that he wasn't paying attention. Again, I wasn't sure, however, my concern began to increase.

I continued to watch to see what developed: Good grades- check. Good behavior at home – check. Social skills – still observing. I tried to watch out for any obvious cause for concern with his social behavior, but as we slowly moved from isolation to social distancing during the pandemic, this was a challenge. Another two years passed before I witnessed an interaction between Taylor and other children that caused me to be solidly concerned. During one conversation in the lobby of his school, Taylor did not respond to the topic and did not make eye contact with the kids. It seemed there was some disconnect. I could only wonder what he was thinking at that moment as his peers ignored his response. Was he anxious? Did he notice them ignore him? At best, they likely quietly questioned if he understood what they were talking about and, at worst, they thought he was acting 'weird.' Witnessing that saddened me.

That moment was pivotal. I wondered the worst. I asked myself, could my child have autism? If he does, I don't know how to help him. I could not gauge what was happening. I didn't know anyone that had gone through this. With no guidance or support, I felt alone.

Deep down I suspected Taylor was on the spectrum. I mentioned my suspicions to his teachers, but they said not to worry and that he might be, "high functioning." I even asked his pediatrician if he should get diagnosed, and she just said, "he may grow out of it." It felt strange to be encouraged to do nothing but observe. I began to read up on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to get a sense of what to look for, what I could do and what questions I should ask.

I researched, I observed and I moved to South Carolina. By the time I arrived in Florence, I had data and enough language to really communicate my concerns.

Taylor had difficulties complying with social conventions, was disinterested in social interactions, needed personal organizational strategies, became dysregulated, had a varied attention span and exhibited perseveration. I shared the information I'd gathered with the teachers, school psychologist and principal when I arrived at the school in Florence to enroll him. Much to my surprise, they knew exactly how to help me. It wasn't another uphill battle to explain all that I'd witnessed and felt all these years. I had finally found support.

During his first school year in Florence, Taylor was tested and found to have characteristics associated with ASD. I cried the day I found out, partly due to relief from suspicion and partly due to new grief from confirmation. I did better from there. I learned to find hope.

With Taylor's challenges outlined, the school's Autism team (comprised of two teachers, a psychologist, a behavior interventionist, a speech pathologist and the principal) put a social education plan in place so we could move forward. There was peace in mapping out a plan, and I learned how to offer Taylor proper emotional support. The team created a plan to support his social developmental and educational needs. It wasn't perfect, but it was a big step in the right direction--finally a way to support him more wholly.

In addition to the school-based developmental plan, I sought extra-curricular activities to help him practice his social skills. Taylor is involved in Tae Kwon Do, basketball, soccer, swimming and is an avid gamer. He keeps up his grades but still has social challenges. He is kind, sweet, thoughtful and funny. He perseveres. He shows grit. I am so proud of him for that.

I want him to dream of a life without limits. I advocate for that regularly.

Everyone's experience having a child on the spectrum is different. Many parents are navigating helping their children experiencing needs at Level 1 (requiring support), Level 2 (substantial support) or Level 3 (very substantial support). All of them are finding ways to cope with the elevated stress, grief and oftentimes burn out from supporting their child's needs. To those, I say, "Get support, build your community and practice self-care." Meanwhile, celebrate your kid's small wins and individual milestones. Yes, I know it's a balancing act. Stay strong. We got this!

Renee A. Byer is director of administration at Amida Care, a not-for-profit community health plan headquartered in New York City. She is a loving mother, daughter and supporter of her family currently in the Florence area.





Amy Holbert

For more than 10 years, Amy Holbert has served as chief executive officer of Family Connection of South Carolina, an organization devoted to supporting families raising children with disabilities, developmental delays and special health care needs. Holbert's work is rooted in personal experience. As the mother of two young adult sons who grew up navigating chronic health conditions, ADHD and anxiety, she understands

the emotional weight families carry.

When Holbert's children were younger, she spent years learning how to navigate health care systems, behavioral health services and school-based supports. Those experiences shaped her belief in the power of peer support and led her to Family Connection. She knows the strength that comes from talking to another parent who has walked the same path.

At Family Connection, Holbert has helped build a model grounded in that belief. Today, more than 30 staff members work remotely across South Carolina, and every one of them is a parent of a child with a disability or special health care need. When a family reaches out, they are connected with someone who understands their fears, frustrations and hopes. The peer support programs include trained volunteer support parents, education partners who specialize in special education and IEP processes and health care navigation specialists who help families understand Medicaid, TEFRA and medical systems. Many of these specialists, like Holbert, are also parents of children with autism, the most common diagnosis among families seeking support.

Accessibility has always been a priority for her. Holbert intentionally hires staff and volunteers from communities across the state so families can speak with someone familiar with their local schools, providers and resources. Families can reach Family Connection by phone, online referral or mobile device. Services are offered in English and Spanish, and all materials are translated into multiple languages. When families need interpreters, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing, the organization provides them. Whether a family lives in a rural county or a large city, she wants them to feel that support is within reach.

Parent voice is central to everything at Family Connection. As South Carolina's Parent Training and Information Center, the organization must be parent-led and family-driven. More than 51 percent of board members must be parents, but under her leadership, the organization has always exceeded that requirement, supporting more than 60 percent.

Organizational policies, programs and decisions are shaped by people who have lived through the experience of raising a child with a disability. Holbert also trains parents to serve as leaders in their communities, whether on advisory boards, committees or statewide initiatives. When organizations request a parent representative, she can recommend someone prepared to speak from experience and advocate for inclusion, education or health care improvements.

When families are newly diagnosed or overwhelmed, Holbert emphasizes meeting them where they are emotionally. She remembers what it felt like when her first child was young and hospitalized. People were giving her information, but all she could think about was whether her child would be okay. That memory guides her approach. Family Connection staff listen first. Emotional support comes before anything else because

sometimes that is what a parent needs most.

From there, staff help families take the next steps—understanding evaluations, preparing for IEP meetings or navigating early intervention. Training is another priority for the organization. Staff and volunteers receive ongoing instruction in autism, special education law, trauma-informed care and family engagement. Depending on their specialty, they stay updated on Medicaid policy, educational regulations and best practices in peer support.

Many bring professional backgrounds as social workers, teachers or early childhood specialists. As a licensed clinical social worker, Holbert values the blend of lived experience and professional expertise that strengthens the team. Measuring impact matters, but the most meaningful feedback comes directly from families. When a parent tells staff they finally felt confident participating in an IEP meeting or that they no longer felt alone after speaking with someone from the organization, Holbert is reminded why this work is so important.

Parents often say, "I wasn't going to be able to get through the next day, and your person gave me hope." Those words stay with staff. Supporting families can be emotionally heavy, and Holbert takes seriously the responsibility of caring for her team. She offers flexible schedules, remote work options and a child-friendly office environment. Holbert encourages staff to take time off and to talk openly about the emotional impact of the stories they hear.



The Henrique Family- DJ (dad), Stevie (mom), with DJ holding Tripp and mom with Matthew

Many staff have lived similar experiences, and hearing another parent's journey can bring back difficult memories. She works to create space for processing, healing and supporting one another. One of the organization's newest initiatives focuses on early autism screening. Early intervention works, yet many children are not diagnosed until age four or five. Family Connection now partners with childcare centers to conduct developmental screenings and secondary autism screenings for two-year-olds, with parental consent.

If a child needs further evaluation, Family Connection helps families connect with doctors, early intervention services or evaluation centers. The team's goal is to identify needs earlier and ensure children receive support as soon as possible. As a nonprofit, Family Connection relies heavily on grants, contracts, and community donations to keep services free for families. Demand continues to grow—peer support referrals have increased from 3,000 before the pandemic to 7,000 last year. Continued support is essential to sustaining programs.

Families across South Carolina, including those in Marion County, can access services by calling 1-800-578-8750 or visiting www.familyconnectionsc.org. Holbert's message to every parent is simple: You do not have to navigate this journey alone. She and Family Connection are here to walk beside you every step of the way.

A CHILD WHO SPEAKS IN OTHER WAYS By Ronette Genwright



Jake Padgett

In the Padgett household, love is measured not in words but in presence, patience and persistence. Clyde and Kristy Padgett, married for 19 years and parents to three boys, have built a life shaped by unexpected challenges and profound joy. Their youngest son, Jake, now 12, was born with medical complexities that reveal a story of resilience, autism, a rare chromosomal disorder and a family's unwavering commitment to ensuring he is

seen and valued.

Jake arrived in 2013 with immediate medical concerns. Born via cesarean section, he had a cleft palate and respiratory distress that required extended hospitalization. His first year revolved around monitoring breathing, feeding and weight, with weekly medical visits and specialist consultations. Developmental delays soon became apparent: milestones like sitting up and crawling did not come easily. By 10 months, Jake underwent his first major surgery. After extensive evaluations, he was diagnosed in 2016 with autism and a rare chromosomal condition known as KDM6B.

The years that followed were defined not by diagnoses, but by resilience. In 2019, frequent hospitalizations and medical emergencies led to the placement of a feeding tube—a lifesaving decision. Though Jake is fully dependent on the tube, it ensures his nutritional and medical needs are met. Through early intervention programs like BabyNet and later specialized schooling, Jake began to thrive in environments tailored to his needs. He now attends Virtus Academy, where small class sizes, one-on-one support, and compassionate educators help him feel safe and included.

Though nonverbal, Jake is anything but silent in spirit. He is expressive, joyful and deeply connected to those around him. He loves swimming, watching “Yo Gabba Gabba,” splashing in the bathtub and riding through the car wash. He communicates with gestures, facial expressions and physical closeness, pressing his forehead against a loved one's or leading a trusted adult by the hand to show what he wants. Through him, his parents have learned that



The Padgett Family. Mom Kristy, Dad Clyde with boys Jake, Charlie and Gray

communication extends far beyond spoken language, encompassing emotion, intuition and connection.

Kristy Padgett says one of the most painful misconceptions about nonverbal autistic children is the assumption that they do not understand. Jake understands far more than people realize. He senses how others perceive him and responds in meaningful ways. The inability to speak, she emphasizes, does not equate to a lack of intelligence, emotion or affection.

The family's journey has required profound personal and financial sacrifices. Kristy left a demanding medical career to be present for Jake, creating significant financial strain that eventually led to selling their home. For years, medical expenses were paid out of pocket, nearly bankrupting the family until state assistance became available. Even now, navigating education, community spaces and places of worship remain complex, as many environments are not designed for children like Jake.

Yet progress shines through in moments both big and small. Recently, Jake began vocalizing sounds close to “Mama,” a milestone that, while delayed by conventional standards, carries immense emotional weight. For his parents, these moments affirm that growth is not linear, and every step forward deserves celebration. As autism awareness grows, Kristy hopes it will bring genuine compassion, increased resources and a collective responsibility to care for individuals with profound disabilities—not just within families, but across communities.

Jake's story is not one of limitations, but of humanity. It reminds us that every child, regardless of ability or communication style, deserves dignity, respect and love. In seeing Jake, for whom he truly is—a joyful, perceptive and deeply connected individual, we are invited to broaden our understanding of what it means to be heard, even without words.

THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP UNDER THE PALMS EVENT

By Jessica Brown, executive director

The Palmetto Partnership of All 4 Autism will host its 3rd annual Under the Palms event on May 7, 2026. The event raises funds to support programs for people with disabilities and their families in the Pee Dee region.

“Our mission is to increase the quality of life for those with disabilities and their families by providing free resources, support and advocacy services, while actively seeking partnerships and serving as ambassadors of goodwill in our community,” said Jessica Brown, executive director.

“This year's event is especially meaningful as we celebrate 10 years of serving local families. I remember taking my first phone call in March 2016. Since then, we have provided services and support to more than 600 families throughout the Pee Dee. Our hope is to continue advocating for the underserved and provide a place where everyone feels they belong,” Brown said.

The evening will begin with a cocktail

reception featuring a signature drink, an open bar and music by David Whatley with Black Tie DJ Services. Guests can enjoy heavy hors d'oeuvres and pasta stations.

Cocktails and dessert will be served during the program, which includes a live auction and a video presentation. This year's video will feature the Padgett family, who share the story of their son, Jake.

“Our mission is rooted in the belief that all individuals have a purpose and deserve equal access in our community, regardless of physical or cognitive ability,” said Jarrod Tippins, president of the board of directors. “We want to promote and celebrate inclusion while actively seeking resources to improve the quality of life for the families we serve.”

The Palmetto Partnership offers a community resource center for collaborative efforts, training and various support and outreach programs. The public is encouraged to visit its website and social media pages for upcoming events and information.

Contact: The Palmetto Partnership of All 4 Autism at 843-472-5215

www.palmettopartnership.org
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Quentin Byrd

HARTSVILLE — For many parents, raising a child brings moments of joy, uncertainty and growth. For Patricia Byrd, motherhood became a journey of advocacy, resilience and unconditional love after her son, Quentin, was diagnosed with autism at an early age. Her story reflects the realities many families face while offering lessons about patience, faith and acceptance.

Quentin was born March 23, 1991. During his early years, his development appeared similar to other children. He said simple words like, “dada,” and “mommy,” waved hello and goodbye and was potty trained by age two. But shortly after his second birthday, Byrd began noticing differences.

Although Quentin continued to pick up individual words, he struggled to form full sentences. He typically spoke in two- or three-word phrases rather than complete thoughts. Comparing his development with other children his age raised concerns.

When Byrd first discussed her worries with their pediatrician, she was reassured that boys sometimes take longer to develop speech. Still, her instincts told her more needed to be explored. With guidance from her sister, who worked in the school system, Byrd returned to the doctor and requested a referral to a specialist in Columbia, South Carolina.

After several evaluations of speech, hearing and cognitive development, Quentin was diagnosed with autism just before his third birthday. At the time, Byrd was pregnant with her daughter. The news came as an emotional shock.

“My initial reaction was heartbreak,” she said. “I cried and felt overwhelmed because I knew nothing about autism at the time. I worried about his future and how we would navigate this new reality.”

Over time, that heartbreak transformed into determination. Byrd educated herself, connected with resources and learned to advocate for her son.

“My perspective evolved from fear to faith and from uncertainty to advocacy,” she said. Motherhood taught her lessons she never expected. She once envisioned raising a child who would follow traditional milestones. Instead, her journey revealed a deeper understanding of love.

“A mother’s love has no boundaries,” Byrd said. “It is not defined by diagnoses or society’s expectations. Unconditional love is not just a phrase. It is a daily commitment.”

During Quentin’s childhood, daily life required constant awareness and structure. Because his speech was limited, he often ran toward whatever captured his attention. Byrd and her family needed to keep a close watch in public spaces to ensure his safety.

As Quentin grew older, routine became essential. Now an

adult, he follows a consistent schedule that provides stability and comfort. Each morning he wakes at 7 a.m., showers, dresses and prepares for the day. Byrd guides him through activities such as sorting tasks, reading and writing. He enjoys listening to music, watching TV, checking the mail and collecting pinecones in the yard when the weather allows.

One of his favorite traditions is watching Wheel of Fortune every evening at 7 p.m.

“Routine gives him comfort and stability,” Byrd said.

Despite his independence in many areas, communication remains a challenge. While Quentin understands instructions well, expressing himself clearly can sometimes be difficult.

Like many families raising adults with special needs, Byrd and her daughter carefully coordinate schedules to ensure Quentin receives the supervision and support he needs. Advocacy has been central to Byrd’s journey. She remained actively involved in Quentin’s education and never missed an Individualized Education Program meeting.

“I always advocated for the services he needed,” she said.

Support networks also became essential. Byrd joined organizations that support individuals with disabilities and their families. She formed teams through the March of Dimes, raising funds for research on birth defects and developmental conditions.

Organizations such as the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Easterseals, Autism Speaks, the Autism Society, occupational therapy programs and South Carolina House Calls also played key roles.

While progress has been made in autism awareness, Byrd believes more work is needed.

“There is a strong focus on services for young children,” she said. “But as individuals grow into adulthood, families often face limited support. We need more community integration and workplace inclusion opportunities.”

Balancing caregiving responsibilities with personal well-being has also been important. Byrd prioritizes self-care, often attending church, exercising, taking dance classes and participating in uplifting events. These moments help her recharge so she can continue supporting her son.



A recent photo of Quentin with his mother, Patricia and sister, Jewel.



Quentin Byrd pictured as a child with his father, the late Allen Byrd, his mother Patricia Byrd and his sister Jewel.



EARLY INTERVENTION, LASTING IMPACT By Cynthia O. Ford



Tchalla Douglas

DARLINGTON— Autism Awareness Month invites communities to move beyond surface-level recognition and toward meaningful understanding, acceptance and action. For Tchalla Douglas, owner of Pee Dee Kids Early Intervention Services, awareness begins with meeting families where they are and helping children access support as early as possible.

Founded in 2014, Pee Dee Kids provides early intervention services for children from birth to age 6 across several South Carolina counties, including Florence, Darlington, Marion, Dillon and Chesterfield.

Through BabyNet and the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Douglas and her team offer developmental assessments, family training and coordinated services in children's natural environments.

Douglas entered the field in 2008 after working with teens and adults in mental health. Over time, she realized the power of reaching children earlier.

"The sooner you get to them, the more likely the outcome will be different," she said. "So many children are handed adult problems and expected to overcome them. Early intervention helps prevent some of that."

Families who contact Pee Dee Kids begin with an intake process followed by evaluations and goal setting. Parents play an active role in identifying concerns, creating individualized family service plans and selecting providers. Services often include speech therapy, occupational therapy and developmental coaching, delivered one-on-one in homes or community settings. During Autism Awareness Month, Douglas emphasizes that autism should not define a person.

"They are people first," she said. "Don't lead with the diagnosis. They are everyday people just like anyone else."

Misconceptions about autism remain widespread. Douglas frequently encounters beliefs that individuals on the spectrum cannot learn or succeed. In reality, she said, learning simply looks different.

"No two clients are the same. You can't put everyone in one box," she said. "You have to think outside the box and find ways to teach skills in a way they understand."

Early intervention is especially critical for children on the autism spectrum. Research and experience show that targeted support during the first few years of life can significantly improve communication, behavior and daily functioning. Douglas said she has witnessed children make measurable progress within six months when families and providers work together consistently.

Access to services, however, remains a challenge, particularly in rural communities. Long waitlists for autism evaluations, transportation barriers and limited availability of therapists often delay care. Families are frequently referred to major

medical centers or private providers, which can be difficult to reach without reliable transportation.

Pee Dee Kids works to ease that burden by helping families navigate Medicaid transportation, connecting them to community resources and coordinating referrals



A 7-month-old baby participates in a play-based early intervention session with a Pee Dee Kids early interventionist, using toys to encourage learning and developmental progress in the comfort of the family's home

for essentials such as food assistance, diapers and clothing.

Douglas describes her approach as judgment-free.

"I'm here to assist, not judge," she said. "Parents need a listening ear during the assessment process, so they feel safe being open."

Beyond therapy services, Douglas and her team help parents advocate for their children during transitions to preschool programs. Before age three, families participate in transition conferences with local school districts to explore 3K services, Head Start options and therapy supports. If eligible, children may receive services through public schools, including transportation.

Douglas believes inclusion begins with everyday kindness. She encourages community members to avoid staring or making parents feel uncomfortable in public spaces. Simple acts of understanding help families feel supported rather than isolated.

For parents who notice developmental delays, Douglas offers clear advice: Don't wait. Anyone can make a referral to BabyNet for children younger than three.

"It doesn't hurt to get an assessment," she said. "It's there to help ensure your child gets what they need to succeed."

She also urges caregivers to watch for missed milestones, loss of previously learned skills, lack of eye contact or limited response to their name. While every child develops differently, early evaluation opens the door to resources that might otherwise be delayed.

Looking ahead, Douglas hopes South Carolina will expand its network of therapists and evaluators to reduce wait times and improve access statewide. Her vision includes more speech therapists, occupational therapists and autism evaluators committed to serving children and families.

As Autism Awareness Month continues, Douglas leaves families and communities with a simple but powerful message: Early intervention works.

"The earlier, the better," she said. "We're here to help. Every child is an individual, and every child deserves the chance to thrive."





Ariana Pickens-Thomas Army Sexual Assault Response Coordinator

During Sexual Assault Awareness Month, communities across the nation reflect on the realities of sexual violence while recommitting to prevention, advocacy and survivor support. For Ariana Pickens-Thomas, advocacy is not simply a professional responsibility. It is a mission rooted in years of service and a deep commitment to ensuring survivors are heard and supported.

Pickens-Thomas proudly served 23 years on active duty in the U.S. Army, where she managed several sexual assault programs, including work within one of the largest training brigades at Fort Jackson. That experience shaped her perspective on leadership, accountability and the importance of advocacy.

Throughout her service, Pickens-Thomas worked closely with the installation's lead sexual assault response coordinator and collaborated with agencies responsible for protecting service members. The military values that guided her work continue to influence her approach today.

"No one left behind. I've got your back. Be a good battle buddy. Treat everyone with dignity and respect," she said. "Those phrases shaped my commitment to advocacy."

After retiring from the Army, Pickens-Thomas transitioned into community advocacy, continuing her work supporting individuals and families affected by violence.

"Everyone deserves to be heard," she said. "It is important to have trusted professionals who truly care for victims and stand with them."

Today, she serves as assistant county coordinator for the Chesterfield County Satellite Center with the Pee Dee Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Assault, working alongside community partners to ensure victims have access to critical resources and services.

Her work involves collaboration with law enforcement, hospitals, schools, faith-based organizations and other partners. These relationships are essential to providing coordinated support for survivors and their families.

"We work with local agencies throughout Chesterfield County to make sure resources are available to victims and their children," she said.

The mission of the Pee Dee Coalition extends beyond crisis response. It also focuses on prevention, education and building stronger community networks that protect individuals before violence occurs. While public awareness has improved, Pickens-Thomas believes the next step must involve stronger action.

"We now acknowledge sexual assault is happening," she said. "The question now is: What are we going to do about it?"

She has seen increased commitment to believing survivors and strengthening collaboration among agencies. Law enforcement, health care providers and advocacy organizations are working more closely to create coordinated response systems, but barriers remain.

For survivors, reporting can be emotionally overwhelming. Many must retell their experiences multiple times, which can reopen trauma and discourage them from seeking help. In rural communities, additional challenges may arise, including concerns about confidentiality or familiarity with those involved in the reporting process.

"Sometimes the perpetrator is connected to someone within the reporting process," Pickens-Thomas said. "That can create fear or hesitation."

Because of these challenges, survivor-centered support is critical. Advocacy professionals work to ensure survivors feel



Master Sgt. (Ret.) Ariana Pickens-Thomas

empowered rather than judged or abandoned.

"Survivor support means motivating and empowering individuals to see themselves as survivors rather than victims when they're ready," she said. "It also means staying connected through follow-ups and check-ins."

The first interaction a survivor has with an advocate or law enforcement officer can significantly influence their willingness to continue seeking help.

"Listen more than you talk," she said. "Do not make their experience about you. Follow their lead and support them through the process."

Education and prevention are also essential. Pickens-Thomas believes conversations about consent, boundaries and healthy relationships should begin early and continue into adulthood.

"Prevention begins with education," she said. "We need age-appropriate conversations in schools and workplaces."

Community awareness plays a powerful role in shifting culture. National statistics show that one in five women and one in six men experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Despite this, sexual assault remains underreported, particularly in rural areas. Open dialogue can reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help.

"If we talk about sexual assault more openly, it stops being taboo," she said.

The Pee Dee Coalition plays a key role in strengthening local response systems. Advocates assist survivors in hospitals, courtrooms and law enforcement offices while also providing education and training throughout the region.

"We go wherever we are invited," Pickens-Thomas said. "Our goal is to provide relevant training and have genuine conversations."

Sexual Assault Awareness Month offers an opportunity for communities to show support for survivors. While social media can raise awareness, Pickens-Thomas believes meaningful solidarity requires deeper involvement.

"Awareness should not only happen in April," she said. "These conversations need to happen year-round."

Despite the emotional weight of her work, Pickens-Thomas finds strength through faith, mentorship and community involvement. She begins each day with prayer and makes time to connect with others outside of her professional role.

Her volunteer work includes service through Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and the National Council of Negro Women Darlington County Section, reinforcing her commitment to advocacy and community support.

What motivates her most is witnessing survivors rediscover their strength.

"I help people create a plan to move beyond fear," she said. "When fear turns into fight, it is like a fire has been lit."



Ariana Pickens-Thomas Fort Jackson SAAM

Ultimately, her message during Sexual Assault Awareness Month is one of compassion and responsibility.

"If it was your daughter, your son or someone in your family, you would want someone to believe them," she said. "Sexual assault does not discriminate. Our role is not to judge. Our role is to listen, advocate and support."

BREAKING THE SILENCE: CONFRONTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Submitted by Executive Director Rozlyn Ford



Sexual assault remains one of the most devastating and underreported crimes in the United States. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people experience sexual violence, yet many never report it out of fear, shame or the belief that justice will never come.

Nationally, about one in five women and one in 38 men will experience rape or attempted rape in their lifetime. These are not just numbers; they are daughters, sons, friends and neighbors whose sense of safety and trust has been violently taken from them.

In South Carolina, the reported rape rate is roughly 37 cases per 100,000 people, similar to the national average. But these numbers reflect only assaults that are reported. Here in Florence and across Florence County, the crisis hits painfully close to home. According to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, Florence County has one of the highest per-capita rates of reported sexual assault in the state, with 8.69 reported cases per 10,000 residents.

These statistics should shake us. Sexual violence rarely happens in distant places at the hands of strangers lurking in the dark. More often, it occurs within our own communities and sometimes at the hands of people victims once trusted. Survivors carry invisible wounds—fear, anxiety and the long struggle to rebuild a sense of safety in a world that suddenly feels unsafe.

The crisis extends beyond sexual assault. South Carolina continues to rank among the most dangerous states in the nation for domestic violence deaths. For more than two decades, the state has consistently ranked in the top 10 nationally for

men killing women. Recent reports show 55 to 59 domestic violence homicides occur each year. In more than 95 percent of these cases, the victim knew the person responsible—often a partner or someone close to them.

These tragedies are not isolated incidents. They represent a pattern of violence that touches families, neighborhoods and entire communities. The ripple effects are profound: children grow up in fear, neighbors lose trust and survivors carry the weight of trauma long after the headlines fade.

While laws are evolving to better protect survivors and hold offenders accountable, legislation alone cannot heal trauma or prevent every act of violence. Real change requires something deeper—a community willing to listen, believe survivors and refuse to look away. Supporting survivors means more than offering resources; it means standing beside them, advocating for justice and creating environments where speaking out is safe and encouraged.

Silence allows abuse to continue. Awareness alone is not enough. If we truly want safer communities, we must speak up, support survivors and demand accountability from the systems meant to protect the vulnerable. Community engagement, education and a refusal to normalize violence are essential steps toward change.

Behind every statistic is a life—and every life is worth protecting. By confronting sexual violence openly, we send a



message to survivors that they are not alone and to offenders that their actions will not be ignored. Together, we can break the silence and begin to heal our communities.

FINDING MYSELF: HEALING AFTER EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Submitted by the Naomi Project



I was foolish enough to think that all I had to do to reclaim my life from a mentally and emotionally abusive partner was to leave. Yes, I was very foolish.

Once I left for a safe environment and was somewhat settled, I realized the work had just begun.

For the first time in a long time, I had the opportunity to think, act and speak for myself. Sounds easy, but it is not.

I had to confront the insecurities, the second-guessing and yes—let's not forget the fear of being alone. The reality was that I had been alone for most of the time I was in that relationship. The peace I found was frightening because it was unfamiliar. Still, I welcomed it and am learning to embrace it every day. And it is wonderful.

Then the real work began, undoing the negative messages, sifting through the layers of toxicity and uncovering the truth of my own life. I remind myself daily: I am worthy. I am smart. I am loving, caring and kind. I deserve all the good in life, and no one else can give me that—I must claim it for myself, so no one can take it away. There is a place for me in this world, at the table of happiness, where I can have what I want, do what I want and be who I am meant to be. Wholeness—that elusive concept—is finally within reach.

I've always tended to my physical health, keeping appointments, taking medicine as prescribed, but my mental and spiritual well-being had been neglected at the very time I needed it most. I didn't detach on purpose; I simply didn't realize how much the turmoil

at home was affecting me. I had to acknowledge the damage and commit to the hard work of healing. It is not easy. There are days when defeat feels tempting, when staying in bed seems safer than facing the world. But I've learned my solutions cannot be found there.

I am learning to sit with my thoughts, to be still. It is not simple. Sometimes fear creeps in if I dwell too long, making life and showing up harder. I am a multidimensional being, and every part of me must be addressed and healed to make room for the growth and happiness I seek. It is not easy—but it is necessary.

Life is not promised to be easy, but it does offer what we need to survive and thrive. And as L'Oréal famously said, "I'm worth it." Life, let it begin.



FROM SURVIVOR TO ADVOCATE: FINDING A VOICE THROUGH HEALING By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



August Anderson

finally connected with the Pee Dee Coalition (PDC), I believed that I could use my words to assist the individuals who were involved with the agency.”

The decision to volunteer opened the door to sharing Anderson’s poetry as an expression to accentuate events and workshops. Those words, Anderson said, may be the words that other survivors are not able to express openly.

Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) is observed annually to raise awareness about sexual assault survivors. Participants who share information and personal stories often do so despite triggers that can challenge their mental well-being.

“Most of my life, my coping mechanism was mentally escaping,” Anderson said. “I could never leave the environment physically, but I could place myself somewhere that made me feel safe and appreciated. Being allowed to express what happened in a way that others may be able to relate to helps me protect my mental and emotional well-being because it means I am helping someone else get through.”

Anderson also said volunteering has shifted the healing journey in many unexpected ways.

“If I had not been volunteering, the timing for my healing journey may have been prolonged,” Anderson said. “It has given me a chance to have a voice not only for myself but for others as well, which has helped me on my healing journey.”

Anderson is constantly reminded why continuing to show up matters. After contributing a piece of poetry to a SAAM event, Anderson saw how it made a difference for other survivors. Survivors of abuse have the strength to encourage others through sharing their stories but should not feel pressured to be involved in activities that may trigger past experiences.

“The time will come when survivors determine whether they are called or led to be involved,” Anderson said. “It may feel gray based on certain circumstances, but the motivation to help others may suppress some concerns. The question survivors should ask is, are you truly ready and willing to be vulnerable? There’s an inner feeling that tells you it’s time — you just never know when that time will come.”

SAAM is designed to be an empowering time for survivors and those indirectly impacted, including friends and family. Events throughout communities raise awareness about sexual violence through education, prevention and survivor support. Participants learn how to respond to and prevent sexual abuse, assault and harassment.

There are many takeaways from effective events and information about SAAM.

“As for myself, this year I hope to become more of an advocate for individuals who are healing or trying to begin the healing process,” Anderson said. “I hope survivors are able to acknowledge that it may have happened to them, but it does not define them. For individuals who are the, ‘listening ear,’ for survivors, I hope they are able to see that their participation in the healing process is important, even though most times it may not be voiced.

“And for the community, I hope they are able to become like-minded in creating safe spaces for survivors willing to share their story. Real change comes from real people acknowledging that real things happen to real people — not just a particular kind of people. Accepting all survivors, giving them space to decide and a safe place to release will have a great impact on the community.”

REDEFINING NORMAL: HEALING AFTER SEXUAL ABUSE Submitted by the Naomi Project



Normal? What Is Normal? Normal for you is not normal for me.

Normal for me was waking up in the middle of the night, being molested by someone who was supposed to be my protector—my hero.

Normal was praying I would wake up from the nightmare, only to realize it never ended. Normal was understanding it wasn’t a nightmare at all, but my reality—happening in that very moment. Normal was blaming myself.

Normal was hoping tonight would be different, that I could get a good night’s sleep. Normal was reliving the trauma over and over again, even at school. Normal was being threatened if I spoke out. Normal was being afraid to close my eyes at night. I wonder how many reading this today have a, “normal,” that mirrors mine—never knowing who to trust or where to turn. My normal was withdrawing. My normal was feeling dirty, no matter how many baths I took or how pretty I looked on the outside. My normal was wanting to kill my abuser but not knowing how to do it without being caught.

My normal was rage and misplaced anger. Not knowing where to seek help, or even if help was possible. I questioned

myself: Do I really know what’s normal? Is it normal to seek help, or is it normal to keep playing the game of make-believe as if nothing ever happened?

Today, I understand that sexual abuse often leads to mental, emotional and physical trauma—and that is not anyone’s normal.

Today, I realize that carrying hurt and pain in silence is what I had been forced to believe was normal. PTSD is not normal; it is the result of trauma.

So, if your “normal” has become what was once my normal, I encourage you to reach out. Seek help now. You deserve freedom. And that freedom—that healing—is normal.



ASSUMING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PREVENTION By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Margaret Bodman

COLUMBIA

Assuming the responsibility of preventing child abuse is a task many people feel unprepared to take on, and those challenges often discourage individuals from working in child advocacy.

Margaret Bodman, a legal advocate, currently serves as interim state child advocate and director of the South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy in Columbia. The agency's mission centers on three core principles: advocacy, accountability and service. Bodman leads her staff by ensuring they have the tools and support necessary to carry out that mission.

Bodman said accountability is a critical part of child welfare work because feedback helps elevate the voices of victims and improve the state's child-serving systems. Her extensive legal background has helped her build relationships that strengthen efforts to hold abusers accountable.

She has worked closely with case managers from the South Carolina Department of Social Services and with medical professionals who specialize in child abuse cases. She has also collaborated on initiatives with the South Carolina Network of Child Advocacy Centers.

Earlier in her career, Bodman prosecuted child abuse and neglect cases as an assistant solicitor in Richland County, where she saw firsthand how criminal and civil child abuse cases intersect. Her goal as a prosecutor, she said, was to hold abusers accountable for the harm they caused to children.

Bodman later worked at the Children's Law Center, where she trained frontline child welfare professionals on recognizing, investigating and prosecuting cases of child abuse and neglect.

As a result of the trauma many young victims experience, Bodman said one of the most significant challenges facing children today is access to mental health services.

"Children who need services are getting younger and younger, and our system is not equipped for this," Bodman said. "They are often diverted to the Department of Juvenile Justice, which was not designed for that purpose. Children end up stuck in limbo, and it's time to reimagine the mental health system for our youth."

Bodman emphasized that prevention requires involvement from the entire community. She believes every person has a role to play in protecting children.

Individuals can help by providing safe and stable environments where children can thrive. Parents can create open lines of communication, so children feel comfortable speaking up if abuse occurs. Organizations, she said, can support families by adopting policies that strengthen access to child care, education and family support services.

The Department of Children's Advocacy works to ensure children's voices are heard through several programs.

"We run the state Guardian ad Litem program and the



South Carolina Department of
**CHILDREN'S
ADVOCACY**
Advocacy. Accountability. Service.

Foster Care Review Division, so the child welfare system is held accountable to provide permanency to children in foster care in a timely manner," Bodman said.

Foster care review hearings are held every six months to ensure children's cases continue moving through the system. The department also operates an ombudsman division that responds to complaints from the public and interviews children to assess their well-being.

The agency recognizes that prevention is a critical component of protecting children. Through its System Improvement Division, the department takes a strategic approach to determine the most effective ways to improve outcomes.

"Prevention is the basic foundation of protecting children," Bodman said. "Reacting by removing a child from an abusive situation or holding the child welfare system accountable is a second layer of protection."

She also believes the most effective strategies rely on evidence-based programs.

Equity also plays a role in the department's advocacy efforts. Communities experiencing poverty often lack necessary services, and advocates must sometimes develop creative solutions to connect children with the help they need.

Advocacy can significantly impact outcomes for children. In some cases, a child may be given the opportunity to share their story directly with a judge, helping expedite decisions. Advocacy has also led to policy changes that improve foster care placements and increase safety standards within facilities that serve children.

Sometimes improvements occur quickly when facilities respond to complaints by implementing new policies, rather than waiting for changes through the legislative process.

Bodman said child advocacy has seen meaningful progress over the years. The long-term vision, she added, is a community where everyone is committed to protecting children.

"We hope collaboration among leaders and communities will continue to make life better for children," she said.



TWENTY-TWO YEARS OF VOLUNTEERISM: THE SC PECAN MUSIC & FOOD FESTIVAL

Submitted by the Florence Downtown Development Office

What began as a spark to promote fellowship, family fun and build capacity in Florence's historic downtown has evolved into a 22-year tradition held on the first Saturday of November each fall — the SC Pecan Music & Food Festival. Today, the festival draws more than 50,000 attendees each year and has become one of the state's largest single-day events, filling the streets of downtown Florence with music, food and community spirit.

But what many festivalgoers don't see is what happens behind the scenes during the 10 months leading to festival day — and the dedicated volunteers who make it all possible.

The SC Pecan Music & Food Festival was conceived by a small group of local leaders. Among them were the late former councilwoman Pat Gibson-Hye Moore and Jeanne Dowling, who developed the concept for the festival and brought it to the Florence Downtown Development Corp., the 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that stewards Florence's Main Street program. At the time, no one knew how the event would evolve and grow to attract more than 50,000 attendees each year.

The organization's Chairman at the time, George Jebailly — who has served as the festival's committee chairman for more than a decade — agreed to take a leap of faith with the duo and hosted the first downtown festival in 2003. After several years, the event was renamed the Florence Pecan Festival.

What started as a modest gathering gained traction within the community and grew in popularity, as did the size and scope of the event. Within just a few years, the Florence Pecan Festival became a signature event in the region.

In 2011, organizers took another step to recognize the event's broader importance and approached the South Carolina General Assembly to designate the event as the South Carolina Pecan Festival. The festival carried that name for a decade before organizers undertook a thoughtful reimagining following the pandemic.

Based on attendee feedback and evolving expectations, the festival was rebranded in 2021, as the SC Pecan Music & Food Festival, highlighting its flagship features — nine stages of live entertainment and diverse culinary offerings found throughout downtown and across the festival footprint.

The festival is still owned, produced and managed by Florence Downtown Development Corp. and guided by an all-volunteer core committee that plans the event's many activities and programs each year. Committee members dedicate hundreds of hours to planning and executing the event's many components.

The City of Florence and Florence County also provide in-kind support to help manage public safety, public works functions and property use, along with financial support through accommodations tax funds earmarked for tourism-driving initiatives.

On festival day, more than 100 additional volunteers step in to support the event's many moving parts, including vendor check-in, festival beautification, hospitality for performers, visitor assistance, activity zone management and merchandise sales. Behind every stage, race course, free Kids Fun Zone and vendor area is a volunteer lending their time and energy to create memorable experiences for thousands of attendees.

Over time, the volunteer base has expanded well beyond the original circle of local supporters and core planning committee members. Today, volunteers come from across the region and represent a wide range of community groups, including churches, civic organizations, student groups and

corporate partners. Local industries encourage employees to volunteer, and many organizations view participation as a meaningful way to give back to the community.

Youth volunteers also play an important role in the festival. Students assist in the festival's free Kids Fun Zone and STEM Zone, helping younger children enjoy games, crafts and activities throughout the day. Others volunteer with the popular, Run Like a Nut race series, which includes a 5K, 10K and USATF-certified half marathon that kicks off the morning's festivities.

These young volunteers not only provide valuable support but also gain firsthand experience in the importance of community service and civic engagement.

Despite its growth into a major statewide attraction, the festival's mission remains true to the vision that inspired its founders more than 20 years ago: bringing people together to celebrate community. Every vendor booth, stage performance and smiling volunteer helping a visitor find their way reflects the dedication of those who believe in downtown Florence and its continued success.

While the festival itself lasts only one day, the impact of the volunteers who make it possible is felt throughout the year. Their commitment strengthens community bonds, supports local businesses and showcases the best of Florence to visitors from across the region.

As planning begins again for the next festival, the spirit of volunteerism that built the SC Pecan Music & Food Festival continues to thrive. Many volunteers return year after year to support the event and its organizing team. Some have been involved for more than a decade, and others travel hundreds of miles annually to contribute their time.

The 22nd annual SC Pecan Music & Food Festival is scheduled for Saturday, November 7, when more than 50,000 attendees will once again gather in downtown Florence to celebrate music, food and community.

Visitors can expect nine blocks of celebration, more than 250 vendors, nine stages of live entertainment, the free Kids Fun Zone, amusement rides, the Run Like a Nut 5K, 10K and USATF half marathon, a classic car show, arts activities, the STEM Zone, the Pecan Pub and more.

Behind the scenes, however, it will be volunteers who ensure the tradition continues to grow year after year.

To get involved as a volunteer, visit www.scpccanfestival.com and click "Get Involved" under "Festival Information."



Photos of Pecan Festival Volunteers

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH VOLUNTEER SERVICE By Ronette Genwright



Judith Rich

GEORGETOWN — Judith Rich, a resident of Georgetown, South Carolina, graduated from Francis Marion University in Florence. She draws strength from family ties, sharing that she has a daughter in North Carolina and a grandson with whom she spends at least a week each month.

After more than 30 years as an elementary school teacher, Rich transitioned into retirement with a renewed commitment to nonprofit and church-based service. Her journey was shaped by a family tradition of care, including summers spent in farm labor and her mother's leadership in a church-based summer feeding program. These early experiences instilled a practical ethic of helping neighbors, which evolved into a lifelong dedication to serving seniors and families in her rural community.

Rich's philosophy is simple: small acts of kindness can have profound effects. "If I can just do a little bit by making someone happy, then that makes me happy," she said. This belief shapes her priorities, which include delivering groceries, assisting with bills, providing rides to medical appointments and offering companionship. She emphasizes the loneliness experienced by many older adults and the difference a brief visit or simple errand can make.

She recalls a moment when a recipient, apologizing for having limited food, expressed gratitude: "Ma'am, I have no food in my house. I appreciate anything that you can give me." That response reinforced the urgency of local assistance.

Reliability and trust are foundational to her work. Rich insists on showing up consistently, recognizing that trust is fragile. Her volunteer efforts extend beyond immediate needs into advocacy, helping individuals locate agencies for home repairs, access mental health services and resolve insurance concerns.

Volunteers, she said, often act as intermediaries who help people navigate complex systems, especially those who may be illiterate or wary of institutions. She recounts guiding a neighbor to contact an insurance company instead of paying an unvetted contractor, describing volunteers as the "eyes and ears" for vulnerable neighbors. In communities with limited formal services, volunteers frequently perform essential support roles.

Generational change and technology are recurring themes in Rich's perspective. She acknowledges that younger volunteers bring digital skills and efficiencies, such as online registration tools, but cautions that a fully digital approach can exclude older adults who lack access or comfort with technology. Many seniors still prefer checks and in-person interactions, and she worries that over-reliance on screens may erode personal connections.

At the same time, she recognizes the energy younger volunteers can offer and believes organizations must bridge the digital divide while preserving face-to-face engagement.

Barriers to volunteering in rural areas are multifaceted. Transportation remains a persistent obstacle, as residents often travel long distances to access food distributions and services, affecting both those seeking help and those willing to volunteer.

Social and cultural factors also play a role. Women tend to dominate volunteer roles, while men are less likely to engage in caregiving activities. Rich views this as a cultural issue that organizations can address through outreach, role models and creating opportunities that appeal to a wider range of interests.

Sustained volunteerism, Rich noted, leads to personal growth and leadership development. Her service has strengthened her compassion, listening skills and initiative. When she sees a need, she takes action—careful not to overstep, but unwilling to wait. Volunteering, she said, serves as a form of civic education, reinforcing the importance of community support.

Rich also connects this commitment to her teaching career,



Judith and her nephew Micah delivering groceries to one of her clients.

emphasizing the shared responsibility educators and volunteers have in supporting children and families. She believes consistent, caring adults can shape young lives.

Her recommendations are grounded in experience. To make volunteering more accessible, particularly in rural areas, she advocates for improved transportation and flexible scheduling. She also stresses outreach efforts that reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help.

Organizations, she said, should balance digital tools with low-tech alternatives to ensure that seniors are not left behind. To attract a more diverse volunteer base, she recommends outreach to men and younger individuals, along with hands-on opportunities that align with different interests. Intergenerational activities, she added, can create meaningful exchanges where younger volunteers learn from older generations while contributing fresh ideas.

Ultimately, Rich underscores the reciprocal nature of service. Volunteers give their time and care, but they also gain connection, purpose and community. Effective volunteerism goes beyond programs—it requires building trust, showing up consistently and honoring the dignity of those served.

For more information about Lydia's Nest Bowels of Mercy Home, contact lydiasnest@yahoo.org.

ALVIN LEACH HONORED AS MCLEOD VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR Submitted by McLeod Health



McLeod Regional Medical Center's Volunteer of the Year, Alvin Leach with Director of Volunteer Services, Linda Boone.

McLeod Regional Medical Center named Alvin Leach its 2025 Volunteer of the Year during the annual Volunteer Recognition Luncheon, January 22, at the Hellenic Center.

Leach is the 38 recipient of the award and volunteers his time and compassion to McLeod cardiac patients.

"Alvin has faithfully served our organization for many years and continues to visit regularly," said Linda Boone, director of Volunteer Services for McLeod. "This past year, I received a call from a patient who wanted to personally express how much Alvin's visit meant to him during an especially frightening medical procedure. The patient was alone, without family support and shared that Alvin's patience, kindness and presence brought him great comfort during that difficult time. He specifically requested that Alvin be recognized for the compassion shown to him."

Boone noted that Leach has devoted much of his life to serving others. Over the past eight years, he has contributed nearly 1,000 volunteer hours, making a lasting impact on patients and staff.

In addition to the Volunteer of the Year honor, Myra Bennett was recognized for Most Clinical Hours for the second consecutive year with 517 hours. Susan Jernigan received recognition for Most Crafting Hours, contributing 2,689 hours.

Nearly 230 volunteers were honored for their service to McLeod Regional Medical Center in 2025, collectively contributing 41,537 volunteer hours.

McLeod recognizes its volunteers annually with service awards to honor their exceptional efforts. The Most Clinical Hours award highlights volunteers providing direct patient care within the hospital.



Attorney Doward Harvin

National Volunteer Month shines a spotlight on individuals who quietly strengthen communities through service. For attorney Doward Harvin, volunteerism is not an extracurricular activity—it is a responsibility rooted in leadership, visibility and connection.

Harvin has practiced law for more than 17 years, serving in multiple roles across South Carolina. His career has included work as a hearing officer for the South Carolina Department of Workforce, assistant solicitor, public defender and private practice attorney in Williamsburg County. Since 2021, he has practiced with the Sabb Law Group, representing individuals in personal injury matters. Despite the demands of his profession, Harvin has consistently made time to give back.

His journey into community service began long before his current legal career. After returning home to Williamsburg County, Harvin volunteered as an assistant basketball coach at a local high school, taught at Williamsburg Technical College and coached mock trial teams at middle and high schools. Those early experiences naturally led him to mentoring opportunities with the Rick and Susan Goings Boys & Girls Club in Hemingway, where he connected with youth through educational programming and leadership development.

For Harvin, volunteering is deeply personal.

"It's important for professionals to spend time in the community sharing information," he said. "Young people need to see someone who looks like them doing something they may desire to do in the future."

He believes volunteerism matters now more than ever. In a society increasingly driven by transactions, Harvin observes that unpaid service has become less common. Where volunteering once flowed naturally

through churches, schools and political campaigns, many people today expect compensation before engagement. He sees this shift as a loss of connection.

"Everything doesn't need a fee attached to it," he said. "Sometimes you just show up because it aligns with your values."

Harvin views volunteerism as both leadership training and community investment. His service spans several organizations, including the South Carolina Bar Foundation, where he helps oversee grants supporting nonprofit legal services statewide. Recently, the foundation awarded more than \$3 million to 41 organizations focused on access to justice, education and representation. He also serves in governance roles within the legal profession, participates in Lions Club vision initiatives and supports his church as a lay speaker, delivering messages every fourth Sunday at Mt. Carmel United Methodist Church in Stuckey.

Through mentoring and outreach, Harvin has witnessed firsthand how exposure changes perspectives. Former mock trial students now pursuing law degrees often reach out, sharing how early encouragement reshaped their goals. For him, those moments reaffirm the importance of showing young people what is possible.

"Sometimes kids just need to see a bigger world than what they currently know," he said. "You don't have to leave your community to do great things."

Balancing a legal career with volunteer commitments is not always easy. Harvin admits there are times when schedules conflict or personal time is limited. Still, he chooses service.

"I just do it," he said. "Volunteering actually helps relieve stress. It refreshes you."

He also believes leaders cannot effectively serve others without understanding their lived experiences.

Spending time in the community provides insight no boardroom conversation can replicate.

"A servant leader is still powerful," Harvin said. "If you don't volunteer, you may not truly understand how the people you lead feel."

Harvin encourages professionals who feel stretched thin to start small. Even one act of service each year can create ripple effects. He emphasizes that volunteering does not require perfection, only presence.

His philosophy extends beyond formal organizations. In recent years, Harvin has supported families impacted by gun violence and continues advocating for youth navigating systemic barriers. He credits his own upbringing and early exposure to underserved communities with shaping his desire to serve.

"I saw things that made me realize that if I had the chance to go to law school, I should take it," he said. "Not just for me, but so someone else could see that it's possible."

As communities face ongoing challenges, Harvin believes volunteerism remains a vital tool for prevention, connection and hope. Nonprofits, he notes, must stay aligned with their mission while responsibly stewarding limited resources. At the same time, individuals must recognize their role in strengthening neighborhoods.

"No matter how things may seem, we are still interconnected," he said. "What happens to your neighbor matters just as much as what happens to you."

National Volunteer Month reminds us that service does not require a title or platform. It begins with showing up. Harvin's closing message is simple: start somewhere.

"Do at least one act of volunteering a year," he said. "It benefits society and it benefits you."



LEATHERMAN SENIOR CENTER RECOGNIZES VOLUNTEERS' HARD WORK AND DEDICATION

Submitted by Joyce Black, grants and community specialist

The Leatherman Senior Center is proud to recognize two outstanding volunteers whose dedication, compassion and service continue to strengthen the center and the community.



Pat Hovatter

Pat Hovatter is a volunteer who gives her all to the Senior Citizens Association. She has been one of the center's longest-serving volunteers and is known for her servant's heart and unwavering commitment.

Hovatter consistently supports the Leatherman Senior Center and volunteers at the front desk, where she greets visitors with a warm smile. She also decorates the desk throughout the year, bringing seasonal cheer to everyone who enters.

At 90 years old — and turning 91 in May — Hovatter remains an active presence at the center. She drives herself to the center at least three days a week and continues to share her time and energy with fellow members.

She is also responsible for developing many of the card game activities at the center, including bridge, canasta, euchre, pinochle and Skip-Bo. Known affectionately as "Ms. Pat," she is widely regarded as the center's "bridge queen."

Hovatter is celebrated as an ambassador for the center. A lifetime member of the Senior Citizens Association, she has been involved since the facility first opened.

Originally from Ohio, Hovatter moved to Florence after deciding she had enough cold winters and snow. Her husband, an avid golfer, hoped to find a place where he could golf year-round. While they initially considered Florida, the couple discovered Florence during a visit.

According to Hovatter, the community had everything on her list. Taking a chance on the move, she and her husband relocated to Florence and quickly fell in love with the area.

Her husband passed away in 2022, and many expected she might move closer to her two children. Instead, Hovatter chose to remain in Florence, where she treasures the friendships and community she has built at the Leatherman Senior Center.

She is known for her love of people and her belief that there are no strangers — only friends waiting to be met. Hovatter frequently encourages others to be welcoming and to build connections simply by starting conversations.

The center is grateful for her dedication and the positivity she brings to everyone she meets.



Janet Cole James

Janet Cole James is another volunteer who gives 100 percent to the Leatherman Senior Center and its programs.

James serves as an exercise instructor, assists in the kitchen for Meals on Wheels, works with the center's food program and serves on the board of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). She is also president of the local AARP Chapter 2401.

A member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., James serves as chaplain of the Florence Alumnae Chapter. She is also a deacon at Savannah Grove Baptist Church.

In addition, James is a member of the Florence County Education Association—Retired and serves as chairperson of the organization's scholarship committee. She is also a lifetime member of the Senior Citizens Association.

James serves on the board of the Ron James Youth Tennis Program, which honors her late husband, who was the tennis coach at Wilson High School.

She and her husband retired to Florence more than 20 years ago. A native of Richmond, James, spent more than 25 years in

New York as a special education teacher and track coach.

Recently, she was inducted into the Hall of Fame at Elmont Memorial High School along with her track teams, recognizing her years of leadership and dedication to student athletes.

James says she loves the people and programs at the Leatherman Senior Center. She especially enjoys exercise classes, line dancing and computer classes. However, her greatest passion is the Meals on Wheels program, where she volunteers five days a week delivering meals to seniors in the community.

She recently celebrated her 75th birthday and expressed gratitude for another year of life and service. Her personal motto reflects her commitment to helping others along the way.

James also encourages fellow seniors to stay active.

"We want to be able to do things for ourselves," she said. "Exercise allows that independence. It keeps you healthy and active."

The Leatherman Senior Center is grateful for James' dedication and the many ways she supports fellow seniors and the Florence community.

BOARD VOLUNTEER DAY SUPPORTS GREATER FLORENCE HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Submitted by Kristin N. Johnson, director of Family Services and Volunteers for Greater Florence Habitat for Humanity



Pictured front L to R: Mandy Simpson, Marvin James Back L to R: Jay Lavrinc, Jessica Watts, Chris Handley, Travis Cooper, Frank O'Shea

On Thursday, February 26, board members of Greater Florence Habitat for Humanity joined the organization's annual Board Volunteer Day, dedicating their time to complete the final touches on a partner family's new home.

The event offered a hands-on reminder that leadership extends beyond meetings and planning sessions. Armed with tools and a shared commitment to service, board members worked alongside volunteers, helping prepare the house for its soon-to-be homeowners. From

finishing details to final cleanups, each task brought the home one step closer to welcoming a family ready to begin a new chapter.

"We extend our sincere appreciation to our committed board members for their generosity, leadership and unwavering dedication to strengthening our community," Johnson said. "Their willingness to serve exemplifies the spirit of collaboration and compassion that defines our organization."

Greater Florence Habitat for Humanity thrives through a variety of service initiatives designed to expand access to safe, affordable housing. Seeing members of its leadership team volunteer alongside community members underscores the organization's mission-driven focus and commitment to leading by example.

The nonprofit's work is sustained through the support of sponsors, the generosity of donors and the countless hours contributed by volunteers. Together, these partnerships make it possible to build safe, affordable homes for partner families throughout the Florence area.

Greater Florence Habitat for Humanity remains committed to its mission: "Seeking to put God's love into action to bring people together to build homes, hope and community in a world where everyone deserves a safe and decent place to live."



Travis Cooper, Mandy Simpson, Jay Lavrinc

A VOLUNTEER'S HEART By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Sheila Generette

JOHNSONVILLE — National Volunteer Appreciation Month is a reminder of the power of kindness, and the impact one person can have in their community. Volunteers give time, energy and compassion to help others, often stepping in when individuals face unexpected financial, medical or personal challenges. In many cases, it is volunteers who provide essential support, whether it is delivering meals, offering guidance

or simply providing a friendly presence.

Sheila Generette volunteers weekly with Lydia's Nest Bowels of Mercy in Johnsonville, helping distribute food every Wednesday. She said the moments that matter most are the reactions of recipients who receive items they truly need. Many express gratitude, but some feel embarrassed to accept help. Generette said she works to ensure that everyone maintains dignity and self-respect while receiving assistance. "It's important that people feel comfortable and valued," she said.

Generette said she was inspired to join Lydia's Nest because she and the founder, Dr. Barbara Black, attended the same church. "Dr. Black offered office space for my insurance business, but once I saw how the organization was helping the community, I knew I wanted to be involved," she said. Black's daughter also invited her to volunteer one day a week. Generette added, "Volunteering isn't challenging for me. I'm a natural social worker. It's a pleasure to assist, and I enjoy it so much. God expects us to help others."

Her commitment to helping others began during her career as a social worker with the Department of Social Services, where she witnessed firsthand the struggles families face. Now retired, she continues volunteering with Lydia's Nest and has observed the growing need for food assistance. Many clients face the difficult choice between buying medicine or groceries, a decision Generette calls heartbreaking. "Volunteering lets me know that the work to end hunger continues," she said. "We have to do what we can, while we can, to help others." She added that Lydia's Nest addresses gaps in local food access, and she takes pride in helping people feel respected and comfortable while receiving services.

Not everyone understands the challenges faced by the people volunteers serve. Generette said the public sometimes assumes those in need are lazy or abusing the system, but many are hardworking individuals who simply struggle to make ends meet. "People really appreciate volunteers who take the time to help them," she said.

Volunteering also provides insight into the needs of the community. "Anyone willing can get involved," Generette said. Many local organizations provide opportunities to serve, allowing volunteers to connect with others and make a meaningful difference. While rewarding, volunteering is not always easy. Some recipients may be rude or ungrateful, though she said this is rare. "It takes love and patience to volunteer," she said. "I believe in the passage to love your neighbor as yourself."

For Generette, volunteering is more than just giving time—it is a way to build relationships, offer hope and make a tangible difference in people's lives. She sees each interaction as a chance to provide comfort, dignity and encouragement for others, even during difficult circumstances. In a world where daily struggles often go unseen, volunteers like Generette remind the community that small acts of kindness can leave lasting impacts. Those interested in volunteering at Lydia's Nest can contact Barbara Black at www.lydiasnest.org.

MILLER, ISGETT RECEIVE 2026 MARION MEDALLIONS

Submitted by Francis Marion University



Pictured Left to Right: Mike Miller, Dr. Fred Carter, Donna Isgett and Kyla Fraser

Francis Marion University and, "The Morning News," presented the 2026 Marion Medallion awards February 27, at the FMU Performing Arts Center. Michael Miller, president of the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce and Donna C. Isgett, president and CEO of McLeod Health, were honored as this year's recipients.

Miller has spent nearly 40 years in media, working in newspapers and television. In the early 2000s, he served as market leader for The Morning News and WBTW-TV Channel 13 under Media General. He returned to Florence in 2014 as president of the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce, where he has played a key role in advancing economic development, fostering partnerships between businesses and community leaders, and championing initiatives that enhance the area's quality of life.

FMU President Fred Carter presented Miller with the award, praising his ability to unite people for positive change.

"Mike quickly became our most successful catalyst for igniting productive change and providing advice to those committed to such change. He performs so much of this quietly, but persistently and persuasively," Carter said. "I could speak forever in praise of Mike Miller's accomplishments, but you all get it. Every aspiring city desperately needs a Mike. We got him at precisely the right time — twice. Count your blessings, Florence."

Isgett has dedicated her career to advancing health care and improving patient outcomes across the region. She began as an emergency flight nurse, providing critical care in high-pressure situations, before moving into executive leadership roles. Before becoming president and CEO of McLeod Health in 2021, she served as chief operating officer and senior vice president of corporate quality and safety.

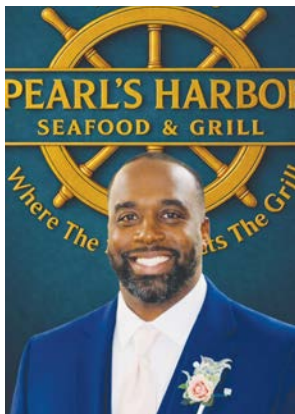
Kyla Fraser, president and director of local advertising for, "The Morning News," presented Isgett's award and highlighted her commitment to both health care and the community.

"Donna says that health care is only 20 percent of health. The other 80 percent is related to food, shelter and feeling safe. Staying engaged in the community and contributing to that other 80 percent is something that she takes very seriously," Fraser said. "Donna is undeniably someone of great influence in the Florence community."

The Marion Medallion has been awarded annually by FMU and, "The Morning News," since 2012 to recognize Pee Dee-area citizens who have made sustained and significant contributions to the region and its residents. The award is presented each year on or about February 27, Francis Marion Day.



GIVING BACK WHERE YOU'VE GROWN By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Pastor Johnny Jenkins

PAMPLICO— About 20 miles southeast of Florence sits the small town of Pamplico, a municipality of roughly 1,500 residents. In this close-knit community, one man has dedicated much of his life to helping his hometown grow and thrive.

Pastor Johnny Jenkins serves Pamplico by being present, accessible and solution oriented. Through mentoring youth, supporting local initiatives, advocating for resources and collaborating with community organizations, Jenkins works to connect residents with opportunities

and support systems.

"Service is not just about programs — it's about relationships, listening to real needs and showing up consistently," Jenkins said. A local high school graduate and longtime family man, Jenkins has spent years identifying service gaps and working to address the needs of Pamplico residents.

Jenkins is a community leader, entrepreneur and a member of the Florence County School District 2 Board of Education. As a business owner, he operates several ventures, including Pearl's Harbor Seafood & Grill, Pearl's at Work and Pearl's on Wheels. Through these businesses, he combines entrepreneurship with community engagement, creating employment opportunities while providing quality service throughout the region.

His commitment to community development extends beyond business. Jenkins serves as fundraising director for the Pamplico Community Center Development initiative and recently joined Be C.I.V.I.L., a community organization that provides scholarships to local high school seniors.

As a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Jenkins continues a tradition of service and dedication to the fraternity's principles of manhood, scholarship, perseverance and uplift.

In addition to his civic leadership, Jenkins serves as pastor of Maxwell Baptist Church in Pamplico, where he provides spiritual guidance to his congregation and the broader community.

"My life's work reflects my deep commitment to faith, family, education, entrepreneurship and community advancement," Jenkins said.

Serving rural communities brings both rewards and challenges. Jenkins says one of the advantages of small-town service is the strong sense of connection among residents.

"Building personal relationships helps create trust because people know each other," he said. "That trust allows communities to feel the impact of change more directly."

However, rural communities can face barriers such as limited resources, smaller volunteer bases and infrastructure challenges. Resistance to new ideas can also slow progress when residents become comfortable with the status quo.

"Rural service often requires creativity because resources are limited, but the impact can be deeply meaningful," Jenkins said.

He believes that mindset can play a significant role in community growth.

"When people believe, 'this is just how it's always been,' or 'we can't do that here,' it limits progress," Jenkins said. "Being a small town isn't the problem — limited thinking is."

With access to information and strong partnerships, Jenkins believes rural communities can innovate and compete.

"Exposure, leadership and belief in possibility can change everything," he said.

Like many communities across the country, Pamplico has also faced racial tensions over the years. Jenkins acknowledges that while these tensions can exist in both rural and urban communities, they often appear differently.

"In smaller communities, racial tensions can be quieter or more generational because history runs deep," Jenkins said.

For years, he has worked to build bridges across those divides through collaboration and community dialogue.

Jenkins has partnered with town, county and state leaders to focus on several key areas of development, including infrastructure, health care access, economic growth, education and workforce training, agricultural diversification and expanded technology access.

Volunteerism remains essential to the future of small communities like Pamplico. National Volunteer Month encourages residents everywhere to, "Give Back and Make a Difference."

For Jenkins, the message is simple.

Real change happens when individuals step forward and commit to improving their communities.

"The answer to the call must be yes," Jenkins said. "And the action is always to go."

GIVING BACK MAKES A DIFFERENCE By Cynthia O. Ford



Chelsea Anderson

Lake City — Chelsea Anderson never set out to be recognized for volunteering. For her, service is simply an extension of who she is. A nurse practitioner and mother of three, Anderson spends her professional life caring for others. That same compassion carries over into her volunteer work at the Boys & Girls Club of Lake City, where she has been actively involved since 2023. Whether helping organize birthday celebrations, supporting field trips or building relationships with children,

Anderson approaches every moment with intention and heart.

Her journey into volunteering began after witnessing the impact of a former director who poured love into the lives of the children. Inspired by his example, Anderson decided she wanted to be part of that mission.

"I saw how much he loved on those kids, and I wanted to do the same," she said.

Anderson has worked in health care since 2009 and became



GIVING BACK CONT'D

a nurse in 2015, progressing through multiple stages of the profession before becoming a nurse practitioner. Today, she provides care across the lifespan, from birth through end of life, while also supporting individuals with disabilities and special needs in Williamsburg County. Despite a demanding schedule, she continues to prioritize volunteering because of the joy it brings.

At the Boys & Girls Club, Anderson plays a hands-on role, bonding with children, learning their likes and dislikes and helping ensure each child feels seen and valued. One of her favorite traditions is making sure every child's birthday is celebrated. She helps coordinate monthly parties and contributes activity ideas, creating moments that allow children to feel special and appreciated. For Anderson, volunteering is not overwhelming — it is fulfilling.

She describes her role simply as being an extra set of hands whenever needed, offering support in any department. Through her service, she hopes to provide positive role modeling, especially for children whose parents may be juggling demanding schedules. Volunteering has also shaped Anderson personally. She says it has given her a deeper appreciation for the importance of community involvement and youth mentorship. Seeing how much children benefit from consistent encouragement has reinforced her belief that even small acts of kindness can leave lasting impressions.

Serving others has taught Anderson humility and gratitude. Each experience reminds her how interconnected communities

truly are and how meaningful it is to show up for someone without expecting anything in return.

National Volunteer Month shines a light on individuals like Anderson, who step forward to uplift their communities. It is a reminder that the future of volunteerism is deeply personal, driven by people willing to give their time, talents and hearts to make a difference. Anderson believes everyone has something valuable to offer and encourages others to experience volunteering at least once.

"It is a very humbling experience," she said. "If you give your time, it will be given back to you in some form."

Looking ahead, Anderson hopes to expand her impact by supporting young people who aspire to attend college. Whether through mentorship, scholarships or guidance, she wants to help open doors for students who may need encouragement along the way. For her, strengthening communities begins with investing in youth.

"Our children are our future," Anderson said. "If we do not guide them, who will? Take the time to volunteer, get involved and you never know what big outcome can come from it."

Chelsea Anderson's story reflects the true power of volunteerism: showing up, building connections and strengthening communities one person at a time. Her dedication reminds us that service does not always require grand gestures. Sometimes it simply means offering your presence, sharing compassion and choosing to make a difference in someone's life.

HOW ONE VOLUNTEER USES THE KITCHEN TO TEACH LIFE SKILLS By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Retired Attorney Patricia Parr

Food has long served as a powerful connector—not only for adults, but for children as well. Potlucks, picnics and other food-centered gatherings often celebrate people's culinary talents, but they can also create opportunities for learning and personal growth. In Florence County, one volunteer is using cooking as a way to help young people develop mentally, emotionally, physically, culturally and socially.

Retired Attorney Patricia

Parr volunteers with several organizations, but one of her most meaningful projects is hosting weekly cooking classes for children. A well-known community advocate, Parr serves on multiple boards, including the Corporate Board of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Pee Dee Area, where she is the immediate past chair, and the Senior Citizens Association Board, where she previously served as president.

Parr is a sustainer member of the Junior League of Florence and a member of Women in Philanthropy, where she serves on the grants committee. She has also volunteered with Florence One Schools and the Boy Scouts of America. A passionate supporter of youth development and women's leadership, Parr is a life member of Jack and Jill of America Inc., where she previously served as Mid-Atlantic regional director. She is also a Diamond Life member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and currently serves as president of the Florence Alumnae Chapter while also participating on the South Atlantic Regional Leadership Team.

In 2016, Parr launched a cooking class for elementary-age members at a Florence Boys & Girls Club location. She approached CEO Neal Zimmerman with the idea, explaining that she wanted more than a board role—she wanted meaningful

interaction with club members.

The one-hour weekly program focuses on simple food preparation, positive behavior and academic progress. Ten students participate at a time, rotating throughout the year. Club Director Larry Fortune selects the students who attend.

At the start of the program, Parr led the classes with assistance from Boys & Girls Club staff. Over time, the cooking club grew with support from corporate board members who began volunteering alongside her. Members of the Florence Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. also frequently volunteer with the program. Parr additionally reactivated the club's Teen Honor Roll Celebration Dinner, which is fully funded by the corporate board.

Students in the cooking class have prepared a wide range of snacks and meals, including personal pizzas, pancakes, sausage, lemon cookies, chocolate chip cookies, smoothies, Rice Krispies treats, brownies and apple turnovers. They have also made mini corn dog muffins, grilled cheese sandwiches, pigs in a blanket, chicken quesadillas, tacos, decorated cupcakes and even chicken and waffles.

"Several years ago, one class prepared meatballs, mashed potatoes and green beans," Parr recalled.

Beyond cooking, students learn important kitchen safety practices, including knife skills, basic culinary techniques and nutrition awareness. Parr also emphasizes good behavior and proper kitchen etiquette to help maintain a positive and productive environment.

Although the program has proven effective and popular with students, Parr says there are currently no plans to expand.

For Parr, the experience is deeply personal. Cooking and baking are passions she enjoys sharing with young people, and the opportunity to teach life skills in the kitchen is especially rewarding.

By giving children the tools to succeed both in and out of the kitchen, Parr hopes the lessons learned in her class will have a lasting impact for generations to come.

THE PALMETTO PARTNERSHIP MARKS GROWTH, HONORS VOLUNTEER By Les Echols



Jessica Brown

"Heart of Service," Award, an honor established to recognize volunteers who demonstrate exceptional commitment. The award is named after Susie Bennett, a longtime advocate for individuals with autism.

McKee serves as the organization's community outreach coordinator and volunteers more than 20 hours each week supporting daily operations, events and resource coordination.

A former educator who spent decades teaching and directing a preschool program in Illinois, McKee relocated to Florence in 2023 with her husband. Her path to The Palmetto Partnership began through a local connection and quickly evolved into a meaningful volunteer role.

"I had been wanting to volunteer with an organization whose purpose and values reflected my own," McKee said. "After meeting with Jessica Brown and learning more, I knew this was the right place for me."

Brown, executive director of The Palmetto Partnership, said McKee's involvement has made a lasting impact.

"From the moment I met her, I felt a connection," Brown said. "She was warm, enthusiastic and truly wanted to be involved. She has committed her time, talent and heart to our families."

Founded in 2005 as a local support group, The Palmetto Partnership grew over time, receiving 501(c)(3) status in 2009 and later establishing its first staffed resource center in 2017. That center became the first and only autism resource center in the Pee Dee region.

Today, the organization operates as a community-based nonprofit serving individuals with disabilities of all ages, along with their families and caregivers. Services are free and open to the public, with no eligibility requirements or federal funding restrictions.

"We are not affiliated with a national organization, which allows us to keep our focus local," Brown said. "Everything we do stays right here in the community."

The organization provides support services, training programs and outreach initiatives in collaboration with schools, health care providers, businesses and government agencies. Its efforts include inclusive summer camps, sensory-friendly events, music and dance therapy classes and informational conferences for families navigating disability-related needs.

A key part of its mission is increasing access to resources in a region where families may otherwise face limited options.

McKee supports that mission by maintaining and expanding the organization's community resource guide, which connects families to agencies and services across the area.

"In this role, I've learned how important it is for families to have a central place to turn to," McKee said. "It can make a

real difference when people feel supported and informed."

The Palmetto Partnership also emphasizes collaboration, working with local and state agencies, medical providers, law enforcement and community organizations to expand awareness and improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Partnerships include coordination with the Department of Social Services, referrals from medical professionals and training initiatives for emergency responders focused on neurodiversity awareness.

Advocacy remains a central component of the organization's work, particularly for families navigating education systems, legal processes and access to services.

In May 2023, the organization purchased its first property at 517 S. Coit St. in Florence. Following a multiyear grant from The Kyle Foundation, the facility underwent extensive renovations and now serves as the organization's headquarters.

The updated space includes meeting areas for support groups, training sessions and community programs. Leaders say the building represents both a milestone and a foundation for future growth.

"When we began discussing expansion, we knew we wanted a space that would allow us to collaborate and better serve families," said Jarrod Tippins, president of the board of directors. "The idea of partnership is at the core of what we do."

The organization's name change from All 4 Autism to The Palmetto Partnership of All 4 Autism reflects that broader mission. While continuing to serve individuals with autism, the organization has expanded its focus to support all individuals with disabilities and promote inclusion throughout the community.

Additional improvements are planned for the facility, including accessibility upgrades such as a new entrance ramp, improved parking surfaces and wider access points within the building. Once completed, the organization plans to introduce new programming focused on transitional support for neurodiverse adults and continued efforts to build inclusive community spaces.

Brown said the organization's growth is driven by community needs and supported by local partnerships and volunteers.

"We want families to know they are not alone," she said. "With the right support, resources and collaboration, we can help improve quality of life and create opportunities for everyone we serve."

As Autism Awareness Month highlights the importance of understanding, acceptance and access to resources, The Palmetto Partnership continues working to expand its impact and strengthen support systems across the region.

The Palmetto Partnership of All 4 Autism can be reached at 843-472-5215 or online at www.palmettopartnership.org.



Jenny McKee





The HGTC Wildlife Society chapter joined representatives from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources during the S.C.O.R.E. Partnership kickoff and oyster roast Feb. 20 on the HGTC Georgetown campus. The event celebrated a new collaboration to expand oyster shell recycling and strengthen oyster reef restoration in estuarine ecosystems across Horry and Georgetown counties. From left: Dr. Lori Heafner, HGTC vice president for Academic Affairs; Shannon Detzler, HGTC Foundation president and CEO; Charles Granger; Al Mosley, HGTC forestry professor; Kevin Swain, SCDNR biologist; Holly Sommers, SCDNR shell recycling coordinator; Mac Altman, HGTC assistant chair and forestry professor.

GEORGETOWN — Horry-Georgetown Technical College's (HGTC) Wildlife Society chapter celebrated a new environmental partnership with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) through the South Carolina Oyster Recycling and Enhancement (S.C.O.R.E.) Program on Friday, Feb. 20, at the Georgetown campus.

The kickoff event featured an oyster roast, partially sponsored by SCDNR, giving students, faculty and local environmental professionals a hands-on opportunity to connect and learn about coastal restoration efforts in Horry and Georgetown counties.

Through the partnership, the HGTC Wildlife Society will work with S.C.O.R.E. to strengthen oyster reef restoration initiatives in estuarine ecosystems across the region.

"This partnership represents the kind of experiential learning that defines HGTC," said Al Mosley, HGTC forestry professor. "Our students will gain valuable field experience while directly contributing to improved water quality, reduced shoreline erosion and stronger marine habitats in our own backyard."

The collaboration grew from years of volunteer work with S.C.O.R.E., particularly in the Charleston Harbor area, and a shared recognition that expanded oyster

recycling and reef restoration efforts were needed along the Grand Strand and Georgetown coastlines.

As part of the initiative, the HGTC Wildlife Society will:

- "Adopt" local restaurants in Horry and Georgetown counties that generate recyclable oyster shells.
- Coordinate shell collection and transportation to designated S.C.O.R.E. drop-off locations.
- Construct manufactured wire reefs (MWRs) to support shoreline stabilization and oyster habitat restoration.
- Assist in reef deployment in areas affected by erosion and water quality challenges.

The program aligns with SCDNR's efforts to increase volunteer engagement and expand oyster recycling in coastal communities.

Beyond environmental impact, the partnership is expected to create internship and networking opportunities for HGTC students pursuing careers in forestry, wildlife management, marine sciences and environmental conservation.

"This initiative strengthens our students' professional foundations while delivering tangible benefits to coastal ecosystems," Mosley added. "It's a win for our students, our partners, and our community."

HGTC leadership, faculty and staff attended the kickoff event to support the collaborative effort.

About the S.C.O.R.E. Program

The South Carolina Oyster Recycling and Enhancement (S.C.O.R.E.) Program restores and manages oyster ecosystems through shell recycling, reef construction and habitat enhancement across South Carolina's coast.

About HGTC

HGTC offers college transfer and skilled associate degree programs in more than 80 fields, many with online options. Nearly all programs feature internships that lead to careers. Ninety-one percent of students either transfer for advanced degrees or start careers in their field. Horry-Georgetown Technical College prohibits discrimination against students and employees. For discrimination or accessibility issues, contact the Office of Student Affairs at (843) 349-5228.

For more information, call (843) 347-3186 or visit www.hgtc.edu. Follow HGTC on Twitter: @gohgtc and Facebook: www.facebook.com/gohgtc.



DON'T LET UNDERAGE DRINKING RUIN YOUR PROM

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



Erica Buffkin

Spring is in the air, and this time of year comes with many special high school traditions and events. Few are as eagerly anticipated as prom night and spring break, along with the parties and rituals that often accompany them. Unfortunately, some teens and parents view alcohol as an acceptable part of these celebrations, seeing it as a rite of passage. Underage drinking remains the most common risky behavior challenging youth today. While overall teen drug use has been declining, alcohol continues to pose a significant threat to their health and safety.

Alcohol use among teens has been declining over the years, particularly during the pandemic, but it remains the number one substance of choice. Statewide, nearly 30 percent of high school students will consume alcohol at some point during their high school years. Even though fewer teens are drinking today, those who do often consume alcohol at dangerous levels. Research shows many young people participate in binge drinking, which is defined as consuming four to five drinks during a single occasion, causing blood alcohol content to rise to unsafe levels.

Teens who binge drink are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including acts of violence, reduced sexual inhibitions, and driving under the influence, which increases their chances of being involved in a crash. Studies also show that female teens participate in binge drinking at higher rates than males, leaving them particularly vulnerable. During COVID-19, The Journal of Adolescent Health reported that more parents began allowing teens

and their friends to drink at home, a troubling trend that can normalize risky behavior.

To help minimize the potential dangers and consequences of underage drinking during prom season, Circle Park Behavioral Health Services and the Florence County Coalition for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention, along with local law enforcement agencies, have launched the, "Don't Let Underage Drinking Ruin Your Prom," campaign. The program emphasizes that anyone under the age of 21 cannot legally purchase, possess or consume alcohol, and reminds parents of their legal responsibilities.

Prom night parties and spring break activities often provide opportunities for teens to drink and binge drink. To address and prevent these incidents, the 12th Judicial Circuit Alcohol Enforcement Team (AET), a multi-jurisdictional group of agencies throughout Florence and Marion counties, will conduct several enforcement activities during prom season:

Source investigations: AET members will identify the sources of alcohol at prom-related events. Adults found providing alcohol to minors will face prosecution.

Party patrols: Officers will monitor neighborhoods, rural areas and other common gathering sites for pre- and post-prom parties.

Parking lot patrols: Law enforcement will check parking areas at local establishments and other prom locations to ensure underage alcohol possession and use do not occur.

Restaurant walk-throughs: Officers will visit restaurants popular with prom-goers, speaking with teens and reinforcing the importance of alcohol-free events.

Compliance checks: Authorities will ensure local businesses are not providing alcohol to underage customers.

Teens should also understand the state's constructive possession law. Anyone under 21 can be cited or arrested for possessing alcohol, having it in a vehicle or being present at a party or event where underage drinking is occurring — even if they are not personally drinking. Youth should be especially careful about situations where alcohol may be present in a car or at a gathering, as they can be held responsible for alcohol even if it is not open.

By working together, parents and teens can make smart, legal and healthy choices to ensure prom events are safe, memorable and alcohol-free. Community leaders hope that all youth participating in this year's prom activities will enjoy a fun and safe celebration, free from the dangers of underage drinking.

THINK TEEN DRINKING TEACHES MODERATION?

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

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



DON'T LET
UNDERAGE
DRINKING
RUIN YOUR
PROM.



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This ad was funded through the Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant award number 1B08TI088131 from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, SAMHSA.

RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE By Cynthia O. Ford



Executive Director Nicole Criss

DILLON — National Alcohol Awareness Month serves as both a wake-up call and a moment of hope. While alcohol use disorder continues to impact families across the country, organizations like the Community-based Alliance of Rural Peer Support in South Carolina (CARPS SC) are proving that recovery is not only possible but sustainable when communities lead with compassion.

Nicole Criss, executive director and co-founder of CARPS SC, brings lived experience to her work. A woman in long-term recovery, Criss launched the organization in 2023 to support individuals and families affected by substance use disorder in rural South Carolina. CARPS currently serves Dillon, Marion, Darlington, Florence and Williamsburg counties, operating recovery community centers in Dillon and soon, Darlington.

CARPS' mission centers on harm reduction, advocacy, education and recovery support. Services are offered in safe, welcoming environments where individuals can attend recovery meetings, receive peer support and access individualized care planning. With a small staff of four people from five counties, CARPS focuses on meeting people where they are, emotionally and geographically. For Criss, this work is deeply personal.

"I wanted to be dead at one point," she said. "I thought the best part of my life was behind me. Now I want to be a beacon of hope."

Her journey into recovery advocacy began in 2014. After attending a national recovery event in Washington, D.C., she realized her purpose was to use her experience to help others. That calling eventually led her back to South Carolina, where data revealed alarming overdose rates and limited recovery resources in rural counties. During National Alcohol Awareness Month, Criss emphasizes one core message: alcohol use disorder is not a moral failure.

"It changes brain chemistry and biology," she explained. "At some point it's no longer a choice. People need love, not judgment."

Despite growing awareness, stigma remains one of the biggest barriers to treatment. Many individuals avoid seeking help after experiencing bias from providers or being treated poorly in medical settings. Criss notes that alcohol use disorder is a biopsychosocial condition often shaped by trauma, lack of healthy coping skills and environmental stressors.

"No one grows up wanting to struggle with addiction," she said. "We only know what we know."

CARPS offers free recovery meetings, peer support and family services, helping individuals identify goals and connect with housing, transportation, medical care and documentation such as birth certificates and Social Security cards. Staff members, all of whom are in recovery themselves, walk alongside clients through each step of the process. Success, Criss explains, is not always defined by immediate sobriety.

"Sometimes the win is that someone keeps coming back," she said. "That tells us they

finally feel seen as human, not as a diagnosis."

Beyond direct services, CARPS conducts community outreach through educational events, cleanups and partnerships with law enforcement. Criss describes growing collaboration with first responders who increasingly recognize substance use disorder as a health issue rather than a criminal one.



Deputy Director Greg Jacobs and staff member Chelsea O'Connell

shifts in mood.

"Addiction is a family issue," she said. "When one person struggles, the whole system feels it."

CARPS encourages loved ones to seek their own support while learning how to walk alongside someone in recovery without enabling harmful behaviors. Healing, Criss says, must happen on both sides. Looking ahead, she envisions recovery-supported communities across South Carolina where individuals are treated with dignity and care regardless of circumstance. She challenges society's inconsistent response to addiction, noting that medical emergencies caused by chronic illness are treated differently than substance-related crises.

Funding remains an ongoing challenge. As a nonprofit, CARPS relies on grants and donations to provide hygiene kits, clothing and outreach services, many of which are not reimbursable. Community partnerships and advocacy are essential to sustaining their work.

CARPS SC is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit, allowing community members, businesses and partners to support its mission through tax-deductible donations as well as in-kind contributions. The organization regularly accepts hygiene items, clothing and basic necessities to help individuals in recovery stabilize their daily lives. Financial support directly funds outreach efforts, peer services and recovery programming across Dillon, Marion, Darlington, Florence and Williamsburg counties, helping CARPS continue providing compassionate, judgment-free care in communities where resources remain limited.

Readers interested in supporting CARPS SC or learning more about available services can visit <https://carpsc.com>, where donations can be made directly and additional information about programs and outreach efforts is available. As National Alcohol Awareness Month continues, Criss leaves readers with a message grounded in empathy.

"People are human regardless," she said. "They deserve love and understanding. And there is always hope."



Deputy Director Greg Jacobs



AWARENESS, ACCESS AND HOPE IN ALCOHOL RECOVERY By Les Echols



Executive Director Wendi Sutherlin

HARTSVILLE — As communities observe National Alcohol Awareness Month, local leaders are working to shine a light on the impact of alcohol misuse and the importance of early support, open conversations and access to care.

Wendi Sutherlin, executive director of Rubicon Family Counseling Center, has spent more than a decade helping individuals and families navigate substance use and recovery. Since joining the organization in 2012, she has served as a clinical counselor, now executive director, a role she assumed in 2022.

"I entered this field right after graduate school simply hoping to help others and build a career, but it quickly became something I'm truly passionate about," Sutherlin said. "Seeing people rebuild their lives, reconnect with their families and rediscover who they are is one of the most rewarding parts of what I do."

Rubicon Family Counseling Center provides a range of behavioral health services, including substance use treatment, mental health counseling and prevention programs. The organization serves individuals and families across the region, focusing on meeting people where they are and supporting them through every stage of recovery.

"Our mission is rooted in compassion, evidence-based care and the belief that recovery is possible for everyone," Sutherlin said.

National Alcohol Awareness Month, she said, is especially important because it brings attention to an issue that is often overlooked or minimized.

"In many communities, alcohol use is so common that it can be hard to recognize when it becomes a problem," she said. "Awareness helps start conversations, reduces stigma and reminds people that support is available."

Sutherlin emphasized that alcohol misuse does not discriminate.

"One of the biggest misconceptions is that it only happens to certain people," she said. "In reality, it can impact anyone, regardless of age, background or circumstances. Another misconception is that someone has to reach rock bottom before seeking help. The earlier someone reaches out, the better the chances for positive outcomes."

The effects of alcohol misuse often extend beyond the individual. Families may experience emotional stress, instability and ongoing uncertainty. Children, in particular, can be affected in ways that influence their development and overall well-being.

"Addiction impacts the entire family," Sutherlin said. "Recovery is often not just about one person healing, but about families learning how to heal together."

Access to care remains a challenge in many communities, particularly in rural areas. Transportation barriers, limited treatment options and stigma surrounding addiction can prevent individuals from seeking help.

Rubicon works to reduce those barriers by offering transportation assistance, financial support through grant programs and flexible scheduling, including evening group sessions for those who work during the day.

"Our goal is to make sure people can actually get the help they need without obstacles standing in the way," Sutherlin



Rubicon Family Counseling Center

said.

Recognizing early warning signs of alcohol misuse can make a critical difference. These may include increased frequency of drinking, difficulty controlling alcohol use, noticeable changes in mood or behavior and strain in personal relationships.

For those concerned about themselves or a loved one, Sutherlin encourages taking the first step by reaching out to a counselor, treatment provider or peer support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon.

Rubicon also offers a free weekly SMART Recovery support group on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m., open to anyone in the community.

In addition to treatment services, the organization provides prevention programs aimed at educating youth about the risks associated with alcohol and other substances, helping them make informed decisions early in life.

"Education and awareness are key," Sutherlin said. "When people understand the risks and have access to support, it can truly change the direction of their lives."

Above all, she emphasizes that recovery is possible.

"With the right support and resources, individuals and families can heal, grow and move forward in a meaningful way," Sutherlin said.



Rethink your drink for a
healthier future.

Alcohol Awareness Month



KNOWLEDGE IS KEY TO REDUCING STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

By Susan Carter



Leola Reaves at NAMI Refresh and Reclaim Workshop for School Staff

Leola Reaves had never heard of mental health conditions affecting children until it hit close to home. She set out to educate herself and joined support groups of other family members experiencing similar challenges, marking the beginning of her advocacy journey.

Her continued involvement led to her current role with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) South Carolina as a regional project coordinator for the Pee Dee Region. NAMI is the largest grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals affected by mental health conditions and their families through advocacy, education and support.

Her daughter's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis at age seven introduced Reaves to both mental health conditions and the stigma surrounding them. At the time, resources and awareness were limited, but she found support through a parent-led organization focused on ADHD.

In the early 1990s, parents of children diagnosed with ADHD were given little guidance beyond medication and reassurances that children would "outgrow it." Reaves notes that treatment has evolved significantly and now includes psychoeducation, parenting skills training and a variety of medication options.

Despite this progress, stigma remains a major barrier. Children exhibiting disruptive behaviors are often shamed, with assumptions that they are choosing to misbehave rather than struggling with impulse control. Reaves emphasizes that these behaviors are often linked to a dysregulated brain.

Simple changes in approach can make a difference. Instead of repeatedly telling a child to "be quiet," offering tools such as fidget items can help them self-regulate and focus. These strategies can support better engagement and understanding in classroom settings.

Speaking to educators about mental health awareness is one of Reaves' passions. A retired school guidance counselor with 30 years of experience, she frequently shares resources like NAMI's "Parents and Teachers as Allies" handbook during presentations. These discussions help educators and families better understand behavioral expectations and encourage meaningful conversations about children's mental health.

Reaves also works to dispel common myths about mental illness. One persistent misconception is that individuals with mental health conditions are violent. In reality, they are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

Another harmful myth is that ignoring mental health symptoms will make them disappear. Reaves stresses that untreated symptoms can worsen over time. Anxiety, for example, can lead to depression and even physical health issues. As awareness of the mind-body connection grows, primary care providers are increasingly screening patients for stress and emotional well-being.

Reaves notes that communities of color may be especially hesitant to seek help due to longstanding cultural beliefs that discourage discussing personal struggles outside the home. This reluctance is often rooted in fear, shame or concern about judgment.

She encourages open dialogue, emphasizing that mental health conditions are treatable medical issues that deserve the same attention as physical illnesses. NAMI's community conversations, such as Sharing Hope and Compartiendo

Esperanza, are designed to reduce stigma and promote healing within Black and Hispanic communities.

Faith communities can also play a vital role in addressing mental health stigma. Research shows that one in five individuals in a religious congregation is affected by a mental health condition, either personally or through a loved one.

Reaves, who is deeply rooted in her faith, advocates for faith leaders to become more informed about mental health. She hopes they will create safe, judgment-free environments where individuals feel comfortable seeking guidance beyond being told to "pray about it."

NAMI provides faith leaders with education and resources to help them guide their congregations. Effective treatment often includes evaluation by a mental health professional, followed by a diagnosis and a personalized care plan. Seeking treatment should not be viewed as a lack of faith.

Treatment does not always require medication. Many individuals benefit from therapy, including individual, family or group counseling, or a combination of approaches.

Several risk factors may increase the likelihood of developing a mental health condition, including childhood trauma, exposure to violence, substance use and family history. However, anyone can experience mental health challenges at any time.

NAMI serves as a valuable resource for individuals, families and communities. While it does not provide clinical counseling, it focuses on the power of lived experience through its trained staff and volunteers.

Reaves explains that families often feel isolated and unsupported when a loved one is struggling. NAMI support groups help fill this gap by offering guidance, connection and practical tools for caregiving while encouraging self-care.

Open and honest conversations are essential to reducing stigma. Even before the pandemic, more than 57 million Americans were living with mental health conditions, and those numbers continue to rise.

Suicide remains the second leading cause of death among youth ages 10 to 24, with increasing rates among communities of color. Support groups provide a space where individuals can learn coping strategies, share experiences and better understand what they can and cannot control.

Mental illness can be isolating, but NAMI creates opportunities for connection and support. Its programs are designed to meet people at various stages of their mental health journey.

NAMI Basics is a free six-week course for parents and caregivers of children and young adults experiencing mental health symptoms. It is also available online through NAMI Basics OnDemand.

NAMI South Carolina's Youth-Centered Awareness Program reaches students, families and educators through its Ending the Silence presentations. These sessions, typically 50 to 60 minutes long, are designed to increase awareness and reduce stigma among middle and high school audiences.

Additional youth programs include Refresh and Reclaim, Mental Fitness and Me, and Go Lime Green, a community awareness initiative often held at high school athletic events.

For those supporting adults with mental health



Leola Reaves Participates at NAMI Tabling Event Hannah Pamplico High

KNOWLEDGE IS KEY CONT'D

conditions, NAMI offers the Family-to-Family program, an eight-week course led by trained individuals with lived experience. Research shows participants gain improved coping and problem-solving skills.

Individuals living with mental illness can participate in the Peer-to-Peer program, a free eight-week recovery course that includes discussions, activities and educational materials. While supportive, it does not replace clinical treatment.

Other NAMI programs include Family Match, In Our Own Voice, NAMI On Campus, Provider Training and Crisis Intervention Team training for law enforcement.

NAMI operates in all 50 states, with local affiliates offering free presentations, classes, support groups and training programs.

Since joining NAMI South Carolina in 2019, Reaves has delivered Ending the Silence presentations to students, parents, educators and community groups across the Pee Dee region and statewide through virtual platforms.

She remains committed to fostering open conversations and changing the language surrounding mental illness—one discussion at a time.

For more information about NAMI South Carolina programs or volunteer opportunities, visit namisc.org.

SUICIDE PREVENTION STARTS WITH AWARENESS AND CONNECTION Submitted by Neva Bailey, LPC, CASII



Neva Bailey, LPC, CASII

Mental health challenges often remain hidden until it is too late. As a licensed professional counselor at HopeHealth, I want to highlight the importance of recognizing the signs of depression and suicidal thoughts. These issues are real, common and treatable, but only if they are identified and addressed.

Every life lost to suicide is a tragedy that leaves families and communities grieving and searching for answers. Prevention begins with understanding, awareness and open dialogue — especially as

mental health challenges continue to rise, particularly among young people.

Depression: More Than Feeling Sad

Depression is a medical condition that affects mood, thinking and daily functioning. It is one of the most common mental health conditions affecting both children and adults.

Common symptoms include:

- Persistent sadness or hopelessness
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Talking about death or dying

These symptoms are not always obvious. Depression can hide behind a smile, good grades or busy routines. That is why paying attention to behavioral changes is so important.

Suicide: A Growing Concern Among Youth

Suicide is not only an adult issue. It increasingly affects young people and impacts individuals across every age, race and background, including here in Florence and throughout South Carolina.

According to the South Carolina Department of Public Health, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for children ages 10–14 and the third-leading cause for teens ages 15–17. In recent years, there has been a troubling increase in mental health emergencies reported in schools and emergency departments.

Children, teens and adults face growing pressures, from social isolation and academic stress to family instability and untreated depression. Suicide prevention requires recognizing that young people are struggling and ensuring they have support.

Know the Warning Signs

Not everyone who experiences depression thinks about suicide, but many people who die by suicide show warning signs beforehand. Suicidal ideation often begins with subtle changes in behavior.

Common warning signs include:

- Talking about wanting to die or expressing hopelessness
- Withdrawing from friends, family or activities

- Major changes in mood, behavior or sleep patterns
- Feeling like a burden or expressing worthlessness
- Giving away possessions or saying goodbye unexpectedly
- Increased substance use or risky behavior

Children and teens may not always express their feelings clearly. For this reason, parents, caregivers and educators should watch closely for changes in behavior, school performance and social interaction.

Debunking a Common Myth

It is OK — and often necessary — to ask someone directly, “Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”

This question does not “plant the idea” in a person’s mind. Instead, it shows concern and gives them an opportunity to talk openly about what they are experiencing.

Many people hesitate to ask out of fear they may make things worse. Research shows the opposite is true. Asking directly demonstrates empathy and can open the door to help. Silence, on the other hand, can reinforce stigma and shame.

What You Can Do

If someone you know may be struggling, there are several ways to help:

- Listen without judgment. Having someone willing to listen can make a significant difference.
- Encourage professional help. Offer to help find a counselor, contact a doctor or reach out to a crisis line.
- Stay connected. Regular check-ins and ongoing support can reduce feelings of isolation.
- If someone is in immediate danger, stay with them and call 911 or take them to the nearest emergency department.

Local Help Is Available

If you or someone you love is struggling, support is available.

- HopeHealth Behavioral Health Services: (843) 667-9414
- Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Dial or text 988, available 24/7

A Message of Hope

No one is immune to depression, and many people will experience it at some point in their lives. No one should have to face it alone.

Talking about mental health can feel uncomfortable, but it is an act of care, strength and prevention. By continuing the conversation, recognizing warning signs and supporting one another, we can help save lives.

About the Author

Neva Bailey, LPC, CASII, is a behavioral health consultant serving patients at HopeHealth in Timmonsville. She has lived in Timmonsville for more than 20 years and is passionate about serving her community. Bailey is actively involved with the Boys & Girls Club of the Pee Dee and is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Her clinical interests include stress management, grief and loss, anxiety and depression, cognitive behavioral therapy and working with adults, seniors and couples.

For more information, call (843) 667-9414 or visit hope-health.org.

PEE DEE MENTAL HEALTH CENTER'S ACT PROVIDE IN-HOME CARE FOR THOSE IN NEED

By Susan Carter, MS, LPC



Sandra Henry

Pee Dee Mental Health Center's offers a wide range of programs for individuals who require services delivered in their homes and communities due to transportation barriers and/or the severity of their symptoms, that require weekly monitoring by a mental health professional. PDMHC provides housing support, job training and placement and home visits to patients with serious and chronic mental health disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression.

Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) is a community-based program that provides highly individualized, intensive services to individuals in the Pee Dee area with severe and persistent mental illness and/or co-occurring mental health conditions who have not benefited from traditional mental health care services. Program Supervisor Sandra Henry, LPC, explains, "Our goal is to provide highly qualified, comprehensive mental health services efficiently, effectively and safely to those we serve. We offer an array of intensive mental health services to individuals aged 18 and older experiencing acute symptoms of mental illness, including schizophrenia and related disorders, psychosis, bipolar disorder, depression, substance use disorders, dual diagnoses and emotional distress.

ACT services are typically provided in the participant's home or community setting, with a focus on addressing basic needs, improving community living skills, reducing hospitalizations, homelessness and incarceration.

PDMHC previously offered a version of this program, which it has since enhanced to meet all requirements and ensure patients receive evidence-based treatment that maintains fidelity to the program's intent.

The center, along with several other Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities outpatient community mental health centers, is now able to offer ACT as a Medicaid-reimbursable service. In 2023, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services added ACT to the State Plan and developed a formal ACT manual.

Henry, serves as the ACT program supervisor, which is managed by Cathy Timmons, MSW and Vickie Redden. Henry describes the team-based approach:

"ACT is a team-based service program in which members meet daily to review the status of each individual served. While certain team members may work more closely with specific participants, all team members are expected to be familiar with every individual to ensure support is always available when needed, including during crises."

A unique feature of ACT is its multidisciplinary team structure. South Carolina ACT teams are required to include staff in nine key roles: team leader, psychiatric care provider, registered nurse, qualified mental health professional, mental health professional, peer support specialist, employment support specialist, substance use specialist and program assistant.

Henry notes that PDMHC's program, "consists of licensed and credentialed professionals specializing in each support area. Services include psychiatry, nursing, psychology, substance use treatment, peer support, employment and education support and case management." ACT team members also assist with coordination of care across medical

providers, hospitals, crisis services, housing, legal systems, and other community resources.

PDMHC's ACT program currently serves 22 participants across the Pee Dee region, including Florence, Darlington, Marion, Mullins, Pamplico, Lake City and Coward.

Henry highlights the value of teamwork to the success of the program:

"I enjoy working with our ACT team and the consistent communication among team members regarding participant progress. Each team member brings specialized knowledge and skills to support participants. We meet daily to discuss updates; review services provided and identify ongoing needs, allowing us to support participants in overcoming barriers and achieving stability."

She also acknowledges a key challenge—eligibility limitations:

"Due to the program model constraints, we are not always able to serve all applicants," says Henry. "ACT is an evidence-based practice specifically for individuals with severe mental illness. Eligibility requires a primary diagnosis of schizophrenia, another psychotic disorder or bipolar disorder. Individuals who do not meet these criteria are not eligible for the program."

While all mental health programs aim to improve outcomes, Henry emphasizes that "ACT differs from other programs in its implementation, intensity and dedication." The program is an intensive, non-residential service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with services delivered in the community. It provides a single, fixed point of responsibility for treatment, rehabilitation and support, with the frequency and intensity of services tailored to each participant's individual needs. While there is no fixed service frequency, most participants receive an average of three hours of face-to-face services and approximately two additional hours of support per week, in addition to access to 24/7 services for emergent needs.

There is no strict time limit for participation in ACT; however, the team works collaboratively with individuals to transition them to less intensive services when appropriate.

Henry encourages individuals and families in need of services to reach out: "Contacting us at Pee Dee Mental Health Center to complete an intake or assessment is the first step." We are here to help.

For more information about ACT or other center services, contact Pee Dee Mental Health Center at 843-317-4073.



DEPRESSION: NOT JUST A WOMEN'S ISSUE

By Susan Carter, MS, LPC



Susan Carter

Depression has traditionally been considered a, “women’s disease.” As reported, depression rates consistently reveal that twice as many women compared to men report depression symptoms. Depression affects one in eight men, with higher rates of suicide despite lower diagnosis rates.

Men outnumber women in alcohol-related disorders, drug-related disorders, anti-social personality diagnoses and any psychiatric condition due to the high numbers of men in alcohol abuse and dependence categories. Many of these men may be depressed and are expressing their depression through these other diagnoses.

Another reason for lower rates of reported depression in men is their tendency to deny illness, self-treat symptoms and avoid professional health care providers. This has contributed to a poor understanding of how depression impacts men, including how to identify it and how to treat it.

One way in which depression looks different in men compared to women is that men focus on physical rather than emotional symptoms. In the early stages, male depression often does not fit the official diagnosis of depression as “persistent sad, anxious or empty mood; feelings of hopelessness and pessimism; feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness and loss of pleasure in hobbies and activities once enjoyed,” (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Depression 5th ed. Revised). Instead, men focus on physical rather than emotional symptoms. They may complain of physical symptoms such as pain or digestive issues rather than overt sadness. Irritability, anger, risky and escapist behaviors such as reckless driving, substance abuse, dangerous gambling or excessive sexual activity, are common behaviors of depressed men. Working long hours, watching excessive tv, or isolating from friends and family are other ways men may react to feeling depressed. These behaviors are attempts to avoid or numb their awareness of an underlying problem.

Men differ from women in how they talk about depression. They may refer to their emotional problems in terms of “stress,” rather than sadness of feeling disappointed. They often report problems at work, including decreased performance or not being able to focus on and complete tasks that they used to be able to do.

Gender and socio-cultural factors such as age, religious background and traditional norms around masculinity explain why depression presents differently in men. Most significant is the traditional value that, “Big boys don’t cry.” As young boys grow and develop, they become aware that independence, competitiveness, emotional stoicism and self-control are expected of men. These values, promoted by parents and other caretakers, shape their approach to health care. Boys can learn to disassociate from aspects of their emotional experience, especially any visible signs of sadness. Anger, shame and control-oriented defenses often arise as a means of self-protection.

Causes of male depression include a mix of biological, social and psychological factors, often triggered by stressful life events. Difficult experiences such as the death of a loved one, trauma, divorce, isolation and lack of support can trigger a depressive episode. Many men’s stressors (relationship loss, parenting, financial, health) become issues of grief and loss over time through loss of status and prestige.

Hormones and neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine contribute to the development of depression in both women and men. There is a strong genetic component to depression. For both genders, if you have a first-degree relative with depression, you’re about three times as likely to develop the condition as the general population. Another common cause of depression is serious medical condition such as chronic pain or diabetes. Medication side effects and substance abuse also impact the likelihood of developing a depressive disorder.

Even though men are reluctant to bring up the topic of depression, we should not avoid it as it is important to let men know that they can discuss their feelings and moods in a nonjudgmental atmosphere. The consequences of not broaching the topic can be deadly. A good way to broach the subject is to note any behavioral changes you have seen in your friend or family member. For example, you can say, “You don’t seem to have energy. Do you feel ok?” Do this in a caring, not critical tone, so that your friend or relative will not feel threatened or defensive. Once assured that you are genuinely concerned, many men will respond honestly and be relieved that they can share their depression burden with someone who may be able to help.

Although depression does not always lead to thoughts or acts of suicide or self-harm, the higher suicide rates of men, especially older men, suggest that the two conditions are often related in men. Death by suicide is four times higher for men than for women overall. Elderly men’s suicide rate is more than seven times higher than that of elderly women. Adverse life events such as loss of a partner, loss of financial status, loss of good health and loss of friends can destabilize men and lead to suicidal thoughts and behavior. Since men are more likely to engage in reckless behavior including unsafe driving and they also often have access to firearms, their attempts to die by suicide are much more likely to succeed than women’s efforts, even though women attempt more often, usually by drug overdoses. Firearms are more likely to cause death than an overdose.

Fortunately, there are evidence-based treatments that can help men (and women) with identified depression get better. Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) is effective in helping individuals recognize and change negative thought patterns. All male group therapy can provide men with a safe environment to discover and express intense and vulnerable emotions associated with their depression. Medication, usually SSRIs such as Prozac, Zoloft, and Lexapro, but also newer SNRIs such as Cymbalta and Effexor, are often helpful in reducing depressive symptoms. Lifestyle changes, such as regular, moderate intensity exercise, a healthy diet and improved sleep habits.

Keep in mind that depression is a serious but treatable disorder that presents differently in men and women. While crying and withdrawing from others is often seen in depressed women, men who demonstrate an irritable or angry mood and/or behave in uncharacteristic ways such as reckless behaviors, may also be depressed. The only way to know is to ask men how they are doing and to listen to them carefully and nonjudgmentally.



SERVICE, SACRIFICE AND GRATITUDE By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Cleveland Williams

The words “thank you” carry deep meaning. Service members who risk their lives for their country do not serve for praise, but out of commitment to protecting the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Throughout history, men and women have enlisted in the armed forces to help safeguard those freedoms for all Americans.

Those expressions of gratitude are reflected each May during Military

Appreciation Month, designated by Congress to honor those who have served and those who currently serve in the United States Armed Forces. The month includes several observances recognizing different segments of the military community.

- **May 1 – Loyalty Day:** First proclaimed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to reaffirm loyalty to the United States. While not an official federal holiday, it is recognized in some communities.
- **May 8 – V-E Day:** Victory in Europe Day, marking the end of World War II in Europe on May 8, 1945.
- **Military Spouse Appreciation Day:** Observed the Friday before Mother’s Day, honoring the contributions and sacrifices of military spouses.
- **Armed Forces Day:** Celebrated the third Saturday in May, recognizing those currently serving in the military.
- **Memorial Day:** Observed the last Monday in May, remembering those who died while serving in the armed forces.

Army veteran Cleveland Williams is among those whose service is honored during Military Appreciation Month. Williams enlisted during one of the most controversial periods in American history — the Vietnam War.

A native of Florence, Williams has been married for 56 years and is the father of three children, along with six grandchildren and two bonus children. He joined the U.S. Army in December 1968, a year marked by political turmoil, assassinations and widespread unrest tied to

the Vietnam War.

After completing basic training, Williams trained as a truck driver and was assigned to Germany, where he served for three years in a transportation unit. He reached the rank of sergeant (E-5) before leaving active duty in 1972. Williams later joined the Army Reserve, where he served an additional 20 years and seven months, retiring as a sergeant first class.

“When I first joined the military,” Williams said, “many people were not happy with Vietnam-era veterans, and they were not welcomed home. They made veterans feel unwanted. The recognition of their service did not come until later.”

Over time, that recognition began to grow. Local veterans organizations started hosting monthly breakfasts for former service members. Churches also became involved, creating spaces where veterans could gather, receive information about available resources and hear presentations meant to encourage and support them.

Williams said organizations such as Gold Star Mothers have also shown appreciation for veterans by presenting Quilts of Valor — handmade quilts given in recognition of military service and sacrifice. Williams received one of those quilts in honor of his service.

“The treatment of veterans has changed,” Williams said. “The difference in how we were treated 50 years ago compared with today makes me feel good.”

He believes programs that provide counseling, drug treatment and other support services are helping veterans cope with the physical and emotional challenges that can follow military service. Group support and outreach efforts, he said, show that the country is moving in a positive direction in recognizing those who served.

Williams also hopes younger generations entering the military will appreciate the sacrifices made by those who came before them. He often speaks with young adults who ask about his time in service and express gratitude for his experiences.

“They must understand that freedom is not free,” Williams said. “Someone has paid the price — whether through disability or death. There have been great sacrifices for the liberties we enjoy today.”



May is National Military Appreciation Month | Remember. Honor. Support.

RECOGNIZING COURAGE AND COMMITMENT By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Dr. Felix Alexander, a retired major

In 1999, the United States Congress designated May as Military Appreciation Month to honor those who have served — past and present — in the U.S. armed forces.

“It is humbling that there is a moment in time when people pause and reflect on the people who have served,” said Dr. Felix Alexander, a retired major in the United States Air Force. “A lot of us gave up an integral part of our lives for the service of our country. I also think about some of the guys who are no longer with me — those who committed their lives, including some who died while on active duty.”

Alexander was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Air Force and served from 1980 to 2000. During his 20-year career, he was stationed in various locations and served honorably before retiring with the rank of major.

After his military service, Alexander pursued higher education, earning several advanced degrees, including a doctorate in community care and counseling with a concentration in marriage and family therapy from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is a licensed counselor in both North Carolina and South Carolina.

According to Alexander, one of the most meaningful ways civilians can show appreciation for veterans is by refraining from judgment.

“I know especially during the Vietnam era, when soldiers returned home, people passed judgment,” Alexander said. “They were called baby killers and other things by people who had no knowledge of what they had experienced.”

Since that time, he noted, there has been greater awareness and understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the challenges service members face.

Alexander explained that during his service as a first responder, he often had to clear the bodies of fallen service members — experiences that were rarely shared with the public. Without that understanding, he said, it was easier for civilians to be critical of returning soldiers.

Exposure to violence and loss can make the transition to civilian life difficult. The structure of military life is vastly different from civilian life, and many veterans struggle with that adjustment — often without full understanding from friends and family.

“There are many misconceptions about how service members return to civilian life,” Alexander said. “People assume they will just resume normal activities, but exposure to violence and loss can deeply affect a person’s mental state.”

Despite those challenges, Alexander said one of the most rewarding aspects of his service has been watching the recruits he trained grow into successful citizens. Many have stayed in touch over the years, expressing gratitude through letters and updates about their careers and families.

“Seeing their success is genuine and meaningful,” he said.

While recognition for military service has grown in recent years, Alexander believes more can be done to support veterans. He emphasized the importance of transitional programs that help service members adjust to

civilian life.

As a licensed mental health counselor, Alexander frequently hears concerns from veterans who feel their voices are not fully heard when policies and programs are developed.

“The ideal Military Appreciation initiative would include stronger transitional programs for veterans who need help adjusting to civilian life,” he said.

Alexander also encourages younger generations to learn about military history and listen to the experiences of those who have served.

“We repeat mistakes because we don’t listen to the ones who have gone before us,” he said.

He believes one of the greatest lessons future generations can learn is to appreciate one another rather than focus on differences.

Alexander added that the United States could do more to care for its veterans, particularly as they age.

“Other countries honor their elderly and don’t let them fall through the cracks,” he said. “If we could learn to take care of them and glean wisdom from them, I think we would be better for it.”

As Military Appreciation Month reminds the nation each year, honoring those who serve is not only about recognition — it is also about listening, learning and ensuring veterans receive the respect and support they deserve.



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, CONFIDENCE AND LONG-TERM STABILITY



(DWM) - April marks Financial Literacy Month, a national observance dedicated to improving Americans' understanding of money management and empowering individuals to make informed financial decisions. Established to raise awareness about financial education, the month serves as a reminder that financial literacy is a lifelong necessity that affects every stage of life.

From budgeting and saving to investing and retirement planning, financial literacy forms the foundation for economic stability and personal success. Yet many individuals lack the knowledge needed to confidently navigate financial systems. Financial Literacy Month aims to close that gap by encouraging education, conversation and action.

The Importance of Financial Literacy

Financial literacy is the ability to understand and effectively use financial skills, including personal financial management, budgeting and investing. It influences everyday decisions, from managing household expenses to choosing credit options and planning for the future.

Without a basic understanding of financial principles, individuals may fall into cycles of debt, struggle to build savings or miss opportunities to grow wealth. Those equipped with financial knowledge are better positioned to achieve stability, avoid financial pitfalls and build generational wealth.

Financial Literacy Month highlights the connection between financial education and overall well-being. Studies show that individuals with higher levels of financial literacy are more likely to save regularly, maintain emergency funds and plan for retirement.

Key Areas of Focus

During Financial Literacy Month, educators, financial institutions and community organizations emphasize core areas of personal finance:

Budgeting: Creating and maintaining a budget is often the first step toward financial control. It helps track income and expenses, identify spending patterns and prioritize financial goals.

Saving: Establishing a savings habit is essential for handling unexpected expenses and achieving long-term goals. Experts recommend building an emergency fund covering three to six months of living expenses.

Credit Management: Understanding how credit works—including credit scores, interest rates and repayment terms—is critical. Responsible use can open doors to homeownership, education and business opportunities, while poor management can limit options.

Investing: Investing allows individuals to grow wealth over time. Learning the basics of stocks, bonds and retirement accounts helps individuals make informed decisions and take advantage of compound growth.

Debt Management: Knowing how to manage and reduce debt is key. Strategies such as prioritizing high-interest debt and making consistent payments can help individuals regain control of their finances.

Financial Literacy Across Generations

Financial literacy is relevant at every stage of life, and Financial Literacy Month encourages age-appropriate education.

For young people, early exposure to financial concepts can set the stage for responsible habits. Teaching children about saving, spending and goal-setting helps build a strong financial foundation. Schools and families play a critical role.

Young adults often face significant financial decisions, including student loans, credit cards and career planning. This is a key time to learn about budgeting, credit management and the importance of starting retirement savings early.

For working adults, the focus often shifts to wealth building, homeownership and long-term planning. Understanding investment options, insurance and tax strategies becomes increasingly important.

Older adults and those approaching retirement benefit from guidance on managing retirement accounts, Social Security benefits and health care costs. Financial literacy helps ensure individuals can maintain their quality of life during retirement.

The Role of Communities and Institutions

Financial Literacy Month is supported by organizations including schools, banks, nonprofits and government agencies. These groups offer workshops, seminars and online resources designed to make financial education accessible.

Employers also play a growing role by offering financial wellness programs that help employees manage money-related stress and improve productivity. Topics often include retirement planning, debt reduction and budgeting strategies.

Community-based initiatives are especially important in reaching underserved populations. Access to financial education can help bridge economic disparities and provide tools for financial independence.

Technology and Financial Education

Technology has transformed how people learn about and manage finances. Mobile apps, online courses and digital tools make it easier to track spending, set goals and access financial information.

During Financial Literacy Month, organizations promote these tools to enhance awareness. Budgeting apps can provide real-time insights into spending habits, while investment platforms offer opportunities to learn about markets and build portfolios.

However, the rise of digital finance underscores the importance of cybersecurity and protecting personal information. Financial literacy now includes recognizing scams, safeguarding accounts and making secure transactions.

Taking Action

Financial Literacy Month is not just about learning—it is about taking action. Individuals are encouraged to assess their financial situation, set realistic goals and develop a plan.

Simple steps can make a significant difference. Creating a budget, starting a savings account or reviewing a credit report are practical ways to begin improving financial health. Over time, these small actions can lead to meaningful progress.

Setting clear, measurable goals—such as paying off a specific debt or saving a certain amount—can help maintain motivation and track success. Consistency and discipline are key to financial growth.

Looking Ahead

As the financial landscape continues to evolve, the need for financial literacy remains strong. Economic changes, technological advancements and shifting job markets require individuals to adapt and make informed decisions.

Financial Literacy Month serves as a reminder that education is the first step toward empowerment. By learning about personal finance, individuals can build confidence, reduce stress and create a more secure future.



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Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



Unexpected expenses happen — a car repair, a medical bill or a home repair you didn't see coming. These costs are much easier to handle when you've set money aside.

Even starting with \$10 to \$20 a week can build momentum and help create a financial cushion over time. Small, consistent actions often lead to meaningful long-term results and greater peace of mind when the unexpected occurs.

And yet, many people say, "I just don't have anything left to save." That may feel true. But ask yourself: Have you really taken a close look at your spending?

Step One: Track Before You Change

If you didn't start building your

emergency fund in January, that's OK. Start now. For the next few weeks — or, even better, a full month — track everything you spend.

- Jot it down in a notebook
- Use a budgeting app
- Save every receipt

Review your bank transactions weekly

At the end of that time, sit down and total your spending. How much went to groceries? Dining out? Subscriptions? Daily coffee runs? Convenience purchases you barely remember making.

These are not "bad" expenses. But seeing the totals in black and white can be eye-opening. You may find opportunities to cut back on dining out or cancel a subscription.

You might discover that trimming just one or two small habits can free up enough money to begin building your emergency fund. Even modest adjustments can lead to steady progress over time.

Dollars, Not Drama

Building an emergency fund doesn't require dramatic lifestyle changes. It requires awareness.

When you understand where

your money is going, you gain control. And with that control, you can make intentional decisions that move you forward. Over time, these choices can build confidence and reduce financial stress.

If you haven't opened an emergency savings account yet, now is a great time. Palmetto First offers member-friendly savings options designed to help you grow without pressure. You can even use direct deposit to make saving automatic and consistent each pay period.

This month, your assignment is simple: Track your spending. Learn from it. Adjust.

We'll check back soon with more practical tips to help make 2026 your most financially fit year yet. You don't have to be perfect — you just have to start.

We're Here to Help

At Palmetto First, we're here to answer your questions and guide you as you build financial confidence. With the right mindset and tools, you have what it takes to succeed. Your credit union is here to support you every step of the way — contact us today to learn more about your options.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUING AND RE-VALUING YOUR BUSINESS



As a business owner, you probably know everything about how your company works. But maybe not what it's worth. If so, that might create problems in the eventual sale or

transfer of your business, especially if the sale or transfer is sudden.

Proper valuation of your business can help you better protect your interests and the welfare of your family and heirs. It can also ease the transition. By taking the guess work out of the valuation process you can possibly avoid disagreements between the different parties.

Subsequently, valuation may help you in planning and saving taxes. Since valuation helps the IRS determine estate taxes and the tax basis for any future sale, with proper planning you may be able to put financial strategies in place that may save you money in the long run.

Now, even if a sale or retirement is years away, understanding what your company is worth today can have multiple pay-offs. It is information that can help you secure financing or make decisions on whether to expand or stay the course. Valuation serves as an important management tool that can give you insights on how to reposition your business to enhance its marketability.

So how do you determine the value of your business? There are generally three approaches used to calculate a business valuation. The asset-based approach is balance sheet-focused, using the difference between a company's assets and liabilities to determine its value. The second is the market approach which

values the business based on pricing multiples derived from the sale of comparable companies. And finally, there's the income approach, which establishes a figure from capitalizing or discounting the company's projected economic benefit stream.

Remember that as your business changes so might your valuation, so be sure to keep it up-to-date. The best way to do that is to make it a standard part of your annual financial review. For instance, you can make it a habit to have your valuation reviewed by a specialist each year right before you meet with your financial professional to review your life insurance policies. That will also help you ensure that you maintain just the right amount of life insurance coverage for your business succession planning.

Valuation is a simple idea, but one that's complex to execute. There are a variety of certified experts who specialize in valuations, and they will determine which valuation methods will deliver an accurate assessment for a given industry. They take the emotion out of the calculation but instill peace of mind.

Business owners have many complicated issues that they need to navigate day in and day out. The sooner you address the needs of your business, the better off you'll be.

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ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK ANNOUNCES LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS

Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant

MULLINS — Anderson Brothers Bank announced the board of directors has approved nine leadership appointments, including six vice presidents and three assistant vice presidents, further strengthening the organization's management team and reinforcing its long-term strategic direction.

Vice president appointments:

- Kendra Jordan, vice president, director of electronic banking;
- Candace Britton, vice president, director of business services;
- Koko Elliott, vice president, director of deposit operations;
- Amy Smith, vice president, director of loan and credit operations;
- Jeff George, vice president, director of credit administration;
- Dan Reynolds, vice president, commercial loan officer.

Assistant vice president appointments:

- Heather Stanley, assistant vice president, mortgage operations manager;
- Maria Cartrette, assistant vice president, branch support supervisor;
- Sherry Young, assistant vice president, call center manager.

"These leadership appointments represent both our respect for tradition and our commitment to the future," said David E. Anderson, chief executive officer of Anderson Brothers Bank. "Each of these individuals has earned the trust of our organization through hard work, professionalism and service. As we continue to grow and evolve, their experience and leadership will help ensure we remain a strong, stable community bank for generations to come. Thanks to each for your contribution, and congratulations."

Michael Martin

Anderson Brothers Bank also proudly announced the appointment of Michael Martin as loan officer and assistant branch manager at

its McIntyre Branch, 232 W. McIntyre St., Mullins.

In his expanded role, Martin will oversee consumer and real estate lending, providing clients with efficient, tailored financial solutions. His leadership is marked by dedication to responsive service and a commitment to fostering strong, long-term relationships with individual clients and local businesses.

"Michael exemplifies the professionalism, expertise and community focus that are the hallmarks of Anderson Brothers Bank," said Luke Gasque, assistant vice president and city executive of Anderson Brothers Bank. "His deep understanding of lending and genuine commitment to our customers make him an invaluable asset to our team and the McIntyre community."

Martin is a graduate of Pee Dee Academy and earned a degree in business administration from the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. His career reflects a strong foundation in financial leadership and a longstanding dedication to serving and uplifting local communities.

An active community leader, Martin serves as president of the Greater Mullins Chamber of Commerce and as board officer and sergeant-at-arms for the Marion-Mullins Rotary Club. He is also a board member of the Pee Dee Coalition, a volunteer football coach at Pee Dee Academy and a member of Mullins First Baptist Church.

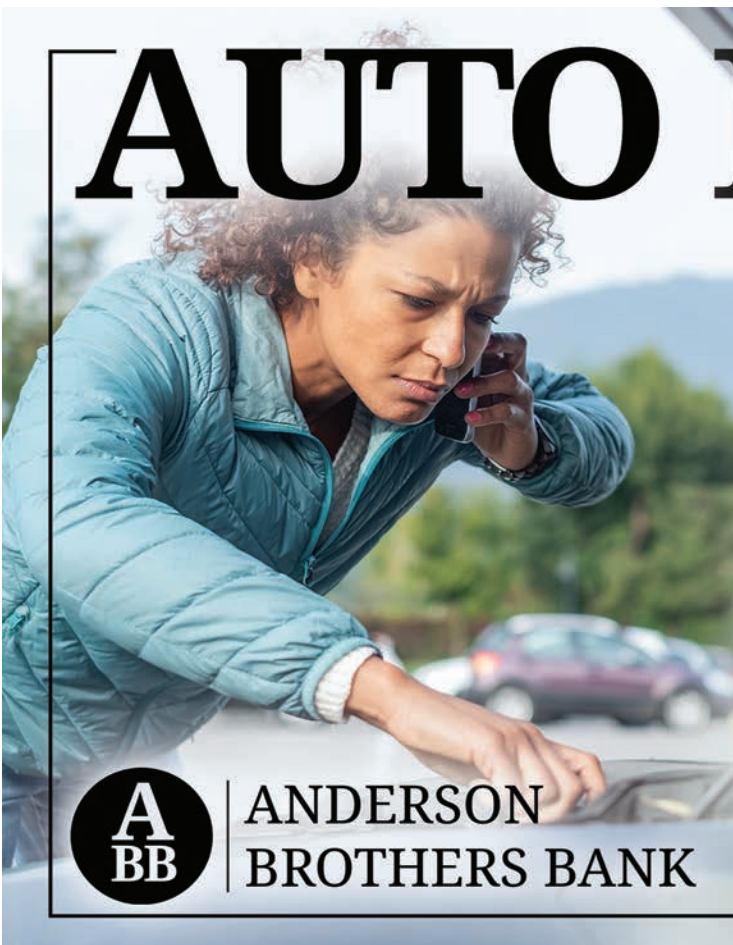
About Anderson Brothers Bank

Anderson Brothers Bank is a full-service community bank offering a complete range of competitive loan services and deposit products. Founded in 1933, the family-owned bank blends traditional personal service, local market awareness and advanced technology to meet customers' financial needs. Anderson Brothers Bank operates 26 branches in 17 communities throughout the Pee Dee, Coastal and Lowcountry regions of South Carolina. The bank's main office is at 101 N. Main St., P.O. Box 310, Mullins, SC 29574. For more information, call 843-464-6271 or visit ABBANK.com.



Michael Martin

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PLANNING TODAY FOR A SECURE TOMORROW



(DWM) - Retirement may feel like a distant milestone, but financial experts agree that the earlier individuals begin planning, the more secure their future can be. Whether retirement is decades away or just around the corner, creating a clear strategy is essential for long-term financial stability.

A strong retirement plan starts with setting realistic goals. Consider the lifestyle you want to maintain, including housing, travel, health care and daily living expenses. Estimating these costs can help determine how much money you will need to save. Financial planners often suggest aiming to replace 70 to 80 percent of your pre-retirement income, though individual needs vary.

One of the most effective tools for retirement savings is consistency. Contributing regularly to retirement accounts such as a 401(k) or an individual retirement account can build wealth over time through compound interest. Even small, steady contributions can grow significantly, especially when started early. Many employers offer matching contributions for 401(k) plans, which can accelerate savings and should not be overlooked.

Diversification is another key principle. Spreading investments across different asset classes — such as stocks, bonds and mutual funds — can reduce risk and improve long-term returns. Younger investors may choose more aggressive portfolios with higher stock exposure, while those nearing retirement often shift to more conservative options to protect

their savings.

Understanding Social Security benefits is also an important part of retirement planning. While Social Security can provide a foundation for income, it is typically not enough to cover all expenses. Deciding when to begin collecting benefits can significantly impact the total amount received. Delaying benefits beyond the earliest eligibility age can increase monthly payments.

Health care costs are another critical factor. As people age, medical expenses often rise, making it important to plan for insurance coverage and out-of-pocket costs. Long-term care insurance is one option some individuals consider to help manage expenses related to extended care needs.

Debt management plays a significant role as well. Entering retirement with minimal debt can ease financial pressure and allow savings to stretch further. Paying high-interest debt, such as credit cards, should be a priority, while managing mortgages and other loans strategically can improve financial flexibility.

Regularly reviewing and adjusting a retirement plan is essential. Life circumstances, market conditions and financial goals can change over time. Conducting annual check-ins can help ensure that savings strategies remain aligned with long-term objectives.

Finally, seeking professional advice can provide valuable guidance. Financial advisors can help assess current savings, recommend investment strategies and identify potential gaps in planning.

Retirement planning is not a one-time task but an ongoing process. By starting early, staying consistent and making informed decisions, individuals can build a financial foundation that supports a comfortable and confident retirement.



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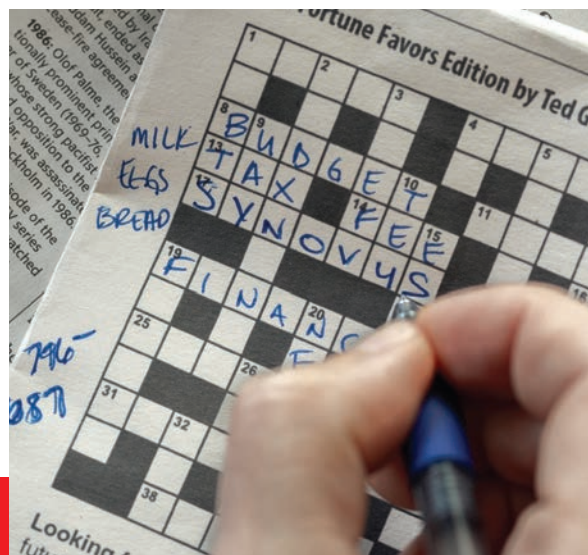
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Breeanna Thames, LISW-CP

Parenting is one of life's most rewarding roles, but it also brings many challenges — from sleepless nights with a toddler to helping a teenager cope with bullying. When work responsibilities, busy schedules, financial strain and relationship challenges are added to the mix, families can easily feel overwhelmed.

While a healthy amount of stress can help keep people motivated, excessive stress can lead to burnout and negatively affect both mental and physical health over time. Research shows that 48 percent of parents with children younger than 18 report their stress is “completely overwhelming” most days. If you feel stressed about your family environment, you are not alone.

If you constantly feel frazzled, react to stress in negative ways or notice that one of your children is struggling, it is important to slow down and evaluate what is happening. Signs of stress to watch for include fatigue, irritability, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating and changes in eating or sleeping patterns.

Take time to assess your home and work environments, family schedules, your stress levels and how you manage them, as well as your children's stress levels. Instead of harsh self-judgment, adopt a more objective approach and implement small, sustainable changes over time. Reducing busyness and developing effective coping skills can help your family lower stress levels and create more moments of peace and contentment.

For Parents

Societal and cultural pressures often encourage families to maintain a nonstop lifestyle. Slowing down can feel difficult, but you do not have to do everything or please everyone. Check in with your values and decide what is truly important.

Create a community of support. It truly takes a village. Explore available resources, including extended family, friends, babysitters, after-school programs, community centers and churches. Ask for help when needed and share responsibilities such as pickups, drop-offs, errands, meals and household tasks.

Plan downtime for yourself and your children. Overscheduling can become normal for many families, but it comes with a cost. Aim for a healthy balance of work, school, extracurricular activities, downtime and family time. Scheduling time for rest, fun and relaxation is essential for overall health and well-being. Review your family's schedule and identify ways to scale back when it becomes overwhelming.

Practice mindfulness and self-awareness. Reflect on how you respond to stress. Do you react quickly with anger? Are you overly critical or negative? Learning to pause before reacting can help you become a more intentional parent. Take a breath or step away briefly until you feel calmer. Changing habits takes time.

Be a positive role model. Children notice everything, and your actions often speak louder than your words. Prioritize your physical and mental health, even in small ways.

For Kids

Children face their own stressors and often absorb

the stress of the adults around them. They also learn how to react to stress by observing their parents. Teaching them healthy ways to manage stress as they grow is essential. Children and teens benefit from structure and consistency.

Help children develop problem-solving skills. Kids are not born knowing how to plan, organize or prioritize tasks. Talk with them about strategies for managing homework, chores and responsibilities. Encourage them to ask for help and collaborate with family members when needed. Remind them they do not have to be perfect.

Create simple systems. Establishing routines can help children manage schoolwork and household responsibilities. Teach them how to organize homework assignments or create a timeline for projects. Chore charts with step-by-step instructions can also help. Provide guidance until they are confident and check in regularly.

Encourage open conversations. Talk with your children about what causes them stress. Many young people experience anxiety related to school, social situations or expectations. Approach conversations without judgment and work together to explore solutions and coping strategies.

For the Family

Set limits on screen time for the entire household. Excessive screen use has been linked to anxiety, depression, anger, attention problems and decreased physical activity. Establish screen-free times, such as during meals or before bedtime.

Learn and practice stress management techniques together. Relaxation and grounding exercises can help calm the nervous system and build emotional resilience.

Breathwork is one of the simplest ways to activate the body's relaxation response and can be done anywhere. Slowly inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth several times.

Other helpful techniques include:

- **Square breathing:** Inhale for four counts, hold for four counts, exhale for four counts and hold again for four counts.
- **Dragon breathing:** Take a deep breath through the nose and exhale forcefully through the mouth with a “HAAH” sound.
- **The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique:** Identify five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.
- **The category game:** Choose a category and list as many items as possible.

Building stronger connections through regular family downtime can also reduce stress. Plan enjoyable activities together, such as game nights, walks or picnics. Positive shared experiences strengthen family bonds and help children develop confidence and security.

If stress begins to interfere with daily life or overall health, consider seeking support from a behavioral health counselor.

Stress naturally ebbs and flows throughout life. Learning how to manage it effectively can help families enjoy life more fully and build skills that benefit every family member.

Breeanna Thames, LISW-CP, is a behavioral health consultant at HopeHealth Pediatrics in Florence. For more information, visit hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.

THE SURPRISING KEY TO AVOIDING DEMENTIA

By Dana Jones, FNP-C



Dana Jones, FNP-C

Dementia is a growing national and local health concern. It is the fourth-leading cause of death among individuals ages 70 and older in the United States. In South Carolina, more than one in 10 residents age 65 and older have been diagnosed with dementia, according to a 2020 study. Among those 85 and older, that number increases to nearly one in two.

Dementia is defined as a decline in memory or thinking ability that is severe enough to interfere with daily life. Because there is currently no cure, care focuses on preserving quality of life and preventing or delaying cognitive decline. Early identification of memory and thinking problems is the first step in reducing risk.

You may be surprised to learn that one of the most important keys to avoiding dementia is you.

Individuals play a powerful role in protecting their own brain health. According to the Lancet Commission on Dementia, there are 14 factors that can reduce a person's risk of developing dementia by nearly half.

While some risk factors, such as genetics and age, are beyond our control, many others are tied to lifestyle choices. Making healthy changes now can help protect cognitive health later in life.

The commission identified the following 14 factors that can help reduce dementia risk:

- Pursue higher education or lifelong learning
- Prevent or treat hearing loss
- Lower LDL cholesterol
- Avoid or treat depression
- Prevent head injuries by practicing safety and wearing helmets

- Stay physically active, such as brisk walking on most days
- Limit sugary foods and refined carbohydrates
- Avoid or quit smoking
- Maintain healthy blood pressure
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption
- Stay socially active
- Reduce exposure to air pollution
- Address vision problems

Researchers estimate that if these factors were addressed broadly, nearly half of dementia cases could be prevented or delayed.

What do all these factors have in common? You.

Right now, you have the ability to make choices that support long-term brain health. Small changes — becoming more active, improving nutrition, staying socially connected or managing chronic conditions — can make a meaningful difference over time.

Talk with your primary care provider about steps you can take today. A provider can help you set realistic goals and develop a cognitive care plan to monitor brain health over time.

For older adults or caregivers looking for senior health care, HopeHealth offers primary care services for patients age 65 and older, including services at Bethea Retirement Community and The Manor. HopeHealth also offers the Hope Gold program, designed to support older adults living with chronic conditions.

To learn more, visit hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.

Dana Jones is a family nurse practitioner who primarily practices at HopeHealth at Bethea. She began her nursing career more than 30 years ago and joined HopeHealth in March 2018. Jones is certified by the American Association of Nurse Practitioners and is also a Certified Dementia Practitioner.

Together Healthy

At HopeHealth, we believe we are truly healthier together. As a Community Health Center, we are guided by a diverse board of community leaders, including Spanish teacher Edna Rodriguez, whose service reflects our deep roots in the community we serve.

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CAROLINA PINES UROLOGY EXPANDS WITH DR. CHRISTOPHER FUKUDA

Submitted by Hanna Caddell, marketing and communications coordinator



Dr. Christopher Fukuda

HARTSVILLE — Carolina Pines Medical Group (CPMG) Urology has welcomed its newest physician, Dr. Christopher Fukuda, to the practice. Joining urologists Dr. David Horger and Dr. Winston Vaught, Fukuda brings advanced training in both urogynecology and pediatric urology — a rare and valuable combination that significantly expands the scope of care available to families across the Pee Dee region.

For decades, Carolina Pines Medical Group Urology has served as a trusted destination for high-quality, compassionate urologic care. The addition of Fukuda strengthens that reputation by introducing subspecialties that have historically required referral to larger cities or academic medical centers. Now, women and children in the Pee Dee will have convenient local access to care that was previously available primarily at tertiary facilities.

A Provider With Dual Expertise



Fukuda's practice blends two highly specialized areas of urology. As a urogynecologist, he treats women with pelvic floor disorders such as urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, overactive bladder and chronic pelvic discomfort. As a pediatric urologist, he cares for children with urinary tract concerns, congenital abnormalities, voiding dysfunction and kidney-related conditions.

Fukuda said his passion for these specialties stems from the meaningful impact they have on patients' quality of life.

"Pelvic health conditions can affect every part of a woman's daily experience," he said. "Being able to offer treatments that restore comfort and confidence is incredibly meaningful to me."

Working with children offers a different but equally rewarding experience.

"When a child is experiencing a urologic problem, it affects the whole family," Fukuda said. "My goal is to provide clear answers, gentle care and solutions that help kids get back to being kids."

A Strong Team Grows Stronger



Fukuda joins a team guided by the experience and leadership of Horger and Vaught, both respected for their clinical expertise and long-standing commitment to the Pee Dee community.

Horger expressed enthusiasm about the practice's newest addition.

"Dr. Fukuda brings a level of subspecialized training that is uncommon in community settings," Horger said. "His expertise will allow many of our patients — especially women and children — to receive advanced care without leaving the region."

Vaught agreed, noting the importance of expanding services as the region grows.

"The Pee Dee continues to grow, and with that comes the need for more comprehensive medical services," Vaught said. "Dr. Fukuda's training fills an important gap. We're excited for what this means for our patients."

Together, the three physicians form one of the most comprehensive urology teams in the area, offering services that meet the needs of patients of all ages.

A Patient-Centered Philosophy

Known for his compassionate and approachable manner, Fukuda prioritizes patient education and partnership during every visit. He emphasizes that many urologic and pelvic floor conditions — particularly among women — often go untreated due to stigma or uncertainty.

"These conditions are incredibly common, but many people feel embarrassed to bring them up," Fukuda said. "I want patients to know they're

not alone, and effective treatments are available."

His approach to pediatric care centers on patience, communication and trust.

"Kids need to feel safe, and parents need to feel heard," he said. "Taking the time to build that comfort level is just as important as the medical treatment itself."

Bringing Advanced Care Closer to Home

With Fukuda's arrival, Carolina Pines Medical Group Urology significantly expands its ability to deliver specialized care in the Pee Dee. Women experiencing pelvic floor issues can now access advanced urogynecologic evaluations and minimally invasive treatment options closer to home. Families with children facing urinary or genital concerns can receive timely guidance and expert care in a supportive environment.

Horger said the addition marks an important milestone for the community.

"Our mission has always been to provide exceptional urology care close to home," he said. "Adding Dr. Fukuda helps us fulfill that mission in a bigger and more impactful way."

Looking Ahead

As CPMG Urology continues to grow, the practice remains focused on providing high-quality, personalized care to every patient. Fukuda said he is honored to serve the region and looks forward to building relationships with families throughout the Pee Dee.

"I'm honored to join a practice with such a strong reputation," he said. "I look forward to building relationships with patients and offering the specialized care they deserve."

With the combined expertise of Horger, Vaught and Fukuda, Carolina Pines Medical Group Urology is well-positioned to meet the evolving health care needs of the Pee Dee for years to come.

Fukuda is now accepting patients at Carolina Pines Medical Group Urology, 701 Medical Park Drive, Suite 110, in Hartsville. To schedule an appointment, call 843-383-2764.





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NATIONAL HIV TESTING DAY: THE JOURNEY OF HIV

Submitted by Brittany Hanes, MSN, APRN, FNP-C



Brittany Hanes, MSN, APRN, FNP-C

The journey of HIV in America has come a long way in the past 45 years. The first cases of what would later be known as AIDS — and eventually HIV — were reported in the United States in 1981. After peaking as an epidemic in the mid-1990s, research, education, prevention and treatment have evolved significantly. Today, HIV can be well managed.

For the vast majority of people living with HIV who follow their treatment plan, the virus can

become undetectable. When HIV reaches an undetectable level, there is no risk of sexual transmission, and individuals can live healthy, fulfilling lives.

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, weakens the immune system by attacking a type of white blood cell called CD4. These cells help the body fight infections and illness. HIV is classified as a retrovirus because it inserts its genetic material into human cells and replicates.

Antiretroviral medications, commonly referred to as ARV therapy, target different phases of the HIV life cycle. These medications prevent the virus from replicating and spreading throughout the body.

If untreated or poorly managed, HIV can progress over time to AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, the final and most serious stage of the disease. Both HIV and AIDS increase the risk of serious infections affecting the brain, lungs, blood and digestive tract, as well as certain cancers such as lymphoma and cancers of the lung or liver.

Although HIV infection rates are declining nationally, the overall numbers remain significant. In 2022, approximately 32,000 people in the United States were newly infected with HIV, while an estimated 1.2 million people were living with the virus. Because HIV typically has no symptoms in its early stages, about 13 percent of people with HIV were unaware of their status and needed testing.

Regionally, the South continues to experience the highest number of new HIV infections, accounting for nearly half of all new cases.

People aged 25 to 34 represent the largest group of new HIV infections, with the second-highest number among those ages 13 to 24. About 70 percent of those diagnosed were Black or Hispanic. Of the estimated 32,000 new infections, approximately 67 percent occurred among individuals reporting male-to-male sexual contact, 22 percent reported heterosexual contact and about seven percent reported intravenous drug use.

Prevention

Unprotected sex and sharing needles used to inject drugs are the two most common ways HIV is transmitted. Practicing safe sex, avoiding shared needles and receiving regular testing as recommended by a health care provider are the first steps in prevention.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that everyone between ages 13 and 64 receives an HIV test at least once. Requesting an HIV test at a provider's office is one option, and rapid HIV tests are also available online for in-home use. Free testing may also be available at many local colleges and universities.

People with certain risk factors are encouraged to get

tested at least once a year. These include men who have sex with men, individuals who have sex with a partner known to have HIV, those who have had more than one sexual partner since their last HIV test, people diagnosed with other sexually transmitted infections and anyone who shares needles used for drug injection.

Two additional prevention strategies are also important in the fight against HIV.

PrEP, or post-exposure prophylaxis, is a medication regimen used to prevent HIV infection after a possible exposure to the virus. It is important to see a health care provider within 72 hours of a potential exposure to begin treatment. The medication is typically taken for 28 days, followed by HIV testing at 30 and 90 days. If a person requires PrEP for unprotected sex three or more times, PrEP may be recommended.

PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, is a medication taken by people who are HIV-negative but at higher risk for infection. PrEP significantly reduces the risk of contracting HIV through sex or injection drug use. Individuals taking PrEP receive regular testing and monitoring, usually every three to six months.

Another important prevention step is prioritizing safe sex. Using condoms consistently, discussing sexual and drug-use history with new partners, disclosing HIV status and considering testing together before beginning a sexual relationship can help reduce risk.

Treatment

If an HIV screening test returns positive, a health care provider will perform a follow-up test to confirm the diagnosis. Once a person is diagnosed with HIV, treatment typically includes antiretroviral medications and routine blood testing. Two primary blood tests are used to monitor HIV.

A **CD4 blood test** measures the number of CD4 cells in the body and helps determine the strength of the immune system.

An **HIV viral load test** measures the amount of HIV in the blood and helps determine how well treatment is working and whether the virus is being effectively suppressed.

People diagnosed with HIV who take their medications as prescribed can usually lower their viral load to an undetectable level. When the virus becomes undetectable, HIV cannot be transmitted to another person through sex. Maintaining this status also helps keep the immune system strong and reduces the risk of HIV-related complications.

A national awareness campaign known as U=U, or Undetectable = Untransmittable, promotes the message that people living with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load cannot pass the virus to sexual partners. The campaign also works to reduce stigma and improve access to HIV testing, treatment and care.

HopeHealth began as Hope for the Pee Dee, an HIV service organization founded in 1994. Today, the nonprofit community health center continues to provide HIV testing, education and high-quality medical care to patients in Florence, Aiken and Orangeburg.

HopeHealth case managers also assist individuals with medication access, transportation, housing, employment and other support services that help improve overall quality of life.

HIV is no longer the death sentence it once was. Reducing stigma begins with education, testing and treatment. If you have questions or concerns about your HIV status, do not delay in seeking testing and medical care.

Brittany Hanes is a nurse practitioner serving patients at HopeHealth in Orangeburg.

For more information, visit HopeHealth online at hopehealth.org or call (843) 667-9414.

HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS Submitted by Sheridan K. Edwards, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



Carson Lee, LPCA

Carson Lee, LPCA, is a behavioral health consultant at HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. She earned a Bachelor of Science in psychology and a Master of Science in applied psychology (clinical/counseling option) from Francis Marion University in Florence.

Lee's clinical interests include trauma-focused therapy and helping patients achieve their personal and mental health goals.

Dr. Will Hunter previously served at HopeHealth from 2018 to 2021 as a clinical psychologist. He then joined Francis Marion University as director of counseling and testing from 2021 to 2026. In addition to rejoining HopeHealth, he will continue teaching master's and doctoral psychology students at FMU.

Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Hunter earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Davidson College in North Carolina, as well as a Master of Science in

Clinical Psychology and a Doctor of Psychology in Clinical Psychology from Baylor University in Texas. He also completed a fellowship in psychosocial rehabilitation and severe mental illness at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, Texas.

Hunter has received additional training in cognitive processing therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder. He enjoys working with veterans. His clinical interests include the diagnostic assessment of complex mental health conditions, crisis intervention and risk assessment, and the treatment of severe and chronic mental illness, including schizophrenia spectrum disorders and bipolar disorder.

He is a member of several professional organizations, including the American Psychological Association, the National Register of

Health Service Psychologists, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, the South Carolina Association on Higher Education and Disability and Psi Chi, the National Psychology Honor Society.

HopeHealth is a nonprofit organization that provides affordable, expert health care and infectious disease services for patients of all ages in Aiken, Clarendon, Florence, Orangeburg and Williamsburg counties. Its federally qualified health centers serve nearly 60,000 patients and function as primary care providers across the region.

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

STACKING HEALTHY HABITS FOR PROGRESS



(Feature Impact) Despite the best intentions, plans to build healthier habits often fall flat. The problem usually isn't a lack of motivation or discipline — it's unrealistic expectations.

Completely overhauling your lifestyle requires a level of commitment that isn't always practical. Understanding your personal health needs and the challenges you face can help create a more realistic roadmap to better health.

Tools to guide you

Every plan needs a starting point, and several reputable sources can help you build one tailored to your health goals.

The American Heart Association offers My Life Check, a free tool designed to help individuals better understand their heart health. Users answer questions about daily habits to receive a personalized heart health score within minutes.

Results are private and downloadable, giving users control over their information. The tool breaks big goals into small, actionable steps. Knowing your numbers — and how they compare with recommended ranges — helps create a clearer path forward.

While reports are customized, no personal data is stored. Responses are used only to calculate health scores and generate recommendations. Even small changes — moving more, eating smarter, sleeping better or managing stress — add up over time.

Finding your path

Once you understand your heart health numbers, small steps become clearer and more manageable. That knowledge makes it easier to focus on one area at a time. Health changes don't need to be expensive or complicated. The most sustainable habits are those that fit into everyday life, where each action moves you closer to your goals.



Eat smart

Choose foods that help you feel your best. Add more color to your plate and aim for balance rather than restriction. Simple swaps can make a meaningful difference.

Move more

Find movement that fits your lifestyle, such as walking, stretching or dancing. Every bit of activity counts and supports both heart and mental health.

Sleep well

Rest is a foundation of good health. Protect your bedtime routine and give your body the recovery it needs.

Manage stress

Check in with yourself regularly — mentally and emotionally. Create simple moments to pause, breathe or step outside. Connection and calmness support heart health.

Staying motivated is easier when you track progress and see the impact of your efforts. Revisit your goals every few months to measure growth and continue building lasting habits.

To get started with personalized tips and set your own health goals, visit heart.org/mylifecheck.

Hope in Every Step

HopeHealth offers substance use disorder treatment services in Florence, Manning, and Orangeburg.

To Learn More:

(843) 432-3690

hope-health.org



CARE SOUTH CAROLINA PROVIDERS ATTEND SC NURSE LEGISLATIVE DAY

Articles submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Barbara Wright, FNP-C, Joe Reynolds, AGNP-C and Jimmi Jones, FNP-BC

SOCIETY HILL — Three CareSouth Carolina health care providers recently represented the organization at South Carolina Nurse Legislative Day at the State House in Columbia.

Barbara Wright, FNP-C; Joe Reynolds, AGNP-C and Jimmi Jones, FNP-BC attended the February 26 event, joining hundreds of nurses and health care professionals from across the state. The annual gathering gives nurses the opportunity

to meet with lawmakers, discuss health care priorities and advocate for policies that support both health care workers and the patients they serve.

This year's legislative focus centered on two key issues affecting South Carolina's health care community. One aims to strengthen protections against workplace violence targeting health care workers, a growing concern nationwide. The other focuses on expanding the scope of practice for advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), allowing them to provide more services independently and increasing patient access, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Wright, Reynolds and Jones serve patients at CareSouth Carolina's Rosa Lee Gerald Center in Society Hill, where they provide primary care and work to improve health outcomes for individuals and families throughout the region.

CARE SOUTH CAROLINA BREAKS GROUND



The groundbreaking ceremony

BENNETTSVILLE—CareSouth Carolina broke ground on a renovation and expansion project at its Bennettsville clinic, improving access to health care services in Marlboro County.

The project will nearly double the size of the existing clinic at 999 Cheraw St., expanding the facility to about 9,940 square feet. The renovation will enhance patient care and bring multiple services together under one roof.

A key feature is a larger pharmacy with new drive-through access, a service requested by patients. The redesigned space also will allow relocation of women's health and pediatric services into the expanded clinic.

"CareSouth Carolina is pleased to begin renovations that will significantly improve patient access in Bennettsville," said CEO Ann Lewis.

Once completed, the clinic will offer improved patient flow, additional clinical space and greater convenience. The groundbreaking brought together leadership, community partners and local supporters.

Convenient Locations:

Bennettsville Center 999 Cheraw Street Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.479.2341	Dillon Center 1016 Old Latta Highway Dillon, SC 29536 843.774.4337
Bennettsville Pediatric Center 210 W. Main Street Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.479.1200	Hartsville Center 1268 S. Fourth Street Hartsville, SC 29550 843.332.3422 843.339.5520 Chiropractic
Bennettsville Women's Center 1076 Marlboro Way Rd., Suite 1 Bennettsville, SC 29512 843.454.2294	Lake View Center 103 N. Kemper Street Lake View, SC 29563 843.759.2189
Bishopville Center 545 Sumter Highway Bishopville, SC 29010 803.484.5317	Latta Center 122 Latimer Street Latta, SC 29565 843.627.6252
Bishopville Pediatric Dental 101 Harris Street Bishopville, SC 29010 866.815.9845	McColl Health & Wellness Center 3080 Highway 15-401 E McColl, SC 29570 843.523.5751
Cheraw Center 812 State Road Cheraw, SC 29520 843.537.0961 843.921.6711 Foot Care	Society Hill Center 737 S. Main Street Society Hill, SC 29593 843.378.4501
Chesterfield Center 204 Perry Wiley Way Chesterfield, SC 29709 843.623.5080	

Pharmacy Locations:

HARTSVILLE 1280 S. Fourth Street 843.339.5530	BISHOPVILLE 545 Sumter Hwy 803.588.7960	BENNETTSVILLE 999 Cheraw Street 843.456.7777
SOCIETY HILL 737 S. Main Street 843.378.4148	CHERAW 812 State Road 843.865.4080	DILLON 1016 Old Latta Highway 842.627.7154
LATTA 122 Latimer Street 843.627.6261	CHESTERFIELD 204 Perry Wiley Way 843.927.1030	MCCOLL 3080 Highway 15-401 E 843.523.6212

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Alan Barrett, PA-C, DPAS, DFAAPA

While many people look for a jump-start to healthier living after the holidays, incorporating more physical activity is a powerful goal year-round. Regular movement offers numerous benefits for people of all ages and ability levels.

Physical activity helps keep the brain, bones, heart, blood vessels and immune system functioning well while reducing inflammation. Moving more can decrease the risk of chronic diseases and help improve management of existing health conditions. Beyond the

physical benefits, combining activity with strength training can enhance mood, boost energy levels and improve balance, endurance and stress management.

Overcoming Barriers

Many people face barriers to becoming more active, including limited time, cost or fear of injury or embarrassment. These challenges can often be addressed by reframing how we think about movement: identify your, “why,” explore activities you enjoy and create a realistic plan.

In 2024, nearly half of Americans met recommended guidelines for cardiovascular activity, but fewer than one-third met guidelines for both cardiovascular exercise and strength training. A balanced approach to physical activity includes both.

Cardio (150 minutes per week)

Cardio activities increase heart rate and blood flow. These can include structured exercises such as walking, running, dancing or swimming, but everyday activities count as well.

- **The power of NEAT:** In medicine, providers often emphasize NEAT — nonexercise activity thermogenesis. This refers to energy burned during daily activities such as vacuuming, washing the car, raking leaves or taking the stairs. These movements contribute meaningfully to overall physical activity.

- **The talk test:** A simple way to gauge intensity is the “talk test.” If you can talk while moving but cannot sing, you are likely exercising at a moderate intensity.

Strength Training (two to three sessions per week)

Strength training builds muscle and improves bone density, both of which are important for long-term health. Strength exercises may include lifting weights, using resistance bands or performing body-weight movements such as squats, lunges and pushups. Activities like heavy gardening or yoga can also provide resistance training benefits.

Strategies for Success

Regardless of your current fitness level, several strategies can help you incorporate more movement into your daily routine.

Identify Your “Why.”

Motivation is closely tied to personal goals. Perhaps you want the energy to keep up with your grandchildren, travel more comfortably or sleep better. Connecting physical activity to meaningful outcomes can help sustain motivation over time.

Find the Fun — and Keep It Local.

Exercise does not have to feel like a chore. When you

enjoy an activity, you are more likely to continue it.

- Explore local opportunities. In Florence, options include walking or running along the Rail Trail, playing pickleball at community courts or walking laps at the mall during poor weather.

- Add enjoyment by listening to music or podcasts while exercising.

- Reframe movement as play, a chance to socialize or an opportunity to relieve stress.

Ditch the “All-or-Nothing” Mindset.

Physical activity does not need to occur in long sessions to be beneficial. “Exercise snacking,” or breaking activity into short bursts throughout the day, can be equally effective. Three 10-minute walks provide similar cardiovascular benefits as one 30-minute walk.

Make a Plan — and Keep It SMART.

Adults older than 40 or those with chronic health conditions should consult a health care provider before starting a new exercise program.

Once cleared for activity, consider using SMART goals: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound. Instead of saying, “I will walk more,” a SMART goal might be: “I will walk the Rail Trail for 20 minutes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings.”



Start Slow and Prioritize Recovery.

Building a sustainable routine takes time. Doing too much too quickly increases the risk of injury and burnout. Start with manageable activities — even standing up and sitting down from a chair — and build gradually. Rest is equally important; aim for one to two rest days each week so muscles can recover and grow stronger.

Define Success Beyond the Scale.

While weight is often used as a measure of progress, “non-scale victories” are equally important. Notice improvements such as increased energy, less shortness of breath, improved mood, better sleep or clothing fitting more comfortably.

Fuel Your Body.

Think of the body as an engine. Eating balanced meals that emphasize whole food and limit highly processed options provides the energy needed for movement. Staying hydrated throughout the day is also essential, especially during periods of increased activity.

Handle Setbacks with Grace.

Interruptions to exercise routines are common due to illness, travel or busy schedules. If you fall off track, take a moment to evaluate what happened and begin again. Rather than viewing setbacks as failure, treat them as feedback that can help guide future progress.

The human body is designed to move. By setting goals you enjoy, checking in regularly and celebrating progress along the way, you can improve your health while discovering the joy of physical activity.



Alan Barrett holds a doctorate in physician assistant studies and specializes in family medicine at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. For more information, visit hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.

McLeod Health

The McLeod Health Board of Trustees continues its commitment to providing strong leadership, stewardship and oversight of the organization's fiscal health.

Effective March 2026, as new board terms began, Dr. Tarek Bishara of Florence assumed the role of chairman of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees. He succeeds Ronald M. Fowler of Loris, who will continue serving as a member of the board.

"We are extremely appreciative of the dedication and hard work of these volunteer board members who embrace the mission of McLeod Health in service to the community and in delivering excellence in health care," said Donna Isgett, president and CEO of McLeod Health. "Their remarkable leadership continues to guide us as we face the many challenges affecting health care today."

"I am deeply honored to accept the chairmanship of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees," Bishara said. "McLeod has a long and distinguished history of serving our region with excellence, compassion and innovation, and I look forward to supporting that mission in this role."

"Additionally, we express sincere appreciation to Ronald Fowler for his exceptional leadership over the past three years. His steady leadership, integrity and genuine care for this organization have made a lasting impact. I am grateful for the foundation he has built and look forward to carrying that work forward."

The McLeod Health Board of Trustees is a self-perpetuating, 24-member governing board that includes eight physicians, as well as 13 emeritus members.



Tarek Bishara, MD

Tarek Bishara, MD, is a pathologist and president of Pee Dee Pathology Associates Inc. He has been a member of the McLeod Health medical staff for 24 years and was elected to the board of trustees in 2017.

Bishara received his medical degree from the University of South Carolina School of Medicine in Columbia, graduating magna cum laude. He completed his residency at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Following residency, he served on active duty in the United States Air Force with the 81st Medical Group as a pathologist and director of surgical pathology at Keesler Air Force Base Medical Center. He separated from service at the rank of major.

He later pursued fellowship training at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore.

A member of the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Society, Bishara is board-certified by the American Board of Pathology in anatomic pathology and clinical pathology.

In addition to his board service, Bishara previously served as a trustee of the McLeod Health Foundation Board and as vice chair of the foundation board for three years. In 2018, he received the McLeod Merit Award in recognition of his outstanding service to McLeod Health, including leadership as

chair of pathology, medical director of the clinical laboratories and longstanding involvement in clinical effectiveness initiatives focused on improving the quality of patient care.

Raised in Mullins, South Carolina, Bishara has spent his career serving the Pee Dee region. He is married to Dr. Lisa Ann Bishara, an anesthesiologist with McLeod Physician Associates. They have one daughter, Katherine.



Ronald M. Fowler

Ronald M. Fowler has served as a member of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees representing Horry County since 2012.

A native of Horry County, Fowler is a graduate of Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. He earned a master's degree in education from the University of South Carolina.

Fowler has served Horry County Schools for more than 50 years and currently works as a learning specialist in the HCS Office of Human Resources. He also serves as a funeral director with Hardwick Funeral Home.

His leadership roles include service as a current member of the Horry County RIDE IV Committee, as well as past service on the Horry County Board of Adjustment and Appeals. He is a past chairman of the City of Loris Election Commission, past co-chairman of the City of Loris Downtown Revitalization Committee and past president of the Loris Lions Club.

Fowler is also the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award (2024) and the Community Service Award (2002) from the Loris Chamber of Commerce.

He was appointed to the Loris Community Hospital District Board of Commissioners in 2001. During his tenure, he served as both chairman and vice chairman.

Fowler also served on the board in 2011 when McLeod Health and Loris Healthcare System formalized their longstanding and mutually beneficial partnership with a decision to affiliate.

As a member of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees, Fowler has been instrumental in the growth of McLeod Health along the coast. In 2023, he was named chairman of the board and has served on the Governance Committee and as a member of the Nominating, Finance, Audit and Compliance, Planning, Physician Development and Workforce Development and Education committees.

About McLeod Health

Founded in 1906, McLeod Health is a locally owned and managed nonprofit organization supported by more than 1,000 physicians and more than 3,800 licensed nurses. The system also includes approximately 18,000 team members and more than 100 physician practice locations across its 18-county service area.

With seven hospitals, McLeod Health operates three Health and Fitness Centers, a Sports Medicine and Outpatient Rehabilitation Center and hospice and home health services. The system currently has 945 licensed beds.

Hospitals within the McLeod Health system include McLeod Regional Medical Center, McLeod Health Dillon, McLeod Health Loris, McLeod Health Seacoast, McLeod Health Carolina Forest, McLeod Health Cheraw and McLeod Health Clarendon.



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MUSC HEALTH FLORENCE WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

By John Russell, marketing manager, MUSC Health-Florence Division

MUSC Health Florence Medical Center has announced the addition of five new providers: Neurosurgeon Pedro Norat, M.D.; Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Surgeons Juan Tio-Pagan, M.D., and James Steinberg, D.O.; Hematologist and Oncologist Sushma Pavuluri, D.O.; and Pain Medicine Specialist Qi Zhang, M.D.



Pedro Norat, M.D.

Pedro Norat, M.D.

Norat is a general and vascular neurosurgeon and director of the Stroke and Thrombectomy Program at MUSC Health Florence. He treats stroke patients and individuals with brain aneurysms, arteriovenous malformations, cavernous malformations, carotid artery stenosis, intracranial stenosis and brain tumors. His research focuses on ischemic stroke, mitochondrial biology and neuroimmunology, and he has authored numerous peer-reviewed publications. Norat also holds a U.S. patent for an innovative stroke therapy.

Juan Tio-Pagan, M.D.

Tio-Pagan is an orthopedic trauma surgeon with specialized training in complex fractures and musculoskeletal injuries. He previously managed periprosthetic injuries, pelvic and acetabular trauma and complicated fracture patterns at Allegheny Health Network in Pittsburgh. He emphasizes working closely with patients and families to develop personalized treatment plans that restore mobility and improve quality of life after orthopedic injuries.



Juan Tio-Pagan, M.D.

James Steinberg, D.O.

With more than 20 years of experience, Steinberg has treated patients ranging from professional athletes to older adults recovering from fractures. He provides surgical and nonsurgical care for conditions such as fractures, arthritis, ligament injuries and meniscus tears. His areas of expertise include knee arthroscopy, partial and total knee replacements, revision knee replacements and hip replacements.



James Steinberg, D.O.

Sushma Pavuluri, D.O.

Pavuluri is a hematologist and medical oncologist focused on providing personalized, compassionate care at every stage of a patient's cancer journey. She treats a wide range of cancers, including breast, colorectal, lung, pancreatic, hepatobiliary, genitourinary, gynecological, lymphoma and blood and plasma cell disorders.



Sushma Pavuluri, D.O.

Qi Zhang, M.D.

Zhang joins MUSC Health Florence from Upstate New York, where she practiced interventional pain medicine and anesthesiology. With more than a decade of experience, she treats acute and chronic pain conditions and complex issues such as failed laminectomy syndrome, chronic regional pain syndrome, migraines and peripheral neuropathies. She provides conservative, evidence-based treatments—often combining physical therapy with targeted interventional procedures—aimed at restoring function and improving quality of life for patients of all ages.



Qi Zhang, M.D.

DOCTORS DISCUSS GLP-1S VS. BARIATRIC SURGERY

By Kristin Merkel

People seem to be struggling with their weight now more than ever. With so many weight-loss options available, how can anyone know which approach is the best fit? From dieting the old-fashioned way — calories in and calories out — to glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) medications and bariatric surgery, there's a great deal to consider when talking with a doctor about what will work best.

"Usually the first step is to try lifestyle and behavioral modifications for weight loss," said Roberto Miranda, M.D., a family medicine provider with MUSC Health Pee Dee Primary Care. "We assess what is working and what's not to establish a plan for the patient."

GLP-1 medications have been a major topic of conversation in recent years. Due in part to celebrity use and the promise of nonsurgical weight loss, they have quickly become a popular option. Miranda sees many patients who want a noninvasive way to achieve their goals and said GLP-1 medications can be an effective alternative to bariatric surgery for patients who maintain a healthy lifestyle.

"GLP-1s have been very helpful," Miranda said. "When patients start these medications, they begin to lose weight gradually, often about five to 10 percent, and sometimes as much as 30% of their original weight. That level of weight loss can be quite significant."

In some cases, GLP-1 medications can serve as a bridge to bariatric surgery by helping patients reach a safer weight for the operation.

Aftab Jafri, M.D., an advanced gastrointestinal and bariatric surgeon at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center, views GLP-1 medications and bariatric surgery as complementary tools. While acknowledging the benefits of GLP-1 medications, he explained that bariatric surgery often provides more effective and lasting weight-loss results for patients with morbid obesity and obesity-related conditions such as diabetes, sleep apnea or hypertension.

"GLP-1s are often effective in patients with mild to moderate obesity," Jafri said. "But when a patient's body mass index is above 35 with serious comorbidities, bariatric surgery frequently offers the most durable results."

Jafri added that although GLP-1 medications are effective and convenient, they typically require long-term therapy and can involve increasing costs. They also carry the risk of side effects, and long-term safety data is still evolving.

"Bariatric surgery has consistently demonstrated more durable weight loss and a higher rate of remission of obesity-related comorbidities," Jafri said. "One challenge with GLP-1 medications is that weight loss depends on continued therapy, and weight regain is common once treatment is stopped."

With a growing number of weight-loss options available, there is no single approach that works for every patient. While GLP-1 medications offer an effective, nonsurgical option, bariatric surgery remains the most effective and lasting choice for patients with higher BMIs or significant health conditions. The best approach is individualized and depends on a patient's medical history, motivation, ability to make lifestyle changes and long-term health goals.

"For me, it's not just about the number on the scale," Jafri said. "I want to see my patients years down the road still enjoying these health benefits and living active, healthy lives. Those goals are achievable by utilizing surgery and GLP-1s as complementary tools."

CHAPIN FOUNDATION CONTINUES LEGACY OF GIVING



Enrique 'Kiki' Alvarez

Thanks to Simeon B. Chapin, who established the Chapin Foundation in 1943, the quality of life in Myrtle Beach has been greatly enriched. His legacy continues to guide the foundation today as it partners with organizations such as McLeod Health.

This year, the visionary businessman's legacy is touching the lives of children experiencing the effects of disease, injury or disability through a \$90,000 grant for pediatric rehabilitation equipment at McLeod Health Carolina Forest's Pediatric Rehabilitation Department.

Chapin's legacy is evident in the specialized care McLeod provides for children like Enrique 'Kiki' Alvarez,

one of many beneficiaries of the foundation's vision of expanding access to high-quality care for Myrtle Beach's most vulnerable residents.

At just 22 months old, Alvarez lights up every room with his curious spirit and contagious giggle. Behind his joyful demeanor, however, his parents began noticing something that concerned them — he was not speaking like other children his age.

Coming from a bilingual household, his parents initially wondered whether the delay was simply part of navigating two languages. Still, their instincts told them something more might be happening.

Fortunately, they followed those instincts and turned to McLeod Pediatric Rehabilitation, where speech-language pathologist Jennifer McKeivitt began working closely with Alvarez.

A key part of Alvarez's journey has been the use of specialized therapy tools and sensory equipment made possible through the Chapin Foundation grant.

Today, Alvarez is making remarkable progress. He is beginning to use small words, imitate sounds and communicate through signs.

"We are still waiting for him to say those precious words of 'mama' and 'dada' — but he's getting closer every day," Alvarez's mother, Lizeth, said with tears in her eyes.

Alvarez's story reflects the power of early intervention, compassionate professional care and community generosity. Thanks to the Chapin Foundation's support, McLeod Pediatric Rehabilitation on the Carolina Forest campus continues to provide children like Alvarez with the tools they need to grow and the hope their families embrace.

Tory Mackey, executive director of the Chapin Foundation, reflected on Chapin's vision.

"We are continually inspired by the vision Mr. Chapin had for Myrtle Beach and how he identified critical areas that have stood the test of time," Mackey said. "From the board to the staff, we all share a deep sense of calling. That is what keeps us going."

For families like Alvarez's, the Chapin Foundation's investment means more than equipment. It represents hope — a belief that every child deserves the chance to thrive, overcome obstacles and step into a brighter future.

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MUSC HEALTH FLORENCE MEDICAL CENTER ADOPTS FASTER HEART ATTACK DETECTION

Articles By Kristin Merkel



Dr. Russell with Patient Deshantell Canteen

to use a new test that helps doctors detect heart attacks faster and more accurately.

"When I came to the emergency room, I thought whatever test they were going to give me would be difficult or painful," said patient Deshantell Canteen. "But once it was performed, it was very simple and easy."

The new test, the Abbott i-STAT High-sensitivity Troponin I Cartridge (hs-TnI), measures extremely small amounts of cardiac troponin I in the blood. Cardiac troponin is a protein found only in the heart, and elevated levels can signal damage to the heart muscle.

The test runs on the portable Abbott i-STAT 1 System, providing lab-quality results in about 15 minutes right at the patient's bedside. This is significantly faster than previous testing, which could take up to an hour to return results.

Because the test can be performed at the bedside, it eliminates the need to send samples to a laboratory, helping emergency teams act more quickly when every second counts. Canteen was one of the first patients in the emergency department at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center to receive the test when she experienced possible symptoms of a heart attack. Fortunately, the device quickly informed her care team that she was not having a heart attack.

"Once the doctors performed it and it was over within minutes,

When someone arrives in the emergency department with signs of a heart attack, every second matters. Yet determining whether a heart attack is actually occurring can take precious time. That's why MUSC Health Florence Medical Center has become the first hospital in South Carolina



Troponin Device in ER

I was relieved," Canteen said. "It was so simple. Then I started thinking, 'Wow! How can something that simple give such accurate results?' I didn't feel overwhelmed, and I wasn't scared. I felt good about it."

Emergency medicine physician Bradley Russell, M.D., has worked at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center for more than 20 years. He believes the device will save more lives than ever before in the emergency department, calling it a "once-in-a-decade type of change" within a health care system.

"I think it shows that MUSC as an organization is committed to innovation and improving the quality of care and how it's delivered to the public," Russell said. "We're thankful the Florence community and the Pee Dee region were chosen to be the first to use this device. I think it makes us stand out in the community as a leader in technology and service to patients. It's exciting to be part of a large organization that is continually on the leading edge of technology and patient care."

Canteen continued to emphasize not only the efficiency of the test but also the care she received. The troponin device may have provided quick and accurate results, but the care team members were the ones who ensured she felt comfortable.

"What made it easy was the nurses and the doctors. Everybody was so caring," Canteen said. "That made a big difference to me. It wasn't just the instrument itself — the staff made it comfortable as well."

Russell praised MUSC Health Florence Medical Center for continuing to lead the way in adopting advanced technology that supports its mission to provide the highest-quality care for patients throughout the Pee Dee region

INNOVATIVE HEAD INJURY TREATMENT NOW AVAILABLE IN FLORENCE



First MMA Neurosurgical Procedure Team

balance problems, weakness or speech difficulties.

A common treatment for chronic subdural hematomas involves drilling a small hole in the skull to drain the fluid that has built up. But the treatment does not always last. The fluid can return, and patients may need to undergo the procedure again.

Now, a new treatment available in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina offers a more modern approach to addressing these hematomas.

MUSC Health Florence Medical Center is the first MUSC Health hospital outside of Charleston to offer middle meningeal artery (MMA) embolization, a minimally invasive procedure often performed after the traditional drilling treatment. The procedure blocks blood flow to the vessels feeding the irritated membranes associated with a chronic subdural hematoma.

Doctors guide a flexible catheter, often inserted through the wrist or groin, to the middle meningeal artery, which supplies blood to the dura — the membrane that forms the brain's

outermost covering. During MMA embolization, doctors deliver an embolizing agent through the catheter to block or seal off the tiny vessels feeding the damaged portion of the membrane. The goal is to shut off the, "fuel line," that allows the membrane to continue leaking and accumulating fluid.

"Recent studies have shown that combining the traditional treatment with MMA embolization reduces the chance of recurrence from around 11 to four percent," said Neurosurgeon Pedro Norat, M.D., of MUSC Health Florence Medical Center. "For the patient's quality of life, this means fewer procedures, which can lead to fewer complications and a better outcome. The procedure can also be done in an outpatient setting."

The arrival of MMA embolization at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center is part of a larger effort by MUSC Health to ensure advanced treatments are available closer to more communities across South Carolina.

"The investment MUSC has made in this region, and specifically in Florence, to support this service for the community reflects MUSC's mission and its commitment to providing quality care for patients across the state," said Ken Watts, director of imaging services at MUSC Health Florence Medical Center.

For Norat, the reward is seeing patients gain access to a cutting-edge, less invasive treatment that reduces the risk of recurrence for chronic subdural hematomas close to home.

"Being able to offer advanced care locally instead of having patients transferred to Charleston to receive it makes me very happy," Norat said. "As a partner to the standard treatment, I believe this helps make Florence a city with some of the best care possible."

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MARION COUNCILWOMAN CHAMPIONS UNITY AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

By Cynthia O. Ford



Councilwoman Tassie Lewis

MARION — For Councilwoman Tassie Lewis, leadership has always meant serving others. A lifelong Marion resident and District 5 councilwoman for nine years, Lewis believes protecting the safety and well-being of citizens is one of the most important responsibilities of public service. Her compassion for the community led her to

launch a proactive initiative focused on unity, awareness and violence prevention.

Lewis' commitment to leadership began long before she entered public office.

"I remember being about five years old sitting in class with my teacher, Ms. Best," Lewis recalled. "She asked who wanted to be the student leader for the day, and I always raised my hand."

When she felt the teacher might not notice her, she stood up so she could be seen.

"I knew even then that leadership was something I was meant to do," she said.

As a child, Lewis stayed active in school and community activities. Neighbors encouraged her to participate in a pageant at Allen University, which she won despite nervousness about speaking in front of a crowd. She also earned academic honors, participated in Beta Club, and remained involved in basketball and cheerleading.

Those early experiences shaped her confidence and desire to lead.

Years later, a tragic incident involving violence between residents of Marion and Mullins deeply affected Lewis and inspired her current initiative.

"I could not understand how a situation between people who knew each other escalated to that level," Lewis said. "It made me ask why there was no conversation or peaceful intervention before things reached that point."

Residents soon began contacting Lewis with concerns about crime and safety. After prayer and reflection, she decided to act.

"I prayed about what I could do and asked God to order my steps," she said.

That decision led to the creation of United We Stand Against Crime and Violence, a community initiative focused on education, prevention and collaboration. Lewis intentionally designed the program to involve multiple communities and leaders.

She partnered with Mullins Mayor Miko Pickett, Rev. Leo Woodberry of the Cease Fire initiative, and other community leaders who supported the effort.

"I did not want the initiative to be about me or just the City of Marion," Lewis explained. "This is about communities working together."

The program brings together citizens, business owners, law enforcement officers and elected officials to promote awareness and encourage peaceful solutions to conflict. Outreach events are held several times each year, often in areas where crime concerns have been raised.

Rather than focusing on blame, Lewis emphasizes education and community responsibility.

"One of the biggest challenges is that when a crime happens, someone usually knows who was involved," she said. "But people are often afraid to speak up."

The initiative encourages residents to support law enforcement through anonymous reporting tools and community cooperation.

"If you see something, say something," Lewis said. "It takes all of us working together."

Community response has been encouraging. Residents frequently thank Lewis for addressing the issue and creating opportunities for dialogue.

Several events have featured testimony from individuals who previously experienced incarceration, as well as families who have lost loved ones to violence. These stories help young people understand the real consequences of crime.

"Every testimony has been powerful," Lewis said. "Those voices matter."

Lewis believes the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. continue to guide her work.

"Dr. King believed in unity and nonviolence," she said. "He showed that people from all backgrounds must work together."

She often reflects on his words: "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal." For Lewis, each outreach event represents a step toward that goal.

Violence prevention also requires addressing root causes such as economic hardship, peer pressure and family challenges. Lewis believes mentorship and strong community relationships are vital.

"It takes a village to raise a child," she said.

Youth engagement remains a priority in her vision for Marion. She supports programs that provide mentorship and guidance for young people before they reach adolescence. Organizations such as Distinguished Gentlemen, Fox 84, RISE, BOOST and the Performing Arts and Science Academy contribute valuable mentorship and leadership development opportunities.

"No one competes," Lewis said. "Everyone has a piece of the puzzle."

Lewis credits her faith for sustaining her leadership journey.

"My faith keeps me grounded," she said. "I believe God orders my steps and gives me the strength to face challenges."

A U.S. Army veteran, she believes perseverance and service go hand in hand.

"The more obstacles I face, the stronger I become," she said.

Although the initiative began with Lewis personally covering many costs, community partners have stepped forward to help. Organizations such as the Marion Fire Department, Pick 42 Foundation and Franklin Home Health have contributed resources to outreach events. Lewis hopes residents will continue joining the effort to create a safer community.

"Unity, peace and justice," she said. "That is what every community deserves."

Residents interested in learning more or supporting the initiative can contact Councilwoman Lewis at tassielewis1@gmail.com.

EMPOWERING SENIORS FOR SAFER ONLINE EXPERIENCES



(Family Features) - Today's seniors aren't shying away from a world increasingly reliant on technology. In fact, recent survey findings suggest adults 65 and older are more digitally active and self-assured than ever.

Nearly all seniors surveyed in the Connecting the Digital Dots: Online Habits and Safety Concerns Across Three Generations study from Cox Mobile consider themselves digitally literate, using devices for shopping, banking, social media and entertainment. With older adults spending significant time online — 41 percent reported spending five or more hours daily — they are also at greater risk for scams, malware and data breaches.

Although 61 percent of seniors who encountered digital threats were able to resolve the issues themselves, demonstrating growing digital capability. Increased online engagement brings new challenges for caregivers, who often play a key role in supporting seniors' digital journeys.

To help older adults stay safe and confident online, Cox Mobile, in partnership with Common Sense Media, offers educational materials on digital safety, smart device use and media literacy. Here are practical strategies caregivers can use to empower seniors:

Encourage strong passwords

Simple passwords — such as number sequences, keyboard patterns, or personal information like names, birthdates or addresses — are easily guessed and can create security risks. While 70 percent of seniors already create strong, unique passwords, it encourages them not to reuse passwords across multiple sites. Recommend a password manager app to store passwords securely and reduce the need to write them down.

Promote security software

Even careful users are vulnerable without protection. Though 63 percent of seniors surveyed have security software installed, it's important to keep it updated — or enable automatic updates — on all devices, including laptops, tablets and smartphones.

Enable multi-factor authentication

A simple and effective way to prevent unauthorized access, multi-factor authentication (MFA) adds an extra layer of protection. Sixty percent of seniors are already using MFA. Some may need help setting it up, which typically sends a code to a phone or email during login for online banking, email or social media accounts. Review apps and channels

Smartphones and tablets can accumulate apps over time. While 51 percent of surveyed seniors remove unsafe apps, caregivers should regularly check for unfamiliar or suspicious applications and delete them. Watch for unauthorized charges, unexpected data sharing or unknown browser extensions.

Use built-in safety features

Privacy controls on devices and apps help protect personal information. Caregivers can also check with internet service providers to ensure security features are enabled, as 43 percent of seniors surveyed already do. Features may include limiting data sharing, disabling location tracking, blocking pop-ups and restricting unwanted communications.

Discuss online safety regularly

Technology is constantly evolving. Open, ongoing conversations — like the one-third of seniors who report talking about online safety several times a week or daily — build trust and increase awareness of current scams, suspicious messages, and commonly used apps. By fostering dialogue, sharing practical safety strategies and leveraging trusted resources, caregivers can help seniors confidently and safely navigate today's digital world.

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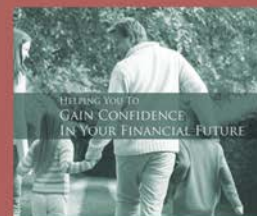
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JACKIE MAYNARD HONORED AS HEART OF THE HOUSE By Ronette Genwright



Jackie Maynard

When Jackie Maynard learned she had been selected for the Heart of the House Employee Award, she did not hear it through a formal announcement or scheduled meeting. She heard it in passing — almost accidentally.

"I had gone to the Express to talk to Monique," Maynard recalled. "She said, 'Congratulations,' and I said, 'Huh?' She told me I won an award, and I said, 'I don't know nothing about no award.'" Only later, when leadership confirmed it and she read the nomination letter written about her,

did the moment truly sink in.

"I was surprised. I didn't expect it. It was overwhelming."

For Maynard, who has spent 20 years working quietly and faithfully behind the scenes at Staybridge Suites in Florence, recognition was never the goal. Her work ethic, consistency and genuine love for her job have always been their own reward. But the honor affirmed what her colleagues and guests have long known: Maynard is the heartbeat of the hotel.

Born and raised in Barbados, Maynard moved to the United States in 1987 and eventually made Florence her home. She is a proud mother of two sons, a U.S. citizen and, since 2006, has been a part of the Raldex Hospitality family.

Her career began in the laundry room, where she still steps in whenever needed.

"We take the linen from the chute, separate it, wash it, dry it, fold it and stock the floors," she explained. "If someone calls out, I go in. Some days I go in at eight in the morning and don't get off until ten at night."

Her responsibilities have expanded over the years, and today she also prepares the hotel's evening social meal three nights a week — Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday — cooking for as many as 112 rooms of guests.

"It's a large amount," Maynard said. "I do my own menu. Something different every day."

Her dishes are rooted in Southern comfort — spaghetti, sausage and rice, chicken bog — seasoned with her own personal touch. Guests serve themselves, but the care behind each meal is unmistakably hers.

What keeps Maynard motivated is simple: she genuinely enjoys her work.

"It gives me joy to go to work every day, put the work in and see the results," she said. "When guests come up and say you're doing a good job, it makes you feel appreciated."

Her leadership style is grounded in honesty, clarity and teamwork. She oversees the work of three people in the Laundry Department and works solo in the kitchen, though co-workers step in when needed. Maynard is known for being direct — something she sees as a strength.

"Sometimes people think saying what you need to say is negative," she said. "But to me, it's positive. If I make their job easier, it makes my job easier."



Jackie Maynard, is pictured with Chad Patterson, chief executive officer and president of Raldex Hospitality Group, along with other award recipients.

Maynard's approach to leadership was shaped by people she admired, especially former manager Chad Patterson.

"No job was ever too low for him," she said. "If laundry was backed up, he came in. If the front desk needed help, he worked it. Seeing how he worked motivated me to put in that extra effort."

Her dedication and character were captured clearly in the award nomination letter written by her management team:

"I am proud to nominate Jackie Maynard for the Heart of the House Employee Award in recognition of her exceptional dedication, leadership, and long-standing commitment to excellence at the Staybridge Suites in Florence. Jackie has been a valued member of the Raldex Hospitality family since 2006, and throughout her tenure she has consistently proven to be an integral part of our company's success. As the leader of the Laundry Department, Jackie demonstrates an outstanding work ethic and a genuine sense of ownership in everything she does. She shows up day in and day out with a positive attitude, ensuring her department operates smoothly and efficiently. Jackie takes great care in making sure her team members are fully supported and have the tools, supplies, and guidance they need to be successful in their roles. Beyond her primary responsibilities, Jackie regularly steps in to assist other departments whenever needed. She does so selflessly to ensure that no team member is overworked and that hotel operations continue to run seamlessly. Her willingness to help wherever she is needed reflects her strong team-first mentality and her commitment to both coworkers and guests. Jackie is also highly attentive to cost control and efficiency, consistently finding ways to save money while never compromising quality. Her attention to detail directly contributes to a clean, comfortable, and welcoming guest experience. In addition, Jackie is known for her friendly personality and clear communication with management, keeping leadership well informed of back-of-the-house operations. Her reliability, professionalism, and positive attitude truly embody the spirit of the Heart of the House Award, making Jackie Maynard a most deserving nominee."

Maynard also plays a role in mentoring the next generation. Through a partnership with McLeod Health, young people



Jackie Maynard, pictured with Robin Osborne, general manager of Staybridge Suites, along with coworkers and family members.

volunteer and learn the basics of hospitality. Maynard remembers her own early days vividly.

"When I first saw that linen coming down the chute, I told the lady I worked with, 'It was nice knowing you, but today is my last day,'" she said, laughing. "She told me, 'No, Jackie, don't do that. It is going to get better.' And it did."

Now she passes that same encouragement on to others: take it day by day, do not let the job overwhelm you and keep a positive attitude.

Looking ahead, Maynard sees herself continuing to grow with the organization — perhaps with fewer hours someday, but still present, still leading and still teaching.

"I can see myself being there," she said. "Maybe not as many hours, but at least as a leader where I can teach someone to have the same work ethics I have. To push them to do better, to be greater."

For someone who never sought recognition, the Heart of the House Award simply confirms what her colleagues already knew: Maynard is the steady, humble force who keeps the heart of the hotel beating.

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EXPLORE THE DIVERSITY OF ARTWORK AT THE ARTFIELDS FESTIVAL Submitted by Roberta Burns, marketing consultant

LAKE CITY — Each spring, the small town of Lake City transforms into something extraordinary. During the ArtFields Festival, storefronts, galleries, restaurants and historic buildings become exhibition spaces filled with creativity. For visitors strolling through downtown, the experience can feel less like a traditional art show and more like a townwide conversation sparked by art.

This year, that conversation is fueled by more than 350 works of art created by artists from across the Southeastern United States, plus nearly 300 artworks created by South Carolina student artists. The festival offers a remarkable diversity of styles, media and perspectives. From bold paintings and intricate sculptures to experimental mixed-media installations, the variety ensures that every visitor can find a piece that speaks to them personally.

The diversity of artwork is one of the defining strengths of the ArtFields Festival. Artists from 12 Southeastern states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia — submit their work to compete in the festival's signature competition. The selected pieces represent a wide range of artistic voices and techniques, showcasing both emerging talents and established creators.

What makes this range especially powerful is the way it invites discovery. One viewer might be drawn to a vivid landscape painting that captures the natural beauty of the South, while another may pause in front of a conceptual sculpture that challenges expectations. In a festival with hundreds of pieces, the chances are high that each visitor will encounter something that resonates.

But the significance of this diversity goes beyond personal taste. ArtFields encourages dialogue. When people stop in front of a painting or installation, they often do more than simply admire it — they talk about it. Friends debate their interpretations. Families compare favorites. Strangers strike up conversations about what a piece might represent.

That interaction is at the heart of the festival's mission. Since its founding in 2013, ArtFields has aimed to celebrate artists living and working in the South while bringing art directly into the daily life of the community. Instead of confining artwork to a single traditional gallery, the festival spreads pieces across more than 40 venues throughout downtown, turning the entire town into a walkable gallery.

This approach makes art feel accessible. Visitors might encounter a sculpture while grabbing coffee, a painting while browsing a boutique or a photograph displayed in

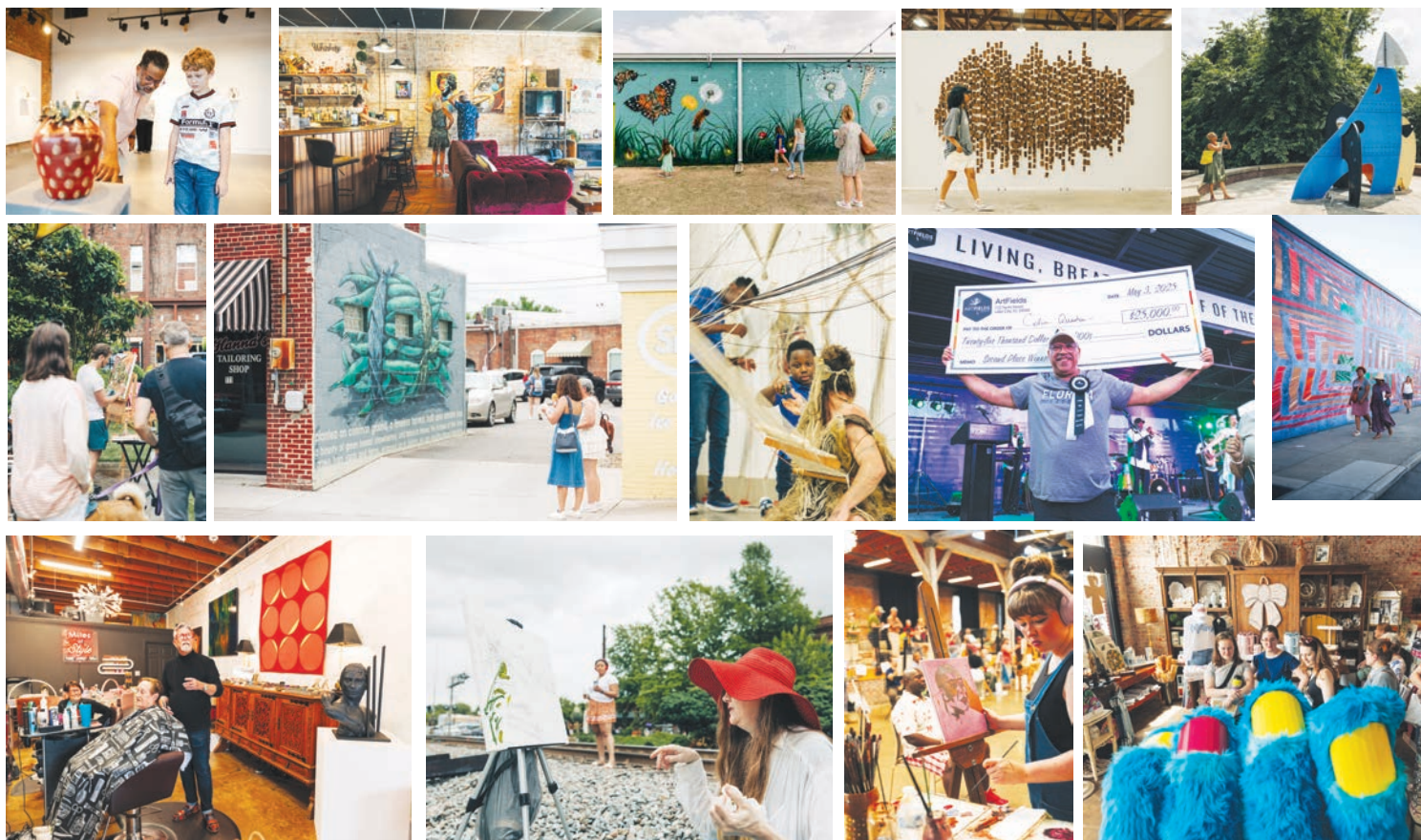
a historic warehouse. These unexpected moments of discovery encourage people who may not typically visit art galleries to engage with creative work.

The sheer number of artworks also makes participation feel personal. With hundreds of pieces to explore, each visitor naturally develops their own “art path” — a collection of favorite works discovered along the way. Those favorites often become the subject of conversation, especially when visitors vote for the festival's People's Choice Awards and determine which two artists will walk away with \$12,500 each.

In the end, the diversity of artwork at ArtFields reflects the diversity of the South itself. Different backgrounds, experiences and artistic visions come together in one place, inviting viewers to slow down, look closely and share their perspectives.

In a world where conversations can often feel divided, the ArtFields Festival offers a refreshing reminder: Sometimes all it takes to bring people together is a piece of art and a simple question — “What do you think about this?”

Attend the ArtFields Festival April 10–May 2 in Lake City, S.C. Art venues are open Tuesday through Saturday. Visit artfieldssc.org for a full festival schedule, including special events and open days at Moore Farms Botanical Garden.



Photos from ArtFields 2025

The Silk Remedy

A SOFT LIFE POUR



Ingredients

- 1.5 oz vanilla vodka
- 1 oz lychee juice
- 1 oz coconut cream
- 0.5 oz simple syrup
- 0.5 oz fresh lime juice
- 1 oz half & half (optional)

Instructions

1. Add all ingredients to a shaker with ice
2. Shake well until smooth and chilled
3. Double strain into a chilled coupe glass

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STAR-STUDED LINEUP SET FOR DARLINGTON'S 2026 COMMUNITY CONCERT SERIES

Submitted by Hunter Thomas, public & community affairs director



Josh Brannon Band 2025

DARLINGTON – The City of Darlington will host its Community Concert Series, presented by Dedicated Community Bank, Duke Energy and Genesis Healthcare, Inc., from April through September 2026. The series, co-sponsored by Darlington Raceway, will feature Julio & The Saltines, Josh Brannon Band, Painted Man Band, Level 10 Band & Show and Andy & Oneida.

The 2026 series mark the second consecutive year the city has offered the free entertainment experience. Each concert will be held on the grounds of the Darlington County Government Building on the Public Square and will run from six to nine p.m. on Friday nights.

Food trucks, vendors and community resource organizations will be set up around the venue. Attendees will also have the opportunity to donate new toys or money to the annual Darlington Fire & Police Toy Drive.

"The City of Darlington is excited to bring the Community

Concert Series back for a second year," said Hunter Thomas, city public & community affairs director. "This year's lineup features strong talent and will appeal to a wide range of music enthusiasts. All concerts will be held in the heart of downtown, and we look forward to bringing the community together each month."

Concert schedule:

- **April 24:** Julio & The Saltines kick off the series. Based in Myrtle Beach, the band is known for its energy, versatility and professionalism, performing at weddings and events where "memories last a lifetime."
- **May 8:** Josh Brannon Band returns for a second year. Based in Murrell's Inlet, the band performs original country songs and top country and rock hits from across the decades.
- **June 5:** Painted Man Band launches the summer portion of the series. The Myrtle Beach-based group plays soul and R&B hits infused with funk and rock.
- **July 10:** Level 10 Band & Show, a local favorite, brings the authentic sound and spirit of soul and R&B to downtown audiences with a performance crafted for unforgettable experiences.
- **Sept. 3:** Andy & Oneida return for the annual NASCAR-themed event. The dynamic duo, with a nine-piece show band featuring electrifying horns, will have attendees dancing all evening.

The city is currently seeking food trucks and vendors. Interested parties can contact Thomas at hthomas@cityofdarlington.com.

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



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.

Visit the Pee Dee Region of South Carolina. Experience the beauty. Discover the difference.

A large scenic image of a river flowing through a dense forest of tall, thin trees. Several kayakers are visible on the river. Overlaid on the image is the text "Visit THE PEE DEE REGION OF SOUTH CAROLINA" in a large, stylized font. Below this is a circular logo for "PEE DEE TOURISM" featuring a map of the seven counties and the text "EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY". At the bottom, contact information is provided: "2513 W LUCAS ST • FLORENCE, SC 29501", "(843) 669-0950 • PEEDEETOURISM.COM", and social media handles for Facebook and Instagram: "PEEDEETOURISMSC". The "DISCOVER South Carolina" logo is in the bottom right corner.



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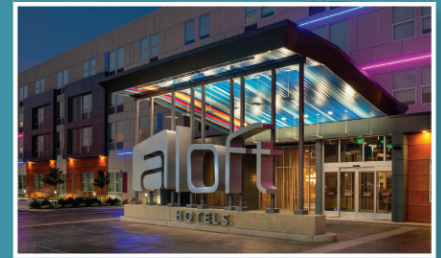
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muschealth.org/cherish



A close-up, high-angle shot of a diverse group of young adults, including men and women of various ethnicities, smiling and laughing joyfully. They are huddled together, creating a sense of unity and happiness. The background is a textured, light blue wall with yellow accents.

We Are All one

Celebrate Diversity and Inclusion