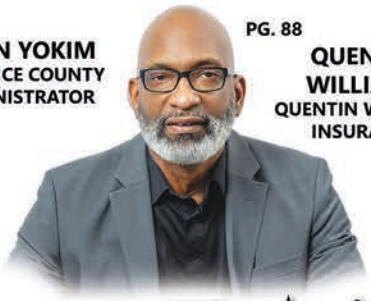


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DIVERSITY WORKS

JULY 2026 VOLUME 16 ISSUE 3

"For All of Us"



COVER STORY: PG. 36
COVER ART: SELU
BY TALISHA LEWALLEN

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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

As Editor of Diversity Works Magazine, I am pleased to present another comprehensive issue dedicated to informing, inspiring and celebrating our diverse community. With summer underway in South Carolina, Diversity Works Magazine and its staff acknowledge the nation's 250th Anniversary, along with other summertime celebrations, festivals and attractions across the region.

This edition features insightful and thought-provoking articles aligned with our recurring quarterly sections, as we transition towards the autumn season. Alongside our regular features, this issue covers both monthly and national observances including Parks and Recreation, National Artists Appreciation Month, Childhood Cancer Awareness, Ovarian and Gynecological Cancer Awareness, Prostate Cancer Awareness, National Recovery Month and Suicide Awareness Month.

Within business coverage, readers can find the latest perspectives on entrepreneurial innovation and profiles of organizations contributing positively to society. Be sure to check out the article on leadership succession through the Florence County Institute or read how employment scams are on the rise, says the BBB and more relevant business centered stores.

Our education section highlights creative learning methodologies and educators advancing inclusion and academic achievement. Calling ALL teachers! Be informed of the Bright Ideas grant and the upcoming application deadline. As you read, learn about the educational collaboration between HGTC and CCU as they create pathways to education. Be sure not to miss the article as HGTC President Marilyn "Murph" Fore says farewell after 51 years as HGTC's leader. These and other informative education stories can be found in Diversity Works Magazine. BUT WAIT!!! Don't miss the announcement of the 2026 UNCF Pee Dee Area Mayors' Masked Ball, dubbed one the region's premier fundraising galas and one of the most anticipated celebrations of the year – all in support of higher education. Mark your calendars today for December 5, 2026!

The diversity in spirituality section focuses on renewal and unity, featuring contributions from Robin Lewis that encourage collective upliftment.

The Pee Dee health care community continues its dedication, as reflected by HopeHealth's updates on welcoming three new providers, and CareSouth Carolina's addition of Dr. Christina Biester (family medicine) and Dr. Tabitha Hennagan (behavioral health). The issue further includes informative articles on robotic surgery, personal experiences with colorectal cancer, details about the pediatric EmPath unit, heart risk assessment, seasonal nutrition and more throughout the section.

Our financial section presents valuable content on identifying and preventing scams in both business and personal finances, alongside practical guidance for building security through diversified income and investments. This issue also introduces new team members at Anderson Brothers Bank: Charlee Rhodes, Keith Norris and Katelyn Willoughby.

The lifestyles section concludes our regular features, providing updates on trends in travel, leisure activities, the arts and everyday living, reflective of our dynamic, multicultural readership.

Special sections this quarter highlight significant national observances.

For National Recovery Month, the issue offers stories of recovery and supportive resources found through behavioral health professionals from HopeHealth, Tenacious Grace, Pee Dee Mental Health and Circle Park, to name a few.

Parks and Recreation Month underscores the impact of green spaces and community programs promoting wellness. As an outlet for kids and adults alike, read about the numerous events and activities going on in local area Pee Dee Parks and get involved.

National Artists Appreciation Month recognizes artists who enrich and broaden our cultural experiences. Diversity Works expresses gratitude to the Florence County Museum for hosting. "Revelations: The Art of Dr. Leo Twiggs," open through October 11. Run, don't walk to see this beautiful exhibition before it closes. Additionally, the Florence Regional Arts Alliance's 10th Small Works Art Competition and Exhibition, will be held at HopeHealth's Streater Community Center on August 28. The annual event features artists from four states displaying their talent in a juried art competition, featuring guest juror and three-time recipient of a U.S. Postal Service commission, Artist Alexander Bostic. You'll be sorry if you miss it! Mark your calendars and plan to attend. The section also features local artists expressing their creativity throughout the region in photography, visual arts, music and so much more.

Our cover story shares ArtFields' landmark fall 2026 launch of the Indigenous Art Initiative, "First Peoples of the Southeast," opening September 9, 2026, through January 30, 2027. The initiative encourages engagement with Native American Indian artists and details the upcoming fall 2026 exhibitions. Read the article which highlights the 19 artists represented, including members of the Lumbee, Catawba, Haliwa-Saponi, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Muscogee Creek nations and more.

We trust that this issue is both interesting and informative! We encourage you to mark your calendars to participate and enjoy upcoming events and activities in the Pee Dee region. Thank you for your continued support of Diversity Works Magazine. Our team looks forward to connecting with you, in the community.

Happy Reading,
Glaceria Brown Mason
Editor

FEATURED ARTICLES & CONTENT

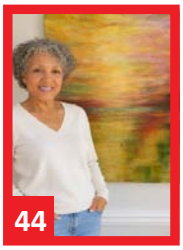
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SC Recreation & Park Association



Claflin University Graduates



Carol Black-Lemon
Artist



Charlee Rhodes
ABB



McLeod GE Partnership



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DCSD

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HOW DOES SOUTH CAROLINA RANK FOR EMPLOYEE HAPPINESS?



(DWM) - Employee happiness has become one of the most important indicators of workplace success. While competitive salaries and benefits remain important, workers increasingly value work-life balance, career advancement, workplace culture, flexibility, mental well-being and a sense of purpose. As employers compete for talent, understanding what contributes to employee happiness has become essential.

So how does South Carolina measure up when it comes to employee happiness?

The answer is mixed. Recent studies suggest South Carolina ranks near the middle nationally while facing challenges related to wages, employee benefits and workplace satisfaction. However, the state's strong sense of community, growing economy and quality of life continue to make it an attractive place to live and work.

A Middle-of-the-Pack Ranking

According to WalletHub's 2025 Happiest States in America report, South Carolina ranked 25th among the 50 states. The report examined emotional and physical well-being, work environment, and community and environmental factors.

The ranking placed South Carolina squarely in the middle nationally. While the state did not rank among the top performers, it also avoided the bottom tier. The results suggest residents enjoy a reasonable quality of life but still face challenges affecting overall happiness.

Workplace satisfaction plays a significant role because most adults spend much of their lives at work. A positive work environment can improve mental health, reduce stress and increase life satisfaction.

What Makes Employees Happy?

Experts say employee happiness extends far beyond a paycheck. While fair compensation remains important, workers increasingly seek jobs that provide meaning, flexibility and opportunities for growth. Employees are more satisfied when they feel valued, respected and supported by their employers.

Several factors contribute to employee happiness, including:

- Competitive pay and benefits
- Access to affordable health care
- Professional development opportunities
- Flexible work arrangements
- Positive workplace culture
- Strong leadership
- Recognition and appreciation
- Work-life balance
- Job security
- Mental health support

Employees who experience these benefits are generally more productive, engaged and likely to remain with their employers. Many workers now prioritize flexibility and wellness alongside traditional compensation.

South Carolina's Strengths

South Carolina offers several advantages that contribute to employee satisfaction. One of the state's greatest strengths is its relatively affordable cost of living. Housing costs remain lower than in many major metropolitan areas, allowing residents to stretch their income further.

The state also benefits from a growing economy. Industries such as manufacturing, health care, logistics, tourism and technology continue to expand, creating employment opportunities.

Natural beauty also plays a role in overall happiness. From the beaches of the Grand Strand and Lowcountry to the mountains of the Upstate, residents enjoy outdoor recreation year-round. Favorable weather, cultural attractions and strong community connections further enhance quality of life.

Cities such as Charleston, Greenville and Columbia have gained national attention for economic development and quality of life. Charleston has been recognized among America's happiest cities.

Challenges Affecting Workplace Happiness

While South Carolina performs well in several quality-of-life measures, workplace-related challenges continue to affect employee satisfaction.

Although the state's cost of living is lower than many states, wages in some industries have not kept pace with rising costs.

Many workers continue to report concerns about:

- Affordable health insurance
- Paid family leave
- Retirement benefits
- Workforce shortages
- Rising health care expenses
- Wage growth

These concerns can directly affect employee morale and overall happiness.

The Importance of Workplace Culture

One area where employers can make an immediate impact is workplace culture. Research consistently shows employees are more likely to remain with organizations where they feel respected, heard and appreciated. Positive workplace cultures often foster stronger teamwork, higher productivity and lower turnover.

Employers across South Carolina are increasingly investing in employee well-being through wellness programs, flexible scheduling and mental health resources.

Why Employee Happiness Matters?

Employee happiness is not simply a feel-good concept. It has measurable effects on business performance.

Studies show happy employees are generally more productive, creative and less likely to leave their jobs. Higher employee satisfaction often translates into stronger customer service, improved teamwork and better organizational outcomes.

For employers, retaining experienced workers can reduce hiring and training costs. For communities, a satisfied workforce contributes to economic stability and growth.

As South Carolina continues to attract new businesses and industries, employee happiness will likely become an even greater competitive advantage.

Looking Ahead

South Carolina's ranking reflects both progress and opportunity. The state benefits from a growing economy, attractive quality of life and expanding employment opportunities. At the same time, challenges related to wages, benefits and workforce development remain.

The future of employee happiness will depend on how employers, policymakers and community leaders respond to changing workforce expectations. Investments in employee well-being, professional growth and workplace flexibility can help create more satisfying work environments.

While South Carolina may not yet rank among the nation's happiest states for workers, its economic growth and focus on quality of life provide a strong foundation for future improvement.



HEATHER SINGLETON JOINS TOGETHER SC

Submitted by Brooke Robertson director of strategic communication & member experience



Heather Singleton

COLUMBIA - Together SC is pleased to announce the hiring of Heather Singleton as its first-ever peer network manager, a newly created role designed to strengthen and expand the organization's statewide peer learning and connection strategy.

This position reflects Together SC's continued investment in its 2030 Strategic Plan, particularly its focus on Convene, as the organization grows its network and deepens engagement across South Carolina's nonprofit community.

Singleton brings nearly two decades of experience working with public and private nonprofit organizations. Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, she earned her degree in political science from the University of South Carolina and has since built her career in the Midlands. Her professional background spans public service and the corporate sector, with a strong focus on brand strategy, storytelling and fund development.

"Heather has been woven into the fabric of Together SC for years," said Karen Riordan, president & CEO of Together SC. "She understands our members, our mission and the power of connection. Her ability to naturally convene, engage and support leaders makes her uniquely suited to guide our Peer Networks into their next phase."

Singleton has been actively engaged with Together SC for more than six years, serving as a consultant, peer network leadership team chair, facilitator and member through her work in nonprofit organizations.

In her new role, Singleton will provide overall leadership and coordination for Together SC's eight Peer Networks: Advocacy Allies, Black Nonprofit Leaders Network, Consultant Collaborative, Development Peer Network, ED/CEO Peer Network, Marketing Peer Network, Operations Peer Network and Volunteer Admin Alliance. She will work closely with staff liaisons to ensure each network meets its annual goals and continues to deliver meaningful value to members.

Singleton will also:

- Oversee Peer Network programming and online communities
- Coordinate with the learning programs and events manager to align webinars, in-person events and annual symposia
- Serve as staff liaison for the Black Nonprofit Leaders Network
- Strengthen policies, processes and overall effectiveness of the Peer Network model

Reporting to the vice president & COO, this role represents a strategic step forward in building a more connected, responsive and impactful nonprofit network across the state.

Singleton's commitment to community and professional development extends beyond her work. She is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and serves on the boards of the South Carolina chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators, City Year Columbia and WellPartners Dental and Eye Clinic. She is also an active volunteer with her church and the Camden alumni chapter of her sorority.

Known for her energy, warmth and ability to bring people together, Heather is widely recognized as a natural connector and facilitator. She is passionate about helping others grow into confident, effective leaders and her leadership will help ensure that Together SC's Peer Networks continue to be spaces where nonprofit professionals can connect, learn and grow together.

About Together SC

Together SC strengthens and unites South Carolina's nonprofit network. Through collaboration, advocacy and shared learning, Together SC supports organizations and leaders working to build thriving communities across the state.

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RISING TOGETHER: FLORENCE'S VISION FOR GROWTH AND INCLUSION

Submitted by the City of Florence

Across the country, city branding campaigns often focus on attracting visitors or promoting economic development. In Florence, however, a new initiative is redefining what a city brand can represent. Through its RISE (Resilient Infrastructure and System Enhancements) campaign, Florence is connecting its identity not only to what people see, but also to the essential systems that sustain everyday life.

At its core, Florence's approach demonstrates a powerful truth: meaningful branding is not only about messaging — it is about measurable investment in community well-being and long-term resilience. It reflects a commitment to accountability, progress and continuous improvement as the city works to deliver the level of service residents and customers expect and deserve.

A Brand Rooted in Infrastructure

The City of Florence's RISE program serves as the centerpiece of its evolving identity. Designed as a long-term investment strategy, RISE unifies water, sewer and stormwater improvements under a single vision, "Investing Today. Building Tomorrow. Serving Our Community."



Freedom Blvd Line Extension 2

Rather than treating infrastructure as a behind-the-scenes function, Florence is bringing these systems into public conversation and positioning them as foundational to quality of life and future growth. The Utilities Department, which oversees drinking water, wastewater treatment and stormwater management, has aligned its work with this vision, emphasizing reliability, environmental stewardship and equitable service throughout the community.



Surface Water

This integrated approach reflects a broader shift in how cities communicate value to residents. Infrastructure is no longer invisible; it is central to civic identity.

Capital Improvement Planning as Community Investment

Florence's branding evolution is closely tied to its Capital Improvement Program, which outlines projects in the design, permitting and construction phases across the city.

Florence City Council recently approved master plans for water, sewer and stormwater systems that guide these investments by identifying projects needed to improve water quality and reliability, reduce sanitary sewer overflows, support growth and ensure sustainable service for the future.

Together, the Capital Improvement Program and master plans create a roadmap that spans decades, ensuring infrastructure development keeps pace with residential, commercial and industrial expansion. This long-range planning is particularly important as Florence continues to attract new development and population growth, placing increasing demands on utility systems.

By linking infrastructure upgrades with branding, Florence is communicating that growth must be intentional, inclusive and

RISING TOGETHER CONT'D

sustainable.

Equity at the Center of Progress

Infrastructure challenges, such as aging water lines, flooding risks and inconsistent service quality, often disproportionately affect communities. Florence's master plans recognize these challenges and prioritize improvements that address both current deficiencies and future risks.

City leaders have also acknowledged resident concerns about water quality and infrastructure reliability, using public feedback to shape investment priorities and guide implementation strategies. Projects are being designed with special attention to neighborhoods most affected by aging utilities, ensuring improvements benefit all residents — not just areas experiencing rapid growth or higher-income communities.

This commitment reflects the belief that infrastructure investments should serve all residents fairly and effectively.

From Projects to Purpose

Florence's RISE initiative does more than group projects together; it creates a narrative residents can understand and support.

Key projects include:

- Improvements that reduce water quality concerns and enhance system reliability.
- Expansion of water treatment capacity to meet growing demand.
- Replacement and upsizing of aging water and sewer lines.
- Stormwater system improvements to reduce flooding and protect waterways.
- Implementation of advanced monitoring and control technologies, including a Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system, to provide real-time oversight, operational control and performance optimization of critical infrastructure assets.

Each of these efforts contributes to a unified story: Florence is preparing not only for growth, but also for resilience.

By framing these updates under a single brand, the city is strengthening transparency and public engagement. Residents and customers no longer see isolated construction projects; they see a coordinated investment in their future that is easy to identify and understand.

Branding as a Tool for Trust

At a time when public trust in institutions can be fragile, Florence's strategy offers an important lesson: Branding can serve as a bridge between government action and community confidence.

The RISE campaign signals commitment and accountability. It tells residents and customers that the city is not only aware of infrastructure challenges, but is actively addressing them through a clear plan, dedicated resources and measurable outcomes.

Florence's RISE campaign is more than a branding initiative. It is a declaration of values that demonstrates a city's reputation is built not only on slogans or aesthetics, but on the reliability of its systems, the inclusiveness of its investments and the trust it earns from residents and customers.

As communities across the nation grapple with aging infrastructure, rapid growth and the need for greater equity, Florence stands out as a city choosing to rise intentionally, collaboratively and inclusively.

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Here to help life go right.™









Starlee B. Alexander
Owner/Agent

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YOUR BUSINESS GROWTH STARTS WITH YOU



(DWM)-Every successful business has a story, but behind thriving companies is a leader who invests in growth, embraces change, and takes responsibility. While external forces matter, business growth starts with you.

Many entrepreneurs focus on external challenges such as competitors, trends, and customers, but sustainable growth begins with internal leadership, mindset, vision, and commitment.

Strong leaders prioritize continuous learning as industries evolve and customer expectations shift. Professional development and industry knowledge help owners make informed decisions and seize opportunities.

Clear vision and measurable goals create direction and accountability, whether increasing revenue, expanding services, entering new markets, or improving customer satisfaction.

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BEYOND DEI: BUILDING INCLUSIVE CULTURES

By Reginal Lyerly, COO- Keeping Carolina Families Covered



Reginal Lyerly

As businesses navigate 2026, corporate conversations about workplace diversity are undergoing a significant transformation. While the goals of creating equitable and inclusive workplaces remain important for many organizations, the language used to describe those efforts is evolving. Increasingly, companies are moving away from the acronym DEI — diversity, equity and inclusion — in public disclosures and annual reports, replacing it with broader terms such as inclusion, belonging, workplace culture and talent development.

The shift reflects changing legal realities, public perceptions and strategic business considerations.

The Decline of Explicit DEI Terminology

Recent reviews of reports from companies in the S&P 500 reveal a growing trend: Many corporations are reducing references to DEI-specific initiatives in favor of language focused on organizational culture and employee engagement. Rather than emphasizing demographic targets or identity-based programs, companies are highlighting efforts to build workplaces where all employees can contribute, grow and succeed.

Several factors are driving the change. Increased public scrutiny, shareholder concerns and legal challenges related to diversity programs have prompted organizations to reevaluate how they communicate workforce strategies. Many executives recognize that while stakeholders continue to expect fair employment practices, the terminology surrounding those practices has become politically and legally sensitive.

As a result, companies are reframing workforce initiatives around concepts that emphasize opportunity, collaboration and business performance rather than specific diversity metrics.

Legal Pressures Influence Corporate Strategy

The legal landscape surrounding workplace diversity programs has become increasingly complex. Following several high-profile court decisions and heightened regulatory attention, organizations are carefully evaluating policies that could be perceived as providing preferential treatment based on protected characteristics.

For many businesses, the response has not been to abandon inclusion efforts but to redesign them. Programs that once focused primarily on demographic representation are increasingly being replaced by initiatives that emphasize:

- Merit-based hiring and promotion practices
- Skills development and workforce readiness
- Leadership accessibility and accountability
- Employee engagement and retention
- Fair and transparent compensation systems

This approach allows companies to support diverse workforces while reducing legal risk and maintaining compliance with evolving employment laws.

Inclusion as a Business Imperative

Rather than treating inclusion as a standalone social initiative, many organizations now view it as an operational necessity. Business leaders argue that inclusive workplace cultures improve employee retention, strengthen collaboration and foster innovation.

Research continues to show that employees who feel respected, heard and valued are more likely to remain with an organization and perform at higher levels. As a result, companies are integrating inclusion into broader talent management strategies instead of housing those efforts exclusively within dedicated DEI departments.

The language of workplace culture has become especially prominent because it focuses on behaviors, leadership practices and employee experiences that affect the entire workforce. By emphasizing culture, organizations can pursue inclusion objectives while avoiding some of the political debates associated with traditional DEI terminology.

Pay Equity Takes Center Stage

One area receiving increased attention is pay equity. Unlike some diversity initiatives that have generated legal controversy, pay equity is widely viewed as both a compliance requirement and a business necessity.

Companies are investing in compensation audits, transparent pay structures and data-driven analyses to ensure employees performing comparable work receive equitable compensation. These efforts are often framed as ways to promote fairness, reduce legal exposure and strengthen employee trust.

Pay equity initiatives also provide measurable outcomes that investors, regulators and employees can evaluate. As a result, they have become a central component of many modern inclusion strategies.

Many organizations view equitable compensation practices as a tangible demonstration of their commitment to workplace fairness, making pay equity one of the most defensible and least controversial aspects of workforce inclusion efforts.

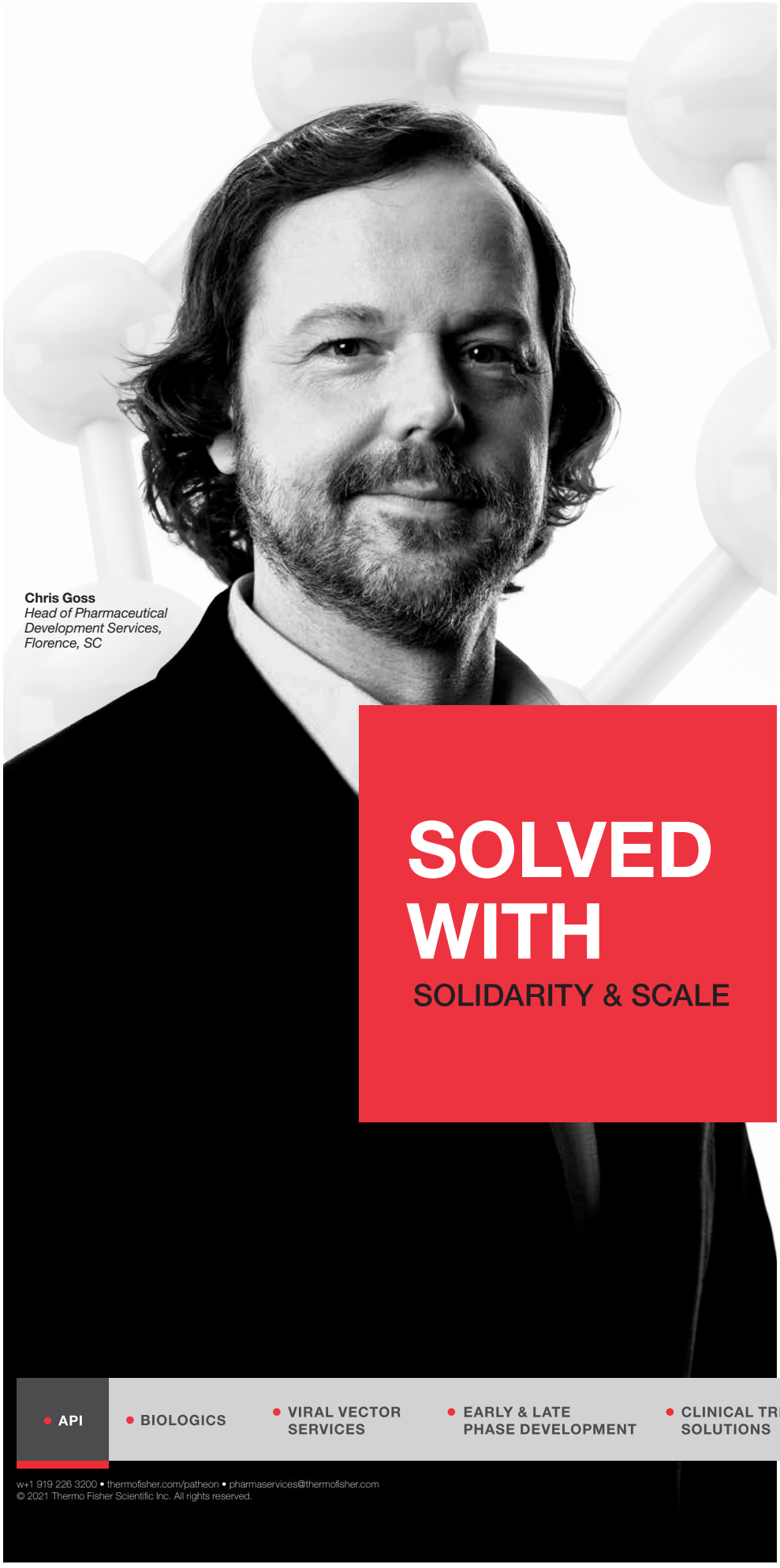
The Future of Workplace Inclusion

The shift from DEI to broader concepts such as inclusion and workplace culture does not necessarily signal a retreat from diversity-related goals. Instead, it reflects an evolution in how organizations communicate and implement those objectives.

In 2026, successful companies are increasingly focusing on universal principles such as fairness, opportunity, employee development and organizational effectiveness. By linking inclusion efforts directly to business outcomes — including productivity, retention, innovation and pay equity — organizations are working to balance workforce diversity goals with emerging legal and regulatory expectations.

As this trend continues, corporate workforce strategies are likely to become less focused on labels and more focused on measurable results. The emphasis will increasingly be on creating workplaces where employees of all backgrounds can thrive while ensuring organizational practices remain legally compliant, operationally effective and aligned with shareholder interests.





Chris Goss
Head of Pharmaceutical Development Services, Florence, SC

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SUPPORTING VETERANS: DUKE ENERGY AWARDS $30K

Submitted by Catherine Ramirez, senior communications manager, Duke Energy Corporate Communications



Pictured left to right: Paul Quarrella, Hidden Wounds volunteer coordinator, Quinetta Buterbaugh, government and community relations manager for Duke Energy, Lance Newman Hidden Wounds executive director, William Bailey, Hidden Wounds administrative assistant and Jay Wrenn, Hidden Wounds facility manager.

GREENVILLE — As communities across the nation honor the sacrifices of military service members and their families, the Duke Energy Foundation has awarded $30,000 in grants to South Carolina nonprofit organizations focused on supporting veterans through workforce development initiatives.

The funding represents the second round of grants awarded through the foundation's America250 initiative, a multi-year effort recognizing the nation's upcoming 250th anniversary.

The grants, part of a total investment of more than $550,000 in South Carolina, were awarded to Hidden Wounds and Upstate Warrior Solution to help expand workforce development programs for veterans across eight counties.

"As we prepare to celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary, I can't help but think of our nation's veterans who made this celebration possible," said Tim Pearson, president of Duke Energy South Carolina. "It's important for us to invest in those who served and their families by providing the training and skills they need to succeed after military service. By partnering with these organizations, we can directly support veterans in communities across our state."

Hidden Wounds received $15,000 to support Operation Hidden Wounds Employment, a comprehensive job-readiness and employment program for veterans. The initiative includes training opportunities, skills assessments and partnerships with veteran-friendly employers in Sumter, Lee, Clarendon and Kershaw counties.

Upstate Warrior Solution received $15,000 to expand workforce development services for justice-involved veterans reentering their communities in Greenville, Spartanburg, Oconee and Anderson counties. The funding will strengthen employment services within the organization's Veteran Outreach Program and support career counseling, résumé development, employer outreach and job placement assistance.

"We are honored to be selected by the Duke Energy Foundation as part of this important America250 initiative," said Theresa Thompson, chief operating officer of Upstate Warrior Solution. "As our nation prepares to commemorate 250 years of history, this support allows us to create meaningful opportunities for veterans, first responders and our community to reflect on the service, sacrifice and shared values that continue to shape our country."

DUKE ENERGY FOUNDATION CONT'D

Dr. Lance Newman, executive director of Hidden Wounds, said the grant will create life-changing opportunities for veterans throughout the organization's service area.

"This support will help veterans gain meaningful and sustainable employment while building stability, purpose and long-term success," Newman said. "Together, we are continuing our mission to ensure veterans and their families have the resources and support they deserve."

The grants build on the Duke Energy Foundation's more than $1 million investment through its America250 initiative, which supports community-driven projects across the company's six-state service territory. Earlier this year, the foundation announced grants supporting local park improvements, green spaces and community gathering places.

In South Carolina, $275,000 was awarded during the initiative's first funding cycle. The third and final round of America250 grants, focused on expanding access to history and civics education, will be announced in June.

Duke Energy Foundation

The Duke Energy Foundation provides nearly $30 million annually in philanthropic support to help meet the needs of communities where Duke Energy customers live and work. Duke Energy shareholders fund the foundation.

Duke Energy

Duke Energy (NYSE: DUK), a Fortune 150 company headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, is one of the nation's largest energy holding companies. Its electric utilities serve 8.7 million customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky and collectively own 55,700 megawatts of energy capacity. Its natural gas utilities serve 1.6 million customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio and Kentucky.

The company is executing an energy modernization strategy focused on strengthening the electric grid, improving reliability and meeting growing energy demands while delivering value to customers.

DUKE ENERGY OFFERS NEW ENERGY SAVINGS PROGRAM *Submitted by Duke Energy*

GREENVILLE— The Public Service Commission of South Carolina has approved a new nonresidential demand response program designed to help businesses lower energy costs while supporting electric grid reliability.

The program, PowerShare Storage®, allows qualifying commercial, industrial, government and other nonresidential customers with energy storage systems to earn bill credits by making stored energy available during periods of high electricity demand.

Energy storage systems function as backup power sources, capturing energy when it is available and delivering it when needed. Through PowerShare Storage, customers can reduce operating costs while helping Duke Energy maintain a reliable and efficient electric grid.

As South Carolina and the Carolinas continue to grow, customer-sited energy storage systems are playing an increasingly important role in supporting grid reliability. These systems store energy when resources are abundant and release it during peak demand periods, such as winter mornings and summer evenings.

Nearly 500,000 Duke Energy customers across the Carolinas currently participate in demand response programs that help reduce system costs and strengthen grid reliability. According to Duke Energy, this participation helps keep electric rates lower for all customers.

Program Incentives

PowerShare Storage offers participants several opportunities to earn incentives:

- A one-time connectivity credit of $120 per kilowatt when a system meets program connection requirements.
- An additional $30 per kilowatt for qualifying battery systems charged by renewable energy sources.
- A monthly capacity credit of $3.50 per enrolled kilowatt, adjusted for independently verified system losses.
- An energy curtailment credit of 10 cents per kilowatt-hour for energy discharged during curtailment events.

Combined, the incentives provide predictable returns for customers who make stored energy available when the grid needs it most.

Participating customers allow Duke Energy to temporarily discharge their systems between 30 and 36 times annually. Each event lasts no more than four hours. Customers may opt out of up to four events each year, including two during winter months, while remaining eligible for bill credits.

Duke Energy plans to begin operating PowerShare Storage in South Carolina in August 2026. Customers interested in learning more should contact their utility account representative or email PowerShareStorage@duke-energy.com.

What They're Saying

"It's a priority for us to save every dollar we can for our customers, who are essential partners in our work to modernize and maximize the grid and keep it operating reliably for everyone," said Tim Pearson, South Carolina president of Duke Energy. "PowerShare Storage is one of the ways we are innovating for customers today while preparing for the grid of tomorrow."

Pearson added that the program reflects the type of innovation encouraged by South Carolina's Energy Security Act of 2025 and provides customers with additional options for managing energy costs.

About Duke Energy

Duke Energy, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, is one of the nation's largest energy holding companies. Its electric utilities serve 8.7 million customers across North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. The company also provides natural gas service to 1.6 million customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio and Kentucky.

The company continues to invest in electric grid modernization and generation resources to meet growing energy demands while maintaining customer value and system reliability.



RATE RELIEF FOR MPD ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE MEMBERS

Submitted by Katie W. Wilcox, CCC marketing and communications

BENNETTSVILLE -MPD Electric Cooperative and Marlboro Development Team announced a significant milestone that reflects years of strategic growth and a shared commitment to community prosperity. Marlboro Development Team has officially completed its 100th development project, a landmark achievement that has directly contributed to the strength and reach of MPD Electric Cooperative, assisting in the reduction of rates for its members.

Over the course of its history, Marlboro Development Team has expanded its footprint across 23 states, championing a total of $1.5 billion investments and developing 8.4 million square feet of space. That growth has created more than 7,000 jobs and generated economic activity that extends far beyond the communities where each project was built, especially in South Carolina and the Pee Dee Region. As one of SC's fastest growing real estate development firms, the completion of the 100th project stands as a testament to the trust placed in the organization by its partners, investors and the communities it serves.

The success of Marlboro Development Team has played a meaningful role in strengthening MPD Electric Cooperative's financial position. The MPD Electric Cooperative Board announced this week a rate reduction averaging 10 percent in current rates across all rate classes for the summer months, effective May 1st. The rate decrease applies to residential, commercial, industrial and municipal members alike.

"Reaching 100 projects is a great moment, but what truly matters is what that success means for the people in our communities," said William L. Fleming, Jr., president and CEO of both Marlboro Development Team and MPD Electric Cooperative. "We are thrilled that these blessings have allowed us to hire an incredibly talented team focused on our cooperative members. Keeping power affordable and assisting in the recruitment of jobs and investments provides a compounding effect on our members' quality of life."

The rate reduction underscores MPD Electric Cooperative's ongoing commitment to affordability and service excellence. Members will see the updated rates reflected in their bills beginning with the May billing cycle.

As Marlboro Development Team embarks on its next 100 projects, both organizations remain focused on generating lasting value, economic, social and financial, for the communities they serve.

About MPD Electric Cooperative

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

About Marlboro Development Team

Marlboro Development Team, a wholly owned subsidiary of MPD Electric, is a South Carolina-based real estate developer focused on single-tenant build-to-suits, value-add acquisitions, speculative industrial development and strategic investments with a portfolio spanning 23 states. With $1.5 billion in total investment, 8.4 million square feet developed, and more than 7,000 jobs created, the organization is committed to responsible, community-centered growth.

FINDING OPPORTUNITY AND PURPOSE AT ADP

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Andrea Lasker

Andrea Lasker's journey to a successful career at ADP is a story of perseverance, growth and gratitude. After beginning her professional life as a teacher, she found herself searching for new opportunities and a different career path. That decision ultimately led her to ADP, where she has grown from a temporary associate into a team leader.

Born in the Philippines, Lasker married in 2003 and immigrated to the United States two years later. Upon arriving in the U.S., she and her husband lived in Pennsylvania before relocating to Florence in 2008. In 2015, she proudly became an American citizen.

Like many people starting over in a new country, Lasker faced the challenge of adapting to a new culture and workplace environment. She remained determined to build a successful future and explored employment opportunities through Kelly Services. That search eventually led her to ADP.

"When I went for the job interview," Lasker said, "and as I was walking through the building, I told myself, 'This is exactly where I want to be.'"

ADP is a global provider of cloud-based human capital management solutions that combine payroll, human resources, talent management, time and attendance, tax services and benefits administration. The company serves businesses of all sizes and is recognized for its business outsourcing, analytics and compliance expertise.

In recent years, ADP has continued to evolve by incorporating artificial intelligence into its technology platforms. The company's ADP SmartCompliance® platform helps HR, IT and finance professionals manage complex compliance requirements more efficiently and accurately.

Innovation is only one part of ADP's success. The company also emphasizes diversity, equity and inclusion, creating an environment where employees feel valued and respected. That culture has helped foster strong employee engagement and teamwork throughout the organization.

For Lasker, the supportive workplace environment has been one of the most rewarding aspects of her career.

She began her ADP career as a temporary entry-level associate in the PSN department. Her strong work ethic and willingness to learn helped her advance quickly. After a year and a half, she was promoted to a permanent position. Through dedication and consistent performance, she earned a team lead position in 2023.

Today, Lasker serves as lead client service and product support specialist in the tax credits department. Her role combines leadership, technical knowledge and customer support while helping ensure clients receive accurate and timely service. "I love my career here at ADP and the people I work with," Lasker said. "I love my managers and director, and I'm grateful for them." She said the relationships she has built with coworkers have contributed greatly to her success.

"We are family," she said. "We support and look out for one another, and I'm so proud of what we accomplish together."

Lasker's department includes two managers, two team leads and a director. Associates in the department process forms 8850 and 9061 for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit program. These forms must be submitted within 28 calendar days of an employee's start date and are processed electronically through state workforce agency portals. Once reviewed, the applications receive either certification or denial.

The work requires attention to detail and ongoing collaboration with several internal departments. Lasker works closely with teams in client services, government relations and robotic process automation to address challenges and identify opportunities for process improvement.

One of her primary responsibilities is helping create efficient workflows and maintaining documentation that promotes consistency across departmental procedures. She also trains and coaches associates, supports onboarding efforts and encourages best practices that help the team achieve its goals.

As a leader, Lasker enjoys helping others develop their skills and confidence. She believes strong communication, teamwork and a willingness to learn are essential for both personal and professional growth.

Looking back on her journey, Lasker remains grateful for the opportunities she has received and the support she has found throughout her career.

"We have great camaraderie," she said. "They are good people, and they are very kind. I am thankful to God for the opportunity."

From immigrating to a new country to becoming a team leader at a global company, Lasker's story reflects the power of hard work, determination and the importance of finding a workplace where employees can grow and thrive.



A FLAVORFUL RECIPE FOR A STRONG WORKPLACE COMMUNITY

Submitted by Ruiz Foods Florence



Team Members and families keeping cool while enjoying hamburgers, hotdogs and fried chicken at the Ruiz Foods Florence Family Fiesta.

Ruiz Foods is known for its flavorful products enjoyed by consumers nationwide, as well as by the team members who produce its flagship El Monterey® and Tornados® brands.

At the Ruiz Foods Florence plant, however, the meaning of good food goes beyond what is made on the production line. For a workforce that reflects a wide range of cultures and traditions, sharing favorite dishes has become an important ingredient in building a strong workplace community.

"We have team members from Mexico, El Salvador, Haiti and several countries in Africa, and that makes for a very diverse work group," said Brittney Alich, a production operations supervisor who joined Ruiz Foods in 2020.

"We've been able to learn about each other's cultural differences and share some of that good food. Some of our Hispanic team members bring in dishes for us to try. We've also had African team members bring in fou fou and other traditional foods."

Fou fou, a staple food common in West and Central Africa, is a smooth, dough-like starch traditionally made by boiling and pounding cassava, yams or plantains. Its mild flavor makes it a versatile accompaniment to many dishes.

Food-centered celebrations have been a part of the Ruiz Foods Florence culture almost since the plant opened in 2014. Today, plantwide events include the annual Ruiz Foods Fiesta, featuring food, games and rides for team members and their families.

"We all work hard every day to make great food for our customers, so it's important to take time to celebrate one another and what we each bring to our workplace," said Krista Meekins, office and community relations coordinator at the Florence plant. "It's also fun when our families can join in."

Alich said one of her favorite aspects of the Fiesta is the opportunity to connect with coworkers outside of work.

"I've had the pleasure of supervising every day-shift line we have, so I know people personally," she said. "The Fiesta is fun because we get to see everyone's kids, parents and grandparents, and I can show off my husband and family."

Allen Tessman transferred to Florence from the Ruiz Foods plant in Denison, Texas, during the facility's early years. Now serving as training and development supervisor, he recalls experiencing some culture shock after relocating.



Josephine Bess, a Ruiz Foods Florence Team Member, enjoying a funnel cake at this year's Family Fiesta!

"Texas is mostly Hispanic flavors, and we know those flavors," he said. "Here you have Southern food, different kinds of Mexican flavors and foods from Africa, Cuba, Puerto Rico, South America and Central America. You name it."

In addition to company-sponsored celebrations that often include visits from Ruiz family members and company leaders, Tessman is a fan of team potlucks, where employees bring dishes to share while he typically supplies drinks, plates and napkins.

"When I was a supervisor in one department, two ladies would request vacation before Thanksgiving and spend the week cooking and serving a full Thanksgiving dinner at the plant," he recalled. "It was enough food for a family of five on one plate."

During orientation, Tessman reminds new employees that working in a food manufacturing environment often means spending many hours together.

"When we sit down at the holiday dinner the company caters, we eat, talk, laugh and joke together," he said. "Then we go back to work with that family vibe."

While employees enjoy sharing food with one another, they are also enthusiastic supporters of the products they make.

"We treat every taquito or Tornados® product like our family is going to eat it because they do," Alich said. "Team members get excited when they're running a product because they know it's going to be in stores soon."

Some team members take that enthusiasm a step further.

"I eat an El Monterey breakfast burrito every morning," said Kirby Male, senior systems administrator. "I believe in our product. I like it, and I get the bonus of helping keep sales up."

Male manages back-end technology infrastructure and other information technology systems that are critical to plant operations and product distribution. As one of the facility's original employees and currently second in seniority, he has witnessed firsthand how food helps connect people.

"What I've really enjoyed about working in food production is that every event is centered around food in some shape or form," he said. "It builds camaraderie when you learn about personal preferences and cultures. It expands your palate and becomes the glue that holds everyone together."



One menu selection at the Ruiz Foods Florence Family Fiesta.

That shared passion for food extends beyond the workplace. Male participates in a Jeep off-roading group made up of Ruiz Foods employees, and their outings often feature meals that include shrimp and grits, hearty breakfasts and his own Dutch oven biscuits and beans.

As the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, Ruiz Foods team members plan to mark the occasion with family gatherings, food and fireworks. For Male and his off-roading group, which could mean burgers and hot dogs or brisket reheated in cast iron. Tessman expects to spend the holiday smoking meat with family, while Alich plans to enjoy plenty of grilled food during a visit to North Carolina.

Beyond the celebrations, they will also reflect on what it means to be part of the Ruiz Foods team—a company they say places a strong emphasis on employees, families and community.

"I absolutely love working with the people I work with," Alich said. "We put our arms around each other and take care of each other. I think that's because we have so many different backgrounds, and we always see each other as people first."

Male agrees.

"Everyone brings something to the table," he said. "Most people have a smile on their face, and you can always find common ground and a way to connect."

For Tessman, whose career at Ruiz Foods has spanned multiple roles and opportunities, the experience has been both rewarding and meaningful.

"It's teamwork and camaraderie," he said. "It's an amazing group of people to work with. I'm in awe most of the time."

At Ruiz Foods, we have a legacy of making great food and a passion for making a difference.



Ruiz Foods is committed to giving back to the communities where our team members live and work.

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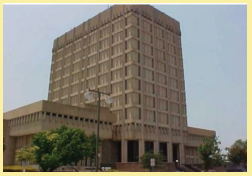
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BUILDING FLORENCE COUNTY'S FUTURE LEADERS *By Cynthia O. Ford*



Kevin Yokim

Leadership succession is a challenge facing organizations across the country, and Florence County is taking proactive steps to prepare its next generation of leaders. Through the Florence County Institute, County Administrator Kevin Yokim is helping employees develop the skills, confidence and leadership abilities needed to serve the community for years to come.

Yokim, who has served as Florence County administrator for three years, previously worked as the county's finance director and assistant city manager for the City of Florence, said the idea for the institute emerged from a growing concern about workforce readiness.

"We realized about two years ago that, based on the age of our workforce, it was possible that half of our department heads could retire within the next five years," Yokim said. "Nearly two-thirds of our leadership team is 50 years old or older. We knew we needed to begin developing managers and supervisors who could step into leadership roles when the time comes."

Rather than looking outside the organization, county leadership chose to invest in its own employees through an in-house leadership development program. The first Florence County Institute cohort launched in August 2025 with 18 participants selected from approximately 40 candidates identified by department leaders.

The program combined leadership training with practical workplace applications through monthly lunch-and-learn sessions. Participants were welcomed into the program with congratulatory cards mailed to their homes and a copy of It's Your Ship, the leadership book by retired Navy Capt. D. Michael Abrashoff.

"We wanted participants to understand from day one that they were being invested in," Yokim said.

The curriculum was developed in partnership with a consultant and tailored to address the county's specific leadership challenges. Topics included emotional intelligence, motivation, managing diversity, communication, delegation, time management, conflict resolution and corrective action.

One surprising discovery emerged during discussions about diversity.

"When we asked managers about their biggest challenges related to diversity, the responses weren't about race, gender or age," Yokim said. "The challenges centered on personality differences and communication styles. That was gratifying because it showed us that our organization had moved beyond some of the issues people often associate with diversity."

Each session built on the previous one, giving participants practical tools they could immediately apply in their daily work. At the conclusion of the program, participants submitted reflective



Florence County Institute Class



Florence County Institute Graduates

essays describing what they learned, what they liked or disliked about the experience and how they planned to apply the lessons moving forward.

The county formally recognized graduates during a Florence County Council meeting and awarded certificates to those who completed the program. The success of the first cohort exceeded expectations.

"We received a tremendous response," Yokim said. "Participants offered thoughtful suggestions and feedback, and we're already preparing for our second cohort this August."

The institute's long-term purpose extends beyond leadership development. Yokim sees it as a way to preserve and strengthen Florence County's organizational culture.

"The goal is to continue developing future leaders who will perpetuate the culture of Florence County," he said.

That culture is rooted in the county's vision, mission and values. Yokim regularly reviews those principles, which emphasize service, excellence and humility. Drawing inspiration from leadership concepts found in Jim Collins' bestselling book, "Good to Great," Yokim believes successful organizations intentionally prepare future leaders rather than waiting for vacancies to occur.

The county also plans to evaluate the program's lasting impact through quarterly follow-up meetings with graduates. These sessions will allow participants to share examples of how they have applied the leadership principles they learned and discuss challenges they have encountered along the way.

The success of the Florence County Institute has also sparked conversations about expanding the concept beyond county employees. Yokim said Florence County is exploring the possibility of creating a citizen academy to help residents better understand local government operations and community leadership.

"We've had citizens ask how they can learn more about what the county does," he said. "We're considering how we might create a program that introduces residents to different county departments and provides a deeper understanding of local government."

Looking back on the program's first year, Yokim said one thing he would change is the format.

"If I had to do it again, I would make the sessions 90 minutes instead of one hour," he said. "There were so many great discussions that we often wished we had more time."

As Florence County continues to grow and evolve, the Florence County Institute represents an investment not only in employees but also in the future of public service throughout the community. By identifying talent, developing leadership skills and reinforcing a culture of service, the program is helping ensure that Florence County remains prepared for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

For Yokim, the mission is simple: Develop leaders today who will strengthen Florence County tomorrow.

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EMPLOYMENT SCAMS DOUBLE IN 2025 AS TASK-BASED SCHEMES SURGE

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



Mallory Wojciechowski

MYRTLE BEACH - It often begins with a text message from an unknown number.

A representative claiming to work for a well-known company says they found your résumé on an online recruitment platform and believe you would be a perfect fit for a fully remote position. The job promises earnings of up to $10,000 per month, daily commissions, free training and no experience requirements.

It sounds like an easy opportunity. In reality, it may be an employment scam.

For years, the Better Business Bureau (BBB) has tracked reports of employment scams that persuade victims to send money and personal information to scammers posing as employers. During the past three years, nearly 50,000 people have reported employment scams to BBB Scam Tracker after falling victim to these schemes. In 2025, reports more than doubled compared with the previous year. A growing number of those reports involve a relatively new tactic. Scammers are asking targets to perform simple online tasks, such as watching videos, while promising substantial payouts for minimal work. The catch comes when victims attempt to withdraw their earnings. They are told they must first send their own money to "unlock" the funds, which the scammers then steal before disappearing.

"Like," "Follow" and "Subscribe" — Then Get Scammed

BBB offices nationwide, along with the Federal Trade Commission, have reported an increase in task-based employment scams. The work often involves liking YouTube videos, rating apps in app stores or leaving reviews for products on websites. Many of the products and websites are fake and created solely to facilitate the scam.

This tactic surged in 2025 as consumers received a flood of text messages and WhatsApp communications promoting work-from-home opportunities. Sometimes scammers conduct fake interviews to appear legitimate. More often, however, applicants are "hired" immediately and instructed to visit a website or download an app to begin tracking their tasks.

Local Reports Highlight the Growing Trend

A woman from Myrtle Beach reported to BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas that scammers impersonating a legitimate digital marketing agency offered her a position requiring completion of daily task bundles. She became suspicious when the recruiter explained that she would need to maintain a daily account balance of $100 with the company.

If her commissions did not meet the required threshold, she would be expected to deposit her own money to maintain the balance and continue working. She reported losing $100 through the scheme.

Another woman from Little River reported encountering a task-based employment scam built around completion "levels." Using an app, she was required to complete 40 tasks to earn commissions and was told she could earn additional income through special "lucky orders." Like the Myrtle Beach victim, she was required to add her own money to maintain a minimum account balance.



"I have sent them a lot of money thinking it was legit," she reported. "I came across an article on Google and Reddit conversations about how this kind of job is a scam, and I was not the only victim."

Task-Based Scams Continue to Rise

Nearly 680 employment scams reported to BBB in 2025 appeared to be task-based schemes, and experts predict reports will continue to increase. BBB Scam Tracker data also shows significantly higher losses associated with these scams, with median losses reaching $2,300 in 2025.

When victims run out of tasks or attempt to cash out their earnings, scammers often claim additional deposits are required to continue. Payments are frequently requested through cryptocurrency. Once money is transferred, scammers either disappear or create new reasons why more money is needed, continuing the deception until the victim recognizes the fraud.

In some cases, consumers lose hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

The rise of artificial intelligence has made it easier for scammers to create convincing websites, apps and communications. At the same time, broader economic factors — including increased remote work opportunities and layoffs across multiple industries — have created an environment in which employment scams thrive.

"For a lot of people, remote work is a new concept," Mona Terry, chief operating officer of the Identity Theft Resource Center, told BBB. "They don't have a paradigm or set of known expectations. It's not setting off any alarms."

According to Consumer Reports data, younger adults ages 19 to 29, along with Black and Latino consumers, are more likely to report financial losses from employment scams, making awareness especially important among these groups.

Red Flags of an Employment Scam

Be cautious if a job opportunity includes any of the following warning signs:

- Unsolicited job offers
- Employment offers made without an interview
- Salaries or compensation that seem too good to be true
- Pressure to accept a position immediately
- Interviewers who refuse to appear on camera
- Payment for liking, following or subscribing to online content
- Requests for fees, taxes or deposits to withdraw earnings
- Upfront costs required to begin work

How to Protect Yourself

Consumers can reduce their risk of becoming victims by following these precautions:

- Research companies thoroughly before accepting job offers.
- Use video conferencing during interviews whenever possible.
- Never pay money to receive a paycheck.
- Avoid jobs that pay you to watch videos or like, follow or subscribe to online content. These offers are almost always scams.

Consumers who encounter a scam can report it through BBB Scam Tracker and receive a personalized recovery plan through the BBB Scam Survival Toolkit.

About BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas

BBB Serving Eastern Carolinas is a nonprofit 501(c)(6) organization serving 48 counties in North and South Carolina. The organization is funded primarily through accreditation fees paid by more than 5,200 local businesses and professional firms.

BBB promotes integrity, consumer confidence and ethical business practices through self-regulation in the marketplace. Services include business and charity reports, advertising monitoring, consumer and business education programs, and dispute resolution services. Most services are provided at no cost to the public, with limited exceptions for mediation and arbitration programs.



HONDA SOUTH CAROLINA HONORED FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT *Submitted by Honda South Carolina Manufacturing*



Honda SCM associates were recently recognized by the Original Six Foundation (O6), and O6 founder and former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, for their ongoing workforce development efforts.

TIMMONSVILLE — For years, associates at Honda South Carolina Manufacturing (SCM) have quietly and consistently opened doors for students across the Palmetto State, demonstrating that manufacturing remains a thriving industry filled with career opportunities.

Recently, those efforts received statewide recognition. Honda SCM was honored during the Original Six (O6) Foundation's "Decade of Opening Doors" celebration for its longstanding commitment to providing meaningful educational field trips that broaden students' perspectives and introduce them to careers in advanced manufacturing.

At the heart of these initiatives is Ron Freed and his team, who lead Honda's community outreach and workforce development efforts throughout the Pee Dee region.

In 2025, the SCM team welcomed more than 800 students and educators to Honda's production facility in Timmonsville, offering immersive plant tours and hands-on experiences designed to challenge outdated perceptions of manufacturing.

"Inviting students inside allows them to see firsthand what today's manufacturing environment is really like — bright, clean and powered by cutting-edge technology that we use every day," Freed said.

That philosophy comes to life during every student visit. Participants experience side-by-side vehicle manufacturing firsthand, speaking directly with Honda associates about career pathways, observing production processes and engaging in interactive activities. Students can try on welding gear, examine paint used in the e-coat department and take a ride on the side-by-side simulator, creating memorable experiences designed to inspire curiosity and confidence.

"Organizing and hosting these tours comes with a lot of responsibility, but it means so much to me," said Gwen Eagle, SCM administrative services coordinator III. "If even one student leaves thinking, 'Hey, I could see myself here,' then it's all worth it."

In addition to onboarding new associates, Eagle coordinates all workforce development tours, collaborating with team members across the facility to showcase each area of manufacturing. Students learn about Honda's powersports business by exploring side-by-side vehicles, participating in bolt-board challenges and experiencing hands-on activities that make each visit memorable.

In April 2026 alone, SCM hosted or supported five workforce development events.

"Over the last two years, the Honda team has done far more than support O6 afterschool students — they have shown them what is possible," said Kara Gormley Meador, executive director of the Original Six Foundation. "Through career exploration experiences, meaningful conversations and genuine encouragement, Honda associates have helped hundreds of O6 Afterschool students see a future they may not have imagined for themselves."

Together, Honda South Carolina Manufacturing associates, community partners and educators are reshaping how young people view manufacturing — and their own potential. Through authentic engagement, innovative experiences and a commitment to developing the future workforce, Honda continues to demonstrate that opening doors today creates opportunities for tomorrow.

THE SACRED GIFT OF BEGINNING AGAIN *By Robin Lewis*



HEMINGWAY-Have you ever noticed how often life gives us reasons to quit?

A missed opportunity. A broken promise. A goal abandoned somewhere between January and June. A prayer that seems to go unanswered. A relationship that didn't work out. A dream that feels delayed.

Sometimes the hardest thing isn't starting. It's starting again.

Most of us love the excitement of a fresh beginning. We love new planners, new goals, new routines and new possibilities. New dreams often arrive like a surprise gift.

But when life gets messy — or when we discover that change takes longer than we expected — discouragement can settle in, tempting us to give up.

Yet one of the most beautiful themes woven throughout Scripture is that God is a God of new beginnings. My life verse serves as a daily reminder not to dwell on the past, but to look for what God is doing today:

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way." (Isaiah 43:19)



Throughout the Bible, we find people who stumbled, failed, doubted, ran away, made poor choices or simply lost their way. Yet time after time, God met them with mercy and invited them forward.

Moses began again after years in the wilderness.

The woman at the well began again after several failed marriages.

Peter began again after denying Jesus.

Ruth began again after losing her husband and moving to a new country.

God's invitation to each of them was not simply to try harder. It was to return to Him.

That distinction matters.

Many of us approach life as though every setback requires more discipline, more determination or more effort. While perseverance certainly has its place, true transformation rarely begins with striving. It begins with reconnecting to the One who gives us strength and allows Him to shape us through the very experiences we have endured.

A few years ago, I found myself frustrated by an area of my life where progress seemed painfully slow. I prayed, worked hard and did everything I knew to do. Yet I felt as though I was walking the same stretch of road over and over again.

As I spent time with God one morning, I sensed a gentle question in my heart:

"Robin, what if this isn't about getting it right? What if success doesn't look like you think it does? What if it's simply about staying close to Me and letting the journey transform you?"

That moment changed my perspective.

So often, we define success as reaching the destination. God often focuses on the relationship formed during the journey. He shapes our hearts and minds as we walk with Him.

The truth is that beginning again is not a sign of failure. More often, it is evidence of courage.

Comedian Martin Short once said, "My career has been 80 percent failure, and I think those are pretty good odds. Nothing works, then something works."

Beginning again does not mean pretending the past never happened. It means gathering the lessons you learned and refusing to let the past have the final word.

I love that God's mercies are described as "new every morning." Not every month. Not every year. Every morning.

Each day is an invitation to start fresh. Not because we have earned it, but because He freely offers it.

"His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Perhaps that is why Jesus spoke so often about becoming like little children. Children are not nearly as afraid of starting over as adults are. They fall, get up, try again and keep learning.

Somewhere along the way, many of us begin believing that mistakes disqualify us. God says otherwise.

His grace reminds us that our identity is not rooted in our performance, but in His love.

So maybe today is your day to begin again.



Maybe it means returning to a dream you have set aside or rebuilding a relationship. Maybe it means renewing your commitment to your health or opening your Bible for the first time in weeks. Maybe it is simply whispering a prayer that says, "Lord, here I am."

Whatever your "again" may be, remember this: You do not begin alone.

The God who called you is the same God who walks beside you. The God who understood your mistakes yesterday still offers grace today. And the God who began a good work in you will remain faithful every step of the way.

Life may give us countless reasons to quit. But God continually gives us reasons to begin again, keep growing and keep trusting Him.

Perhaps that sacred gift is one of His greatest expressions of love.

So, take the next step. Open the door. Turn the page. Say yes one more time.

You may discover that God has been holding the door open to a new beginning all along.

Robin Lewis writes the "Awakened Faith" column for Diversity Works. She is a Christian life coach, speaker, author and founder of Awakened Discipleship & Coaching Co., where she helps women awaken to their identity in Christ, embrace healing and walk in purpose. Learn more at RobinLewisLife.com.

HELPING FAMILIES NAVIGATE COLLEGE EXPENSES



(BPT) - For many families, receiving a college acceptance letter is a moment of celebration. Yet alongside the excitement often comes a pressing question: How will we pay for it?

As students prepare to enter college in fall 2026, families across the country are evaluating tuition bills, housing expenses, meal plans, textbooks and other costs associated with higher education. While the price tag can seem intimidating, financial experts say planning ahead and using multiple funding sources can make college more affordable than many families realize.

A recent parent survey conducted by College Ave found that most families combine several forms of financial support to cover educational expenses.

Understanding the Financial Aid Process

The foundation of most college funding plans begins with financial aid.

Students seeking aid typically complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, known as the FAFSA. Once a student chooses a school and commits to enrollment, the institution provides a financial aid award letter outlining available grants, scholarships, work-study programs and federal student loans.

Families should carefully review the award package to understand which aid does not require repayment and which assistance comes in the form of loans. Financial aid funds are generally applied directly to tuition, fees, housing and meal plans, leaving any remaining balance as the responsibility of the student and family.

Building a Realistic College Budget

Creating a detailed budget is one of the most important steps families can take before the school year begins. Many parents focus primarily on tuition, but other expenses affect the overall cost of attendance. Housing, meal plans, books, transportation, technology and personal expenses should all be included when estimating annual costs.

According to the College Ave Parent Survey, families commonly rely on a combination of resources to finance college, including:

- Regular income and savings: 67 percent
- Grants and scholarships: 64 percent
- 529 college savings plans: 45 percent
- Federal student loans: 41 percent
- Student employment: 39 percent
- Parent loans: 18 percent
- Additional employment or side jobs for parents: 17 percent
- Private student loans: 16 percent

Many colleges offer payment plans that allow tuition costs to be spread throughout the academic year instead of requiring a lump-sum payment.

Having Honest Conversations About Money

Financial experts stress the importance of discussing college costs openly with students before classes begin. Students should understand how tuition is being paid, whether loans are involved and what financial responsibilities they may assume while in school.

Working part time during the academic year or summer months can provide additional income and valuable work experience. However, families should ensure employment does not interfere with academic success.

Looking Beyond Traditional Financial Aid

Many families assume that once financial aid awards are finalized, no additional assistance is available. In reality, numerous funding opportunities remain accessible throughout a student's college journey.

Private scholarships are awarded by businesses, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, community foundations and civic groups.

Religious organizations, local clubs and employers may also offer educational assistance programs. Students are encouraged to continue searching for scholarships throughout college, as many opportunities are available to enrolled students.

The Impact on Family Finances

The financial commitment associated with higher education often requires families to make difficult choices. According to the College Ave survey, more than half of parents said they would be willing to delay retirement savings to help pay for their child's education. Many also reported postponing personal financial goals or reducing contributions to savings accounts to support college expenses.

Financial planners caution against sacrificing long-term financial security entirely. Balancing educational expenses with retirement planning remains an important consideration for many households.

Reducing Costs Wherever Possible

Cost-saving strategies can make a meaningful difference over four years of college.

Students who completed Advanced Placement courses, dual-enrollment programs or community college classes while in high school may be able to transfer credits and reduce the number of courses required for graduation. Summer classes can also help students stay on track and potentially lower overall costs.

Textbooks represent another area where savings are possible. Purchasing used books, renting textbooks or using digital versions through university libraries can significantly reduce expenses.

Evaluating Loan Options Carefully

Even after grants, scholarships and savings are applied, some families may need to borrow money to cover remaining expenses.

Financial aid professionals generally recommend utilizing federal student loans before considering private loans because federal programs often offer flexible repayment options and borrower protections.

Before borrowing, families should review interest rates, repayment terms and projected monthly payments. Understanding debt can help families make informed financial decisions.

Planning for Success

Paying for college requires preparation, flexibility and a willingness to explore multiple funding sources. While rising educational costs continue to challenge many families, careful budgeting, scholarship searches and financial planning can help make higher education more attainable.

By understanding available resources and developing a realistic strategy, families can focus less on financial stress and more on helping students succeed during one of the most important transitions of their lives.

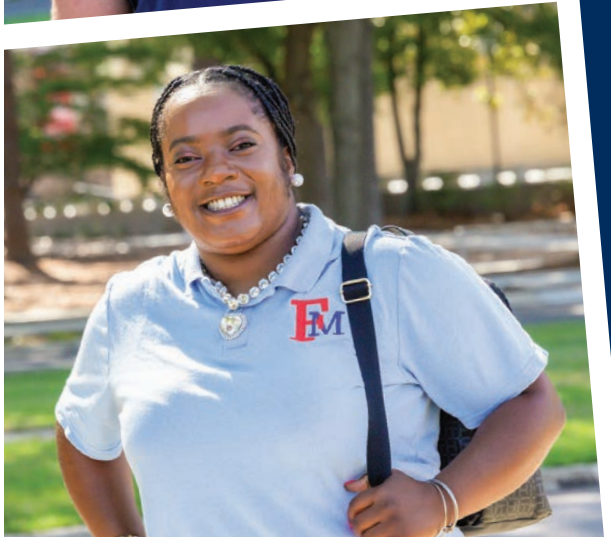












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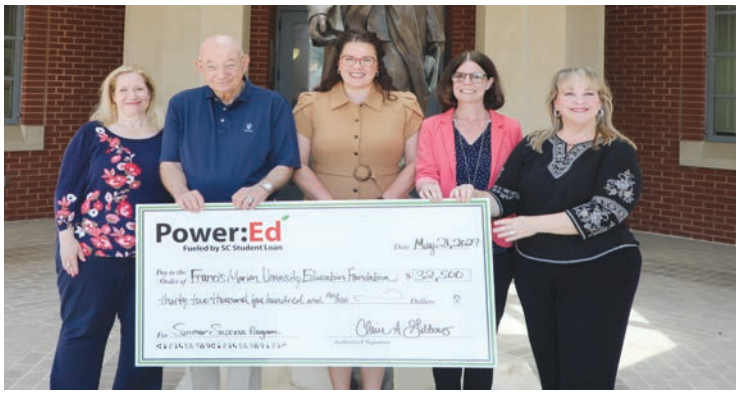
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FMU RECEIVES POWER:ED GRANT

Articles submitted by Francis Marion University



Pictured left to right: Dr. Jennifer Kunka, FMU President Dr. Fred Carter, Lauren Stanton, Jennifer Taylor and Claire Gibbons.

The Francis Marion University Education Foundation has received a $32,500 grant from Power, the philanthropy of SC Student Loan Corporation, to support the expansion of FMU's Summer Success Program. The initiative will help approximately 35 South Carolina students retain their state merit scholarships.

The funding will cover up to four credit hours of summer tuition and fees for students with significant financial need who must complete summer coursework to meet scholarship requirements.

Originally created to support first-year students struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has evolved into an important resource for low-income, underrepresented and first-generation students. The Power grant will allow FMU to expand eligibility and continue providing assistance to South Carolina students, many of whom are from the Pee Dee region and rely on state scholarships to fund their education.

State merit scholarships require first-year students to earn 30 credit hours and maintain a 3.0 LIFE GPA before the start of the next academic year. Students who experience academic challenges or must withdraw from a course often find it difficult to meet those requirements during the regular academic year. As a result, summer coursework may be necessary to maintain scholarship eligibility. However, the cost of summer classes can create a significant barrier for many students.

Students who lose their state merit scholarships are among those most at risk of discontinuing their college education.

With the help of federal funding from 2022 through 2024, FMU's pilot project demonstrated strong results. The university expanded the program in 2025 with support from a Power grant. Approximately 77 percent of students assisted through the program have retained their scholarships, helping many first-generation students from high-need backgrounds continue their education.

"We are grateful to Power for investing in the success of our students," Carter said. "This support helps remove financial barriers for students working to retain their scholarships and continue pursuing their educational goals."

"Power and SC Student Loan are proud to support this incredible program from Francis Marion for a second summer, helping more students retain their merit scholarships and persist to graduation," said Claire Gibbons, executive director of Power. "We hope it will become a model that can be replicated by higher education institutions across South Carolina."

In fiscal year 2025-26, Power awarded $1.325 million in grants to South Carolina education and career readiness organizations, including the FMU Education Foundation. Grants are administered quarterly, and the next funding deadline was July 1, 2026.

FMU DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR



Dr. Hari Rajagopalan and FMU President Dr. Fred Carter

Dr. Hari Rajagopalan, professor of management, has been named FMU's J. Lorin Mason Distinguished Professor for the 2025-2026 academic year. The announcement was made during an awards ceremony held at the FMU Performing Arts Center.

The annual award, named in honor of a former chairman of the FMU Board of Trustees, is the highest honor bestowed upon a faculty member at the university. Rajagopalan will also be the university's nominee for the South Carolina Governor's Professor of the Year Award competition.

Rajagopalan joined the faculty of Francis Marion in 2006 as an assistant professor of management. He served as coordinator of the management track in the School of Business from 2012-2015, associate dean of the School of Business from 2015-2016, and was named dean of the School of Business in 2016, where he served until 2025. He teaches a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses, including business analytics, strategic management, decision support systems, supply chain analytics and applied statistics for economics and business.

He is the 50th recipient of the Distinguished Professor award. He earned a Bachelor of Engineering in mechanical engineering at Anna University in 1995, Master of Business Administration at Delhi University in 1999, and both the Master of Science in Computer Science in 2004, and Ph.D. in Information Technology: Operations and Quantitative Management in 2006 from the University of North Carolina – Charlotte.

The Distinguished Professor Award is based upon a faculty member's contributions to teaching, professional service and scholarly activities.

An extraordinary scholar, Rajagopalan has authored twenty-six peer-reviewed journal articles, nineteen case studies and seventeen book chapters. He has also served on numerous committees including Faculty Senate, Academic Affairs, Deans and Chairs, Graduate Council and Information Technology. He received the Faculty Award for Excellence in Research and Scholarship in 2011 and the Excellence in Teaching Award in 2025.

FMU President Dr. Fred Carter commended Rajagopalan for his contributions to the university.

"Hari is a remarkable colleague whose work is prolific and exemplary. His leadership as Dean of the School of Business has expanded our curriculum and strengthened the university," said Carter. "Beyond all of this, he is one of our most respected and beloved professors. Hari is the perfect choice for this award, and the entire university applauds his selection."



FMU FACULTY RECOGNIZED AT 2025-26 AWARDS CEREMONY *Submitted by FMU*



Pictured fron left are Dr. Nathan Harness, Dr. Erica Johnson, FMU President Dr. Fred Carter, Dr. Karen Fries and Dr. Allison Munn.

Francis Marion University recognized four faculty members for their outstanding work during the university's annual Faculty Awards Ceremony held at the FMU Performing Arts Center in downtown Florence.

Dr. Allison Munn, associate professor of nursing, received the Charlene Wages Shared Governance Award from the university's chapter of the American Association of University Professors. The award recognizes a faculty member who has made substantial contributions to shared governance at the university.

Munn joined the Francis Marion faculty in 2015. She earned a Bachelor of Science in nursing from Clemson University in 2001 and a doctorate in nursing from the Medical University of South Carolina in 2016.

Three faculty members were also honored for outstanding achievements during the 2025-26 academic year.

Dr. Nathan Harness, assistant professor of biology, received the Award for Excellence in Teaching. Dr. Erica Johnson, associate professor of history, received the Award for Excellence in Research and Scholarship. Dr. Karen Fries, professor of education, was honored with the Award for Excellence in Professional Service.

Harness earned a Bachelor of Science in biology from Truman State University in 2008 and a doctorate in biology from the University of Missouri in 2018.

Johnson received a Bachelor of Arts in history from the University of Central Oklahoma in 2005, a Master of Arts in history from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2007 and a doctorate in history from Florida State University in 2012.

Fries earned a Bachelor of Science in psychology from George Mason University in 1995, a Master of Science in special education from the University at Albany, State University of New York, in 2000 and a doctorate in special education from Pennsylvania State University in 2013.

Five retiring faculty members were also recognized during the ceremony and named professors emeriti. They are Dr. Deborah Hopla, Dr. V. Scott Kaufman, Professor Travis Knowles, Dr. Kay Lawrimore-Belanger and Cindy Miller-Price.

DCSD ANNOUNCES 2026-27 ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES *Submitted by Darlington County School District*

DARLINGTON — The Darlington County School District (DCSD) has announced the hiring of four administrators for the 2026-27 school year. The Darlington County Board of Education approved the recommendations during a special-called meeting. The appointments include:



Larry Johnson, chief human resources officer



Brandan Craig, principal of J.L. Cain Elementary School



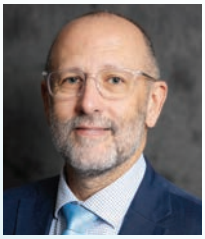
Patricia "Beth" Hall-Caulder, principal of Southside Early Childhood Center

- Larry Johnson, chief human resources officer
- Brandan Craig, principal of J.L. Cain Elementary School
- Patricia "Beth" Hall-Caulder, principal of Southside Early Childhood Center
- George "Chad" Hulsey, director of technology

DCSD Superintendent Matthew Ferguson said the district is excited and confident in the new leadership team as it continues its focus on learning for every child, every day.

"At the heart of this work is a simple idea: the power of each," Ferguson said. "Each leader. Each teacher. Each student matters. These leaders believe in what's possible in every classroom and are committed to supporting our people, strengthening our schools and ensuring every child has access to real opportunities and a clear path forward."

Johnson returns to DCSD after three years serving in North Carolina school districts as a chief operating officer and associate superintendent of employee relations. From 2018 to 2023, he served as DCSD's assistant superintendent of administration and operations. Johnson brings 32 years of public education experience in the Carolinas to the position.



George "Chad" Hulsey, director of technology

Craig currently serves as director of Southside Early Childhood Center in Lancaster County. He brings 15 years of public education experience in South Carolina to DCSD. Craig began his career as a teacher at Brooklyn Springs Elementary School in Lancaster in 2012 and has since served as a teacher, assistant principal and administrator in districts across the state.

He holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from the University of South Carolina Upstate and a master's degree in educational administration from the University of South Carolina.

Hall-Caulder currently serves as assistant principal at Southside Early Childhood Center, where she has worked since 2022. During the previous decade, she served as a literacy coach at Southside and Carolina Elementary School. She began her career as a teacher and brings 20 years of public education experience to the principalship.

Hall-Caulder holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Francis Marion University, a master's degree in literacy studies from Coker University and principal certification from Lamar University.

Hulsey, who has served as interim director of technology since June, will now assume the role permanently. He has spent the past 28 years in DCSD's Technology Department, serving as a network administrator and coordinator of IT operations. Hulsey holds numerous technology certifications and a bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in computer information systems management from Francis Marion University.

All four administrators will assume their leadership roles July 1, 2026, as DCSD continues its efforts to strengthen instruction, support educators and improve outcomes for every student.

Lee County School District

Congratulations Class of 2026

Lee Central High School

Mr. Kevin D. Wilson, Principal



Valedictorian

Miss Lakevia Austin

Our Valedictorian is the daughter of Mr. Alton & Mrs. Teresa Austin. During her years at Lee Central High School, Lakevia has been an All A Honor Roll Student, Student Council President, Member of the Multimedia Team, National Beta Club, Community Service Club, SCSU HYPE Club, Member of the LCHS Cheer Team, and Resident Artist. In the fall, Lakevia plans to attend Clemson University majoring in Biology.



Salutatorian

Miss Shaunia Briddell

Our Salutatorian is the daughter of Ms. Shaundra Bryant. During her years at Lee Central High School, Shaunia has been an Honor Roll Student, Member of the Multimedia Team, Scored 100% on two EOC Assessments, Earned a 3 on her AP Exam, Member of the Beta Club, SCSU HYPE Club, Member of the LCHS Cheerleading Team, Earned her Drone License, Teacher Cadet, Crowned Miss LCHS, CATE Director's Award & CATE Student of the Year, and most recently, Earned an Associate Degree through the Central Carolina Technical College Early College Program. In the Fall, Shaunia plans to attend Coastal Carolina University majoring in Marine Biology.

Centrial Carolina Technical College Graduates



Marlene Aguilar, Lakevia Austin, Shaunia Briddell, Natalia Hannibal, Nasir Jackson, Taylor Lewis, Daryl Robinson, Allan Rogers, Shadrach Williams, Mr. K. Wilson Principal

88 Lee Central High School Graduates

9 Central Carolina Early College Graduates

Total Earned in Scholarships: $2,971,642

61 CATE completers

40 HOPE Scholarship Recipients

25 Life Scholarship Recipients

4 Enlisted Military Cadets

Lee County School District Board of Trustees

Lucretia Mack, -Chair, C. Bernard Simon-Vice Chair, Mattie Mack-Secretary

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FROM RN TO PH.D: CLAFLIN'S DECADE OF NURSING EXCELLENCE *Submitted by Claflin University*



Seven graduates participating in Claflin's partnership with Clemson University

ORANGEBURG -The grocery store was not exactly where Dr. Verlie Tisdale expected to recruit nursing students. Neither was a church pew. But when you are building what would become South Carolina's only nursing program at a Historically Black college or university offering both bachelor's and master's degrees, recruitment opportunities can happen anywhere.

"I wouldn't care if I was at church or if I saw somebody in a nurse's uniform," said Tisdale, former dean of Claflin University's School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. "I told them about our program, and believe it or not, they were really eager to hear about it."

That entrepreneurial spirit, born of necessity and sustained by purpose, helped transform a modest idea into a thriving educational pipeline. Since launching in 2016, Claflin's nursing program has grown from an inaugural cohort of 20 students — the minimum needed to begin the program — into a robust pathway that has produced 304 RN-to-BSN graduates, 25 Family Nurse Practitioner graduates and 22 nursing leadership graduates through 2025.

With 83 additional students expected to complete one of the program's three tracks in 2026, the total number of graduates will surpass 430.

"This is amazing for a program that is only 10 years old," Tisdale said. "This is impactful. It goes far beyond Claflin."

The program's success is especially significant given the challenges facing the region. The Interstate 95 corridor through Orangeburg, Bamberg and Calhoun counties has long experienced health care shortages, limited transportation access and persistent disparities in care.

When Claflin launched its nursing program, there was no comparable HBCU nursing program between Orangeburg and Columbia, about 42 miles away, or Orangeburg and Charleston, roughly 72 miles away.

To build the program from the ground up, Tisdale developed partnerships with regional hospitals and Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College, creating a pathway for registered nurses to continue their education through Claflin's RN-to-BSN program. She later secured a partnership with South Carolina's technical college system, significantly expanding recruitment opportunities statewide.

A nursing consultant was hired to develop the curriculum, which received state approval and achieved accreditation within the program's first year.

Dr. Melissa Knight, interim associate dean and assistant professor of nursing, said the program's growth reflects more than enrollment numbers.

"We've created a streamlined, accelerated pathway for working nurses to attain their bachelor's degree and master's degree in nursing," Knight said. "It really reflects our university's commitment to providing access for students who want to advance their nursing education."

FROM RN TO PH.D CONT'D

That commitment carries significant implications for the health care workforce. As health care systems increasingly seek nurses with advanced education, Claflin graduates are helping address critical shortages in rural and underserved communities across South Carolina.

"Most of our graduates come directly from the communities they now serve," Knight said. "They're serving underserved populations, addressing health disparities, social determinants of health and provider shortages across the Tri-County area. Claflin's nursing program has filled a critical gap and strengthened health care access across the region."

The program has also produced a growing number of scholars.

Seven graduates participating in Claflin's partnership with Clemson University are among the first cohort expected to earn Doctor of Nursing Practice degrees through the Claflin-to-Clemson Big Cat Fellowship. The fellowship provides up to $10,000 annually to support doctoral students.

One of those graduates is Patrice Burgess, a nurse practitioner who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees at Claflin before pursuing a doctorate at Clemson University.

Burgess credits Claflin's faculty for preparing her academically and professionally.

"Claflin had me well prepared," Burgess said. "I had amazing teachers who pushed us to be great. They made me do more than I ever thought I could."

Her doctoral studies strengthened her commitment to rural health equity and health care policy.

"It pushed me to think beyond what I could see in front of me and get out in the community, do more and learn more about rural health," she said.

Now working in primary care, Burgess hopes to pursue opportunities in quality management and health policy.

"I love policy, and I love quality management, because you need the right policies in place to ensure not only the care and safety of patients, but also the staff," she said. "Having the foundation that Claflin laid for me helped tremendously."

Tisdale recalled another student whose journey reflects the program's mission.

A former Claflin professor encountered a nurse in his neighborhood and asked whether she had earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree.

"She said, 'No, but I'm looking into it,'" Tisdale recalled. "He said, 'Why not now?'"

The woman eventually earned her BSN and master's degree through Claflin and is now among the students completing a doctorate through Clemson.

The nursing program's impact has also become a priority for university leadership.

Claflin President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack has made expansion of the program a key component of the university's capital development plans. The university is preparing to break ground on a new public health complex that will include a nursing facility, social sciences classrooms and psychology programs.

The project is supported in part by a $3.5 million grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration and will feature a state-of-the-art simulation center.

Looking ahead, Knight envisions post-master's certificates in psychiatric mental health and nursing education, expanded scholarship opportunities and eventually terminal nursing degrees.

"Our program, at its essence, is really about elevation and transformation," Knight said. "That's what Claflin University stands upon."

For Tisdale, who has served at Claflin since 1998, the milestone is both personal and rewarding. She never expected to lead the development of a nursing program.

"I'm not even a nurse," she said with a laugh. "And they said, 'Oh, you can do that.'"

More than a decade later, and with hundreds of graduates serving communities across South Carolina and beyond, her confidence — and Claflin's vision — has proven well founded.

DR. JOHNSON RECEIVES EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARD *Submitted by Claflin University*



Dr. Friggita Johnson recipient of the 2026 Excellence in Teaching Award.

ORANGEBURG - Claflin University is celebrating Assistant Professor of Education, Dr. Friggita Johnson, for being named the university's recipient of the 2026 Excellence in Teaching Award presented by the South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (SCICU).

The prestigious award recognizes outstanding faculty members across South Carolina whose commitment to teaching, mentorship and student success has made a lasting impact on their campuses and in the lives of their students.

A native of India, Johnson has dedicated her career to preparing future educators to become leaders, reflective practitioners and service-oriented professionals. Through her work in Claflin's Department of Education, she encourages students to embrace lifelong learning while developing the skills needed to succeed in diverse classroom environments.

Johnson's teaching philosophy centers on student engagement, inclusive learning experiences and the application of research-based practices that promote academic achievement. She is known for creating a supportive classroom environment that challenges students to think critically, collaborate effectively and develop confidence in their abilities as future educators.

In addition to her work in the classroom, Johnson has presented at numerous national and international conferences and has contributed to the field of education through scholarly publications and professional review work in special education. Her research and professional service reflect her commitment to advancing educational practices and improving outcomes for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

University leaders praised Johnson for her dedication to academic excellence and her passion for helping students reach their full potential. Her recognition by SCICU highlights the important role faculty members play in shaping future generations of educators and community leaders.

The annual SCICU Excellence in Teaching Awards Dinner was held April 21 and honored one faculty member from each of SCICU's 20 member institutions.

"We are proud to recognize these faculty members for the meaningful role they play in shaping their students' futures and strengthening our state," said Robert Lloyd, president and CEO of SCICU.

LEADERSHIP SC SUPPORTS HGTC STUDENT FOOD PROGRAM

Submitted by HGTC



Members of the Leadership South Carolina Class of 2026 present a gift to the Horry-Georgetown Technical College Foundation to support the HGTC Market and help combat student food insecurity at Horry-Georgetown Technical College. The contribution is part of the class's statewide, "Tree to Table," service project benefiting technical college students across South Carolina.

CONWAY — Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) announced that the Leadership South Carolina Class of 2026 has made a gift to the HGTC Foundation as part of the class's statewide service project, "Tree to Table."

The contribution is part of more than $62,000 raised by the class and distributed among South Carolina's technical colleges to help address student food insecurity, one of the most significant barriers to student persistence and completion.

At HGTC, the funds will support the HGTC Market, expanding access to food and essential resources for students working toward credentials that can change the trajectory of their lives and careers.

"Food insecurity is a very real challenge for many college students, including right here at HGTC," said Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president of HGTC. "Many of our students are balancing classes, jobs, clinical experiences and family responsibilities while working to build a better future for themselves and their families. This generous investment from Leadership South Carolina's Class of 2026 will help ensure students have access to basic necessities so they can remain focused on their education and long-term success. We are deeply grateful for their support and commitment to strengthening communities across South Carolina."

Surveys of community and technical college students consistently show that a significant number experience food insecurity during their enrollment. The challenge often affects working adults, parents and first-generation college students balancing academics with financial and family obligations. Even short-term disruptions in access to food and basic necessities can affect academic performance, persistence and completion.

"Tree to Table" is the class project of the Leadership South Carolina Class of 2026. The statewide initiative includes planting 250 trees while raising funds to support South Carolinians pursuing education and economic mobility. By investing in technical college students across the state, the project aims to strengthen South Carolina's workforce and communities.

"Through their project, 'Tree to Table,' Leadership South Carolina's Class of 2026 brought people together to invest in our state," said Jody Jernigan, executive director of Leadership South Carolina. "The project strengthened our state parks while supporting technical college students facing food insecurity across South Carolina, reflecting who we are and creating lasting opportunity. We invite those who are passionate about South Carolina's future to get involved with Leadership South Carolina and be part of this important work."

"We are deeply grateful for this generous investment in the HGTC Market," said Shannon Detzler, president and CEO of the HGTC Foundation. "These funds will directly support our students and employees experiencing food insecurity, helping ensure basic needs are met so they can focus on learning, teaching and thriving. This support strengthens not only individuals, but the entire HGTC community."



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HGTC PRESIDENT ENDS 51-YEAR CAREER

Articles submitted by HGTC



President Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore

CONWAY — Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) President Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore has announced her retirement after 51 years of service to the College, effective July 31, 2026.

Fore has served as president of Horry-Georgetown Technical College since 2017, leading the institution through a period of sustained growth, expanded academic offerings and strengthened partnerships across Horry and Georgetown Counties. Her career at the College began as a faculty member, and over more than five decades, she has played a significant role in shaping the institution's mission and impact.

"It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve this institution," said Fore. "I am deeply grateful to the area commission, faculty and staff whose dedication and commitment have made this College such a strong impact on our communities. Together, we have achieved meaningful milestones and made a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of students."

Under Fore's leadership, the college has experienced significant enrollment growth, expanded workforce development initiatives and strengthened transfer partnerships to support student success and regional economic development. Her tenure reflects a deep commitment to access, opportunity and student achievement.

The Horry-Georgetown Technical College Area Commission will form a search committee to begin the process of identifying the college's next president. Additional details regarding the transition will be shared as they become available.

"For more than five decades, Dr. Fore has demonstrated exceptional leadership and an unwavering commitment to the mission of Horry-Georgetown Technical College," said Tommy Branyon, chair of the Horry-Georgetown Technical College Area Commission. "Her impact on this institution and the communities it serves will be felt for generations."

Fore will continue to serve as president through July 31, 2026, ensuring a smooth and thoughtful leadership transition.

CCU, HGTC LAUNCH BUSINESS TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP



Pictured from left: Dr. Theresa M. Strong, assistant vice president and dean, School of Business, Computer Technology, English, Math and Personal Services, Horry-Georgetown Technical College; Dr. Lori Heafner, vice president for academic affairs, Horry-Georgetown Technical College; Dr. Marilyn "Murph" Fore, president, Horry-Georgetown Technical College; Dr. James Winebrake, president, Coastal Carolina University and Dr. Monica Fine, associate dean, E. Craig Wall Sr. College of Business Administration, Coastal Carolina University

CONWAY— Coastal Carolina University (CCU) and Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) have launched a new academic partnership that creates a seamless transfer pathway for students pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

The agreement establishes a transfer pathway for HGTC students completing an Associate in Applied Science in Business Administration. Students who complete the coursework specified in the agreement can transition into Coastal Carolina University's undergraduate business program and pursue advanced academic and professional opportunities.

The partnership strengthens both institutions' ability to support workforce needs across South Carolina by expanding access to high-quality business education and creating a direct pipeline of skilled graduates prepared to contribute to the region's economy. By reducing barriers to degree completion and aligning academic programs, CCU and HGTC are increasing opportunities for students while addressing evolving industry demands.

"The CCU-HGTC business transfer pathway was designed as a true two+two education model that honors the work students have already completed," said Monica Fine, associate dean of the E. Craig Wall Sr. College of Business Administration. "It ensures a smooth transition, preserves academic progress, reduces the overall cost of earning a business degree for local students and prepares graduates to step confidently into the regional workforce."

Designed with student success and academic continuity at its core, the collaboration offers expanded course equivalencies and clearly defined credit transfer expectations. The agreement helps students maintain momentum toward degree completion while minimizing the loss of earned credits. Coastal Carolina University will accept applicable transfer credits, provide additional course equivalencies and allow students to earn upper-division business credit through university-administered competency assessments at no cost. Eligible students also may be exempt from core curriculum requirements based on completed general education coursework.

"This articulation agreement creates a clear pathway for our students to continue their education and achieve their long-term career goals," said Theresa Strong, assistant vice president and dean of the School of Business, Computer Technology, English, Math and Personal Services at HGTC. "By aligning our Associate in Applied Science in Business Administration with Coastal Carolina University's Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, it creates a seamless transition from HGTC to Coastal Carolina University, removes barriers, preserves credits and prepares our students to succeed at the next level."

Developed through collaboration among faculty, staff and administrators from both institutions, the partnership will welcome transfer students as early as summer 2026. The agreement will be reviewed annually and reflects a shared commitment to expanding access to high-quality, affordable higher education.

By strengthening transfer pathways, CCU and HGTC are increasing the reach and impact of their programs while supporting the success of future graduates of the Associate in Applied Science in Business Administration program.

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CENTRAL CAROLINA
TECHNICAL COLLEGE

HISTORIC DELOACH GIFT SETS GSSM RECORD

Articles submitted by Dave Matthews, director of marketing and communications



Harris and Louise DeLoach make the largest private donation to the South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics in school history.

HARTSVILLE — The South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics (GSSM) and the GSSM Foundation have announced the largest private donation in the school's history from Harris E. and Louise H. DeLoach.

The DeLoaches donated their home in Hartsville, which will be named the DeLoach House. It will serve as the official residence for the GSSM president and a site for GSSM educational programs.

Harris DeLoach, retired CEO and executive chairman of Sonoco Products Co., and his wife, Louise, have been longtime supporters of GSSM since its inception in 1988. While serving as chief legal counsel for Sonoco, Harris DeLoach played a key role in the formation of GSSM and its foundation.

He served six years on the GSSM Board of Trustees and six years on the GSSM Foundation Board, where he led capital campaigns to establish an endowment and build the school's new campus in the early 2000s. In 2009, GSSM presented him with the Townes Award, its highest honor.

"It was my honor to work as an original framer for the development of the Governor's School in Hartsville, and it has been with great pride to see it flourish into the top public college preparatory institution in South Carolina and one of the top schools in the country," DeLoach said. "Louise and I can think of no better way to contribute to this legacy than to provide support to assure its long-term benefit for the best and brightest young men and women of South Carolina."

"I've had the pleasure of following in Harris' footsteps on several boards of Hartsville's most impactful organizations, but none more impactful to the state of South Carolina than the Governor's School for Science and Mathematics," said Bob Brown, chairman of the GSSM Board of Trustees. "This gift from Harris and Louise is not only a vote of confidence in the current direction of the school, but also a message to those dedicated to improving public school offerings in South Carolina that something great is happening at GSSM."

"Harris DeLoach played a vital role in the founding of GSSM in the late 1980s and has remained a steady guiding force ever since," said Danny Dorsel, GSSM president, Class of 1990. "Now, he and Louise are extending their legacy in a very personal and meaningful way. The DeLoach House will serve as an extension of the GSSM campus, creating new opportunities for school events and enriching educational experiences for our students. While words cannot fully express our gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. DeLoach for their extraordinary generosity, we are incredibly thankful and will honor their gift in every way we can."

The DeLoaches said they are confident in making a major investment in GSSM and hope their gift will inspire others to support the public-private partnership.

For more information about GSSM, visit www.scgssm.org.

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

The South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics (GSSM) is a nationally ranked top 10 public high school that provides STEM education to students across the state. Founded in 1988 by Gov. Carroll Campbell, GSSM offers an intensive two-year residential high school, online courses, summer camps and in-school programs for students in grades 3–12.

At GSSM, challenge is viewed as a gateway to opportunity. Learn more at www.scgssm.org.

GSSM HOSTS GLOBAL SCIENCE WORKSHOPS

SOUTH CAROLINA GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL FOR SCIENCE+ MATHEMATICS
INTERNATIONAL BIOTECHNOLOGY WORKSHOP 2026

HARTSVILLE— Students and educators from around the world recently gathered at the South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics (GSSM) for a series of intensive workshops designed to introduce participants to advanced scientific research and foster international collaboration.

June 1-6, the Global Science Workshops were developed through GSSM's Center for Research, Global, and Innovation Initiatives. The program aimed to prepare South Carolina's top STEM students for the increasingly global nature of scientific inquiry by emphasizing how diverse cultural perspectives contribute to innovation and discovery.

"While science is universal, different cultures approach scientific inquiry in unique ways," said Dr. Neval Erturk, GSSM executive director for research, global and innovation initiatives. "These workshops gave our students firsthand experience engaging with a truly global scientific community, teaching them how to collaborate across cultural boundaries to solve complex problems." Teacher and student mentors from Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic joined more than 20 GSSM students for hands-on workshops focused on research opportunities and international scientific practices. School leaders said the initiative strengthens South Carolina's STEM pipeline while helping ensure graduates are prepared to compete and collaborate in a global workforce.

GSSM President Danny Dorsel emphasized the long-term value of exposing students to international perspectives and experiences.

"At GSSM, our mission is to identify South Carolina's most talented students and provide transformational experiences that challenge them to grow," Dorsel said. "Science no longer happens in a vacuum or within a single country's borders. By introducing global perspectives early in their academic journeys, we are giving our students the critical tools, adaptability and mindset they need to lead future research and innovation efforts."

The program officially began with an opening ceremony June 1, in the school's gymnasium. Featured speakers included Dr. Rebecca Gunnlaugsson, chief of staff for the South Carolina Department of Education, and Erin Ford, executive vice president and chief operating officer of SCbio. Both addressed the importance of global collaboration in advancing South Carolina's educational and economic future.

As part of the week-long program, participants visited the Clemson Pee Dee Research and Education Center, where they toured laboratories and learned about applied agricultural and scientific research. Dr. Sachin Rustgi of Clemson University delivered closing remarks, highlighting the connections between research, innovation and international scientific partnerships.

School officials said the workshops reflect GSSM's ongoing commitment to providing students with meaningful opportunities to engage in research while developing the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.



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FIRST PEOPLES OF THE SOUTHEAST

Submitted by ArtFields

LAKE CITY - Two major exhibitions this fall in Lake City will bring the voices, traditions and contemporary works of Southeastern Indigenous artists to the Pee Dee region.

For more than a decade, ArtFields has transformed Lake City into one of the Southeast's most dynamic arts destinations. What began in 2013 as a festival designed to revitalize a small agricultural community has evolved into a year-round cultural organization that engages communities across the region.

ArtFields will launch, “First Peoples of the Southeast,” an initiative that places Indigenous art, history and living culture at the forefront of the conversation.

The initiative features two exhibitions opening Sept. 9, 2026, through Jan. 30, 2027. A gallery reception is scheduled for Sept. 11, and a free Cultural Celebration on Oct. 3.

The exhibitions offer residents an opportunity to experience Indigenous artistic traditions, firsthand.

"ArtFields is very excited about organizing this project for Lake City as well as the state of SC as an acknowledgment of the historic, contemporary and cultural significance of Native American artists in the Southeast region," said ArtFields Consultant Harriett Green.

Art of the Native South

“Art of the Native South,” at the Jones-Carter Gallery, is organized through a partnership with the Museum of the Southeast American Indian at the University of NC at Pembroke.

The exhibition draws from the museum's permanent collection, developed through its annual juried 9|9 Native South Art Show. It highlights the artistic diversity and cultural vitality of Indigenous communities throughout the Southeast.



“Lumbeelorian” by Karen Rhodes

Nineteen artists of the Lumbee, Catawba, Haliwa-Saponi, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Muscogee Creek, Nansemond and Waccamaw-Siouan nations are represented. Visitors will encounter contemporary paintings, photography, sculpture, textiles and other artistic traditions.

Karen Rhodes' “Lumbeelorian,” is a piece that combines popular culture imagery with Lumbee identity. The exhibition challenges outdated perceptions that Native American art exists only as part of the historical record.

Bounded Space: Belonging to the Native South

At TRAX Visual Art Center, “Bounded Space: Belonging to the Native South,” explores Indigenous identity through the lens of place, craft and cultural memory.

The exhibition is part of, “Craft in America's Handwork: Celebrating American Craft 2026,” a national semi quincentennial initiative commemorating the nation's 250th anniversary through handmade craft traditions and cultural diversity.

Its title, inspired by the work of Viola F. Cordova, a philosopher of Jicarilla Apache descent, is described as, "bounded space," a homeland defined by natural features such as rivers, mountains and canyons shape a community's sense of place.

The exhibition materials are gathered according to generations of traditional knowledge and transformed through artistic practices.

By centering Southeastern Indigenous voices in a national conversation about American craft, the exhibition invites viewers to reconsider the cultural traditions that have always shaped the American experience.

Featured Artist Jeffrey Gibson, a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and of Cherokee descent, became the first Indigenous artist to represent the U.S. with a solo exhibition, in 2024, at the Venice Biennale, marking a significant milestone for Native American art on the international stage.



“Hinushi 22” by Sarah Sense

Sarah Sense’s photo-weavings combine landscape photography and cultural imagery with traditional Chitimacha basket-weaving patterns. The resulting works blend photography, textile traditions and cultural storytelling.



“Selu” by Talisha Lewallen

Cherokee artist and cultural practitioner Talisha Lewallen contributes basketry rooted in Cherokee material traditions.

Additional artists include Marcus Amerman and Preston Singletary, Harlen Chavis, Sue Fish, Raven Halfmoon, Bill Harris, Troy Jackson, Cindy Locklear, Senora Lynch, Joel Queen, Lisa Rutherford, Joanna Underwood and Laura Walkingstick.

Curator Nancy Strickland Chavis

The exhibitions are curated by Nancy Strickland Chavis, a citizen of the Lumbee Tribe of NC and a museum professional with more than 20 years of experience.

Chavis has held positions at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico; the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.; and the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum in Oklahoma City. She currently serves as director and curator of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian at UNC Pembroke.

Chavis was the first Lumbee graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, where she studied museum studies. She earned a master's degree in history from the University of NC Wilmington and is pursuing a doctorate in public history at NC State University.

Her recent exhibition, “To Take Shape and Meaning: Form and Design in Contemporary American Indian Art,” opened at the NC Museum of Art and received widespread recognition.

"There is power in sharing culture and identity from place. Southeastern Native peoples reflect the land and waters they come from," Chavis said. "The art in this exhibition is a lens into this world. I believe viewers will leave with a new understanding of what the South is."

A Story Rooted in Place

The Pee Dee region derives its name from the people, whose cultural and political influence was so significant that European settlers named both the river and region in their honor.

That connection makes the, “First Peoples of the Southeast,” initiative especially meaningful for residents of the Pee Dee. The stories presented are a part of the region's enduring cultural foundation.

The Oct. 3, Cultural Celebration will further highlight that connection through performances, storytelling, artist demonstrations and an Indigenous art market. The free event invites visitors to learn about Indigenous cultures and engage directly with the artists and traditions.

Both exhibitions will be on view from Sept. 9, 2026, through Jan. 30, 2027, at Jones-Carter Gallery and TRAX Visual Art Center in Lake City. A gallery reception will be held Sept. 11, and the Cultural Celebration will take place Oct. 3.

For more information, visit artfieldssc.org or follow @ artfieldssc on social media.

FIRST PEOPLES OF THE SOUTHEAST

A Celebration of Native American Art & Culture



Frog Pot by Marcus Amerman and Preston Singletary. Photo by Russell Johnson.

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FRAA ANNOUNCES 10TH ANNUAL "SMALL WORKS" JURIED EXHIBITION



Alexander Bostic

(DWM) - The Florence Regional Arts Alliance (FRAA) has announced the 10th installment of its signature juried exhibition, “Small Works,” showcasing two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork created by artists from South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and, for the first time, Tennessee.

"We are thankful to present the 10th installment of Florence Regional Arts Alliance's “Small Works” exhibition," said FRAA Board Chair Tonita Perry. "It is always a joy to host an exhibition that provides visual artists an opportunity to establish themselves as professionals. Our commitment to preserving, supporting and promoting a vibrant arts community in Greater Florence County is reflected in this annual showcase of talented creators from across the region. It is more important than ever that we continue to uplift and advocate for the arts as a cultural, social and economic asset."

The “Small Works” competition provides opportunities and visibility for both emerging and established artists while encouraging art collecting among new and seasoned collectors. All submitted artwork must not exceed 12 inches by 12 inches by 12 inches, making the pieces accessible and affordable for purchase.

Cash awards will be presented for first, second and third place, along with an honorable mention. A guest juror will select participating artists and award winners. Over the years, the competition has earned a strong reputation by featuring respected artists, curators and arts advocates as jurors.

This year's juror is South Carolina native Alexander Bostic. Born in Bennettsville and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Bostic developed an early passion for art through weekend classes at Pratt Institute. Inspired by comic book characters, he began creating his own designs and later earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration from Pratt Institute in 1979 and a Master of Arts in illustration from Syracuse University in 1994.

After more than 40 years as an illustrator, Bostic transitioned to traditional figurative painting and has become a nationally recognized realist artist. Now living in Mississippi, he focuses primarily on portraiture that tells stories of everyday people. He participated in the ArtFields Festival in 2019 and 2023, where his painting, “The Worker,” sold for $15,000. A retired professor, Bostic was commissioned by the U.S. Postal Service Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee to create three postage stamps. His two most recent works, honoring political philosopher Thomas Paine and Continental Army spy James Armistead, are part of the Postal Service's "Figures of the American Revolution" Forever stamp series, commemorating America's 250th anniversary.

In 2025, artist Michaela Pilar Brown served as juror and selected North Carolina artist Cecil Norris' graphite drawing, “Blinded by Faith,” as the competition winner.

Previous winners and jurors include:

- 2024: “Twofold Flood,” by Julie Mixon, South Carolina; juror Mär Martinez
- 2023: “Iron and Ironing Board,” by Mel Schnur, South Carolina; juror Chris Nitsche
- 2022: “Hugg-Diddle Bereavement Movement #24,” by Charles Clary, South Carolina; juror Jerome Meadows
- 2020: “Snake Handlin' Elvis Impersonator,” by Jeffery Donovan, South Carolina; juror Lisa D. Watson
- 2018: “Bee,” by Adrian Rhodes, South Carolina; juror the late Wim Roefs
- 2016: “The Light,” by Ivo Kerssemakers, South Carolina; juror Clay Burnette
- 2015: “Thicket,” by Douglas Gray, South Carolina; juror Edward Puchner
- 2014: “The Swimmer,” by Paolo Andre' Gauldi; juror Kara Warren

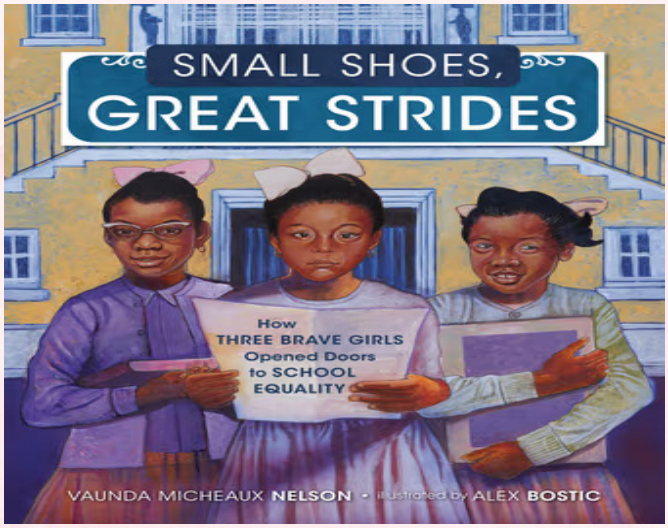
FRAA alternates the exhibition location each year between Florence and Lake City, providing opportunities to showcase artwork in both traditional and non-traditional gallery spaces.

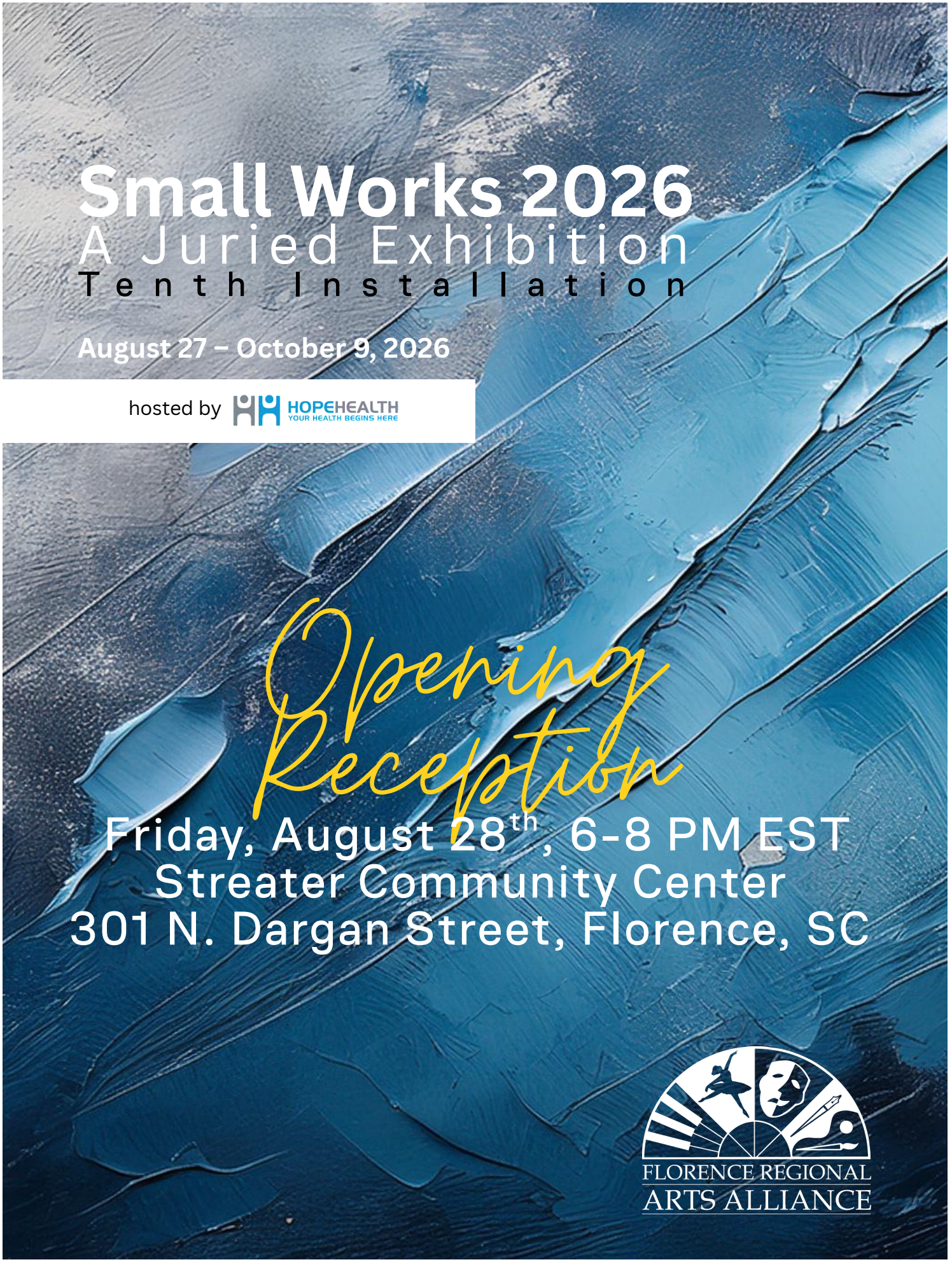
This year, FRAA is partnering with HopeHealth to host the exhibition at the new Streater Community Center in downtown Florence. In addition to serving as an art gallery, the facility functions as a community gathering space and offers year-round programming.

The exhibition will begin with an invitation-only artist talk on August 27, followed by a public opening reception on August 28, when award winners will be announced. The exhibition will remain on display through October 9 and will be open for viewing from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. A collectors workshop and special Saturday viewing hours will also be offered during the exhibition.

For submission guidelines and event information, visit florenceartsalliance.org.

FRAA is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) community arts organization dedicated to serving residents throughout the Greater Florence County area. The organization advocates for, preserves, supports and promotes a vibrant arts community. FRAA receives partial funding from the South Carolina Arts Commission, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as individual and corporate donations and grants.




Small Works 2026
A Juried Exhibition
Tenth Installation
August 27 – October 9, 2026
hosted by HOPEHEALTH
YOUR HEALTH BEGINS HERE
Opening Reception
Friday, August 28th, 6-8 PM EST
Streater Community Center
301 N. Dargan Street, Florence, SC
FLORENCE REGIONAL
ARTS ALLIANCE

HONORING EXCELLENCE IN SOUTH CAROLINA ARTS

Submitted by SC Arts Commission



Pictured: Dr. O'Malley receives the award from the Deputy Director of the South Carolina Arts Commission, Kimberly Washburn-Motte (center) surrounded by the Florence 1 Schools Board of Trustees. The awards presentation and reception were held Thursday May 14th in the Poynor Building.

COLUMBIA - The South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC) annually presents the South Carolina Governor's Awards for the Arts, the highest honor the state gives in the arts.

These awards honor South Carolina arts organizations, patrons, artists, members of the business community and government entities that maximize their roles as innovators, supporters and advocates of the arts. In 1980, the awards took on special significance with their designation as the official "Governor's Awards for the Arts."

Florence 1 Schools Superintendent Dr. Richard O'Malley has received South Carolina's highest honor in the arts.

O'Malley has served as superintendent of Florence 1 Schools for the past eight years. Before coming to South Carolina, he was a superintendent in New Jersey for 15 years. He is committed to ensuring every student has equitable access to the arts. Together with district staff, Florence 1 Schools has implemented robust music and arts education across the district.

His leadership has helped transform the district, earning local, state and national recognition for innovation in technology, teaching and learning and student achievement, much of it rooted in arts education. He has spearheaded millions of dollars in districtwide investments in the arts to provide new and innovative supplies, equipment and facilities that support success in classrooms, on stage and in competition.

These efforts have earned state and national recognition for Florence 1 Schools' programs, staff and students, as well as for O'Malley himself, including Superintendent or Educator of the Year honors from various organizations, the Palmetto State Arts Education Ray Doughty Arts Integration Award, Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence recognition, S.C. Palmetto's Finest Awards and two Arts Administrator of the Year awards.

O'Malley earned his undergraduate degree from Clemson University and holds a doctorate in educational administration from Seton Hall University. He lives in Florence with his wife of 28 years, Christina. They have three children: Ryan, Kaitlin and Emma.

The SCAC announced O'Malley as the 2026 recipient of the prestigious Governor's Award for the Arts in Education.

The recognition celebrates O'Malley's unwavering support of the arts, including his leadership in championing investments in equipment, staffing and building renovations across Florence 1 Schools over the past seven years.

According to SCAC, the award recognizes organizations, patrons, artists, members of the business community and government entities that maximize their roles as innovators, supporters and advocates of the arts.

CELEBRATING A LEGACY OF ART AND HISTORY



Dr. Leo Twiggs

(DWM) - Revelations: The Art of Dr. Leo Twiggs will be on display at the Florence County Museum from June 11 through Oct. 11, 2026. Opening during Juneteenth week, the exhibition honors one of South Carolina's most celebrated artists and educators while showcasing a career that has profoundly influenced the state's cultural landscape for more than six decades.

Born in St. Stephen in 1934, Dr. Leo Twiggs has become synonymous with artistic innovation, educational excellence and cultural preservation. Best known for elevating batik from a traditional craft to a respected fine art form, Twiggs has earned national acclaim for works that explore Southern Black history, family memory, racial identity, resilience and the enduring symbolism of the Confederate flag.

His artwork often challenges viewers to confront difficult aspects of history while encouraging deeper conversations about heritage, community and the human experience. Through a distinctive visual language developed over decades, Twiggs has created a body of work that remains both deeply personal and universally relevant.

Twiggs' artistic journey began during his childhood in Berkeley County. As an elementary school student, he participated in a regional field day where children from several schools displayed their artwork. Determined to stand out, he drew a picture of his school on wallpaper rather than traditional paper.

The unconventional choice attracted attention from teachers and students alike.

"Everyone started talking about it," Twiggs recalled in discussing the experience. The excitement surrounding that early work sparked his interest in art and inspired a lifelong desire to create something different.

That spirit of innovation would later become a defining characteristic of his career.

After graduating summa cum laude from Claflin College in 1956, Twiggs began his professional life as an art teacher at Lincoln High School in Sumter. Working within the constraints of a segregated educational system, he inspired students to pursue excellence and compete on regional and national stages.

His students earned more than 135 regional and national awards during his tenure. One student became the first senior high school student in South Carolina to win a National Gold Key Award through the Scholastic Art Awards program. The achievement carried special significance because the competition was among the first to reject segregation and evaluate students solely on artistic merit.

For Twiggs, the accomplishments of his students represented far more than trophies and recognition.

The awards demonstrated that talent and excellence transcend race and circumstance. The success of his students helped reinforce a lesson he would emphasize throughout his career: artistic achievement has no color.

While teaching, Twiggs continued his own education during summer sessions. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and later earned a master's degree from New York University, where he worked with renowned African American artist and muralist Hale Woodruff.



"Targeted Man" When I was growing up, the Ku Klux Klan and other groups targeted African-American communities by intimidation to keep us in what they felt was our "place".

During this period, Twiggs began experimenting with batik, an ancient wax-resist dyeing technique traditionally associated with textiles. Fascinated by its possibilities, he pushed the medium beyond conventional boundaries.

What began with inexpensive scarves, wax and dyes evolved into a highly sophisticated artistic process. Through years of experimentation, Twiggs taught himself how to manipulate color, texture and composition in ways few artists had attempted.

The batik process is labor-intensive and requires exceptional patience. Layers of wax and dye are repeatedly applied and removed over several weeks. A single large work can take more than a month to complete. The resulting images possess a depth, texture and luminosity that cannot be fully appreciated through photographs alone.

Twiggs' mastery of the medium has made him one of the nation's foremost batik artists. His works often feature fragmented imagery, layered symbolism and rich colors that invite multiple interpretations.

In 1970, Twiggs achieved another historic milestone when he became the first African American to earn a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Georgia.

A few years later, he joined South Carolina State University, where he would leave an equally significant mark as an educator and administrator. Charged with developing the institution's visual arts program, Twiggs built a department grounded in artistic practice, technical excellence and professional preparation.

Rather than simply teaching students what to teach, he emphasized how to teach. He encouraged future art educators to remain active artists throughout their careers, believing that creative practice strengthens classroom instruction.

His commitment to excellence attracted talented faculty members representing a variety of disciplines, including sculpture, printmaking and mixed media. Under his leadership, South Carolina State's visual arts program gained a reputation for producing accomplished artists and educators.

Twiggs also played a key role in developing the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium, helping expand opportunities for artistic and cultural engagement on campus. He retired as professor emeritus in 2000 after more than two decades of service.

Outside the university, Twiggs maintained an active and influential artistic career. He has presented more than 50 solo exhibitions and participated in countless group shows throughout the United States.

His artwork can be found in museums, universities, churches and private collections across the country. His ability to blend personal narrative with broader historical themes has earned admiration from scholars, collectors and fellow artists alike.

National recognition followed. In 2001 and again in 2008, former First Lady Laura Bush invited Twiggs to design ornaments for the White House Christmas tree, highlighting his artistic contributions on a national stage.

Faith and community have also remained central to his life. A longtime member of New Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Orangeburg, Twiggs has contributed his artistic vision to several church building projects over the years.

Among his most notable contributions is a circular stained-glass window designed for the church sanctuary. The work reflects his belief that art should serve both aesthetic and spiritual purposes while creating lasting meaning for future generations.

Throughout his career, Twiggs has received numerous honors recognizing his contributions to the arts and education.

In 1981, he became the first visual artist to receive South Carolina's Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Governor's Award for the Arts. More than three decades later, he received a second Verner Award for lifetime achievement.

In 2017, he was awarded the Order of the Palmetto, South Carolina's highest civilian honor. Three years later, he was inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame.

These accolades reflect not only his artistic accomplishments but also his impact as a mentor, educator and cultural leader.

Today, at age 92, Twiggs remains a powerful voice in American art. His work continues to challenge audiences to consider the complexities of history while celebrating the strength and resilience of the human spirit.

Revelations: The Art of Leo Twiggs offers visitors a rare opportunity to experience the breadth of his career and the evolution of an artist whose vision has helped define South Carolina's cultural identity.

More than an exhibition, the show serves as a tribute to a lifetime of creativity, scholarship and service. Through his art, teaching and leadership, Leo Twiggs has demonstrated how one individual can preserve history, inspire future generations and leave a lasting mark on a community, a state and a nation.



"Targeted Man"

ILLUMINATING THE IMAGE

By Ronette Genwright



Logan Cooper

Logan Cooper, a Florence native and graduate of Lander University, has built a meaningful career at the intersection of education and artistic practice. Initially pursuing a degree in visual arts, Cooper later transitioned into art education and now teaches photography at South Florence High School. Although photography was not originally her intended focus, it became central to her creative identity during college, where she consistently enrolled in photography courses and developed a strong portfolio.

One of Cooper's earliest significant projects centered on her family's roots in Lake City. The series documented family members and explored generational identity within the Cooper lineage. Through the project, she discovered a passion for storytelling, using photography to preserve narratives and personal histories.

Teaching has had a profound influence on Cooper's artistic perspective. Working with students from diverse backgrounds exposes her to a wide range of ideas and interpretations. She said students often approach assignments in unexpected ways, pushing creative boundaries beyond her original prompts. The environment not only inspires her but also challenges her to remain open-minded and adaptable in her own work.

At the same time, Cooper acknowledges that teaching can sometimes limit personal creativity because of time constraints and professional responsibilities, particularly during her first year in the classroom.

Despite those challenges, Cooper has found ways to balance teaching with her artistic pursuits. She dedicates time on weekends to photography, viewing even small creative efforts as meaningful progress. She also looks forward to extended breaks, such as summer vacation, to explore more intensive artistic projects. The approach reflects a realistic commitment to sustaining creativity while managing a demanding career.

Cooper's artistic interests span both traditional and contemporary mediums. In visual art, she enjoys working with mixed media and oil pastels, appreciating their vibrant colors, textures and versatility. In photography, she is especially drawn to portraiture. She prefers photographing people with whom she can relate, often focusing on subjects who reflect aspects of her own identity and experiences.

Beyond technical skills, Cooper emphasizes the deeper purpose of art in her teaching. She hopes her students understand that art is not merely decorative but can serve as a powerful tool for communication and social change. By encouraging students to think critically and express their perspectives, she aims to foster both creativity and confidence.

One of her most meaningful works, "White Frilly Socks," reflects that philosophy. The photograph captures a young girl dressed in traditional church attire, symbolizing a shared cultural experience among many Black girls. For Cooper, the image represents both nostalgia and identity. She has expressed interest in expanding the concept into a broader series exploring themes of church, culture and community.

Cooper also reflects on the unique storytelling capabilities of photography compared with traditional visual art. While painting and sculpture allow for greater interpretive flexibility, photography offers a sense of immediacy and documentation. She describes photographs as direct evidence of lived experiences, making them particularly powerful in conveying reality and prompting discussion.

Art, according to Cooper, plays a vital role in strengthening communities. It brings people together and provides insight into perspectives that might otherwise remain unseen. This belief extends to her views on youth creativity. She stresses the importance of encouraging young people to create rather than passively consume content, noting that artistic expression remains essential in a rapidly changing world.

Throughout her career, Cooper has faced challenges related to artistic interpretation and representation. She recalls a moment when a viewer questioned why a sculpture of a Black woman was not painted with a literal skin tone. For Cooper, the experience highlighted broader assumptions about representation in art. She emphasizes that identity does not always require explicit labeling and can be conveyed through form, features and context.

Cooper also addresses the broader issue of representation in the arts, noting that certain perspectives are often treated as the default. As a result, artwork featuring Black subjects is frequently expected to carry a specific message or explanation. She challenges that notion, asserting that sometimes a piece simply represents a person without requiring additional justification.

Among her influences, Cooper cites photographer Carrie Mae Weems, known for the, "Kitchen Table Series," as well as local photographer Amanda Nicola, who inspired her to engage more deeply with portrait photography within her own community. Those influences have shaped both her artistic style and her commitment to representing diverse experiences.

For aspiring artists, Cooper offers practical advice: study the work of established artists, understand what makes their work effective and use that knowledge as a foundation for developing an individual voice. She encourages artists to learn from history without imitating it, emphasizing originality grounded in understanding.

Looking ahead, Cooper is developing a project focused on Black girlhood, along with a community-based portrait series in Florence. In the ongoing project, she photographs an individual who then nominates the next participant, creating a chain of connection and storytelling. The approach not only fosters community engagement but also expands the diversity of subjects and experiences represented in her work.

Ultimately, Cooper hopes her art sparks conversation. Rather than seeking to change opinions directly, she aims to encourage dialogue and reflection. For her, the value of art lies in its ability to make people think, question and engage with the world in new ways.



Logan Cooper's Photography work

THE ART OF MUSIC: TERRY CARSWELL'S LIFELONG LEGACY

By Cynthia O. Ford



Dr. Terry Roberts Carswell

Growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, in a family where music was woven into everyday life, Dr. Terry Roberts Carswell was surrounded by musicians from an early age. His mother played piano and directed the church choir, while his three brothers played trombone, trumpet, percussion and sang. His father, although not a musician, served as the family's patient audience and biggest supporter.

By sixth grade, Carswell knew music would become both his career and his passion. More than four decades later, that childhood certainty has grown into a life devoted to teaching, conducting, mentoring and strengthening communities through the arts.

"I have been amazingly fortunate to have done the thing I love for the past four decades," Carswell said.

Carswell credits his mother as his first musical inspiration. Listening to her play the piano and encouraging him to try it himself sparked a passion that would shape the course of his life.

Two teachers later deepened that passion. Leonard Brendel, his middle school band director, and Jim Williams, his high school choral director, inspired him not only through their musical talent but also through their love of teaching. Carswell describes them as supportive, professional and challenging, adding that the trajectory of his life in music was a direct result of their guidance and infectious love for the art.

Today, Carswell carries that same influence into every classroom, rehearsal and performance. He earned degrees from Appalachian State University, the University of South Carolina and Florida State University before building a distinguished career in higher education, church music and community arts.

He currently serves as associate provost at Francis Marion University, director of music and organist at St. Matthew's Anglican Church in Darlington, and music director and conductor of the Masterworks Choir. Since 2012, he has served as only the second conductor in the organization's history.

"Music has served as the foundation for most everything I have achieved and enjoy in this life," he said. "Put simply, it is central to everything I do."

That philosophy has shaped his leadership of the Masterworks Choir, one of South Carolina's premier choral ensembles. Now celebrating 47 years of musical excellence, the choir has grown from 30 singers into an auditioned ensemble of approximately 90 voices representing communities across the Pee Dee.

Through performance, outreach and education, the organization remains committed to increasing appreciation for choral music while enriching lives through the power of artistic expression. Under Carswell's leadership, the choir has expanded its repertoire, strengthened community engagement and continued building upon a legacy of musical excellence.

"The Masterworks Choir is a central part of the artistic fabric of Florence and the broader region," he said. "Music has the power to change people and the world, and it acts as a profound social glue that brings people together. It can provide comfort when words fail and foster cultural understanding across borders. We need Masterworks. We need music. We need all the arts now more than ever."

That commitment has earned the choir recognition well beyond Florence. Masterworks has performed throughout South Carolina, at Carnegie Hall and internationally, sharing its music with audiences across Europe while continuing to call Florence home.

Yet Carswell is quick to remind others that the choir's greatest impact is not measured by where it performs but by the lives it touches within its own community.

Carswell also speaks passionately about the value of music education. Research consistently demonstrates that music strengthens cognitive function, improves memory and focus, reduces stress and supports stronger academic performance. Beyond measurable outcomes, he believes music develops discipline, creativity, confidence and life skills that extend well beyond the classroom.

"Music and the arts are a necessity, not a luxury," he said.

Despite conducting in some of the world's most prestigious venues, including the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and Carnegie Hall, Carswell says his most rewarding work has always been with students. Every university choir brought together talented musicians who challenged him to become a better teacher and conductor while reminding him why he chose this profession in the first place.

He has earned numerous honors, including the Excellence in Teaching Award from South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities and the 2021 John W. Baker Distinguished Service Award presented by the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. Receiving an award honoring Baker, a respected musician and academic leader at Francis Marion University, held special significance for Carswell as both an educator and administrator at the university.

Carswell encourages aspiring musicians to pursue what they love while embracing the discipline required to succeed. He believes growth comes through hours of practice, finding joy in the process, seeking inspiration from a variety of musical styles and remaining connected to a musical community.

Carswell measures his career by the lives touched through music. Every rehearsal, every classroom, every performance and every student has been an opportunity to pass forward the same encouragement, discipline and love for music that was first given to him by his mother and later nurtured by teachers who believed in him.

His work reminds us that music is never confined to a stage. It follows us into our homes, schools, churches and communities.

"I think my legacy will be determined by others — those whom I have had the good fortune of knowing, teaching and directing," Carswell said. "I hope that those who have worked with me will feel that my dedication to music and the arts has made a positive impact on them and in our small part of the world."

A young boy who discovered his calling in the sixth grade grew into an educator, conductor and arts leader whose greatest composition has never been measured by a single performance. Instead, it is written in the generations of students he has mentored, the communities he has united through music and the countless lives he has touched along the way.

Long after the final note fades, that may be the masterpiece that endures.

STILL BECOMING: A CREATIVE LIFE IN COLOR

By Glaceria Brown Mason



Carol Black-Lemon

In honor of American Artist Appreciation Month, we shine a spotlight on the vibrant and ever-evolving creative journey of Carol Black-Lemon, a multidisciplinary artist who is, "still becoming," embracing creativity, growth and learning at every stage of life. Born in Newark, NJ and raised in Brooklyn, NY, Lemon's story embodies the spirit of lifelong artistic discovery and community engagement. He early life was steeped in art and design, thanks to a father who painted and built things, and a mother with a career in the fashion industry. These influences sparked a love for creativity that would shape her path for decades to come.

After building a life and raising a family in West Orange, NJ, Lemon and her husband relocated to Florence, SC, seeking warmth, a slower pace and community. The move provided a change of scenery and opened doors for deeper artistic exploration and meaningful connections.

Lemon's formal education began at Baruch College and flourished at the School of Visual Arts and Borough of Manhattan Community College. Her artistic foundation was shaped by hands-on experience in advertising, graphic design and entrepreneurship. Through these avenues, she honed her skills in visual communication and creative problem-solving, ultimately building her own web and graphic design business.

For Lemon, art is more than a career, it is a lifelong passion. Her creative journey began in childhood, assembling found objects and experimenting with mixed media, a practice that would later become a hallmark of her work. Winning the MLK Art Award and earning a scholarship to the Brooklyn Museum at age 12 was a pivotal moment, igniting her fascination with storytelling through visual art and connecting her to a wider world of cultures and histories.

Today, her process is rooted in emotion, storytelling and a deep love of color. "There is an energy in color that evokes emotion and creates mood," she explains, often beginning her paintings with layers of vibrant hues that guide the direction of her work. Her pieces, whether abstract or figurative, are developed through patient layering—sometimes over the course of days, sometimes months—using both acrylics and oils to create depth and texture.

Lemon finds inspiration and joy in music, video storytelling and learning new instruments such as harmonica and ukulele. She says, "Creativity doesn't only live on a canvas. It can be found in movement, music, conversation and being open to new experiences at every stage of life."

Lemon's artistry is rooted in both natural talent and a belief that creative skills can be nurtured in everyone. "I believe some people are naturally gifted with an artistic sensitivity or creative instinct from a very young age. At the same time, I believe creativity exists within all human beings, and it can absolutely be nurtured and taught," she shares. Her perspective is shaped by the stories of artists like Vincent van Gogh, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Miles Davis and John Coltrane—visionaries who defied convention and found recognition through passion and persistence.

The journey of an artist is ongoing, built on curiosity, resilience and a willingness to evolve. Lemon's work continues to inspire those around her, to live creatively, connect with community and find art in every corner of life.

For Lemon, true artistry is about feeling deeply and embracing the creative process with courage. The satisfaction she finds in completing a work of art—signing her name and titling a painting—reflects the magical transformation of inspiration into something tangible. Creativity, she insists, is not about perfection but about growth and expression, and having the courage to try.

Beyond her studio, Lemon enjoys supporting and participating in art societies and groups, including ArtFields, Black Creek Arts Council, Pee Dee Women's Professional Association and the Florence County Museum. Her involvement strengthens the local arts community and supports opportunities for artists to thrive and connect.

Her commitment extends to teaching and mentoring, enriching lives through creative workshops and instruction for both youth and adults. She has led workshops at the Barnes Center and served as an art instructor at the Performance Arts & Science Academy in Marion, inspiring students to explore curiosity, confidence, creativity and joy. Working with different generations, Lemon sees creativity as a force that builds connection and community, bridging gaps and nurturing self-expression.

Lemon's work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions throughout SC, NY and NJ, including galleries, libraries, art centers and community spaces. She created a permanent pillar mural installation for the Africana Institute at Essex County College. In addition to exhibitions, her work is held in private collections throughout the United States, the United Kingdom and Denmark. Lemon shares and sells her artwork through Carolblacklemonart.com and through community art initiatives.

Lemon's celebrated "She Worthy" series was successfully showcased at the Dr. N. Lee Morris Gallery in Florence, SC. From the series, Lemon developed "She Worthy: The Gift of Generations," a coffee-table book which she curated and published, thoughtfully pairing her artwork alongside poetry and prose from women writers representing different generations. "She Worthy" holds deep personal significance, and her extraordinary body of work, "The Gift of Generations," is a highlight due to its depiction of legacy, resilience, wisdom and the enduring connections shared among women and passed down through families.

As the founder of Creative Connection, Lemon created this discussion group to unite artists and creatives, providing a space where ideas can be shared and supported. The group was built on the belief that everyone should have a safe, judgment-free environment to explore their creative voices, encouraging inspiration and a true sense of belonging.

As we celebrate American Artist Appreciation Month, it is only fitting to highlight Lemon's contributions as a multidisciplinary artist, mentor, innovator and advocate for creative expression. Her story encourages all of us to embrace creativity, support one another and never stop exploring our passion regardless of age or background. Lemon hopes her journey inspires others to understand "it is never too late to discover or rekindle creativity." Her life and work epitomize the spirit of American artistry: bold, inclusive and transformative.



Carol Black-Lemon work with students

THE POWER OF ONE OPPORTUNITY

By Cynthia O. Ford



Robert Hill

Sometimes the most powerful moments in life do not arrive with fanfare. They come disguised as ordinary opportunities. For Robert Hill, director of tennis for the City of Florence and the Dr. Eddie Floyd Florence Tennis Center, that moment came when he was 13 years old.

"Tennis has been a big part of my life since I was 13," Hill said. "I was exposed to tennis in middle school P.E. class and instantly knew it was the sport for me."

Hill is known throughout South Carolina as a leader in recreation, youth development and tennis programming. As director of tennis, he oversees operations at the Dr. Eddie Floyd Florence Tennis Center and supports programs throughout the city at Timrod Park, Lucas Park and Levy Park. His work helps expand access to specialized recreation programs and training opportunities while creating experiences that improve quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

While attending Francis Marion University, he majored in mathematics and finance and expected to build a career in retirement planning. During his second semester, a local tennis facility contacted his college coach seeking someone to help at the facility. His coach recommended Hill. After graduation, Hill accepted a full-time position as a head tennis professional.

Over the years, he advanced from head tennis professional to director of tennis before joining the City of Florence in 2013. Since then, he has helped transform the Dr. Eddie Floyd Florence Tennis Center into one of the premier tennis facilities in the region. His responsibilities extend far beyond organizing matches and maintaining courts.

Hill helps oversee programs designed to introduce new players to the sport, supports league play for adults and works to attract tournaments that benefit the local economy. The Florence Tennis Center hosted 23 multiday tournaments that generated an estimated economic impact of more than $8 million for the Florence community.

"I have seen tennis create its own community," Hill said. "I have also seen it put people from different backgrounds that may not have otherwise socialized together and be the bridge for them to become friends."

The Florence Tennis Center's success is built on partnerships that expand access and remove barriers to participation. Hill credits organizations such as the Florence Tennis Association, the Ron James Youth Tennis Program, the United States Tennis Association and community partners such as McCall Farms for helping create opportunities for local youth and adults.



Robert Hill was recognized by the City of Florence Mayor, members of City Council, and the Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism Director for being named the 2024 United States Tennis Association's South Carolina Professional of the Year.



The City of Florence Director of Tennis and Head Tennis Professional traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio to receive the Florence Tennis Center's designation of being named one of the nation's Outstanding Tennis Facilities by the United States Tennis Association.

One of the most significant investments came through a $66,000 grant from the United States Tennis Association. The funding provided equipment for Florence-area schools and helped subsidize beginner tennis clinics, making the sport more accessible to children and families.

Hill believes tennis is one of the most valuable sports a person can learn. Unlike many sports that fade after high school or college, tennis is truly a lifelong activity. Last year alone, Florence's adult leagues recorded 1,925 registrations, demonstrating that people continue to play well into adulthood.

For Hill, the greatest benefits go far beyond physical health. Tennis teaches self-reliance, communication, perseverance and problem-solving. It also teaches players how to work through adversity and how to be part of something bigger than themselves.

"When you play singles, you learn to be self-reliant, how to overcome adversity and how to problem-solve," Hill said. "When you play doubles, you learn to communicate and work as a team."

In 2024, he was named the United States Tennis Association South Carolina Tennis Professional of the Year, one of the state's highest honors in the sport. Another career highlight came when he coached Team Florence athletes at the International Children's Games in New Taipei City, Taiwan. Competing against athletes from around the world, two Florence players earned a bronze medal after a doubles victory against a team from Greece.

The most meaningful accomplishments are often the quiet ones — a child learning a new skill, a beginner gaining confidence, a new friendship formed or a young person discovering a passion that could shape the rest of their life. Hill reflects on the people who helped him reach where he is today: the teacher who introduced him to tennis, the coach who gave him an opportunity and the mentor who taught him the profession.

"The reason tennis has given me so much is because of the cumulative effect of the small acts that people around me made along the way," he said.

One teacher can change a life. One coach can open a door. One mentor can create a future. Today, Hill is working to provide those same opportunities for others.

Looking ahead, he is excited about plans to expand the Dr. Eddie Floyd Florence Tennis Center from 30 courts to approximately 40 through support from the Bruce and Lee Foundation. The expansion will create additional opportunities for youth programs, attract larger events and strengthen Florence's reputation as a destination for recreation and sports tourism.

Hill hopes his legacy will not be measured by awards or titles. Instead, he hopes to leave the facility bigger and better than he found it, with strong tennis and pickleball communities, full calendars and opportunities for generations to come. One opportunity changed his life. Now he spends every day creating opportunities for someone else. That is the power of recreation, community and one opportunity.















The Pee Dee Region

Adventure Runs Through it

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One region connected by nature, community, and belonging.

This July, Pee Dee Tourism celebrates Parks and Recreation Month and the power of public spaces to bring people together. Across Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Lee, Marion, Marlboro, and Williamsburg counties, our parks invite everyone to explore, play, reflect, gather, and feel at home.

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Featured parks:
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Little Pee Dee State Park — Dillon County
Lynches River County Park — Florence County
Lee State Park — Lee County
Amazing Grace Park — Marion County
Lake Paul Wallace — Marlboro County
Black River State Park — Williamsburg County

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The Pee Dee Region



Kalmia Gardens



Little Pee Dee State Park



Black River State Park



Lynches River County Park

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EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY

Adventure Runs Through it



Lake Paul Wallace



Lee State Park



Amazing Grace Park

Pee Dee Tourism peedeetourismsc PeeDeeTourism PDT

CAMP PEE DEE PRIDE UPDATES 2026 PROGRAM

Submitted by Submitted by Warren Snell, president, Camp Pee Dee Pride

Camp Pee Dee Pride announced it will make temporary adjustments to its 2026 summer program by reducing the number of campers served and shortening camp sessions due to a significant decline in grant funding and sponsorship revenue, coupled with rising operational costs.

For nearly 30 years, Camp Pee Dee Pride has partnered with the Florence County Sheriff's Office and community volunteers to provide a free summer camp experience that builds confidence, friendships, leadership skills and positive relationships for children throughout the Pee Dee. The program focuses on mentorship, character development, teamwork, recreation, educational opportunities and creating lasting memories for local youth.

Camp leadership emphasized that the decision was made to preserve the quality and safety of the camp experience while maintaining responsible financial stewardship.

"Camp Pee Dee Pride has always been committed to providing the very best experience possible for every child who attends," said Warren Snell, president of Camp Pee Dee Pride. "While we are disappointed that we cannot serve as many children this year as we would like, these adjustments ensure that we can continue delivering the safe, meaningful and impactful program our campers deserve."



Kids enjoying summer camp.

The reduction in available funding, combined with increasing costs associated with transportation, activities, meals, insurance, supplies and facility operations, made it necessary to temporarily scale back the program for the upcoming season. Camp leadership noted that every effort was made to avoid reducing services before arriving at the difficult decision.

Camp leadership also expressed gratitude to the sponsors, donors, volunteers, counselors, the Florence County Sheriff's Office, local businesses and community partners who have supported Camp Pee Dee Pride throughout its history.

"Our vision is not to shrink the camp but to grow it," Snell said. "For nearly three decades, our community has come together to invest in the lives of local children. With renewed community support, we are confident we can restore capacity, strengthen our programs and create opportunities for even more children in the years ahead."

Community members and businesses interested in supporting Camp Pee Dee Pride through sponsorships, donations, fundraising partnerships or volunteer service are encouraged to visit www.camppeedeepride.com for more information.

About Camp Pee Dee Pride

Camp Pee Dee Pride is a free summer youth camp serving children throughout the Pee Dee region. Through a partnership with the Florence County Sheriff's Office and dedicated community volunteers, the camp provides positive experiences, mentorship, leadership development, educational activities and recreational opportunities in a safe and supportive environment. Since its founding nearly 30 years ago, the camp has positively impacted thousands of children and families across the Pee Dee.

LYNCHES RIVER COUNTY PARK: NATURE & DEDICATION

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Scott MacGillivray

Millions of people visit local, state and national parks each year, drawn by their appreciation for the natural world. From scenic trails and unique rock formations to rivers, waterfalls and walking paths, visitors travel great distances to experience nature's beauty. Preserving these treasured spaces requires dedicated professionals committed to conservation and public service.

At Lynches River County Park in Florence County, that responsibility falls to a team of park rangers and staff led by Supervisor Scott MacGillivray, whose primary role is ensuring the park remains safe, accessible and enjoyable for visitors.

A resident of Marion County, MacGillivray has worked for Florence County for nine years. He began his career with the Parks and Recreation Department as a part-time employee in 2017 before transitioning to a full-time role. Through hard work, dedication and a passion for parks and recreation, he advanced through the ranks to become a supervisor.

MacGillivray said a typical day includes monitoring the park through regular inspections to ensure visitor safety. Staff members clear storm debris, remove fallen tree limbs and maintain trails to eliminate potential hazards. He emphasized that guest safety remains the team's highest priority, and staff members meet daily to coordinate maintenance efforts and park operations.

Lynches River County Park offers a wide range of recreational opportunities, including horseback riding trails, a splash pad, upgraded campgrounds and a recently added 18-hole disc golf course. In addition to overseeing park maintenance, MacGillivray helps promote programs and activities designed to connect visitors with nature.

One of the park's most popular attractions is the Environmental Discovery Center, which provides interactive educational experiences focused on nature and science. The center serves as a valuable resource for teachers and students, offering hands-on learning opportunities that extend beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Visitors can also enjoy canoeing, kayaking, fishing, archery, a climbing wall and miles of walking trails. While some activities require a fee, many are available at no cost. MacGillivray noted that recent upgrades have helped attract more visitors to the park. Among the additions are six miles of equestrian trails for horseback riders and the new disc golf course, which appeals to participants of all ages.

The park's splash pad, a favorite destination for families, has also been upgraded just in time for summer. Four-legged family members have not been forgotten, either, thanks to a dedicated dog park that provides a safe space for pets to play and socialize.

With its growing list of amenities and programs, Lynches River County Park relies on dedicated staff and strong community support to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for visitors. Opportunities are available for both employees and volunteers who want to contribute to the park's success.

MacGillivray said most positions within parks and recreation do not require a specific academic background. Instead, he believes success comes from a willingness to work hard, a commitment to serving others and a genuine appreciation for the outdoors.

"Sustainability is more than a trend," MacGillivray said. "It is a critical component of building environmentally responsible and financially sustainable parks, facilities and programs."

He added that community partnerships play a vital role in maintaining the park's success, ensuring that Lynches River County Park continues to offer meaningful outdoor experiences for generations to come.

DISCOVER LOCAL HISTORY OUTDOORS *Submitted by Florence Convention and Visitors Bureau*



Kayakers gather at Lynches River County Park boat ramp. Photo credit: True Light Photography

In today's world, it is easy to spend days indoors, working at computers, scrolling through phones and rushing from one obligation to the next. Yet some of the greatest benefits to health, well-being and sense of community can be found outside. Florence County is fortunate to have remarkable outdoor resources that offer opportunities to exercise, relax, learn and reconnect with nature while experiencing a unique chapter of American history.

Research consistently shows that spending time outdoors reduces stress, improves mental health, increases physical activity, and strengthens family connections. Whether it's a short walk, a bike ride, a paddle down a scenic river or simply sitting beneath a canopy of trees, time in nature provides a welcome break from the demands of everyday life.

One of Florence County's greatest outdoor treasures is Lynches River County Park. Nestled along one of South Carolina's most beautiful blackwater rivers, the park offers something for visitors of all ages. Families can explore boardwalks and nature trails, enjoy playgrounds and picnic areas, participate in environmental education programs or launch a kayak for an unforgettable adventure on the river. The park serves as a gateway to one of the most significant outdoor recreation experiences in the state.

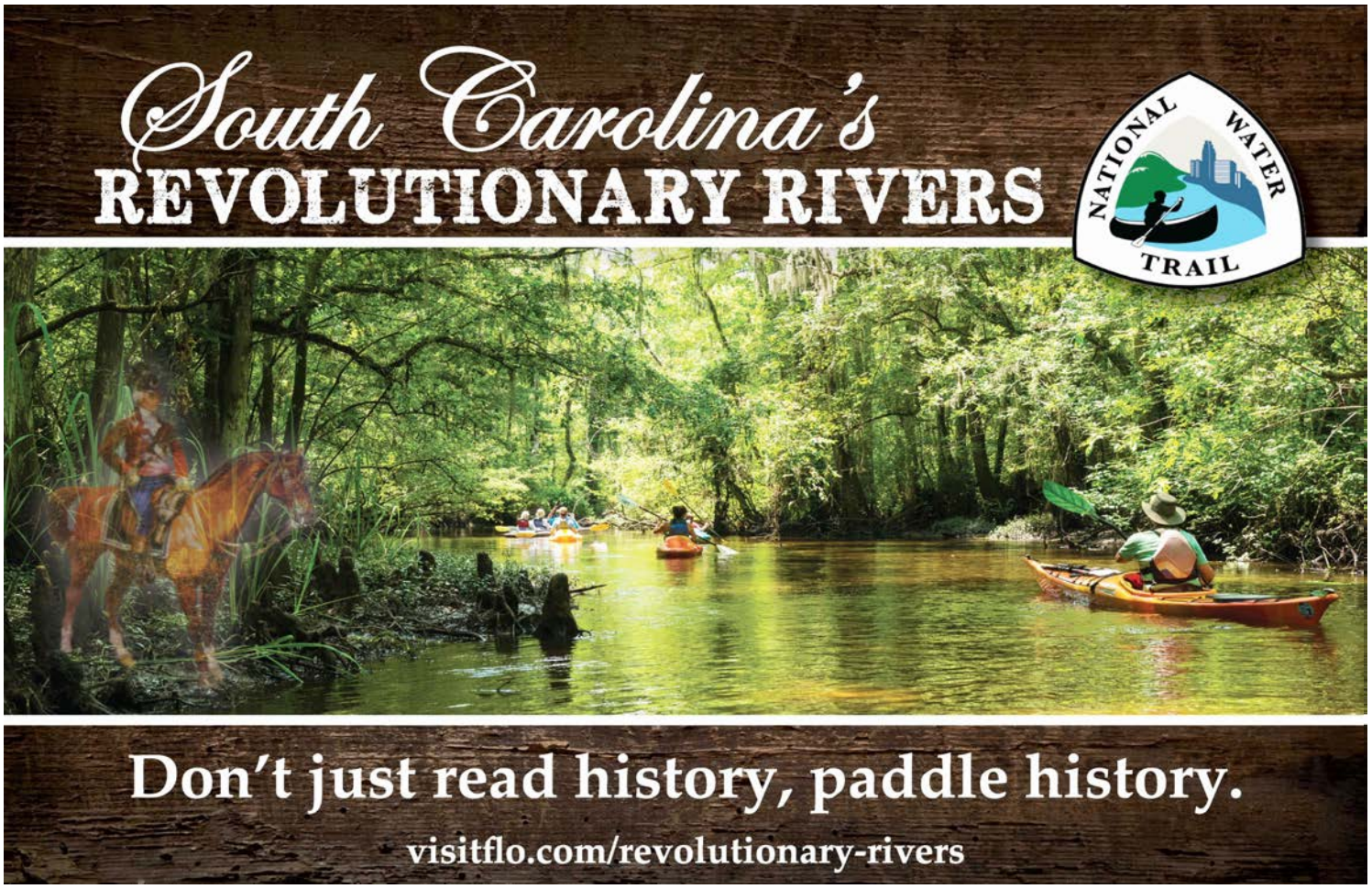
As South Carolina commemorates the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution through SC250, residents and visitors have a unique opportunity to experience history in a way that goes far beyond reading a textbook. The SC Revolutionary Rivers National Water Trail follows the Lynches River through the very swamps and waterways where General Francis Marion, better known as the "Swamp Fox," carried out the guerrilla tactics that helped turn the tide of the Revolutionary War in the South.

Designated as a National Water Trail in 2022, the 66-mile route begins at Lynches River County Park and winds through breathtaking cypress and tupelo forests before joining the Great Pee Dee River. Along the way, paddlers experience landscapes that have changed little since Marion and his militia used these waterways as a refuge from British forces more than 240 years ago.

The trail is more than a historical attraction. It is also an ecological treasure. Birdwatchers, anglers, photographers and nature enthusiasts are drawn to the river's rich biodiversity and scenic beauty. Ancient cypress trees, abundant wildlife, and quiet stretches of blackwater create an experience that is both peaceful and inspiring.

As we celebrate SC250, let us remember that history is not confined to museums and monuments. Some of the most meaningful connections to our past can be found outdoors, where the landscape itself tells the story. Florence County residents are uniquely positioned to explore one of South Carolina's most significant Revolutionary War resources while enjoying the physical and mental benefits of time spent in nature.

This summer, consider putting down the phone, stepping away from the television and heading outside. Visit Lynches River County Park. Walk a trail. Paddle a river. Experience the natural beauty and rich history that make Florence County special. You may discover that the best way to appreciate both our heritage and our future is simply to spend more time outdoors.



BUILDING CONNECTIONS, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

By Cynthia O. Ford





James Headley

COLUMBIA - When most people think about parks and recreation, they think about playgrounds, ballfields and summer camps. According to James Headley, executive director of the South Carolina Recreation and Park Association (SCRPA), that view only scratches the surface.

For Headley, parks and recreation is not simply about places to play. It is about people, community and quality of life. It is about giving children, families, seniors and entire communities a safe place to belong.

After 39 years with SCRPA, Headley speaks with the kind of wisdom that comes from experience. He became the association's first full-time executive director in 1987. At the time, the organization had approximately 380 members. Today, SCRPA has grown to more than 1,300 members, serving all 46 counties in South Carolina.

The association provides professional development, training and resources for recreation professionals across the state. Those services include playground safety certification, after-school program quality standards, pesticide education, policy awareness and professional development opportunities that help local departments better serve their communities. Headley also represents the profession at the State House and works with lawmakers on issues affecting parks, recreation and public spaces.

One of the most important points Headley emphasized is how parks and recreation help make communities attractive places to live, work and invest in. When companies consider relocating or expanding into a community, they are not only evaluating the workforce. They also examine education systems and overall quality of life. Families want to know what opportunities exist for their children, where they can gather, walk, play and connect with others.

Sports tourism also plays a significant role in South Carolina's economy. Youth and adult tournaments, tennis competitions, baseball, softball and other recreational events bring visitors into communities across the state. Those visitors stay in hotels, dine at restaurants and spend money with local businesses.

"When a community is growing and thriving and there's a lot of things to do, that makes it a more attractive place," Headley said.

Parks and recreation touch people throughout every stage of life. Headley described the profession as one that serves people from "cradle to grave," offering programs ranging from day camps and youth sports to senior centers, travel opportunities and, in some communities, even cemetery services.

Headley also emphasized the importance of accessibility and inclusion. Therapeutic recreation programs, inclusive playgrounds and accessible facilities help ensure that public parks truly serve everyone. He pointed to inclusive playgrounds throughout South Carolina that allow children with disabilities, sensory needs and mobility challenges to enjoy recreation alongside their peers.

Providing that level of access requires thoughtful planning and significant investment. Public playgrounds cannot simply be purchased and installed. They must meet safety standards,



Spartanburg County Parks Department Earns Award for Tyger River Park

undergo inspections and be designed to serve diverse populations. Some playgrounds cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, while larger inclusive playgrounds can require investments of several million dollars. Headley believes those investments are worthwhile.

For some children, a coach, camp counselor or recreation leader may become one of the most influential positive figures in their lives. That is why parks and recreation professionals are often the unsung heroes of their communities. They may not always receive public recognition, but they help shape lives every day.

Technology also continues to transform recreation experiences. Local park systems now use QR codes, interactive trails, mobile-based activities and educational tools that help visitors learn more about nature while exploring it. SCRPA has also embraced esports. While some may not traditionally view gaming as recreation, Headley said esports provide opportunities to engage young people who may not participate in conventional sports programs.

Trails have become one of the greatest recreational needs across South Carolina. Whether it is a nature trail, a walking path in a small town, a trail within a county park or a regional trail system, people increasingly want safe places to walk, exercise and spend time outdoors.

That demand is closely tied to health and wellness.

"Just getting outside does some wonders of good," Headley said.

Headley also highlighted the arts as an important component of recreation. Communities such as Columbia, Newberry and Greer offer robust arts programming through their parks and recreation departments, including pottery, theater, painting and other creative classes. In other areas, recreation departments partner with local arts organizations to bring creative programming into summer camps, after-school activities and senior programs.

That reality serves as a reminder that recreation is not one thing. It is many things. It includes sports, arts, trails, camps, senior programs, dog parks, concerts, playgrounds, nature experiences and community events. It encompasses both structured activities and unstructured play. It embraces competition and creativity, movement and rest, wellness and belonging.

As much as Headley values organized programming, he believes communities must also preserve opportunities for unstructured play. Not everything needs to revolve around tournaments, schedules or rules. Children need time and space to explore, imagine, solve problems and simply be children. For Headley, the future of parks and recreation must include safe and welcoming spaces for everyone.

"If I can help our community reach that one child, that one senior, that one adult, then it's made my life and my career very satisfying," he said.

As Parks and Recreation Month is celebrated across the country, Headley's message is simple: Go enjoy a park today.

Behind every park, trail, playground, program and gathering space is a larger story — one of community, connection and belonging.

SUMMER DOWNTOWN: SHOP, DINE & EXPLORE FLORENCE

Submitted by Florence Downtown Development Office Staff



Florence After 5, photo courtesy of True Light Photography.

There is something special about summer in South Carolina, especially in downtown Florence, where the season creates the perfect atmosphere to slow down, connect with neighbors and experience all the historic district has to offer. Whether enjoying a meal with friends, searching for a unique gift or spending an afternoon exploring, there is no better time to shop locally and support the businesses that make downtown Florence a destination worth celebrating.

When residents choose to shop or dine locally, their dollars do much more than making a purchase. They help strengthen the local economy, create jobs, support entrepreneurs and contribute to the vitality of the community. Every purchase made at a locally owned business helps keep resources circulating within Florence, supporting the people and places that make the city unique.

Summer is an especially important season for local businesses. Families travel through the area on their way to the beach, students are home from school and residents are looking for ways to make the most of the season. Downtown Florence offers countless opportunities to do just that. From locally owned boutiques and specialty retailers to restaurants, coffee shops, entertainment venues and cultural attractions, downtown provides an experience that cannot be replicated by online shopping or big-box retailers.

Downtown Florence is also home to a rich collection of historic buildings that serve as the backdrop for the community's shopping and dining experiences. When residents and visitors spend time downtown, they help support the preservation and continued use of these important spaces. The businesses that occupy these buildings demonstrate how historic preservation and economic development work hand in hand. Vibrant storefronts, restored facades and active public spaces contribute to a downtown environment that attracts visitors, encourages investment and creates a strong sense of place.

Summer is the perfect season to discover something new in downtown Florence. Perhaps there is a boutique you have always meant to visit, a restaurant you have wanted to try, an event you have yet to attend or an exhibit you are eager to see at the FMU Gately Gallery or the Florence County Museum. Take a stroll downtown, browse local shops and restaurants and experience the atmosphere that makes downtown such a treasured part of the community.

When residents support local businesses, they help create a downtown that remains vibrant, welcoming and economically resilient for future generations.

Before visiting, explore downtown's Shop, Dine, Stay directory at florencedowntown.com.



Hot days, cool finds, downtown vibes. From Florence After 5 to exploring our shops, restaurants, public art, and cultural amenities, Downtown Florence is your destination whether you're passing through or staying a while. Explore our Shop, Dine, Stay directory at www.florencedowntown.com.

MORE THAN A PLACE TO PLAY *By Cynthia O. Ford*



Matt Owens and his fiancé Madison Adams

Long before the first baseball is thrown, walking trails begin to fill and families gather around the fishing pond. Behind those experiences are dedicated professionals whose work often goes unnoticed but helps create memories that children and families carry with them for years. For Matt Owens, operations manager of the Freedom Florence Complex, that responsibility is both personal and purposeful.

Owens is not simply maintaining one of the Pee Dee's premier recreational facilities. He is caring for a place that helped shape his own childhood.

Born and raised in Florence, Owens developed a love for sports and the outdoors at an early age. After graduating from South Florence High School in 2016, he attended Florence-Darlington Technical College before earning a bachelor's degree in sports management from Francis Marion University in 2021. Today, he has come full circle, serving the same community that helped shape his life and career.

For the past two and a half years, Owens has helped oversee the daily operations of the Freedom Florence Complex, ensuring its athletic fields, walking trails, fishing areas and recreational facilities remain safe, welcoming and ready to serve thousands of visitors each year. His responsibilities also include assisting with leagues, tournaments and special events that bring athletes, families and visitors from across the region to Florence. While much of his work takes place behind the scenes, its impact can be seen every day in the experiences families enjoy throughout the complex.

"I have always had a passion for giving back to others and serving my community," Owens said.

That passion became even clearer while studying sports management in college. He realized he could combine his love for athletics and the outdoors with a career dedicated to improving the lives of others. Whether preparing fields for championship tournaments or maintaining scenic spaces where children can explore nature and families can spend time together, Owens believes parks and recreation are about much more than facilities. They are about creating places where people can connect, grow and make memories that last a lifetime.

Spread across more than 100 acres, the Freedom Florence Complex offers something for nearly everyone. The facility includes nine baseball and softball fields, three football fields, a five-acre fishing pond, nearly four miles of walking trails, a 12,000-square-foot gymnastics center, a youth center and eight automated batting cages. It also hosts youth and adult sports leagues while serving as a venue for high school softball and cross-country competitions.

Whether visitors arrive to compete, exercise, fish or simply enjoy the outdoors, Freedom Florence provides opportunities for people of all ages to stay active and connected.

Owens believes the complex plays an important role beyond recreation. Every tournament, league and special event introduces visitors to Florence while creating opportunities for local athletes to compete close to home. At the same time, those events generate meaningful economic activity by supporting local restaurants, hotels and businesses throughout the area. What begins as a weekend sporting event often becomes an opportunity for visitors to experience everything the Florence community has to offer.

While economic growth is important, Owens believes the greatest return on investment cannot be measured in dollars. Parks and recreation strengthen physical health, support mental wellness, encourage family connections and bring neighbors together in ways few public spaces can.

Over the past several years, he has watched recreation evolve through increased participation, expanded facilities, greater investments in health and wellness, and a renewed appreciation for outdoor spaces. Even with challenges such as funding limitations, staffing shortages, aging facilities and changing community expectations, he remains optimistic about the future of the profession because of the positive impact it continues to have on people's lives.

That impact has not gone unnoticed. The Municipal Association of South Carolina recently presented the City of Florence with an Achievement Award recognizing its success in using sports facilities to attract regional and national tournaments that generate tourism and economic activity. For Owens, recognition reflects what can happen when recreation is viewed as an investment in both people and place.

This year's Parks and Recreation Month theme, "The Power Of," resonates deeply with Owens because it captures what he sees every day.

"The true power of parks and recreation is found in the smiles of children, the friendships they build and the confidence they gain as they grow into the next generation of our community," he said.

As someone who once made childhood memories at Freedom Florence, Owens hopes to spend his career helping today's children create memories of their own. His advice to anyone considering a career in parks and recreation is simple: Focus on serving people. The facilities matter, but the lives changed within those spaces matter even more.

Looking ahead, Owens hopes his legacy will be measured not by the number of fields maintained or tournaments hosted, but by the experience's families carry home long after they leave the park. Having grown up playing baseball at Freedom Florence and spending countless hours enjoying Florence's parks, he understands how powerful those moments can be.

Today, his goal is to ensure future generations have the same opportunity to build friendships, gain confidence and create memories that will last a lifetime.

In many ways, Freedom Florence is more than a place to play. It is where Florence comes together. It is where children discover new passions, families reconnect, visitors experience the best of the Pee Dee, and a community continues to grow stronger — one experience at a time.



Matt Owens

APPRECIATING THE BEAUTY OF NATURE

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Sarah Howard

When people step into nature, its beauty invites admiration and appreciation for all it offers. One person whose passion for the outdoors began at an early age is Sarah Howard, supervisor of the Environmental Discovery Center at Lynches River County Park.

For the past 10 years, Howard has helped students, teachers and families develop a greater appreciation for nature. What began as a summer job at age 18, while she was a college student, has grown into a rewarding career. Today, she oversees the daily operations of the nature center, coordinates educational programs, plans summer camps and organizes monthly events.

The Environmental Discovery Center serves as the hub of the park, where guests make reservations for activities and accommodations and check in for camps. Howard's familiarity with the center began during her summer employment while attending school. Over time, she discovered that she enjoyed working with park visitors and coordinating educational experiences.

"I think what made me passionate about families was realizing how many people in our area don't have exposure to the kinds of animals we have or access to the information available in the center," Howard said.

The park offers a variety of programs for students from kindergarten through high school, as well as educational opportunities for adults. Each grade level has access to age-appropriate programs and on-site field trips. Staff members also provide outreach programs at local schools, bringing educational activities directly to students.

During the summer, the park hosts six-week educational camps and partners with other camps throughout the region. Interactive exhibits are available six days a week and are open to the public.

Increasing student participation is an important part of Howard's role. Greater involvement helps support fundraising efforts for the park's animal program. Funds raised help offset the costs of feeding and caring for the animals. The center also hopes to expand its outreach efforts into Williamsburg County, Horry County and other areas of South Carolina.

The Environmental Discovery Center plays a vital role in the community by encouraging children to spend time outdoors rather than indoors using electronic devices.

"One of our biggest challenges is screen time," Howard said. "Kids just aren't getting outside as much as they used to. They're not participating in sports as often as previous generations. Every kid has a cell phone, video games and a Chromebook at school. Screen time is one of the biggest obstacles to getting people outdoors to experience the resources and activities available to them."

Howard has witnessed firsthand the impact the center can have on young people. She recalled a local Girl Scout and her troop leader mother who helped plant a garden at the park. The student became fascinated with the project and continued returning to the park to work in the garden beds, replanting seeds and donating supplies.

Experiences like these demonstrate the value of partnerships with community organizations. Howard said those relationships help the center reach more people and strengthen community connections that allow Lynches River County Park to continue thriving.

The center also partners with students from Francis Marion University, who serve as interns and assist park staff. One of the newest outreach initiatives involves bringing educational materials and live animals to Vacation Bible Schools throughout the area.

"I was a little nervous at first about taking the programs off-site," Howard said. "But now I'm excited about the opportunities to reach more children and families."

The Environmental Discovery Center also hosts a monthly homeschool program on the second Tuesday of each month, providing homeschooled students with opportunities to learn, interact and build social connections with peers.

Howard encourages families, especially those with young children, to take advantage of outdoor opportunities throughout the community.

"Florence County has so many resources, not just Lynches River County Park," she said. "Our nature center is free to visit, and everything is hands-on. Many people simply don't know we're here because of our location. We've been told we're a hidden gem, and we don't want to be hidden."

Through its educational programs, outreach initiatives and commitment to environmental stewardship, the Environmental Discovery Center continues to inspire a new generation to explore, appreciate and protect the natural world.



DUAL DIAGNOSIS WITH MARTHA STEWART, LPC-S

By Susan K. Carter



Martha Stewart, LPC-S

Dual diagnosis, also known as co-occurring disorders, occurs when an individual experiences both a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder at the same time. These conditions often reinforce one another, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break without comprehensive, integrated treatment.

Martha Stewart, Licensed Professional Counselor/Supervisor and owner of Stewart Behavioral Services, has spent decades helping individuals navigate the challenges of dual diagnosis. Early in her career, following her graduation from Francis Marion University's Clinical and Community Counseling Program, she worked as a crisis counselor at Pee Dee Mental Health Center and co-facilitated a dual diagnosis group at Circle Park with Holly Morrison.

The weekly group included eight to 12 participants living with both a primary mental health diagnosis and a substance use disorder, most commonly alcohol use disorder. One of the group's primary goals was helping participants understand the connection between substance use and mental health.

"We talked about how alcohol and other drugs affect brain health," Stewart recalled. "Many participants were amazed by the brain-body connection and would say, 'I never heard it explained like that before.'"

As participants gained a better understanding of how substance use affected their thinking, emotions and overall functioning, many became motivated to reduce or stop use.

The dual diagnosis triangle

Stewart often uses what she calls the "dual diagnosis triangle" to explain how co-occurring disorders develop and worsen over time.

"The mental health condition leads the individual to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs," she explained. "Substance use eventually increases depression, anxiety or even psychotic symptoms, which worsens mental health. The individual then seeks relief through substances again, and the cycle continues."

Because substances initially provide temporary relief, individuals often believe they have found a solution. However, as effects wear off, the emotional crash frequently leaves them feeling worse than before.

"The crash following the high is often more severe than the original depression or anxiety," Stewart said. "This can lead to worsening symptoms and heavier substance use in subsequent cycles."

Understanding this cycle allows treatment providers to approach individuals with compassion rather than judgment.

"They want to do well," Stewart emphasized, "but the drive to drink is strong."

The reality of recovery

Stewart has witnessed both heartbreaking losses and meaningful successes throughout her career.

She recalls one former client, referred to as "Linda*," who had maintained stability and shown tremendous promise.

"We had high hopes that she would be okay," Stewart shared. "Unfortunately, after leaving therapy, she relapsed and eventually died as a result of her substance use."

Stories like Linda's highlight the chronic, relapsing nature of dual diagnosis and underscore the importance of ongoing support and treatment.

Effective treatment for co-occurring disorders

Treatment for dual diagnosis often includes counseling, psychiatric medications when indicated, substance use treatment and, in some cases, residential care.

Recovery can be complicated by several factors. Over time, individuals often develop tolerance to substances, requiring increasing amounts to achieve the same effect. Financial hardship resulting from substance use can intensify feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Many individuals begin to believe, "I can't get out of this."

These thoughts can contribute to suicidal ideation and behaviors, requiring clinicians to prioritize stabilization and safety before more intensive dual diagnosis interventions can occur.

Collaboration leads to success

In her private practice, Stewart carefully assesses clients for signs of substance misuse and discusses findings openly.

"If alcohol or drug use is substantial," she explained, "I let clients know that it can get in the way of effective mental health counseling."

She frequently collaborates with Circle Park to coordinate substance use treatment while continuing to support clients' mental health needs. Clients are reassured that counseling remains an essential part of recovery.

Stewart points to one former client, "Mary*," as an example of how integrated care can change lives.

Mary was referred to Stewart following discharge from Owl's Nest after experiencing THC-induced psychosis. Her symptoms deeply affected both her and her family.

As therapy progressed, Stewart helped Mary explore childhood experiences underlying her depression, anxiety and substance use. Mary's struggle for acceptance from a perfectionistic mother left her feeling inadequate and unworthy.

As a teenager, Mary recalled her mother suggesting she lose weight to improve her appearance. The comment left a lasting emotional wound.

"What is wrong with me as I am? Am I fat?" Mary wondered.

Without an outlet to process those feelings, she eventually turned to alcohol and drugs to cope with stress and negative emotions during college.

Through therapy, Mary developed insight into the connection between her childhood experiences, emotional struggles and substance use. Using cognitive behavioral techniques, she learned to identify emotions and replace unhealthy coping patterns with healthier strategies such as deep breathing, exercise and self-care practices.

Today, Mary is thriving. Stewart connected her with Vocational Rehabilitation, where she received mentorship and assistance securing employment at a local business. She now enjoys meaningful work, improved mental health and a more stable life.

Her transformation has been so significant that even her parents have sought Stewart's guidance for their own concerns.

Hope and healing

Dual diagnosis is complex and often marked by setbacks and relapses. Yet recovery is possible.

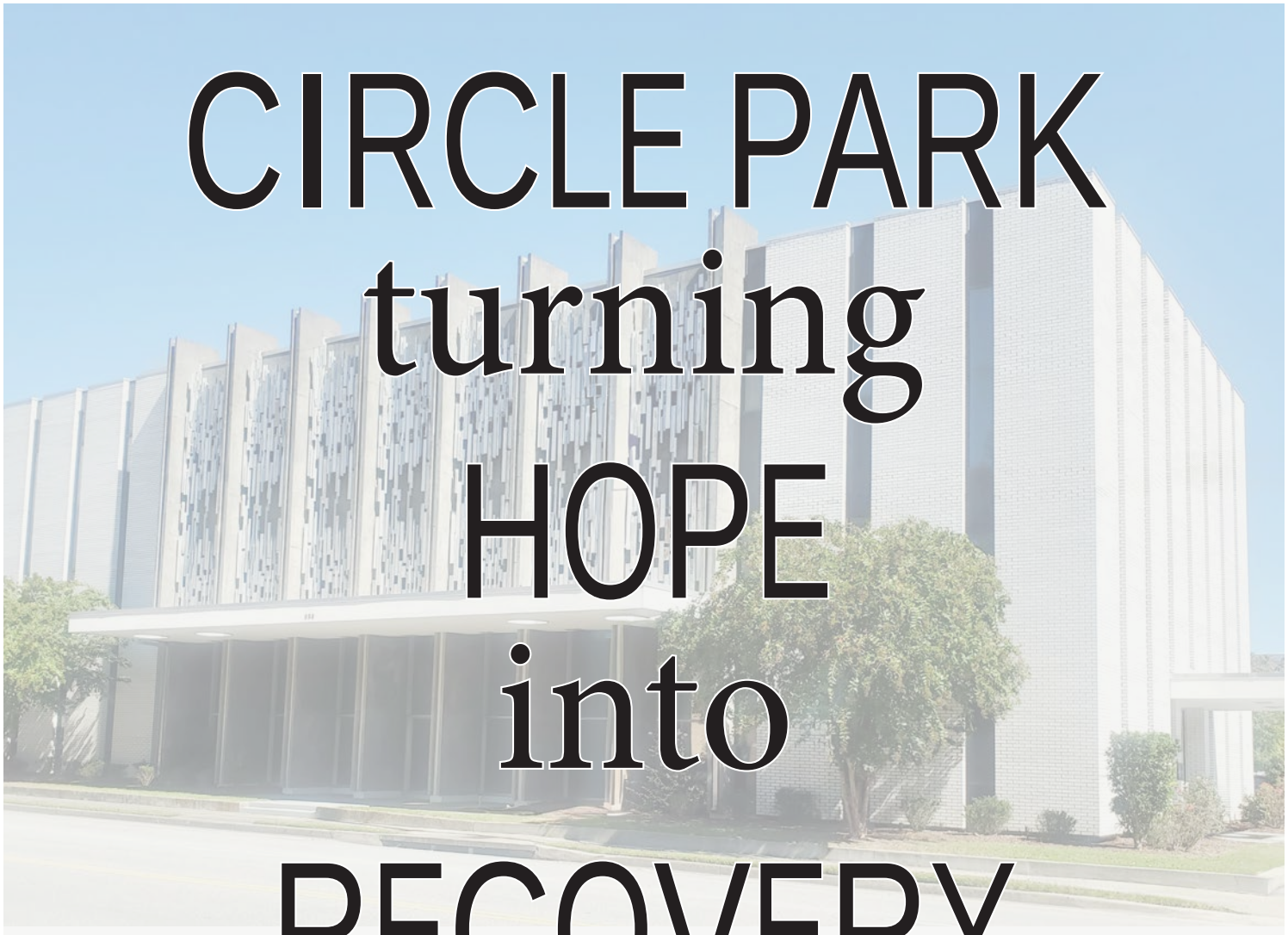
With compassionate, well-trained professionals and strong community partnerships among organizations such as Pee Dee Mental Health Center, Circle Park, Vocational Rehabilitation and Leatherman Behavioral Health Care Pavilion, individuals can build healthier, more meaningful lives.

Stewart's years of experience reinforce one enduring truth: when people receive coordinated treatment, understanding and hope, healing can happen.

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

Stewart Behavioral Health is located at 525 S. Dargan St., Florence. For more information or to request an appointment, call (843) 407-5419 or visit StewartBehavioralHealth.net.





CIRCLE PARK turning HOPE into RECOVERY

Florence
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238 S. Coit St., Florence, SC

Lake City
843.665.7988
111 N. Matthews Rd., Lake City, SC

Hemingway
843.551.2343
2811 S. State Hwy. 41, Hemingway, SC

PATH TO RECOVERY THROUGH TENACIOUS GRACE

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Cookie Cawthon

When Cookie Cawthon answered the call to transform her passion for women's ministry into a purpose-driven mission, Tenacious Grace was born.

Founded in 2014, Tenacious Grace provides a safe and supportive environment for women struggling with substance abuse as they navigate their recovery journeys. A Florence resident for more than 20 years, Cawthon began her ministry by serving incarcerated women, many of whom faced addiction and the stigma that often accompanies it. Through visits to local detention facilities, she offered spiritual guidance and ministerial care to women who frequently felt marginalized and isolated.

With support from the Florence County Detention Center Ministry team, Cawthon began writing Bible studies specifically for incarcerated women and sharing resources designed to encourage personal growth and healing.

In 2016, Tenacious Grace became a federally recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and began raising funds for its flagship program, Five Sparrows, a two-year residential recovery program for women affected by abuse, poverty, addiction and sexual exploitation. The community living home welcomed its first resident in May 2021.

Many participants have experienced trauma, abuse or exploitation. Through Five Sparrows, residents receive services focused on spiritual development, life skills and job readiness, helping them build a foundation for long-term recovery and independence.

September is recognized nationally as Recovery Month, formerly known as National Recovery Month. While Tenacious Grace does not host specific awareness events during September, Cawthon said the organization promotes its services year-round through community outreach, networking and participation in local events.

According to research cited by Recovery Answers, the gap between overdose death rates among men and women has narrowed significantly in recent years. Women are more likely than men to experience chronic pain, receive prescriptions for pain relievers, be prescribed higher doses and use those medications for longer periods. As a result, overdose rates among women continue to be a growing concern.

Since its inception, Tenacious Grace has served 32 residents. Cawthon reports that every woman who has remained in the program for at least one year is thriving in recovery.

Operating the program costs approximately $26,000 per resident annually. However, all housing and services are provided at no cost to participants. The organization's goal is to allow women to save their earnings during treatment so they can transition successfully into independent living without the financial pressures that can contribute to relapse.

A network of community partners helps provide the comprehensive services residents need to achieve holistic wellness. HopeHealth offers medical care, while Florence Family Dental Care and Pamplico Family Dentistry provide dental services. Residents are encouraged to participate in yoga classes at First Presbyterian Church as part of their physical wellness journey. Through a partnership with the Lions Club, residents can receive prescription eyewear. Employment support is available through SC Works and Jobs for Life.

In addition, residents participate in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous support groups to strengthen their recovery and maintain sobriety. Together, these partnerships help foster personal growth, self-sufficiency and long-term success.

To learn more about Tenacious Grace or to support its mission, visit www.tenaciousgrace.cc. Donations are always appreciated, and vetted volunteers are welcome to assist with programming and resident support.

CELEBRATING SOBRIETY *By Cynthia O. Ford*



Brittany McGee before and after photos

Three years ago, Brittany McGee sat in jail wondering what would happen next. Like many people battling addiction, she had become trapped in a cycle that seemed impossible to break. Homelessness, heroin addiction, methamphetamine use and repeated encounters with the criminal justice system had become part of her reality.

Addiction was not the only challenge she faced. Before recovery, McGee endured losses that would test anyone's resilience. She lost both of her parents and later a close friend to a drug overdose. Grief, addiction, homelessness and incarceration became intertwined, leaving her questioning whether a different life was possible.

She knew where the road was leading. What she did not know was that her life was about to change because of a simple poster hanging on a jail wall.

While incarcerated in Florence County, McGee noticed information about Five Sparrows, a free residential recovery program operated by Tenacious Grace. At the time, she faced difficult choices and an uncertain future. Her sentence could have resulted in years behind bars, but another path was placed before her.

"I really didn't believe I could do anything different," McGee said. "But I gave it a shot."

That decision became a turning point.

Today, McGee is celebrating three years of sobriety. The woman who once struggled with homelessness and addiction now has stable housing, employment, restored family relationships and a future she once thought was impossible. More importantly, she has become an example for other women beginning their own recovery journeys.

Five Sparrows is a free residential recovery program designed to serve women affected by substance use disorder, trauma, violence, exploitation, financial hardship and other life challenges. The long-term program focuses on healing the whole person by providing structure, accountability, life-skills training, employment readiness, recovery support and community.

Recovery did not happen overnight. The program is built around phases and milestones that encourage personal growth, accountability and preparation for independent living. Residents work toward goals, participate in counseling and recovery activities, and gradually build the skills needed to transition into the next chapter of their lives.

For McGee, one of the greatest discoveries was realizing she was stronger than she ever imagined.

"I learned that I was stronger than I thought," she said. "If you would have asked me three years ago, I couldn't have imagined this would be my life."

That statement carries the weight of experience. Recovery required more than simply staying sober. It meant learning to balance work, recovery, relationships and daily responsibilities. It required building a new foundation while leaving an old life behind.

Today, some of her proudest accomplishments are the things many people take for granted. She successfully completed the Five Sparrows program, regained her driver's license, rebuilt relationships and maintained her sobriety for three years.

McGee lost both parents. She lost a close friend to an overdose. She lost years of her life to addiction. But she refused to lose her future.

She speaks openly about the importance of community and support. Recovery, she says, is not something people should attempt alone.

Faith, church, support groups, recovery meetings and

CELEBRATING SOBRIETY CONT'D

relationships built through the program all played an important role in her journey. Even now, she remains connected to those support systems because she understands their value.

Today, McGee works for a contractor and continues living in transitional housing available to program graduates. She also gives back by maintaining relationships with women currently participating in recovery. Whenever possible, she returns to encourage and support them as they navigate the same challenges she once faced.

Her willingness to share her story is especially meaningful during National Recovery Month. Observed each September, National Recovery Month raises awareness about substance use treatment and mental health services while celebrating the millions of people who have achieved recovery. It also seeks to reduce stigma and remind individuals and families that healing is possible.

McGee's story reflects the heart of that mission.

Recovery is not simply about overcoming addiction. It is about rebuilding lives, restoring families, healing from trauma and creating new possibilities. Every year, National Recovery Month shines a light on stories like McGee's, reminding people that recovery is possible and that no one has to face their struggles alone.

For McGee, recovery has become an opportunity to show others what is possible. She celebrates three years of sobriety by sharing her story and encouraging others to believe that change can happen.

She wants people who are struggling to know they are not alone. She wants women entering recovery to understand that the life waiting on the other side can be greater than they ever imagined.

Three years ago, Brittany McGee saw a poster on a jail wall. Today, her story may become the sign of hope someone else has been waiting to see.

Recovery is possible. Sometimes freedom begins with a single decision to try.

Learn More About Five Sparrows

Five Sparrows is a residential recovery program operated by Tenacious Grace that serves women impacted by addiction, trauma, violence, exploitation, financial hardship and other significant life challenges. To learn more about the program, referral opportunities or ways to support its mission, visit the Tenacious Grace website (www.tenaciousgrace.cc) and explore the Five Sparrows program.

UNDERSTANDING CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS

By Susan K. Carter



Susan K. Carter

Every year, millions of individuals and families are affected by dual diagnosis, also known as co-occurring disorders. A dual diagnosis occurs when a person experiences both a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder at the same time. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or schizophrenia may exist alongside the misuse of alcohol, prescription medications or illicit drugs.

Raising awareness about dual diagnosis is essential because many individuals suffer in silence, often unaware that their mental health symptoms and substance use are interconnected.

Understanding the Connection

Mental health disorders and substance use disorders frequently influence one another. Some individuals may turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to manage symptoms such as anxiety, depression, trauma or emotional pain. Others may develop mental health symptoms as a result of prolonged substance use.

This cycle between mental health symptoms and substance use can make it difficult to determine which condition occurred first. However, what is most important is recognizing that both conditions require treatment.

Common Warning Signs

Individuals experiencing dual diagnosis may show signs such as persistent sadness, anxiety or mood swings. Friends and family may notice a loved one spending more time alone, sleeping or eating more or less than usual, increasing drug or alcohol use and encountering problems at work or school. Loss of interest in once-enjoyed activities and difficulty concentrating or making decisions are also common symptoms.

Without professional help, more severe symptoms may occur, including feelings of hopelessness or isolation and thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Recognizing these signs early can help individuals access treatment before symptoms worsen.

Breaking the Stigma

One of the greatest barriers to treatment is stigma. Many people fear being judged for struggling with mental health challenges, substance use or both. Unfortunately, stigma often prevents individuals from seeking help until they reach a crisis point.

Dual diagnosis is not a moral failing or lack of willpower. It is a complex health condition influenced by biological, psychological, social and environmental factors. Recovery begins when communities replace judgment with understanding and support.

The Importance of Early Intervention

Early intervention can significantly improve outcomes. Screening for both mental health and substance use concerns in health care settings, schools, workplaces, and community programs helps identify individuals who may benefit from treatment.

Early support can reduce the severity of symptoms, prevent relapses, and decrease hospitalizations and emergency interventions. It also increases treatment engagement and improves relationships and quality of life.

Effective Treatment Approaches

Research consistently supports integrated treatment, which addresses both mental health and substance use disorders at the same time. Effective treatment may include individual counseling, group therapy, and medication management. Relapse-prevention planning and community-based recovery programs are also vital components of care for many individuals.

Treating only one condition while ignoring the other often leads to poorer outcomes and an increased risk of relapse.

The Role of Families and Communities

Families, friends, employers, health care providers, schools, and faith communities all play a role in supporting individuals with dual diagnosis. Simple actions such as listening without judgment, encouraging treatment, and learning about co-occurring disorders can make a meaningful difference.

Communities can further support recovery by promoting mental health education and expanding access to treatment services. Recovery-friendly workplaces are essential to encourage individuals to seek help without fear of losing employment.

Broader community goals include reducing stigma through awareness campaigns and advocating for integrated behavioral health care. The ability to receive treatment for physical and mental conditions in the same place reduces stigma and improves access to care.

Hope and Recovery

Recovery from dual diagnosis is possible. With appropriate treatment, support, and ongoing care, individuals can manage symptoms, maintain recovery, build healthy relationships, and lead fulfilling lives.

Dual diagnosis awareness is about more than recognizing a condition — it is about fostering compassion, increasing understanding, and ensuring that those affected know they are not alone. By working together, mental health and substance use service providers, primary health care workers, and an informed and compassionate community can create pathways to healing, resilience, and lasting recovery.

ONE WOMAN'S PATH TO RECOVERY *By Ronette Genwright*



Mandy Guilford, pictured in the past and present

Recovery is rarely a straight path, especially for women who have faced addiction, homelessness and incarceration. For Mandy Guilford, the journey to sobriety required courage, determination and a willingness to rebuild her life from the ground up. Today, her story serves as a testament to the power of recovery, faith and community support.

For years, Guilford's life was marked by instability. Cycles of addiction, incarceration and homelessness left her struggling to find hope for the future. The turning point came during her final incarceration when a prison chaplain introduced her to a two-year residential recovery program available upon her release.

"I was tired," Guilford said. "I knew I couldn't keep living the way I had been."

That decision changed the course of her life.

Today, at 47, Guilford has built a life that once seemed impossible. She serves as an administrative and event coordinator at Town Hall Restaurant, a position she has held for three years. She is also the mother of three adult children and spends her free time reading, walking and volunteering.

Much of her volunteer work is focused on helping others with recovery. Through Tenacious Grace and Celebrate Recovery, organizations that played a critical role in her healing, Guilford has transitioned from participant to mentor, offering guidance to those beginning their own recovery journeys.

Before entering the program, survival consumed nearly every aspect of her life. Raising three children at a young age with limited support created constant challenges. Her criminal record made finding employment difficult, and at times she found herself homeless.

"There was no long-term plan," she said. "I was just trying to get through each day."

The residential program provided something she had never experienced before: an opportunity to focus entirely on healing. Because the program was offered at no cost, Guilford was able to dedicate her attention to recovery without the immediate pressure of finding work or paying bills.

During her first months in the program, she attended recovery meetings, received mental health treatment and began taking medication to address underlying issues. She also participated in counseling, horse therapy, spiritual mentoring and the 12-step recovery process.

Those experiences helped her rebuild not only her sobriety but also her sense of purpose.

The early stages of recovery were far from easy. Guilford often battled the urge to return to familiar habits and behaviors. Much of the program required intense self-reflection, including writing about past mistakes, fears and personal trauma.

Confronting painful memories demanded honesty and courage. Learning to forgive herself and others became one of the most important milestones in her recovery.

As she progressed through the program, Guilford began rediscovering her identity. When she arrived, she felt broken and unworthy. Through classes focused on self-worth, boundaries and healthy relationships, she slowly began to see herself differently.

Therapies such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, commonly known as EMDR, helped her process past trauma and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Over time, she came to believe that she deserved a life free from addiction and destructive patterns.

Support from others proved equally important.

Program staff, mentors, volunteers and fellow participants each contributed to her success. Many volunteers became like family members, offering encouragement and accountability when she needed it most.

Seeing others prioritize faith, healing and recovery inspired Guilford to remain committed to the process and reminded her that lasting change was possible.

Today, maintaining a strong support system remains a priority. She stays connected to the recovery community and avoids environments that could threaten her sobriety. Instead, she focuses on healthy relationships that encourage growth, stability and accountability.

Since completing the program, Guilford has achieved several milestones she once believed were beyond reach. She has maintained her own apartment for three years, married a supportive husband she met through church and reconnected with her daughter.

Those accomplishments represent more than stability. They symbolize the fulfillment and peace she has found through recovery.

The experience also restored her confidence. Completing the program proved that she could follow through on commitments and build a sustainable future. It helped her regain a sense of self-worth that had been missing for much of her life.

Looking ahead, Guilford continues to pursue new goals. She hopes to become a homeowner and is working toward earning peer support certification so she can assist others professionally.

Sharing her story has become a central part of her purpose. Through speaking engagements and community outreach, she hopes to inspire others who may feel trapped by addiction, incarceration or hopelessness.

Her experience also highlights the challenges many justice-involved women face after reentry. Limited employment opportunities, financial hardship and unhealthy relationships often create significant barriers to long-term recovery.

Guilford's success demonstrates how structured recovery programs, supportive communities and access to mental health resources can help individuals overcome those obstacles and create lasting change.

Today, recovery means more than sobriety.

For Guilford, it means serving others, offering hope and proving that transformation is possible. After 35 years of drug use, she is approaching five years of sobriety — a milestone she once thought unimaginable.

Reflecting on her journey, Guilford hopes others will understand that their past does not determine their future.

"Recovery is possible," she said. "No matter where you've been or what you've done, there's always hope."

Her story is a powerful reminder that with faith, commitment and support, lives can be rebuilt and new beginnings can emerge from even the darkest circumstances.

UNDERSTANDING DUAL DIAGNOSIS

Articles by Susan K. Carter



Shelbra Woodberry

Dual diagnosis occurs when an individual experiences both a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder simultaneously. Also known as co-occurring disorders, these conditions often interact with and worsen one another, making comprehensive treatment essential for long-term recovery.

At Pee Dee Mental Health Center, clients are assessed for both mental health and substance use concerns during the intake process or by their assigned mental health professional or clinician in Adult Outpatient Services. Substance use is often an attempt to manage emotional pain or psychiatric symptoms, and concerns may be identified through client self-report, family input or clinical assessment.

An Integrated Approach to Treatment

Individuals with a dual diagnosis receive coordinated care through an integrated treatment model. Rather than treating mental health and substance use separately, one multidisciplinary team addresses both conditions simultaneously. This team may include a psychiatrist or advanced practice registered nurse, a mental health professional, nursing staff and a licensed addictions counselor.

Treatment begins with a comprehensive evaluation that examines:

- Substance use history
- Mental health symptoms
- Medical conditions
- Social factors, such as housing, employment and family support
- Risk factors, including withdrawal, suicidality and trauma history

This comprehensive assessment helps clinicians understand how the two conditions interact and develop a unified treatment plan that is regularly updated as the individual's needs change.

The Role of Group Therapy

A cornerstone of treatment for dual diagnosis at Pee Dee Mental Health Center is group therapy. Groups are co-facilitated by Licensed Addictions Counselor Matt Jeffords of Circle Park and Shelbra Woodberry, a mental health professional with the center.

Group therapy is built on the understanding that recovery requires addressing mental health challenges, substance use issues and overall life functioning together. Participants receive psychoeducation on topics such as:

- The effects of substance use on the brain
- How substance use can worsen mental health symptoms
- Understanding and interrupting the relapse cycle

This education helps individuals understand the connection between their thoughts, emotions and behaviors better.

Participants also learn practical coping skills, including:

- Managing cravings
- Handling stress without substances
- Emotional regulation
- Grounding techniques for anxiety and trauma
- Identifying triggers and early warning signs

These skills help individuals build stability and confidence in their recovery journey.

Building Support and Preventing Relapse

Group leaders strive to create a safe, welcoming and supportive environment where participants can learn from one another and develop healthy coping strategies.

Cognitive behavioral therapy techniques are incorporated to help participants:

- Recognize high-risk situations
- Develop personalized relapse-prevention plans
- Strengthen motivation for recovery
- Practice refusal skills
- Celebrate progress and maintain long-term sobriety

The program has demonstrated meaningful success. According to Ms. Shelbra Woodberry: "We have at least four participants who have now been sober for more than a year and recognize their inner strengths," Woodberry said. "They regularly share with others in the group how sobriety has made such a positive difference in their lives."

Accessing Services

Individuals seeking help for themselves or a loved one can contact either Pee Dee Mental Health Center or Circle Park for an assessment. Staff members emphasize that there is no "wrong door" when seeking assistance for mental health or substance use concerns.

The center utilizes a dual diagnosis referral form to ensure clients receive appropriate services. During the intake process, staff assess for substance use concerns and make referrals when indicated. In some cases, a dual diagnosis is identified later during individual therapy sessions and clients may be referred at that time.

Once enrolled, participants are invited to attend the Dual Diagnosis Group, which meets every Monday, except holidays, from 2 to 3:30 p.m.

Recovery Through Connection

Dual diagnosis treatment has proven effective because it addresses both mental health and substance use disorders simultaneously. The program provides structure, accountability, education and peer support while helping participants distinguish between mental health symptoms and substance-related issues.

Participants are also encouraged to connect with community-based recovery resources such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and other 12-step programs.

Woodberry described the impact of the program this way:

"Co-facilitating the Dual Diagnosis Group is the highlight of my work week. Each week, as I prepare for group, I feel a sense of purpose. It is a space where real change happens. Members support one another, challenge old patterns and practice new ways of coping. Seeing someone open up for the first time, recognize a trigger or celebrate a week of progress reminds me why this work matters. It gives me the privilege of witnessing resilience, growth and the power of people healing together."

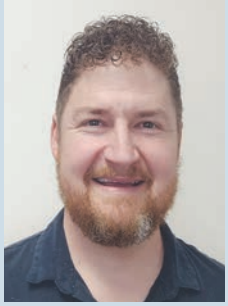
Through integrated treatment, education, skill-building and peer support, the Dual Diagnosis Program at Pee Dee Mental Health Center helps individuals move toward lasting recovery and an improved quality of life.

Pee Dee Mental Health Center's Florence office is located at 125 E. Cheves St. and accepts walk-ins. Appointments may also be scheduled by calling 843-317-4081.

Circle Park Behavioral Health Services is located at 238 S. Coit St. in Florence. For information, call 843-665-9349.

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis or considering suicide, call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, for free, confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

THE POWER OF RECOVERY: MATTHEW JEFFORDS



Matthew Jeffords

For many people working in addiction treatment, the profession is more than a career — it is a calling. That is certainly true for Matthew Jeffords, whose personal recovery journey and passion for helping others have shaped a career dedicated to supporting individuals and families affected by substance use disorders.

Today, Jeffords serves in a leadership role at Circle Park Behavioral Health Services, where he supervises the Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) Program, oversees the Peer Support Program, manages satellite operations in Hemingway and Lake City, and provides counseling services to clients.

THE POWER OF RECOVERY CONT'D

A Personal Path to Helping Others

Jeffords' journey into addiction counseling began through his own recovery experience. For nearly two decades, he served as pastor of a small church. As financial pressures on the congregation increased, he began exploring a second career that aligned with his values and desire to serve others.

"I wanted any second job I took to be something close to my heart," he said.

After reaching out to a mentor in recovery, opportunities in addiction treatment began to emerge. Since 2014, Jeffords has worked in a variety of roles supporting individuals on their recovery journeys.

Building a Strong Foundation

Jeffords' educational background reflects his commitment to both spiritual care and professional counseling. He earned a bachelor's degree in church music from Concordia University Chicago, a Master of Divinity from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and a master's degree in professional counseling from Concordia University Wisconsin.

This combination of education allows him to address the emotional, behavioral and spiritual dimensions of recovery.

Understanding Medication-Assisted Treatment

One of the programs Jeffords oversees is Medication-Assisted Treatment, commonly known as MAT. While some individuals achieve recovery through counseling, support groups or personal determination alone, many struggle with severe cravings and withdrawal symptoms that make recovery more difficult.

Medication-assisted treatment helps reduce those barriers, allowing individuals to focus on the underlying issues that contribute to substance use while developing healthier coping skills and long-term recovery strategies.

"MAT relieves some of the burden," Jeffords said, helping people build the stability necessary for lasting change.

The Rewards and Challenges

When asked what he enjoys most about his work, Jeffords points to the opportunity to support people facing struggles he understands personally.

"I love the opportunity to support people who are experiencing some of the same struggles that affected me," he said.

He also credits the compassionate staff at Circle Park for creating an environment where clients feel genuinely supported and cared for.

Like many helping professionals, Jeffords acknowledges the challenges of the work. Addiction can impair decision-making and lead individuals to repeatedly engage in behaviors that place themselves and others at risk. Watching clients struggle can be difficult, especially when resources and solutions are available.

Yet those challenges make success stories even more meaningful.

"When we see the lightbulb go on," he said, "and people begin using the skills, supports and resources they've identified, it's incredibly rewarding."

Balancing Leadership and Self-Care

In addition to providing counseling services, Jeffords carries significant management responsibilities. Balancing administrative duties with direct client care requires flexibility, patience and strong organizational skills.

"It is hard to achieve balance between my various roles," he said.

To prevent burnout, Jeffords emphasizes the importance of setting boundaries and practicing self-care. He relies on strong relationships with coworkers, attends support groups, spends time reading and nurtures his spiritual life. Most importantly, he prioritizes time with his wife and six children.

A Message of Hope

As behavioral health providers increasingly recognize the connection between mental health and substance use disorders, Jeffords believes continued collaboration is essential. He hopes to see stronger integration of mental health and addiction treatment services throughout Florence and the Pee Dee region.

Through his recovery journey, years of ministry and dedication to addiction counseling, Jeffords brings both professional expertise and personal understanding to his work. His story serves as a reminder that recovery is possible and that compassionate, community-based support can make a lasting difference in the lives of individuals and families affected by addiction.

THE REGENERATION CENTER: FAITH AND RECOVERY

By Jennifer Guiles Robinson



Tony Thomas

EFFINGHAM - WHAT began as a small ministry in 2018 has grown into a life-changing mission for men seeking freedom from addiction. Since its founding, The Regeneration Center has helped hundreds of men overcome substance abuse and rebuild their lives through faith, structure and community support.

The organization was founded by Tony Thomas, with the steadfast support of his wife, Marilyn Thomas. Having both battled addiction themselves, the couple emerged from recovery with a passion for creating a safe, Christ-centered environment for others seeking a fresh start.

Tony's story reflects that of many men who arrive at the center. Although he was raised in a loving home, his parents divorced when he was seven years old, leaving emotional wounds that later contributed to behavioral struggles. By age 13, he had begun experimenting with drugs. Despite attending private schools and earning a degree from Penn State University, addiction continued to follow him throughout his life.

In 1995, while living in Miami, Tony made his first attempt at recovery and was introduced to Christian discipleship. His true turning point came in 2002 when he entered House of Hope in Effingham, South Carolina. There, he achieved sobriety, deepened his faith and discovered a call to ministry. It was also during his recovery journey that he met Marilyn, who would later become his wife.

Drawing from their experiences at the Miami Rescue Mission and House of Hope, the couple felt called to help others facing similar challenges. Together, they founded The Regeneration Center, a residential recovery home dedicated to helping men overcome addiction and rebuild their lives from the inside out.

"Regeneration means to be reborn from the inside out," Marilyn said. "It means renewal, restoration and regrowth."

Their mission is to help men regenerate spiritually, emotionally and physically while equipping them to become a source of hope for others.

In a full-circle moment, Tony and Marilyn were able to purchase the original House of Hope property in Effingham — the very place where Tony's transformation began. Today, the facility serves as a residential recovery home for formerly incarcerated men and individuals battling addiction, providing support throughout their recovery journey.

A Structured Path to Healing

Residents follow a disciplined schedule designed to promote stability, accountability and long-term sobriety. Their days include

THE REGENERATION CENTER CONT'D

devotional time, meditation, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, biblical teaching and personal reflection.

After three months in the program, residents begin seeking employment. Many also receive assistance with mental health services, medical care and applications for Social Security disability benefits when needed.

Community Partnerships

The Regeneration Center works closely with several community organizations to provide comprehensive support for residents, including:

- Pee Dee Mental Health — Individual and group counseling services.
- Probation and Parole — Support for residents transitioning from incarceration.
- HopeHealth — Medical and behavioral health services.

These partnerships help ensure residents receive the resources and care needed to support lasting recovery.

Faith, Accountability and Purpose

A cornerstone of the program is the integration of Christian ministry with a 12-step recovery model. Residents are encouraged to journal, reflect and apply both spiritual and practical lessons to their daily lives. Honesty, accountability, willingness and sound decision-making are emphasized throughout the recovery process.

Many graduates go on to serve as ministers, deacons, pastors and evangelists, sharing the message of faith and recovery with others. The center's impact extends beyond sobriety, helping individuals discover purpose and become leaders in their communities.

Supporting the Mission

The Regeneration Center welcomes donations of all kinds, with financial contributions playing a vital role in sustaining and expanding its services.

For more information or to support the ministry, visit www.mygenerationcenter.com or follow The Regeneration Center on Facebook.

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Submitted by Danielle Williams, MS, LAC, LPC



Danielle Williams, MS, LAC, LPC

In 2023, 48.5 million Americans age 12 and older, or 16.7 percent of the population, experienced a substance use disorder. Substances may include tobacco, alcohol, vaping products, marijuana and other drugs, including stimulants and opioids.

Substance use disorder can affect anyone. Risk factors include family history, mental health conditions, abuse, neglect, violence, peer pressure and other psychological factors.

While every case is different, substance use disorder often begins with experimentation. It may progress to occasional use in social situations or medical treatment and eventually escalate to daily or frequent use.

Common signs include strong urges to use a substance, difficulty controlling use, spending significant time obtaining or using substances, and struggles with work, school or relationships. Other signs include using substances in dangerous situations and experiencing withdrawal symptoms that are relieved by taking more of the substance. Prescription medications can also lead to substance use disorder for some individuals.

Many people develop a false sense of confidence that they can control their substance use. Over time, however, they may find themselves unable to achieve the same high, using drugs simply to avoid becoming sick or experiencing repeated overdoses. Substance use disorder can also result in the loss of employment or housing and strained relationships with loved ones.

Fortunately, these consequences often motivate individuals to seek help. Treatment is the most effective path to recovery.

Treatment may include inpatient care, medical detoxification, outpatient services or a combination of approaches, depending on a patient's needs. Medication-assisted treatment (MAT) is available for individuals diagnosed with alcohol use disorder or opioid use disorder.

MAT helps normalize brain chemistry, reduce cravings and block euphoric effects. These medications can also help prevent overdose and support long-term recovery. At HopeHealth, treatment options include Narcan, Vivitrol, Sublocade and Suboxone. The medication selected depends on the individual's diagnosis and treatment needs.

Counseling and behavioral therapy are also essential. Two primary treatment models are commonly used: abstinence-based treatment and harm reduction.



Conversation about Substance Use Disorder

The abstinence-based model is familiar through programs such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. These programs focus on complete abstinence from substances. Many inpatient and outpatient facilities also use this approach through drug screenings, group therapy and care coordination. While effective for many, it may discourage some individuals from seeking treatment.

For those not ready to stop using substances entirely, the harm-reduction model may be a more appropriate starting point. Harm reduction focuses on decreasing the harmful consequences of substance use rather than requiring immediate abstinence. This approach meets individuals where they are and recognizes there is no one-size-fits-all treatment plan.

Therapists provide education, support and practical strategies to help people reduce risks while working toward reduced use or eventual abstinence. Examples include taking smaller doses, using clean needles, avoiding substance use when alone and calling the Never Use Alone Overdose Prevention Hotline when overdose is a concern.

Because relapse is common, individuals can return to treatment whenever needed and are not typically discharged solely because of relapse. Ongoing support often plays a critical role in maintaining recovery.

At HopeHealth, substance use disorder treatment is available at the HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence, HopeHealth in Manning and HopeHealth in Orangeburg. Patients begin with a diagnostic assessment to determine the most appropriate treatment plan. Some patients may be referred to inpatient treatment when medically necessary.

Recovery takes time, but there is always hope. Freedom from addiction is possible, and a healthier future can be achieved with the right support and treatment. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use disorder, the first step toward healing begins by reaching out for help.

Danielle Williams is a behavioral health counselor specializing in alcohol and substance use disorder treatment at HopeHealth. She is accepting new patients. Individuals do not have to be HopeHealth patients to receive treatment services. A brief, confidential phone assessment is required before scheduling an appointment. For more information, call 843-432-3690.

THE GIRL WHO SHINED THROUGH IT ALL

By Ronette Genwright



Gwenavere Chichester and Erin Robinson

There are moments in life that divide everything into "before" and "after." For Erin Robinson, that moment came when her daughter, Gwena, was diagnosed with cancer at just two years old.

At an age meant for curiosity and carefree discovery, Gwena instead found herself surrounded by hospital rooms, unfamiliar routines and treatments she could not understand. For Erin, the diagnosis brought a weight far beyond the medical reality, filling each day with fear, uncertainty and decisions no parent is prepared to make.

The transformation was immediate. Erin was thrust into a role that demanded strength, resilience and a rapid education in a world she never imagined entering. She learned how to advocate for her daughter, ask difficult questions and remain steady even when everything felt uncertain.

Growth was no longer something that unfolded gradually. It became urgent, shaped by long nights, emotional exhaustion and an unwavering determination to keep moving forward.

In those early days, healing was not about recovery in the traditional sense. It was about survival. Every appointment, treatment and small step forward required endurance. Erin held her daughter through tears, offering comfort without always having answers.

Moments of relief came in small but meaningful ways — a positive report, a peaceful night's sleep or a brief return to normalcy. These became milestones, reminders that hope could exist even in the most difficult circumstances.

As time passed, the meaning of healing evolved. It shifted from physical endurance to emotional restoration. Erin learned to loosen the grip of constant fear and place trust in the care her daughter was receiving. She began making room for peace, even while uncertainty remained.

Although the memories of those early days never fully faded, they no longer held the same power. Instead, they became markers of how far the family had come.

Advocacy soon became one of the defining aspects of Erin's journey. Being a mother meant being a voice for her daughter, especially when Gwena was too young to speak for herself. Erin navigated a complex medical system, asked difficult questions and, at times, challenged decisions to ensure her daughter received the best possible care.

What began as necessity grew into purpose, shaping not only Gwena's experience but also Erin's own sense of direction.

Beyond the hospital, that purpose expanded into connection. Erin found herself supporting other families facing similar battles, offering understanding and reassurance drawn from lived experience. Sharing her story became a way to ease the isolation many families feel during a childhood cancer diagnosis.

Sometimes that support means listening. Other times, it meant offering hope grounded in reality. What began in pain gradually transformed into something meaningful — an opportunity to give back through empathy and shared strength.

The challenges were profound. Watching a child endure treatment while being unable to take away the pain is a reality no parent can fully prepare for. There were moments of exhaustion, helplessness and fear that threatened to overshadow everything.

Yet within those moments, Erin discovered a strength she never knew she possessed. She learned how to function in crisis, carry emotional burdens and hold on to hope even when it felt fragile.

Support has become an essential source of strength. The family leaned on the compassion and dedication of Gwena's medical team, as well as the presence of loved ones who stood beside them throughout the journey. Faith also played a significant role, providing comfort during uncertain times and strength when it was needed most.

Over time, that support system became a foundation that sustained them through their most difficult days. Hope, which at first felt fragile and dependent on outcomes, gradually became something stronger. It was rooted not in circumstances but in belief, belief in Gwena's resilience, the family's strength and the possibility of a future beyond illness.

Hope was no longer something that rose and fell with each test result. Instead, it became a constant, quiet force guiding them forward.

Today, that hope is reflected in Gwena herself. Now 14, she is full of life, determination and dreams that extend far beyond her early years.

Cancer remains part of her story, but it does not define her. She attends a camp each year for children affected by cancer, a place that fosters connection, confidence and joy. She dreams of becoming a writer and an art teacher — goals that reflect both her resilience and the promise of her future.

Looking back, what once felt like the darkest chapter of the family's life has become a foundation for growth, gratitude and purpose.

Erin is no longer the person she was before her daughter's diagnosis, and in many ways, that transformation has been a gift. She has learned to cherish the present, speak up when it matters and support others with compassion and understanding.

Most importantly, she has learned that even in life's darkest moments, light remains.

And some lights — like her daughter's — are simply too powerful to ever be dimmed.



Left to right Nikolas Chichester, Theresa Robinson, Jeremiah Robinson, Sherry Chichester, Erin Robinson, Gwenavere Chichester (center)

COVERED BY GRACE AND STRENGTHENED BY FAITH

By Ronette Genwright



Robin J. Robinson

HARTSVILLE - Robin J. Robinson's journey over the past decade is a testament to faith, resilience and the quiet strength that carries a person through life's most unexpected storms.

Born and raised in Hartsville, South Carolina, Robinson spent her childhood between Hartsville and New York, where her mother lived. Raised primarily by her grandparents, she attended Washington Street Elementary School and Butler Junior-Senior High School before continuing her education at Florence-Darlington Technical College and through coursework with Benedict College.

Her professional life has centered on children and service. Over the years, she worked with Head Start, served as a teacher, managed daycare centers and later worked in food service at Coker College. She also served as an assistant manager for Subway.

Her life changed dramatically in 2015 when she was diagnosed with gynecologic cancer. At the time, she was employed at Coker College. Treatment began in 2016, and the months that followed were physically and emotionally overwhelming. Robinson endured surgery, chemotherapy and radiation while also facing profound personal loss.

Less than a week after her surgery, her mother passed away.

The weight of grief and illness pressed heavily on her, yet she remained anchored in her faith. Robinson often describes that season as "an eye-opening experience" that transformed her outlook on life.

Today, she stands as a 10-year cancer survivor, grateful for every milestone. She continues annual follow-up appointments with her medical teams in Columbia and Florence, with each visit affirming her continued healing.

Robinson celebrates survivorship through community involvement, participating in Relay For Life, YMCA cancer walks and American Cancer Society events. She considers each walk, each year and each testimony shared a victory. She looks forward to June 13, 2026, marking 10 years since completing chemotherapy, and Sept. 22, 2026, marking 10 years since completing radiation therapy — dates she holds with deep gratitude.

Faith remains the foundation of Robinson's life. A devoted prayer warrior, she intercedes for others Monday through Friday from 5 to 6 a.m. and participates in "Monday Minute" prayer gatherings each week. She is active in Spiritual Growth Ministries and serves as a member of the Daughters of the King Women's Ministry.

She is also involved with the Butler Senior Center through the Darlington County Council on Aging and participates in a cancer support group in Hartsville. Robinson takes part in exercise programs through the YMCA and T.B. Thomas and enjoys senior travel opportunities offered through the Hartsville Recreation Department. She is currently employed with Adult Education Darlington-Lee through the Darlington County School District.

Robinson offers special appreciation to Diana Murphy-Eaddy and Chanel Jame-Boateng for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout her journey.

Her experience has reshaped how she views women's health and preventive care. She encourages women to pay attention to their bodies and seek medical attention at the first sign of abnormal bleeding, spotting or any symptom that feels unusual.

She stresses the importance of self-advocacy, early detection and refusing to ignore warning signs. Her own experience has made her more proactive about her health. Even minor concerns prompt her to schedule an appointment rather than take chances. She believes women should never ignore changes that feel abnormal, especially after menopause.

Like many cancer survivors, Robinson acknowledges that fear of recurrence can linger. However, she chooses to live with faith instead of fear. Prayer, positivity and trust in God guide her daily life. She believes stress and worry can work against healing, so she focuses on gratitude and the belief that God will continue to keep her healthy and whole.

She often says she is thankful that she does not "look like what she's been through," giving all credit to God's grace.

Sharing her testimony publicly has become one of the most rewarding parts of her journey. She hopes her story reaches those who may feel ashamed, afraid or hesitant to speak about their diagnosis.

Robinson remembers how overwhelmed she felt when she first received the news. Sitting alone in a doctor's office, she cried and prayed until a physician and nurse reassured her that she would be OK. That moment of compassion stayed with her and inspired her to become a source of encouragement for others.

She wants women to know that a diagnosis is not the end, but rather the beginning of a journey that can still be filled with hope.

Her diagnosis also sparked a personal transformation. On Dec. 11, 2015, the day she learned she had cancer, Robinson prayed for a second chance at life. She believes God honored that prayer, and she has never looked back.

To caregivers, she offers heartfelt advice: Be present, be patient and offer love and encouragement. She knows firsthand that family members often carry fears of their own, even when they try not to show them.

Robinson remembers difficult days when she lived alone, relying on a cane to move from room to room and using walls for support. Today, many people are surprised to learn what she endured because she carries herself with such strength and grace.

Looking ahead, she hopes to see more education and awareness surrounding gynecologic cancers in local hospitals and communities. She envisions workshops, newsletters, lunch-and-learn sessions and other accessible resources that help people better understand the disease. She firmly believes that awareness saves lives.

Above all, Robinson gives thanks to God for healing, strength and the gift of life. She is grateful for her family, including her three adult sons, one of whom has passed away, six grandchildren, her sister-cousin, extended family members and friends.

She also expresses appreciation for the pastors, ministers and evangelists who prayed for her and encouraged her to keep moving forward.

Today, Robinson lives each day with purpose, faith and a desire to help others find hope in their own journeys. Her story stands as a reminder that even in life's darkest moments, grace, perseverance and faith can light the way forward.



Robin attends a Relay for Life event in support of cancer awareness, survivor recognition and community fundraising efforts.

TYRON WILSON CHAMPIONS MEN'S HEALTH

By Les Echols



Tyron Wilson

For more than 20 years, Tyron Wilson has dedicated his life to serving others. Whether mentoring young people, strengthening communities or advocating for better health outcomes, his work has always centered on helping people reach their full potential.

Today, that commitment is driving a mission that could save lives across South Carolina.

As community engagement director for the South Carolina Cancer Alliance and community engagement specialist with St. James Health and Wellness, Wilson is helping lead efforts to increase awareness about prostate cancer and the importance of early detection. His work focuses on connecting men with information, resources and health care services that can improve and extend lives.

"Too many men wait until something is wrong before they see a doctor," Wilson said. "The reality is that early detection can save lives. We have to make sure men understand that getting screened is one of the most important things they can do for themselves and their families."

That belief helped inspire the Men's UNITED for Health Initiative, a statewide effort launched through the South Carolina Cancer Alliance under the leadership of CEO Nicole Echols. The initiative encourages men to prioritize preventive care, establish relationships with health care providers and become more informed about health issues that disproportionately affect them, including prostate cancer.

At the center of the initiative is a simple philosophy: Meet men where they are.

Wilson has helped build partnerships with churches, barbershops, health care providers and community organizations throughout South Carolina. These trusted spaces have become important venues for conversations many men have traditionally avoided. Rather than relying solely on clinical settings, the initiative brings health education directly into communities where people feel comfortable asking questions and sharing concerns.

One of the initiative's signature programs is, "Men Talk," a series of community discussions designed to create open dialogue around men's health. These conversations focus on topics such as prostate cancer risk factors, screening options, preventive care, mental wellness and the importance of establishing a medical home.

For Wilson, education is only the first step.

"We want men to understand that their health matters," he said. "When men take care of themselves, they are better able to take care of their families, contribute to their communities and enjoy a better quality of life."

The initiative has partnered with 10 organizations and aims to reach more than 1,000 men across South Carolina. By connecting participants to health care resources and encouraging routine screenings, Wilson hopes to reduce health disparities and increase early-detection rates, particularly in underserved communities.

While his current work focuses heavily on health advocacy, Wilson's commitment to service extends far beyond health care. In 2016, he founded the TWLUM Teens Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to mentoring and empowering young people. Through leadership development, STEM experiences, tutoring, wellness education and community service opportunities, the organization has impacted more than 500 youth across the state.

His dedication to community service has earned recognition from the South Carolina House of Representatives and numerous community organizations, including the BlazinEagle Lifetime Achievement Award. He is also a senior fellow of the Waccamaw American Leadership Forum and a graduate of the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program.

Despite these accomplishments, Wilson remains focused on the work that still lies ahead.

Prostate cancer continues to affect thousands of men and families each year. Wilson believes that awareness alone is not enough. Meaningful change happens when education leads to action and when men take the next step to schedule screenings, establish primary care relationships and make their health a priority.

His message is both simple and urgent.

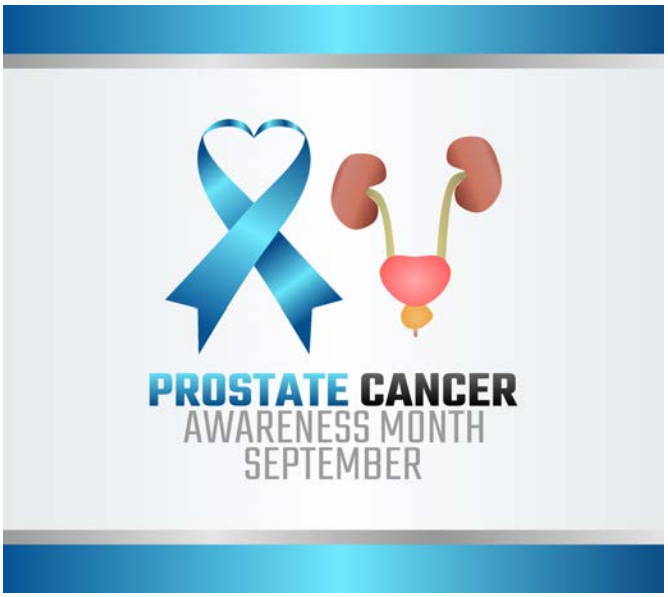
"Getting checked is not something to fear," he said. "It is something that could save your life."

As communities continue raising awareness about prostate cancer and men's health, Wilson remains committed to creating opportunities for education, conversation and action. Through every partnership he builds and every community he serves, he is helping ensure more men have access to the knowledge and resources they need to live longer, healthier lives.

For Wilson, the mission has always been about creating pathways to a better future. Today, that pathway begins with a conversation — one that has the power to save lives.

It is a mission rooted in service, driven by compassion and guided by a belief that has shaped his life's work:

"Exposure creates opportunities, and opportunities change lives."



GRACE AND DETERMINATION: A PROSTATE CANCER JOURNEY

By Les Echols



Dennis Ward

HARTSVILLE — When Dennis Ward reflects on the many obstacles he has overcome, one phrase continues to define his life. "I went through it by the grace of God," he said.

At 65, the Hartsville native has survived more hardships than most people experience in a lifetime. After losing his mother at a young age, Ward was raised by his grandmother in North Carolina. Although life presented many challenges, he learned valuable lessons through both triumphs and mistakes. Looking back, he openly acknowledges that some of the choices he made as a young man placed him on a difficult path.

Ward's life has been marked by extraordinary resilience. Over the years, he survived being shot three different times. In 2011, a gunshot wound to the mouth left a bullet lodged in his neck, a permanent reminder of how quickly life can change. Despite those traumatic experiences, Ward continued moving forward, determined not to let his past define his future.

Like many Americans, financial struggles often made health care a lower priority. Routine checkups were frequently delayed because simply providing for everyday needs came first. As a result, medical concerns sometimes went untreated until they became emergencies.

One of those emergencies nearly claimed his life. Ward became critically ill after experiencing severe pain and persistent vomiting. He was rushed to the hospital, where doctors discovered that his intestines had twisted, cutting off blood flow and requiring emergency surgery. When he awoke six days later, he realized he had been given another opportunity to live.

Just when he believed the worst was behind him, Ward faced another life-changing challenge. In March 2023, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Instead of giving in to fear, Ward committed himself to treatment with determination and faith. Every morning, he traveled for radiation therapy, remaining focused on recovery and trusting God through every step of the process. The treatments were physically demanding, but he never lost hope.

Today, Ward has been in remission since October 2024. He continues to attend regular medical appointments, takes medication each morning and still manages occasional pain, but he remains grateful for every new day.

"I went through it by the grace of God," Ward said. "Thank God I survived."

Ward credits his faith as the foundation of his strength throughout every challenge he has faced. He also expresses deep appreciation for the family members who stood beside him during his cancer journey, especially his sister-in-law, Barbara Williams, whose constant encouragement, love and support helped him through some of his darkest days.

As Prostate Cancer Awareness Month reminds men to take charge of their health, Ward hopes his story inspires others not to ignore routine screenings or warning signs. Early detection can make the difference between successful treatment and a more difficult outcome.

His journey is one of perseverance, faith and hope. By sharing his story, Ward hopes more men will schedule regular prostate screenings, seek medical attention when something does not feel right and recognize that taking care of their health is one of the greatest investments they can make for themselves and their families.



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, CONFIDENCE AND LONG-TERM STABILITY



(DWM) — For many people, financial success means earning more money, saving diligently hoping for steady growth over time. While those are important components of financial wellness, experts agree that one of the most effective ways to build long-term stability is through diversification.

Diversifying your finances means spreading money across different sources of income, savings vehicles and investments rather than relying on a single stream. Like the old saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket, diversification helps reduce risk while creating opportunities for growth.

Whether you're beginning your financial journey or preparing for retirement, a diversified financial portfolio can help protect your future from unexpected economic changes.

Understanding Diversification

Diversification involves allocating financial resources across various assets and income sources. Instead of depending solely on one paycheck or investment account, individuals create multiple pathways for financial growth.

Economic conditions can change quickly. Markets fluctuate, industries experience downturns and unforeseen circumstances can impact employment. Diversification helps soften the impact when one area of your finances experiences challenges.

For example, someone who relies entirely on a single employer for income may face financial hardship if that company downsizes. A person with additional income streams, emergency savings and investments may be better positioned to navigate the situation.

Building Multiple Sources of Income

A primary job often serves as the foundation of financial stability, but additional income sources can provide flexibility and security. These may include freelance work, consulting, rental properties, dividend-paying investments or small business ventures.

Technology has also created new opportunities for supplemental income through remote work, online marketplaces and digital products.

Even modest secondary income streams can make a difference over time. Additional earnings can be directed toward debt reduction, savings goals or investment accounts.

Diversifying Investments

Rather than investing all funds into a single stock, company or industry, investors often spread assets among stocks, bonds, mutual funds, exchange-traded funds, real estate and cash equivalents.

Each category responds differently to economic conditions. Stocks may offer growth potential, while bonds often provide stability. Real estate can generate income, while cash reserves provide liquidity during emergencies.

Although diversification does not eliminate risk, it can help reduce the impact of poor performance in any one area.

Strengthening Savings Strategies

Diversification extends beyond investments and income. Savings should also support various financial goals.

Financial experts generally recommend maintaining an emergency fund that can cover several months of living expenses. Beyond emergency savings, individuals may establish separate accounts for goals such as education, home purchases or retirement.

By assigning savings to different purposes, financial goals become more manageable and less likely to compete with one another.

The Long-Term Benefits

Diversification is not about chasing quick profits or eliminating every risk. Instead, it is a long-term approach designed to create financial stability, flexibility and growth.





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ABB BREAKS GROUND ON NEW FULL-SERVICE BRANCH IN SUMTER

Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant



Pictured (left to right): Bryan Lenertz, executive vice president and chief banking officer; Dan Reynolds, vice president, commercial loan officer; Rivers Anderson, executive vice president and chief operating officer; Neil Anderson, executive vice president; David Anderson, CEO; Mallory Steadman, vice president and commercial lending officer; Richard Carroll, executive vice president and chief credit officer and Shanda Logan, loan officer.

MULLINS— Anderson Brothers Bank proudly celebrated the groundbreaking of its newest full-service branch in Sumter, South Carolina, marking another milestone in the bank's continued growth across the state.

The ceremony took place at the future site of the branch, located at 2831 Broad Street in Sumter. The event brought together state and local dignitaries, community leaders, business representatives and members of the Sumter Chamber of Commerce.

The new 5,164-square-foot full-service branch will further support Anderson Brothers Bank's mission to serve local families, support small businesses and contribute to the economic growth of the Sumter community.

Representatives from Anderson Brothers Bank shared their vision for expanding into the Sumter market and emphasized the bank's continued commitment to delivering exceptional service.

"As a lifelong resident of Sumter, I look forward to the opportunities Anderson Brothers Bank will bring to our community, serving both consumers and businesses with the level of service they expect and deserve through a full-service branch," said Dan Reynolds, vice president, commercial loan officer. "Our ability to create value for our employees, customers, communities and shareholders will be evident from day one. Anderson Brothers Bank strives to be the bank where people love to work and do business, and those core values are a big part of why I was proud to join ABB four years ago."

Additional details regarding the anticipated opening date will be announced at a later time.

About Anderson Brothers Bank

Anderson Brothers Bank is a full-service community bank offering a complete range of competitive loan services and deposit products. Founded in 1933, this family-owned bank blends the elements of traditional personal service, local market awareness and advanced technology to meet the financial needs of its customers. Anderson Brothers Bank offers 26 branches conveniently located in 19 communities throughout the Pee Dee, Coastal and Low Country regions of South Carolina. The bank's main office is located at 101 North Main Street, P.O. Box 310 in Mullins, South Carolina. For additional information about Anderson Brothers Bank, call (843) 464-6271 or visit ABBank.com.

ANDERSON BROTHERS BANK EXPANDS TEAM WITH NEW HIRES

Submitted by Morgan Holden, marketing assistant

MULLINS — Anderson Brothers Bank is pleased to welcome two new commercial loan officers Charlee Rhodes as commercial loan officer at the Florence 2nd Loop office located at 501 Second Loop Road, Keith Norris as commercial loan officer at its Loris Main branch, located at 302 Highway 701 N. in Loris and Katelyn Willoughby has joined the Marketing Department located at 144 N Main Street in Mullins as social media promotions coordinator.



Charlee Rhodes

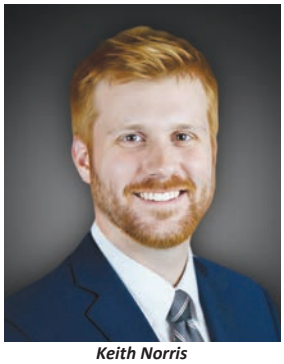
Charlee Rhodes

Rhodes is a graduate of Lake City High School and attended Liberty University for psychology. Prior to joining Anderson Brothers Bank, she built a career centered on business development, relationship management and community engagement through leadership roles in recruitment and nonprofit development. Her professional experience spans financial services, fundraising and youth mentorship, with a consistent focus on creating meaningful connections, developing strategic partnerships and serving as a community-minded leader dedicated to helping organizations and individuals succeed.

Rhodes is actively involved throughout the Pee Dee community and currently serves as president of the Pee Dee Women's Business and Professional Association. She also serves as a board member for the Juneteenth Fest of the Pee Dee.

"We are thrilled to have Charlee joining our growing Florence team and know she will be an integral part of our success in developing relationships across the region," stated Malorie Steadman, vice president and commercial lending officer. "Her drive, dedication and commitment to excellence in every interaction make her a perfect cultural fit for our bank."

As commercial loan officer, Rhodes will be responsible for developing new business relationships, serving customers throughout the Florence market and supporting the continued growth of Anderson Brothers Bank within the Pee Dee region.



Keith Norris

Keith Norris

Norris will serve customers and businesses throughout the surrounding communities, providing personalized financial solutions and relationship-focused service.

As Commercial Loan Officer, Norris will be responsible for developing new business relationships, growing deposit accounts and managing and servicing existing loan portfolios. His financial expertise and customer-focused approach make him a valuable addition to the Anderson Brothers Bank team.

A graduate of Loris High School, Norris earned a degree in corporate finance from Clemson University. Before joining Anderson Brothers Bank, he worked in the financial services industry, commercial metals companies, and infrastructure consulting and engineering firms. His diverse professional background provides a strong understanding of business operations and relationship management.

"We are excited to welcome Keith to the Anderson Brothers Bank family," said Lisa Rife, vice president and branch manager of the Loris Main branch. "His experience and passion for serving others reflect the values we believe in. When everyone is moving forward together, success takes care of itself, and we look forward to seeing all he accomplishes in the Loris community."

Outside of work, Norris enjoys spending time with his five-year-old mastiff, Kora, who keeps life active and entertaining.



Katelyn Willoughby

Katelyn Willoughby

In her new role, Willoughby will help plan, create and execute the bank's social media and digital marketing initiatives. Her responsibilities include developing engaging content for the bank's social media platforms, coordinating promotional campaigns, supporting community outreach efforts, assisting with internal and external communications and capturing and sharing stories that highlight the bank's culture and commitment to the communities it serves. She will also monitor digital engagement trends and collaborate on creative projects that strengthen the Anderson Brothers Bank brand.

Willoughby is a graduate of West Bladen High School and earned a Bachelor of Science in business administration with a concentration in marketing from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

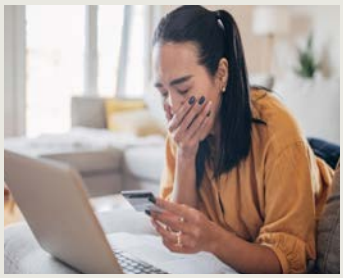
Willoughby brings a strong background in social media strategy, digital marketing and content creation through previous internships and professional experience. In addition, she has two years of experience in early elementary education, where she developed skills in communication, organization, creativity and relationship-building.

Willoughby has brought positive energy, a creative mindset and genuine enthusiasm that made her feel like part of the team immediately," said Susan Grant, CFMP, vice president and marketing director. "She has already contributed thoughtful ideas, embraced new challenges and shown a passion for helping us share the stories that make Anderson Brothers Bank special. Her willingness to jump in, learn and build upon the strong culture she has experienced here has been impressive, and we are excited to see her talents continue to grow within our organization."





PROTECTING YOUR WALLET AVOIDING FINANCIAL SCAMS



(DWM) - Financial scams continue to evolve, costing Americans billions of dollars each year. From fraudulent phone calls and fake investment opportunities to phishing emails and online marketplace schemes, scammers are finding new ways to target people of all ages. Understanding the warning signs can help consumers protect their finances and personal information.

One of the most common red flags is urgency. Scammers often pressure victims to act immediately, claiming there is a problem with a bank account, a missed payment or a limited-time investment opportunity. Their goal is to create panic and prevent people from taking time to verify the information.

"If someone is demanding immediate action, that's a sign to slow down and investigate," financial experts advise.

Another warning sign is a request for personal information. Legitimate financial institutions generally do not ask customers to provide account numbers, passwords, Social Security numbers or other sensitive information through unsolicited emails, text messages or phone calls. Consumers should contact the organization directly using a verified phone number or website if they have concerns.

Phishing scams remain one of the most widespread threats. These scams often arrive through emails or text messages that appear to come from trusted companies. The messages may contain links directing users to fake websites designed to steal login credentials or financial information. Before clicking on links, consumers should carefully examine the sender's address and verify the website's authenticity.

Investment scams also continue to rise, particularly through social media platforms. Fraudsters frequently promise unusually high returns with little or no risk. Financial professionals caution that every investment carries some level of risk and guarantees of extraordinary profits should be viewed with skepticism.

Consumers should also be cautious of payment requests involving gift cards, cryptocurrency or wire transfers. Scammers favor these methods because they are difficult to trace and often impossible to recover once the money has been sent. Government agencies, utility companies and legitimate businesses rarely request payment through these channels.

Technology can provide an added layer of protection. Enabling multi-factor authentication on financial accounts, regularly updating passwords and monitoring account activity can help reduce the risk of fraud. Many banks also offer alerts that notify customers of unusual transactions.

Education is another powerful defense. Discussing scams with family members, especially older adults and young adults who may be less familiar with certain schemes, can help prevent financial losses. Staying informed about current scam tactics allows consumers to recognize threats before becoming victims.

If a scam is suspected, experts recommend acting quickly. Contact financial institutions immediately, change compromised passwords and report the incident to the appropriate authorities. Prompt action can help limit financial damage and protect others from similar schemes.

While scammers continue to develop new tactics, awareness remains the best defense. By staying vigilant, verifying information and resisting pressure to act quickly, consumers can significantly reduce their risk and keep their hard-earned money safe.

SUPPORT YOUR FAVORITE CHARITY WITH LIFE INSURANCE



As Americans, we can take pride in the fact that we are a nation of givers. And as the economy improves, charitable giving is on the rise. In fact, according to the National Philanthropic Trust in 2023 total charitable giving from U.S. individuals, corporations, foundations, and bequests exceeded $557 billion with 67% coming from individuals.1

While money may be tight for many Americans, it's nice to know that there is a way to support a favorite charity without having to worry about the impact it could have on your budget. How? By giving the gift of life insurance. Here are just a few ways you can use this proven method to contribute money to your favorite causes:

• Donate an existing policy—If you already have a policy and no longer need the death benefit, you can gift the policy to your desired charity, which may give you some tax benefits. The charity will receive the full benefit amount when you die.

• List the charity as a beneficiary—As the owner, you remain in control of your policy and can leave money to as many beneficiaries as you like: children, grandchildren—even multiple charities. Or, you can name a single charity the sole beneficiary, and it will receive the entire amount.

• Purchase a separate policy—There are times when it makes sense to have separate policies: one for loved ones and one for charitable gifts. This technique can prove especially helpful if you would like to retain ownership of one policy, but not the other.

• Create a Charitable Remainder Trust—While this planned-giving tool is designed to shelter appreciated assets such as stocks and real estate, you can also incorporate life insurance if it's set up properly. Be sure to consult a trusts and estates advisor before pursuing this approach.

Giving life insurance can be a lasting legacy to support causes dear to you. Depending on the method you choose, it may also offer a variety of tax benefits.

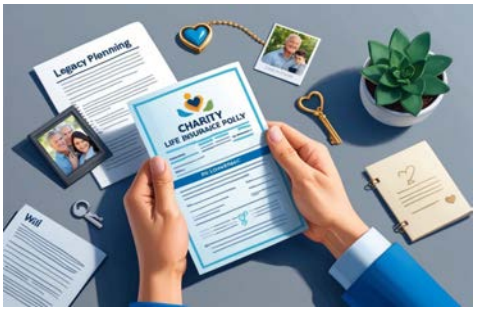
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[1]"Charitable Giving Statistics," National Philanthropic Trust, 2023. https://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics



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JUST GRADUATED? HERE'S YOUR REAL-WORLD MONEY GAME PLAN

Submitted by Palmetto First Federal Credit Union



First off—congratulations, graduate. You crossed the stage, tossed the cap and are officially stepping into the real world. It's exciting, overwhelming and, yes, it can get a little expensive.

Whether you're starting a new job, figuring things out or enjoying some well-earned downtime, we've got your back with real-world money tips to help you start strong.

1. Get to know your paycheck

Your job offer said $50,000, but your first paycheck may look a little smaller. Welcome to taxes, insurance and possibly a 401(k).

Take time to understand what's being deducted from your paycheck and where that money is going.

2. Build a budget you can actually stick to

Budgeting doesn't have to be boring. It's simply a plan for how you want to spend and save your money.

Try the 50/30/20 rule:

- 50 percent = needs (rent, groceries, bills)
- 30 percent = wants (dining out, subscriptions, entertainment)
- 20 percent = savings and debt payments

There are many free budgeting apps available, or you can use online banking tools to track spending and stay on budget.

3. Use credit—but don't let it use you

Building credit is important, but balance is key.

Use a credit card for small purchases you can pay off in full each month. You don't need to max out a card to build credit—that's a myth and can be financially harmful.

We offer credit card options designed for young adults. Contact us if you're ready to start building smart credit habits.

4. Start saving, even if it's small

No one expects you to have it all figured out on day one. But saving even $10 a week adds up over time.

Set up automatic transfers from checking to savings so you're building savings consistently without thinking about it.

Aim to build an emergency fund of at least three months of expenses. Your future self will thank you.

5. Tackle student loans with a plan

Student loans can feel overwhelming, but they're manageable with a strategy.

Know your loan types, grace periods and minimum payments. If you can pay more than the minimum, you may save significantly on interest over time.

Need help building a repayment plan? Our team can point you to helpful resources.

6. Keep learning—money skills matter

You may have graduated, but financial learning doesn't stop here.

Follow trusted financial blogs, listen to money podcasts or speak with us at Palmetto First Federal Credit Union. We're here to help you build confidence with your finances.

Bonus tip: celebrate smart

You've earned the celebration—just don't spend your entire first paycheck on it.

Find ways to treat yourself while staying on track financially. That's the balance to aim for.

Ready to kick off your financial journey?

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ROBOTIC SURGERY IMPROVES PATIENT CARE

Submitted by Hanna Caddell, marketing and communications coordinator

HARTSVILLE — At Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center, innovation means providing safer procedures, faster recoveries and better outcomes for patients across the region. One of the hospital's most significant advancements is robotic-assisted surgery, technology that is changing the way many complex procedures are performed.

Robotic-assisted surgery enables physicians to perform operations with greater precision, flexibility and control. Using advanced systems such as the da Vinci Surgical System, ROSA Robotic System and Globus ExcelsiusGPS Robotic Navigation System, surgeons perform minimally invasive procedures through small incisions while viewing highly magnified, 3D images.

Compared with traditional open surgery, robotic-assisted procedures reduce trauma to the body while giving surgeons greater accuracy during delicate operations. Patients often experience smaller incisions, less blood loss, lower risk of infection, shorter hospital stays, faster recovery and improved outcomes that support long-term healing and return to daily life.

"Investing in robotic technology reflects our commitment to innovation, quality and ensuring our patients receive the very best care without having to travel far from home," said Dr. Brian Sponseller, CEO of Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center.

Carolina Pines offers robotic-assisted surgery across multiple specialties, allowing more patients to receive advanced care close to home.



Dr. Barry Clark with ROSA Robotic System

ROSA Robotic System

Carolina Pines Medical Group Orthopaedics & Sports Medicine surgeons Dr. Aaron Wynkoop and Dr. Barry Clark use the ROSA Robotic System for total knee replacement surgery. ROSA creates a personalized surgical plan based on each patient's anatomy while providing real-time guidance that helps surgeons accurately position implants.

Precise implant placement can improve comfort, mobility and long-term success following knee replacement surgery and overall joint stability.

"ROSA allows us to tailor each knee replacement to the individual patient in a way we simply couldn't before," Clark said. "That level of precision translates into better function, improved alignment and ultimately a better quality of life for our patients."

Patients often experience improved joint function, better implant alignment, reduced postoperative pain and faster rehabilitation.

Globus ExcelsiusGPS Robotic



Globus ExcelsiusGPS Robotic Navigation System



Dr. Mills with Globus Excelsius GPS Robotic Navigation System

Navigation System

Carolina Pines Medical Group Pain & Spine surgeons Dr. Douglas Stofko and Dr. Michael Mills use the Globus ExcelsiusGPS Robotic Navigation System for advanced spine procedures. The technology provides image-guided navigation that helps surgeons precisely place spinal hardware while avoiding critical nerves and surrounding structures.

"In spine surgery, accuracy is everything," Stofko said. "With robotic navigation, we're able to plan and execute procedures with an exceptional level of precision, which enhances safety and helps our patients recover more quickly."

Benefits include greater implant accuracy, fewer complications, smaller incisions, less muscle disruption, shorter recovery times and improved outcomes for patients with complex spinal conditions.

da Vinci Surgical System

General surgeon Dr. Matthew Csonka and OB-GYN Dr. Ashekia Pinckney use the da Vinci surgical system for minimally invasive procedures, including hysterectomies, gallbladder removal and hernia repair. The system translates a surgeon's hand movements into precise, real-time movements, providing enhanced dexterity and visualization.

One of Pinckney's patients said robotic-assisted surgery made the experience much easier than expected.

"I was nervous going into surgery, but Dr. Pinckney took the time to explain everything," the patient said. "Knowing she was using robotic technology was reassuring. My recovery was quicker than I expected, and I was back to my normal routine in no time. I'm so grateful for the care I received and the professionalism of the entire surgical team."

Pinckney uses the da Vinci system to perform minimally invasive gynecologic procedures that help women recover sooner with less discomfort and greater confidence in their outcomes.

Robotic-assisted surgery represents more than advanced technology. It reflects a strong commitment to delivering personalized, patient-centered care through innovation and surgical expertise. By combining experienced physicians with leading robotic technology, Carolina Pines continues to improve outcomes across orthopedic, spine, general surgery and women's health services.

From joint replacements that restore mobility to spine procedures that relieve chronic pain and minimally invasive surgeries that shorten recovery, robotic-assisted technology is helping patients return to their lives sooner and with improved quality of life.



Dr. Matthew Csonka, General Surgeon



Dr. Ashekia Pinckney, OBGYN

As technology continues to advance, Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center remains firmly committed to investing in tools that enhance patient safety, improve precision and provide high-quality care close to home for families throughout the region.

For more information or to schedule an appointment with a Carolina Pines Medical Group provider, visit cprmc.com.

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Bennettsville Center
999 Cheraw Street
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.479.2341

Bennettsville Pediatric Center
210 W. Main Street
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.479.1200

Bennettsville Women's Center
1076 Marlboro Way Rd., Suite 1
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.454.2294

Bishopville Center
545 Sumter Highway
Bishopville, SC 29010
803.484.5317

Bishopville Pediatric Dental
101 Harris Street
Bishopville, SC 29010
866.815.9845

Cheraw Center
812 State Road
Cheraw, SC 29520
843.537.0961
843.921.6711 Foot Care

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204 Perry Wiley Way
Chesterfield, SC 29709
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DR. BIESTER LEADS FAMILY MEDICINE AT CARESOUTH CAROLINA

Submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Dr. Christina Biester

HARTSVILE - CareSouth Carolina has named Dr. Christina Biester as its new director of family medicine, recognizing nearly two decades of service and leadership within the organization.

Biester, who will celebrate her 20th anniversary with CareSouth Carolina in July, has spent her entire tenure caring for patients in Chesterfield. Her longstanding commitment to both the organization and the community makes her well-positioned to lead efforts aimed at strengthening services, supporting providers and expanding access to care.

In her new role, Biester will work closely with medical teams across CareSouth Carolina to improve patient outcomes and enhance the overall care experience. Her priorities include increasing operational efficiency, expanding services and ensuring the organization continues to meet the evolving needs of the communities it serves.

"This role is about enhancing the service we provide, supporting our providers and doing everything we can to improve quality, patient experience and success," Biester said. "I also want to help grow and expand what we offer so we can better meet the needs of our community."

A key focus of her leadership will be strengthening relationships between CareSouth Carolina and the residents it serves.

"We can play a major role in meeting the needs of our local population through medical care, access and education," she said. "It's about building and solidifying those relationships with the community."

Throughout her career, Biester has valued CareSouth Carolina's team-based approach to health care. Working alongside social workers, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, counselors and support staff allow providers to address the needs of the whole patient, she said.

"What I've enjoyed most is being part of a team where we can truly address a patient's needs from every angle," Dr. Biester said. "If someone needs extra support, our counselors and social workers are there. There are so many different ways we can help people here, and I wouldn't want to work anywhere else."

Looking ahead, Biester plans to focus on increasing access to care, improving efficiency and expanding community outreach efforts. She noted that one of the greatest challenges in health care is helping patients remain engaged after receiving medical advice.

"The patients I worry about most are the ones who get guidance but aren't able to take the next steps," she said. "We need to find ways to increase motivation and engagement. My goal is to strengthen our resources so we can help patients take control of their health and achieve better outcomes."

Biester will continue seeing patients in Chesterfield on a modified schedule, which will be communicated to patients. She also plans to increase collaboration with nurse practitioners to ensure continuity of care and greater access to services.

Outside of work, Biester enjoys gardening, birdwatching and spending time outdoors. She is also active in her church, where she plays the violin.

DR. HENNAGAN JOINS CARESOUTH CAROLINA

Articles submitted by CareSouth Carolina



Tabitha Hennagan, Ed.D., LPC,

LATTA - CareSouth Carolina has announced that Tabitha Hennagan, Ed.D., LPC, is now seeing patients full time at the organization's Latta office, expanding access to behavioral health services for residents throughout Dillon County and surrounding communities.

Hennagan joined CareSouth Carolina three and a half years ago as a school-based counselor, serving students at McColl Elementary Middle School, Blenheim Middle School of Discovery and Bennettsville Primary School in Marlboro County.

A native of Latta, Hennagan said returning to serve her hometown community is especially meaningful.

"I am originally from Latta, so being able to come home and work with the community that has fostered my growth and development and to give back is a great honor," Hennagan said. "I am excited about helping people work toward reaching their goals and providing the support they need to surpass them."

Hennagan specializes in a patient-centered approach to care, emphasizing individualized treatment plans designed around each person's unique needs, strengths and goals.

"I love working with patients to develop a care plan that fits their needs and growth potential rather than placing everyone into the same structured mold," she said. "I believe that the more involved a person is in their treatment plan and direction, the better the potential outcome for growth and success."

Hennagan is also a strong advocate for CareSouth Carolina's Integrated Behavioral Health Services model.

"I support Integrated Behavioral Health Services because they allow for care coordination under one roof, quicker service turnaround, familiar treatment team members and opportunities to collaborate with providers who know the patient," she said. "These advantages create better opportunities for quality patient care and improved outcomes that address the whole person."

Behavioral health services play a vital role in overall wellness, and CareSouth Carolina remains committed to ensuring patients have access to comprehensive care close to home.

Outside of work, Hennagan enjoys spending time with her family, reading, listening to music, traveling and exploring new restaurants and cuisines.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the Town of Latta and surrounding communities while supporting continued growth and promoting positive behavioral and mental health coping strategies," she said.

CareSouth Carolina is a private, nonprofit community health center that provides patient-centered health and life services throughout the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. The organization operates health centers in Bennettsville, Bishopville, Cheraw, Chesterfield, Dillon, Hartsville, Lake View, Latta, McColl and Society Hill.

Services offered by CareSouth Carolina include family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, women's health services, OB-GYN care, HIV/AIDS primary care, infectious disease treatment, IV therapy, substance abuse prevention, dental care, chiropractic services, pharmacy services, senior support services, family support services, clinical counseling, laboratory services, ultrasound, X-ray, agricultural worker health services, podiatry and Veterans Choice provider services.

CARESOUTH CAROLINA RECEIVES HISTORIC LATIMER BUILDING



Town of Latta handing over the keys of the historic Latimer Building to CareSouth Carolina

LATTA - The Town of Latta has officially presented the key to the historic Latimer School building, located at 122 Latimer Street, to CareSouth Carolina, marking a major step forward in expanding health care access for the community.

CareSouth Carolina has been operating out of the Latimer building since 2015, initially utilizing only a portion of the facility.

With the official transfer of ownership now complete, the organization will be able to fully occupy the space—allowing for significant upgrades, expanded services and the ability to nearly double its patient capacity in the Latta area.

"We are deeply honored by the Town of Latta's generous donation of the historic Latimer School," said Ann Lewis, chief executive officer of CareSouth Carolina. "Our organization first began providing services in Latta in 2015, initially occupying one half of the building as a lessee. This donation represents an important milestone for us. It will allow us to invest in much-needed repairs and improvements to preserve the building's legacy while enhancing its functionality. We are especially excited about the opportunities this creates for future growth and expanded services to better serve the community."

CareSouth Carolina plans to make necessary renovations and improvements while preserving the structure's historical significance. The expanded footprint will allow for the addition of new services and improved patient flow.

"We're excited about the partnership with CareSouth Carolina to bring more services to our communities and surrounding areas," said Mayor Marcus McGirt. "We're thrilled to pass over a part of history to CareSouth Carolina so that they can redefine and redesign our history into something modern that can be for all of our people. We're thankful for Ann [Lewis] and Joe [Bittle] and grateful that this is going with the Town of Latta."

The Latimer building has long been a meaningful part of Latta's history, and this new chapter ensures that it will continue to serve the community in a new and impactful way. By transitioning the building, both the Town of Latta and CareSouth Carolina are working together to ensure that residents have greater access to essential medical services close to home.

MCLEOD HEALTH TEAMS VISIT GE HEALTHCARE FACILITY IN FLORENCE

Articles submitted by McLeod Health



McLeod Health and GE HealthCare leaders are pictured following a tour of the MRI production process on May 12. A partner of McLeod's for more than four decades, GE in Florence is building the new MRI system for McLeod Health Carolina Forest Hospital.

On May 12, 2026, leaders and staff from McLeod Health visited the GE HealthCare manufacturing facility in Florence, S.C., for a behind-the-scenes tour of the MRI production process. The group also had the opportunity to sign the 1.5T magnet for an advanced MRI scanner that will be installed at the new McLeod Health Carolina Forest Hospital.

McLeod Health has partnered with GE HealthCare for more than four decades. In addition to acquiring advanced MRI systems for its hospitals across the region, McLeod teams have worked with GE leaders to learn Lean Six Sigma problem-solving methods focused on continuous improvement and operational efficiency. That shared approach has supported McLeod Health in developing programs that improve patient care by empowering staff to apply their experience to streamline processes and better meet patient needs.

The new MRI system for McLeod Health Carolina Forest Hospital is being built at the Florence facility, underscoring both organizations' commitment to innovation and high-quality patient care.

"McLeod Health is pleased to continue investing in advanced imaging technology that enhances health care for the communities we serve," said Scott Montgomery, CEO of McLeod Health Carolina Forest and McLeod Health Loris. "Partnering with GE HealthCare on the production of this MRI system for the new McLeod Carolina Forest Hospital reflects the strength of local relationships and our shared commitment to bringing world-class diagnostic imaging closer to home. It's especially meaningful to work with a company that has such a strong presence in Florence. This is truly local buying local."

McLeod Health hospitals perform more than 35,000 MRI scans annually using systems produced locally at the Florence GE HealthCare plant. These MRI units are located at McLeod Regional Medical Center, McLeod Health Seacoast, McLeod Health Loris, McLeod Orthopaedics and McLeod Health Carolina Forest.

The GE SIGNA™ Voyager 1.5T system being installed at McLeod Health Carolina Forest Hospital is designed to deliver quick, patient-friendly exams with consistent image quality. The wide-bore MRI scanner is intended to balance patient comfort and productivity, with features that improve the patient experience while helping reduce exam times and optimize image quality. MRI technology enables physicians to diagnose and monitor a wide range of conditions with greater precision and accuracy.

The McLeod Health Carolina Forest Hospital is a $90 million, four-story, 48-bed facility scheduled to open in August 2026. It will be the first new hospital in Horry County since McLeod Health Seacoast opened in 2011. The facility is designed to provide 24/7 emergency services, inpatient care, surgical procedures, advanced imaging and patient-centered care for the growing Carolina Forest community.

McLeod Health continues to partner with GE HealthCare to provide patients with advanced imaging technology designed to improve comfort while delivering faster, clearer diagnostic results.

MCLEOD REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER OPENS PEDIATRIC EMPATH UNIT

McLeod Health

The Choice for Medical Excellence

McLeod Regional Medical Center has opened a pediatric behavioral health crisis stabilization unit, expanding access to specialized mental health care for children in the Pee Dee region.

McLeod was among 13 South Carolina hospitals selected to receive funding from the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services to establish hospital-based emergency department units dedicated to treating behavioral health crises.

Located within McLeod Children's Hospital, the Pediatric EmPATH Unit — Emergency Psychiatric Assessment, Treatment and Healing — is designed to serve children and adolescents experiencing acute psychiatric crises. The 15-bed unit provides immediate assessment, treatment and stabilization in a therapeutic environment focused on rapid intervention and recovery.

Unlike traditional emergency department settings, patients in the EmPATH Unit are evaluated and treated in an open, calming space that allows freedom of movement while receiving care. The unit is supported by McLeod Children's Hospital's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, where both a pediatric intensivist and a pediatric hospitalist are available around the clock.

"The EmPATH Unit will provide specialized care for children experiencing psychiatric crises using the principles of patient-centered and evidence-based emergency assessment, stabilization, treatment and healing," said Rebecca Vincent, vice president of Women's and Children's Services for McLeod Regional Medical Center.

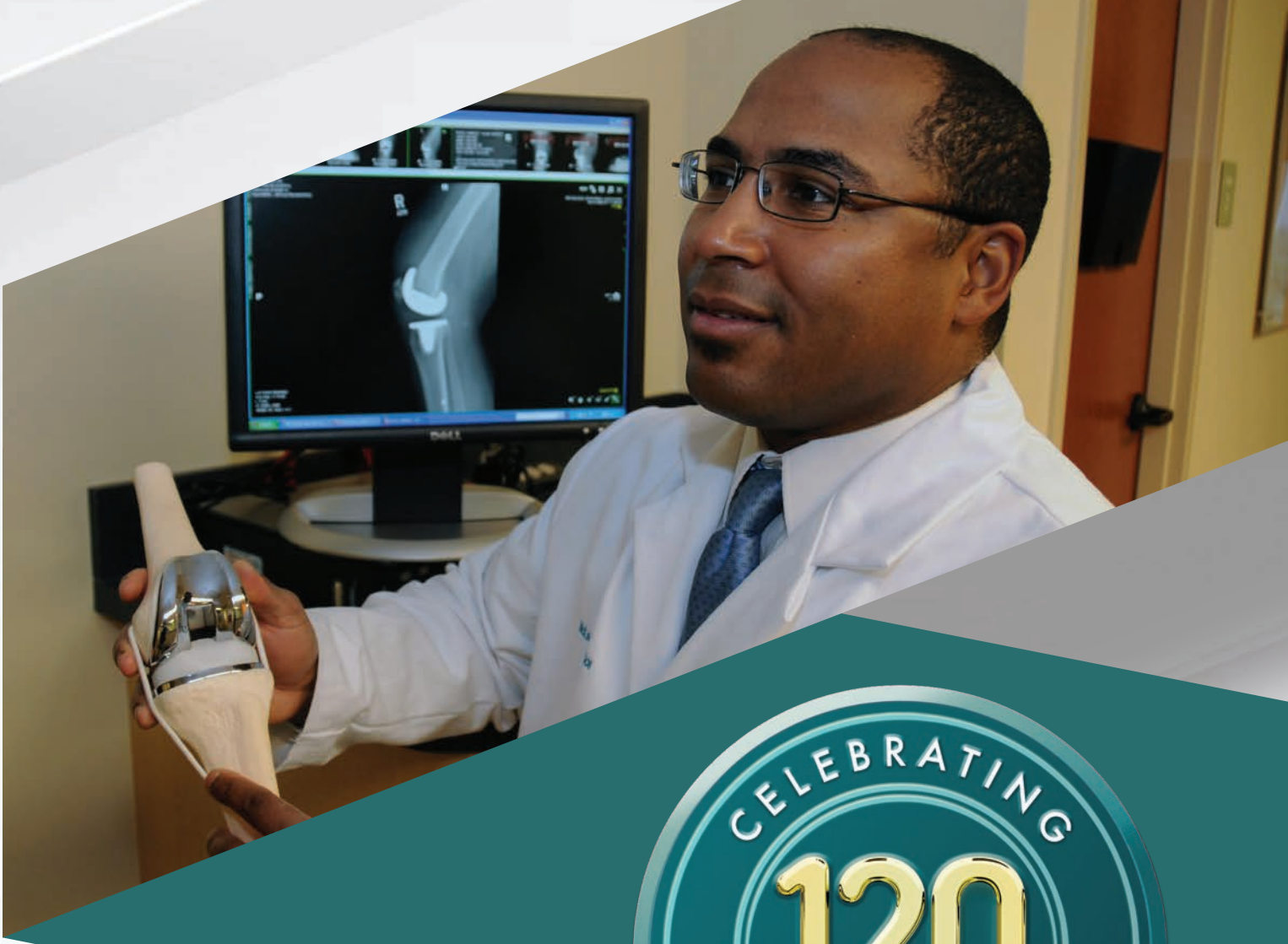
Vincent noted that the nation's mental health crisis has intensified in recent years, contributing to a rise in pediatric mental health-related emergency department visits, particularly among girls.

"This project is a necessary response to the entrenched obstacles to care affecting this patient population," she said.

Patients treated in the Pediatric EmPATH Unit receive intensive individual and group therapy tailored to their specific needs, as well as their cognitive and developmental stages. The program is built on the premise that children who can be stabilized in a supportive environment with professional and peer support during the first 72 hours of care may be able to transition safely to outpatient treatment rather than requiring inpatient psychiatric hospitalization.

The EmPATH model has demonstrated success in reducing emergency department length of stay, decreasing inpatient psychiatric admissions and improving rates of follow-up care, offering a more effective pathway for children and families navigating mental health crises.

The new unit reflects McLeod's ongoing commitment to addressing the growing need for pediatric behavioral health services and ensuring timely access to care for children in crisis.



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A LIFE-SAVING MESSAGE ABOUT COLORECTAL CANCER

By Helen Adams, MUSC public information specialist



Willy Davis gives Colon Cancer Testimonial

A Florence County man who jokingly calls himself, "Hillbilly Willy," and loves his lifted truck has found another passion — encouraging people to get screened for colorectal cancer.

"I guess you could say that after I dealt with it myself, I realized the importance of getting it done," said Willy Davis of Florence County. "If I can help somebody else and save them from what I went through, then it's worth it."

Davis, who works at the Dixie tableware facility in Darlington, was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2023 after finally undergoing the colonoscopy he had intended to schedule since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I didn't even have any symptoms, but my doctor wanted me to get screened, and I was going to do that," Davis said. "But then COVID came along, and they weren't doing anything except life-and-death procedures."

When he finally had the procedure, doctors discovered colorectal cancer.

"I told only a few people at home and my church," Davis said. "The day I found out, I called my pastor. My pastor prayed with me."

Davis was referred to Wael Ghalayini, M.D., a cancer specialist at MUSC Health Hematology and Oncology–Florence Medical Center. Under Ghalayini's care, Davis underwent about seven months of chemotherapy to shrink the cancer. He then had surgery in Charleston, followed by several more months of chemotherapy in Florence.

As he reflected on his diagnosis, Davis realized the pandemic was not the only reason he delayed screening.

"My biggest thing was watching my mom go in and out of the hospital because she had heart problems," he said. "A little bit of fear set in with me. I let that fear take over when I should have had my faith a little stronger. That's where I paid the price for that."

Fortunately, the price was not his life.

According to Ghalayini, colorectal cancer is the third-leading cause of cancer deaths among men and the fourth-leading cause among women in the United States. Screening can significantly reduce risk because doctors can detect and remove polyps — abnormal growths that can eventually develop into cancer.

"Colonoscopy is a kind of maintenance for our body," Ghalayini said. "Just like we maintain our homes and vehicles, maintaining our bodies is even more important. Take care of yourself so you can take care of others."

He emphasized that the procedure is straightforward and generally painless.

"It is done under sedation, and it doesn't take long," Ghalayini said. "If the colonoscopy doesn't detect anything concerning, you may not need another one for 10 years."

The American Cancer Society recommends that people at average risk begin colorectal cancer screening at age 45. Individuals with certain risk factors, such as a family history of colorectal cancer or a personal history of radiation treatment for cancer, may need to begin screening earlier.

Common symptoms of colorectal cancer include:

- Changes in bowel habits that last more than a few days.
- Rectal bleeding.
- Blood in the stool.
- Cramping or abdominal pain.
- Weakness or fatigue.
- Unintended weight loss.

While colonoscopy remains the gold standard for colorectal cancer screening, Ghalayini said newer testing options are providing additional opportunities for early detection.

"A blood test that checks for colon cancer-specific DNA features is an exciting tool," he said. "It is more convenient for some individuals, but it does not detect precancerous conditions or aggressive polyps. Colon cancer develops over time, and you want to catch it as early as possible, when it is still precancerous and highly treatable."

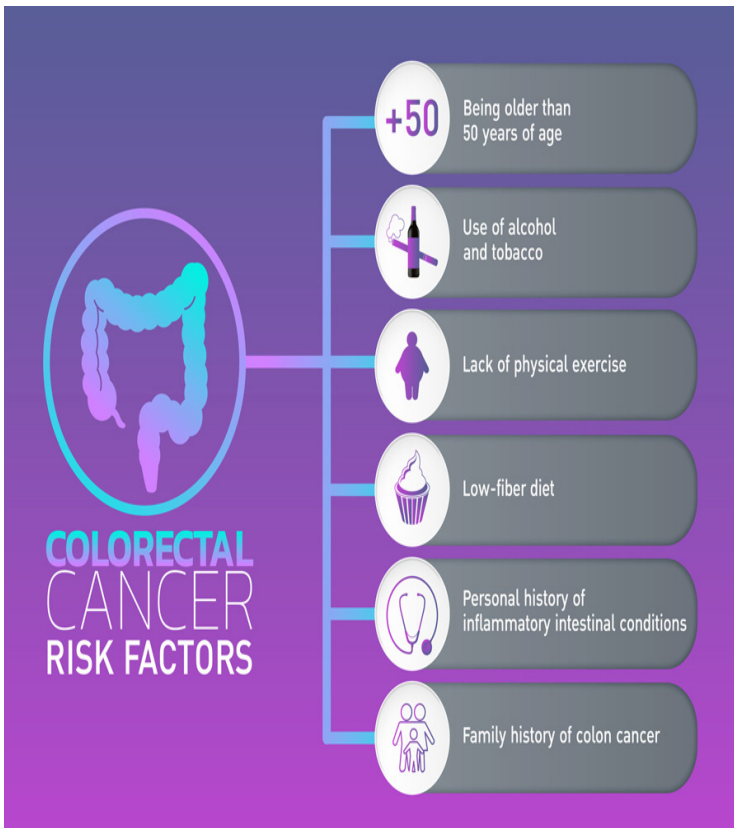
Today, Davis shares his story through social media and at community gatherings, including church services.

"Some people have actually gotten colonoscopies because of that," he said. "One lady came up to me after a church service last year and said, 'If you hadn't said that I wouldn't have gotten it done.'"

Davis is grateful she listened — and thankful he finally did, too.

Two years after surgery, he says he is doing well.

"Thank the Lord, I'm good," Davis said. "Restroom trips are a little different now, especially with a shorter colon. It takes some time to get used to it. I also get colder quicker. Other than that, I'm doing pretty good."



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EAT FRESH THIS SUMMER: A GUIDE TO SEASONAL EATING IN FLORENCE

Submitted by Caitlin Guess, MPH, RDN/LDN, CDCES



Caitlin Guess

Eating seasonally is a simple way to improve health, support local farmers and reduce environmental impact. Fruits and vegetables harvested at peak ripeness offer the best flavor and nutritional value. During colder months, root vegetables such as sweet potatoes and carrots provide nourishment, while spring brings leafy greens and strawberries. Summer in Florence offers an abundance of fresh produce, making it the perfect time to enjoy local foods.

Benefits of Eating Seasonally

Seasonal produce offers benefits beyond great taste. Fruits and vegetables picked at peak ripeness contain more vitamins, minerals and antioxidants than produce harvested early for shipping. Fresh produce is also high in fiber, supporting digestive health and helping you stay full longer. Eating a variety of seasonal foods throughout the year provides a wider range of nutrients while encouraging healthier eating habits.

Choosing seasonal produce also supports local communities. Buying from nearby farms strengthens the regional economy and reduces the environmental impact of transporting food long distances. Locally grown produce is often fresher because it spends less time in transit. Seasonal farming also promotes crop diversity and healthier soil.

Summer's Best Picks

Florence's summer harvest offers plenty of delicious choices.

Tomatoes are perfect for salads, sandwiches and sauces. They provide vitamin C, potassium and lycopene, an antioxidant linked to heart health.

Peaches are packed with vitamin C, fiber and antioxidants that support immune and digestive health.

Watermelon is refreshing on hot days and contains vitamin A, lycopene and plenty of water to help with hydration.

Squash and zucchini can be grilled, roasted or spiralized into noodles. They provide fiber, vitamin C and antioxidants.

Okra is delicious roasted or added to soups and stews. It supplies fiber, vitamin K and folate.

Sweet corn is a summertime favorite that offers fiber, B vitamins and lutein, which supports eye health.

Bell peppers add color and crunch while providing vitamins C and A and antioxidants.

Where to Find Local Produce

Fresh seasonal produce is available throughout the Pee Dee. The Pee Dee State Farmers Market and City Center Farmers Market offer locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey and other farm products. Many grocery stores also feature produce from nearby farms, while roadside stands provide freshly picked selections throughout the summer.

Two Easy Summer Salad Ideas

Peach and Black Bean Summer Salad

This refreshing salad combines sweet peaches with hearty black beans for a colorful meal.

Ingredients

- 2 ripe peaches, diced
- 1 cup black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1/2 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1/4 cup red onion, finely chopped
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro, chopped
- Juice of 1 lime
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl and toss gently. Serve as a side dish or light meal.

Zucchini and Chickpea Salad With Lemon Dressing

This crunchy salad is rich in fiber and plant-based protein.

Ingredients

- 1 medium zucchini, spiralized or thinly sliced
- 1 cup canned chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1/2 cup bell pepper, diced
- 1/4 cup feta cheese (optional)
- 2 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Mix all ingredients together and let the salad stand for 10 minutes before serving so the flavors blend.

These simple salads highlight fresh summer produce while making healthy meals easy to prepare. Seasonal fruits and vegetables can also be added to wraps, grain bowls, grilled dishes and smoothies for quick, nutritious meals.

Enjoy the Season

Eating with the seasons is about more than nutrition. It is an opportunity to enjoy fresh flavors while supporting local agriculture. Shopping locally helps strengthen the community and provides families with fresh ingredients for healthy meals.

Whether visiting a farmers market, stopping at a roadside stand or selecting locally grown produce at the grocery store, summer is the perfect time to fill your plate with colorful fruits and vegetables. Grab a basket, head to the market and enjoy the best of Florence's summer harvest.

Caitlin Guess, MPH, RDN/LDN, CDCES, is a registered dietitian nutritionist at The Diabetes Institute at HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. For more information, call (843) 432-3717 or visit hope-health.org. To learn more about cooking classes offered by The Diabetes Institute, visit hope-health.org/community/events.





SELLERS BROTHERS, SUGGS HIGHLIGHT HOPEHEALTH BRINNER

Submitted by HopeHealth



Tommy Suggs interviewed LaNorris and Jayden Sellers about football, family and community at the Brinner event

HopeHealth hosted a special evening of food, football and community impact during its third annual Brinner on June 4 at the Florence Country Club. The breakfast-for-dinner fundraising event featured University of South Carolina standouts LaNorris Sellers and Jayden Sellers, along with Gamecock legend Tommy Suggs.

The evening began with a private VIP reception for event sponsors, where attendees had the opportunity to meet the special guests, take photos and engage in conversation. Guests interacted with LaNorris Sellers, the University of South Carolina quarterback, and Jayden Sellers, a Gamecocks wide receiver, while sharing stories with Suggs, a former USC quarterback and longtime sports commentator.

Following dinner, guests enjoyed a lively question-and-answer session moderated by Suggs. He reflected on the evolution of college football since his playing days and expressed admiration for the Sellers brothers' athletic abilities and accomplishments.

Suggs also highlighted Florence's role as a regional health care hub and the hometown of the Sellers brothers. LaNorris and Jayden spoke about the importance of their community and how their upbringing in Florence helped shape their success.

"To have a room full of supporters at this event tonight, it's just a testament to the love from our community," LaNorris Sellers said.

When discussing their partnership with HopeHealth, both brothers emphasized the organization's impact on local residents.

"HopeHealth has helped me be healthy from childhood until today," LaNorris Sellers said. "It's always great to give back to them after all they've done for me."

Jayden Sellers shared similar sentiments.

"They give back to the community, and they help people who truly need it," he said. "They also helped us a lot growing up, so I want to repay that now."

The brothers noted that maintaining their health is essential to their success on and off the field. They discussed strength training, conditioning, the demands of competition and preparation for the upcoming football season.

"I just want the ball to be in my hands," Jayden Sellers said.

"Whatever it takes, I'll do it," LaNorris Sellers added.

The evening concluded with a meet-and-greet and photo opportunity for attendees. Organizers said the event celebrated family, leadership and service while supporting HopeHealth's mission to improve access to quality primary and specialty health care throughout the Pee Dee region and beyond.

The event was co-presented by McLeod Health and MUSC Health Florence Medical Center. Additional sponsors included Chronic Care Staffing, HUB International, Molina Healthcare, Carrington Wingard and Jennifer McKay.

Proceeds from the event will benefit the HopeHealth Compassionate Care Fund, which helps provide essential health care services and support for patients facing financial hardship and barriers to care. The fund assists with preventive health screenings, emergency assistance and other critical needs.

ASSESS YOUR RISK FOR HEART DISEASE

Submitted by Brinda Chokshi, M.D.



Brinda Chokshi

Cardiovascular disease, including heart attacks and strokes, remains a leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for one death every 34 seconds. Because heart disease develops gradually, identifying and addressing cardiovascular risk early can help reduce the likelihood of serious complications later in life.

Cardiovascular screening should be a collaborative process with a health care provider. Evaluating personal risk factors, medical history and available screening tests helps patients make informed decisions to protect heart health.

Risk Factors

Research shows that more than 90 percent of men and 80 percent of women who experienced a fatal or nonfatal cardiovascular event had at least one elevated risk factor.

Modifiable risk factors include high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol, tobacco use, chronic kidney disease, obesity and diabetes. Nonmodifiable factors include genetics, family history, sex and age.

A healthy lifestyle remains the foundation of prevention. Healthy eating, regular exercise, adequate sleep, stress management and maintaining a healthy weight all help reduce cardiovascular risk. Managing blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and kidney disease is equally important.

Nearly half of Americans have high blood pressure, while millions more have diabetes, prediabetes or unhealthy weight, placing many at increased risk without realizing it.

Annual physical exams beginning in the early 30s, or sooner for those with risk factors, provide an opportunity to identify concerns early and establish a long-term relationship with a trusted health care provider.

Common Screening Tests

Blood pressure

Blood pressure measures the force of blood against artery walls. Uncontrolled hypertension increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, kidney disease and dementia by damaging blood vessels and forcing the heart to work harder over time.

Lifestyle changes and medications can effectively manage hypertension. A blood pressure below 130/80 is generally recommended.

Lipid profile

A fasting lipid panel measures total cholesterol, LDL, HDL and triglycerides.

- LDL ("bad") cholesterol contributes to plaque buildup in arteries. Most adults should aim for an LDL below 100, while those with diabetes or a strong family history may benefit from levels below 70. Statin medications and heart-healthy eating patterns, including the Mediterranean diet, can help lower LDL.
- HDL ("good") cholesterol helps protect blood vessels. Regular physical activity supports healthy HDL levels.
- Triglycerides are another blood fat linked to cardiovascular disease. Levels below 150 are recommended.

Some patients may also benefit from advanced testing, including ApoB and Lp(a), which can provide additional information about inherited or elevated cardiovascular risk.

PREVENT Risk Calculator

Health care providers may use the American Heart Association's PREVENT risk calculator to estimate a person's 10-year and 30-year risk of cardiovascular disease. The tool is especially helpful for younger adults because it identifies long-term risk and encourages early lifestyle changes before symptoms develop.

CT Calcium Score

A CT calcium score is a one-time heart scan that detects calcium buildup in the coronary arteries before symptoms appear. It may be recommended for patients with elevated LDL cholesterol and additional risk factors. Results help determine whether more aggressive treatment or referral to a cardiologist is appropriate.

Prevention and Early Action

The best defense against heart disease is early prevention. Adults should become familiar with their cardiovascular risk factors in their 20s or early 30s, schedule annual checkups and work closely with their health care provider to develop a personalized prevention plan.

Taking action early can reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke and other cardiovascular complications while supporting lifelong heart health.



Heart Disease

Dr. Brinda Chokshi is an internal medicine physician at HopeHealth Medical Plaza in Florence. She specializes in preventive care and lifestyle medicine to help patients manage chronic conditions, including diabetes and heart disease.

HOPEHEALTH WELCOMES NEW PROVIDERS

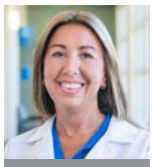
Submitted by Sheridan K. Edwards, publications coordinator, HopeHealth



Dr. Will Hunter

Dr. Will Hunter is a clinical psychologist at HopeHealth Medical Plaza. Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Hunter completed a fellowship in psychosocial rehabilitation and severe mental illness at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, Texas.

He has received additional training in Cognitive Processing Therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and 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 illnesses, including schizophrenia spectrum disorders and bipolar disorder.

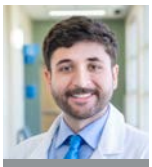


Stuart Powell, DNP, FNP-C

Stuart Powell, DNP, FNP-C, is a nurse practitioner at the Lake City School-Based Clinic, located at Lake City High School. The clinic provides primary and behavioral health care to students, teachers and staff of Florence School District 3.

In addition, Powell serves in the Department of Senior Health, providing annual wellness visits for HopeHealth patients in Clarendon and Williamsburg counties. These visits offer Medicare patients assessments of their physical and cognitive health and opportunities to update immunizations, screening tests and other preventive services.

Her clinical interests include family medicine and disease prevention.



Luke Hall, FNP

Luke Hall, FNP, is a family nurse practitioner at HopeHealth Medical Plaza. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Francis Marion University in Florence and a Master of Science in Nursing, Family Nurse Practitioner, from South University in Savannah, Georgia.

His clinical interests include hypertension, Type 2 diabetes management, and preventive health and wellness. Hall is a member of the American Nurses Association, the American Association of Nurse Practitioners and the Francis Marion University Honors Program.

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 throughout the region.

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

HEALTHY AGING MONTH: PRIORITIZING SENIOR HEALTH

Submitted by Kristin Jackson, FNP-C



Kristin Jackson, FNP-C

The Baby Boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, represents the largest aging population in U.S. history. In 2024, about 61 million Americans, roughly 18 percent of the population, were age 65 and older. By 2060, that number is projected to reach 91 million, or nearly one quarter of the U.S. population. This growth is driven largely by increased life expectancy, earlier disease detection, and improved medical treatments that allow people to live longer than previous generations.

As the older adult population expands, so does the demand for age-friendly, affordable health services, including adult day care, assisted living, retirement communities and skilled nursing facilities. Nearly 70 percent of seniors are expected to require some form of long-term care during their lifetime, making planning for supportive services increasingly important for families and communities.

Research indicates that about 93 percent of adults 65 and older live with at least one chronic condition, and nearly 80 percent have two or more. More than half take four or more medications daily, increasing the complexity of care and the importance of coordination among providers and pharmacists to prevent adverse drug interactions and hospitalizations.

By focusing on maintaining function, independence and quality of life, older adults can remain active and engaged longer in their communities. Many providers now use the term pro-aging to emphasize empowerment, wellness and healthy longevity rather than decline. Taking an active role in personal health, including preventive care, self-awareness and consistent follow-up, is essential for optimal aging.

Establishing a strong relationship with a primary care provider helps individuals navigate chronic conditions and changing health needs over time. Regular communication ensures concerns are addressed early, care plans remain effective and patients feel supported in making informed decisions about their health.

See Your Health Care Provider Regularly

Routine care is essential for prevention and management of chronic disease. Patients should keep appointments, bring an updated list of medications and supplements, and share changes in symptoms or new concerns. Writing down questions before visits can help ensure all issues are addressed. Preventive care visits also help identify risks before they become serious medical problems.

Be Aware of Your Risk Factors

Common conditions affecting older adults include heart disease, diabetes, cancer, chronic lung disease, arthritis, depression, obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Knowing your personal risk factors allows for earlier intervention, lifestyle adjustments and better long-term outcomes through coordinated care.



Report changes such as falls, pain, fatigue, memory issues, sleep disturbances, appetite changes or mood shifts. Even small changes can signal larger health concerns if left unaddressed. Difficulty with daily activities like cooking, bathing or driving should be discussed promptly with a provider to prevent decline in independence.

Adopt Healthy Habits

Healthy living includes balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, stress management and strong social connections. Small, consistent changes over time can significantly improve long-term health outcomes and support emotional well-being as well as physical health.

Social engagement is especially important for cognitive and emotional health. HopeHealth offers Seniors with Hope, a free monthly event held at multiple locations. These gatherings provide education on healthy aging, along with refreshments, peer interaction and opportunities for community connection that reduce isolation.

Complete Your Medicare Annual Wellness Visit

Medicare Part B beneficiaries are eligible for an Annual Wellness Visit each year at no cost. These visits focus on prevention, early detection and long-term health planning rather than treating illness or acute conditions.

During the visit, providers assess health risks, review medical history, update medications, screen cognitive function and discuss advance care planning. Personalized prevention plans are developed based on individual needs, goals and risk factors to support healthier aging.

Preventive Screenings and Services

Common screenings include colorectal cancer testing, mammograms, bone density scans, Pap tests and prostate-specific antigen testing. Vaccinations and lab work may also be reviewed or updated to ensure patients remain current with recommended guidelines.

Education and coordination may include nutrition guidance, exercise recommendations and referrals to physical therapy, behavioral health or home health services when needed. These coordinated efforts help patients maintain independence and reduce preventable complications.

Brain Health and Cognitive Care

When cognitive concerns arise, patients may be referred to HopeHealth's Brain Health Network, a partnership with the University of South Carolina. The program expands access to dementia and Alzheimer's care, especially in underserved communities, and supports caregivers through education and resources.

Advance Care Planning

Advance care planning is a key part of preventive care. Patients are encouraged to complete advance directives such as a living will and durable power of attorney. Tools like Five Wishes can help guide these decisions in a clear and accessible way, ensuring patient preferences are respected.

The senior years should be a time of purpose, independence, dignity and well-being. Prioritizing preventive care helps ensure healthier and more fulfilling aging for individuals, families and communities.

Preventive care also plays a vital role in reducing health disparities and supporting caregivers who assist older adults with daily needs. Families are encouraged to participate in care planning discussions and stay informed about available community resources. Early intervention, routine screenings and consistent follow-up appointments can help seniors maintain independence longer while improving overall quality of life across physical, emotional and social dimensions across rural and urban areas.

Jackson is a nurse practitioner at HopeHealth Medical Plaza and provides Medicare Annual Wellness Visits. Learn more at hope-health.org or call 843-667-9414.



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ROBOTIC SURGERY TRANSFORMS GYN CARE IN THE PEE DEE

Submitted by MUSC Health Staff Reports



Freestanding OBGYN Robot

Undergoing a hysterectomy, a procedure that half a million women in the U.S. have each year, has become simpler for some patients at MUSC Health in Florence. They don't have to go into a hospital.

That's because a freestanding outpatient surgery center now offers robotic-assisted uterine removal, along with two other gynecological procedures also aided by robotics:

• Surgery to remove one or both ovaries. It's part of about half of all hysterectomies.

• Fallopian tube removal, which may be done to prevent pregnancy or ovarian cancer or because of ectopic pregnancy, infection or blockage in a tube.

But doctors say robotic-assisted hysterectomies, the second most common type of surgery for women – C-sections are No. 1 – really stand out. "It's a gamechanger in terms of what we're able to do outpatient as opposed to what happened before," said Jennifer Patchett, M.D., an OB-GYN.

"Before, with a hysterectomy, there was a big incision, with a six-week recovery time. There was a two-night stay in the hospital and six weeks out of work for everybody. Now, women go home the same day they have surgery and have really great outcomes, a great return to normal function."

Patchett says the robotic system allows them to do minimally invasive surgery even on uteruses that have become enlarged.

If you haven't seen robotic surgery, it may seem hard to imagine. But here's how it works in the case of a hysterectomy, according to the maker of the Da Vinci system in use at MUSC Health in Florence.

• The surgeon sits at a console in the operating room near the patient.

-There's a surgical "cart" by the patient's bed that contains the surgical instruments.

-The doctor remotely controls those instruments along with a tiny camera that gives a magnified 3D look at the surgical area.

-The surgeon makes a few small incisions instead of one large one, which can mean shorter recovery time with less pain.

"I think the robot is just so important," said Emily Stonerock, M.D., another OB-GYN surgeon at the Florence outpatient center. "It's performing an invasive surgery in a very noninvasive way. I mean, a hysterectomy is about as big a surgery as we do. We can just do it through small incisions, and they're back to normal life."

Patchett said the robotic system allows them to do minimally invasive surgery even on larger uteruses. The uterus, sometimes called the womb, can become enlarged because of:

• Hormonal changes.
• Fibroids.
• Adenomyosis, where the uterus lining grows into the organ's muscle layer.
• Uterine cancer.
• Pregnancy.
• Perimenopause, the time before menopause.

Those hysterectomies can be more complex. But Patchett said the robotic system helps address that complexity by giving surgeons flexible instruments to see and operate with. "I can move around corners and get into places that I couldn't before."

That ability to take on complex cases has strengthened ties with other OB-GYN clinics. "I get lots and lots of referrals now, specifically for this. It's not an option somewhere else. And so they come here because this is what we'll do," Patchett said.

Some patients also like the fact that they can have surgery without going into a hospital, Stonerock said. "We have so many women who have physical challenges, physical disabilities, emotional disabilities, concerns where going into a large hospital may be overwhelming. We can now take them to a very small setting with minimal steps along the way and get these very complex surgeries done."

Patchett said the outpatient robotic-assisted option may also help ease worries about the surgery itself. "I think it's kind of changed how women feel about hysterectomies a little bit. It's a much safer option now than it used to be."

GREEN GLOBE CERTIFICATIONS AWARDED

Submitted by John Russell, MUSC Health-Florence Division marketing manager/media relations



Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion

The Green Building Initiative (GBI) has awarded the MUSC Health Jean and Hugh K. Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion two Green Globes certifications, recognizing the facility's commitment to sustainable, healthy and resilient building practices. Green Globes is a nationally recognized, science-based building rating system that assesses environmental efficiency and overall building performance.

"The Green Globes certifications speak to all that we took into account when building the facility," said Elizabeth Crowley, executive director of the MUSC Health Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion. "We worked intentionally to optimize air quality, our irrigation system for our plants outside and to reduce the amount of water we are using."

The two Green Globes ratings represent a significant achievement in environmentally conscious design, resource efficiency and occupant well-being. According to GBI certification criteria, facilities awarded at this level demonstrate strong performance across multiple sustainability categories, including energy efficiency, indoor environmental quality, water conservation and reduction of environmental impacts.

Crowley emphasized that sustainability is not an optional feature but a core expectation of new MUSC Health facilities. "We wanted to make sure that this new building met those expectations," Crowley said. "When building new facilities, we take into account not only taking care of our patients but also taking care of the environment as well. It's also important that we have sustainable workflows and sustainable building structures. We want these buildings to be in the community for a long time to serve our patients."

The Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion integrates a range of sustainable elements, including efficient HVAC systems, improved indoor air quality strategies, low-flow water fixtures and landscape irrigation systems designed to reduce water consumption. These features align with GBI's comprehensive evaluation process, which uses both prescriptive measures and performance-based metrics to verify sustainability achievements.

Green Globes-certified buildings benefit from reduced energy and water costs, lower carbon emissions, enhanced occupant wellness and responsible long-term resource use. The certification process ensures that building owners and project teams meet clearly defined, consensus-driven sustainability standards.

The MUSC Health Jean and Hugh K. Leatherman Behavioral Care Pavilion offers a modern, therapeutic environment for patients and families in the Pee Dee region. The facility provides a full range of behavioral health services, combining advanced clinical care with a healing, patient-centered design.

FOWLER HONORED WITH THE ORDER OF THE PALMETTO

Submitted by McLeod Health



Ronald Fowler is presented The Order of the Palmetto by (from left to right) Dr. Tarek Bishara, chairman of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees; Tina Hardee, Horry County auditor and Kevin Hardee, South Carolina House of Representative for District 105.

Ronald M. Fowler, a member of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees and previous chairman of the board, was presented The Order of the Palmetto, on Friday, May 1, 2026. The Honorable Kevin Hardee, South Carolina House of Representative for District 105, presented the honor alongside his wife Tina Hardee, Horry County auditor and Dr. Tarek Bishara, chairman of the McLeod Health Board of Trustees, on behalf of the Office of Governor Henry McMaster.

Fowler received the highest civilian honor bestowed to a South Carolina citizen at a gathering of family, friends and McLeod Health Board of Trustees and Emeritus members. "Tonight is a special event for McLeod Health and for all of us who have had the honor of working alongside individuals who give so much of themselves for the good of others," said Bishara who offered the welcome. "We are gathered here to recognize one such individual -- a man whose dedication has strengthened this organization and touched countless lives across our region."

Bishara also thanked Fowler's family stating, "Your support of him throughout his years of service has truly contributed to this achievement, and your presence tonight reflects the love, pride and admiration that surrounds him."

Bishara then introduced Representative Hardee who represents the district that Fowler calls home. "We are honored to have Kevin with us, accompanied by his wife, Tina who also represents the district. They will present this honor to one of his own constituents, whom he admires as a friend and mentor."

Before presenting the honor, Representative Hardee offered remarks on Fowler's contributions to the region. "It is truly an honor to recognize a man whose leadership has strengthened not only McLeod Health, but the entire Pee Dee and Coastal regions and the State of South Carolina. We are pleased to celebrate Mr. Fowler, whose service reflects the very best of what it means to be a South Carolinian — dedicated, humble, compassionate and committed to the well being of others."

"The Order of the Palmetto is reserved for individuals who have made exceptional contributions that elevate communities, improve lives and leave a lasting impact on South Carolina. The circle of recipients, vetted and approved for this distinction by the Office of Governor McMaster, now hails the inclusion of Mr. Fowler who is unquestionably one of those individuals whose life reflects the merits of this honor."

"As past Chairman of the McLeod Health Board of Directors, Mr. Fowler helped guide this organization through periods of growth, innovation and challenge. His leadership was steady, thoughtful and always grounded in the mission of providing the highest quality care to the people of this region. But his influence extends far beyond the boardroom. He has been a mentor to many, a champion for access to health care, improvements and strengthening education and a tireless advocate for the needs of patients, students and families. He has given generously of his time, his expertise and his heart — never seeking recognition, always focused on service.

"Those who know Mr. Fowler also know that he leads with integrity. He listens carefully. He treats everyone with respect. And he believes deeply in the responsibility we all share to make our communities stronger. Tonight, we honor not only his accomplishments, but the spirit in which he has served — with humility, with purpose and with a genuine desire to make life better for others," added Representative Hardee.

Following his remarks, Representative Hardee, Tina Hardee and Bishara formally presented The Order of the Palmetto to Fowler. "On behalf of the Office of the Governor of the State of South Carolina, and with deep appreciation for your decades of service, leadership and dedication, it is our privilege to present you with the Governor's Order of the Palmetto. This award symbolizes the gratitude of our state and the countless individuals whose lives have been touched by your work. Your legacy is one of service, compassion and unwavering commitment to the people of South Carolina."

In closing, Bishara said, "On behalf of the entire McLeod Health Board of Trustees, thank you Ronald once again for your years of steady leadership and for the example you continue to set for all of us. We thank each of you for being here tonight to celebrate this extraordinary achievement and to honor a man who has given so much to McLeod Health and to our state."

Former McLeod Health recipients of this honor include: Mr. Rob Colones, previous president and CEO of McLeod Health, in 2022 presented by Governor Henry McMaster; Mr. Laurence McIntosh, previous McLeod Health Board chairman, in 2002 by Governor Jim Hodges; Mrs. Dot Johnson, nurse and McLeod advocate, in 1997 awarded by Governor David Beasley; Dr. Conyers O'Bryan, Jr. in 1994 by Governor Carroll Campbell; Dr. William Hester, McLeod physician and medical director of the Residency Program, in 1990 presented by Governor Carroll Campbell and Dr. John M. Wilson, a Darlington physician, in 1988 awarded by Governor Carroll Campbell.

About Ronald M. Fowler

Fowler has spent a lifetime exemplifying the highest ideals of service, leadership and civic responsibility in the State of South Carolina. Born and raised in the Pee Dee region, Fowler developed early an unwavering commitment to community uplift, integrity in leadership and the belief that every individual has a responsibility to leave their community better than they found it. Over the course of more than four decades of professional, civic and philanthropic engagement, he has become a respected pillar of service whose influence has touched education, economic development, veterans' advocacy, faith based initiatives and countless community

FOWLER HONORED CONT'D

organizations.

A native of Horry County, Fowler is a graduate of Wofford College and holds a master's degree in education from the University of South Carolina. With more than 50 years of service to Horry County Schools, he currently works as a learning specialist in the Office of Human Resources. He also serves as a funeral director with Hardwick Funeral Home in Loris, South Carolina.

Beyond his professional achievements, Fowler's community service is where his legacy shines most brightly. He has devoted thousands of hours to organizations that strengthen South Carolina's social fabric. His leadership roles have included service as current member of the Horry County RIDE IV Committee, as a past member of the Horry County Board of Adjustment and Appeals, 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.

Following a long history of leadership in education, where he championed programs that expanded educational access, supported underserved families and fostered economic opportunity in rural communities, Fowler said health care was a calling for him. In 2001, he was appointed to the Loris Community Hospital District Board of Commissioners. During his service with the board of commissioners, he served as chairman and vice chairman. He was also on the board in 2011 when McLeod Health and Loris Healthcare System formalized their long standing and mutually beneficial partnership with a decision to affiliate. Since 2012, Fowler has represented Horry County on the McLeod Health Board of Trustees, where he has been instrumental in the growth of McLeod along the coast. He has served as chairman of the Board and Governance Committee and as a member of the following committees: nominating; finance; audit and compliance; planning; physician development and workforce development and education. His leadership and dedication have left a legacy in health care and civic life across the region.

His advocacy for veterans and military families has been especially impactful, ensuring that those who served the nation receive the dignity, resources and recognition they deserve. Fowler has also led outreach programs, youth mentorship initiatives and community partnerships that have improved the lives of countless South Carolinians. His ability to bring people together -- across backgrounds, generations and perspectives -- has made him a unifying force in the communities he serves.

About McLeod Health

Founded in 1906, McLeod Health is a locally owned and managed, not for profit organization supported by the strength of more than 1,000 members on its medical staff and more than 3,800 licensed nurses McLeod Health is also composed of approximately 18,000 team members and more than 100 physician practice locations throughout its 18-county service area. With seven hospitals, McLeod Health operates three Health and Fitness Centers, a Sports Medicine and Outpatient Rehabilitation Center, Hospice and Home Health Services. The system currently has 945 licensed beds. The hospitals within McLeod Health include McLeod Regional Medical Center, McLeod Health Dillon, McLeod Health Loris, McLeod Health Seacoast, McLeod Health Carolina Forest, McLeod Health Cheraw, McLeod Health Clarendon and McLeod Behavioral Health.

FOX FAMILY BUILDS ON MCLEOD LEGACY

Submitted by McLeod Health Foundation



Dan and April Fox have ensured that their legacy of caring at McLeod Health will continue for generations to come.

A recommendation from a friend brought April Fox and Dan Fox from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to McLeod Health 30 years ago. Since then, the couple has become an integral part of the McLeod Health family, leaving a lasting impact on the region through their professional service and philanthropic support.

In the early years, Fox cared for patients as an anesthesiologist in Surgical Services, while April worked as a pharmacist in the Operating Room Pharmacy.

Over the years, the Foxes became dedicated supporters of the McLeod Health Foundation, gaining a deeper appreciation for the institution's role in improving health care and supporting the region's growth.

The couple embraced McLeod Health's culture of excellence and its commitment to quality care through Clinical Effectiveness initiatives.

"We knew we were part of something special when all hospital board meetings and retreats opened with prayer," Fox said.

The Foxes value McLeod Health's emphasis on collaboration among physicians, administrators and nursing staff. Through these collective efforts, the hospital earned recognition as a top-tier health care organization and received the American Hospital Association-McKesson Quest for Quality Award.

The couple appreciates working in an environment that reflects the values their family shares. They credit the organization's strong leadership, faith and determination for advancing its mission to improve the health and well-being of people throughout the region.

"Each year as we return from vacation, I like to remind Dan of how fortunate he is to look forward to returning to the hospital," April said.

"It became apparent to us that McLeod Health's focus on quality is built on the legacy of many who came before us, including our founder, F.H. McLeod," Fox said. "We wanted to be part of that legacy and are honored to make our personal commitment."

Recently, the Foxes established a life insurance policy, naming the McLeod Health Foundation as the sole beneficiary. They designated the future gift to McLeod Cardiac Services to help ensure quality cardiac care continues for generations to come.

"It is an honor for us to participate by making our commitment, alongside so many others who have supported the hospital and, in turn, blessed our entire region," the couple said.

Through their careers, generosity and long-term commitment, Dan and April Fox continue to help strengthen the legacy of caring that defines McLeod Health.

BUILDING STRONGER FUTURES



Quentin Williams

(DWM) - For more than 15 years, Quentin Williams has dedicated his career to helping individuals and families make informed financial decisions that can have a lasting impact for generations.

As founder of Quentin Williams Insurance, Williams believes financial literacy is one of the most powerful tools available to help people build wealth, protect their loved ones and prepare for life's unexpected challenges. His passion for educating clients stems not only from professional experience but also from personal circumstances that shaped his understanding of the importance of financial planning.

Williams entered the insurance industry after a family member encouraged him to explore the profession.

"I was introduced to the industry by a family member who had recently obtained his license," Williams said. "He believed my personality and network of contacts would be assets in the business."

That opportunity launched a career that has allowed Williams to serve clients while also mentoring others interested in entering the insurance profession.

His decision to establish Quentin Williams Insurance was driven by a desire to better serve clients through partnerships with multiple insurance carriers.

"I wanted the ability to work with different companies so I could fully meet my clients' needs," he said. "I also wanted to create opportunities for individuals who wanted to enter this industry."

Williams' approach to helping clients is deeply influenced by his own health journey. As a two-time kidney transplant recipient, he understands firsthand how quickly circumstances can change.

"At age 20, I was considered uninsurable," Williams said. "That experience taught me the importance of getting in front of as many people as possible and educating them about their options. The earlier someone plans, the better."

Education remains the cornerstone of his work.

"Most clients are truly clueless about life insurance and how it works," Williams said. "My primary goal is educating, educating and educating."

He believes many people mistakenly view insurance as an expense rather than an investment in their family's future. To help clients understand its value, he often discusses real-life scenarios, and the financial hardships families can face when a loved one passes away without adequate coverage.

"Most people have either experienced the loss of a loved one or know someone who has," he said. "They understand the challenges that come with handling funeral expenses and other financial obligations without help."

One of the most common mistakes Williams sees is individuals underestimating how much financial support their families will need after their death.

"Many people don't know the numbers," he said. "They don't fully understand the needs their loved ones may have after they're gone."

To help clients balance immediate financial concerns with long-term security, Williams conducts a thorough needs analysis that examines household expenses, education costs, recreational activities and other financial obligations.

"We look at monthly bills, college funds and other expenditures to determine what level of protection a family may need," he said.

Williams encourages individuals who are just beginning their financial journey to invest time in learning about personal finance and seeking guidance from qualified professionals.

"With today's access to information, people can find answers to almost anything," he said. "The key is taking the time to educate yourself and seek advice when needed."

He believes financial literacy is particularly important in underserved communities, where access to financial education may be limited.

"Insurance is known as one of the greatest wealth-transfer tools available," Williams said. "When implemented properly, it can change lives and impact generations."

Williams emphasizes that understanding a client's unique circumstances is essential to providing effective guidance. He spends time asking questions and learning about clients' financial goals, family responsibilities and personal beliefs.

"You have to understand people before you can truly help them," he said.

As technology continues to reshape the insurance industry, Williams has embraced virtual tools that make education and communication more accessible. He notes that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of online applications, video conferencing and digital interactions, while emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence continue to create new opportunities for connecting with clients.

At the same time, he recognizes that many families face significant financial challenges.

"The rising cost of living, unemployment concerns and lower wages often force people to make difficult decisions," Williams said. "Many families are trying to determine whether they can afford to invest in their future while managing their immediate needs."

When choosing an insurance professional, Williams believes clients should look for three key qualities: transparency, professionalism and knowledge.

Trust, he says, is built through honest communication and a genuine commitment to putting clients' interests first.

"You have to establish a connection and reassure people that their information is confidential," he said. "Most importantly, they need to know you have their best interests at heart."

Looking ahead, Williams plans to expand educational outreach efforts and continue creating opportunities for future insurance professionals.

His long-term goal is to increase financial literacy throughout the communities he serves while helping more families secure their financial futures.

"I want to influence and provide services to more than 1,000 clients," Williams said. "I also want to make financial literacy an essential part of every home."

For readers seeking a stronger financial foundation, Williams offers straightforward advice: learn as much as possible about personal finance, obtain adequate life insurance coverage, explore investment opportunities and establish a will or trust.

He also encourages individuals not to postpone important financial decisions.

"Life insurance approval and pricing are based on age, health and other factors," Williams said. "The younger and healthier you are, the more affordable coverage is likely to be. Don't wait until circumstances change and limit your options."

Ultimately, Williams believes the first step toward financial security is simple: take action.

"Contact a qualified insurance professional and schedule a consultation," he said. "The best time to start planning for your future is today."

"Helping to Educate Generations on Making the Best Financial Decisions"



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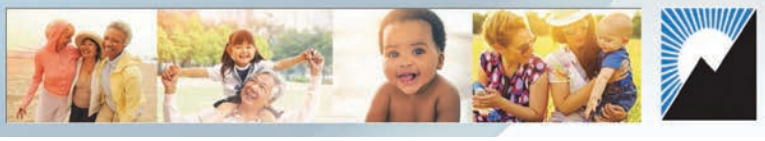


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CREATE A DIY DIRTY SODA BAR FOR SUMMER ENTERTAINING



(BPT) - Summer is the perfect time to gather friends and family for outdoor fun, good food and refreshing drinks. This year, elevate your backyard gathering with a DIY dirty soda bar, a fun and interactive way for guests to customize their favorite beverages.

Originating in Utah, the dirty soda trend has gained popularity nationwide. The concept is simple: combine traditional soft drinks with flavored syrups, cream and creative toppings to create a personalized beverage. A dirty soda bar not only offers delicious drink options but also encourages guests to get creative.

Start With a Variety of Sodas

The foundation of any dirty soda is, of course, the soda itself. Offer a variety of options to accommodate different tastes. Popular choices include colas, lemon-lime sodas, orange sodas and root beer. Providing several options ensures guests can create a drink that suits their preferences.

Stock Up on Essential Ingredients

The ingredients that transform an ordinary soda into a dirty soda include creams, flavored syrups and garnishes.

Creams

Cream gives dirty sodas their signature flavor and texture. Traditional recipes often use half-and-half, but flavored coffee creamers such as vanilla or coconut also work well. Be sure to include dairy-free alternatives, such as oat milk, almond milk or coconut milk, so all guests can participate.

Flavored Syrups

Syrups add sweetness and flavor to dirty sodas. Popular options include coconut, vanilla, raspberry, peach and mango. For an authentic soda-shop experience, consider serving syrups in pump dispensers.

Garnishes

Toppings add both flavor and visual appeal. Offer fresh fruit such as cherries, strawberries, raspberries, oranges, limes, blueberries and blackberries. For a playful twist, include gummy candies or fresh herbs such as mint and rosemary.

Upgrade Your Drinkware

Skip disposable plastic cups and serve dirty sodas in clear tumblers. Transparent glasses allow guests to enjoy the colorful marbling effect created when cream is mixed with soda. Add festive straws and decorative straw toppers for an extra touch of fun.

Signature Dirty Soda Recipes

For guests new to the trend, provide a menu featuring a few suggested combinations:

The Classic
- Diet cola
- Coconut syrup
- Fresh lime juice
- Half-and-half

Orange Creamsicle
- Orange soda
- Vanilla syrup
- Cream
- Citrus garnish

Dirty Root Beer
- Root beer
- Hazelnut syrup
- Cream

Shirley Temple Dirty Soda
- Lemon-lime soda
- Grenadine syrup
- Vanilla creamer
- Maraschino cherries

A Fun Addition to Any Gathering

Creating a dirty soda bar is an easy way to add excitement to summer entertaining. With a selection of sodas, flavorful mix-ins and creative toppings, guests can craft their own custom beverages and enjoy a unique experience that keeps them coming back for more.

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