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« FADING HARVEST »



Joseph Fields sits atop his tractor on his John's Island, S.C., farm. Fields said he's noticed fewer Black producers over the years, but is determined to stay the course. "Farming is a job," he said. "It's not a hobby, it's a job. You can lose and you can make money. I love to do it. I love farming."

Black farmers confront stiff challenges to sustainability

From legacy of racial bias to tariffs and climate change, their livelihood is at risk

By Herbert L. White
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First in a series produced in partnership with Pulitzer Center.

Farming has always been hard. It's expensive, labor intensive and rarely includes days off. For Black Americans, it's especially daunting as decades of racial discrimination, economic uncertainty, generational attitudes and land displacement have decimated the ranks.

"There's a lot fewer black farmers now," said Joseph Fields, a third generation farmer in John's Island, South Caro-

lina. "You've got to have interest in going to the farm service and talking to them. ... But farming is something you've got to love to do and want to do. You keep going, keep going, and find a way to sell your product and deliver your product."

The Post is launching "Fading Harvest," a series produced with support from the Pulitzer Center that examines challenges Black agriculture producers face, why their livelihoods are endangered and initiatives to open opportunities long denied. The reporting includes Carolinas farmers like Fields revealing their concerns and expectations for the future as well as advocates and policy makers who

offer competing visions on whether decades of racial discrimination from federal government to county extension agencies should be addressed.

"What it says about the country is that we still have a long way to go and acknowledging who we are as a country," said Gbinga Ajilor, chief economist at the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and a USDA senior advisor for rural development during the Biden



Ajilor

Please see **BLACK** | 2A

Toll road foes rally behind history

By Herbert L. White
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The Brooklyn neighborhood's demise is a rallying point for opposition to proposed Interstate 77 South toll roads.

A Dec. 5 letter signed by a coalition of 24 mobility, environmental and community advocates urged state Transportation Secretary Daniel Johnson to lobby him to scrap the plan, citing economic inequality and Charlotte's legacy of transportation projects cutting through historic Black neighborhoods. The most prominent example is the Brooklyn neighborhood, which was leveled to make way for the I-277 loop in the 1960s. Thousands of families, businesses and schools were displaced in the process as part of a federal urban renewal campaign.

"The highway cut a swath through nearly every one of Charlotte's historically Black communities along its length — starting in the Historic West End with Biddleville, Oaklawn Park, McCrorey Heights, Dalebrook, and parts of Wesley Heights and Seversville, then continuing south to Wilmore and into the West Boulevard and South Tryon corridors that served Black Charlotteans pushed out of other parts of the city," the signatories wrote.

"77 South brushes or bisects Black and historically Black communities along the West Boulevard

Please see **I-77** | 2A

NC gets OK for \$300M broadband expansion

By Christine Zhu
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The National Telecommunications and Information Administration has approved North Carolina's proposal to use federal funds to bring broadband internet access to unserved areas, Gov. Josh Stein announced Monday.

Under the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment program, North Carolina can award more than \$300 million to projects aimed at expanding high-speed internet service to more than 93,000 homes, businesses, and other community institutions across the state. BEAD allocated \$1.53 billion overall for broadband expansion in North Carolina.

"Reliable high-speed internet opens doors of opportunity," Stein said in a statement. "Broadband empowers students to learn, helps businesses grow, supports our health care system, and strengthens our economy. With this additional funding, we're moving one step closer to connecting every household and community in the state."

These projects will begin in mid-2026. In the meantime, the American Rescue Plan Act has contributed \$670 million towards broadband projects that will support faster internet service to more than 250,000 homes and businesses statewide by the end of 2026.

Following this approval, North Carolina will have more than \$1 billion remaining in its BEAD funding. Stein wrote a letter to the Sec-

Please see **NC** | 2A

Guns marketed for personal safety fuel public health crisis in Black communities

By Fred Clasen-Kelly and Daniel Chang
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PHILADELPHIA — Leon Harris, 35, is intimately familiar with the devastation guns can inflict. Robbers shot him in the back nearly two decades ago, leaving him paralyzed from the chest down. The bullet remains lodged in his spine.

"When you get shot," he said, "you stop thinking about the future."

He is anchored by his wife and child and faith. He once wanted to work as a forklift driver but has built a stable career in information technology. He finds camaraderie with other gunshot survivors and in advocacy.

Still, trauma remains lodged in his daily life. As gun violence surged in the shadows of the covid pandemic, it shook Harris' fragile sense of security. He moved his family out of Philadelphia to a leafy suburb in Delaware. But a nagging fear of crime persists. Now he is thinking about buying a gun.

Harris is one of tens of thousands of Americans killed or injured each year by gun violence, a public health crisis that escalated in the pandemic and churns a new victim into a hospital emergency room every half hour.

Over the past two decades, the firearm industry has ramped up production and stepped up sales campaigns through social media influencers, conference presentations, and promotions. An industry trade

Please see **GUN** | 3A



CITY OF CHARLOTTE

Juan Diego Mazuera Arias is the first Latino elected to Charlotte City Council.

Council member Mazuera Arias' goal: Represent overlooked district

By Ashleigh Fields
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When Juan Diego Mazuera Arias launched his Charlotte City Council campaign last year, his goal was to represent marginalized communities.

Mazuera Arias, a Democrat who grew up in the east Charlotte district he represents, graduated Idlewild Elementary, Randolph Middle and East Mecklenburg High School. The city's rapid development, he said, has largely excluded those neighborhoods and the objective of his first

term is to pick up the pieces left from a transient storm sweeping the Carolinas' largest city.

"While all of Charlotte is growing at an incredible pace, east Charlotte has been neglected from that growth," Mazuera Arias said. What I'm looking for is that east Charlotte is part of that growth, that we are growing without displacement, that we are growing without gentrification, that we're progressing forward without pushing to the side the people that have lived here for generations and

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Please
Recycle



Black farmers confront challenges to livelihood

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administration. “And it’s not just in agriculture, but we see in so many other sectors throughout the country.”

Those perils have impacted farmers’ numbers even as agriculture remains a vital industry in North Carolina and nationally. A 2025 analysis from Farm Flavor using USDA data found that North Carolina generated \$20.6 billion in agricultural sales — eighth highest in the U.S. and 3.4% of the country’s total of \$599.9 billion.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2022 census of agriculture, there were 46,738 Black farmers, 1.4% of the nation’s nearly 3.4 million producers. Their numbers represented a 4.5% slide from five years previous when the census counted 48,697. The number of total farmers fell from 3,399,834 to 3,374,044, a drop of 0.8% over the same span.

In North Carolina, the numbers are marginally better. According to the USDA, there are 2,058 Black producers – an increase over 2017 when a little more than 1,500 were counted – and make up 4.4% of the state’s 46,000

farmers. A third of the Black producers are women. In the early 20th century, an estimated quarter of North Carolina’s farms were owned by Black people.

“When we talk about black farmers, we’re looking at 100 years of issues that they face,” Ajilor said. ... “I think about the [President Donald Trump] tariff scheme and how much the tariffs have really impacted farmers all across the board where you have issues where the president’s put tariffs on other countries so other countries pull back their importing, but also just tariffs on a lot of goods.

“For farmers, there’s tariffs on steel, tariffs on aluminum, tariffs on fertilizer, so you have the export markets decreasing, and then their input costs are going up. This makes their margins a lot thinner, which for Black farmers, are already difficult.”

Fields, though, is determined to remain with the soil his grandparents bought in 1903.

“Farming is a job,” he said. “It’s not a hobby, it’s a job. You can lose and you can make money. I love to do it. I love farming.”



AARoads

A toll road along Interstate 77 North in Huntersville is part of the first phase of toll roads planned for Mecklenburg Count. The second phase, which would stretch 11 miles from Center City to the South Carolina border, has drawn protests from community, environmental and mobility groups, who want the North Carolina Department of Transportation to scrap the toll lanes in favor of enhanced mass transit.

I-77 toll road foes rally behind history of inequity, displacement

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and South Tryon corridors — Reid Park/Arbor Glen, Revolution Park, Clanton Park/Irwin Creek, and the West Boulevard villages. These areas sit immediately west of I-77 or depend on greenways, parks, and streets that would be affected by widening or an elevated option.”

The signatories want the North Carolina Department of Transportation to scrap the plan and invest in mass transit and reconnection programs for affected neighborhoods. Mecklenburg County voters in November approved a 1% transit tax referendum that will raise the local sales tax from to 8.25% and generate a projected \$19.4 billion over 30 years.

“The only effective way to move more people in this corridor is to invest in reliable, frequent transit — dedicated bus lanes on I-77, buses that come at least every 15 minutes on primary roads parallel to I-77, safe and accessible bus stops, and coordinated land use to shorten trips,” they wrote. “NCDOT’s current plan offers no public transit alternative, requiring local residents to fund improvements to transit and active transportation themselves – with no financial support from the state.”

NCDOT proposes widening 11 miles of I-77 South from I-277 in Center City and NC 16 to the South Carolina border to add a pair of toll express lanes in each direction. Opponents say the toll lanes, which would be operated by a private company, would create a two-tier situation for commuters in which drivers who can afford the fare will drive that option while congestion would worsen on the free lanes.

“This project would create premium, high-priced lanes for those who can afford them, while everyone else remains in the general-purpose lanes, which NCDOT’s own analysis shows will continue to be congested over time,” project opponents wrote. “That is the definition of a two-tier system. We have already seen on I-77 North that dynamic pricing can push tolls to levels that are out of reach for many working families. Building more lanes that only some people can use is not transportation equity.”

Toll lanes have been the source of con-

tentious debate for more than a decade. The initial I-77 North project, completed in 2019, sparked outrage in northern Mecklenburg that combined with the so-called “Bathroom Bill” HB2, led to incumbent Gov. Pat McCrory losing his 2016 re-election bid.

In addition to the toll lanes, DOT proposes 13 interchanges and several retaining walls as part of the 11-mile project, which includes, in some segments, elevated roadways. It would slice into Frazier Park in Third Ward and halt a planned extension of Irwin Creek Greenway through McCrory Heights that would bar neighborhood access to the Irwin Creek corridor – originally prohibited by I-77.

The project would also further infringe on Pinewood Cemetery, established in 1853 as the burial ground for Black Charlotteans located beside from Elmwood Cemetery, the white burial space. I-77 was routed through Pinewood, which split the cemetery into multiple parcels and relocation of graves.

“The construction of I-77 through Charlotte’s Black neighborhoods stands as one of the most harmful examples of environmental injustice in the city’s and state’s history — and rather than working to repair that injustice, this project would deepen it even further,” the advocates wrote.

Pollution is also a concern. With more lanes, a phenomenon called “induced demand” ensues in which more commuters drive the less congested road until congestion returns.

“So, while NCDOT’s I-77 South project may promise smoother travel in the first years after completion, the long-term result will almost certainly be more cars, more congestion, and higher costs — not lasting relief,” the coalition signers wrote. “Those who can afford the tolled express lanes will continue to move freely, while everyone else will be stuck in even heavier traffic on the ‘free’ lanes.

“Charlotte deserves better than another billion-dollar experiment that’s already failed here and in cities across the country.”



THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

Clarence Mann (from left), LeVelle Moton and Terrell Midgett joined forces in 2020 to form Raleigh Raised Development, a real estate development and construction management company.

Neighborhood kids develop, preserve community as adults

By Freda Freeman

THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

RALEIGH – Three childhood friends who grew up in Southeast Raleigh are pooling their business acumen, skills, experience, and money to preserve the history and legacy of their beloved communities.

Terrell Midgett, LeVelle Moton and Clarence Mann joined forces in 2020 to form Raleigh Raised Development, a real estate development and construction management company. Together they are building homes, renovating schools and supporting the community.

“We’re Raleigh raised, we grew up together, we have a passion for the city and what we do. When we got in the business, we saw the changing of the communities, and we wanted to make sure that we were able to provide housing and opportunities,” Midgett said.

Moton, North Carolina Central University’s head men’s basketball coach, lived at the Cottages of Idlewild while growing up. He recalled how neighbors watched out for him, even feeding him when he was hungry.

“It’s super important to come back to a community that’s been so good to me,” Moton said. “I will never forget who I was and where I came from. Now that I’ve made it out, I’ve got to send the elevator back down.”

Midgett, Moton and Mann believe home ownership is key to controlling your destiny, and they want to help more Black people own their homes.

“The way that we help our community is by creating spaces and ownership for our community, because if you own the community and you own the spaces and you own the uses that go on in the community, then nobody can tell you any different

what goes on in that community,” Mann said. “If you own that space, you determine what goes on in that community and you create something for your own people.”

Moton and Mann credit Midgett with being the impetus for Raleigh Raised. Midgett and Moton have been friends since they were 9 years old. Mann, who’s 10 years younger, knew them through the Raleigh Boys Club. Later, Midgett, who worked in construction, and Mann, whose family was in real estate and land acquisition, started doing business together and worked on various projects from 2010 and 2020.

“Raleigh was really changing during that decade, and he said let the three of us get together and form the perfect company to impact the community, because all the redevelopment and development happening in Raleigh, the faces that were benefitting from the changes were not the faces that we were used to,” Mann said.

Mann said no one should benefit from Raleigh’s redevelopment more than the city’s lifelong Black residents. “The folks who have legacy should have priority on receiving all these changes, not people from out of town. The people who should benefit are the people who suffered in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s who slaved and went through Jim Crow and all this racism and segregation here in the city. They should be included in the positive change happening here in the city, not just folks from a different demographic, not people who 20, 30 years ago wouldn’t even have come to our neighborhood,” he said.

Raleigh Raised’s planned developments include Cottages of Idlewild and Holt at Oberlin, which they broke ground on in August

and September, respectively. Working with Raleigh Housing Authority, the company is drafting a master plan to build a mixed-use development that will provide opportunities for over 1,000 families. They are also remodeling several schools, including Brentwood Elementary School and East Garner Middle School in Raleigh.

“The Cottages of Idlewild will be long-term affordable housing. We partnered with the Raleigh Land Trust to keep the housing at the current affordable rates for the next 99 years. The families that stayed in the area – such as the McDougalds, Motons, Jones, Pulleys, Blaylocks – will forever be a part of that community because all our projects are named after people in the community,” Midgett said.

Holt at Oberlin will bring eight market rate townhomes and one single-family home to Oberlin Road in late 2026. Oberlin was the largest Reconstruction-era Black settlement in Wake County. One way Raleigh Raised hopes to preserve the legacy of neighborhoods is by naming its redevelopment projects after Black families who have lived in those communities for decades. Holt at Oberlin is named after the Holt family who led the fight for the desegregation of Raleigh public schools.

“I was taught your blessing is when you give. So, the more you give, the more you get in return,” Mann said. “Especially coming from the community I come from, it’s important to give back to those communities, because, frankly, they’re in need. If we are blessed enough to be abundant enough to help folks, then we should do that. Your blessing comes from helping people.”

NC gets federal OK for \$300 million broadband expansion

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retary of Commerce and the NTIA Administrator encouraging flexibility for using reserves to implement high-speed internet and connectivity.

The state could use this funding to address online safety and cybersecurity, advance workforce development and artificial intelligence, and improve infrastructure resiliency. By removing house-

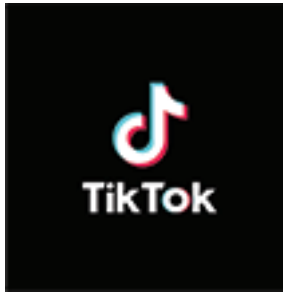
hold barriers to connectivity, the state could also improve access to services like telehealth.

“This federal approval is a critical step in launching more high-speed internet projects across primarily rural areas to change people’s lives,” North Carolina Department of Information Technology Secretary and State Chief Information Officer Teena Piccione said.

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Gun marketers locate a new target: Black Americans

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group acknowledged that its traditional customer was “pale, male and stale” and in recent years began targeting Black people and other communities of color who are disproportionately victimized by gun violence.

The Trump administration has moved to reduce federal oversight of gun businesses, heralding a new era announced by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives as “marked by transparency, accountability, and partnership with the firearms industry.”

The pain of gun violence crosses political, cultural, and geographic divides — but no group has suffered as much as Black people, such as Harris. They were nearly 14 times as likely to die by gun homicide than white people in 2021, researchers said, citing federal data. Black men and boys are 6% of the population but more than half of homicide victims.

Washington has offered little relief: Guns remain one of few consumer products the federal government does not regulate for health and safety.

“The politics of guns in the U.S. are so out of whack with proper priorities that should focus on health and safety and most fundamental rights to live,” said attorney Jon Lowy, founder of Global Action on Gun Violence, who helped represent Mexico in an unsuccessful lawsuit against Smith & Wesson and other gunmakers that reached the Supreme Court. “The U.S. allows and enables gun industry practices that would be totally unacceptable anywhere else in the world.”

KFF Health News undertook an examination of gun violence during the pandemic, a period when firearm deaths reached an all-time high. Reporters reviewed academic research, congressional reports, and hospital data and interviewed dozens of gun violence and public health experts, gun owners, and victims or their relatives.

The examination found that while public officials imposed restrictions intended to prevent covid’s spread, politicians and regulators helped fuel gun sales — and another public health crisis.

As state and local governments shut down schools, advised residents to stay home, and closed gyms, theaters, malls, and other businesses to stop covid’s spread, President Donald Trump kept gun stores open, deeming them essential businesses critical to the functioning of society.

White House spokesperson Kush Desai did not respond to interview requests or answer questions about the Trump administration’s efforts to reduce regulation of the firearm industry.

During the pandemic, the federal government gave firearm businesses and groups more than \$150 million in financial assistance through the Paycheck Protection Program, even as some businesses reported brisk sales, according to an analysis from Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy group.

Federal officials said the program would keep people employed, but millions of dollars went to firearm companies that did not say whether it would save any jobs, the report said.

About 1 in 5 American households bought a gun during the first two years of the pandemic, including millions of first-time buyers, according to survey data from NORC at the University of Chicago.

Harris is keenly aware of what drives the demand.

“Guns aren’t going away unless we get to the root of people’s fears,” he said.

Surveys show most Americans who own a gun feel it makes them safer. But public health data suggests that owning a gun doubles the risk of homicide and triples chances of

suicide in a home.

“There’s no evidence that guns provide an increase in protection,” said Kelly Drane, research director for the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. “We have been told a fundamental lie.”

Record deaths

Less than a year into the pandemic, 20-year-old Jacquez Anlage was shot dead in a Jacksonville, Florida, apartment. Five years later, the killing remains unsolved.

His mother, Crystal Anlage, said she fell to her knees and wailed in grief on her lawn when police delivered the news.

She said Jacquez overcame years in the foster care system — living in 36 homes — before she and her husband, Matt, adopted him at age 16.

Jacquez Anlage had just moved into his own apartment when he was shot. He loved animals and wanted to become a veterinary technician. He was kind and loving, Crystal Anlage said, with the 6-foot-4, 215-pound physique of the football and basketball player he’d been.

“He was just getting to a point in life where he felt safe,” Crystal Anlage said.

Gun violence researchers say parents like Crystal Anlage carry trauma that destroys their sense of security.

Anlage said she endures post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. She is terrified of guns and fireworks.

But she has made something meaningful of her son’s killing: She co-founded the Jacksonville Survivors Foundation, which works to raise awareness about the impact of homicide and to support grieving parents.

“Jacquez’s death can’t be in vain,” she said. “I want his legacy to be love.”

His legacy and that of other young men killed by guns is muted by firearm manufacturers’ powerful message of fear.

During the pandemic, gun marketers told Americans they needed firearms to defend themselves against criminals, protesters, unreliable cops, and racial and political unrest, according to a petition filed by gun control advocacy groups with the Federal Trade Commission.

In a since-deleted June 18, 2020, Instagram post from Lone Wolf Arms, an Idaho-based manufacturer, a protester is depicted being confronted by police officers in riot gear between the words “Defund Police? Defend Yourself,” the petition shows. The caption says, “10% to 25% off demo guns and complete pistols.”

Impact Arms, an online gun seller, posted a picture on Instagram on Aug. 3, 2020, showing a person putting a rifle in a backpack, the document says. “The world is pretty crazy right now,” the caption reads. “Not a bad idea to pack something more efficient than a handgun.”

The National Rifle Association in 2020 posted on YouTube a four-minute video of a Black woman holding a rifle and telling viewers they need a gun in the pandemic. “You might be stockpiling up on food right now to get through this current crisis,” she said, “but if you aren’t preparing to defend your property when everything goes wrong, you’re really just stockpiling for somebody else.”

The messaging worked. Background checks for firearm sales soared 60% from 2019 to 2020, the year the federal government declared a public health emergency.

The same year, more than 45,000 Americans died from firearm violence, the highest number up till then. In 2021, the record was broken again.

Weapons sold at the beginning of the pandemic were more likely to wind up at crime scenes within a year than in any previous period, according to a report by Democrats on Congress’ Joint Economic

Committee, citing ATF data.

Gun manufacturers “used disturbing sales tactics” following mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, “while failing to take even basic steps to monitor the violence and destruction their products have unleashed,” according to a separate memo released by congressional Democrats in July 2022 following a House Oversight and Reform Committee investigation of industry practices and profits.

The firearm industry has marketed “to white supremacist and extremist organizations for years, playing on fears of government repression against gun owners and fomenting racial tensions,” the House investigation said. “The increase in racially motivated violence has also led to rising rates of gun ownership among Black Americans, allowing the industry to profit from both white supremacists and their targets.”

In 2024, then-President Joe Biden’s Department of the Interior provided a \$215,000 grant to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a leading firearm industry trade group, to help companies market guns to Black Americans.

The Federal Trade Commission is responsible for protecting consumers from deceptive and unfair business practices and has the power to take enforcement action. It issued warnings to companies that made unsubstantiated claims their products could prevent or treat covid, for instance.

But when families of gun violence victims, lawmakers, and advocacy groups asked the FTC in 2022, during Biden’s term, to investigate how firearms were marketed to children, people of color, and groups that espouse white supremacy, officials did not announce any public action.

This summer, the National Shooting Sports Foundation pressed its case to the FTC and derided “a coordinated ‘lawfare’ campaign” that it said gun control groups have waged against “constitutionally-protected firearm advertising.”

FTC spokesperson Mitchell Katz declined to comment, saying in an email that the agency does not acknowledge or deny the existence of investigations.

Serena Viswanathan, who retired as an FTC associate director in June, told KFF Health News that the agency lost at least a quarter of the staff in its advertising practices division after Trump came into office in January.

Gun companies Smith & Wesson, Lone Wolf Arms, and Impact Arms did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did the National Shooting Sports Foundation or the NRA.

In an August 2022 social media post, Smith & Wesson President and CEO Mark Smith said gun manufacturers were being wrongly blamed by some politicians for the pandemic surge in violence, saying cities experiencing violent crime had “promoted irresponsible, soft-on-crime policies that often treat criminals as victims and victims as criminals.”

He added, “Some now seek to prohibit firearm manufacturers and supporters of the 2nd Amendment from advertising products in a manner designed to remind law-abiding citizens that they have a Constitutional right to bear arms in defense of themselves and their families.”

Guns and race

In 2015, the National Shooting Sports Foundation gathered supporters at a conference in Savannah, Georgia, and urged the firearm industry to diversify its customer base, according to a YouTube video and reports from Everytown for Gun Safety and the Violence Policy Center. Competitive shooter



MEREDITH RIZZO | KFF HEALTH NEWS

Leon Harris credits his wife, Tierra, with helping him find happiness and build a life after injuries from a shooting took away his ability to walk.

Chris Cheng gave a presentation called “Diversity: The Next Big Opportunity.” Screenshots from the conference include slides purporting to show “demographics,” “psychographics,” and “technographics” of Black and Hispanic shooters.

The slides described Black shooters as “expressive and confident socially, in a crowd” and “less likely to be married and to be a college grad.” They said Hispanic shooters were “much more trusting of advertising and celebrities.”

Nick Suplina, senior vice president for law and policy at Everytown for Gun Safety, said industry marketing shifted in the latter half of the 20th century as the popularity of hunting declined. The new sales pitch: guns for personal safety.

“They said, ‘We need to break into new markets,’” Suplina said. “They identified women and people of color. They didn’t have a lot of success until the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the death of George Floyd. The marketing says, ‘You deserve the Second Amendment too.’ They are selling the product as an antidote to fear and anxiety.”

Gun manufacturers were harshly criticized in the Oversight Committee’s 2022 investigation for marketing products to people of color, as gun violence remains a leading cause of death for young Black and Latino men.

At the same time, some companies also promoted assault rifles to white supremacist groups who believe a race war is imminent, the investigation found. One company sold an AK-47-style rifle called the “Big Igloo Aloha,” a reference to an anti-government movement, it said.

Still, Philip Smith wants more Black people to get guns for protection.

Smith said he was working as a human resources consultant a decade ago when he got the idea to form the National African

American Gun Association, which helped the National Shooting Sports Foundation compile its report on communicating with Black consumers.

Smith encourages Black people to buy firearms for self-defense and get proper training on how to use them.

After 10 years, Smith said, his group has about 45,000 members nationwide. Single members pay \$39 a year and couples \$59, which gives them access to discounts from the organization’s corporate partners, including gunmakers, and raffles for gun giveaways, according to its website.

The police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the shooting death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin helped spark early interest from doctors, lawyers, and others in joining the group, he said. But interest took off during the pandemic, he said, even among Democrats who had resisted the idea of owning a gun.

“Hundreds of people called me and said, ‘I don’t agree with anything you’re saying, but what kind of gun should I buy,’” Smith recalled.

Smith, describing himself as “quiet, nerdy, and Afrocentric,” said criticism of guns misses the point.

“My ancestors bled for us to have this right,” he said. “Are there some racist white people? Yes. But we should buy guns because there is a need. No one is forcing us to buy guns.”

‘American Amnesia’
During the pandemic, gun violence took its greatest toll on racially segregated neighborhoods in places such as Philadelphia, where roughly 1 in 4 residents live in poverty.

A city report says a one-year period in the pandemic saw more than 2,300 shootings, or about six a day. Many of the cases haven’t been solved by police.

City officials cited the boom in gun sales in the report: Fewer than 400,000 sales took place in Penn-

sylvania in 2000, but in 2020 it was more than 1 million.

Gun sales have dropped since the pandemic ended, but the harm they’ve caused persists.

At a conference last year inside the Eagles’ football stadium, victims of firearm violence or their relatives joined activists to share accounts of near-death experiences and the grief of losing loved ones.

Paintings flanked the stage and the meeting space to commemorate people who had been fatally shot, nearly all young people of color, under messages such as “You are loved and missed forever” and “Those we love never leave.”

Marion Wilson, a community activist, said he believes the nation has forgotten the suffering Philadelphia and other cities endured during the pandemic.

“We suffer from the disease of American amnesia,” he said.

Harris was on his way home from a job at Burlington Coat Factory nearly two decades ago when robbers followed him from a bus stop and demanded money. He said he had none and was shot.

Harris had spent his early life fixing cars with his grandfather, when he wasn’t at school or attending church. He remembers lying in a hospital bed, overcome with a sense of helplessness.

“I had to learn to feed myself again,” he said. “I was like a baby. I had to learn to sit up so I could use a wheelchair. The only way I got through it was my faith in God.”

Harris endured years of rehabilitation and counseling for PTSD. As someone in a wheelchair, he said, he sometimes fears for his safety — and a gun may be one of the few ways to protect himself and his family.

“I’m mulling it over,” Harris said. “I’m afraid of my trauma hurting someone else. That’s the only reason I haven’t gotten one yet.”

Council member represents overlooked

Continued from page 1A
have been able to call this side of town home for years and decades.

“I’m not saying that we’re not welcoming to the new folks that are moving here each and every day, but ... I feel like Charlotte is at a crossroads. We are growing for others that do not live here, and we are really forgetting about the people that have lived here for generations and call this area home.”

Mazuera Arias, 27, is the first Generation Z council member and first person of Latino descent elected to the panel. He immigrated to the United States as an infant and plans to use his family’s experience to inform and protect others amid federal crackdowns.

“Immigrants are not solely Latino,” he said. “They are Latino, they’re Ethiopian, they’re Middle Eastern, they’re Nigerian, they’re Eastern European. I understand that from a personal level. And now I also understand it as someone who has gone through all the legal pathways to become a citizen, the endangerment that other citizens are now facing because this administration has no bounds, has no limits.”

“They are now wanting to increase efforts to denaturalize folks. We saw it during the CBP Charlotte’s Web operation that they were detaining legally ... permanent residents, as well as U.S. citizens.

So, this attack ... is not only an attack on immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, but an attack on every American regardless of legal status.”

Mazuera Arias, who worked for U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Public Policy Fellow, is founder of the North Carolina Latino Political Caucus and chair of the Hispanic Democratic Caucus of Mecklenburg County.

“I lived in Washington, D.C.,” Mazuera Arias said. “I saw what worked and didn’t work at the national level. I lived in New York City. I saw what worked and didn’t work in the (nation’s) largest city, right? The world’s most diverse city. And I took those lessons learned and those best practices back to Charlotte.”

“What we’re dealing with now is an emboldened, a loud machine that is trying to distract us by throwing everything at the wall and be like, ‘we’re going to arrest immigrants here. We’re going to take transgender rights here. We’re going to gerrymander here so Black voters don’t vote.”

“They’re throwing everything so they divide us. So, now our organizing and looking forward should be focused on how do we build coalitions, interracial coalitions, interethnic coalitions, intersexuality coalitions, interreligious coalitions, because now they’re attacking all of us.”

The Charlotte Post

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Anti-immigrant party makes return

In the mid-19th century, an influential political party, the Know Nothings, carried on about the dangers of immigration—not from African slaves but from Europe.

The Know Nothings faded out with the Civil War, but they have made a comeback—today’s Republican Party. When Donald Trump decided to run for president in 2015, he was advised that immigration should be his key issue. He took the advice, evidenced in his first campaign speech, in which he said: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. ...They’re sending people that have

lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. Some.”

A decade later, he’s still at it, in baseless and vile rhetoric and most importantly in policy. His speech to the nation Dec. 17 included a replica of his 2015 speech:

“Our border was open [under Joe Biden]. And because of this, our country was being invaded by an army of 25 million people, many who came from prisons and jails, mental institutions and insane asylums. They were drug dealers, gang members and even 11,888 murderers, more than 50 percent of whom killed more than one person. This is what the Biden administration allowed to happen to our country, and it can never be allowed to happen again ... foreign nations ... took advantage of us at levels never seen before.”

Targeting immigrants

Trump has called migrants “animals,” denounced “shithole” countries from which immigrants come, equated migration with an “invasion,” and targeted them in “the war within.”

J.D. Vance has embraced the same rhetoric, underscoring the threat to America’s way of life posed by immigration, “low-wage serfs” in particular: “You cannot swap 10 million people from anywhere else in the world and expect for America to remain unchanged,” he said in a July speech.

Never have current U.S. leaders offered a positive word about immigrants, choosing to ignore people who contribute to the economy and society in crucial ways, from harvesting crops to advanced science and from Social Security to tax payments. Instead, his Department of Homeland Security boasts that it has deported over 605,000 people as of this month, the great majority of whom are law-abiding people who have over many years lived, worked, and raised their children here.

Here is a brief history of the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant campaign, which began with the Laken Riley Act. It mandated the detention of undocumented immigrants charged with burglary, theft, or other crimes. An executive order in January paved the way for “expedited” mass deportations. Another executive order the same month, now before the Supreme Court, seeks to end birth-right citizenship for children of undocumented parents.

An expansion of that order last month would deny U.S. citizenship to immigrants who have violated the law even if they hold U.S. citizenship. Other acts include a declaration of national emergency that militarized the southern border; the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” in July, which provided \$170 billion for immigration enforcement; travel bans and restrictions covering 39 countries, mostly in Africa and the Middle East; termination of special status for refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela; a policy shift that effectively blocks appeals for asylum; new rules aimed at preventing undocumented immigrants from receiving Social Security Act benefits and increasing identity theft prosecutions in immigrant communities; and vetting by the U.S. Customs Service to include “anti-American” or “antisemitic” activity as negative factors in immigration benefit requests.

Unity in diversity

Vivek Ramaswamy, the Republican candidate for governor in Ohio, said last week that bigotry in his party is redefining what it means to be an American—and is fueling hostility toward immigrants. Responding to those who say that one’s heritage defines an American, Ramaswamy said “our lineage is not our strength. Our true strength is what unites us across that diversity and through that lineage.”

His party’s leaders have other ideas. They meet with neo-Nazis and white supremacists, and they speak the language of Christian nationalism. They have made racism and bigotry defining features of the American political landscape—overt, out front, no longer on the fringe, embedded in public policy and foreign policy.

The good news here is that communities across the country, with support from blue-state governors and local officials, have supported their immigrant neighbors and done their best to restrain ICE and Border Patrol goons from seizing people off the streets, in court houses, and at airports.

In short, the immigration issue is a battle for the soul of America. Lose it, and we lose democracy, the rule of law, and our humanity.

Mel Gurtov, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is professor emeritus of political science at Portland State University.

Lessons learned from Jim Hunt

In the spring of 1992, state Treasurer Harlan Boyles received a phone call from Jim Hunt, who was running for an unprecedented third term as governor.



TOM CAMPBELL

Hunt asked the treasurer to accompany him to New York, saying he had been out of office for eight years and wanted to get acquainted or reacquainted with Wall Street’s financial leaders.

On the plane ride up to New York, I asked Harlan what he thought Hunt wanted to talk to the “money men” about. Boyles speculated that Hunt would remind them he had a record of sound financial management as governor and would do the same when elected in ’92.

Imagine our great surprise on our first appointment when Hunt quickly began talking about children in North Carolina who were not prepared for either kindergarten or first grade. He cited statistics and laid out the need to act on it.

Throughout the day Hunt made virtually the same speech to every head of big financial houses with whom we met. The Treasurer and I were flabbergasted, and on the way home speculated why Hunt talked to the financial “Who’s Who” about these

problems instead of about financial needs or plans.

Shortly after the inauguration we found out, when Gov. Hunt announced, “Smart Start,” the plan to jump start early public education in North Carolina.

Many have paid tribute to Jim Hunt since his death, and all the superlatives are well deserved for a man who changed our state like no other. But after returning to Wilson from Nepal, we lived in the same neighborhood and got to know Jim and Carolyn. I want to share lessons learned from Hunt.

Most people don’t know it, but Jim was a pretty good square dance “caller.” He wasn’t just politics.

It was commonly known in Wilson that Jim Hunt was going to be a future governor. Civic clubs and organizations invited him to speak to their events, giving him the opportunity to hone his speaking skills while also developing in leadership.

Jim Hunt became a consummate politician. As Democratic chair of the 8th precinct in Wilson County he learned how to win in grassroots politics. He and Carolyn went to the county elections board and wrote individual index cards with the name, address and phone number of every Democrat in the precinct.

Hunt gathered a group and assigned each of us about 20 names, with instructions to get those voters to the polls. At 3

p.m. election day he checked to see who had not voted and contacted each of us to call and offer that voter a ride to the polls. We had the highest percentage of voter turnout in the county.

He worked and became statewide president of the Young Democrats of North Carolina and in 1972 he was elected lieutenant governor and used the time to learn how the legislature worked and laws got passed.

In his 1976 gubernatorial campaign Hunt named 100 “keys,” a person in each county who was to raise money, organize the county and get out the vote. They later helped in Hunt’s appointment making and communicating.

There’s no telling how many in our state encountered the “Hunt handshake,” where he grasped your right hand and, with his left hand on your arm, would greet you as “my good friend.” When he looked you in the eye, you knew he was focused just on you.

Jim didn’t just want to be governor; he had a vision for our state and a plan for us to achieve it. The Centennial Campus, Institute of Emerging Issues, Micro-electronic Center of NC, the gubernatorial veto and gubernatorial succession were a few of his achievements.

Hunt was the hardest working governor our state has ever known. If you were on Hunt’s radar, you

weren’t surprised when the phone rang at 6 a.m. or 11 p.m. with Hunt on the phone. He was very convincing in urging action and Jim Hunt could work the legislature like no other governor, playing hardball if necessary to get a vote.

He was expert at managing crises. When something went wrong Governor Hunt had a three-step approach to emergency management. He would quickly call the Capitol Press Corp together. Step one was to acknowledge the problem. Step two was to clearly admit the impact the issue was going to have, not attempting to minimize the damage. Step three quickly followed with the classic ... “now, let me tell you what I’m going to do about it.” Assured that the problem was acknowledged and being acted upon, most quickly went away.

The lessons I learned from Hunt were simple but not easy. Have a vision for what you want to achieve and a plan to achieve it. Articulate your vision clearly. Organize others to embrace and help in achieving the goals. Work hard. Stay focused and work even harder. Celebrate victories but take responsibility for failures. Repeat.

Tom Campbell is a Hall of Fame North Carolina broadcaster and columnist who has covered North Carolina public policy issues since 1965.

Better days are ahead, if we work at it

This week’s column was supposed to be a celebration.



BEN JEALOUS

A celebration of a wonderful little toy store in a joyful Midwestern town.

A store that, heartbreakingly, is scheduled to close the week after Christmas. But circumstances intervened.

Yellow Springs, Ohio, is the kind of place that makes you smile the moment you step onto its main street. The kind of Main Street Generation X – and every generation before us – assumed would always exist. The kind that, to my children’s generation, now feels less like a living place and more like a memory: something America once built everywhere, and now struggles to protect anywhere.

For decades, Yellow Springs resisted the fate that hollowed out so many towns like it. Its downtown endured in large part because of Antioch College, the pathbreaking liberal arts school founded by 19th-century education reformer Horace Mann. Mann believed deeply in education. He did not believe in endowments. The result is a college that still stands for bold ideas, even as it has struggled financially in recent years.

The town itself has fared better. Not by accident. In no small part because Dave Chappelle invested in it – not just money, but belief. Belief that culture matters. That joy matters. That small towns are worth loving. Even as he mourns the

loss of a beloved local store, he continues to pour his presence, his resources, and his faith into keeping the town alive.

Recently, I was back in town to see Dave perform at his new club. My parents helped recruit his father to teach at Antioch in the late 1960s. So, this place has always felt personal. Rooted. Shared.

We were talking in a local coffee shop when Jamie Sharp walked in. She owns the Yellow Springs Toy Company – the store that has probably generated more smiles than any other place on the block. The kind of store that feels like childhood made visible. Wooden toys. Books. Games. Objects chosen with care. A place that invites wonder instead of noise.

Jamie told us she was closing the store. I asked why. I thought of the last time I took my son there. He loved it. Everyone did. You could feel it in the room. The quiet joy that comes from a place built not to extract, but to give.

Jamie did not speak in abstractions. She spoke plainly. Tariffs had raised costs. Online giants had tightened margins. And then she said the thing that mattered most. People just do not seem to have as much money this year.

But what stayed with me was what she did not say. This was not surrender. This was not bitterness. Dave told her to stay in touch. And it was clear she is an entrepreneur who loves her town – someone closing one chapter, not abandoning the story. Home still matters. And this is almost certainly not

her last act.

That understanding traveled with me.

After I returned home, I spoke with a friend who owns a paddleboard factory in Florida. Orders still come in for his most expensive models – the ones bought by people with yachts. But the middle is gone. The heart of his business has vanished. He named the paddleboard and kayak companies that have failed as middle-class families quietly pull back from anything that feels optional.

The NAACP and the National Urban League have warned that Black unemployment has surged this year, now topping 8%. That matters. It always does. But it does not, by itself, explain what is happening on Main Streets – or at a factory in Florida.

Something broader is moving beneath the surface.

For generations, Black Americans have said that when white America gets a cold, we get pneumonia. What is striking now is how widely the symptoms are spreading. Economic fragility has moved beyond the places segregation and redlining engineered it into. It is showing up on Main Streets. In small businesses. In kitchen-table conversations across this country.

Look closely at the numbers and you see what economists call nuanced joblessness. The unemployment rate looks manageable. But beneath it are families working fewer hours than they need. Earning less than they used to. Falling behind as costs rise. Quietly losing ground.

Taken together, it is hard not to feel we are standing near the edge of a recession. Families feel it first. Small businesses feel it next. Wall Street always feels it last.

This was not the story I planned to tell when I set out to write this column. It was supposed to be an interview with Ms. Sharp. A celebration of a store and all the smiles it created over the years. But when I reached out, she told me she could not do the interview. Not mine. Not anyone’s. Ending this chapter was painful. The messages she sent were gracious. And heavy.

As I read them, and reflected on my conversations with her – and my friend who owns the factory – I felt something else settle in. We may be entering a season of deeper economic pain. For families. For workers. For shop owners. For towns like these. For all of us.

Still, what endures is what people choose to build. Thank you, Jamie Sharp.

Thank you to your store – for all the smiles, the joy, and the childhoods it helped shape. And thank you to those who choose to stay. To invest. To keep faith. People like Dave Chappelle, Jamie Sharp, and so many others who believe that small towns – and the people who love them – are worth fighting for.

There are always better days ahead for the America we build with love.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former national president of the NAACP.

NC near bottom in teacher pay, per-student funding

By Ahmed Jallow

NC NEWSLINE

North Carolina ranks near the bottom nationally for teacher pay growth and per-student public school funding, according to a new report by the libertarian think tank Reason Foundation.

The findings about North Carolina are similar to the results of studies by other organizations, including the National Education Association. They are notable, however, because they come from a right-leaning group.

The report found the state ranked 48th in both teacher salary growth and per-pupil funding from

2002 to 2023. While overall education spending increased during that period, inflation and rising benefit costs significantly eroded teachers’ purchasing power, according to the analysis.

Nationwide, per-student funding grew from \$14,969 to \$20,322 during that period. New York topped all states at \$36,976 followed by New Jersey at \$30,267. In all, eight states exceeded \$25,000 per student in 2023.

Compare that to North Carolina where per-pupil spending in 2023 was just \$13,661, ranking 47th in the nation. Idaho, which

ranked last, was the only state spending less than \$12,000 per student.

North Carolina’s per-student funding grew just 8.5% between 2002 and 2023, ranking 48th in the nation. But it rose slightly in recent years largely because of federal pandemic relief dollars. From 2020 to 2023, per-pupil spending increased 8.7%, slightly above the national average. But those gains may not continue now that federal relief funds have expired.

“With federal pandemic relief funding now expired, combined with rising economic uncertainty, declining public school enrollment, and increased

competition from school choice and homeschooling, the era of unrelenting public school funding growth may be coming to an end,” the report says.

Since 2002, student enrollment in North Carolina increased 17.2%, the ninth-highest growth rate in the country.

Over the same period, the number of non-teaching staff — including administrators, counselors, and social workers — grew 18.2%, outpacing growth in the teaching workforce.

Nationally, the report found non-teaching staff increased more than three times faster than teacher hiring.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2026



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers cornerback Mike Jackson (2) tackles Seattle running back Kenneth Walker III during the Seahawks' 27-10 win Dec. 28 at Bank of America Stadium. The loss dropped Carolina to 8-8, a game ahead of Tampa Bay for the NFC South lead. The Panthers and Buccaneers play Saturday in Tampa, Florida, for the division title.

One last chance at redemption

Up and down Carolina can clinch first NFC South title in a decade with a win Saturday at Tampa Bay

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Mike Jackson enjoyed his redemption moment.

When Seattle Seahawks quarterback Sam Darnold lofted a pass intended for Jaxon Smith-Njigba in the far corner of the end zone, Jackson tracked it down for an over-the-shoulder interception. Sprinting down the sideline at Bank of America Stadium, Jackson, who was traded by the Seahawks at the end of the 2024 training camp, searched for former teammates.

The ones who arrived at the locker room well after he started his morning work. The ones who might have overlooked him.

Jackson wanted them to notice how he helped keep Sunday's game tied at 3-all 2:48 into the second half. The one-time Seahawks cast-off kept the Panthers (8-8) competitive for an elusive NFC South title - at least until the final stages of the third quarter.

"A lot of them people used to laugh at me," Jackson said. "They tried the slow ball. I felt it coming. I just went and got it. Running all the way down the sidelines, it was kind of like, 'Look at me now,' like, 'You feel me?' I used to come in the building at 5:30 in the morning and it was just kind of like, 'Now you got to look at me.'"

The Seahawks didn't blink. The NFC leaders scored off two third-

quarter turnovers and ended up with the last laugh, pulling away to a 27-10 victory.

Panthers in a must-win situation

With the Tampa Bay Buccaneers losing for the seventh time in eight outings Sunday, the Panthers (8-8) could have clinched their first division title since 2015, but Jackson and the defense couldn't completely compensate for Carolina's inconsistent and over-matched offense.

Utilizing a mix of man-to-man coverages with an effective pass rush, Panthers quarterback Bryce Young threw for a career-low 54 yards. The Panthers limited Darnold, an MVP candidate, to 147 passing yards, marking the second

straight outing in which they held a former Panthers quarterback to fewer than 150 yards.

"We know who we are on defense," said Jackson, who played all 66 snaps and posted a career-high 11 tackles. "We played good, but we still let some plays get away from us, so it's like, we just got to be consistent. That's a play-off team and that's kind of how playoff games go, so we've got to be ready to go toe-to-toe for four quarters."

Sunday's loss in the franchise's 500th regular-season contest, established a winner-take-all NFC South showdown Saturday at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa.

Please see **CAROLINA** | 6A

Panthers rookie class rises to the challenge in playoff chase

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Lathan Ransom responded to his mistakes.

In the waning seconds of the Carolina Panthers' 23-20 win Dec. 21 against Tampa Bay, Buccaneers quarterback Baker Mayfield fired a pass in the direction of receiver Mike Evans. Except the six-time NFL Pro Bowler wasn't where Mayfield expected.

Evans, who earlier scored his sixth

touchdown in his last eight games against Carolina, peeled off on an inside slant route. Mayfield, meanwhile, threw to the outside, where Ransom dove to secure the game-clinching interception with 49 seconds remaining.

Instinctively, Ransom rose to return the interception, but a fellow rookie stepped in to bestow a bit of veteran leadership. Realizing that protecting the ball was paramount, outside linebacker Nic Scourton instructed Ransom

to simply fall to the turf so the offense could end the game with a kneel-down.

"Everybody's telling me to get down," Ransom said with a laugh afterward. "I was just excited and I got down."

Ransom's first career interception helped push the Panthers into first place in the NFC South.

"I was trying to find a lane to step through and make the throw to (Evans)," Mayfield said. "He thought I was going to scramble ... can't blame

him. Just honestly, it's just a sucky situation."

Ransom: 'I faced a lot of adversity'

Following Sunday's win, Ransom ran excitedly off the field, celebrating with anyone he contacted. It was a stark contrast to the previous week against New Orleans.

In that outing, Saints quarterback Tyler Shough engineered a final-minute drive. With the score tied at 17-all,

Please see **YOUNGEST** | 6A

Next man up mentality fuel competitive Hornets

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

The Charlotte Hornets can't win for losing when it comes to injuries.

Kon Knueppel went down with a leg injury after rolling his ankle against Orlando on Dec. 26 just when the Hornets started finding a solid rhythm. To domino, in the first quarter against Milwaukee on Monday, forward Miles Bridges went down with an ankle injury, forcing to him miss most of a 123-113 loss.

"All we got real fast was just we'll evaluate him tomorrow at practice," coach Charles Lee said. "It's his right ankle."

Said Lee: "There were no excuses from the group because of who wasn't able to play. Everyone made the most of their opportunity. ... The game was within reach. We did a lot of really good things to put ourselves in position to win that game. We just have to be a little bit sharper, a little bit tighter communication and be on the same page."

Brandon Miller and LaMelo Ball scored 31 and 26 points respectively. Charlotte also got a big lift from guard Collin Sexton with 16 points and a team best plus-plus-12 when he

Please see **SHORT-HANDED** | 8A



CHARLOTTE HORNETS

Charlotte Hornets forward Brandon Miller goes up for a dunk against Milwaukee's Kyle Kuzma in the Bucks' 123-113 win Dec. 29 at Spectrum Center. Miller scored 31 points lead Charlotte.

Reports: Charlotte FC to sign midfielder Luca de la Torre

By Steve Goldberg

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte FC is poised to sign U.S. Men's National Team midfielder Luca de la Torre on a permanent transfer, according to the Athletic.

De la Torre played last season on loan from the Spanish side La Liga side Celta de Vigo in his hometown for San Diego FC during their inaugural season. That loan officially ends on Dec. 31.

In exchange for the rights to negotiate with de la Torre, San Diego FC will receive \$50,000 in general allocation money from Charlotte. No specifics were given about terms of a deal between Charlotte and Celta de Vigo. The transfer window opens on Jan. 1.

If the deal goes through, it will give the

Crown another technically gifted midfielder who is more architect than finisher with a reputation as a hard worker. Primarily a central midfielder, de la Torre is known for his passing and link-up play and should work well with Wilfried Zaha and Pep Biel in orchestrating the Charlotte attack.

Across 34 appearances with 24 starts in MLS regular season and playoff matches for SDFC, de la Torre scored five goals and added one assist. He has 32 caps and one goal for the U.S. National Team, where he started all six matches in front of Charlotte centerback Tim Ream in the 2025 Concacaf Gold Cup. He was with Ream on the 2022 U.S. World Cup team but did not appear in any matches.

De La Torre is a self-described team player.

In an article for The Player's Tribune last May, he wrote: "I've always been a pretty relaxed person. I'll 'go with the flow' and not complain. In some ways that's good as a professional athlete, because it helps you show up every day and work hard no matter how you feel. Respect authority. Do what you have to do. Those are pretty basic things that set you up for success in football. It's a lot like how I imagine the military would be. You get told where to be, what time to be there, when to eat, what to eat, how to train, how to rest. It's difficult for some people to live like that, but I've always enjoyed the routine of it."

Born and raised in San Diego to a Spanish father and American mother, de la Torre, 27,

Please see **CHARLOTTE FC** | 6A

Allen's win a first for HBCU football

I intentionally held my "Best of 2025" column back a week to await the Harlon Hill Trophy announcement.

Whatever the outcome, it was going to be my top sports moment. Thankfully, instead of a rant, I can write, "History has been made!"

Curtis Allen waited his turn behind Virginia Union star running back Jada Byers and, while so many Panthers defected to other teams, Allen stayed the course, set the 2025 season ablaze and was rewarded with the Harlon Hill Trophy. The trophy is Division II's version of the Heisman. Oh yeah, no HBCU player had EVER won. Only two had finished among the top four finalists: Byers in fourth in 2022 and North Carolina Central quarterback Earl Harvey at third in 1988.

Allen led the entire NCAA - not just DII - in rushing yards, rushing touchdowns, rushing yards per game, scoring and total touchdowns. He ran for over 100 yards in every game. What a statement for a conference that used to be a football laughingstock.

SWAC who?

The MEAC regained su-

Please see **ALLEN'S** | 6A



BONITTA

BEST



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Carolina Panthers safety Lathan Ransom runs off the field after their 23-20 win against Tampa Bay on Dec. 21, 2025. Ransom, a rookie, clinched the win with his first NFL interception with 49 seconds remaining.

Youngest Panthers chip in during playoff drive

Continued from page 5A

Shough escaped the pocket and attempted to slide following a 4-yard run. Ransom aggressively attempted a diving tackle and made helmet-to-helmet contact and was penalized for unnecessary roughness. What would have been a 62-yard field-goal attempt turned into a 47-yard game-winner by Charlie Smyth.

Ransom heard criticism.

"I faced a lot of adversity, the noise from everybody last week," Ransom told reporters. "Probably some of y'all too, you feel me?"

"I understand that the game is not won or lost by one play, but people behind their phones are going to have their own opinions. I just heard all the noise, listened to it and used it as fuel for this game. I mean, that's football."

The Panthers could clinch their first division championship since 2015 with a win Saturday at Tampa Bay.

Panthers safety Nick Scott, who endured his share of on-field mistakes over the past seven seasons, understands all young players must learn to ignore "all the noise."

"I'm just really happy for him personally, that he can have that feeling of what it's like to close a game," Scott said. "For DBs, there's no better feeling than getting a pick and ending it. It's a blessing to have a young guy that learns as well as he does, plays as hard as he does, and just really happy for him. I mean, the guy plays the game the right way, and he's really learning how to be a pro fast."

The fourth-round draft pick is in good company.

Youth movement in high gear

The Panthers, who are in contention for their first trip to the playoffs since 2017, fielded 10 rookies against Tampa

Bay.

Along with Ransom's late heroics, first-year kicker Ryan Fitzgerald connected on three field goals, including the game-winner on a 48-yarder with 2:26 remaining; wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan collected a game-high six receptions for 73 yards and a touchdown; Scourton compiled four tackles and tight end Mitchell Evans hauled in three passes.

Fitzgerald posted his fourth game-winning kick, McMillan remains a top candidate for Rookie of the Year and Scourton ranks second on the team with 3.5 sacks.

"We have a group of guys that don't need to be motivated," quarterback Bryce Young said. "That rookie wall people talk about, you don't see that from our guys. It doesn't show up in practice. It doesn't show up in games. The guys are motivated (and they) won us the game there."

Scourton, who worked his way into a starting role after Patrick Jones II injured his back in Week 6, credited the Panthers' development culture for preparing the rookies for inevitable ups and downs of an NFL campaign.

"It's just a testament to the coaches putting us in the best positions and then it's a testament to the guys, whenever we get called," Scourton said. "You have to step up, man, and that's what (the) guys did."

Carolina coach Dave Canales appreciated the rookies' prompt response.

"Couldn't be at a better time and it's why we play these guys," he said. "It's why we believe in them and live through the bumps along the road with having young players out there. We had an aggressive style of play (against Tampa Bay) so I'm really proud of those young guys coming through."

Carolina has final chance at wrapping NFC South title

Continued from page 5A

"We definitely feel the missed opportunity, but at the same time, we know it's in front of us," Panthers coach Dave Canales said. "It's clearly defined ... facing the Bucs one more time on the last game of the season."

The Panthers took care of business by edging the Buccaneers 23-20 Dec. 21 to take control of the division. With several tiebreakers in play, Carolina's most direct route to qualifying for their first playoff since 2017 remains replicating their Week 16 effort against quarterback Baker Mayfield, who earned wins during his first five outings against his former team. On Dec. 21, however, the Panthers' defense limited Mayfield to 145 passing yards.

'That's life in the big leagues'

Jackson should expect to remain busy against Tampa Bay. Despite their recent skid, Mayfield still leads a talented collection of offensive assets. Receiver Mike Evans is healthy and flanked by Emeka Egbuka, Sterling Shepard and Chad Godwin Jr.

Tight end Chris Odun and running backs Rachaad White and Bucky Irving provide Mayfield with a balance of options.

Jackson and Jaycee Horn formed a reliable cornerback duo the past two seasons. Jackson added two passes defended Sunday, increasing his NFL-high total to 19.

The Panthers likely will continue focusing on limiting explosive plays like they did against the Seahawks, one of the league's top big-play offenses.

Entering Week 17, Darnold topped all quarterbacks by averaging 20.3 yards per attempt and posted eight touchdown passes of at least 20 yards, third most in the league. The Panthers allowed just one touchdown reception of at least 16 yards Sunday.

"I just got to talk about our defense and the amazing game they played to give us opportunities offensively," Canales said. "We didn't do anything with those."

Will Young have more time in the pocket than he did against Seattle, which posted two sacks, four hurries and 10 pressures? The Panthers' offense produced just 139 total yards against the league's fifth-ranked defense (292.6 yards per game).

"The Seahawks certainly got some wins," Canales said. "They had some nice stunts where they came free, some one-on-one wins."

"(Young) was going through his progressions. There were times he had to move and get out of the pocket. That's life in the big leagues. That's the NFL."

Saturday's winner will likely face the NFC West runner-up, either the Seahawks, Los Angeles Rams, or San Francisco 49ers. Carolina beat the Rams but lost to the 49ers and Seahawks.

Short-handed Hornets put focus on moving forward

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was on the floor. Sexton emphasized the team aspect despite being short-handed.

"I would say [we] just have a next man up mentality," Sexton said. "Going out there and competing for our brothers. We came into the locker room at halftime and Miles wasn't able to go back out, we knew someone had to step up. I feel like Tidjan [Salaün] answered the call. He was one of those guys that was all over the boards and doing the little things that don't always show up on the stat sheet. But he had that next man up mentality, and he went out there and was very helpful."

Salaün finished with a team-high 11 rebounds and drew the assignment of guarding Giannis Antetokounmpo with Bridges out.

Sexton added the team is staying together and not getting distraught by injuries. The Hornets are still without Ryan Kalkbrenner and Mason Plumlee due to injuries sustained earlier in December. Sexton missed extended time already due to injury.

"I would say staying together is the most important thing," he said. "We have to stay together through ups and through the downs, through the wins and through the losses. We have to continue to stay together and continue to lead with one another, so that when one person falls, we're right there to pick our brother up. And I think it's a team. If we're going to throw a

punch, you want to throw a punch together, and that's how it is."

Lee said he was happy with Ball's leadership and how he has improved throughout the season dealing with injuries personally and the team as a whole.

"I think that Melo has done a great job of adjusting to whatever the circumstances need of him," Lee said. "He's brought real leadership to our group in terms of how he approaches every day, but also his competitiveness on both ends of the floor. And I think that no matter who's been out there, he's definitely improved defensively and then offensively. A lot of our ball movement is because of him. I think that it really becomes contagious when you see one of your best players willing to get a piece of the paint."

The Hornets finished the calendar year on Dec. 31 against the Golden State Warriors. The status of Kneuppel and Bridges remain under evaluation.

"I think Kon, he is attacking his rehab plan like I would expect Kon to attack his rehab plan," Lee said. "I think that every day he sees a little bit of improvement. I think that the goal from our coaching staff and from our performance staff is just to take the approach like we would with anybody that's hurt - just a daily evaluation of where he is and where his symptoms are. I would say today, I think that he made good progress, and we'll kind of see how he shows up tomorrow."

Allen's win a first for HBCUs

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premacy over the SWAC by sweeping the MEAC/SWAC Challenge and the Cricket Celebration Bowl for the first time since 2021 when North Carolina Central won the Challenge and South Carolina State the CB.

In fact, if my math is correct, the MEAC went 5-0 against the SWAC in football. S-h-h-h-h-h, it's very quiet in Birmingham, Alabama, at the SWAC headquarters.

Declared no more

Johnson C. Smith's football turnaround under Maurice Flowers in four seasons has been nothing short of miraculous.

Folks thought Flowers was insane leaving a good Fort Valley State program to coach a team that hadn't won a CIAA championship since 1969, even if it was his alma mater. Just goes to show.

End of an era

St. Augustine's permanent removal from CIAA membership is still hard to fathom.

A track and field stadium named after a legend that will never produce another. A basketball gymnasium that won't house another rivalry game with Shaw or hang another championship banner.

Why alumni aren't still fuming at the way the university was run into the ground is just mindboggling.

9, 10, 11...can we get 12?

By April, 11 schools were looking for basketball coaches, the most at one time in years. J.C. Smith had two openings at the same time, but the biggest news was the release of Fayetteville State championship-winning coach Luke D'Alessio. The Broncos hired Bluefield State men's coach Devin Hoehn. Then Bluefield said, "OK, then we'll take your man" and hired D'Alessio.

Other departures, both voluntary and involuntary, were Virginia State, Winston-Salem State, Prairie View A&M, Alabama State and Coppin State on the women's side, and Alcorn State and Grambling State on the men's.

Sisters doing it for themselves

As Aretha Franklin sang back in the day, DI women's basketball teams had one of the best postseason showings in a long time.

Seven teams earned postseason bids, including the two automatics by the MEAC and SWAC in the Big Dance. With the addition of the new NCAA-sponsored Women's Basketball Invitation Tournament, where North Carolina A&T decided to go, more spots opened in the WNIT. Two SWAC teams and two MEAC teams extended their seasons.

Four of the seven teams won first-round games: Southern in the First Four, and Howard, Coppin State and Texas Southern in the WNIT. A couple should have kept going, but officiating got in the way. Still, the ladies did HBCUs proud and gave their programs well-deserved national recognition.

SIAC rising

The NCAA DII Football Committee's restructuring the regions and giving conference champions an automatic bid opened a new world for HBCUs.

Albany State was the SIAC's qualifier, and Kentucky State and Benedict earned at-large berths. ASU and Benedict won their first-round matches, then had to meet for a third time. The Golden Rams advanced to the third round before losing to Newberry. Notice has been served.

Goodbye to 2 legends

The deaths of Abraham "Mr. CIAA" Mitchell and HBCU historian Fred Whitte closed a chapter but not the memories.

Mitchell thrilled us all with his outings at the CIAA tournament; it just wasn't a true tournament without him. And Fred, who was a dear friend, kept HBCU history alive with the Black College Sports Encyclopedia, famous HBCU alumni and so much more. We all called Fred with sports questions. But, most importantly, he was a great guy.

The curse continues

As much as Florida A&M folks hate to admit it, former director of athletics Tiffani-dawn Sykes' curse is still in effect.

The Rattlers have gone through three presidents and five athletics directors since Sykes and several others were fired last year. After football coach Willie Simmons left, alumni didn't want Shawn Gibbs because he coached at "lowly" Division II Fort Valley State. They got the man they wanted in James Cozie III, but he was fired after two seasons. Now they're hiring alumnus Quinn Gray - from a Division II school. Go figure.

Whose ice is colder?

The inaugural Black College Invitational Championship wanted to give HBCU DI and DII basketball teams another option after the NCAA tournament.

Sixteen teams (eight DI and eight DII) were going to compete at Bojangles Coliseum in Charlotte. Instead, only eight teams participated, and all were DII. Teams either rejected the invitation or pulled out over a lack of funding and trust issues with president/CEO Wes Bellamy.

Next year, the Invitational will be played on Virginia State's campus.

Hard lesson learned: Black-owned doesn't mean folks will buy your ice. (Shout out to Malcolm X).

Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.

Charlotte FC near deal on de la Torre

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moved to London to join Fulham's youth system. He said the desire to make the leap came from two things. First, his father decided that his son would be a professional, and second, "I was born with the right blend of athleticism, ego and willingness to do what people told me."

Left home at 15 for England

De la Torre first received an invitation from Fulham when he was 13 and traveled there several times over the next two years before making the move. He learned a competitiveness that he couldn't have playing club or college soccer at Stanford, his mother's alma mater.

"I'd always been one the best players on my teams in San Diego, but the players at the Fulham academy were fighting for their lives, because to have a kid on a pro contract is a big deal financially to a lot of families in England," de la Torre said. "Your teammate was also your rival, the guy who was going after your spot on the team. You'd say, 'good morning,' but you were both thinking, 'I'm going to crush this guy.'"

Going with the flow doesn't mean de la Torre won't take control of his own destiny. He did just that as he navigated between the Fulham academy and first team, and moved to the Netherlands to play for Heracles Almelo in the Dutch Eredivisie.

When they were relegated in his second season, he moved to Celta Vigo on the southwest coast of Spain. The move was facilitated by his dual citizenship, but he had to prove himself again in addition to learning how to speak Spanish.

Back to MLS

De la Torre said San Diego general manager Tyler Heaps came to see him during the summer of 2024 when the USMNT were playing in Kansas City and recruited him. The chance to help build that side appealed to him and he made the move, on loan, during the January transfer window.

Although de la Torre was a key player for SDFC, things changed towards the end when they were eliminated by Vancouver in the Western Conference final. He started the first nine games before coming on as a second half substitute against Charlotte at Bank of America Stadium.