

Life!

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2026 SECTION B



GAVIN EASLEY

"She was the most incredible woman I've ever known," Gavin Easley says of his mother, Susan, shown here with Gavin in the Dominican Republic in August 2023. Susan Easley died in 2024 after liposuction and a fat transfer at a clinic in Virginia.

When cosmetic surgery goes terribly wrong

By Fred Schulte
KFF HEALTH NEWS

Lisa Farris worried that a nasty infection from recent liposuction and a tummy tuck was rapidly getting worse. So she phoned the cosmetic surgery center to ask if she should head to the emergency room, she alleges in a lawsuit.

The nurse who took the call at the Sono Bello center in Addison, Texas, told her she "absolutely should not" go to the ER — even though Farris "had a large gush of foul fluid" leaking from the incision, according to records in the malpractice case she filed against the cosmetic surgery chain in 2024.

The nurse told Farris she "only needed to reinforce her dressing to collect the fluid drainage and give it time," filings in the lawsuit alleged.

"Thankfully, Ms. Farris did go to the ER where she was diagnosed with sepsis from her surgery complications," a medical expert for her legal team wrote in a court filing. Left untreated, sepsis can lead to death.

Sono Bello officials declined to discuss malpractice cases filed against the company, citing patient privacy laws. But in court filings, the company has dis-

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Easy and affordable winter seed starting

By Melinda Myers
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Turn off the grow lights, gather a few milk jugs and potting mix and start planting seeds. Winter sowing is a way to start transplants from seeds outdoors without a greenhouse or cold frame.

You'll save money on equipment and time tending the seeds and seedlings. Just transform milk jugs, soda bottles and other items into mini grow chambers to start some of your favorite and hard to find transplants from seeds.

Gather flower and vegetable seeds, milk jugs or two-liter soda bottles, duct tape, a quality potting mix and weatherproof marker. Check the seed packet for information on planting details and timing. Winter sowing dates vary with the growing climate, individual gardener, and the seed variety you are planting.

Try starting hardy perennials, hardy and self-seeding annuals, and cold weather vegetables now through late winter. Other flowers and vegetables

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«RIDES

Upgraded Subaru Crosstrek hybrid boasts better range and more horsepower

By Winfred Cross
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Subaru continues to offer a wide variety of all-wheel-drive cars the fit almost every budget and need.

The Crosstrek has been popular for its size, value and fuel economy. It's now offered in a hybrid with more power and exceptional fuel economy.

The hybrid Crosstrek comes in two flavors: sport and limited. My test vehicle was the sport in an odd but appealing color called Citron Yellow Pearl (optional at \$395). The hybrid option is new 2026 and you may wonder why something so small needs to be a hybrid? Maybe The Crosstrek doesn't need to

be but we're all glad it is.

Let's talk about the gas mileage. The hybrid gets 36 miles per gallon on the highway and in the city. Its gas tank holds 16.6 gallons, which equals a range of 597 miles. If that figure doesn't impress you, add the fact the engine has been upgraded from 2.0 liters to 2.5 and power output has been bumped to 194 horsepower. Impressed yet?

The Crosstrek sport truly sips gas. I had it for a week, and I used little more than a quarter tank of gas. This was during the Christmas selling season, so I drove a bit more than usual, but this thing was a fuel economy champ.

There was also a bit more oomph from the engine.

You will not get blazing speed, but The Crosstrek hybrid is certainly more peppy than last year's gasoline model. The continuously variable transmission sends power to all four wheel to give maximum traction during spirited driving.

The ride comfort is good as well. The four-wheel independent suspension soaks up a lot of the rough stuff. The ride is a bit stiff but not choppy. It's on par with most small cars. Engine and road noise creeps in but are acceptable levels.

The Crosstrek's interior is comfortable, fairly spacious and a full of neat touches.

All the USB-C and USB-A outlets are illuminated for easy access at night.

The Crosstrek comes with dual function X-mode for better off-road performance, active torque vectoring, hill descent control, auto vehicle hold, and Subaru's intelligent drive.

Several safety features are included. Eyesight Driver's Assist helps avoid collisions while Blind Spot detection warns of approaching vehicles from the sides. Emergency Lane keep Assist nudges back towards the center of the lane while Rear Cross-Traffic Alert warns of objects in the rear. The heated front seats and power driver's seat make the front pas-

sengers cozy. The 12.3-inch digital dash allows drivers to customize to their liking.

The interior has a great deal of plastic, but it's done in a tasteful manner without looking cheap.

The Crosstrek was totally redesigned in 2024, so Subaru didn't take long to make some major up-

grades. The hybrid offering makes this already appealing vehicle more desirable.

Please see UPGRADED | 2B



MELANIN MOMS

Melanin Mamas founders Mary McManus (left) and Stephanie Owens of Charlotte started the initiative to help families navigate homeschooled from academic growth to self-care.

Homeschool mamas wrote book on lifestyle

Melanin Mamas initiative helps families navigate academic journey

By Charles K. Harris
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Stephanie Owens and Mary McManus are helping families navigate the potential minefields of homeschooled.

Drawing on their own experiences, education and trial and error, the Charlotte moms

launched Melanin Mamas, an initiative to support parents balancing homeschool and family that includes the 186-page Homeschooling Planner.

"We struggled to find a home-school planner that truly sup-

ported our needs," Owens said. "We didn't just want something academic; we needed a tool that nurtured the educator personally, spiritually and practically. So, we created one."

Said McManus: "By working together, we were able to thoughtfully curate a planner that addresses a wide range of homeschool lifestyles, making it both flexible and universal. "Every ele-

ment - from attendance tracking and assessments to goal setting, quarterly check-ins, and self-care - was included with intention, reflecting the realities and rhythms of homeschooling across ages."

The planner opens with a section for parents to write down their specific home school mission statement and goals.

"Our goal was to create a planner that supports parents in organizing, adapting, and thriving along-

Please see MAMAS | 2B

Law may deepen jail, health care strains

By Rachel Crumpler
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

A law that took effect this month tightens North Carolina's pretrial release rules, making it more difficult for people accused of violent offenses to be released before going to trial.

The changes are expected to keep more people in jail for longer, which would add pressure on county jails across the state — many of which are already near or at capacity.

The Republican-led North Carolina General Assembly passed House Bill 307, known as Iryna's Law, in response to the fatal stabbing in August of 23-year-old Iryna Zarutska on the Charlotte light rail — a crime that drew statewide and national attention.

The bill moved through the legislature in just two days, despite objections from many Democrats who

argued that it failed to address gaps between the mental health and criminal justice system and did not provide funding to support those needs.

The law makes changes to the state's pretrial release system, which critics have blamed for Zarutska's death. They argue that Decarlos Brown Jr., who is charged with killing her, should not have been free in the community given his criminal and mental health history.

Under the new law, magistrates and judges have stricter criteria for weighing release decisions for people charged with violent offenses, or for those who have been charged with a Class 1 or higher misdemeanor three times within the past decade. Examples of Class 1 misdemeanors are breaking and entering, soliciting a pros-

titute, drug paraphernalia possession, criminal trespassing and cyberbullying.

The law also requires mental health evaluations for more people and requires judicial officials to make written explanations for release decisions.

The legislation — signed into law by Gov. Josh Stein despite his opposition to some provisions related to the death penalty — also eliminates the option for defendants to be released on a "written promise to appear."

Supporters of the law, including the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association, argue that the changes are needed to break what they describe as a cycle of quick releases followed by repeat offenses.

Eddie Caldwell, executive vice president and general counsel of the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association,

said sheriffs across the state have long raised concerns about what he called "catch-and-release situations."

"That's a real problem for creating victims and increasing crime," Caldwell said.

"The objective of the bill is to hold more people in jail than are currently being held so they're not out on the street committing more crimes," he said.

That will have an effect on jail capacity, Caldwell said.

Terry Johnson, Alamance County sheriff since 2003, said he agrees with about 99 percent of the legislation, though he has some concerns about implementation.

"I don't think a whole lot of thought was probably put into how it was going to impact the number of

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The 2026 Subaru Crosstrek hybrid.

SUBARU

The Crosstrek was totally redesigned in 2024, so Subaru didn't take long to make some major up-

grades. The hybrid offering makes this already appealing vehicle more desirable.

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Mamas help families navigate homeschooling

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side their children, no matter where they are in their homeschooling journey," Owens said.

The planner also includes a feature seldom found in any traditional teacher's planner.

"To support the well-being of parents, our planner includes dedicated monthly pages for setting and prioritizing self-care goals," Owens explains. "By making space for reflection and intention, it becomes easier for educators to maintain balance and meet their needs while guiding their children."

After years of working with each other and a growing community of home school parents, Owens and McManus say there is a commonly held misbelief behind why parents feel overwhelmed almost instantly after shifting to homeschool. Creating an atmosphere conducive to successful learning, even at home, requires effort, research and energy.

"We often hear the idea that homeschooling is 'easy,' as if education happens automatically once resources are provided," McManus said. "That's a misconception. We are not simply putting worksheets or books in front of our children and telling them to get to it. The focus is on adapting education to the child, rather than expecting learning to happen automatically."

The U.S. Department of Education reports that around 3.1 million school age children are homeschooled, which constitutes about 6% of that age group's total population. The U.S. Census Bureau revealed that some 10% of North Carolina students are learning at home, making the Tar Heel State fourth in the nation for most homeschool students.

Federal data reports that more than 40% of children homeschooled in the 2019-20 academic year were non-white and non-Hispanic, meaning parents of color are following the trend. The reasons behind this growth vary, but typically parents mention school safety concerns and displeasure with academic curricula as the top motivators for their choice.

For Owens and McManus, the decision to home school was motivated in part by a desire to provide tailored instruction but also concerns about inclusion, particularly in the face of growing political debate about African American historical content in public schools.

"Recent CRT and DEI controversies have intensified the challenges that many Black students already face," said Owens, a Virginia Tech electrical engineering graduate. "Limiting honest discussions about race further reduces the support available for students navigating racial bias."

Owens and McManus say it's not only Black students, but any child considered "different" who faces systemic challenges, subtle or blatant.

"These children have faced culturally irrelevant curricula, micro-aggressions, disproportionate discipline, or racial bias," said McManus, a Buffalo native with a paralegal background.

Said Owens: "In a homeschool setting, children of color don't struggle for acceptance. They simply belong."

Owens and McManus initially started their homeschooling journeys separately.

"I never imagined becoming a stay-at-home Mom," Owens said, "[but] after the birth of my first child, I felt a strong desire to spend more time with my family."

After the birth of her second child, Owens and her husband made the decision to homeschool their eldest daughter. Around the same time, but many miles away, McManus and her husband made a similar decision with their preschool-aged daughter.

"[We] wanted to give her a gentle, confidence building start before kindergarten," McManus said. "What [we] didn't expect was how quickly our daughter flourished. It was clear homeschooling was where my daughter thrived."

Once McManus relocated to Charlotte and reconnected with Owens, they rejoiced in finding out they were undertaking the same challenge.

"We naturally fell into doing everyday life together - science projects,

field trips, curriculum chats, mom vent sessions, and everything in between," McManus said.

Several years on, both women celebrate their decision.

"Seeing our children grow, lead and discover on their own has made every step of this journey worth it," Owens said.

That's not to say homeschooling is without obstacles. Many parents report suffering from burnout stemming from being unprepared for the workload accompanying the transition to a home classroom.

"One of the biggest challenges many parents face is time management. When you're fully responsible for your child's education, there are countless moving parts to juggle," Owens said.

"It's easy to feel overwhelmed. We understand this firsthand."

Owens and McManus point out that issues like lesson planning, accurate record keeping, establishing effective routines and ensuring compliance with state guidelines can quickly accumulate and frazzle homeschool parents. The Melanin Mamas encourage parents to be patient with themselves as well as their children.

"Our greatest advice for new homeschoilers is to give yourself grace, above all else," McManus says. "For many families, this is completely new territory, and with the continually evolving world of homeschooling, there is no one-size-fits-all approach."

Said Owens: "The goal isn't to recreate traditional school at home. The goal is to build a rhythm that truly works for your family. You can create a peaceful, flexible flow — one filled with read-alouds, nature walks, hands-on activities, and playful, gamified learning."

"Remember: there is no perfect teacher. What matters is being present, consistent, and responsive to your child's needs."

McManus' advice is simple: "Take a breath. Slow down. Adjust when necessary. Everything will fall into place."

Neither Owens nor McManus are surprised by the recent uptick in Black parents turning to homeschooling.

Many parents are opting for homeschool primarily based on public school safety concerns, but that is not always the case, particularly among parents of color.

"Parents are choosing homeschooling not out of fear, but out of a desire for customized, child-centered learning that allows our kids to thrive at their own pace and in their own brilliance," Owens said. "In our view, homeschooling can create an environment where these children feel emotionally safe, seen, and genuinely celebrated."

Beyond the security and belonging learning at home offers, statistics suggest there are noticeable academic benefits to homeschooling as well.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, homeschooled students, on average, scored between 15% and 25% percent than their public-school peers on academic achievement tests. Among Black students, a 2015 report showed that Black homeschooled students scored up to 47% higher than Black students in public schools on similar assessments.

Homeschooled students' success was found to be unaffected by their family's economic status or their parents' educational background.

Melanin Mamas recognize parents' motivations, goals and methods differ greatly, but the end goal is typically the same.

"[We] share a desire for our children to be seen, valued, and educated in ways that honor who they are, not just academically but emotionally and culturally," Owens said.

With the Homeschool Planner, the Melanin Mamas hope to continue leading the charge for parents who have the desire and ability to homeschool.

"This trend tells a powerful story of families reclaiming agency," McManus asserts, "[They are] creating educational spaces that embrace a more personalized, family-centered approach to learning."

For more information about Melanin Mamas or to purchase a Homeschool Planner visit: www.melaninmamashomeschooling.com.

Upgraded Subaru Crosstrek hybrid boasts better range, more horsepower

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Getting nearly 600 miles to a tankful is impressive. When you add in the facts that Subarus are safer and more reliable than ever this car is almost a no-brainer.

The Subaru Crosstrek Sport Hybrid starts at \$33,995.

Pros:

- New Hybrid model
- Excellent fuel economy
- Wild new colors available

- Sport and Limited trims for hybrid
- More powerful engines
- Tons of safety features
- Raised roof rails
- Standard sunroof
- Configurable digital dash
- Standard AWD

Cons:

- Needs more storage space
- Can be noisy



MELINDA MYERS

Winter sowing allows gardeners to start transplants from seeds outdoors using recycled items.

Time for easy, affordable winter seed transplanting

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seeds are typically winter sown at about the same time you would plant them indoors or a month or two before the transplants get moved into the garden. Keep a record of your planting dates and results to help you fine tune your planting schedule and increase future success.

Wash containers and make four to 12 small holes in the bottom of the jug for drainage. A hot skewer, knife, screwdriver or drill work well for this step. Next, partially cut the jug to create a hinged lid. Make your cut about three to four inches above the bottom, leaving the area with the handle attached so it forms a hinge. Use the bottom of the milk jug handle as your guide.

Place a coffee filter or piece of paper towel over the drainage holes to contain the potting mix while still allowing water to drain. Fill the bottom with moist, quality potting mix. Plant seeds at the depth and spacing recommended on the seed packet. Mix smaller seeds with sand to help with proper spacing. Gently water until the excess runs out the bottom of the container.

Make transplanting easier by using the cardboard tubes from toilet paper to help space winter sown seedlings. Cut the toilet paper cardboard tubes to the right height and set them in the milk jug. Fill

the bottom of the milk jug with potting mix and plant the seeds. Otherwise, plan on doing some careful separating of the individual seedlings in each milk jug or soda bottle.

Label the inside and outside of the jug with a permanent marker. Close the lid and seal it shut with duct tape. Remove the cap before setting your milk jugs in a sunny location outdoors where rain and snow can reach it. Set jugs in a milk crate in windy locations and protect them from curious pets and wildlife if needed.

Water your outdoor seed starting chambers during snow-free and dry weather. This will be much less often than those seedlings growing indoors under artificial lights.

Your plants will be ready to move into the garden at their normal planting time. Just open the lid, seedlings and move them into the garden.

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including the *Midwest Gardener's Handbook, 2nd Edition* and *Small Space Gardening*. She hosts *The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything"* streaming courses and the nationally syndicated *Melinda's Garden Moment* radio program. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for *Birds & Blooms* magazine and her website is www.MelindaMyers.com.

« BLACK BRILLIANCE »



NEW YORK CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A home in Seneca Village, surrounded by the rolling hills that would become Central Park.

Before Central Park, there was New York City's Seneca Village

CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY

Editor's note: For Post is highlighting significant and uniquely American stories every week in 2026 as part of our yearlong salute to U.S. history from a Black perspective.

Before Central Park was created, the landscape along what is now the Park's perimeter from West 82nd to West 89th Street was the site of Seneca Village, a community of predominantly African Americans, many of whom owned property.

By 1855, the village consisted of approximately 225 residents, made up of roughly two-thirds African Americans, one-third Irish immigrants, and a small number of individuals of German descent.

One of few African American enclaves at the time, Seneca Village allowed residents to live away from the more built-up sections of downtown Manhattan and escape the unhealthy conditions and racial discrimination they faced there.

Seneca Village began in 1825, when landowners in

the area, John and Elizabeth Whitehead, subdivided their land and sold it as 200 lots. Andrew Williams, a 25-year-old Black shoeshiner, bought the first three lots for \$125.

Epiphany Davis, a store clerk, bought 12 lots for \$578, and the AME Zion Church purchased another six lots. From there a community was born. From 1825 to 1832, the Whiteheads sold about half of their land parcels to other African Americans. By the early 1830s, there were approximately 10 homes in the village.

For African Americans, Seneca Village offered the opportunity to live in an autonomous community far from the densely populated downtown. Despite New York State's abolition of slavery in 1827, discrimination was still prevalent throughout New York City, and severely limited the lives of Black Americans.

Seneca Village's remote location likely provided a refuge from this climate. It also would have provided an escape from the unhealthy and crowded con-

ditions of the city, and access to more space both inside and outside the home.

During the early 1850s, the city began planning for a large municipal park to counter unhealthy urban conditions and provide space for recreation. In 1853, the New York State Legislature enacted a law that set aside 775 acres of land in Manhattan—from 59th to 106th Streets, between Fifth and Eighth Avenues—to create the country's first major landscaped public park.

The city acquired the land through eminent domain, the law that allows the government to take private land for public use with compensation paid to the landowner. This was a common practice in the 19th century and had been used to build Manhattan's grid of streets decades earlier.

Roughly 1,600 inhabitants were displaced. Although landowners were compensated, many argued that their land was undervalued. Ultimately, all residents had to leave by the end of 1857.

New law may deepen jail, health care strains

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inmates increasing in facilities, and that's where we've run into a problem," he said.

Increased pressure on jails

Sheriffs and jail administrators say increases in jail populations can quickly strain detention centers. Every incarcerated person requires food, clothing, a bed and medical care — costs that can quickly add up and demand more staff to handle daily operations, security rounds and services.

Mecklenburg Sheriff Garry McFadden, who oversees North Carolina's largest jail, said its capacity is already stretched. The jail is managing its highest population levels since he became sheriff in 2018 — and he is bracing for additional strain as a result of Iryna's Law.

At a Dec. 8, media briefing, McFadden said 1,619 people were in the jail's custody — an 18 percent increase over the same time last year. He attributed that in part to stricter pretrial release rules, as well as another recent law — House Bill 318 — that took effect this year. It requires jails to hold undocumented people for up to 48 hours for Immigration and Customs Enforcement after a magistrate has approved their release.

Maj. Anthony Durrah, who oversees Detention Center Central in Charlotte, told reporters at the briefing that 97 people were sleeping on stack-a-bunk beds — portable bed platforms used when housing units reach capacity.

Just weeks into the implementation of Iryna's Law, Durrah said he expects the jail population to continue to grow — as well as the length of time people stay. That's going to come as more people who are arrested are booked into the detention center instead of being released because of the new limits on judicial discretion. The increase will carry a financial cost; McFadden said it costs the county \$198 a day to house one person in the jail.

"Overcrowding also reduces efficiency and raises the risk of incidents, making it harder to maintain order," Durrah said. "As far as morale goes, when the resident population rises, staff demand rises with it. We are without additional personnel. The burden falls on those already here."

Johnson, sheriff of Alamance County, said his 396-bed jail is facing similar challenges.

"Our population at the jail is already over population, and to have to hold these individuals, it's really going to put some pressure on us," he said.

Anticipating a higher jail population under Iryna's Law, Johnson ended Alamance County's agreement with Immigration Customs Enforcement in November, which had provided 40 beds to hold federal detainees.

Those beds have already been filled, he said. Johnson said the county needs even more beds than the jail has — a capacity issue he said he's been raising with county commissioners for years. It has taken on new urgency now.

"Even if we don't hold a single ICE inmate, we are overcrowded now, which puts my detention officers in a tough situation," Johnson said. "When you've got more inmates and some sleeping on the floor, they're not going to be in a good mood to start with, and then if you have one inmate to start a fight ... it's going to take more detention officers in that detention center to make sure our inmates are kept safe and our officers are kept safe."

But Johnson said his detention center is already short by about 10 personnel — roles that can be tough to fill given the scope of work and pay.

Onslow County Sheriff Chris Thomas said he is less worried about his jail capacity. Over the past few weeks, he said the 528-bed detention center's census is running at about 430 people, and he has not yet seen a significant increase tied to the new law. The law's impact will vary by county, hinging in part on local crime rates, he said.

Caldwell acknowledged that some counties will be better positioned to manage the effects of Iryna's Law than others.

"Some counties have done great preparations, and they're looking ahead and building ahead and thinking ahead, both in the number of jail beds that they're building and also in the pay and benefits for their detention officers," Caldwell said. "Part of that is perhaps attributable to local demographics, but in some cases, it's just due to money. And you can't expect someone to work as a detention officer for the same salary that somebody flipping hamburgers is going to get."

"Some counties probably should have built a jail decades ago and haven't done it, and so they're likely to be impacted the hardest by this."

No new funding, likely higher costs

McFadden and others have criticized the legislation for adding pressure on jails without providing more

funding to offset some of the new demands.

"It's a difficult pill to swallow when you talk to my staff, but my staff is ready to take on the challenge," McFadden said.

Johnson said he would have liked to see some state money set aside for grants to counties to help with expansion or construction of new jails.

"If [lawmakers] don't do something, our commissioners — and I'm not talking about just Alamance County commissioners — are going to have to raise taxes considerably to add on to these detention centers to be able to fulfill the obligation that the law requires of the sheriff," he said.

Caldwell from the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association, which provided some feedback to lawmakers on the legislation, said while state lawmakers could have provided some money for jail construction and personnel if they chose, North Carolina's structure of government leaves county commissioners responsible for funding local agencies like the sheriff's office and jail — not the state.

On Nov. 25, days before implementation of the new law, the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners held a budget public policy workshop focused on the local impact of Iryna's Law. A main takeaway: The county — and taxpayers — will be on the hook to provide any additional funding.

"We're going to be forced to make some very difficult choices moving forward with respect to our priorities," Mark Jerrell, chair of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners, said.

More mental health evaluations ahead

Another provision of Iryna's Law, which is not scheduled to take effect until next December, will require more people who are arrested to undergo mental health evaluations to determine if they should be hospitalized involuntarily.

The law mandates that law enforcement officers take criminal defendants to an emergency department for a psychiatric evaluation if the arresting officer has reason to believe a person is mentally ill and a danger to themselves or others — regardless of whether their crime was violent. Also, if someone is charged with a violent offense and has been subject to an involuntary commitment order at any time in the past three years, officers are required to take the person for a psychiatric evaluation to determine if there are grounds to start involuntary commitment proceedings.

The delayed implementation of this requirement, which was originally scheduled to take effect this month, came as a relief to sheriffs. They say they are concerned about the increased burden it will place on their staff, who often have to travel long distances to take people to facilities for the evaluations and then the needed treatment.

"That's a lot of manpower that puts law enforcement in more of a mental health role than what they generally should be in," said Thomas, the Onslow County sheriff, who explained that implementing this portion of the law is his biggest concern.

To work out some logistics and potentially adjust the process, Speaker of the House Destin Hall established a House Select Committee on Involuntary Commitment and Public Safety in October to study the involuntary commitment process. So far, the committee has held two meetings, where hospital administrators and state health officials have raised concerns about their ability to handle more patients under involuntary commitment orders with the state's shortage of specialty psychiatric beds.

Caldwell said the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association supports the provision because it could help move people with serious mental illness out of jails and into appropriate care — rather than having them languish in detention centers that have increasingly become de facto mental health institutions.

"People with mental health needs and problems need to be receiving that care in a mental health facility, not in the jail," Caldwell said. "A jail will never be a hospital and never be a psych ward. It's not designed for that, and that's not the purpose of a jail."

More work needed

Caldwell and other sheriffs told NC Health News that they believe Iryna's Law can improve public safety, but that it shouldn't be considered a solution to the revolving door of crime. They said the law should be viewed as a first step — one they hope will spark more work at the intersection of the mental health and criminal justice systems.

"I am very, very big on our mental health issue," Johnson said. "Some of the individuals that are repeated criminals, had they received proper mental health treatments, would never be in this jail again. I think that's where we got to look at some of these issues that we're dealing with now."

When cosmetic surgery goes terribly wrong

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against Sono Bello in September — each in a different state. In an interview, Marcy Norwood Lynch, a Sono Bello executive vice president and chief legal officer, speculated that the spurt in cases was related to reporting by KFF Health News and NBC News about the company.

There "could be alignment" between the coverage and the filing of the suits, she said. The company has denied the allegations in court.

KFF Health News reviewed a sample of more than 100 medical malpractice cases filed against multistate surgery chains from the start of February 2023 through November 2025. Malpractice suits do not by themselves prove substandard care, though many medical authorities and licensing boards consider them a tool for helping to judge medical quality.

Heather Faulkner, a plastic surgeon and associate professor at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, said surgeons must quickly recognize signs of infection before they progress and become serious, even life-threatening conditions.

At Emory, she said, surgeons must attend their patients' first visit after cosmetic surgery.

"Ultimately, the physician is the one responsible," she said. "The patient has to be seen by the person who did the operation and knows how to recognize something is wrong," Faulkner said in an interview.

Patients suing cosmetic surgery chains often argue that they were seen by nurses or other staff members who, they allege, lacked the training to recognize and deal with problems before they required emergency wound care.

Schaner, the Sono Bello medical director, said the company has a phone messaging system that ensures patients can get in touch with their surgeon or other company physicians. While nurses see some patients, the "ultimate decision-making is passed to the surgeon," he said.

Five patients treated at Sono Bello centers who sued the company during 2025 alleged that surgical wound complications were dismissed after medical staff, including surgeons, viewed pictures of the injuries, court records show. The cases are pending.

Schaner said Sono Bello sometimes has patients submit photos of wounds but the images are "not the sole means of triage" of patient injuries or complications.

Joshua Kiernan sued Sono Bello after having liposuction on May 28, 2024, at the branch in Columbia, South Carolina. On June 8, 2024, he stumbled and fell in a gym parking lot, causing drainage around the incision in his stomach, according to the suit.

On June 17, 2024, Kiernan visited the office complaining of "redness and pain" around the incision, according to his suit.

The surgeon, Stacie Rhodes, didn't examine him in person but had an office staff member take a picture "so that she could view it from another part of the office," according to the complaint.

The surgeon sent back word that the photo "looked fine," and Kiernan was told to take Tylenol for the pain and follow up at the office a week later, the complaint alleged.

Two days before his appointment, Kiernan required emergency hospital treatment for "abdominal hematoma and infection," according to the suit.

Kiernan underwent six surgical procedures and ran up medical bills of more than \$325,000 to treat his condition, according to the suit. In court filings, Sono Bello denied the allegations.

"Surgical care does not end at the last stitch," said Mark Domanski, a plastic surgeon in Virginia, who believes the chain clinics in general are more adept at marketing than providing patients with top-notch care. "It involves postoperative visits with the surgeon who did the procedure, who is there to respond to the patient's concerns, questions, especially if things are not going well," he said.

Recovery houses

Many patients who travel for cosmetic surgery, either to save money or because services aren't available in their area, can't return home right away.

Yet there's little agreement on where patients should recuperate, for how long, and what medical services should be readily available to them.

Scott Hollenbeck, immediate past president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, said laws or regulations in most states don't spell out requirements.

"This can create a wide variation of oversight, staff qualifications, and available medical support," he said.

The plastic surgery society has warned against a cottage industry of recovery houses that often charge patients hundreds of dollars a night while they recuperate, even though they may lack medical staff capable of handling possible surgical complications.

Court filings in Florida show patients staying in recovery houses and hotels have died or suffered untreated complications, mostly in South Florida, where officials have struggled for a decade or more to regulate unlicensed facilities. One local lawmaker recently filed a bill to rein them in.

Hollenbeck said patients who recuperate in a hotel or other facility need to find out in advance what "level of care" will be available. He said ads touting "luxury" accommodations or "conveniently located" do not make a hotel "clinically qualified to provide recovery care."

Patients filed seven malpractice cases

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Woodlawn House	1315 E. Woodlawn Rd, 28209	2

Family Site

Cedar Knoll	304 Green Needles Ct, 28217	3
Claremont	1036-A Coliseum Dr, 28205	3
McMullen Woods	6508-C Walsh Blvd, 28226	3
Robinsdale	10001-A Margie Ann Dr, 28213	3
Tarlot Hills	201 Frazier Ave, 28216	2, 3, 4
Wallace Woods	7120-C Wallace Rd, 28212	3

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HEALTH

5 Sugar Intake Tips to Prevent Cavities in 2026

(StatePoint) Holiday celebrations often feature lots of great food and drinks, including sweet treats to indulge in. But too much sugar in your diet can weaken your teeth, leaving your smile vulnerable to cavities. After a sweet holiday season, follow these five sugar intake tips so you can prevent cavities and improve your oral and overall health in 2026.

Restore the balance. If your holiday season was filled with candy canes, hot cocoa and cookies, now is the time to revive a balanced diet with a variety of healthy foods from each of the five major food groups. Fill your plate with whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and low-fat dairy foods.

Sugary beverages like soda and juice should be served sparingly, as healthier options like water and plain milk have far more nutritional value. "Water is the best beverage for your teeth," said American Dental Association (ADA) dentist, Mirissa Price, D.M.D. "Not only does water help wash away cavity-causing bacteria and weaken the acids in your mouth, but water with optimal levels of fluoride strengthens your teeth against cavities.

Be picky if it's sticky and watch out for starch. You might think dried fruit is a healthy choice, but raisins and dried cranberries often stick to your teeth, giving the bacteria in your mouth more time to feast on the natural sugars. Meanwhile, starchy foods like chips and cakes often get trapped between your teeth where cavities also form. "If you choose these foods, pair them with water, and make sure to brush and floss thoroughly," said Dr. Price.

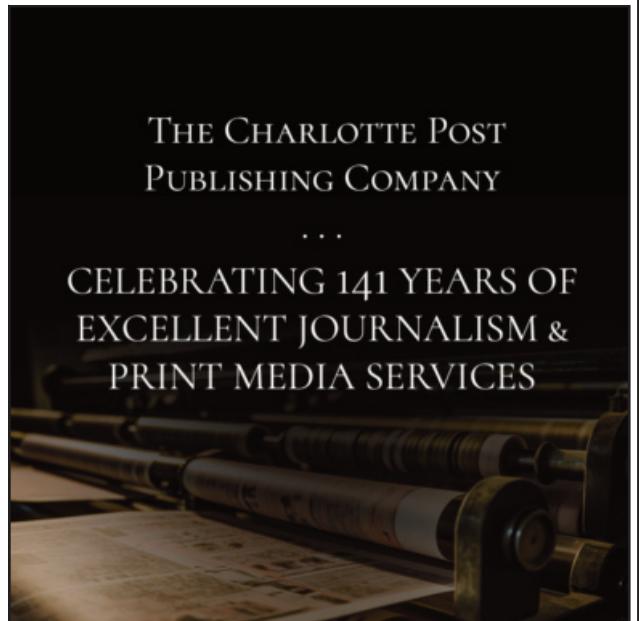
Resolve to maintain your dental routine. Speaking of brushing and flossing, it's important to keep up with your dental care routine no matter what your diet looks like. That means brushing your teeth twice daily with fluoride toothpaste and cleaning between your teeth once a day. Choose dental products with the ADA Seal of Acceptance and see your dentist regularly for valuable checkups. Appointments can fill up fast after the holidays, so schedule them far in advance to avoid delays.

Timing matters. Instead of eating sweets on their own, pair them with meals or eat them shortly after meals. During a meal, your mouth releases more saliva, which is another tool in the fight against tooth decay, canceling out acids and washing away food from teeth and gums. Saliva also contains minerals to repair weakened teeth. For snacks between meals, choose a healthy option like fruit, vegetables or cheese. "If you find yourself enjoying a sweet treat apart from a meal, chewing sugar-free gum with the ADA Seal of Acceptance after can increase saliva and may help counter acidity," said Dr. Price.

Set a good example. It's no surprise that most kids also want to enjoy a sweet treat now and then, but remember that cavities are the most common chronic childhood disease. Provide children with foods and drinks that are healthy and low in sugar, remind them about regular at-home dental care, and set a good example by modeling all the tips above.

To learn more about how nutrition affects your teeth, visit MouthHealthy.org/nutritionimpact. For help keeping your child's dental routine on track, visit MouthHealthy.org/calendar to download a free 12-month brushing and flossing calendar.

"Making choices to keep your mouth healthy doesn't stop you from enjoying good food," said Dr. Price. "Finding a balance is key, and the start of a new year is a great time to focus on healthy behaviors to benefit your dental and overall health."



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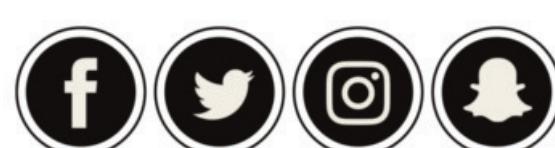
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Tyler Perry's accuser's sent gratitude texts

By Jonathan Landrum

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — Text messages show that Tyler Perry and "Boo! A Madea Halloween" actor Mario Rodriguez, who recently filed a lawsuit accusing the filmmaker of sexual assault, remained in contact years after Rodriguez alleges their interactions ended.

Rodriguez alleged in the lawsuit filed last week in California that Perry assaulted him during encounters that occurred between 2014 and 2019. The lawsuit says Rodriguez cut off contact with Perry in 2019, though Perry would periodically reach out afterward. But screenshots of text messages obtained by The Associated Press on Sunday night show Rodriguez initiating contact with Perry as recently as Thanksgiving 2024 and again on Aug. 31, 2025, expressing gratitude, friendship and financial distress.

In one message sent on Thanksgiving, Rodriguez thanked Perry for helping him through difficult periods in his life and wrote that he appreciated him "to the moon," according to the screenshots. In another series of messages dated Aug. 31, Rodriguez described ongoing health problems, said he lacked health insurance and told Perry he was scared and struggling financially.

The messages were provided to the AP by a source close to the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Perry's attorney, Alex Spiro, disputed Rodriguez's allegations.

"I said it before and I will say it again," Spiro said in a statement. "This is nothing but a \$77 million money grab scam."

Rodriguez's lawsuit seeks at least \$77 million in damages and accuses Perry of sexual assault, sexual battery and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Perry has denied the allegations.

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been sexually abused unless they come forward publicly as Rodriguez has.

The lawsuit follows a separate case filed in June by actor Derek Dixon, who alleged Perry groped him while Dixon worked on Perry's television series "The Oval" and "Ruthless." That lawsuit was originally filed in California state court and later moved to federal court in Georgia, where Perry is based. Perry also has denied Dixon's allegations.

AP reached out to Rodriguez's attorney, Jonathan Delshad, seeking comment on the text messages, but did not receive a response. Delshad also represents Dixon.

How to revive your love of books in 2026

By Adithi Ramakrishnan

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — People stop reading in adulthood for lots of reasons. But it's never too late to turn the page on old habits and start again.

Curling up with a good book can reduce stress, increase creativity and boost empathy. A recent analysis of U.S. government data found that the percentage of Americans who read for pleasure during an average day has fallen to 16% in 2023 from 28% in 2004. That includes not just books but audiobooks, e-books and periodicals like magazines.

Some people say they're fatigued from years of assigned reading in school. Others don't have the time or would rather zone out by doom-scrolling on social media. And many just got out of the habit.

"It's difficult for people who are really tired and busy to think about getting into reading if it's not something they're used to," said Jacqueline Rammer, director of Menomonee Falls Public Library in Wisconsin.

For those looking to set reading goals or resolutions in 2026, here's how to get back into the habit.

Choose the right book

When picking your next book, avoid dense nonfiction or a 500-page doorstop.

"Your first book should be something that you think will be joyful," said Joelyn Luizzi, a software engineer from Chicago who blogs about books.

Everyone's taste is different, so get recommendations from a variety of places including friends, booksellers

Please see WANT | 6B

« ON THE MARQUEE »



DANIEL COSTON | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, led by conductor Kwamé Ryan, presents Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 on Feb. 13-14 at Belk Theater.

Charlotte Symphony plays Motown and Tchaikovsky

Music rings in new year; the Mint Museum shows off sneaker innovation

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Happy New Year!

There's plenty to do as 2026 kicks off. Here's a list of some of them.

Through Jan. 4

Mint Museum Randolph presents "Future Now: Virtual Sneakers to Cutting-Edge Kicks" and "Central Impact: Skateboarding's Art and Influence."

"Future Now" features futuristic designs from Bata Shoe Museum's holdings alongside creations from top designers, collectors, and innovators.

"Central Impact" explores skateboarding through its most iconic canvas: the deck. The exhibit features rare boards, original art, and archival media from the 1980s forward as it highlights the evolution of skate culture locally and globally. Free with general admission to the museum.

Jan. 9-10

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra presents Strauss' "Blue Danube" at Belk Theater, 130 N. Tryon St.

A sweeping tribute to Vienna and the rich tradition of the waltz, the program includes virtuosity to start the new year. Grammy-winning conductor Michael Christie will lead the symphony.

Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Jan. 17

The Philharmonik with Bobby Carter at Booth Playhouse, 8 p.m.

Black Notes Project Music Weekend kicks off with the ensemble, which fuses classical orchestration with hip-hop's energy and contemporary groove.

Christian Gates, known professionally as The Philharmonik, is an American vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, lyricist, music producer and genre defining artist.

Special guest Carter, producer of NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts, opens with a live DJ set.

For tickets, go online to: blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/the-philharmonik.

Jan. 23-24

Charlotte Symphony presents "The Music of Motown" at Belk Theater, 7:30 p.m., 130 N. Tryon St. The symphony plays iconic pop-soul hits by Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder and others. The program is part of the symphony's Sandra & Leon Levine Pops Series. Tickets available at tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Feb. 13

Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight, and Stephanie Mills are extending their "The Queens! 4 Legends. 1 Stage" tour to Spectrum Center. The tour brings together four trailblazing R&B/pop giants for

a celebration of legacy, sisterhood, and music.

Tickets: bpctickets.com.

Feb. 13-14

Charlotte Symphony presents Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5, Belk Theater, 130 N. Tryon St.

As part of the CSO Spotlight Series, pianist and vocalist Gabriel Kahane joins the orchestra conducted by Kwamé Ryan to perform "Pattern of the Rail," a song cycle inspired by Kahane's cross-country train journey through the United States during the 2016 presidential election.

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 closes the program, tracing a journey from darkness to resolve, with sweeping melodies and dramatic power.

Program starts at 7:30 p.m. both days. Tickets \$40.39-\$145.68; available at tix.blumenthalarts.org.

March 7

The eighth annual Queen City Blues Festival is at Ovens Auditorium at 7 p.m. The Southern soul and modern blues scene blend old-school storytelling with contemporary R&B. with performances by King George, Pokey Bear, Lenny Williams, West Love, Tonia Armani, Mike Clark Jr., E.J. Jones, Stephanie Luckett & the YP Band, and Henry Welch.

Tickets: ticketmaster.com.

« MOVIE REVIEW »

How can a loser ever win? It's 'Marty Supreme'

By Dwight Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

Marty Supreme

3.5 stars

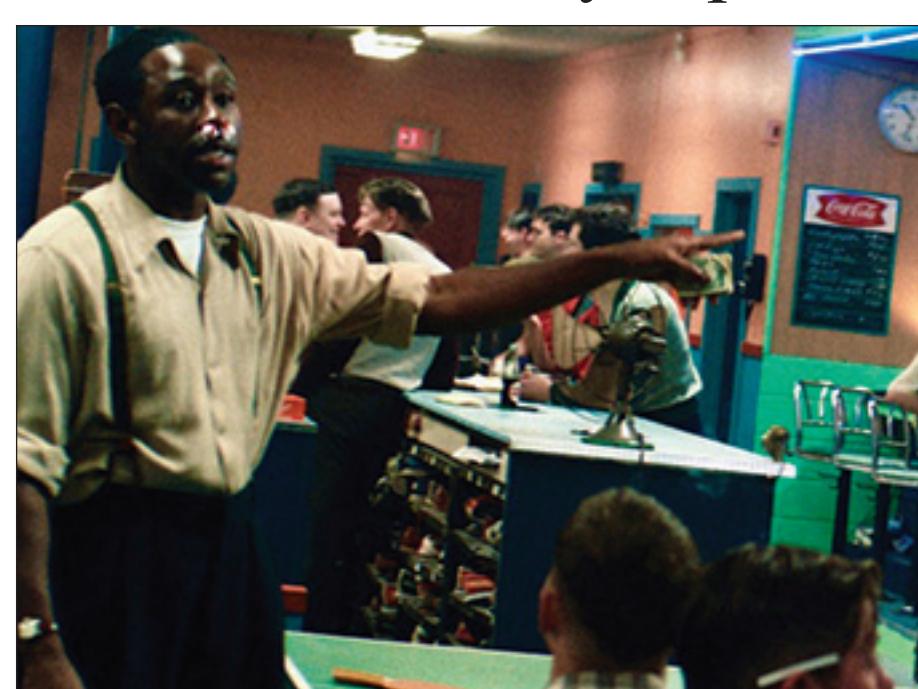
He's reckless and ambitious.

A loser who never gives up. Born poor but has rich man dreams. Dreams he's desperate to fulfill.

For Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet), life on New York's Lower East Side in the 1950s is a trap. He's been looking for a way out of his low-income Jewish American community since day one. But how? How do you escape the tediousness of working in your uncle's (Larry 'Ratso' Sloman) shoe store, shoving size 9 feet into size 6 shoes? It's gonna have to be a group effort. Friends, family, lovers and whoever will be conned.

"Every man for himself from where I come from. That's just how I grew up."

Writer/director Josh Safdie ("Uncut Gems") reteams with co-screenwriter Ronald Bronstein ("Uncut Gems") to tell a story about table tennis champ wannabe designed around a real pro, Marty Reisman, once dubbed "The Needle." Their fictionalized Marty Mauser character, played by Chalamet, is driven by unbridled zeal.



Tyler The Creator in a scene from "Marty Supreme."

A sneaky perseverance that fuels his venture into the world of the rich and famous via a sport no one knows or re-

Please see MARTY | 6B

Want to read more in 2026? Here's how

Continued from page 5B

and online communities like BookTok.

Rammer and her staff ask library visitors: What was the last book, TV show or movie that you really enjoyed? Then, they look for similar genres or themes.

Many libraries offer access to a service called NoveList which suggests "read-alikes" for various books and authors.

Set a reading routine

To create a habit that sticks, "start by scheduling reading into your day," said Gloria Mark, an attention span expert with the University of California, Irvine. Read five pages during a lunch break or right before bed.

If you're reading a physical book, Mark said to avoid distractions by keeping phones and laptops out of sight.

But experimenting with other formats can make reading more convenient. E-books are portable and audiobooks are a good candidate to accompany chores or the morning commute. You can likely access both for free by downloading an app called Libby and signing in with a library card.

Try to read in a quiet setting, but don't be afraid to make it a social activity. Many cities in the U.S. and around the world host silent book clubs where people read their own books together in coffee shops and li-

braries.

Setting a reading goal for the year or joining a local library's winter reading challenge can help with motivation—but if it feels like added pressure, don't do it.

Shannon Whitehead Smith, a book blogger from the Atlanta area who also works in marketing, says scrolling through lists of other people's reads on social media and trackers like StoryGraph encourages her to keep the habit.

"Seeing all these other people reading motivates me to put my phone down and pick up this book that's sitting beside me," she said.

Feel free to skip a read

If a book feels particularly sluggish, it's OK to put it down and start another. Reading "shouldn't feel like a burden," said Jess Bone with University College London, who analyzed the survey data about American adults reading for pleasure.

Routine readers say the habit helps them stay curious and release the stress of the day. Rammer, the library director, reads mysteries rife with twists and turns, and romances that cycle through roller coasters of emotions.

Most of all, she likes books that end with a "happily ever after."

"I think the guarantee of knowing that things are going to end up OK is really reassuring," Rammer said.

The best movies of 2025

By Lindsey Bahr and Jake Coyle

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The bean counters might say otherwise, but 2025 was a good year for movies.

Filmmakers working in and out of the studio system managed to make bold, personal, wildly imaginative and singular works. Some of them even broke through to the mainstream — how extraordinary that "Sinners" is among the highest earning of the year in North America, alongside all those "safe" sequels, reboots and known brands? Most, however, are more likely destined for cult classic status.

If anything, 2025 was also a year in which audiences showed that they still crave the theatrical experience, whether it was to shout "chicken jockey" at the screen or, despite all logic and polling otherwise, help "KPop Demon Hunters" unofficially top the box office charts two months after hitting Netflix.

Here are The Associated Press' Film Writers Lindsey Bahr and Jake Coyle's picks for the best movies:

Bahr's top picks

1. "One Battle After Another"

Paul Thomas Anderson took us on ride of the year with "One Battle After Another," which is so many things — a clever farce, a frenetic thrill ride, a poignant drama about single parenting, a buddy comedy — it's nearly impossible to describe compellingly or coherently. The performances are excellent from lead to smallest supporting character, the vision is ambitious and singular, and the payoff is a great time and a reminder of an experience that can only really happen at the movies. (In theaters)

2. "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You"

Mary Bronstein turned her own domestic nightmare into a raw and surreal cinematic expression of maternal exhaustion and madness in "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You." Anchored by an utterly fearless performance from Rose Byrne, Bronstein's film is an exposed nerve come to life, existential dread manifested. Plus Conan O'Brien and A\$AP Rocky.

3. "Marty Supreme"

Great filmmakers can make anything exciting, like, say, the adventures of a broke table tennis player, and true SOB Marty Mauser, in mid-century New York. Josh Safdie and his cowriter and editor Ronald Bronstein (Mary's husband) built an enormously entertaining, white-knuckle spectacle of ambition and ego giving us the defining Timothée Chalamet performance we've been waiting for.

4. "Sentimental Value"

The ghosts of the past and things unsaid linger in cracks and floorboards of the quiet home at the heart of Joachim Trier's latest, a textured and mature portrait of family, grief, forgiveness and the loneliness of a life in the arts.

With a moving turn from Stellan Skarsgård as an acclaimed filmmaker trying to reconnect with the daughters he cast aside for his career, it's also surprisingly funny in its deft exploration of how difficult it can be to express love to those who matter most, even for artists.

5. "The Naked Gun"

Finally, a great studio comedy and in the most unlikely of packages: A self-consciously shameless reboot/sequel/remake that stands on its own through Akiva Schaffer's total commitment to absolute silliness. Only "Hamnet" elicited more tears. 6. "Sinners"

Another deeply personal, go-for-broke film that (in this case) only Ryan Coogler could have made, "Sinners" is the bluesy, vampire, gangster musical we never knew we needed.

Vibrantly filmed and told, with an extraordinary ensemble cast (and two Michael B. Jordans), its surface pleasures alone are



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Teyana Taylor in a scene from "One Battle After Another."

despite the hardships they document and exist in, are also playful and entertaining. So see his latest not just because it's an important Iranian film, shot through with pain and fury, and made by one of the most courageous filmmakers on the planet, but because it's gripping and funny and human. (In theaters)

7. "Sound of Falling"

Past and present also blur in Mascha Schilinski's haunting and ethereal second feature. It's both disorienting and transfixing in telling the stories of four young women, in four different times, on the same North German farm, somehow both coming-of-age and ghost story at once.

8. "It Was Just an Accident"

Tense, devastating and even a darkly funny, Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi sets up an enthralling moral conundrum in his first film since his own imprisonment. What does justice look like after imprisonment and torture? What should they do to the man who did it? How can they be sure they even have the right guy? (In theaters)

9. "The Voice of Hind Rajab"

Kaouther Ben Hania also confronted modern atrocities using the language of cinematic storytelling, and the real audio of a young girl's call for help, in "The Voice of Hind Rajab," a shattering document of the Israel-Hamas war, set entirely inside the dispatch center of the Palestine Red Crescent Society rescue service.

10. "Urchin," "The Chronology of Water" and "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight"

Three wonderful films this year came from familiar faces, all making their feature debuts. Harris Dickinson channeled the social realism of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh to tell a compassionate but clearly eyed story about the cycles of homelessness in "Urchin."

Kristen Stewart proved to be as bold behind the camera as she is in front of it with "The Chronology of Water," an utterly electric and alive memory piece of trauma and inspiration. And Embeth Davidtz, drawing on her own experience, confronted a thorny story about the Rhodesian bush war fearlessly and with grace.

Coyle's top 10

1. "One Battle After Another"

For a movie that feels so enthrallingly of the moment, Paul Thomas Anderson's latest is curiously out of time. The echoes of the Black Panther and Weather Underground movements seem to belong to another era.

Yet Anderson's scruffy opus makes its own history and its own resistance. Key, I think, is that both the forces of oppression and counterculture in the film are lost in rituals and code words. It's about finding your own grammar of struggle. And it's also about how unstoppable Teyana Taylor is.

2. "No Other Choice"

In Park Chan-wook's masterful, midnight-black comedy, a newly out-of-work man (Lee Byung-hun) decides his best option to get a leg up on similarly qualified job applicants is to kill them, one by one. It's an ingenious narrative (from Donald E. Westlake's 1997 novel, previously adapted by Costa-Gavras) that Park extrapolates in increasingly profound ways.

3. "It Was Just an Accident"

Jafar Panahi has made a lot of great films, many of them in extraordinary circumstances. All of them,

'Marty Supreme' an imaginative — and unlikely — success story

Continued from page 5B

scopic. Who could make this stuff up? Safdie and Bronstein! They let their imaginations run wild, up and down dark alleys, through scary country homes and to world championships. Nothing gets in their way and that's the gumption they instill in their Marty.

A flake who is as deft at getting himself into wacky, unlawful situations as he is at getting out.

Marty slowly climbs the amateur table tennis ladder, hustling along the way. A slew of predicaments block his path: Jobs taken and lost. A pregnant ex-girlfriend (Odessa A'zion) married to another man (Emory Cohen). A hoodlum king (Abel Ferrera) who Marty tries to con with his friend Wally (Tyler Okonma, aka Tyler The Creator). A sneering, dream-crushing tycoon, Milton (Kevin O'Leary). And that man's glamorous but aging movie star wife, Kay (Gwyneth Paltrow), who alternately shades and flirts with the young hustler.

He is not deterred: "I live with the confidence that if I believe in myself the money will follow." Marty Mauser evolves into "Marty Supreme," an empowered vision of himself. A player who eyes a table tennis British Open championship. A chance to play the steely world champ Koto Endo (Koto Kawaguchi) and show the world what he's made off.

Sports movies with unlikely protagonists trying to win are normal. Yet there's nothing normal about the approach Safdie takes. Not the lead character, his surroundings, pure guile or inability to feel guilt. In another filmmaker's hands, the lead would be a prick you didn't like. You'd walk out of the theater or turn off the TV, completely unmoved.

This writer/director, an innovative artist, finds ingenious ways to make the unpredictable Marty likable. He makes his life melodramatic, desires contagious and to feel heard and respected a relatable objective. The twists and turns in this narrative, don't always make sense.

But so what. The absurdity of it all is the film's magic potion. Just as you think you might have had enough, Safdie's instinctive, animated and caution-to-the-wind direction blows you away. Again, and again.

Scenes of Marty running down streets of his Lower East Side neighborhood, chased by whoever he just conned, are ki-

netic. Seductions are romantic. Impromptu love scenes erotic. Fights wonderfully choreographed. Fortunately for Safdie's agile, directorial style, cinematographer Darius Khondji and his prying lens can keep up with his whims.

Production designer Jack Fisk designs, builds and paints tempestuous hallways like he lived there. Costume designer Miyako Bellizzi ("Uncut Gems") clothes and veils Paltrow with grace and beauty and makes some cast member's clothes look like they haven't been washed since WWII.

Safdie and Bronstein have edited the footage down to two hours and 30 minutes of a romp that has a beat so strong you could dance to it. Which brings up the musical soundtrack. Composer Daniel Lopatin ("Uncut Gems") creates a great score. However, a jumpy, energetic '80s playlist that includes infectious tunes like Tears for Fears' spirited chart-topping "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" feels out of place.

Yes the catchy music amplifies Marty's uncrushable spirit. But it has nothing to do with the period. Actual hit songs from the '50s, like Tiny Bradshaw's "The Train Kept Rollin'" or Leroy Anderson's "Blue Tango" would've helped to evoke the era.

Every role Chalamet has had in his career was just a building block to this moment. Marty is his crowning achievement. The rebellious, electric, urban-smart character he was destined to play. The way Chalamet handles interactions with mob bosses, older women, best friends, etc. is intuitive and perfect.

It's as easy to believe his anger, fear and frustration as it is to understand his quest for success and happiness.

Paltrow dampens his spirit. A'zion snares him. O'Leary humiliates the novice. The arch rival Kawaguchi challenges his mettle. While Okonma, his wingman and guardian angel, protects him.

An innovative director, deft screenwriters and a solid production team join forces. Chalamet and his supporting actors run in ways that make you want to follow them. Continuously barreling toward disaster.

You'll get caught up in this hectic whirlwind and not want to let go. If only roller coasters were this exciting.

Visit film critic Dwight Brown at DwightBrownInk.com.

