

Life!

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2026 SECTION B

NC stagnates on maternal and infant health

By Jennifer Fernandez

NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

Since its opening in September 2020, 850 children have been born at UNC Health Chatham's Maternity Care Center.

The center's staff is made up mostly of family physicians instead of OB-GYNs. The care model aims to address the lack of maternal and infant care in rural areas, where obstetric units have shut down.

A dozen rural hospitals across the state have stopped providing any inpatient care or closed entirely since 2005, according to the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research.

North Carolina has struggled with access to care, especially in those rural areas. Of the state's 100 counties, 20 are considered maternity care deserts because there are no hospitals offering obstetric services or birth centers, and no practicing obstetricians, gynecologists or certified nurse midwives.

"We need more hospitals to actually open up their maternity units again, because distance to care matters," said Dana Iglesias, a family physician and interim medical director of UNC Health Chatham's Maternity Care Center.

A recent study by March of Dimes researchers, published in *Jama Network Open*, puts an exclamation point on that statement. The study found that babies born in counties with little or no access to maternity care face a much higher risk of death in their first year.

Infant mortality is one of six measures tracked in the annual March of Dimes report that looks at how the U.S. is handling maternal and infant health. The 2025 report, released Monday, Nov. 17, gave North Carolina a D+, the same grade as last year and the same grade as the U.S. as a whole. Twenty-seven states received a C or higher, with New Hampshire earning the only A.

There was little movement in North Carolina on any of the measures tracked: preterm birth, infant mortality, the rate of low-risk Cesarean births, access to adequate prenatal care, severe maternal morbidity and maternal mortality.

"We're the only high-income country struggling with this, who have moms and babies dying with supposedly all the resources that we have," Iglesias

Please see NC STAGNATES | 2B

Stock the pantry: The best foods for cold and flu season

By Kweli I. Wright

BLACKDOCTOR.ORG

Cold and flu season can catch anyone off guard. No matter how busy or healthy we are, one sneeze can set off a flurry of group texts and get the tea kettle boiling.

In many Black families, this time of year brings special routines: checking on elders, sharing remedies, and using the same trusted ingredients that our parents and grandparents relied on.

This isn't about miracle cures. We're not here to tell you a pantry item can get rid of a virus overnight, however some foods and staples can support your immune system, ease symptoms, and help you recover.

Comfort, hydration, nourishment, and consistency are what really help when you're not feeling well.

Here's a quick, but essential guide to the pantry staples every family should have on hand during cold and flu season.

Why the pantry matters when everyone's sniffing

When illness hits your home, everyone's energy drops. This also brings on appetite changes, and no one feels like cooking.

Even simple decisions — what should I eat? what sounds OK? — can feel like too much. That's why what's already in your pantry matters so much.

Pantry staples help you:

- Stay hydrated when you don't feel like drinking

Please see STOCK | 2B

Winning perennials for gardens

By Melinda Myers

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

When creating a new garden or looking for new additions, check out the Perennial Plants of the Year.

Selected by members of the Perennial Plant Association, winners must be suited to a wide range of climate conditions, low maintenance, and provide multiple seasons of interest.

The 2026 PPOY is Blackhawks big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* 'Blackhawks'), a cultivar of one of the dominant grasses of the North American tallgrass prairies. Its smaller stature makes it easier for most gardeners to include in home landscapes.

It grows 5 feet tall and two feet wide as opposed to the species that can grow up to eight feet tall and readily self-seed, dominating a garden.

Combine Blackhawks big bluestem grass with other early and late season perennials in natural and cottage-style gardens. Watch as the foliage emerges dark green in the spring then develops red tips

in summer and ends the season with deep purple leaves and stems. Its three-parted flower tops the plant in late summer, providing additional texture and motion in the garden.

Grow Blackhawks in full sun with well-drained soil. It is hardy in zones three to nine and drought tolerant once established. Just cut it back in late winter or early spring and watch as new growth emerges.

This grass combines nicely with past winning perennials. The Arkansas bluestem (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), a 2011 winner, is still popular thanks to its fine foliage that turns amber in the fall. This, along with its light blue, star-shaped flowers that appear in late spring to early summer, provide season long beauty.

It is hardy in zones four to nine, drought tolerant once established and the deer tend to leave it be.

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) was selected as the 2022 Perennial Plant of the Year. This North

Please see WINNING | 2B



NIC ANTAYA | KFF HEALTH NEWS

Ste'Aira Ballard's mother, Tamala Smith, died less than two weeks after having liposuction and a fat transfer procedure performed at a California cosmetic surgery clinic.

Ads promising 'Dream body' get little scrutiny

No federal law requires accuracy in marketing cosmetic surgery

By Fred Schulte

KFF HEALTH NEWS

Lenia Watson-Burton, a 37-year-old U.S. Navy administrator, expected that cosmetic surgery would get rid of stubborn fat quickly and easily — just as the web advertising promised.

Instead, she died three days after a liposuction-like procedure called AirSculpt at the San Diego office of Elite Body Sculpture, a cosmetic surgery chain with more than 30 offices across the U.S. and Canada, court records show.

Cosmetic surgery chains setting up shop in multiple states depend heavily on advertising to attract customers: television, print, social media influencers, even texts hawking discounted holiday rates.

The pitches typically promise patients life-changing body shaping with minimal pain and a quick recovery.

Yet there's no federal requirement that surgery companies post

evidence supporting the truth and accuracy of these marketing claims. No agency tracks how frequently patients persuaded by sales pitches sustain painful complications such as infections, how effectively surgeons and nursing staff follow up and treat injuries, or whether companies selling new aesthetic devices and methods have adequately trained surgeons to use them safely.

In 2023, Watson-Burton's husband and six children and stepchildren sued Elite Body Sculpture and plastic surgeon Heidi Regenass for medical malpractice, alleging that the thin cannula the surgeon used to remove fat perforated Watson-Burton's bowel, causing her death.

The suit also accused Elite Body Sculpture of posting false or misleading advertising on its website, such as describing the clinic's branded procedure AirSculpt as "gentle on the body" and stating:

"Our patients take the fewest possible risks and get back to their regular routine as soon as 24-48 hours post-operation."

Watson-Burton was one of three patients who died after having liposuction and fat transfer operations performed by Regenass from October 2022 to February 2023, court records state. Families of all three women sued the surgeon, who denied wrongdoing in legal filings. The parties settled the Watson-Burton family case in 2024. Two other wrongful death cases are pending, including a suit by an Ohio woman who alleges her mother relied on promises on Regenass' website that the operation in California would be safe with a quick recovery.

Neither Regenass nor her attorneys responded to repeated requests for comment. Emails and phone calls to Elite Body Sculpture's Miami headquarters were

Please see COSMETIC | 2B

Sports betting fuels public health crisis

By Fran Smith

USC CENTER FOR HEALTH JOURNALISM

Every moment in sports has become a wager, and not just on who will win the Super Bowl or how many strikeouts a pitcher will throw. With a quick tap on your phone, you can bet on what color Gatorade will drench a winning coach, whether a player will propose to his girlfriend on the field, and more.

The collision of legalized sports betting, smartphones and celebrity culture is quietly creating a public health crisis we've barely begun to understand.

But the signs are everywhere. From 2018, when New Jersey legalized sports betting, to September 2024, calls to the hotline run by the state's Council on Compulsive Gambling nearly quadrupled. In the months following the legalization of sports betting in Connecticut, calls to that state's hotline quadrupled.

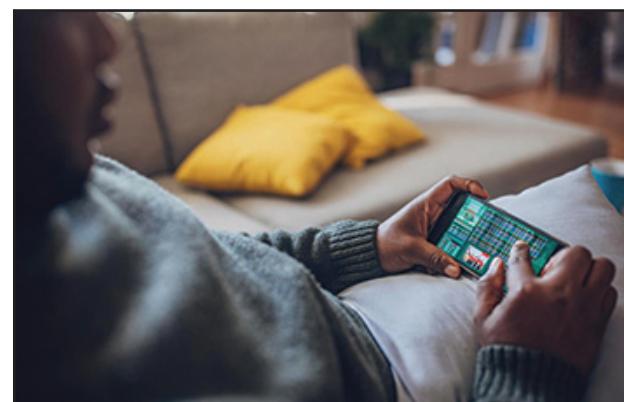
And a survey in Maryland found that in the 20 months after online sports betting launched in that state, the rate of persistent problematic gambling among adults jumped 42%, from 4% to 5.7%. Two-thirds of those who reported troubling behaviors — running up big debts, for example, or lying to loved ones to hide losses — were men, according to the survey by the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

"Yeah, it's a pretty significant increase," said Dr. Christopher Welsh, the Center's medical director. "And this was looking only at 18 and older. So, we're not even looking at teenagers, and we know there's an issue."

Some 22% of all Americans, and 48% of men ages 18 to 49, have an account with at least one online sportsbook.

It's not surprising, then, that young men are most susceptible to the compulsive and self-destructive behaviors that sports betting can lead to. The Maryland survey found the rate of problematic sports gambling was highest among white men, while the rate of problematic gambling more generally was three times higher among Black adults than white adults.

Other research has found that sports betting is most common among Black adults. Although the activity is generally prohibited



GETTY IMAGES

The growth of sports gambling has led to a spike in addiction, especially in Black men.

for anyone under 21, a 2023 national survey of 18- to 22-year-olds found that 68% Black respondents had engaged in sports betting, compared with 63% of Hispanic, 55% of Asian, and 54% of white respondents. And the Black young adults were twice as likely as bettors overall to make big wagers.

The finding is consistent with years of research pointing to higher rates of

Please see SPORTS | 2B



MELINDA MYERS

Blackhawks big bluestem grass surrounded by garden phlox, Agastache, coreopsis and panicle hydrangea.

Cosmetic surgery advertisements get little scrutiny

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not returned.

State and federal authorities do have the power to prohibit false or misleading medical advertising of all types, though enforcement is spotty, particularly when promotions pop up online. That means patients must do their own homework in evaluating cosmetic surgery marketing pitches.

"While consumers should be able to trust that ad claims are substantiated because the law requires them to be, the reality is that it pays for consumers to bring a skeptical eye," said Mary Engle, an executive vice president at BBB National Programs.

'Up a cup'

Founded by cosmetic surgeon Aaron Rollins, Elite Body Sculpture says in Securities and Exchange Commission filings that it offers a "premium patient experience and luxurious, spa-like atmosphere" at its growing network of centers. The publicly traded company, based in Miami Beach and backed by private equity investors, markets AirSculpt as being "much less invasive than traditional liposuction" and providing "faster healing with superior results." The ads say that AirSculpt "requires no scalpel, or stitches, and only leaves behind a freckle-sized scar" and that patients "remain awake the whole time and can walk right out of their procedure, enjoying dramatic results!" Some risks are disclosed.

Rollins, who recently made headlines for putting his Indian Creek mansion on the market for \$200 million, did not respond to repeated requests for comment. A lawyer for Rollins, Robert Peal, responded to an email but didn't comment. On Nov. 4, the company announced that Rollins had resigned as executive chairman of the board of directors of AirSculpt Technologies and as a member of the board.

Many AirSculpt patients opt to have fat that is removed from their stomachs or other places injected into their buttocks, often called a Brazilian butt lift. Others use the fat to enhance their breasts, a procedure the company brands as "Up a Cup." Since March 2023, at least seven patients have filed lawsuits accusing Elite Body Sculpture of running misleading advertising or misrepresenting results, arguing, among other things, that they felt more pain or healed much more slowly than the ads led them to believe they would, court records show. One of the lawsuits has been dismissed, and the company has denied the allegations in others.

The Watson-Burton family argued in their lawsuit that some marketing claims about AirSculpt were simply not true.

For instance, Elite Body Sculpture's website stated that AirSculpt has "automated technology" set to "turn off" before the cannula penetrates the body too deeply and possibly causes serious injury, according to the suit. That feature didn't protect Watson-Burton, who paid \$12,000 for the operation, hoping for a "quick and timely recovery" before a scheduled U.S. Navy deployment, according to the lawsuit.

Rather than being gentle on the body, AirSculpt was "extremely painful, highly invasive, unsafe, required more than a short 24-hour recovery period and could and did damage internal organs," according to the suit.

Watson-Burton called the San Diego center on Oct. 27, 2022, a day after the operation, to report "severe pain" in her upper abdomen, but staffers took no action to evaluate her, according to the suit. The next morning, an ambulance rushed her to a hospital, where emergency surgery confirmed the gravity of her injuries. Surgeons noted her injuries included three perfora-

tions of the small bowel and sepsis.

Watson-Burton died on Oct. 29, 2022. An autopsy report cited complications of the cosmetic surgery, ruling she died after becoming "septic following intraoperative small bowel perforation." Her death certificate lists the cause as "complications of abdominoplasty."

In court filings, Elite Body Sculpture said Watson-Burton had "experienced an uncommon surgical complication." The company denied that it made any "specific guarantee or representation that injury to organs could not occur." It denied any liability or that its ads made misrepresentations.

The dispute never played out fully in court. The parties settled the case in August 2024, when Elite Body Sculpture agreed to pay Watson-Burton's family \$2 million, the maximum under its insurance policy. Regenass, the surgeon, who did not carry liability insurance, agreed to pay \$100,000 more, according to the settlement agreement.

Promises not kept

Social media pitches and web advertising also led Tamala Smith, 55, of Toledo, Ohio, to Regenass for liposuction and a fat transfer, court records state.

Smith was dead less than two weeks later, one of two other women who died following elective operations Regenass performed from December 2022 to February 2023, court records show. The surgeon operated on the two women at Pacific Liposculpture, which runs three surgery centers in Southern California, court records state.

The families of both women are suing Regenass, a board-certified plastic surgeon, and the surgery center. In both cases, which are pending in California courts, Regenass and the surgery center have denied the allegations and filed dismissal motions that deny responsibility for the deaths.

Smith was a traveling registered nurse working the overnight shift at a hospital in Los Angeles. She chose Regenass after viewing the doctor's Instagram page, according to a lawsuit filed by Smith's daughter, Ste'Aira Ballard, who lives in Toledo.

The ads described the surgeon as an "awake liposuction and fat transfer specialist," while her website assured patients they would feel minimal pain and be "back to work in 24-48 hours," according to the suit.

During the three-hour operation on Feb. 8, 2023, at Pacific Liposculpture's Newport Beach office, Regenass removed fat from Smith's abdomen and flanks and redistributed it to her buttocks, according to the suit. Smith called the office at least twice in subsequent days to report pain and swelling, but a staffer told her that was normal, according to the suit. Smith never spoke to the surgeon, according to the suit.

When Ballard couldn't reach her mother, she called the hospital only to learn Smith hadn't turned up for her overnight shift for two days. The hospital called police and asked for a welfare check at the extended-stay hotel in Glendale, California, where Smith had been living.

An officer discovered her body on the bed "surrounded by towels and sheets that are stained with brown and green fluids," according to a coroner's report in the court file. A countertop in the room was "covered in medical paperwork detailing post-operative instructions from a liposuction clinic," according to the report. Ballard said she learned of her mother's death when she called Smith's cell phone; a police officer answered and delivered the devastating news.

"Oh, my God, I fell to the floor," Ballard said in an interview with KFF Health News and NBC News. Ballard said she learned of her mother's death when she called Smith's cell phone; a police officer answered and delivered the devastating news.

"Oh, my God, I fell to the

floor," Ballard said in an interview with KFF Health News and NBC News. Ballard said she still has not gotten over the shock and grief. "It bothers me because how does someone that dedicated their life to save other people's lives end up deceased in a hotel, as if her life didn't matter?" she asked.

Ballard said her mother trusted Regenass based on her web persona. She believes her mother, a registered nurse, would not have gone to the surgeon had she known someone had died after an operation Regenass performed at the Pacific Liposculpture San Diego office. Terri Bishop, 55, a truck driving instructor who lived in Temecula, California, died on Dec. 24, 2022, about three weeks after undergoing liposuction and fat transfer at Pacific Liposculpture, a company with a history of run-ins with state regulators.

Pacific Liposculpture did not respond to requests for comment. In court filings, the company has denied that the operations played a role in either patient's death and moved to dismiss the cases. The company also argued that Ballard waited too long to file suit.

Bishop, who had a history of smoking, diabetes, and high blood pressure, died from "arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease aggravated by viral pneumonia (Influenza A H1N1 2009)," according to a Riverside County medical examiner's report made part of the court record. The family disagrees and is arguing that Bishop died from blood clots, a known complication of surgery. A trial is set for June 2026.

In Smith's case, the Los Angeles County medical examiner ruled the nurse died of "renal failure of unknown cause." The autopsy report noted: "This is a natural death since an injury directly from the surgery cannot be identified."

Ballard is demanding further investigation to get to the bottom of what happened to her mother.

"I don't think they were straightforward with the risk and complications that could occur," Ballard said. "I think they are promising people stuff they can't deliver."

Ballard filed a complaint against Regenass with the California Medical Board, which the board is investigating, according to documents she provided to KFF Health News and NBC News. She believes regulators need to be more transparent about the backgrounds of surgeons who offer services to the public. She also hopes the investigation will shake loose more details of what happened to her mother.

"I just don't understand how she came back to me in a body bag," she said.

Buyer beware

Concerns about sales pitches for cosmetic surgery date back decades.

Witnesses testifying at a June 1989 congressional hearing held by a subcommittee of the House Small Business Committee in Washington heard a litany of horror stories of patients maimed by surgeons with dubious training and credentials. Subcommittee Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) said patients were victimized by deceptive and false ads that promised a "quick, easy and painless way to change your life — all through the cosmetic surgery miracle."

Calling for reform, Wyden added: "So, cosmetic surgery consumers are largely on their own. It's back to a buyer beware market, and it smacks more of used car sales than medicine." Wyden now represents Oregon in the U.S. Senate.

All these years later, there's far more territory to police: an onslaught of web advertising, such as splashy "before and after" photos, online posts, and podcasts by social media influencers and others courted by surgery companies in a costly effort to attract business. Elite Body

Sculpture, for instance, spent \$43.9 million in "selling expenses" in 2024. That came to \$3,130 per "customer acquisition," according to the company's SEC filings.

Under Federal Trade Commission guidelines, medical advertising must be "truthful, not deceptive, and backed up by competent and reliable scientific evidence," according to Janice Kopec of the agency's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

Any claims that are "suggested or reasonably implied" by ads also must be accurate. That includes the "net impression" conveyed by text and any charts, graphs, and other images, according to the FTC. The agency declined to elaborate.

Medical businesses are free to decide what documentation, if any, to share with the public. Most cosmetic surgery sites offer little or no such support for specific claims — such as recovery times or pain levels — on their websites.

"There is no requirement that the substantiation be made available to consumers, either on a website or upon demand," Engle, who is also a former FTC official, said in an email.

The law permits "puffery," or boastful statements that no person would likely take at face value, or that can't be proved, such as, "You've tried all the rest, now try the best," Engle said.

Where to draw the line between acceptable boasts and unverified claims can be contentious.

Ath nix, a private equity-backed cosmetic surgery chain with locations in six cities, defended its use of terms such as "safer" and "better results" as puffery in response to a false advertising lawsuit filed against the company by Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer in California in August 2022.

Spitzer argued that Ath nix touted its "microbody-contouring" technique as "safer" than traditional liposuction and offered "outstanding results with less pain and downtime" without backing that up, according to the suit.

There is no study or evidence to support these statements and no scientific consensus about the use of these new techniques," Spitzer argued.

The parties settled the case in July 2023 when Ath nix agreed to pay \$25,000 without admitting wrongdoing, court records show.

Before the settlement, Ath nix argued that its use of terms such as "safer" and "better results" was "subjective" and "puffery" — and not false advertising.

While there's little indication that local or state authorities are stepping up scrutiny of cosmetic surgery advertising, federal authorities have signaled they intend to crack down on dubious advertising claims made by drug manufacturers.

In a letter sent to drug companies in September, FDA Commissioner Marty Makary wrote that "deceptive advertising is sadly the current norm" on social media platforms and that the agency would no longer tolerate these violations.

"The idea that you could return to work 24 hours after effective liposuction seems like extremely bad advice," Hollenbeck said.

'I Felt Horrible'

Ads that promised patients minimal discomfort also have come under attack in patient lawsuits.

More than 20 other medical malpractice cases reviewed by KFF Health News made similar allegations of unexpected pain during operations at cosmetic surgery chains using lidocaine for pain relief in "awake liposuction."

Some lawsuits filed by injured patients add allegations by surgery chains misled them, or that surgeons failed to fully explain possible risks of injuries, a requirement known in medical circles as informed consent.

Caitlin Meehan had such a case.

She underwent a \$15,000 AirSculpt procedure at Elite Body Sculpture's clinic in Wayne, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia. She agreed to the surgery in March 2023, she said, because the company's website described it as "Lunch Time Lipo," according to a lawsuit she filed in late August. The suit alleges that the doctor she discussed the procedure with "maintained that there are no serious, life-threatening, lasting and/or permanent complications," according to the suit.

During the procedure, however, gases became

trapped beneath her skin, causing a widespread swelling called subcutaneous emphysema, according to the suit. Meehan was shocked to see her face, neck, and upper body severely swollen, causing her shortness of breath.

A friend who drove her to the appointment asked the staff to call an ambulance, but staff members said that wasn't necessary, according to the suit. After an hour's drive home, Meehan said her skin felt like it was burning and she called 911. She spent four days in the hospital recovering and remains scarred, according to the suit. The suit is pending, and the company has yet to file an answer in court.

Scott Hollenbeck, immediate past president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, said recovering from liposuction in a day "seems unrealistic" given the bruising and swelling that can occur.

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'Bad advice'

To prove medical negligence, injured patients generally must show that their care fell below what a "reasonably prudent" doctor with similar training would have provided. In their defense, surgeons may argue that complications are a risk of any operation and that a poor outcome doesn't mean the doctor was negligent.

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</

Stock the best foods to fight off colds and flu

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much

- Get key nutrients when your appetite is unpredictable
- Soothe sore throats, congestion, and body aches
- Put together something warm and comforting without a lot of effort

For many of us, these foods are also emotional anchors. They remind us of being cared for — of someone telling us to sit down, drink this, and rest.

Cold Season Staples: Supporting Mild Symptoms

Colds tend to come with congestion, sore throats, sneezing, and fatigue. While they're usually mild, they can linger. These pantry staples are especially helpful during cold season:

Honey

Honey can help soothe coughs and sore throats. Research from the Mayo Clinic shows it may reduce nighttime coughing in children over one year old (do not give honey to children under age one) and improve sleep quality.

Whether you stir it into tea or take it by the spoonful, it's an old-school remedy that still holds up.

Herbal teas

Warm liquids help thin mucus and relieve congestion.

Ginger tea may help with inflammation and nausea, peppermint can ease throat irritation, and chamomile supports relaxation and sleep, which the body needs to heal.

Broth or bouillon

For many of us, chicken broth or soup is one of the first things that comes to mind when someone isn't feeling well. There's a pot simmering on the stove, or a mug pressed into our hands with a reminder to sip slowly.

Chicken broth isn't just old-school hype. It provides fluids, electrolytes, and warmth. Broth-based soups are easy to digest, and even a few spoonfuls can help the body feel steadier.

Saltwater

Simple, but effective. Saltwater gargles can ease throat discomfort, chest congestion, and help loosen mucus. There's a good reason that it's one of those remedies passed down.

Flu staples when the body needs support

Having the flu is more intense than having a cold. Fever, chills, body aches, and extreme fatigue are common. These pantry staples focus on hydration, calories, and immune support:

Electrolyte drinks or powders

When you have a flu-related fever, you're losing fluids and sweating, which can lead to dehydration.

According to the National Institutes of Health, it is imperative to stay hydrated with electrolytes, which help replace sodium and potassium, especially when eating is difficult.

Look for options with lower added sugar when possible.

Canned soups and stews

When standing at the stove isn't an option, shelf-stable canned and refrigerated soups step in.

They provide much-needed hydration, sodium, and calories, which are all important when appetite is low, but the body needs fuel.

The Mayo Clinic agrees that warm soups and broths also help clear congestion and soothe sore throats.

Oatmeal

Oatmeal is gentle, filling, and easy

to customize. It provides carbohydrates for energy and soluble fiber, which supports gut health and immune function.

Canned fruits (in juice)

Fruits like peaches, pears, and oranges provide vitamin C and hydration. Soft textures make them easier to eat when chewing feels like too much work.

Home remedies

Every Black household has its classics. The remedies everyone swears by. The ones that start with, "Now, this is what my mama used to do..."

Some are backed by research. Others are all about tradition, repetition, and love, but both still matter.

Ginger, garlic, and lemon

These ingredients show up again and again in teas, broths, and hot drinks across cultures:

- Ginger may help with inflammation and nausea
- Garlic contains compounds linked to immune support
- Lemon adds vitamin C and a bright flavor that makes it easier to keep sipping

Hot tea with honey and lemon

This simple and reliable combo hydrates, soothes the throat, and encourages rest. Sometimes it's less about the science and more about the signal it sends: slow down.

Steam and warm showers

While not pantry items, steam is often paired with eucalyptus oils or mentholated rubs that many of us grew up with. Steam can temporarily ease congestion and make breathing more comfortable, especially before bedtime.

That remedy everybody swears by

Maybe it's a special soup. Maybe it's a herbal tea concoction you can't quite explain. Maybe it's something an auntie insists works every single time.

Even when the evidence is mostly anecdotal, there's something powerful about being checked on, having something prepared for you, and being firmly told to rest. That attention is part of healing, too.

What these staples can — and can't — do

Let's be clear: pantry staples don't cure colds or flu. Viruses run their course, but these foods and remedies can:

- Ease symptoms
- Prevent dehydration
- Support immune function
- Help you feel cared for and comfortable

They work best alongside rest, fluids, and, when needed, medical care.

Flu symptoms that are severe, prolonged, or worsening should always be checked by a healthcare provider.

Build a cold and flu-ready pantry

You don't need a cabinet full of specialty products. A few intentional choices go a long way:

- Keep a mix of teas, broths, and soups
- Stock honey, ginger, and garlic
- Have easy-to-eat foods on hand
- Rotate items so nothing expires unused

Cold and flu season has a way of reminding us that wellness isn't always about doing more. Sometimes it's about slowing down, leaning on what's familiar, and letting nutritional and emotional care do its work.

NC stagnates on maternal, infant health; earns D-plus

Continued from page 1B

said.

In its report, the March of Dimes said nearly 380,000 babies in the U.S. were born preterm last year. That's one in 10 births, putting the country "among the highest rates in developed nations."

"Behind that static letter grade lies a troubling truth: our nation remains stuck in a maternal and infant health crisis," the nonprofit said, adding that progress "is not reaching the families who need it most."

Little change

North Carolina's preterm birth rate of 10.7 percent remained the same as the previous year. That's even though some counties, including Durham, Guilford and Wake, saw their rates improve.

The state's infant mortality rate continues to hover around 7 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is essentially the same as before. That means in 2023, 834 Tar Heel babies died before their first birthday.

In a bright spot in the report, the state performs a smaller percentage of C-sections for low-risk births, 24.9 percent compared with 26.6 percent for the U.S. (That also represents no change from the previous year for the state.)

North Carolina's statistics reflect racial and ethnic disparities, which means that some babies continue to die at much higher rates than others.

From 2021 to 2023, Black babies died at a rate of 12.1 per 1,000 live births. By comparison, the rate for white babies was 5.2 per 1,000 live births. Overall, babies born to Black moms die at 1.7 times the state rate.

Preterm birth and low birth weight account for 17.2 percent of all infant deaths. An array of other things cause infant deaths, ranging from birth defects, to homicides, to accidents and sudden unexpected infant deaths (previously known as SIDS).

Meanwhile, 18.6 percent of North Carolina mothers receive inadequate prenatal care. That's a larger share of women who lack this important care than the national average of 16.1 percent.

Only 72.3% of mothers in North Carolina start prenatal care in the first trimester, compared with 75.5 percent of U.S. moms.

Elizabeth Tilson, North Carolina's former state health director and chief medical officer, said she wasn't "too disheartened" by the report.

"These types of metrics take a really long time to move," said Tilson, who was recently named executive director of Nurture NC, a new nonprofit focused on improving maternal and infant health in the state.

And North Carolina has been taking steps that will help address maternal and infant health, she said. Since 2022, the state has expanded Medicaid, as well as extended Medicaid coverage to women for one year after giving birth. The state also altered the law to allow certified nurse midwives to practice without physician supervision after meeting certain criteria.

Tilson said organizations like Nurture NC are also looking at ways to make some headway on these issues. Some of that, she said, is simply making better use of existing resources.

Ensuring a healthy start

According to Tilson, Medicaid funding is vitally important for maternal and infant health.

The federal health care program for low-income people covers 35.8 percent of live births in North Carolina, according to the March of Dimes report. In some, predominantly rural, counties Medicaid covers as many as eight in 10 births.

In 2024, that amounted to 43,842 Medicaid-supported births in the state.

"We really want to be sure we are funding those things that are gonna help people have that healthy start," Tilson said.

She said it is unfortunate that Medicaid cuts this year at the state level led to the loss of the Perinatal Quality Collaborative of North Carolina. The group coordinated initiatives at hospitals intended to improve perinatal and maternal outcomes, such as reducing cesarean section births, increasing exclusive breastfeeding in newborn nurseries and reducing central line infection rates.

Winning perennials for gardens

Continued from page 1B

American native grass adds beauty, texture and motion to the landscape. Grow the species or one of the cultivars like Jazz, The Blues, Standing Ovation or Blue Heaven that is best suited to your growing region.

Calamint (Calamintha nepeta), the 2021 winner, is a long-blooming, drought-tolerant perennial. Its small white flowers cover the plant summer through fall, attracting bees and other pollinators while deer tend to leave it alone.

It works well with ornamental and native grasses and other perennials in meadow, natural or more formal gardens.

For those shadier spots in your landscape consider Aralia 'Sun King'. It grows best in full to part shade where the bold foliage combines nicely with other shade-loving perennials. A bit of sun increases the yellow in the leaves while they are more chartreuse colored in shadier spots.

Variegated Solomon's Seal (Polygonatum odoratum var. pluriflorum 'Variegatum') is another shade-tolerant PPOY. The upright, arching stems, subtle leaf variegation and yellow fall color make it a welcome addition to any shade garden. Its fragrant white flowers appear in late spring and dangle from the stems and are followed by bluish-black

"The investment in young families and infants are going to give you that long-term return on investment," Tilson said. "That's not an area we should disinvest public dollars."

Since the transformation of Medicaid to being a program run by managed care companies in 2021, more young families are receiving a suite of value-added benefits from those companies that really help moms and babies. That help can be anything from providing car seats to offering breastfeeding support to paying for birth doula, Tilson said.

Unfortunately, she said, not everyone is using them. Nurture NC wants to make sure patients and providers are aware of and using those services, she said.

Another underutilized service Nurture NC hopes to promote is UNC's NC MATTERS, a hotline for providers that need help addressing mental health issues facing pregnant and postpartum patients.

The hotline is only getting about 12 to 15 calls per week, Tilson said, so they have a "huge amount of capacity not being used."

Other states have seen success with using mobile care units to reach people for prenatal care, said Pat Campbell, a nurse who serves as director of maternal and infant health for March of Dimes of North Carolina. She said the state chapter is in the early stages of exploring that.

"I do think that has some potential for North Carolina, perhaps in the future, when we're thinking about access to care," Campbell said.

Campbell and Tilson lauded the state's 2023 law change that gave certified nurse midwives the ability to practice without physician supervision after meeting certain criteria. Maternal and infant health advocates said the loosened restriction would pave the way for more certified nurse midwives to open practices, reaching into underserved areas.

At the time that law was passed, the state had only one standalone birth center where certified nurse midwives, under the supervision of a physician, provided maternal and infant care. Since then, five more have opened, according to the Commission for the Accreditation of Birth Centers. Three are in suburban areas — Buncombe, Iredell and Onslow counties. Most of the new centers are run by certified nurse midwives.

"I'm really happy to see that, because people need more birth options, they don't need less," Iglesias said.

The North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force has been exploring another way to expand the maternal health care workforce. The legislative study group of volunteer experts, state agency leaders, community leaders and state legislators researches child health issues and makes policy and spending recommendations to the General Assembly. The task force has been gathering information about licensing certified professional midwives.

This category of midwife does not have to be a registered nurse, but must meet certification standards set by the North American Registry of Midwives. North Carolina currently prohibits the practice of CPMs.

Senate Bill 617, a bipartisan bill introduced this legislative session, would have created a license for certified professional midwives and established a North Carolina Council of Midwives to oversee CPMs in the state. The bill did not advance after it was filed in March.

The task force has not made a recommendation on CPMs.

Campbell said more work needs to be done to determine how certified professional midwives would operate in North Carolina, but she also sees the potential benefit.

"Coming together and creating that type of thing with the professional midwife could help provide some answers for the maternity deserts," she said.

Increasing the maternal health workforce is one of the focus areas for Nurture NC, which is ramping up its work after 18 months of research and planning. The group is also focusing on increasing access to care and optimizing public policy.

"It's going to take a long time to change, and it's going to take investment in multiple sectors," Tilson said. "It's not just one thing."

Sports betting sparks addiction

Continued from page 1B

gambling disorders in communities of color. Dice, lottery tickets and horse-race betting were popular in low-income communities well before our phones turned into casinos and tethers to sportsbooks, Welsh said. "The person doesn't even see it as gambling. It's a way to try and make money."

This longstanding pattern begs two questions: How will the new normalization and ease of gambling affect the most vulnerable communities? And why didn't gambling disorders get more attention — and funding — until it mushroomed as a problem among white men in recent years?

The explosion of sports betting started with a 2018 Supreme Court decision that overturned a federal law that effectively banned the activity in all but a few states. Now, 38 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico offer legal sports betting for adults and 30 states allow it online.

There are dozens of betting apps, with relentless push notifications to place a wager. Sports leagues, broadcasters, and colleges have lucrative partnerships with sportsbooks, which advertise heavily during games watched by millions of people of all ages. Last year alone, Americans legally wagered \$148 billion on sports.

Wagers are common even in states that haven't legalized sports betting. A survey last year found that nearly a half-million Californians reported symptoms of problem gambling, even though online casinos and sports betting remain illegal there. It's not hard to skirt restrictions. One way is by using a "prediction market" app, which is not a betting app per se, but

a tool — legal in every state — that allows a user to invest in the outcome of a game. Amid the betting frenzy, it's not surprising that high-profile scandals are mounting. In October, several current and former National Basketball Association players and a coach were arrested in illegal betting schemes. In November, two Cleveland Guardians pitchers were indicted for allegedly rigging individual pitches to provide huge payoffs on prop bets — bets that depend on pitch characteristics rather than who wins or loses the game.

Also in November, the NCAA announced that six former men's basketball players at three colleges took part in schemes that included throwing games and funneling information to known bettors. Now, match-fixing concerns even extend to table tennis and surfing.

A study published in mid-November found that legalized sports betting is associated with a measurable rise in crime, especially assaults, on game days. The increase is sharpest when games are close, and stressful for fans.

And researchers in California have documented the financial consequences: Legalizing sports betting is followed by a significant increase in bankruptcies, debts sent to collections, and delinquent car loans and credit cards.

Problem gambling was not even recognized as an addiction by the American Psychiatric Association until 2013, long after drug and alcohol addictions were widely accepted as public health issues.

The federal government has provided little funding for research or treatment of gambling addiction.

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Woodlawn House	1315 E. Woodlawn Rd, 28209	2

Family Site	Address	Br Size
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Claremont	1036-A Coliseum Dr, 28205	3
McMullen Woods	6508-C Walsh Blvd, 28226	3
Robinsdale	10001-A Margie Ann Dr, 28213	3
Tarlton Hills	201 Frazier Ave, 28216	2, 3, 4
Wallace Woods	7120-C Wallace Rd, 28212	3

To apply for a community waiting list, please go to www.INLIVIAN.com to apply through our application portal.

To whom it may concern, I am Kenya Smith the parent of Khamani J. Perkins whom proceeded in death on January 13, 2024. Currently I am placing this ad to locate the father of her son KyAir Jihad Perkins DOB 08/12/2020 born in Mecklenburg County.

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2026 PAGE 5B



KYLIE MARSH | THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE
Victoria Scott-Miller and sons Langston, left, and Emerson, at the re-opening of Liberation Station, North Carolina's first Black-owned children's bookstore.

Historic bookstore re-opens

By Kylie Marsh
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

RALEIGH - Dec. 29 was the fourth day of Kwanzaa, dedicated to Ujamaa, or cooperative economics. It also was a historic day in North Carolina.

Liberation Station, the state's first Black-owned children's bookstore, re-opened its doors at its new location, 430 Hill Street in Raleigh, thanks to over \$71,000 in community donations through GoFundMe.

The bookstore was open for a year in downtown Raleigh before racist threats and security concerns led founders Victoria Scott-Miller and Duane Miller to shut down. Scott-Miller said the reopening celebration was not about grief.

"Today, this moment right here isn't about what tried to stop us. Struggle doesn't get the spotlight today. Grief doesn't get the microphone. Today belongs to liberation," she said to a small crowd of children and families gathered to celebrate the reopening and purchase books.

"When the world said, 'not now,' we said, 'watch us;' and every time something tried to dim our light, we gathered more candles," Scott-Miller said. "Liberation is not a moment; it is a practice."

The Millers' sons, Langston, 9, and Emerson, 15, spoke on the significance

Please see CHILDREN'S | 6B

« ON THE MARQUEE »

Charlotte Symphony does Strauss

By Herbert L. White

her.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Your weekly listing of music, cinema and exhibits in Charlotte is here.

Let's see what's on the menu:

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. Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" evoking Vienna's famous river. Grammy-winning conductor Michael Christie will lead the symphony.

Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Jan. 10

The Independent Picture House (4237 Raleigh St.) screens the short film "The Twelve Thousand" from 10:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. as its next Community Impact Film Series event, which focuses on human trafficking and survivor-centered responses. The event will include a resource fair with local and national organizations as well as additional documentaries, and a panel discussion with advocates and experts working in prevention, legal aid, healthcare, and survivor support.

Jan. 16

The Light Factory Photo Arts Center presents "Thank You Please Come Again" at VAPA Center, 700 N. Tryon St. from 6:30-8:30 p.m.

The exhibit by Kate Medley documents her road trips across the South photographing people and landmarks at the region's service stations, convenience stores and quick stops.

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.

Please see ON THE MARQUEE | 6B



ALICIA BENJAMIN
Charlotte filmmaker Alicia Benjamin's movie debut, the documentary "Dreams Float Around Us," spotlights the concerns of Black women during the second Trump administration.

Alicia Benjamin's filmmaking debut reveals concerns of societal change

By Charles Harris

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Using adversity as inspiration for creative work is a longstanding practice among artists.

For local fledgling documentary filmmaker Alicia Benjamin, today's divided political landscape became the motivation for her debut "Dreams Float Around Us."

"[All] the crazy policies and actions of the current administration [are] causing so much confusion and unease," Benjamin said. "I knew if I was feeling traumatized and disillusioned after the 2020 presidential election [then] other Black women were feeling the same way."

Benjamin wanted to shine a spot-

light on the voice of African American women, a group frequently locked out of political discussion.

"I want people to see the real angst, unease and courage Black women, and many other groups of people, had and still have surrounding the second go round of the Trump administration," she said.

In her debut documentary Benjamin turns the camera on eight Black women of various ages and backgrounds and asks them one question, "How does it feel to be a Black woman in 2025?"

"The women in the film frankly discuss their triumphs, fears and hopes for themselves and their community during these uncertain

and chaotic times," Benjamin said. "They represent so many of us."

The documentary, which premiered at the Charlotte Black Film Festival in June, is a culmination of Benjamin's lifelong passion for creative storytelling and performance art.

"I've always been interested in writing, performing and film since I was in grade school," she said.

Raised primarily in the Wilmington, Delaware, area, Benjamin earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Maryland and studied theater and screenwriting at Hunter College in New York City.

Please see DOCUMENTARY | 6B

Bad Bunny could make Grammy history again

By Maria Sherman

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The Puerto Rican superstar Bad Bunny has redefined what it means to be a global giant — and he may once again make history at the 2026 Grammy Awards.

The artist born Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio is up for six awards at the Feb. 1 show, becoming the first Spanish-language artist to be

ominated for album, song and record of the year simultaneously. His critically acclaimed album, "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," is only the second Spanish-language record to be nominated for album of the year. The first? Well, that also belonged to Bad Bunny, 2022's "Un Verano Sin Ti."

Win or lose, experts say Bad Bunny's Grammy nominations mark a symbolic moment for Latinos. Just a week later, after all, he'll headline the Super Bowl halftime show.

Historic nominations reflect the cultural zeitgeist

Vanessa Díaz, associate professor of Chicano and Latino studies at Loyola Marymount University and co-author of "P FKN R: How Bad Bunny Became the Global Voice of Puerto Rican Resistance," says Bad Bunny's nods extend beyond his own art and serve as a "very welcome recognition of Latin music that is growing."

"Music from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean has been shaping global music tastes since the 19th century," adds Albert Laguna, associate professor of ethnicity, race and migration and American studies at Yale. "Bad Bunny is another link in a much longer chain of the popularity of Caribbean music on a global stage."

Much of this music — particularly Latin trap and reggaeton, the genres Bad Bunny got his start in and con-

tinues to use in his new work — has been historically criminalized in Puerto Rico, not unlike hip-hop in the United States. Reggaeton in particular, Diaz points out, "comes from the most marginalized communities in Puerto Rico. And so, the fact that Bad Bunny is receiving nominations in three main categories, and this is an artist who came up with trap ... is the most groundbreaking thing about the entire situation."

Petra Rivera-Rideau, associate professor of American studies at Wellesley College and co-author of "P FKN R," says that element is particularly noteworthy because institutions often ignore marginalized genres — including at the Latin Grammys, a sister award show to the Grammys.

A victory in the major categories could have "profound, symbolic meaning," she says. But with a caveat: "I'm interested to see if this is going to open doors for other people." After all, Bad Bunny himself isn't immune to the Recording Academy's institutional biases: He already has three career Grammys, but all have been in música urbana categories — despite the fact that he is the most streamed artist on the planet.

Local-to-global appeal that meets political moment

Across "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," Bad Bunny and his producers weave traditional Puerto Rican folkloric styles into a hyper-contemporary context. Latin trap and reggaeton aren't abandoned but fused with música jibara, salsa, bomba, plena and even aguinaldo, a kind of Christmas music, in "Pitorro de Coco." While Bad Bunny's previous albums also fused different genres — including bossa nova, mambo, rock, reggaeton and more — this album's melange was more homegrown.

Laguna sees "Debí Tirar Más Fotos" as a direct challenge to the prevailing "formula for global pop stardom," which

he describes as an artist making it locally, gaining traction and then "watering down" their sound into something commercial and palatable for a global audience.

"Bad Bunny went in the opposite direction. It's his most Puerto Rican album ever," says Laguna. He hopes it will communicate to other artists that they, too, can look to their ancestry and history for artmaking.

"There's so much amazing Latin music that has been overlooked and that's part of what is so beautiful about this moment," says Diaz. "And that's why it feels like a win for all Latinos."

The timing of the album's release and recognition, too, feels consequential. "The U.S. has a history of othering Latinos, othering the Spanish language. ... We're in a moment where that feels extremely acute," she continues. "For a community that is being targeted on such a deep level, it is a little bit of light, a little bit of faith that we can still carve out our place here."

Latinos and the Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. have grown increasingly wary amid growing anti-immigrant sentiment and raids, as President Donald Trump's immigration policies and executive actions have vastly expanded who is eligible for deportation and routine hearings have turned into deportation traps for migrants.

In an interview with i-D Magazine earlier this year, Bad Bunny mentioned that concerns around the mass deportations of Latinos factored into his decision not to tour in the continental U.S. (Hundreds of people have been detained in Puerto Rico itself since large-scale arrests began in late January.)

"The content of the lyrics — which are so steeped in the history of Puerto Rico, political histories, tourism and gentrification — there's so much rich

Please see BAD BUNNY | 6B

Documentary speaks to Black women's issues

Continued from page 5B

"First I focused on journalism, then theater (acting and directing), and then I did some work on small film productions in Nashville, which really piqued my interest in producing and directing film," she said.

Benjamin worked as a journalist in New York, Baltimore and Nashville prior to relocating to Charlotte in 2007, where she is a freelance writer and editor. She has also worked as a director and writer for several theatrical productions.

Benjamin admits that her creative goals initially didn't include documentary filmmaking, but her interest was ignited after interviewing Tommy Nichols, founder of the Charlotte Black Film Festival.

"Tommy invited me to a gathering with filmmakers that he has worked with and mentored," Benjamin recalled.

Despite lacking experience in filmmaking, Benjamin applied for a micro grant offered by Nichols in 2025.

"I wasn't prepared for much of any of the documentary filmmaking process," she said. "But I had passion for the idea of my documentary because of the times we're living in, after the Trump administration took over."

Benjamin recalls feelings both overjoyed and apprehensive when she received notice that she had been selected as a grant recipient.

"Now I had to actually put together the pieces to make a short film."

Undeterred by any reservations, Benjamin turned to a common 21st Century resource to learn the ropes.

"I watched all kinds of tutorials on YouTube on the best way to shoot projects," she said, adding that she used her iPhone for principal filming.

Working without a script, Benjamin set about finding participants for the project. She scouted eight Charlotte-area women ranging in age from 22 to

80. Among the women interviewed are college students, an entrepreneur, mental health advocate, performing artist and school board member.

"We knew the trouble that was coming, and we've all seen it and experienced it," Benjamin said of the topic, "but through the words of the women in the film, we see the hope and bravery they have. I put the 'script' together after I shot everything, found the additional footage and selected the sounds and music that I wanted."

Benjamin commissioned video editor Bryan Archilla, admitting, "I knew I wouldn't be able to do that part." Once filming was complete and adding copious production notes, she passed the footage to Archilla.

"I gave [Archilla] the script – meticulously detailing everything I wanted to see in the film and prayed he would cut it the way I was seeing it," she said.

Her prayers were answered.

After the premiere at CBF, "Dreams Float Around Us" was subsequently selected for the Durham Region International Black Diversity Film Festival in Ontario.

"To know that my film resonated with folks all the way in Canada made me happy," Benjamin said, adding she hopes the film will be selected for other festivals.

Although Benjamin, who lists David Fincher, Spike Lee and Julie Dash as some of her inspirations, is thrilled about the interest in "Dreams Float Around Us" and committed to staying humble.

"I'm so very far from that," Benjamin says after noting the "great work" being done by Black women filmmakers like Ava Duvernay and Gina Prince-Bythewood in recent years.

"I'm just a tiny little worm, crawling in the dirt, seeking information," she said.

Children's bookstore

Continued from page 5B

of the opening.

"I like this bookstore because I see kids who look like me. I see kids who are smart, brave and doing amazing," Emerson Miller said. "That makes me feel good about who I am."

Langston Miller discussed how people of color, including Black people, have been racially profiled by Immigration and Customs Enforcement countrywide.

"This can be very frightening for a young Black child to be looked at as a potential threat or to be misidentified. That is why this is important," he said.

Despite receiving death threats at the former downtown location, the family stood steadfast in their mission.

"I'm sure you have all heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child, but what is a village without the resources? What is a classroom without the materials to learn or to teach? And how do you find these resources when they are constantly being taken away?" Langston asked. "These are the reasons it was imperative that we return."

On the marquee

Continued from page 5B

Christian Gates, known 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.

Jan. 30

Independent Picture House (4237 Raleigh St.) shows "Do The Right Thing" at 7:30 p.m. as part of its Black History Month series.

On the hottest day of the year on a street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, hatred and bigotry smolder until it explodes into violence. The 1989 movie earned Oscar nominations for Best Actor (Danny Aiello) and Best Original Screenplay (Spike Lee).

For tickets: independentpicturehouse.org

Jan. 30-Feb. 1

Charlotte Symphony presents Prokofiev & Schumann at Knight Theater, 430 S. Tryon St.

Music director Kwame Ryan opens the program with Ives's "The Unanswered Question," a meditation on existence. Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3, played by Ran Dank, follows. Schumann's Symphony No. 2 caps the program with a testament to resilience, soaring melodies and spirit.

Tickets available at tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Bad Bunny's appeal

Continued from page 5B

political and historical content," Diaz adds. "This album is historic even without a Grammy win."

But if Bad Bunny does win, Diaz says, it will be "akin to Halle Berry being the first Black woman to win an Oscar. That was a watershed moment. Or Rita Moreno being the first Latina to win."

Beyond that, Laguna says the politics of the album are not exclusive to Puerto Rican or even Latino identity — "the lyrics on this album align with global struggles," he says. Take, for example, "Lo que le pasó a Hawaii" ("What happened to Hawaii"), a rallying cry for cultural autonomy in an era of neocolonialization.

The album's multigenerational appeal

Rivera-Rideau says one of the reasons "Debí Tirar Más Fotos" has resonated is not just the political implications of using folkloric music in addition to música urbana, but its sound. The traditional genres are "a lot more digestible" to listeners who embrace the antiquated taboos sur-

rounding Latin trap and scoff at reggaeton's sexuality. As a result, the combination of sounds makes for an album that is "popular across generations," she says.

But it only works because it is "musically really interesting. If it was just traditional music, and that's only what people cared about, it wouldn't have done as well as it did," she explains. "Musically, it is super innovative and makes accessible a lot of these older genres that people in Puerto Rico listen to, but he's been able to globalize these very local genres in a way that no one else has."

That intergenerational appeal was a feature of Bad Bunny's landmark Puerto Rican residency, with the age and global diversity of its audience.

"A lot of people feel like this is a tense moment, it's a difficult moment. And here's someone giving us a sonic language in which to narrate this complex present," Laguna says. "There's pleasure, in political critique, that the music makes possible in a beautiful way. And I think that's very much welcomed."

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