



New West Charlotte football coach D.J. McFadden opens a new era and aspirations

THE VOICE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY SINCE 1906

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« FADING HARVEST »



The Jzar family at Deep Roots CPS Urban Farm, a 7-acre spread in west Charlotte. Wisdom and Cherie Jzar became food producers in 2003 at their home in Charlotte's Coulwood neighborhood. Today, they own Deep Roots in addition to a 44-acre farm in Monroe.

MICHAEL MAXWELL

## ‘We’ve come this far,’ but farmers face uncertainty

Black producers adjust business approach as markets, support and funding shift

By Herbert L. White

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Third in a series produced in partnership with Pulitzer Center.

Wisdom and Cherie Jzar are meme busters.

The couple are first generation food producers with an expanding operation. They launched Deep Roots CPS Urban Farm in 2019 on a 7-acre spread in west Charlotte, an area where gentrification and food deserts co-exist. Seven years later, the Jzars are thriving. Their operation has expanded to a 44-acre spread in Monroe, nonprofit partnerships and growing agritourism.

As the number of Black farmers in America falls perilously close to extinction, the Jzars are a home-grown exception.

“We started as homesteaders” in 2003 in the Coulwood community, Cherie said. “Basically, we grew food for our family. We raised some chickens in the backyard. We did beekeeping. And of course, when you start growing food, you’re going to grow in abundance. You’re going to grow more than what your family can sustain or need, and you’re going to share it with the community. That’s just a natural part of it, especially if you’re in a community like a neighborhood that we were in.”

“We grew more and our yard became a place where we welcomed people and taught or shared what we were doing there, and then we took it a little further.”

Said Wisdom: “We see the need – it’s so great in our community, for Black farmers, for Black people, to be a part of food production and not just the food service industry. Our goals are lofty, so we do value where we’ve come, but we also have ideas and ambitions and goals that go beyond where we are.”

“We are grateful that we’ve come this far and every once in a while, we get a chance to say, ‘Wow, we’ve come this far.’

Please see BLACK FARMERS | 2A

## Durham PAC adapts to city’s political challenges

By Kylie Marsh

THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

Housing, education, employment and public safety are at the top of Durhamites’ minds during the 2026 election cycle.

The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People was established by Durham’s Black male elite almost a century ago to address similar concerns.

“We must acknowledge that significant progress has occurred, and significant change has occurred,” committee chair Floyd McKissick said regarding Durham’s Black representation in civic leadership. “But with that, there are still challenges.”

One notable instance of the DCABP’s political influence in the Bull City was the organization’s incremental approach to integration, which, at times, opposed more revolutionary youth movements in Durham, particularly among North Carolina Central University students.

McKissick has an extensive career as a public official in Durham and North Carolina government. “I’ve been involved in politics literally all my life,” he told The Tribune. McKissick also is vice chair for the North Carolina Utilities Commission. “You have to learn to work with people who don’t always agree with you but establish good relationships and be able to get things done effectively,” he said.

DCABP also has a political action committee. Last year, it faced public scrutiny surrounding the misuse of funds. McKissick clarified the PAC and DCABP are separate entities.

“The PAC that exists is only for receiving money. It

Please see POLITICAL | 3A



Clean energy jobs in North Carolina were attributed to the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill.

## Report: High Black unemployment, but some gains in North Carolina

By Brett Peveto

NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

A new report on racial equality shows signs of a recession among Black Americans and changes to workforce policy threatening economic gains. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies’ annual “State of the Dream 2026” report finds Black unemployment at over 7%, with large swings in youth unem-

ployment month to month.

Study contributor Kayla Elliott Ph.D., director of workforce policy for the center, says Biden-era legislation was responsible for new job training programs in North Carolina. “We saw great collaboration in North Carolina around these new opportunities in clean climate jobs and clean energy, and around semiconductor

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# Black farmers face business uncertainty

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far,' but our main focus is to say, 'OK, next steps.'"

## Urban county, forgotten industry

Agricultural production is far from Mecklenburg County's top industry - multi-billion financial services and energy corporations dwarf farming - but everybody eats. And small family farms like Deep Roots occupy an important niche - direct-to-market access for people who may face barriers to healthy foods.

To spur more output, local government is taking steps to help farmers. Mecklenburg County last year established a Voluntary Agricultural District program to preserve farmland and support food producers. The creation of such districts and enhanced VADs, decrease the likelihood of legal disputes between farm owners and their neighbors, and increase protection of farmland from non-farm development.

"We have over 10,000 acres of agricultural land remaining in Mecklenburg County, including horticulture, livestock, and forestry," Erin Stanforth, Mecklenburg's sustainability and resiliency manager said in a statement. "The Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance provides farmers a stronger voice in county government to help them advocate for themselves and the agricultural community."

The ordinance includes 10-year conservation agreements between the landowner and county that prohibit nonfarm use or development. Mecklenburg farmers can apply for the program, which is administered by the Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District and supported by North Carolina Cooperative Extension.

The county also established an Agricultural Advisory Board made up of residents who are actively engaged in agriculture. The board considers agriculture district applications; conduct hearings on public projects that propose to condemn or rezone enrolled parcels; and advise the county on local agriculture issues.

## Higher tariffs, dwindling support

The federal government has long been the largest supporter of agriculture programs, but it has a checkered record when it comes to Black people. In the past, U.S. Department of Agriculture denied loans and support to farmers based on race and the second Trump administration's campaign to dismantle initiatives has cast uncertainty over their sustainability.

Trump's tariff program has raised the price of imported materials from fertilizer to steel that are essential to food production. Rollbacks of food assistance programs not only increases barriers for consumers, but international buyers also pass on U.S. products, further reducing farmers' bottom line.

"A great example of this is with soybean market, which I know is big in North Carolina," said Gbinga Ajilor, chief economist at the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and a USDA senior advisor for rural development during the Biden administration. "Because of the trade war with China, China just actually stopped purchasing soybeans for a couple months. Very difficult for farmers."

"Even though there's a so-called deal now that China agreed to, it's still different than what they've been doing the past couple years. When they stopped purchasing from the U.S., they started purchasing from Argentina. Now you have these soybean farmers competing with Argentina, and they had already been competing with Brazil from the first Trump administration. So, you have a lot of those issues that's been happening, hurting farmers here, and it's always the smaller, medium sized producers

that get impacted."

Retaliatory U.S. trade policy could devastate North Carolina's food producers and the state's economy. A report published earlier this month by the Raleigh-based John Locke Foundation estimates that reductions in agricultural exports could cost North Carolina farmers roughly \$695 million — or a third of the state's average annual net farm income.

The conservative-leaning think tank's report, authored by North Carolina State University researcher Jeffrey Dorfman, found a trade war would wipe out nearly 3,000 jobs in agriculture and forestry as farmers respond to falling prices and lost export markets by reducing production. Job losses in related industries like transportation, food processing and manufacturing would bring the statewide total to roughly 8,000.

The peer-reviewed study identified pork, cotton, tobacco, and sweet potatoes as commodities most at risk due to their reliance on international markets and sensitivity to price declines when foreign demand falls. "When agriculture is targeted in international trade disputes, North Carolina is especially vulnerable," said Donald Bryson, president and CEO of the John Locke Foundation. "This report shows that the costs are not abstract — they mean lost farm income, lost jobs, and real harm to rural communities."

When indirect effects are included — such as reduced spending by farm families and less activity in processing and manufacturing — the report estimates total economic losses of up to \$1.9 billion, which equals 2% of North Carolina's gross state product.

As USDA starves states and municipalities of funding for initiatives like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, food access is more challenging for seniors and the poor. Those decreases, coupled with new trade barriers, left producers of all sizes scrambling.

"Under the Biden administration, it was more of the understanding that there was a deep need and trying to meet those needs," Cherie Jzar said. And then when [Donald] Trump came in office, that shifted. It shifted a lot because the tariffs and the impacts to some of the larger farmers, or commodity farmers, when the markets were cut off, specifically, the soybean market ... because China decided they weren't going to purchase U.S. soy, there wasn't a market for a lot of the soybeans that were being produced in the United States.

"North Carolina has a large number of farms who are producing soy, and so lots of those larger farmers were concerned about where their soybeans were going to be sold."

**Changing with the times**  
To mitigate the impact of change, farmers like Joseph Fields have adjusted their business model.

A third-generation producer in John's Island, South Carolina, he's lived through decades of transition on the 80-acre spread his grandparents bought in 1903.

"It started with organic fertilizer, like spreading chicken manure and horse manure after that; from horse and plow to one tractor," he said. "Then we would start using commercial fertilizer, and we started growing from there. Plant different products, cabbage, collards, corn, sweet potatoes, okra, green beans, a lot of variety of stuff."

Fields, who grows corn, soybeans and wheat, has adopted a direct-to-consumer approach. With that change, new challenges emerged.

"We do a farmers mar-

ket," he said. "People are looking for organic stuff. I went to a conference in Santa Cruz, California for two weeks to learn about organic farming and ... the farm is totally organic now, but at that time, it's hard to find organic chemicals to spray your stuff with. I've been using household stuff to control the bugs and the disease."

As a certified organic farmer, Fields said his business responsibilities have changed — primarily keeping records required to maintain his status with government rules. Balancing production and regulations can be a hassle.

"Well, it gets a little difficult," he said. "A lot of paperwork — you put in a lot of paperwork to become certified. Paperwork gets thicker and thicker. You know, you got to keep records of what you sell and what you plant and what you harvest."

As the largest urban area in the Carolinas, Charlotte is a ready-made market for the Jzars, where part of their mission is to bridge the gap to food access. They tap into community and nonprofit partnerships like farmers markets and grants to make it work.

"We're direct to consumer in a lot of ways," Wisdom Jzar said. "There was a time when there was a hold on SNAP and (Electronic Benefit Transfer) funding, we had to do some collaborations with food pantries and the Food Policy Council here and we did giveaways.

"We did a lot to try to support the people who are being affected by those changes. Now, a part of the cuts that came into the farm bill with the SNAP EBT benefits, that directly impacts us because a lot of our mission at Deep Roots is to address food insecurities, and that includes people who lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables. And a lot of times those people are the ones using Snap and EBT."

## Stripping away a lifeline

Food producers are under increasing pressure to make do with less. When USDA froze funding for regional business centers earlier this month before canceling the program entirely, U.S. Rep. Alma Adams, senior member of the House Agriculture Committee, called for the Trump administration to reverse course. Killing the program will cut services to thousands of farms and food businesses.

A USDA report from 2024 found that business centers led to 2,800 individuals receiving technical assistance, 1,500 new partnerships formed by recipients, and 287 businesses reporting increased revenue.

The RFB cuts are the latest in a string of federal program cancellations that impact farmers. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative and Local Food for Schools, which enabled local farmers to sell their goods to schools and food banks, was cancellation in 2025.

"While cost of living skyrockets and our farmers struggle to make ends meet due to the reckless trade war, the Trump administration is stripping away a lifeline to our agriculture communities," Adams said. "Our small, mid-sized, and family farms are the backbone of our economy, but this administration has chosen to abandon them by defunding the Regional Food Business Centers."

The difficulties family farms face from tariffs and falling support is a sharp departure from the previous administration, when USDA invested in them through program development and collaboration.

"There was lots of momentum under the Biden administration for equitable opportunities, equi-

table distribution of resources, and in some manner, trying to alter policy to accommodate small farmers. Black farmers who had not had always had a benefit from some of the federal government's initiatives and policies and programs and to do a redress," Cherie Jzar said. "A lot of that momentum, as it happened in the local area, was trying to reach Black farmers, trying to better understand what the challenges were and meet those needs."

"Once the administration changed, all of that momentum sort of went away, and so some of the programming started to focus

more on what we call commodity farmers, larger farmers who aren't necessarily producing food directly for their community."

Ajilor believes farmers will endure and Black farmers — despite decades of indifference if not hostility from government — will ultimately be treated as equal partners in the agriculture community.

"There's been a shift towards the industrial operations and getting larger and larger," he said. "I think there will have to be a reckoning at some point. Farmers are really struggling right now, and they're making their voices

heard and so at some point there's going to have to be something that changes. Now, what that means for black farmers, I'm not sure."

"I think it's one of those things where it's like a pendulum swing, where like the last couple of years, everyone's complaining about equity and talking about (diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives) ... and this administration has gone way too far. I think there's going to be people who are more receptive to supporting more farmers, farmers of color, Black farmers, and I think there is a roadmap ... that may not have been there before."



Ajilor



SARAH MICHELS | CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

North Carolina A&T State University juniors Shia Rozier and Terence Olu Rouse hold a press conference on Jan. 23, 2026, at the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro to discuss the launch of Protect Ours, a movement to transport students from campus to the polls this primary, after election boards denied requests to add early voting sites on campus.

# North Carolina A&T students take the wheel on early voting

Continued from page 1A  
plans in 2020.

However, neither A&T site has ever been used during midterm or municipal election cycles as early voting sites.

Students want that to change. Ideally, they'd like to be on the list for every election, no matter how small, Rouse said.

"This was no goof of the system or administrative error; this is a modern day poll tax on a student," he said. "There are thousands of students who do not have accessible transportation from campus to polling sites off campus, or students that cannot financially afford it or do not have the time to figure out another means of transportation."

But it's too late to change election board members' minds for this election, so A&T students are taking the primary into their own hands. That means tackling the biggest barrier to student voter participation: transportation.

## Letting the grown ups decide?

Rozier has gone to the county elections board three times in her three years to advocate for the inclusion of NC A&T campus voting sites. This time, she didn't succeed.

Republican State Board member Stacy "Four" Eggers, for one, doesn't buy that an urgent need exists to add campus early voting sites in Guilford County. He cites the historical record; in 2022, a majority Democratic county board voted unanimously to approve early voting plans that did not include campus sites.

If there was such a need, Democrats should have included the sites then, he said.

"Now we're being asked, suddenly, you must add seven sites and double the amount of sites, otherwise you're discriminating against someone?" Eggers asked.

Guilford County Republican elections chair Eugene Lester is of the same mindset. Campus sites will be open on Election Day, and mail-in absentee voting is available, he said in a December interview with Carolina Public Press. Plenty of options exist, he said, because the board chose 10 sites he thinks serve the entire community.

"We're certainly not going to look at one group and say that that group is more important than any other group," Lester added.

Democratic State Board member Siobhan Miller thinks excluding students sends the wrong message.

"What you've done, is you've said in the primary, the grown ups are going to pick the candidates, and then in the fall, you all can vote or not vote as you want to," she said. "What my point is, is that I think the primary sites should be as representative as possible and as similar, demographic-wise, to the general so that it's the same group that's doing the choosing."

After the Guilford County portion of the meeting, dozens of A&T students stood in front of board members with signs, asking why they weren't included. In a video of the exchange, one student suggests that if their skin color were different, the outcome would have been too.

Republican board chair Francis De Luca firmly rejected that idea.

At the January meeting, the State Board also upheld the Jackson County election board's majority plan, which cuts a historical Western Carolina University campus early voting site that has been proven to increase youth voter turnout.

## Building a movement at A&T

Transporting students to the polls won't be cheap.

Rozier and Rouse are raising funds for a shuttle to take students from campus to the Old County Courthouse, a 1.5-mile journey, for five days of early voting. Each day would cost about \$1,500.

As of Monday, they had raised \$1,370.

In the meantime, they plan to stage a march on Feb. 12 from A&T's Dudley Lawn to the Old County Courthouse. The students are in discussions to partner with several local and statewide organizations in their effort, but were not ready to share a finalized list Monday. Their effort is not connected in any way with the university.

State Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, said A&T students have always been engaged in the voting process.

"It's really commendable how energetic students are about voting, and I think this is a great commentary on that commitment to making sure that their votes are recorded," she said.

In the longer term, Rozier hopes this is a "turning point" for current and future A&T students. They want to work with county boards of election, not against them. They'd like to address and resolve any barriers in the way of placing early voting sites on their campuses so they don't have to continuously relitigate the issue, she said.

That will be difficult. Early voting decisions often hinge on turnout, which tends to be lower on college campuses. But while those numbers are important, they aren't everything, Bunker insists.

"Students are our future," she said. "... We have to be cultivating our students into being lifelong voters, and if we don't provide the sites for them to be able to vote, then we are doing a disservice to our future generation."

In addition, early voting on college campuses has always been a "partisan battle," Harrison said. Republicans perceive campus sites as boosting Democratic turnout. It's also sometimes hard to justify "student-specific" early voting sites that may have difficult parking situations for outsiders, she added.

"But the population centers at these campuses are tremendous, and so from my perspective, it makes sense to locate them there," Harrison said.

Rozier and Rouse at NC A&T plan to coordinate with other student leaders across the state moving forward — both those who have lost early voting sites and those who want to maintain them.

"We won't see these different attempts to get college voting to stop anytime soon," Rozier said. "There is power in strategy, power in community. We hope to build a larger community where we can strategize together about what's coming next, what we're doing."



Adams

## Black unemployment up, but some NC gains

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ductor production, and around increasing these new short-term programs to get folks into jobs with good wages," Elliott said.

The report found workforce policy changes in 2025 brought increasing support for apprenticeships, but programs that advance Black workforce participation were cut.

In June, administration of Perkins Career and Technical Education funding was transferred from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor. Researchers have expressed concern that this reorganization would bypass civil rights protections overseen by the education department's Office of Civil Rights.

Pell Grants have also seen reforms with the creation of a Workforce Pell

Grant program. Historically, Pell Grants were limited to education that was part of a degree pathway, but beginning in July, the grants can be used for short-term training and credential programs. Elliott said researchers will be looking at the value of using Pell dollars in new ways.

"There's lots of questions and concerns around accountability, around making sure that if Pell dollars were being used for degrees that led to a certain job or level of income, what should the return on investment in these types of programs be?" she said.

Workforce Pell was established by the 2025 budget reconciliation bill, and the legislation requires 70% completion rates and 70% job placement within 180 days. Median earnings will be reported one year post-completion.



Garrison Gibson (left), Teyona Brown, and Abena Abraham during a press briefing in St. Paul, Minnesota on Jan. 17.

## Released from ICE custody again after warrantless arrest

By Alaysia Lane

MINNEAPOLIS SPOKESMAN-RECORDER

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. - Garrison Gibson, a 38-year-old Liberian immigrant and father, was released from Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody for a second time after being re-arrested hours after a federal judge ruled his initial arrest unconstitutional.

Gibson's attorney confirmed last week that he is home with his family and required to wear an ankle monitor while remaining under immigration supervision. The second release followed a series of events that began with a warrantless raid on Gibson's north Minneapolis home: an entry a U.S. District Court judge later ruled violated the Fourth Amendment.

"This is not just a mistake. This is a constitutional violation," said immigration attorney Marc Prokosch.

According to Gibson and his family, federal agents arrived at their home around 9 a.m. Jan. 11, knocking before announcing themselves. Gibson said he asked whether they had a warrant and was told they did not.

Minutes later, multiple ICE vehicles arrived, parking in the alley, on the street and in neighbors' yards as more officers gathered. Gibson said about a dozen agents and vehicles were present, drawing neighbors outside.

Family members said agents later returned to the door claiming they had a warrant but did not show it before breaching the home. They said agents used a battering ram multiple times, damaging the front door and an interior wall.

Gibson's wife, Teyona Brown, said she stood in front of him as agents entered, attempting to shield him and their daughter.

"I had to make sure my daughter had a father," Brown said. "And I had to make sure that we had a record, not just for us, but for everyone to see how they're doing things."

The family said agents entered with weapons drawn, issued commands to sweep the home and did not show a warrant until Gibson was nearly inside a patrol vehicle.

A federal judge later ruled that ICE violated Gibson's constitutional rights by entering his home without a judicially signed warrant. The judge ordered his immediate release, noting that Gibson had been complying with immigration supervision requirements, including attending a check-in just weeks before his arrest.

"He was following every rule," Prokosch said. "There was no reason for this."

Gibson has lived in the United States since childhood after fleeing the civil war in Liberia. He has a longstanding deportation order but has been allowed to remain in the country under supervision for years.

After the arrest, Gibson was transferred to the Whipple Federal Building, where he described overcrowded and degrading conditions. He said about 40 people were held in a single cell with no beds, cold temperatures and metal surfaces.

Detainees, he said, were forced to use the bathroom in front of one another while shackled, and one man in the cell had scabies.

"It felt like humiliation," Gibson said.

Gibson said he was later placed on a plane to Texas without being told where

he was going and remained confused about what was happening. In Texas, he said conditions were somewhat different but still restrictive, with detainees sleeping on metal bunk beds in crowded units.

Following the judge's ruling, Gibson was released Thursday evening and returned home. The next morning, Gibson, Brown and Prokosch returned to the Whipple Federal Building for what they believed would be routine paperwork to finalize his release.

"The officer said, 'This looks good. I'll be right back,'" Prokosch said.

Minutes later, several unfamiliar officers entered the room and informed them Gibson was being taken back into custody.

According to Prokosch, the lead officer said the decision came from a higher authority and was "above my pay grade." Prokosch said the officer told them the order came from the White House and became emotional during the exchange.

Gibson was taken into custody for the second time but released again approximately two to three hours later.

"It was chaos," Brown said. "Nobody knew what was going on."

Brown said the raid and re-arrest deeply affected the couple's children, particularly their daughter, who now reacts with fear when someone knocks on the door.

Brown, a certified nursing assistant and pediatric health coordinator, said the family had to block their damaged front door with dumbbells for several days after the raid because it would not close properly.

"We couldn't even turn the heat on," she said. "We had to use weights to keep the door shut."

Gibson said wearing an ankle monitor has affected his ability to find work.

"It's hard to go into an interview with this big ankle monitor," he said. "People think you did something."

Prokosch said his legal team is pursuing two parallel strategies: seeking habeas protections in federal court and moving to vacate Gibson's 2009 deportation order in immigration court.

"The most important thing right now is to keep him with his family," Prokosch said. "Then we will work to permanently resolve his immigration status."

The Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota condemned ICE's actions in a statement, calling the raid "terrifying" and warning of a pattern of transferring detainees out of state to obstruct access to legal counsel.

"This case is a powerful reminder that community vigilance matters," the organization said.

Gibson said he plans to remain home as much as possible while his case continues.

"I'm not a violent person," he said. "If I was, I wouldn't have been out for the past 17 years, checking in."

Despite the trauma, the family expressed gratitude for community support.

"The love has been overwhelming," Brown said. "People brought food. They stayed in the cold for hours. These people are angels on earth."

For now, Gibson remains under supervision, wearing an ankle monitor, while attorneys fight to keep him in the United States.

"I just want to stay with my family," he said. "That's all."

## Political action committee adapts to changing issues

Continued from page 1A

is a financial entity that receives contributions that are used to help get out the vote and to educate voters," he said. The account connected to the alleged fraud was closed and all records turned over to the State Bureau of Investigations, McKissick said. The criminal fraud investigation is still active.

McKissick said the DCABP has been involved in working toward affordable housing, as gentrification presents a significant challenge. "There's a need to make certain when we come up with revised development ordinances that were sensitive to economic integration," he said, adding that mixed-use developments that include low- and moderate-income allowances are imperative.

Connected to housing is performance of students in Durham Public Schools to ensure they secure stable employment. McKissick said past conversations about integration of public schools have not yet ended; in recent years, North Carolina

public schools are often more segregated than in decades previous, according to the Public School Forum of North Carolina. In addition, private school vouchers and the presence of charter schools have funneled more affluent students away from public schools.

"They're not required to provide free and reduced lunches," McKissick said. "They're not required to provide bussing for people to be able to get their students there. So those are real realities that exist today."

McKissick said DCABP seeks partnerships with like-minded community members, not just Black people.

"We endorse Black as well as white candidates or candidates of other races, and I think it's important for us to do so," he said. "To evaluate these candidates based upon their capacity to contribute in a way that identifies with the interest that the Durham committee articulates in terms of what's good for our community and what's good for our state."

## State lawmakers wrestle with unfunded federal mandates

Continued from page 1A

100 counties, shifts the burden to already strapped county governments.

In all, the law reduces national SNAP funding by an estimated \$186 billion over 10 years while requiring states to cover a larger share of program costs. The bill also penalizes states financially if they exceed federal payment error thresholds.

The changes place North Carolina on a tight timeline, with the first major deadline arriving Oct. 1, when the state's share of SNAP administrative costs rises from 50% to 75%.

That 25 percent loss in federal administration dollars will mean county governments will have to come up with about \$67 million, and the state will need to find \$16 million,

icy changes," Hall said. "We need more quality control in what we do, but that is not a primary position that we see in a lot of our departments because we have timeliness requirements where we have to get the benefits out."

"You've got small counties who can't hire anybody because their budget's not big enough, they're too far for people to want to drive," said committee co-chair Rep. Larry Potts (R-Lexington). "These deadlines that are coming down ... will starve you out if you keep missing the deadline."

New error rate requirements

Beginning in fiscal year 2028, states will also be required to pay a share of SNAP benefit costs tied to its payment error rate.

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## King changed landscape of the US and humanity

Our nation needs more compassion.

We are in desperate need of caring and kindness. It seems that righteousness and justice are in short supply today. There are men and women in our history who were clarions and carriers of these characteristics. One such person was Martin Luther King Jr. His contributions in my opinion will never be duplicated again. This is my opinion.

He cared about people. While he was one of the chief architects of the Civil Rights Movement, he never lost his ability to be with those who didn't have a title or position. I met King when I was a college student.

This period of social justice history was significant as it gave all of us a role to play. Our community in Winston-Salem was a community of believers. We admired right and called out wrong. Sit-ins and other acts of non-violence were always happening in our city.

It was because of King's mantra of nonviolence. He knew and made us believe that right would overrule wrong. Good would triumph over evil. It is fitting and right that America celebrated the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday.

There were church services, parades and other events held in his honor. We re-committed ourselves to being strong advocates for justice in our communities. Giving of ourselves is what he did. We know that he gave his life on April 4, 1968, in Memphis.

I can remember this time quite vividly and like the world, I was in shock. The news reports and interviews were painful and hurtful to watch. This was a defining moment of sadness for our country.

Yet, like it was yesterday, we recall with joy his "I Have a Dream" speech on Aug. 28, 1963. He said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

It seems at times that America is in a holding pattern when it comes to equality for all its citizens. There is happiness for some of us but sadness for way too many of us.

An enduring faith was central in his life. He said, "With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

King always strived to make America better. It is my opinion that we are better. Can we get even better? Yes, we can.

It is my strong belief that it begins with how we treat one another. Wanting what is best for each other should always be a part of our humanity. Dr. King understood this important life tenet and that is how he lived his life.

Love is the prescription of hope that all of us need. Do you remember the R&B group Friends of Distinction? They sang a song titled, "Love Can Make it Easier." The lyrics are, "love can make it easier if only you give it a chance. Is it really hard to go out of your way for someone and lend a helping hand just to make one life much brighter."

So, let's lighten up on meanness and let's do away with hate.

James Ewers Ed.D. is an author and member of National Association of Black Journalists.

## What to do when your take home pay won't even take you home

Do you remember what the minimum wage was when you got your first paycheck? It was \$1.15 per hour when I got a job as a part-time radio announcer in high school.

Since then, Congress has increased the federal minimum wage 17 times before enacting the current \$7.25 an in 2009. And workers in 22 states welcomed in this new year with increases in the minimum wage. Currently, 30 states have minimums that exceed \$7.25; in 20 it exceeds \$18 per hour.

Back in 2009, a living wage was considered to be \$11 or more per hour, so even then the \$7.25 minimum wasn't really adequate.

My research reveals that more than 1.5 million workers in our state, about 37% of our workforce, earn less than \$15 per hour. A living wage for a single earner is considered

ate. But think what has happened since then.

Costs in 2025 are significantly higher than when the current federal minimum wage was established. Here are a few: In 2009, rent for a two-bedroom apartment was about \$875 per month. Today you will pay \$1,500 per month, a 58.33% increase.

A pound of hamburger meat increased by 63.5%, going from \$1.99 compared to today's \$3.13 and a ribeye steak increased a whopping 202%, costing \$19.25 today compared to 2009's \$3.89 per pound. Even a dozen eggs has increased 50% in cost (\$1.66 to \$3.29 today).

Here's where we are. The minimum wage is an embarrassment and doesn't even come close to providing a sustainable income. The good news is that fewer than 2% of our work-

## Healthcare worker burnout costs us

By Steve Forti

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

When it comes to health care, Americans increasingly pay more for less.

One in five patients now waits over two months to see a primary care physician or specialist. At its core, this crisis stems from a growing mismatch between patient demand and provider supply. In the wake of pandemic-era delays, demand for physicians has skyrocketed, while the healthcare workforce has shrunk by tens of thousands since 2020.

A major driver of this exodus is exhaustion. In the US, employee burnout costs the healthcare system billions each year in lost productivity and staff turnover. Each departure increases the burden on those who remain, creating a vicious cycle similar to what I have witnessed in Army Special Operations.

Why have we allowed the healthcare workforce to reach such a breaking point? The answer lies in a

workplace culture that prioritizes daily endurance over sustainable schedules. For decades, healthcare systems tacitly celebrated martyrdom by praising those who worked the longest, slept the least, and sacrificed the most.

Patients need nurses and doctors who aren't exhausted. But we can't just tell healthcare workers to who are used to putting others' needs before their own - to get better at maintaining their own health.

Healthcare is a calling for many providers, and asking them to put themselves first can feel at odds with their deeply ingrained sense of service.

Instead, healthcare organizations must fulfill their moral obligation to support their workers physically, mentally, and emotionally - and insist on self-care as a line item for evaluation. Neglecting this responsibility doesn't just harm individual employees; it erodes institutional culture, damages public

trust, and ultimately compromises patient care. A nurse is unable to provide compassionate care while running on empty. A physician's judgment is clouded by the fog of constant fatigue.

To protect our talent, our institutions, and ultimately our patients, we need to reimagine how we support employee wellbeing.

Some innovative health systems are demonstrating a better path.

For example, at Ohio State University, the MIND-BODYSTRONG program equipped new nurses with cognitive strategies through weekly group sessions, yielding sustained improvements in mental health and job satisfaction.

And at my institution, the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City, physicians who fully engaged with our comprehensive wellness effort,

The Resiliency Project, which combined the use of a wearable device with professional coaching, re-

ported a threefold reduction in burnout symptoms over 12 weeks.

These success stories share common elements. They're evidence based, integrated into schedules rather than piled on top of already heavy workloads, fully funded, and supported by leadership. And the implementers recognize that while individual resilience matters, it can't compensate for the inherent stress that has become a cultural norm in healthcare.

We now have the tools and knowledge to make this transformation. Now we need the will to turn them into standard practice. It's time to build a system that cares for caregivers as much as they care for us.

Steve Forti is a U.S. Army Special Forces combat veteran and former critical care nurse. Currently, he serves as the Chief Wellness and Resiliency Officer at the Hospital for Special Surgery.

## Injustice anywhere threatens justice for all

The start of 2026 arrives less as a new beginning and more as the potent aftershocks of the many earthquakes we endured in 2025.

It was a year defined by widening wars, democratic backsliding, the systematic hollowing out of governmental, diplomatic, and humanitarian institutions, tariff-driven economic uncertainty, and the normalization of political violence in the United States and around the world.

Heading into the second week of January, the news cycle has only grown heavier and faster than most of us anticipated. We have witnessed the forcible removal of Venezuela's dictator under circumstances that appear to violate core principles of international law: the killing of Renée Good, a U.S. citizen, during an ICE operation in Minneapolis, Minnesota; renewed rhetoric suggesting territorial or military escalation involving Greenland; and what increasingly resembles a revolutionary moment taking shape in Iran. All of this unfolds against the backdrop of ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Ukraine, wars that continue to grind on with limited resolution, uneven attention, and devastating human cost.

Amid this convergence of crises, another pattern has become impossible to ignore, particularly across social media: the rise of false equivalencies, what-aboutism, and competing narratives that demand suffering be ranked, compared, or morally audited, rather than seen plainly as injustice and harm. This dynamic is not new. But in

recent days, it has been especially visible in reactions, or the perceived lack thereof, to the unfolding revolution in Iran when contrasted with the massive global mobilization around Gaza.

I've noticed this same dynamic in responses to the Trump administration's removal of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, where public discourse collapsed into a false choice: either condemning the action as illegal or justifying it because Maduro was a brutal dictator. In reality, both can be true. Acknowledging one injustice does not require excusing another. Holding these truths together is not moral confusion. It is moral clarity.

I'll also be the first to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that not all lives receive the same attention or urgency from global media or policymakers. This is precisely the context in which the Black Lives Matter slogan emerged. Despite frequent mischaracterizations and criticism, its core message was never that only Black lives matter, but that Black lives matter too. Selective empathy is real; it is a structural feature of global politics and media ecosystems.

People tend to engage most deeply with crises that intersect with their identities, interests, political commitments, or moral frameworks. At the same time, it is both necessary and appropriate to call out moments of moral exclusion, when certain lives or struggles are implicitly deemed less worthy of concern, visibility, or protection.

We also need to be honest about the limits of human attention and endurance. Compassion fatigue is real for many of us. Each of us has a finite emotional and cognitive capac-

ity to absorb a constant barrage of global crises and human suffering. Some people are moved to action; others disengage from the news entirely; still others feel overwhelmed and shut down. These responses are human, not moral failures. We all navigate chaos differently.

The tension emerges not from our human limits themselves, but from how they are misused or perceived. Fatigue is turned into a reason to dismiss others, feeling overwhelmed becomes a way to minimize someone else's pain, and caring deeply about one injustice is treated as proof that you must not care about another, or that you are somehow being hypocritical.

Recognizing our limits should deepen humility and empathy, not turn suffering into a contest. Some will step forward where others cannot, and others will step back when they must. Neither requires permission.

There can be more than one injustice in the world that we care about. In that spirit, it is worth recalling the enduring truth articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. in his Letter from Birmingham Jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." If that principle still means anything, then we must reject the impulse to rank suffering or create competitions of victimization.

Repression and human rights violations, and the movements that challenge them, share a common pursuit of human rights, justice, and dignity. That principle applies to those protesting the killing of Renée Good by an ICE agent in Minneapolis, to those demanding accountability for Gaza, to those marching in Iran against an oppressive regime, and to those advocating on behalf of Sudan or wherever oppression persists. These are not competing commitments. They are different expressions of the same moral impulse.

This distinction becomes especially important when we consider how global crises are interpreted and compared. What happened in Gaza was horrific: thousands killed, starved, and bombed. Acknowledging that reality does not negate, or even diminish, what has unfolded in Iran. Information from inside the country has arrived sporadically precisely because the regime has blocked communications, shut down internet access, and responded to protests with lethal force, killing hundreds of demonstrators.

Recognizing our limits should deepen humility and empathy, not turn suffering into a contest. Some will step forward where others cannot, and others will step back when they must. Neither requires permission.

Suffering does not need competition. Justice is not a finite resource. And our responsibility, to see clearly, to care broadly, and to act, belongs to each of us.

Jared O. Bell, PhD is a former U.S. diplomat and scholar of human rights and transitional justice, dedicated to advancing global equity and systemic reform.

## What to do when your take home pay won't even take you home

Do you remember what the minimum wage was when you got your first paycheck? It was \$1.15 per hour when I got a job as a part-time radio announcer in high school.

Since then, Congress has increased the federal minimum wage 17 times before enacting the current \$7.25 an in 2009. And workers in 22 states welcomed in this new year with increases in the minimum wage. Currently, 30 states have minimums that exceed \$7.25; in 20 it exceeds \$18 per hour.

Here's where we are. The minimum wage is an embarrassment and doesn't even come close to providing a sustainable income. The good news is that fewer than 2% of our work-

force actually earns the minimum.

If we are waiting for our lawmakers, either in Washington or Raleigh, to take action on the minimum wage we will likely be waiting until Jesus comes again.

So, if we're not going to do anything, let's do nothing! In other words, let's abolish having a state minimum wage at all, like five other states have done.

This simple solution might frighten some people and delight others. Our Libertarian friends might celebrate, since they don't like government intervention in much of anything. And it might scare those who are afraid that if we eliminate the state minimum wage that all hell would break lose. It might, but not the way many suspect. A free market ap-

proach to paying workers might threaten some employers who have used the minimum as a ceiling for paying workers too little. And it might scare some progressives who would fear it would end up with workers earning less. We don't think either scenario will occur.

In both Tennessee and South Carolina, two of the five states with no state minimum wage, they are still loosely regulated by the federal minimum wage. But consider what has happened. In South Carolina, the average hourly wage in 2023 was \$26.08 and 2025 data from Tennessee indicates the average hourly wage is \$30.81. Data from our own state indicates the average wage is \$33.82 per hour.

Simply put, the state minimum wage doesn't really mean anything. Even fast-food restaurants and other firms that hire entry-level workers in low skill jobs must pay what the market demands. Folks flipping burgers in fast food eateries earn, on average, \$12.27 an hour. The one critical point in the minimum wage debate is that continuing to do nothing is not an acceptable solution. If we care about our people - all people - we need to provide an environment where people can earn a living wage. Let's loosen the shackles of unreasonable minimum wage laws. We might be pleasantly surprised at the results.

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



UNC PEMBROKE ATHLETICS

Johnson C. Smith added former UNC Pembroke receiver JaQuan Albright, who caught 64 passes for 895 yards and five touchdowns as a redshirt junior last year, via transfer.

## Golden Bulls parlay portal process

*Johnson C. Smith aims to continue recent success via transfers at skill positions and defensive line*

By Herbert L. White  
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Johnson C. Smith didn't stand still on upgrading its football roster.

The Golden Bulls, who won a school-record 10 games last year, the CIAA title and a first-ever berth in the NCAA Division II playoffs, used the transfer portal to grab reinforcements at the skill positions on offense and defensive line.

"We've gotten stronger as a ball club," JCSU coach Maurice Flowers said. "We've hit some what we call some need areas, and we've got a couple more we're trying to get in before a

drop-add [deadline for classes]. Very excited about our program, very excited about the guys that have come back. They've come back with the attitude, just ready to go to work. We know nothing's going to be given to us to get a bull's eye on us, but we're just concerned about the work that we're going to put in day by day to put together a championship program."

For the fifth straight year, Flowers recruited a quarterback from the portal

in Josh Jackson, a 6-foot-5, 215-pound former Tennessee Mr. Football who spent two years at FCS program Central Connecticut State. Jackson, who has two years of eligibility, played sparingly with the Blue Devils but has the raw skills JCSU coach Maurice Flowers sought.

"We're just glad to beat out some really good schools for him, but glad he's on campus," Flowers said. "... He's got two, for sure, maybe three years of eligibility, and a big dual threat

quarterback that really caught our eye."

Smith added former UNC Pembroke receiver JaQuan Albright to a corps that lost Biggie Proctor to graduation and Brevin Caldwell to FCS Norfolk State via transfer. Albright (6-0, 180) caught 64 passes for 895 yards and five touchdowns in 2025 as a redshirt junior. He also rushed for 132 yards on 22 carries.

"We think he's a mix of a biggie type of receiver," Flowers said. "A big receiver, but also some shiftiness that we had with Brevin Caldwell. He can play outside, play inside. He's got explosiveness, and we're just extremely excited

Please see JC SMITH | 6A



### « HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL »

## McFadden's goal: expand West Charlotte culture

By Cameron Williams  
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West Charlotte High football will look different in the fall.

New coach D.J. McFadden plans on instilling four foundational principles to help shape a new culture for the team, school and community.

"Our culture is going to be based on discipline, accountability, responsibility and integrity," he said Wednesday at a campus meet-and-greet, "and it is going to be more process based. I want us to focus on the process of what it takes to get the things that we want done rather than worrying about those end results like a state championship. That is everyone's goal, but I want to make sure we are living daily by those four principles, and I think everything else will take care of itself."

#### Ready to win now

West Charlotte is two seasons removed from winning the NCHSAA 3A state championship under the leadership of Sam Greiner, who was fired last month. McFadden believes the Lions have the talent to continue their run.

"This place is ready [to win]," McFadden

Please see DJ MCFADDEN | 6A



CHARLOTTE HORNETS

West Charlotte High football coach D.J. McFadden speaks with junior varsity players on Jan. 21 during a campus meet-and-greet. McFadden, who coached at Independence for five years, succeeds Sam Greiner.

## Charlotte 49ers moving up in American basketball

By Cameron Williams  
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Charlotte has vaulted to second in the American Conference basketball standings.

The 49ers (11-9, 5-2) withstood a late rally by Tulane inside Halton Arena for a 73-70 win on Jan. 23 for their second in a row. After

scoring just 23 points in the first half, the 49ers scored 50 in the second.

"I'm really proud of the guys," Charlotte coach Aaron Fearne said. "[Tulane] is not an easy team to play. They're so disruptive with their zoning and pressing and changing zones and going into man [defense sets]. It

makes it a thinking game, which you don't want it to be, because you want to just play. ... It was a bit of a grindy game."

After losing to Tulsa on Jan. 14, Fearne challenged his team to be tougher, especially in rebounding. In that game, Charlotte was out-

Please see CHARLOTTE | 6A

## NC Courage land Evelyn Ijeh via transfer from AC Milan

By Herbert L. White  
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Evelyn Ijeh, who finished third in Italy's 2024-25 Golden Boot race as a member of AC Milan, has moved to the North Carolina Courage on a permanent transfer.



NORTH CAROLINA COURAGE

Evelyn Ijeh is moving from AC Milan to the North Carolina Courage.

The Swedish forward is joining the Courage via permanent transfer for an undisclosed fee and signed to a guaranteed contract through the 2029 NWSL season. She will join North Carolina once she receives a P-1 visa and an International Transfer Certificate.

Ijeh, who joined Milan in 2024, became one of the top attacking players in Italy, finishing third in the Golden Boot race in 2024-25 with 12 goals in 29 games. In the 2025-26 season, Ijeh scored four goals in just over 800 minutes and a goal in three caps for the Swedish national team.

"I'm very excited to join the North Carolina Courage and begin this new chapter of my ca-

Please see NC COURAGE | 6A

## UMES coach makes converts

People thought Cleo Hill Jr. was crazy for leaving Winston-Salem State for Maryland Eastern Shore.

After all, Hill was the king of Ram Nation for six seasons, delivering two CIAA Tournament titles and a couple of postseason appearances. He is one of three CIAA coaches to win a championship with two different teams: WSSU and Shaw. Lonnie Blow (St. Augustine's/Virginia State), and Lou D'Alessio (Bowie State/Fayetteville State) are the others.

UMES was a dud when Hill took over the reins last season. Fans and alumni spent more time debating about reinstating the football program than they did talking about basketball. The university even embarrassed itself by trying to change its brand from UMES to MDES. (Think new Coke.)

The Hawks had one winning season in eight years when Hill was recruited. Coached by Jason Crafton, that 2022-23 squad went 18-13 overall, 9-5 MEAC. But it was short-lived. The old Hawks returned the following season with a 9-20 finish. Crafton left to become chief program strategist at Columbia.

An old cliché is coaches always need a challenge, the next big thing they can put their stamp on. Hill, obviously, was at that stage. Why else would he leave a storied program where his father, Cleo Sr., was a mega superstar from 1957-61, and played under one of the greatest coaching legends in any division, Clarence "Big House" Gaines? Hill Jr. could



BONITA BEST



HILL JR.

Please see CLEO | 6A



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith football coach Maurice Flowers said the Golden Bulls balance recruiting from the transfer portal with developing high school recruits to build the roster's foundation.

## JC Smith parlays portal process with newcomers

**Continued from page 5A**

to get him."

The top returning receivers are Brian Lane, who caught 46 passes for 676 yards and five scores last season, and Reggie Daniel (18, 345 yards, 6 TDs).

There's more depth at running back with transfer Fabian Duncan, a North Mecklenburg High graduate who was SIAC most valuable player at Allen University after rushing for 1,301 yards and 15 touchdowns last year. Duncan will compete for carries along with All-CIAA Bobby Smith (1,030 yards, 9 TDs) and Kamarr Edmonds, who missed the last eight games in 2025 due to a leg injury.

"When you got a guy that wants to run toward competition, man, you just look forward to bringing him into the fold and really bringing a lot to your program," Flowers said, "because those are the young men that we want."

JCSU shopped for defense as well, adding edge Jason Romero, 6-5, 250-pounder from Laurinburg who played at East Carolina. Another signing is defensive tackle Anthony Binyard (6-2, 290), an All-CIAA pick who played on the Broncos' 2022 conference title team as a redshirt freshman. As a sophomore in 2023, he racked up 29 tacks



Duncan

(15 solo) and five sacks – including a pair against Smith. He'll likely succeed Steny Joseph, who transferred to North Carolina A&T.

"When we played Fayetteville State in 2023 at Fayetteville State, they beat us 14-7 and we had two fourth-and-1s and went for both of them. Both ... were stopped by No. 8, Anthony Binyard. He was impressive on film."

Marque Vereen, a cornerback who played at West Florida last year, managed three tackles in five games as a junior. He'll have an opportunity to compete for the starting spot left open by Rontay Barber's graduation.

Nearly every program picks up transfers in the offseason, but JCSU's approach has been to balance recruiting the portal while developing high school signees to form the roster core. It delivered a conference title and a national that rose as high as 11th last year.

"That's also why we do not just go to the portal and get 30 guys to just say, 'OK, we're going to build a team,'" Flowers said. "You've heard me rave about our coaching staff. You know that we're good recruiters, and so in being good recruiters, you have to trust your recruiting and also your development."



Binyard

## Charlotte 49ers basketball rises to second in American standings

**Continued from page 5A**

rebounded 35-22. Since then, they outrebounded East Carolina by 14 and Tulane by 17.

"I think tough teams win and soft teams don't," Fearne said. "We've kind of talked a lot about collisions in basketball; there are collisions everywhere. The guy goes one on one at some point we're going to meet. There's going to be a collision. ... I talk to these guys a lot about that... you have to dominate physically. It's a mentality. ... Football is obviously the biggest [physical sport]. Physical teams in football dominate you with the line, they dominate you with the run, they dominate you with the routes that they run. ... That's how I try to get these guys to play, to play really tough, really physical, and just try and dominate that space."

Fearne's message resonated with forward Ethan Butler, who came off the bench to score 10 points on 4-of-5 shooting against Tulane. He also grabbed four rebounds.

"It's a repeated message we get every day," Butler said, "just the importance of how it creates control of the game. It cre-

ates pressure opportunities and that's big for us. That has been key to our success this year. And on defense, getting a big rebound and getting stops allows us to get out and run in transition and it's big for us."

Defensively, Charlotte played fairly sound. Tulane forward Ryan Brumbaugh had a big game with 35 points on 11-of-15 shooting, but only one other Green Wave player, Asher Woods, scored double figures with 10 points.

"I thought we made it difficult for a lot of the guys tonight," Fearne said, "like we did some pretty good things like slide our feet, sit in gaps, and follow the scout and being really continuous with our game plan a little bit the last couple of games. Someone will just do what they have to do, and we'll make it difficult for everybody else. I think it's hard to stop everybody. It's almost impossible to do, in this day and age."

The 49ers go to Temple next on Jan. 28 in the second meeting between the two. Temple won the first game 76-73 in Charlotte, but Fearne feels his team has grown since.

## Cleo Hill has Eastern Shore believing

**Continued from page 5A**

have retired at WSSU if he wanted.

But shot at rebuilding a Division I program in a good basketball conference was just too tempting.

Hill and UMES took their lumps last season, winning just six games, two in the MEAC. Their 8-13 record this year is from a brutal nonconference schedule. The MEAC portion couldn't come soon enough, as the Hawks were riding a seven-game losing streak to end nonconference play. But those losses are long forgotten. What has folks talking is the 4-0 MEAC mark, their best conference start since the 1973-74 season.

"The whole campus is excited. ... It's difficult not to take a look at it," Hill said on a recent MEAC teleconference. "I just want to make good on my promise."

Hill did what most coaches do today to turn around a program – hit the transfer portal. UMES's big three that have grabbed media attention are Zion Obanla (Claflin), Dorion Staples (Miles, Southern Illinois) and Joseph Locandro (Concordia, St. Leo).

Obanla played at Claflin when Hill was at

WSSU. Who knew they would wind up on the same team? When Obanla decided to enter the transfer portal, Hill was waiting. Although the trio leads the team in scoring, their stats show a more equal squad than any one dominating player. Hill has a "problem" many coaches wish they had.

"Our strength is our depth," he said. "I am comfortable playing our 11 through 14 guys in any situation. It's challenging trying to find minutes for guys on the bench. But I rather have that problem than not."

UMES has wins over Morgan State, Howard, Norfolk State and Coppin State. The road win at the Spartans, the two-time champs, really raised eyebrows. The Hawks were scheduled to visit Durham Jan. 26 in a doubleheader – UMES women also are undefeated at 4-0 – but the games were postponed due to the threat of weather.

There's still plenty of basketball left to play, but for now, Hill is not looking so crazy after all.

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

## DJ McFadden opens a new chapter with Lions

**Continued from page 5A**

said. "This isn't a rebuild. Sam did a great job with this program in the past and got them to a spot where they are ready to win right now. That is the standard and that isn't going to change. I am not coming here trying to change [the standard]. My expectation is to win right now. I think that is what the community expects. ... If you call yourself a ball coach, that is what should drive you to put the work in. I've always done that but now in a community where it is almost like championship or bust, I am excited for that challenge."

It came as a shock to some that McFadden would want to leave Independence where he played quarterback and won two state championships. But, he said, complicity started to set in. He believes West Charlotte is the perfect place to spread his wings.

"The reason it was so appealing to me is because of the overall community support," McFadden said. "The support this place has from the alumni, it is like nothing I've ever seen before. I don't want to sound cliché but, seriously, the support is crazy. I think every program wants to win a state title but that is the expectation here. And with that comes the challenge of making sure we are doing the right things each and every day to make sure we have a chance to sit at the table. With me being an alumnus of Independence, I wanted to be immersed in a community that expects to win, but I am built for that and I am ready."

### Eradicating stigma

In his opening remarks to West Charlotte parents, McFadden said he wants to instill a culture of change where home games aren't restricted regarding the number of tickets sold. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools last season limited availability due to potential chaos.

McFadden said that he doesn't intend on writing CMS athletics director Erica Turner

to adjust district's policy because; rather, the goal is to prove the program's worthy of a rethink.

"I don't think that this is something that you can tell them or write to them," McFadden said. "It is something that we have to show them over time. I think it's the things that you have to see and identify when they do come to visit here at a football game. They need to see the changes that we have made from the past. A lot of that starts on the administration side of things. ... But, like I said, I think they will be able to come out and see the difference. I think that will make more of a difference than calling whoever up and saying, 'Hey, we did XYZ.' They can actually get out here and see the difference."

### The Husky Hump

In 2025, West Charlotte lost in the 8A West regional final to eventual state champion Hough. The Huskies went undefeated to secure their first state title, but despite their prior lack of deep playoff success, since hiring coach DeShawn Baker in 2023, have not lost to a Charlotte-Mecklenburg team.

The Lions lost to Baker-led Hough teams in 2023 (23-7), 2024 (40-14), and 24-0 last year. And although McFadden's Independence teams couldn't knock off the Huskies either, he isn't looking ahead yet.

"That is something that I don't want to worry too much about," McFadden said. "We know it is coming, and we'll deal with it when we need to deal with it. I think it is all process-based. I think that from a culture standpoint, if we can get the things we need to get done, done, by the time that game gets here we will be a lot more equipped for it. I don't want us thinking about that game right now. We'll get there when we get there and it will be settled when it is settled. Right now, I want us to focus on the process it is going to take to even get back to that game."

## NC Courage sign Evelyn Ijeh

**Continued from page 5A**

reer, Ijeh said in a statement. "The Courage is a club with a strong identity, high standards, and a history of competing at the highest level, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to be part of such an ambitious environment."

Ijeh turned professional in 2017 with IFK Göteborg, which became the women's team for BK Häcken in 2021 before ending the year with Lidköping. Ijeh's best season in Sweden was with

Växjö DFF, where she scored 32 goals in 42 appearances.

Ijeh moved to Liga MX Femenil club Tigres UANL in 2023, before going on loan to AC Milan in 2024. After scoring four goals in 15 matches to end the 2023-24 campaign, the transfer to the Rossonere was made permanent.

"Evelyn is a dynamic attacking player who brings pace, physicality, and a real presence in the final third," Courage chief soccer offi-

cer Ceri Bowley said. "She fits our game model well — aggressive in transition, committed in the press, and dangerous attacking space behind the defense. Beyond her on-field qualities, she has shown strong mentality and a clear desire to grow, which aligns perfectly with our long-term vision."

Ijeh's father, Peter, played for the Nigerian national team and played professionally in Sweden, including a two-year stint with IFK Göteborg.

## Courage hires Mak Lind as new coach

By Herbert L. White

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Mak Lind is the North Carolina Courage's new coach.

Lind, who starts immediately with training camp underway, is the third coach in franchise history. He comes to the NWSL side from Swedish side BK Häcken Women, where he coached the club to the 2025 Damallsvenskan title with a 21-1-4 record and a dominant plus-68 goal differential.

"This is a club with an incredible history and a clear expectation to compete for trophies," Lind said in a statement. "I'm very aligned with the system and style of play already in place and look forward to continuing to evolve it alongside the players and staff. I can't wait to get started and for my family and me to fully immerse ourselves in this community."

Lind, who was hired by Häcken in 2023, led the club to second place in 2024 before taking the title the next year. He also coached Häcken to the 2023-24 UEFA Women's Champions League quarterfinals, where they lost to Paris Saint-Germain.

"Mak brings a proven track record of building competitive, modern teams and developing players within a clear footballing identity," courage chief soccer officer Ceri Bowley said. "His experience in Europe and his attention to detail align strongly with our long-term vision, and we're excited to welcome him to the club as we continue to raise our standards on and off the pitch."

"Mak's ability to combine performance, culture, and player development makes him a perfect fit for our club."

Lind has led professional clubs in Sweden since 2016, mostly on the men's side before transitioning to BK Häcken Women.

A former center back as a player, Lind started his professional career at age 15 and tallied 256 senior appearances, mostly with BK Häcken, where he eventually was named captain. He earned 10 international caps with the Lebanese men's national team between 2013-15 and was named to the IFFHS All-Time Lebanon Men's Dream Team in 2022. A Swedish citizen, Lind was born in Lebanon.



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