



Charlotte Symphony Orchestra music director Kwamé Ryan earned a Grammy Award for best opera recording with "Intelligence," a 2023 performance with the Houston Grand Opera.

## Charlotte maestro ‘on top of the world’ with Grammy win

*Kwamé Ryan earned music’s top prize for best opera recording ‘Intelligence’*

By Herbert L. White  
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Kwamé Ryan is literally and figuratively on top of the opera world. Ryan, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra’s music director, reached the pinnacle of his profession last week when he earned a Grammy Award for best opera recording with “Intelligence,” recorded in 2023 with the Houston Grand Opera. In an interview with The Post, Ryan, the first CSO conductor to win a Grammy, discussed the thrill of winning music’s biggest prize, the significance of “Intelligence” from a cultural standpoint and whether the award changes his professional prospects.

Answers are edited for brevity and clarity.  
**Immediate emotions after winning:** Ryan: I feel on top of the world. I’m really still basking in the glow ... it happened to me, and I was there to experience it, which was not self-evident, believe me.  
**Expectations once the program started:** Ryan: Well, I was delighted to be nominated. One of the things that you notice when you’re sitting in the ceremony, which is a very long event – it’s perhaps four hours long – is that everybody who’s nominated is working at the top of their game and is worthy of a win in some sense. Second thing you notice is

that there are five nominees, which means that you have a one in five chance of winning it and that kind of manages your expectations automatically. Those two things together manage your expectations, so when they get to your category, and they list off the nominees, all of whom are amazing, and then they say, ‘and the Grammy goes to,’ your heart stops a little bit.  
My heart skipped at least two beats before they said the name of our project, ‘Intelligence’ and then the adrenaline hits like a like a hammer, and then you’re really on a kind of nervous autopilot until you get back off the stage.  
Please see **MAESTRO’S** | 2A

## Suit takes on US air quality rollback

*Charlotte plaintiff alleges waiver harms Black neighborhoods*

By Herbert L. White  
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A Charlotte environmental advocacy group is challenging Trump administration exemptions of a cancer-causing chemical used to sterilize medical devices. CleanAIRE NC is among the plaintiffs represented suing to block the waiver of 2024 Environmental Protection Agency standards that lower cancer risks for people near medical sterilizer facilities by more than 90%. Studies show sterilization of medical equipment using substitutes for ethylene oxide can be done safely without raising costs. The plaintiffs allege some facilities that received exemptions were already capable of complying with the 2024 standards.



Robbins

One of the exemptions went to Oak Brook, Illinois-based Sterigenics, which has a facility located near predominantly Black communities in southwest Charlotte. The lawsuit was filed last month in the District Court for the District of Columbia.  
“These exemptions raise serious questions about whose health is being prioritized,” CleanAIRE NC executive director Jeffrey Robbins said in a statement. “We are talking about a known carcinogen being pumped into neighborhoods already overburdened by industrial pollution, where so many families live, learn, and play. To strip away these life-saving protections, which are already proven and working in facilities across the country, is a profound betrayal of the public trust.”  
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## North Carolina prisons face ‘dire’ staffing crisis

By Rachel Crumpler  
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

Five prison employees were killed in North Carolina in 2017 — four from a failed escape attempt at Pasquotank Correctional Institution and another in an attack at Bertie Correctional Institution. It was the deadliest year for prison staff in state history. Investigations that followed pointed to understaffing as a central factor. At the time of the incidents, correctional officer vacancy rates at the two prisons ranged from roughly 20% to 28%, according to reporting by The Charlotte Observer. Eight years later, that worst-case scenario is looming large for corrections leaders. Staffing levels across most of North Carolina’s prisons are as bad — or worse — than they were in 2017. Prison officials and advocates say the shortages have reached a dangerous tipping point, heightening the risk of another catastrophic incident.  
“The way those prisons were staffed when those murders happened is the average way prisons are staffed now,” said Ardis Watkins, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, which advocates for state employees, including those working in prisons. “What we thought were terrible vacancy rates eight years ago are pretty average right now.”  
About one in four state prisons — 14 facilities — have half or more of their correctional officer positions vacant, according to December 2025 staffing data from the Department of Adult Correction provided to NC Health News. Vacancy rates by facility range from a low of about 5% N.C. Department of Adult Correction Secretary Leslie Cooley Dismukes described staffing at North Carolina’s 55 state prisons in stark terms during a recent meeting of the  
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LYNN BONNER | NC NEWSLINE

NC A&T State University tried unsuccessfully on Jan. 13, 2026, to have the NC Board of Elections approve a voting site on the Greensboro HBCU’s campus.

## Court denies NC college students’ petition for campus voting sites

By Clayton Henkel  
NC NEWSLINE

U.S. District Judge William L. Osteen denied a motion for a preliminary injunction for North Carolina college students seeking to have polling sites available on their campuses when early in-person voting begins this week. The state Board of Elections rejected early voting sites in January at on-campus locations at NC A&T State University, UNC Greensboro, and Western Carolina University. College Democrats of North Carolina and students at the three campuses ap-

pealed, arguing that denying universities early voting sites was part of a targeted effort to limit young people’s opportunities to vote. The students argued in their suit that because many do not have transportation, it would be difficult to travel to the off-campus polling locations. But Osteen wrote in a Sunday opinion that in the court’s view, the solution sought by the college students was “problematic” because it would depend on the actions of third parties beyond the court’s control.  
Please see **COURT** | 2A

## Teens push safe driving initiatives

By Jennifer Fernandez  
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

During Isabella Avila’s freshman year at Union Pines High School in rural Moore County, a member of the senior class died in a car accident. Then, during her sophomore year, a freshman was killed when the vehicle he was driving crashed into a house, she said. Media reports at the time indicate the SUV’s driver and his passenger, who survived, were both 14.  
“He was actually in my class,” Avila, a 17-year-old junior, recalled of the boy who died. “I remember he talked to me one time.”  
In North Carolina, the number of fatal wrecks involving teen drivers ages 15 to 19 increased by 41 percent from 2013 to 2023, according to data analyzed by the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. They rose from 111 to 157 a year. “Unfortunately, when it comes to my school ... we have ... one or two kids pass away every year due to driving,” Avila said.  
When Avila learned about the NC Alliance for Safe Transportation Teen Safe Driving Ambassador  
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# Maestro’s ‘on top of the world’ after Grammy win

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*How the winning project – based on a true story – came about:*

Ryan: It was developed like pretty much any other opera. Opera is a complex art form that involves lots of different disciplines and creatives from many different fields. The orchestra, the cast of singers on stage, and then set design and construction, costume design and construction lighting. So, there’s a lot of people that need to be coordinated into the creative space at the same time.

Two years in advance, I knew that they wanted me to be on this project. Houston Grand Opera was interested in having me lead this project musically. I accepted without even having seen the score, because it wasn’t finished yet Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer was still writing it at that point, but I was so taken with the story, this true story of a wealthy abolitionist, Elizabeth Van Lew, whose family had owned slaves, who during the Civil War, created this spy ring against the South, and her prime agent was a former slave, Mary Jane Bowser, who was secretly educated and also had a photographic memory.

Mary Jane Bowser infiltrated the Confederate White House as a servant, and while she was cleaning and looking after kids, she was reading documents, memorizing them, and sending information back to the Unionists. I just think that’s a story that reads like a thriller. That’s a movie script for me.

*On whether winning the Grammy carries more weight given “Intelligence’s” intersection of race, politics and espionage:*

It does in some ways. I mean, a Grammy win is an incredible moment in anybody’s career, regardless of what the project is. But what I find exciting about this particular win for this particular project is that the broad exposure that Grammy win for the project that goes way beyond the normal boundaries of the classical music interested public is well placed on ‘Intelligence,’ because ‘Intelligence’ is a project that, in itself, is so accessible and so rhetorical and so relevant to where we are historically today, even though it’s a period piece, but the themes that it tackles are very contemporary. So, I’m happy that this particular project that’s so rhetorical and so accessible is getting this kind of exposure and coverage.

*Immediate reaction from friends and supporters around the world:*

It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. You speak about the

phenomena, you know, the phenomenon of phone blowing up. We use that turn of phrase [but] had never actually experienced it, to have your phone going off constantly for a number of days is something that’s quite new to me.

But what I loved, and continue to love about the experience, because my phone hasn’t stopped since the Grammy win, is that we all have people who orbit our lives at different proximities. They may be close family, close friends, but then there are colleagues, ex-colleagues, people who are who have followed our work but aren’t even personally known to us. All of these satellites that have been orbiting my life, many of them unseen from my perspective, suddenly came into sharp focus, and I was just bowled over by wave after wave of love and support that’s been coming since the ceremony, and you talk about a blow after an event like this, it really does feel like a blow that I’ve been in ever since.

*If winning a Grammy ever on the career radar:*

When I was a boy, I knew that there was a thing called a Grammy Award. But at that time, maybe because the classical Grammys are not carried live the way the pop Grammys are. I didn’t even know that there were Grammys for classical music, so I only discovered that once I became part of the business ... but it never occurred to me that I would ever be nominated for one, and the idea that I would actually win one wouldn’t have been further from my mind.

*What’s next:*

One of my colleagues from the Academy for the Performing Arts in Trinidad asked me that. He was like, ‘Now you’ve climbed this mountain, you won a Grammy, what’s the next mountain to climb?’ I said to him, ‘The strange thing is, I don’t feel like I’ve been climbing anything. I feel like I’ve been doing something that I that I love; that I wanted to do. Ever since I was a boy, I’ve been privileged enough to get to do it at the highest level and privileged enough to be honored with this award. But it doesn’t change anything about how I do my work.

I still am going to be looking for projects that make me curious and make me enthusiastic and joyful in the execution, because that’s what it takes to work at this level, but it’s what I’ve been doing to date. And as they say, ‘If it ain’t broke, you don’t fix it.’



JORDAN DRIVING SCHOOL

A student gets a lesson through Jordan Driving School in Wake County.

# Teens push for safe driving initiatives to curb fatalities

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program, she thought it would be a good fit for her. The program, in its second year, has about 100 students from across the state serving as ambassadors.

Their goal: to encourage safe driving behaviors among their peers.

**Graduated driver’s licensing**

Young drivers are at high risk of crashes due to contributing factors such as inexperience, distractions and unfamiliarity with today’s ever-evolving and complex vehicle technology, according to Justin Owens, a senior research scientist with the UNC Highway Research Safety Center. “Countermeasures that are out there can include graduated driver’s licensing, which is so critically important,” Owens said in an April 2025 webinar hosted by the NC Governor’s Highway Safety Program in partnership with the Institute for Transportation Research and Education.

North Carolina’s graduated driver’s license program dates to the late 1990s, when the state became one of the first to require young drivers go through several levels of training before getting a full license.

Other ways to stem young driver deaths can include using multipronged approaches to address distraction and impairment, and teaching new drivers about automation and advanced vehicle systems, Owens said in the webinar.

He also said improving messaging to parents is important so that “they can make use of this training period, this practice period, to help their teens learn how to drive as safely as possible.”

Once North Carolina moved to the multi-level licensing in 1998, the rate of crashes involving only 16-year-old drivers declined by 38 percent, according to data collected by the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. Fatal and serious injury crashes declined by 46 percent.

More recently, though, new data released last year showed the lower crash rates only held steady until 2021. Researchers with the Highway Safety Research Center at UNC Chapel Hill told NC Health News that those rates then started to tick up after the pandemic. That corresponds to when state lawmakers reduced the required practice period from 12 months to six months.

With the exception of a short period, the six-month requirement was in place until December 2023.

It was during that time — from July 2021 through December 2023 — that the crash rate for 16-year-old drivers ticked up by 13 percent, according to that early data analyzed by the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. Data hasn’t been released for 2024, when the nine-month learner’s permit period took effect.

Khalia Cain, an 18-year-old senior at Greensboro College Middle College, also recently became a teen safe driving ambassador. One of the things she learned is how those crashes decreased under the state’s graduated driver’s licensing system.

“It just makes me realize how important it is to have this program and to have these talks about safe driving,” Cain said.

**Permit periods vary by state**

The majority of U.S. states, and the District of Columbia, state that novice drivers hold a learner’s permit for at least six months before gaining more independence, according to data compiled by the independent Insurance Institute for Highway Safety-Highway Loss Data Institute.

Nine states require a 12-month practice period, which has long been considered the gold standard in graduated driver’s licensing. Thirty-six states require at least six months of practice.

Data show that the rate of fatal crashes for 16- and 17-year-old drivers dropped 30% in North Carolina after it instituted the 12-month learner’s permit period. States with a six-month period saw an average decrease of 12%.

North Carolina required a 12-month practice period under the supervision of a fully licensed adult driver — until the COVID-19 pandemic. That’s when North Carolina state lawmakers temporarily shortened the time required for teens to drive with supervision from 12 months to six.

Then, in 2023, amid constituent complaints about backlogs at the state Division of Motor Vehicles that delayed teens their final licenses, lawmakers decided not to restore the 12-month training period, opting for nine months instead starting in January 2024.

In 2025, North Carolina lawmakers again considered reducing the time young drivers must have a learner’s permit before moving on to unsupervised driving.

But child safety advocates again pushed back against any changes, arguing that a longer practice period gives novice drivers more time to face varied experiences — driving in spring rains or winter snow, through bright summer sun or gusty fall days.

The bill did not pass.

For the moment, North Carolina’s requirement stands at nine months.

“From a research perspective, the data do not support it being as safe to have a nine-month period as a 12-month period,” Owens told NC Health News.

When lawmakers made that reduction, researchers and driver’s education officials said they were worried it would likely lead to an increase in vehicle crashes involving young drivers.

No one has researched the effects of shifting from a 12-month learning period to a nine-month period, researchers with the UNC Highway Safety Research Center previously told NC Health News.

North Carolina is now one of only four states to have a nine-month learning period. The states with the shortest periods are Wyoming, which requires a learner’s permit be held for only 10 days before moving to the next stage of its graduated license, and New Hampshire, which has no time limit at all.

**Sharing teen driver safety information**

The North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force has included education about the state’s graduated driver’s license as part of its 2026 agenda. The legislative study group wants to emphasize the importance of the science behind graduated licensing and plans to continue to receive updates on the latest science on the issue.

Members of the NC Alliance for Safe Transportation Teen Safe Driving Ambassador program are also looking to share information this year.

Cain, the teen driving ambassador from Guilford County, is planning to use social media to promote safe driving practices and spread awareness to her peers about how they can be better drivers.

She said she’s concerned that North Carolina legislators changed the law in 2023 to allow young drivers to ferry up to two passengers under 21.

“Some people like to drive with, like, too many people, too many passengers in the vehicle,” she said. “And I think limiting that, especially even more for newer drivers, can be helpful.”

When no teen passengers are allowed, fatal crash rates for 15- to 17-year-old drivers are 21 percent lower than when two or more passengers are allowed, according to data collected by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety-Highway Loss Data Institute. Allowing only one teen passenger reduces the rate 7%, the group found.

**‘Worth the extra time’**

Avila knows how hard it is to wait to move on to the next stage of the graduated driver’s license. She’s still working on getting her minimum 60 hours of practice logged, which is part of the learner’s permit portion of the licensing.

Her father has been her licensed supervisor, but he’s in the Army and has been deployed for the past year. She said her mom is busy working, so she is waiting for her dad to return before resuming her driving practice.

Getting a license is especially important in rural communities like Moore County, Avila said.

“Everything is so far away,” she said. “You cannot walk to anything.”

Considering the number of young driver deaths in her area, Avila said she understands the importance of that practice time.

“It’s worth the extra time for saving a potential life,” she said.

# Court denies students’ petition for campus early voting sites

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“Those universities are independent entities that are not party to this case and not subject to this court’s equitable powers,” reasoned Osteen.

Further, Osteen said that it was also “speculative” to suggest that granting the motion would result in the opening of on-campus early voting sites at the three campuses in just a matter of days.

“That the universities hosted early voting sites in prior elections, or that one of them indicated over a month ago that it could do so in this election, is one thing,”

Osteen continued in his 14-page ruling. “Whether they are able or willing to do so now, only days away from the start of the early voting period, is another.”

The court further reasoned that it would risk causing voter confusion if it were to issue a preliminary injunction now, given that the locations and schedules for early voting were publicized in January.

While Osteen left open the door for a possible appeal, timing may be an issue. Early in-person voting begins on Thursday for the March 3 primary election.

# Environmental groups challenge Trump rollback of chemical emissions rules

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The Trump administration granted two-year renewable exemptions for 40 sterilizer facilities nationwide, including nine located in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. All of them are located near low-income residential areas that are predominantly Black or brown.

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin announced last year a process inviting regulated facilities to seek Clean Air Act “presidential exemptions.” The agency posted instructions for submitting requests, including a dedicated email address. Operators of petrochemical plants, coal-fired power plants, coke ovens and commercial sterilizers requested ex-

emptions.

“The law is clear, the science is clear, and the technology to control dangerous ethylene oxide pollution exists today,” said Irena Como, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center, which is representing the plaintiffs along with Natural Resources Defense Council. “Many of these facilities have shown that they are capable of complying with stronger standards that are effective in better protecting communities, yet the Trump administration’s unlawful actions continue to create chaos at the expense of the health and safety of communities on the ground.”

In 2024 under the Biden administration, EPA strengthened regulations

governing ethylene oxide emissions from commercial sterilization facilities after scientific studies showed the chemical pollutant is 60 times more toxic than previously thought. The technology to control it, the plaintiffs argue, is widely used.

“This administration is systematically looking for ways to let polluters off the hook,” said Sarah Buckley, senior attorney for NRDC. “If this abuse of authority is left unchecked, communities will pay the price in higher cancer risks. We’re challenging these cancer-causing sterilizer exemptions because people have a right to breathe safe air — and the government has a duty to enforce it.”

# North Carolina prisons face ‘dire’ staffing crisis

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Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety.

Dismukes told lawmakers on Jan. 15 that the department employs 4,979 correctional officers statewide. However, to fully staff all posts across North Carolina’s prisons, she said, the department needs 9,682 officers — a shortfall of 4,703 people, or an overall vacancy rate of nearly 49%.

That wide gap is pushing prisons to the brink. Dismukes said the department has determined that the absolute minimum number of officers needed to staff only “critical” posts is 4,651. Current staffing exceeds that bare-bones threshold by only 328 officers — a precarious margin as mandatory overtime, rising workloads and low pay continue to fuel burnout and departures.

“Our staffing situation is dire, and it is dangerous — dangerous to my staff, dangerous to the people in my custody and dangerous to the people of North Carolina,” Dismukes told lawmakers.

“Our vacancy rates have grown higher and remain at unsustainable levels, leaving us with fewer staff to run safe prisons,” she continued. “This problem has compounded year over year, as salaries of our employees have not kept up with the cost of living — much less the market rate.”

North Carolina’s starting salary for correctional officers is \$37,621 — second-lowest in the nation and thousands of dollars below the average starting salary of \$45,594 among neighboring Southeastern states, according to Department of Adult Correction data. Dismukes said low pay is the primary barrier to hiring and retention, and she urged lawmakers to allocate funding for raises.

“We need your help, and we need it now,” Dismukes said, noting that she was before lawmakers to “sound the alarm” on the agency’s staffing crisis.

“If we do not address these issues immediately, something bad will happen,” she said. “It is not a question of if. It is a question of when.”

**Fewer staff, high turnover**  
Wendell Powell has worked for the North Carolina prison system for more than 20 years, starting as a correctional officer. Now a captain at Harnett Correctional Institution in Lillington, he helps manage staffing at a facility grappling with shortages typical across the state’s prisons.

Powell, who also serves as president of the State Employees Association of North Carolina’s executive committee, said he has seen shifts that once had 40 people working a decade ago plummet to 15.

“The least you had in a building was four people — that was considered short,” he said. “Now you have one or two.”

“Back in the day, we would have thought that was the skeleton crew.”

Now, Powell said, it’s the norm.

The work hasn’t changed, but with fewer people to oversee the state’s prison population of about 32,000, workloads have intensified. Shifts are longer with more tasks to complete, breaks are fewer and days off are harder to come by.

Staffing has long been a challenge in prisons because of the nature of the job and work environment, Dismukes said, but the COVID-19 pandemic pushed staffing to new lows as the coronavirus swept through facilities and added another layer of risk to the job.

Staffing levels have not rebounded and appear to be far from doing so.

In 2025, the Department of Adult Correction hired 2,647 employees across all job classes, according to data shared with NC Health News. That’s a ramp up in hiring from previous years,

Dismukes said. But nearly as many people — 2,483 — left during the same time period.

Turnover is particularly high among correctional officers. The department recorded a 24 percent turnover rate for those positions last year. Despite hiring 1,530 correctional officers in 2025, the Department of Adult Correction ended the year with 38 fewer filled positions than in 2024. Nearly half of the state’s correctional officers have been on the job less than five years, according to department data provided to NC Health News.

“The bottom line is that unless I can pay them the raises that they deserve, I will not keep them my employee,” Dismukes said. “We cannot provide adequate staffing levels needed for our current population.”

In addition to custody staff, prison health care positions are also experiencing high vacancies, with the highest rate among nurses. As a result, shortages have forced some prison medical units to close, pushing more care to community providers — at a higher cost.

To help fill staffing gaps, the Department of Adult Correction has about 760 private security contractors working at 34 prisons, a spokesperson told NC Health News. Those contractors provide perimeter security, freeing up state correctional officers for other duties inside the prisons. Additionally, about 65 percent of the Department of Adult Correction’s nursing and medical providers are contract workers who are more expensive than employees.

Most staff are also working mandatory overtime to keep prison operations going. In 2025, prison staff logged between 150,000 to 225,000 overtime hours per month, according to Department of Adult Correction data provided to NC Health News — a tab of roughly \$6 million to \$8 million monthly. Over 12 months, the department spent \$73.5 million on overtime.

“That overtime is for people who are already working a 12-hour shift and who are sometimes driving an hour to an hour and a half to and from work each day,” Dismukes told lawmakers. “That is a really long day, and it’s a really long month, and it is a very dangerous environment when people get tired in prison.”

Powell has seen the toll firsthand. He and other prison management staff routinely step in to help complete the day-to-day tasks of line-duty correctional officers, such as supervising meals, showers and medical and transfer trips. As a result, Powell said that can put him behind on his administrative work, including completing investigations, safety reports and ordering supplies.

Staff shortages exacerbate an already demanding work environment, fueling a cycle that drives even more people away. Powell said burnout is a top concern, but options to delegate the workload are limited.

“In our profession, fatigue and bad decisions can lead to someone getting hurt or killed,” Powell said. “If we see that a person’s working more, we try to schedule them off or put them on an assignment that’s easier.”

Shortages disrupt prison operations

Amid worsening staff shortages, North Carolina’s prison population has ticked up. In 2025, Dismukes said admissions outpaced releases by more than 50 people per month on average.

At the same time, the Department of Adult Correction has fewer beds available to house them. Insufficient staffing has forced the temporary closure of 4,281 beds across 19 prisons. For example, Bertie Correctional Institution in Windsor — the

state’s newest and one of its largest prisons — has a capacity to house 1,504 men. But it is operating at roughly half that level due to lack of staffing, Dismukes said.

Staff shortages affect nearly every aspect of daily prison life. Correctional officers are responsible not only for security, but also for distributing meals, transporting people to medical care, supervising education and rehabilitation programs and more.

Some days, the staffing just doesn’t add up, Powell said, forcing tough operational decisions that directly affect those in custody.

“Sometimes facilities have to just lock it down,” Powell said, referring to days when some activities and programs are suspended for safety, leaving people confined in their cells for longer periods.

Those cancellations may solve an immediate staffing problem, but they come with ramifications.

“If you cut out programs and school, a lot of offenders look forward to that,” Powell said. “When they’re stuck in the building all day, tension rises. Tempers flare. It does have a short-term fix, but long term it’s not a good situation.”

With staffing margins already razor-thin, unexpected emergencies can be precarious to manage. Powell recalled a recent day when multiple medical transports — each requiring two officers — depleted staff working inside the prison. He made it work by calling in other officers, but Powell said sustaining operations with a smaller workforce is increasingly tough.

“Sometimes you just pray and take a deep breath, and you try to put your most advanced staff where you may have the most issues,” Powell said.

Years ago, Powell said, he didn’t have to worry as much. There were more staff on hand each shift — and many were seasoned officers — to step in if problems arose. Today’s less-experienced workforce adds another layer of concern, he said.

And with thousands of prison beds offline, staff have less flexibility to move people between housing units, custody levels or facilities.

“We cannot move them out of restrictive housing or into restrictive housing if we need to,” Dismukes told lawmakers. “We cannot move them into maximum custody if we need to, because we don’t have the staff to run those beds.”

Staffing shortages also hurt the prison system’s ability to support people as they near release and to reduce recidivism — a key priority as North Carolina works to improve outcomes for formerly incarcerated people by 2030.

“We cannot assign them to programming,” Dismukes said, noting that prisons often only have enough staff for primary security functions. “We are warehousing people if we cannot use programming for them, and we are not releasing them any better than when they came into our custody.”

**Need to pay more**

Dismukes described the staffing situation as a “crisis” — one she said is not sustainable. She knew staffing would be her biggest challenge when she took the job. More than a year into the role, it still is.

Low pay, she said, is one of the biggest barriers to recruiting and keeping staff.

“The police pay more. The sheriffs pay more, and often, even fast food restaurants pay more,” Dismukes told lawmakers as she urged them to approve raises.

Powell said the compensation doesn’t match the demands of the job, which he described as physically and mentally taxing.

“In some areas, you have prisons competing with Burger King and Subway,”



RACHEL CRUMPLER | NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

Orange Correctional Center, Hillsborough.

Powell said. “That says a lot — that someone can go work fast food or work in the supermarket and make more than at a prison securing and keeping offenders safe and keeping the state safe.”

For many, the math doesn’t add up — particularly given the risks of the work. Studies show that correctional officers across the country have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and are at greater risk of suicide compared with the general population. The average life expectancy of a correctional officer in the United States is about 59 years — substantially shorter than the national average of 75 years, according to a national 2024 study.

“The idea that you would risk your safety in that way for no more pay than you could get working in a fast food restaurant is simply not adding up,” said Watkins, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina. “The mental, the emotional, the stress and the

toll it takes on you is something that literally changes and shortens your life, but you’re not paid as though you’re making that kind of sacrifice.”

Powell said he has stayed at the Department of Adult Correction because he believes it’s a good career, but he maintains that it needs to be compensated as such. He plans to retire with the department, but he’s watched others head for the door.

Dismukes said she wants 2026 to be the “year of retention,” but she needs lawmakers’ financial backing to help make that happen.

Gov. Josh Stein, as well as lawmakers in the state House and Senate, supported raises for correctional officers in their proposed budgets last year. But last year’s salaries are unchanged because the Republican leaders of the House and Senate are locked in a budget stalemate that has left the state without a new budget more than halfway through the fiscal year.

“No one’s gotten pay raises,” Powell said. “Your insurance is going up ... your cost of living is going up. But your pay is not moved. It’s very frustrating.”

Powell said raises could be one of the most effective ways to stabilize the prison workforce and give people a reason to stay, but it’s not clear if or when that will happen.

“Right now there’s not a relief in sight,” Powell said.

The stakes of understaffing are high, Watkins said, and prison staff are increasingly voicing concerns.

“If we don’t [solve staff shortages], someone will die again in a prison because of understaffing,” Watkins said. “People know when they take the job it’s dangerous, but they don’t need to die because of understaffing.”

That’s what Dismukes wants to avoid.

“We are doing everything we can,” she told lawmakers. “But these conditions are unsustainable.”



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# The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

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## Black History Month brings a dire warning

Black History Month often arrives wrapped in celebration—progress, perseverance, firsts.

But this year, it begins with a sobering reminder that some of the most dangerous chapters of U.S. history are not behind us. They are repeating.



TRACIE POWELL

Black journalists Don Lemon and Georgia Fort were arrested for doing their jobs. The charges—widely viewed as flimsy and initially unable to withstand judicial scrutiny—appear less about securing convictions and more about sending a message. History tells us exactly what that message is meant to do: intimidate, exhaust, and chill speech.

For Black journalists—and for those who support community-led news—this moment feels unsettlingly familiar.

What is happening today is not new. It is part of a long and violent pattern in American history in which the Black press has been targeted not only through law and surveillance, but through physical destruction and lethal force.

Black newspapers were burned down.

Black printing presses were destroyed.

Black journalists were threatened, attacked, and killed for reporting the truth.

These were not accidents of history. They were deliberate acts meant to silence Black communities by destroying the institutions that informed them.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Black newspapers that exposed racial violence, voter suppression, labor exploitation, and state hypocrisy were met with mob attacks and official indifference. Newsrooms were torched. Editors were forced into exile. Some never lived to publish again.

During World War I, the Wilson administration used the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 to suppress Black newspapers that criticized the war or highlighted the contradiction of fighting for democracy abroad while denying it at home. Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson weaponized the postal system, revoking mailing privileges for Black publications deemed “disloyal.”

The Messenger, co-founded by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, was labeled by the federal government as “the most dangerous Negro publication” in America and placed under surveillance. The Chicago Defender—one of the most influential Black newspapers in U.S. history—was routinely blocked from Southern mail routes with federal approval, a calculated effort to cut off its reach without banning it outright.

That same playbook reappeared during World War II. The Roosevelt administration targeted the Black press for its “Double V” campaign—victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover considered sedition charges against Black editors. Federal agents visited newsrooms to intimidate journalists. Black publications were restricted or banned from military bases. Even The Crisis, the NAACP’s magazine led by W.E.B. Du Bois, was placed under surveillance and forced to submit content to legal review after government intervention.

And although she was recognized posthumously with a citation from the Pulitzer Board for her coverage of lynchings, threats of violence during her lifetime drove Ida B. Wells out of Memphis.

By the Civil Rights era, repression was more covert but no less aggressive. Through COINTELPRO, the FBI sought to “discredit, disrupt, and destroy” Black writers, journalists, and media outlets. More than 50 Black writers were surveilled—not because their reporting was inaccurate, but because it was effective.

Seen in this historical context, the arrests of Don Lemon and Georgia Fort are not isolated incidents. They are contemporary expressions of an old strategy: use the machinery of the state not to win in court, but to instill fear; not to correct journalism, but to deter it.

We have also seen a recent blueprint for how far this strategy can go.

The detainment—and ultimate deportation—of journalist Mario Guevara sent a chilling signal. His case demonstrated how easily immigration enforcement, detention, and removal could be used as tools of intimidation against a journalist of color, and how limited the industry’s sustained response could be once the initial news cycle passed.

That moment mattered. It showed an administration how much backlash it would—or would not—face. It revealed a painful truth that many Black and brown journalists already know: the broader journalism industry has not always treated attacks on them as attacks on press freedom itself.

Public solidarity matters. It raises the cost of repression. But statements alone are not enough. History shows us that repression thrives when responses are temporary, fragmented, or unevenly applied.

Tracie Powell is founder of Atlanta-based The Pivot Fund, a nonprofit venture philanthropy organization supporting independent, community newsrooms led by people of color.

# Affordability catches up to GOP

By Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel

SPECIAL TO THE POST

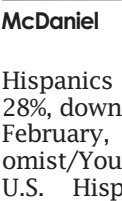
Donald Trump won 48% of Latino voters in 2024 – the best Republican showing in half a century. Four-



Harris

teen months later, 70% disapprove of his performance as President. What changed? The price of groceries.

Pew Research found 68% of Latinos say things are worse for them today than a year ago – the first time most Hispanics said this in nearly 20 years of surveys. Trump’s support among



McDaniel

Hispanics has fallen to 28%, down 13 points since February, said The Economist/YouGov. And the U.S. Hispanic Business Council reports 42% of Latino business owners say things are worse for them under Trump.

Black working-class voters face the same squeeze. Trump’s support with Black voters has fallen to just 10%, reports the New York Times. Among Blacks, high prices now poll higher than civil and voting rights concerns.

When Black and Brown

families can’t get ahead economically, social justice issues like civil rights and immigration tend to fall on their priority list. When rent hikes eat up raises or grocery bills climb 20% while pay stays flat, social issues become a luxury instead of a necessity.

Democrats used this to their advantage in 2025 to reverse Trump’s gains with Black and Brown voters. In key races across Virginia and New Jersey, Democrats focused on high prices and showed pocket-book messaging works strongly when it’s centered rather than mentioned as an add-on to social issues.

Latino voters swung hard toward Democrats – backing Democratic governors by 37- and 34-point margins in New Jersey and Virginia. Kamala Harris only carried Latinos in these states by a razor-thin 3-point margin in 2024.

Among Black voters, 89% voted for Democrats for governor in New Jersey and 86% in Virginia, while Harris carried Black voters by a much smaller margin at 68%, according to the Pew Research Center.

Trump is many things, but he is not politically oblivious. He sees the data. He sees working-class voters frustrated by debt traps and high prices. And he sees Democrats gaining trust by offering real answers to high prices, while he pivots to foreign policy

side shows like military action in Venezuela – an issue that doesn’t pay anyone’s rent.

But if Democrats remain disciplined and deliver results, Trump’s recent pivot to affordability won’t be enough.

Republicans still oppose the very policies that could lower costs. Take insulin prices. Democrats capped costs at \$35 per month for Medicare, saving diabetic seniors thousands yearly. House Republicans voted against it 215 times. When voters see one party cutting prices and another blocking them, the choice becomes clear. Republicans can’t run as champions of working-class families while protecting the corporations that squeeze them. Voters are increasingly sophisticated about that contradiction, and this creates an opportunity for Democrats.

Republicans are realizing affordability is not a niche issue or a Democratic hoax. It is the issue. It cuts across race, ideology, and geography. When people feel economically trapped, they will abandon any party that seems indifferent, no matter their personal feelings on cultural or identity politics.

Republicans built gains with working-class Black and Brown voters by presenting themselves as insurgents against an unfair system. But when the bills

keep rising, and their party offers no real relief, that image collapses.

Democrats meanwhile have rediscovered that when everyday life becomes unaffordable, cultural politics cannot cover the bill. The working class doesn’t experience inflation, rent hikes, or credit-card interest rates as abstract economic data, nor do they have the luxury of worrying about cultural issues when bills are due.

And across the country, affordability is beginning to reshape political loyalties, including among groups of working-class Black and Brown voters where Republicans had been steadily gaining.

As we head into the 2026 midterms, Democrats must remember we won’t win back Black and Brown working-class voters by becoming more progressive or more moderate. We win them back by becoming more relevant to daily life. And that is what now has Trump scrambling.

Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel are veteran Democratic strategists with over 100 political campaigns between them, including the past five presidential elections and several congressional races. They co-host “Maroon Bison Presents: The Southern Comfort Podcast.”

## Where do we even begin with US chaos?

There is so much buffoonery, it is even hard knowing where to start.

We could start with the capture of Venezuela.

Illegal seizure of a sovereign state should be a point that concerns every American. I don’t care if Maduro is a bad actor. We have our own share of those, and nobody is coming across our borders to capture the Donald.



LIB CAMPBELL

Sending American troops to Venezuela would be a grievous act, not too unlike May Lai. Viet Nam was a great teacher of what not to do in warfare.

Resisting illegal orders is a fundamental tenet of the US military.

But law is a mere inconvenience to our bone spur president. His corruption, grifting, and general disregard of all democratic values and principles is on full display daily.

People like me are alarmed that Congress is not standing against such

corruption. Even our own North Carolina congressmen have elected to follow the lead of this tyrant rather than buck the bully.

My husband, Tom, has a story about bullies. His school chum picked on him mercilessly. One day, school-age Tom came home yet again crying. Tom’s mother told him she was opposed to violence but the only way to deal with a backyard bully was to punch him in the stomach.

The gut punch shocked the bully so much, he ran home crying, never to bully Tom again.

Bullying is an act of weakness. It means you have no intellectual argument, no vision or ideas for a better solution. Brute force is the raw animal “fight or flight” instinct. It is the law of the jungle.

That is what we look like on the world stage. The reputation of America is tarnished daily as complicity and self-preservation become normative among MAGA leaders. Our congress is more concerned with keeping their jobs than doing their jobs.

Even people who voted for Donald Trump cannot be blind to it. The right-wing propaganda machine feeds the line that somehow all this is acceptable.

When I teach, I tell people not to leave their brains in the parking lot. Critical thinking is a learned skill. It requires effort to broaden your scope of knowledge.

The theory of the munching sheep comes to mind. Sheep are not very intelligent in the animal kingdom. They will eat and eat to the edge of the cliff and fall off the cliff because of their ravenous hunger. Lemmings have a similar pattern.

One thing this Madura incident points to is the weakness of international systems that have failed in their watchdog duty. And whatever happened to the international criminal court?

Nation-building is not putting America first. It is just plain imperialism.

Apparently, no country is off limits for hostile takeover. Trump has talked often about confiscating Greenland and Cuba.

Watch out Sweden!

We’re told Trump does not sleep, except in Cabinet meetings. He is over-caffeinated, eaten up with aspirin overdoses. Plus, he is 79 years old.

Nobody is willing to hold Donald Trump accountable for anything. Across the Congress, there is willingness to let him grift and grind American values into the ground.

Jack Smith reported the most damning evidence of Trump’s culpability in the January 6th insurrection. Plainly and without emotion, Smith said evidence showed Donald Trump directed the melee. His fingerprints are all over the actions of the angry mob that desecrated the Capital and killed officers who stood in the path.

History will not be kind to this era in American politics. We have lost our way and few of us seem to care.

Lib Campbell is a retired Methodist pastor, retreat leader, columnist and host of the blogsite www.avirtualchurch.com. She can be contacted at libcam05@gmail.com

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DONALD WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers receiver Tetairoa McMillan earned the Associated Press NFL Rookie of the Year Award, the second Panther to earn the prize after Cam Newton in 2011.

# McMillan validates Panthers' pick

Receiver's selection as Associated Press rookie of the year confirmed Carolina's talent evaluation

By Jeff Hawkins  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Tetairoa McMillan proved plenty of NFL "insiders" wrong.

While doing so, the Carolina Panthers' rookie wide receiver validated the job reference quarterback Bryce Young provided to general manager Dan Morgan prior to the 2025 draft.

A pair of Southern California natives, Young and McMillan connected during a summer football camp, and it helped guide the defense-needy Panthers to select the former Arizona standout No.

8 overall.

Citing a lack of separation skill, McMillan received a mid-to-late first-round grade from a series of draft pundits. Young witnessed something different and scheduled a sit-down with Morgan.

"I'm just fortunate that he sat on the table for me," McMillan said of Young's lobbying. "That connection is gonna be something special."

Drafted over several top edge prospects, McMillan validated the prognostication with produced 70 recep-

tions, 1,014 yards and seven touchdowns. On Thursday, he hauled in The Associated Press NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year award.

In a vote of 50 electors, The AP selected McMillan over five other finalists: New York Giants quarterback Jaxson Dart, Tampa Bay receiver Emeka Egbuka, New England running back TreVeyon Henderson and New Orleans quarterback Tyler Shough.

McMillan, the lone finalist to start all 17 regular-season games, helped the Panthers (8-9) capture their first NFC

South title since 2015.

"For T-Mac, he has a general football understanding of timing for the quarterback, also, where the window (is) to throw," Panthers offensive coordinator Brad Idzik said in November. "So you'll see him a lot of the time, his routes don't look like the lines on the page, but he gets to the window in the appropriate amount of time for the quarterback to garner that trust of 'I know if I get to this window on my timing, he's going to be there for me.'"

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

« JOHNSON C. SMITH »

## Golden Bulls recruit class leans into development

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

Johnson C. Smith football is still committed to development.

Of the 34 players in the Golden Bulls' 2026 signing class, 24 are high school seniors, including 14 on defense. Eight are defensive backs. Under coach Maurice Flowers, JCSU has emphasized recruiting high school talent for the long term and experienced transfers when necessary.

"In being good recruiters, you have to trust your recruiting and also your development of athletes," Flowers said. "We believe that we can develop student athletes really good, and the ones that we recruit believe in us and we believe in the system. This is the opportunity for us to show that we believe in them and just don't go to the transfer portal for every position."

Among next year's freshmen, four are receivers, paced by Jhalen Pharr-McNair, who caught 45 passes for 560 yards and nine touchdowns at Tarboro High and Tyree John-

Please see **JC SMITH** | 6A



Flowers



HOGGARD HIGH SCHOOL

JaQuay Locke, who tallied 59 tackles, caused four fumbles and intercepted two passes as a senior at Hoggard High in Wilmington, is one of eight defensive backs to sign with Johnson C. Smith.

## NCCU's top recruits on sideline

Feb. 4 officially was National Signing Day, but the 24-hour sports cycle makes it more a promotional event than any revealing information.

For North Carolina Central, the player recruits take a slight backseat to the recruiting class head coach Trei Oliver assembled on his coaching staff.

Head coaches are only as good as their staff, and players are only as good as the assistant coaches assigned to their unit. It's a brotherhood, a camaraderie that is part coach, part mentor and part disciplinarian.

Oliver had to refill several positions left vacant by "mo' money" or ineptitude.

The biggest shocker was the departure of offensive coordinator Matt Leone to Tennessee State after five seasons. Leone gave the Eagles bigger and better wings to fly on offense.

Since their 2022 Celebration Bowl season, the Eagles have averaged over 30 points and 400-plus total yards per game.

Despite what Eagle Nation consider a subpar 8-4 season, Leone still helped quarterback Walker Harris receive the 2025 MEAC Offensive Player of the Year Award.

Tennessee State may be in financial straits, but Leone didn't come cheap. Head coach Reggie Barlow got a rude welcoming to the Ohio Valley Conference in his first season. The Tigers finished 2-10 and 0-8 in the OVC. This after former coach Eddie George led the team to a share of the OVC championship and a trip to the FCS playoffs, which - by the way - knocked NCCU out of the running.

The way athletics directors are pulling the plug these days, Barlow has one more year to get it right despite a five-year deal. Can't let fans drink the winning Kool-Aid and then send them back to tap water.

New NCCU OC Chris Barnette

Please see **RECRUITS** | 6A



BONITTA  
BEST

## A&T signs 38 players to launch rebuild process

By Reiven Douglas  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

A major roster reconstruction is officially underway for North Carolina A&T football.

The Aggies welcomed National Signing Day by signing 38 new players, including 21 from the high school ranks and another 17 from the transfer portal. Head coach Shawn Gibbs executed an aggressive, intentional recruiting strategy that prioritized the Southeastern region of the country, bringing in 16 athletes

from North Carolina, eight from South Carolina, and seven from Georgia.

Twenty-two of the 38 signees are already on campus.

"We wanted to focus recruiting efforts within the state and bordering states," said Gibbs, who grew up in Black Mountain and stayed in-state for his college career at North Carolina Central. "We feel good about the homegrown talent we've been able to find."

A&T also focused on schools in the North-

east and Washington, D.C./Maryland/Virginia area. They secured three players from each.

"It was important to us to recruit in the Northeast because a lot of (Coastal Athletic Association) schools are up there," Gibbs said.

Half of the 14 CAA teams are in that region and four are on next season's schedule: Rhode Island, Bryant, New Hampshire, and Albany. Since joining the conference in 2023, A&T has matched the competition in speed

Please see **NC A&T** | 6A

## Charlotte chancellor Gaber: Athletics director hire in March

By Cameron Williams  
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Progress is being made on the Charlotte 49ers' athletic director search, according to Chancellor Sharon Gaber.

Charlotte is almost four months removed from the dismissal of Mike Hill. In the meantime, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Integrity and General Counsel, Jesh Humphrey has been the interim.

In a Q&A via email with The Post, Gaber said she wants the university to find a leader who has a firm understanding of the modern college landscape. The goal is to have the next AD hired by mid-March.

Q: What does the timetable look like for hir-

ing the next athletic director?

Gaber: Our goal is to name our next athletic director by mid-March. We are currently in an active phase of the search, working closely with our search firm and committee to identify and vet strong candidates.

Q: What are a few key things you're looking for in a candidate?

Gaber: We are looking for a leader who understands the rapidly changing landscape of college athletics and has the experience to navigate it successfully. That includes a demonstrated ability to generate revenue, build strong external partnerships and lead with vision and integrity. At the same time, this person must be deeply committed to student-athlete success, competitive excellence and alignment with the broader academic mission and values of the University.

Q: With the evolving landscape in college athletics, how important is it for Charlotte to get this hire right so that the university can best be positioned for the future?

Gaber: This is a pivotal moment for all of college athletics. Selecting our athletic director is critical not only to our competitive success, but for positioning our athletics program to grow sustainably, strengthen our national profile and remain aligned with the University's long-term priorities.

Q: What is your message to alumni and donors who may feel blindfolded in a sense as to what or when the hire will be made, as well as any uncertainties they may have?

Gaber: I would assure our alumni and donors that this process is thoughtful, deliberate and moving forward with purpose. I

Please see **GABER** | 6A



Gaber



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Luke Kuechly, who spent all eight of his NFL seasons with the Carolina Panthers, was inducted to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his second year of eligibility. Kuechly, 35, is the second-youngest player inducted to the hall, trailing only Gale Sayers.

# Kuechly HOF induction was a matter of timing

By Jeff Hawkins  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers general manager Dan Morgan recalled his work leading up to the 2012 NFL Draft.

As a mid-tier scout for the Seattle Seahawks, Morgan created a thorough report on Luke Kuechly. Morgan, a former Panthers standout, entered his third season in his new role with a strong endorsement for the Boston College linebacker.

One of the Seahawks' more seasoned scouts, however, favored Dont'a Hightower. He intensely debated that the Alabama linebacker would eventually grade out as the better prospect. Morgan remembers trumpeting Kuechly for the Seahawks' No. 15 pick. The former Panthers' Pro Bowl linebacker trusted his eyes and gut, but the topic turned moot when Carolina drafted the All-American ninth overall.

"I remember actually having an argument out in Seattle about Luke Kuechly and Don't'a Hightower," Morgan said during an interview with Panthers.com. "I was a huge Luke Kuechly fan. Like it wasn't even close to me. I just remember watching his tape at BC and just being blown away by the type of player he was. You could see that in all the instincts. He is a special one."

Kuechly showed just how special. In eight seasons with the Panthers, he compiled 1,092 tackles and seven All-Pro campaigns. A member of the 2010s All-Decade Squad, Kuechly earned the

2013 NFL defensive player of the year and 2012 defensive rookie of the year distinctions.

Kuechly last week learned of another accolade: the gold jacket that goes with induction to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Joining Kuechly in the Class of 2026 were quarterback Drew Brees, running back Roger Craig, wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald and kicker Adam Vinatieri.

At 35 years old, Kuechly will become the Hall of Fame's second-youngest Gold Jacket member behind Gale Sayers (34). The induction ceremonies are scheduled for Aug. 6-9 in Canton, Ohio.

As Morgan discovered during his pre-draft scouting analysis, Kuechly's work ethic exceeded expectations. Former Panthers great Julius Peppers, dressed in his 2024 Hall of Fame gold jacket, played a role in announcing his ex-teammate's induction.

"What I remember most about Luke is that he was one of my favorite teammates, man," Peppers said. "And I played a long time, had hundreds, maybe even thousands of teammates over the years. 'Just how he was with the guys in the locker room, just trying to be one of the guys, trying to be a great teammate, trying to be a leader, doing things the right way, being very professional."

"So that's what I saw in him and that's what I really admired about him more than all the great things he did on the field."

# McMillan's ROTY validated Panthers evaluation process

Continued from page 5A  
Southern California connection

Young and McMillan were familiar with each other during their high school years. During Young's senior season, he led Mater Dei High to a win against Servite High in a nationally televised matchup. McMillan was a sophomore, just beginning to build his reputation as an acrobatic prospect.

As Young earned the 2021 Heisman Trophy at Alabama, McMillan prepared to advance to his next stage at Arizona, where he continued to progress. By the time Young and McMillan reunited last summer, the groundwork was laid for the Panthers to make a surprise pick.

"Every time we watched him, we're like, 'Another great catch,'" Morgan said of his film review. "He's effortless. The way he catches the ball and he catches everything outside his frame. His body controls (are) some of the best I've seen in a while."

That's how McMillan helped overcome his top pre-draft knock: could he constantly create separation from defensive backs? At Arizona, he utilized his 6-foot-4, 219-pound frame and long arms to make up for any lack of elite speed.

McMillan snapped Kelvin Benjamin's

franchise rookie record of 1,008 receiving yards (2014) and became the first Carolina player to earn the AP's top rookie honor since quarterback Cam Newton (2011).

Panthers coach Dave Canales started recognizing McMillan's potential not long after rookie camp opened.

"He looks smooth, easy to throw to," Canales said. "Just like we thought."

Despite the injury-plagued defense yielding an all-time league-worst 534 points in 2024, Young needed help on offense. The pass offense ranked No. 30, averaging just 187.5 yards per game and No. 24 in plays that generated at least 20 yards.

McMillan, along with the emergence of Jalen Coker, provided Young a deep outlet. Twenty-seven of his receptions went for at least 16 yards. He also caught six fourth-down conversions and totaled 55 receiving first downs, tops among all rookies.

"Jalen and T-Mac, they produced for us in an incredible way," Panthers head coach Dave Canales said. "The chemistry they have with Bryce has certainly grown. They're going to have the first opportunity to be out there to start [in 2026]. You want those guys on the field."



McMillan



Canales

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# JC Smith football leans into recruit development

Continued from page 5A

son, who caught 26 passes for 494 yards and four touchdowns at Brookland-Cayce High (S.C.) last year.

As JCSU has done since Flowers' arrival, the Golden Bulls recruited the Carolinas heavily, adding 15 players from the region to the freshman class, including Charlotteans Kenyan Stewart, a Butler High defensive end who tallied 58 tackles and six sacks as a senior, and Power Mba, a 6-5, 320-pound defensive tackle who played at Ambassador Christian. Among the 10 transfers, seven are North Carolinians.

Among the more notable high school signees:

- Ja'Quay Locke, a defensive back from Hoggard High in Wilmington who tallied 59 tackles, forced four fumbles and snagged a pair of interceptions as a senior.
- Alexis Rosario-Beltran, a Concord High kicker and punter who connected on 25-of-28 extra points and 12-of-20 field goals with a long of 52 yards in 2025. He also averaged 39.8 yards per punt with a long of 64.
- Keivious Bridgers, a Tarboro High defensive back, racked up 84 tackles (seven for loss) last year.

Among the transfers, the biggest signings are skill position players in quarterback Joshua Jackson, receiver JaQuan Albright and running back Fabian Duncan, all of whom are expected to start or make significant contributions.

Albright caught 64 passes for 895 yards and five touchdowns in 2025 as a redshirt junior at UNC Pembroke. His reception total equaled the combined output of top returning receivers Brian Lane (46 catches, 676 yards and 5 TDs) and Reggie Daniel (18, 345 yards, 6 TDs).

Jackson, a 6-foot-5, 215-pound former Tennessee Mr. Football who spent two years at FCS program Central Connecticut State, where he played sparingly.

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 Kamarro Edmonds, who missed the last eight games in 2025 due to a leg injury.

With spring drills kicking off next month, the transfers have an opportunity to get up to speed with returning players. Even after winning the CIAA title and the school's first

Division II playoff berth last year, the goals remain constant.

"It's going to be spring ball as usual, because there's not anything that we're going to do differently this spring that we haven't done the previous springs," Flowers said. "That's really just learning to be the best type of football player we can be as an individual and as a team and just put winning habits together."

Johnson C. Smith 2026 football signees, hometown and high school/previous college:

**Defensive back**  
Andre Davis Jr., Vanceboro, N.C. (West Craven High); Keivious Bridgers, Tarboro, N.C. (Tarboro High); Ja'Quay Locke, Wilmington (Hoggard High); Jacobie Smith, Duncan, N.C. (Mountain View Prep); Kenneth Faison, Greensboro (Ben L. Smith High); Chris Briggs, Greenville, S.C. (Hillcrest High); Gaven Kraut, Fayetteville (Terry Sanford High); Mekhi Armour, Newark, N.J. (Weequahic High); Zahky Mitchell, Winston-Salem (Virginia Wise); Marque Vereen, Tampa, Fla. (West Florida); Rossie Graves, Stockbridge, Ga. (Eastern Kentucky); Isaiah Pelham, Vanceboro, N.C. (Chowan)

**Defensive line**  
Anthony Binyard, Winston-Salem (Fayetteville State); Power Mba, Charlotte (Ambassador Christian); Anquavion Darden, Rocky Mount (Southwest Edgecomb High); Kenyan Stewart, Charlotte (Butler High); Braylen Daniels, Statesville (Statesville High); Jason Romero, Laurinburg, N.C. (East Carolina)

**Linebacker**  
Aujshawn Izzard, Savannah, Ga. (Jenkins High); Joseph Sutton, Savannah, Ga. (Benedictine Military)

**Offensive line**  
Justin Smith, Concord (West Craven High); Aaron Dixon, Jonesboro, Ga. (Jonesboro High); Devin Harris, Fairburn, Ga. (Creekside High); Kenneth Roby, Loganville, Ga. (Grayson High)

**Receivers**  
JaQuan Albright, Winston-Salem (UNC Pembroke); Chris Tillman, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Dillard High); Trevon Moore, Tampa, Fla. (Tampa Bay Tech); Jhalen Pharr-McNair, Tarboro, N.C. (Tarboro High); Tyree Johnson, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Brookland-Cayce High)

**Quarterback**  
Joshua Jackson, Chattanooga, Tenn. (Central Connecticut State); Somai Cabell, Greenville, N.C. (D.H. Conley High)

**Running back**  
Fabian Duncan, Charlotte (Allen University)

**Kicker/punter**  
Alexis Rosario-Beltran, Concord (Concord High); Christopher Meija, Clayton, N.C. (UNC Pembroke)

# Recruits on NCCU sidelines

Continued from page 5A

helped put Alabama State in the running for a SWAC championship. The Hornets averaged over 42 points and 460 yards of offense per game. Sound familiar, Eagles? A loss to Celebration Bowl runner-up Prairie View A&M kept them out of the championship.

Barnette also has coached at South Carolina State, Winston-Salem State and North Carolina A&T.

Can he keep NCCU's offensive machine percolating? All eyes will be watching.

And not far behind Barnette in the spotlight is new defensive coordinator/safeties coach Tommy Thigpen who replaces former DC Jesse Thompson.

Thigpen was a star linebacker at North Carolina and recent co-defensive coordinator/linebackers coach for five seasons until Bill Belichick and his girlfriend arrived. He coached in the UFL last season. NCCU's defense uncharacteristically

broke down at critical times last season with miscues and undisciplined penalties. And who can forget Delaware State going for it on fourth down inside its OWN 30-yard line – and converting? If that's not a slap in the face, what is?

The Hillside High alumni community would never forgive me for not mentioning the hiring of former director of track and field Omar Beasley. The NCCU alumnus put the Hornets on the national and international map. Beasley was an assistant coach at North Carolina Wesleyan before becoming NCCU's director of speed development.

The stakes have been raised in the MEAC, and defense is the star.

Defense is what got South Carolina State to two straight trips to Atlanta. And defense is the catalyst to dethroning the Bulldogs.

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

# NC A&T signs 38 for football

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but lacked size.

The Aggies defense, which ranked last in both scoring and total defense in the conference last season, will receive 22 incoming players who will help close the gap. Where last season only two A&T defenders stood 6-foot-4 while the majority were 6-2 or under, the Aggies will now have three 6-5 athletes, and two stand at 6-4.

The group includes a promising interior defensive lineman in Ben Boulware (6-foot-5 and 305 pounds), a three-star from Winston-Salem. He had offers from Power Four programs such as Florida State, Florida and Michigan.

On the offensive side, A&T's quarterback options will see receivers ranging from 5-11 to 6-3. The same could be said for the offensive line, which will add eight players, including notable prospects Andre Oben and Desmond Jackson.

Oben is a 6-5, 290-pound redshirt junior transfer from Monmouth who started his

career at Purdue as a three-star recruit ranked as the No. 15 prospect in New Jersey by Rivals. He comes from a football family. His brother R.J. is a defensive end at Duke, and his father, Roman, had a 12-year NFL career, including a 2002 Super Bowl championship with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Jackson is a 6-4, 305-pound Coastal Carolina transfer. The redshirt sophomore from Winston-Salem was the nation's 49th-best interior offensive line prospect and No. 49 player statewide by ESPN. A&T will have big shoes to fill after losing star kicker and program record holder Andrew "Money" Brown. On deck for that responsibility is Asher Holland, a freshman from Durham.

Holland ranked No. 12 statewide and first in North Carolina 8A in kickoff yards (4,048), showcasing reliable leg strength. He also finished seventh in the division in field goals made (six).

# Gaber: New AD expected in March

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have two alumni/donors participating on the search committee. I also want to thank those who filled out our input form to gather feedback on the qualities that are essential in our next AD. We are confident that

this approach will serve the university and its supporters well.

Q: Will the next candidate bring staff members with them, or will the current staff remain in place?

Gaber: At this stage, it would be premature to

speculate about staffing decisions. Our priority is hiring the right athletic director. Once that leader is in place, they will have the opportunity to assess the organization and determine how best to structure their team for success.

