



Field of Dreams: Youth baseball initiative aims to make the sport more accessible

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MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Bishop William Barber II, president and founder of Reparers of the Breach, led a 50-mile march from Wilson, North Carolina, to Raleigh, kicked off the Love Forward Together movement to raise awareness of voter suppression and intimidation

After march, focus turns to ballot and economic justice

Procession to Raleigh launches statewide campaign for voter awareness

By Herbert L. White

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The march to Raleigh is over.

The business of strengthening voting rights and economic empowerment for lower-income North Carolina is underway.

A three-day, 50-mile procession from Wilson to the state capitol led by Bishop William Barber II, founder and president of Reparers of the Breach, coincided with the start of early voting and highlighted extreme gerrymandering of the state's congressional districts. The trek, which launched the Love Forward Together movement, aims to raise aware-

ness of voter suppression and intimidation leading to the 2026 election cycle.

"Love has always won," said Barber, who founding director of the Yale Center for Public Theology and Public Policy. "Not because it's never been battered or bruised, but because it endures, it's remembered, and it remains strong. Those who came before us fought to make this nation live up to its promises on paper, and we continue that struggle today because we love unity, truth and justice."

Marchers rallied to raise awareness of how Republican-led gerrymandering in the 1st congressional district in northeastern North Carolina stripped Black

communities of political power by spreading them into the 3rd District, a GOP stronghold. The march through Bailey - which is part of the 1st District - brought together clergy and impacted voters. The march ended on Feb. 14 with a Mass People's Assembly & Moral March at the state capitol.

A federal court on Nov. 26 upheld North Carolina's new map, which gives Republicans a chance at holding 11 of the state's 14 congressional seats. The panel voted to allow the redrawn lines, which changes Districts 1 and 3 and improves the chances of bouncing U.S. Rep.

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« REV. JESSE JACKSON 1941-2026 »

Carolinas activism set stage for rise

By Herbert L. White

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Before the collaboration with Martin Luther King Jr., ordination as a Baptist preacher or groundbreaking presidential campaigns, the Rev. Jesse Jackson was a Carolinas activist.

Rev. Jackson, who died Feb. 17 at age 84, was hospitalized at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago on Nov. 12 for observation due to Progressive Supranuclear Palsy, a neurodegenerative disease that was initially mistaken for Parkinson's, according to a Rainbow/PUSH Coalition statement. Because there is no cure, his treatment focused on alleviating symptoms.



Jackson

Public observances will be held in Chicago, with scheduling handled by Rainbow/PUSH.

"Our father was a servant leader — not only to our family, but to the oppressed, the voiceless, and the overlooked around the world," the Jackson family said in statement. "We shared him with the world, and in return, the world became part of our extended family. His unwavering belief in justice, equality, and love uplifted millions, and we ask you to honor his memory by continuing the fight for the values he lived by."

Born Jesse Louis Burns in Greenville, South Carolina, on Oct. 8, 1941, to Helen Burns, who married Charles Henry Jackson when Jesse was 2. After attending the Univer-

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Challenge to the EPA on air quality

By Herbert L. White

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A Charlotte nonprofit plans to sue the Trump administration for missing a court-imposed deadline to improve air quality.



Robbins

CleanAIRE NC joined nearly 20 environmental, community and health groups suing the Environmental Protection Agency for missing a Feb. 7 deadline to designate areas in violation of the 2024 national air quality standard for soot required under the Clean Air Act. The designations, established under the Biden administration, are designed to lower soot pollution levels in compliance with the 2024 standard EPA previously contended would save thousands of American lives yearly.

"The Clean Air Act is not a suggestion; it is a mandate to protect the very air we breathe," said Jeffrey Robbins, executive director of CleanAIRE NC. "By missing this deadline, the EPA is effectively choosing to leave millions of Americans in the dark about the safety of their air while delaying the urgent work of reducing deadly soot pollution."

Soot pollution stems largely from burning fossil fuels for electricity, manufacturing, transportation, and agriculture. It causes premature death and is further linked to

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NORTH CAROLINA INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ETHICS BOWL

Johnson C. Smith University's team of Jaslynn Vorachith, Holiness Mhlanga, Christian Smith, Marvin Brown and Alastair Park won the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities Ethics Bowl.

Great debaters: JCSU the first Black college to win NC Ethics Bowl

By Herbert L. White

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Johnson C. Smith University's debate team set a milestone in argument.

JCSU is the first historically Black college or university to win the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities Ethics Bowl in its 15-year history. Teams from 18 schools competed at the state legislative complex for two days of debate centered on

the theme "Ethics in Leadership." JCSU, the first HBCU to reach the final round, topped Catawba College in the semifinal and North Carolina Wesleyan University in the finale.

"I looked at this historic win as a moment of progress for all students at JCSU," said Marvin Brown, one of five team members along with captain Holiness Mhlanga, Alastair Park, Christian Smith and Jaslynn Vorachith.

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The Post celebrates Women's History with March conversations

By Herbert L. White

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The Post is celebrating Charlotte trailblazers and community builders for Women's History Month.

"Conversations: HER Story" is the publication's second annual series of presentations with women who've made an impact in the community in endeavors like the arts, social justice activism, community engagement and media. The weekly programs will be hosted at West Boulevard Library, 2157 West Blvd. All programs are from 6-7:30 p.m. and free admission.

The lineup of conversations:

• Ayisha Cravotta (March 3). Cravotta spent five seasons with Charlotte Ballet as a dancer, where her most memorable roles were as Tinker Bell in Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux's "Peter Pan," Alvin Ailey's "The River" and George Balanchine's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." After retiring in 2007, Cravotta joined Charlotte Ballet's marketing department and four years later, was appointed principal of the Charlotte Ballet Academy.

• Monique Couvson Ed.D. (March 10). Couvson is an award-winning author, social justice scholar, and philanthropist who focuses on education, civil rights, juvenile and criminal justice. She is president and CEO of G4GC, a philanthropic organization that resources movements and organizations that center the wellbeing of girls and gender-expansive young

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MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Marchers from across North Carolina walked 50 miles to the state capitol in Raleigh to raise awareness of voting rights security and economic mobility.

After march, focus turns to ballot, affordability

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Don Davis, a Black Democrat, from the 1st by adding more Republican voters.

The previous 1st District was 40% Black, 47% white and skewed slightly Republican.

A lawsuit filed in October sought to block the changes by arguing the remap disproportionately impacts Black voters. Davis introduced the Restoring Electoral Stability to Enhance Trust, or RESET, Act of 2025, a bill that would prohibit statewide mid-decade redistricting legislation unless mandated by a state independent redistricting commission created through a state constitution, a court order on constitutional grounds, or state referendum.

Voters and pro-democracy advocacy groups challenged the redraw, arguing lawmakers intended to nullify Black voting power, especially in the northeast, where District 1 has elected Black Democrats to Congress since 1992. The federal court cited the U.S.

Supreme Court's ruling in Alexander v. South Carolina NAACP, which raised the standard to show racial bias in voting rights.

The movement, which includes clergy, organized labor and human rights advocates, focuses on North Carolina's 3.4 million poor and low-income voters and their struggles to access health care insurance and food. Activists argue are directly impacted by policy decisions without their input or representation at the ballot box.

"We're focused on love and loving forward together," Barber said. "That is why we are Black, we are white, we are indigenous, we are poor, we are working, we are wealthy conscious, we're young, we're old, we're straight, we're gay, we're from the east, we're from the west, we're from the North, we're from the South. But we are most of all lovers of justice and truth and lovers of humanity. We are not going anywhere."



STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The Rev. Jesse Jackson (right), who died Feb. 17 in Chicago at age 84, was one of Martin Luther King's top lieutenants during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Jackson, a native of Greenville, South Carolina, became an activist as a student at North Carolina A&T State University and was arrested in 1960 after walking into the whites-only Greenville County Library and demanding its desegregation.

Carolinas activism set stage for Rev. Jesse Jackson's rise

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sity of Illinois for a year on a football scholarship, the younger Jackson transferred to North Carolina A&T College (now North Carolina A&T State University) where he joined the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. As a freshman in 1960, Rev. Jackson and seven high school students were arrested after walking into the whites-only Greenville County Library in South Carolina to demand its desegregation five months after A&T students launched the modern sit-in movement in Greensboro.

He graduated A&T in 1964 with a sociology degree.

Jesse Louis Jackson now rests with the angels and ancestors. His name in Hebrew means a gift from God because God exists," Bishop William Barber, founder of Repairers of the Breach said in a statement. "Indeed, Jesse Jackson was a gift from God and a witness that God exists in the ways he cared for and lifted all people, the way he called forth a rainbow coalition of people to challenge economic and social inequality from the pulpit to a historic presidential run, the way he dared to keep hope alive whenever the nation struggled with being who she says she is and yet ought to be. When I was a college student, he was a gift to me as a mentor, and it has been my great privilege to have him walk alongside me through my whole public ministry.

"Now his eternal hope is realized as he takes his place among the ancestors in the presence of God. May we all take up his hope for the America that has never yet been but nevertheless must be."

In 1965, Rev. Jackson was active in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and a student at Chicago Theological Seminary. Responding to King's call to rally support for activists beaten in Selma, Alabama, by state troopers in the "Bloody Sunday" attack, Rev. Jackson drove south with a group of students for a follow-up march. That led SCLC to hire him for initiatives in the urban north.

When King arrived in Chicago to advocate for the end of racial discrimination in 1966, Jackson transitioned to SCLC's economic development and job preparation program, which became Operation Breadbasket.

Rev. Jackson was one of King's top lieutenants and at age 26 was in Memphis working on the Poor People's Campaign when King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. Rev. Jackson, who was in the courtyard during the

shooting, was tasked with calling Coretta Scott King to deliver the news.

"Those eight or 10 steps to that phone was like a long journey," he recounted.

In 1971, Rev. Jackson founded Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) an economic advocacy group that encouraged corporations to hire more Black workers and collaborate more with Black entrepreneurs.

"The Reverend Dr. Jesse Louis Jackson was not simply a civil rights leader; he was a movement unto himself," the Rev. Al Sharpton in a statement. "He carried history in his footsteps and hope in his voice. One of the greatest honors of my life was learning at his side. He reminded me that faith without action is just noise. He taught me that protest must have purpose, that faith must have feet, and that justice is not seasonal, it is daily work."

In 1984, Rev. Jackson organized the Rainbow Coalition, a diverse collection of progressive voters that laid the foundation for his groundbreaking presidential campaign in which he earned 3 million votes and won five Democratic primaries despite limiting funding and little support from the national party. He finished third behind former Vice President Walter Mondale and U.S. Sen. Gary Hart.

Rev. Jackson was criticized for remarks made in a private conversation that were regarded as antisemitic as well as his relationship with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. He apologized for the comments but refused to break with Farrakhan.

Four years later, Rev. Jackson finished second to Michael Dukakis for the Democratic nomination and won the Michigan primary as well as four caucuses while receiving 6.9 million votes. Those campaigns helped lay the groundwork for another Black presidential contender from Illinois - Barack Obama - to win in 2008 and 2012.

"I'm often asked, 'Jesse, why do you take on these tough issues? They're not very political. We can't win that way,' he told Democrats at the 1988 national convention. "If an issue is morally right, it will eventually be political. It may be political and never be right. Fannie Lou Hamer didn't have the most votes in Atlantic City, but her principles have outlasted every delegate who voted to lock her out. Rosa Parks did not have the most votes, but she was morally right. Dr. King didn't have the most votes about the Vietnam War, but he was morally right. If we are principled first, our politics will fall in place."

The Post celebrates women's history with March conversations

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people of color.

LaRita Barber (March 17).

Barber has been involved in community endeavors in the Charlotte community since 1987. As Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont's chief advancement officer, she is responsible for identifying and cultivating relationships and strategies that establish and sustain Goodwill's relevance in the community and advance



the nonprofit's mission.

Debbie Mann Gibbs (March 24). Gibbs is Charlotte's first Black woman television reporter. She was recruited to WBTW in 1975 shortly after taking a job at the Charlotte Observer. A print journalist in her native St. Louis, Gibbs' writing and editing skill paved the way to her Charlotte transition, where she covered breaking news and politics at Channel 3.

Barber



JCSU makes debate history with NC independent colleges win

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chith. "It reminds us that excellence lives here at 100 Beatties Ford Road. Hard work is being done here."

Debate teams typically consist of groups of students who compete in structured arguments for or against a topic, usually with of two to three speakers per side. Teams research, prepare, and deliver speeches to persuade judges. The debaters analyze topics, research evidence, and make arguments within a time limit in debate styles that include Policy, Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum, and Parliamentary debate.

The competition for the first time used a digital scoring system in which

judges leveraged tablets for real-time submission and faster tabulation of results.

"I am still in shock from the win," Mhlanga said. "I believe this year worked not because of effort but because of passion. Each of us connected on a more personal level. We didn't see each other as teammates we saw each other as people. Because we saw each other as people, we appreciated the differences we all brought to the team. Through channeling all these differences is what made us a unique team."

The tournament kicked off with a keynote address by North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruc-

tion Mo Green, who shared personal experiences on the challenges to ethical leadership.

"The Ethics Bowl is a showcase of the NCICU experience, and Johnson C. Smith's outstanding team presentations during our 15th anniversary year were remarkable," NCICU President A. Hope Williams said. "This event highlights the intellectual rigor and leadership potential across our 36 campuses. We are incredibly proud of all our participants for their ability to navigate difficult ethical landscapes with integrity, collaboration, and profound critical thinking."

Charlotte nonprofit threatens EPA lawsuit

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cancer, asthma attacks, and hospitalizations and emergency room visits for severe heart and lung diseases.

"The EPA's inaction isn't just illegal; it's a reckless forsaking of human health," said Seth Johnson, senior attorney at Earthjustice, which represents the community groups. "The 2024 soot standard is the law, supported by EPA's own scientific evidence, so this is an indefensible move. It is absolutely EPA's legal responsibility to designate the areas that are not in compliance so that they can start taking the commonsense steps the Clean Air Act requires to ensure all Americans breathe clean air. Implementing the 2024 standard is not about assigning blame, it's about saving lives."

Last year, EPA asked a federal court to strike down the updated National Ambient Air Quality Standard limit for PM2.5, also known as soot, which EPA strengthened in 2024. The rule requires reductions in air pollution. The EPA didn't dispute scientific evidence supporting the tougher standard, which is projected

to save 4,500 lives in 2032 alone.

"As physicians, nurses and respiratory therapists who treat patients with lung disease, we know air pollution kills," said Dr. Alison Lee, chair of the American Thoracic Society Environmental Health Policy Committee. "Exposure to particulate matter pollution triggers asthma attacks, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease exacerbations, heart attacks, emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and premature death. The EPA has a duty to protect the American public from the dangers of air pollution by ensuring all communities meet the existing pollution standards."

Health, environmental, and community groups, along with a coalition of states led by California, have asked the federal court to uphold the 2024 standard. The case is pending, and the 2024 soot standard remains in effect.

The Clean Air Act requires EPA to cite areas in violation of the particulate matter standard for remediation but missed the deadline. The most recent official data shows over 75 million people live in counties that violate the 2024 standard.

Primary battles for Democrats who vote with NC Republicans

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

North Carolina State Rep. Rodney Pierce, D-Halifax, didn't have time to eat as he campaigned ahead of this year's primary election.

By the time he greeted the various preachers and community leaders dispersed throughout Mozingo and Walter Lowe's lake-front home in Littleton, N.C., it was showtime. A bit later, at a fundraising event at the Acorn Center, Pierce spent his time chatting with donors before his second speech of the day. He never made it to the dinner buffet. Eventually, in the final hours of the evening, he sat down for a meal with his campaign team at a local restaurant. It was a successful — but exhausting — day on his path to reelection, he thought.

In North Carolina, primary candidates have a little over two months between the filing deadline and Election Day to make

their case to voters. Election Day is March 3, early voting begins in mid-February and absentee ballots go out starting in January.

That's not much time for challengers to make their name known. The short runway means incumbent state legislators don't usually have to break their necks to secure a primary win.

Pierce may be an exception. He's up against former legislator Michael Wray, who is back with a vengeance after being renounced by his own party in the 2024 election over several controversial votes with the Republican caucus.

State Rep. Shelly Willingham, D-Edgecombe, may have reason to sweat, too. He faces a primary challenger in Patricia Smith after his own series of high-profile votes that helped the Republican majority override the past two Democratic governors' vetoes. This election cycle, Willingham has spent over

\$3,000 on gas traveling between the state legislature in Raleigh and his district to campaign, he told Carolina Public Press.

In the eyes of the North Carolina Democratic Party, voting against the caucus in any circumstance is a red flag. Voting with the Republicans to override the governor's vetoes is as good as a mortal sin. Particularly when, as in the current North Carolina House of Representatives, Republicans are one seat shy of a supermajority. That means that they need at least one Democrat's support to defy Gov. Josh Stein's will.

Willingham has been that one Democrat before. More often, he and Wray have been one of a handful of defectors that often includes former State Rep. Cecil Brockman, D-Guilford, Garland Pierce, D-Scotland, and Mecklenburg Democrats Carla Cunningham and Nasif Majeed. With the exception of

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THE AFRICAN TIME BOMB

If you bother to pay attention to any of the major broadcast news outlets in this country (ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, and of course, the FOX network) you can't help but notice that the news coming out of Africa is almost always negative. Yes, there are occasionally positive stories about stunning scenery and adorable lion cubs, elephants and giraffes, but when it comes to Africa's people it's an entirely different story.

Africa is generally portrayed as a dirty, dangerous, and impoverished place (in fact the current US President once referred to African nations as "*shit-hole countries*"). As a result, the news about Africa that is presented by America's major media outlets tends to only focus on things like military coups, civil wars, starvation, disease, crime and corruption.

While these things do exist it is important to put them in their proper context. Africa is a huge place, rich in natural resources and extremely diverse. It's not like it's just one country. It's the world's second largest continent, more than **three times** the size of the United States. It consists of 54 sovereign nations, each with different political systems, social issues and cultural traditions, whose people speak over 2,000 different languages and dialects.

Although Africa's poverty is all too evident there is also immense wealth. Some of this wealth can easily be seen in many of Africa's major cities with their skyscrapers, freeways, upscale neighborhoods, fine restaurants and world class universities.

Most important, however, is the fact that Africa has the youngest population in the world. Indeed, according to the United Nations, in less than 25 years one of every four people on earth will be an African. Moreover, the UN estimates that by the end of this century (within the life span of today's toddlers) one of every three people in the world will be an African. In short, the world is sitting on an **African population time bomb**.

Like it or not, a new world order is now emerging. The global balance of power is shifting away from the old powers in Western Europe and North America toward rising Asian, African and Latin American nations like China, India, Brazil and South Africa. It is Africa, with its size, its geography, its resources and its population, that will tip the balance and determine the winners and losers in this global north-south struggle.

This will require those of us in this country, who are of African descent, to make some basic decisions about our own identity, our loyalties and our collective future.

For example, will we continue to see ourselves, first and foremost, as American citizens by right of birth, who just happen to have dark skin (the black Americans) whose future and that of our children is completely tied to the national health, welfare and security of the United States of America? If so, are we prepared, for the sake of what we think is a good standard of living, to forever accept being dismissed as just some "*racial minority*" in a country ruled by people who don't look like us? Will we then leave our future and that of our children to the mercy of those people and trust them to treat us well? ... or

Will we see ourselves, first and foremost, as African people who are Americans only by an accident of birth, and as such are an integral part of a global African diaspora whose future and that of our children is inevitably tied to the health, welfare and security of the African Continent and its people? If so, will we then have the psychological courage to free ourselves from an American mentality and identify with people half-way around the world who may have a lower standard of living today, but are sitting on a vast trove of natural resources and will soon be the leaders of a new global majority?

This is the choice. We can submissively accept our fate and behave like loyal and patriotic dark-skinned copies of the people who disrespect us and make it clear on a daily basis that they don't really want us in their country, or we can claim our rightful place in the global family that has our same genetic character and who have experienced a history of brutal colonial oppression at the hands of the same people who have tormented us and our ancestors.

It's not rocket science. Africa will determine the future in this world ... and we are Africans.



The Charlotte Post

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How concerned are you about the future of America?

An increasing chorus of voices is warning us that the future of this great republic is being threatened.

These alarmists are saying our country is going in the wrong direction and their message is resonating with large numbers.

A 2025 Politico Poll found 49% saying America's best days are behind us. A September CNN survey had 54 percent agreeing with that statement. And a just-released Gallup poll indicates that the number of people who anticipate a high quality of life in five years is only 59%; it was 68.3% in 2020.

These survey results cut across all age groups, races, sexes, and political parties, although Republicans are less pessimistic than Democrats and Independents. Even in North Carolina, where our economy remains quite healthy, there is a sense of foreboding.

People are worried. But are they worried about what they are willing to do about it? Do we just want to gripe and complain, or have we reached a place where we are willing to take action? And, if action is advocated, what action is appropriate and necessary?

There was a moment in America's history, 250 years ago, when colonists were similarly upset with the way things were headed. A Parliament in England made laws with no consideration for the colonists' feelings or positions. A King refused to acknowledge the colonists were subjects with rights equal to his subjects in England.

Following the infamous Boston Tea Party and other taxes imposed just upon the colonies, many refused to continue in the direction they were headed. What did they do?

The movement in our colony began in Wilmington. Led by Colonel Samuel Harnett, they formed a Committee of Correspondence, where members shared information with other colonies, as well as within our own colony.

In August 1774, they called together the First Provincial Congress in New Bern, passing The New Bern Resolves to denounce laws persecuting Boston and affirming this colony's solidarity with Massachusetts. They staunchly affirmed their loyalty to King George and their rights as British citizens, however the emphatically stated that duties, tariffs and taxes imposed upon them without their consent were "illegal and oppressive."

Further, in a direct challenge to the King and Parliament, this body proclaimed that unless their rights were acknowledged and their grievances addressed by October 1775, North Carolina would neither import nor export products with England. They took decisive action, also forming a Committee of Safety to organize militias and assert their rights.

Other colonies took responded similarly. We know what followed: The American Revolution.

Nobody would presume to assert that people today are as concerned as those colonists 250 years ago. But how concerned are we?

Let me suggest one way of measuring our concerns. Our votes have always been considered a bellwether of the temperature of the state and nation. Let's put that to a test in the primary election in which early voting has already begun.

The primaries rarely generate large voter turnouts, but in years when there is a presidential election more voters cast ballots. In 2024, only 24.1 percent of the voters cast ballots. The largest recent turnout was in 2008, when 36.86 percent of registered voters showed up.

Turnout remained in the 30-plus percent range in 2012, 2016 and 2020 but in non-presidential primaries, turnout hovered in the mid-teens, peaking at 19.7 percent in 2022.

It is logical to assume that the larger the primary turnout the more interest there is in the election. A corollary might be that the larger the turnout the more concern is being voiced. We've seen large numbers of voters casting ballots in other state elections and many consider these turnouts to be a repudiation of the current situation.

Here's the challenge for us in North Carolina. A large turnout would signify a high level of concern among voters.

What can we do to ensure that large turnout? Just as in colonial days, we can rally friends, neighbors, church and club groups, asking them not only to vote but to get five others to vote in the primary. The goal is not necessarily to promote one candidate or one party over another but to get large numbers to the polls.

If more than 30% of registered voters cast ballots in the March 3 primary the message would be sent. The more voices raised, the more politicians will pay attention.

Exercise your voice by voting. Who knows what may happen as a result!

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

Primary battles for Dem lawmakers

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Pierce, all represent fairly secure Democratic districts.

For Pierce, Wray, Willingham and Smith, the primary is the real election. Who wins the battles may determine more than two seats; it might impact whether Stein's vetoes will stand.

Willingham vs. Smith

There's much talk about tables in the House District 23 primary contest between Willingham and Smith.

The pair are vying to represent a trio of poor, rural counties in northeastern North Carolina: Bertie, Edgecombe and Martin. Willingham has been in office since winning his first election in 2014. Before, he was a school board member, election board member and county commissioner. Smith is an accountant, minister and Martin County Democratic Party treasurer.

At a recent primary candidate forum at E.J. Hayes Alumni Center in Williamsburg, Willingham and Smith sat side by side, taking turns pitching themselves to Martin County residents.

Smith went first. She highlighted the district's issues. First and foremost, health care. Martin County lost its hospital a few years ago. East Carolina University Health needs \$220 million and a halt to Medicaid cuts to bring it back in a limited capacity, which seems unlikely without a Medicaid deal or state budget. There's no EMS or urgent care either, as of January.

Smith is also concerned about the state's education system, rising insurance premiums and small business survival in the district.

"Our future at this point is at stake," Smith said. "We've been under the same representation for over a decade now, and we're not progressing. So, I believe at this point, we need change."

She also criticized Willingham for being disloyal to Democrats.

During the 2025-26 session, Willingham has voted with Republicans to override vetoes six times, including on House Bill 193, which allows certain private school employees and volunteers to conceal carry on school property; House Bill 549, which expands the state auditor's investigative scope to any entity that receives state or federal funding; and Senate Bill 266, which removes an interim 70% carbon emissions reduction goal for electric public utilities like Duke Energy, previously set for 2034, on the way to 2050 carbon neutrality. It also allows those utilities to charge ratepayers for the construction costs of electric generating facilities before the projects are complete.

Willingham vs. Smith

There's much talk about tables in the House District 23 primary contest between Willingham and Smith.

Willingham is unapologetic. He told CPP that he listens to proponents and detractors of each bill, considers each side along with his inside knowledge, makes a decision, and sticks with it. He doesn't ask how the governor or his caucus feels about it. He also doesn't "trade" votes for influence among the Republican caucus, he said. He's willing to accept the consequences of his independent streak.

If HB193 dealt with public schools, he wouldn't have supported it, he said.

But he thinks private schools should have the freedom to do what they want. He voted for SB266

because he doesn't think it will cause energy rates to increase on its own. In

recent years, he's been a proponent of charter school legislation because he supports all types of education, he said. He doesn't see eye-to-eye with most of his fellow Democrats, who think state money to charter schools comes at the expense of public education.

"When the governor asks me to change my vote, well, why would I change my vote?" he asked. "I mean, the bill didn't change."

When it was Willingham's turn to wield the microphone to address potential primary voters, he was matter-of-fact. One person can't make anything happen at the General Assembly, he told the crowd. Democrats can introduce all the bills they want, but they won't go anywhere.

The only way to operate as an influential member of the minority party is to

build relationships and compromise with the other side, he said.

A decade of that strategy

has earned Willingham a

spot on 23 legislative com-

mittees — more than any

other legislator — and

chairmanship of the House

Ethics Committee. He

serves on the Rules Com-

mittee, which sees every

bill before it hits the floor

for a vote. This year, he is

a member of the budget

conference committee.

Throughout his tenure, he said he's secured \$62 million for Martin and Edgecombe County school systems, funding for the Edgecombe County mega-site and water mitigation aid, among other appropriations.

As for the Martin County hospital? Willingham is working on it "24/7," he said. He's asking for hospital money in the budget. While every district has health care needs, not every Democrat is in his position, with the relationships he's developed.

"If there's nobody at the table advocating for you, nothing's going to happen," Willingham told attendees. "I'm at the table. So, what is the alternative to take me away from the table?"

Smith prefers a seat at a different table. To her, the governor is the president of North Carolina. She wants to be a part of his house, sitting at his table.

"If I can't be with him, then I don't need to be in the house," she said. "I'm not going to be that one Democrat (who votes with Republicans). I'm not going to bend, and I'm not going to betray my party. I'm going to be a team player."

Smith was appalled when she heard Willingham voted to allow certain private school employees to conceal carry. What happens if a child gets hold of a gun? Or a teacher has a particularly bad day?

She also doesn't buy that getting the Martin County hospital back is as complicated as Willingham makes it seem. Schools are disappearing, educators are leaving because of low pay, and she thinks she could do a better job at stemming the losses.

"When I started thinking about running, I knew it would be a hard race," Smith said. "But, as I look at the record, his performance being in there a decade, it's not so hard. I think the hardest part of the race is just getting the people educated so that they will come out and vote."

Rematch: Pierce vs. Wray

What is a "real" Democrat? The question is more than philosophical in the primary for District 27, which spans Halifax, Northampton and Warren counties in northeastern North Carolina.

Wray, a former state legislator and small business owner, argues that a real Democrat "is willing to work across party lines to get things done for his constituents and his district."

he said in a Facebook post.

"My opponent criticizes me for voting with the Republicans on the state budget, but those votes gave pay raises to state employees and teachers, and it provided more than \$200 million to our county governments, our cities and towns and local nonprofits," the post stated.

Wray declined an interview and chose not to respond to a list of emailed questions from CPP.

For Pierce, the definition is a bit different.

"Real Democrats don't vote to take money out of public schools," he said. "A real Democrat will not represent the birthplace of environmental justice in Warren County and have an anti-environment voting record. A real Democrat won't take the power of a sheriff to determine who can legally purchase a firearm in their county. A real Democrat won't vote to raise the cost of living by raising your energy bill, by raising your homeowners and auto insurance rates."

Most importantly, a "real" Democrat won't override the governor's vetoes, Pierce said.

Wray served in the state legislature from 2005 until his 2024 primary election loss to Pierce by 34 votes. In the 2023-24 legislative session, he was the Democrat who voted with Republicans at the highest rate. The session before, he voted with Republicans at a higher rate than two actual Republicans.

His aisle-crossing tendencies included key veto override votes on the North Carolina Farm Act of 2023, which stripped wetland protections; the Fairness in Women's Sports Act, which banned transgender girls and women from competing in female athletic categories; House Bill 808, which barred gender transition procedures for minors; and House Bill 10, which required sheriffs to cooperate with federal immigration officials and funded the state's private school voucher program.

The ice from the previous week's winter storm still coated the backroads leading to the Lowe's household. Inside, several dozen faith leaders caught up over chicken salad sandwiches and fruit.

Former U.S. Rep. Eva Clayton — the first Black woman to represent North Carolina in Congress — sat in the front row to listen to Pierce speak. Former Rep. G.K. Butterfield was also present.

« BLACK BRILLIANCE »

Freedom's Journal: Black America's first publication

PUBLIC BROADCASTING SYSTEM

Founded on March 16, 1827, as a four-page, four-column standard-sized weekly, Freedom's Journal was the first Black-owned and operated newspaper in the United States and was established the same year that slavery was abolished in New York.

Begun by a group of free Black men in New York City, the paper served to counter racist commentary published in the mainstream press.

Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm were respectively, senior and junior editors.

Freedom's Journal was similar to other ante-bellum reform papers in that its pages consisted of news of current events, anecdotes, and editorials and was used to address contemporary issues such as slavery and "colonization," a concept which was conceived by members of The American Colonization Society, a mostly white pro-emigration organization founded in 1816 to repatriate free black people to Africa.

Initially opposed to colonization efforts, Freedom's Journal denounced slavery and advocated for black people's political rights, the right to vote, and spoke out against lynchings.

Freedom's Journal pro-

vided its readers with regional, national, and international news and with news that could serve to both entertain and educate. It sought to improve conditions for the over 300,000 newly freed black men and women living in the North. The newspaper broadened readers' knowledge of the world by featuring articles on such countries as Haiti and Sierra Leone.

As a paper of record, Freedom's Journal published birth, death and wedding announcements. To encourage Black achievement, it featured biographies of renowned black figures such as Paul Cuffee, a Black Bostonian who owned a trading ship staffed by free Black people, Toussaint L'Ouverture and poet Phyllis

Wheatley. The paper also printed school, job and housing listings.

Russwurm became sole editor of Freedom's Journal following the resignation of Cornish in September 1827, and began to promote the colonization movement. The majority of the newspaper's readers did not support the paper's radical shift in support of colonization, and in March 1829, Freedom's Journal ceased publication.

Soon after, Russwurm emigrated to the American Colonization Society of Liberia and became governor of the Maryland Colony. Cornish returned and attempted to revive the newspaper in May 1829 under the new name The Rights of All, but the paper folded after less than a



Freedom's Journal, founded in 1827 by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, was the first Black-owned publication in the United States.

year. Freedom's Journal's two-year existence, however, helped spawn other papers.

By the start of the Civil War, over 40 black-owned and operated papers had been established throughout the U.S.



JAMES WHALEN
FOR NORTH CAROLINA COURT OF APPEALS

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Attorney James Whalen has the endorsements of the following organizations:

- Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People
- RWCA - Raleigh-Wake Citizens Association
- The George C. Simkins, Jr. Memorial PAC
- Bladen Improvement PAC
- Henderson-Vance Black Leadership PAC
- Pam's Picks



NBAE

Charlotte Hornets guard LaMelo Ball drives to the basket against the Detroit Pistons in a Feb. 9 game. The Hornets are 15-7 since the start of 2026, including 11 of their last 12.

Hornets gear up for stretch run

Winner of 11-of-12 games before the All-Star break, Charlotte picks up pursuit of playoff position

By Cameron Williams

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The All-Star break is over, and the Charlotte Hornets are in position to pick up where they left off.

After their nine-game win streak ended Feb. 9 with a loss to Detroit, the Hornets bounced back with a 110-107 victory against Atlanta. Charlotte (26-29) is ninth in the Eastern Conference, a half-game ahead of Atlanta (26-30) and two behind Miami (28-27). Charlotte coach Charles Lee feels the early-season growing pains have helped

form a strong team identity.

"With 27 games to go, we have built this mindset," he said. "We've built some resolve. We've built an identity, I really, truly believe. And so as they get a day or two to let their bodies recover, think about what we want to accomplish when we come back here, and I think I know the answer, but it's a perfect time for us to be able to kind of reflect on everything we've done and figure out how we can stay hungry and take advantage of a couple days to kind of rest and recover."

Since the calendar turned to 2026, the Hornets are 15-7 and have won 11 of their last 12 games. A big piece to the puzzle has been the play of rookie Kon Knueppel, who was named Eastern Conference rookie of the month for the third straight time.

Knueppel, who is averaging 18.9 per game, is second in the NBA in three-pointers made, trailing only Cleveland guard Donovan Mitchell. Knueppel is headed to all-star weekend to compete in the Rising Stars Challenge and the three-point contest.

Knueppel — like Lee — feels the Hornets have an identity he attributes to defensive tenacity that has propelled them to the corner.

"I really think just defensively, our attention to detail and our competitiveness on that end," Knueppel said. "We're a pretty good offensive team, but I think also on the offensive end, trust in the pass, early pass-ahead in transition that have really made our offense pretty efficient. But I think the biggest reason is just our change of

Please see IMPROVED | 6A

In or out? Zaha and Charlotte FC mull the future

By Herbert L. White

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Do Wilfried Zaha and Charlotte FC have a future together?

The forward's loan runs through July — which coincides with a key segment of the MLS season where the best teams try to position themselves for the postseason. As the campaign nears, the question is whether Charlotte and Zaha, who scored 10 goals in 31 matches last season share enough interest to close a new deal.

"We have (spoken)," Zaha said last month. "We plan to speak in more depth, probably after preseason. Just sit down and find out if we can come to some sort of agreement. So yeah, I've spoken to [sporting director Zoran Krneta], but we plan to speak in depth, probably in the preseason times."

Zaha isn't tipping his hand as to whether he's leaning toward staying in Charlotte or moving on to another club. There are family considerations as well as the business aspect to deciding on his future with the Crown.

"That I don't know," said. "I have to have the talk. Like I said before, I feel comfortable here. My family are good. My son loves the

Please see ZAHA | 6A



Charlotte FC forward Wilfried Zaha, who scored 10 goals in his first season with the Crown in 2025, is out of contract in July. He and Charlotte are talking about an extension, but nothing has been decided.

Golden Bulls hire Massey as assistant

Former WSSU, Shaw coach is Garinger grad

By Herbert L. White

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A longtime CIAA football rival is now on Johnson C. Smith's coaching staff.

Former Winston-Salem State head coach Robert Massey, who lost three in a row to JCSU during Maurice Flowers' tenure as coach and 1-3 overall, will assist with cornerbacks, the position he played at North Carolina Central before going to an NFL career with the Detroit Lions and New Orleans Saints. A Garinger High graduate, Massey is in familiar territory.



Flowers

"A lot of times as a head coach, you get away from what you were really good at, what you cut your teeth with," Flowers said. "For Robert Massey, he was coaching corners, and he's just hungry to get back home. I say get back home in a couple of different ways. Him being a Charlottean, a graduate of Garinger High School, he's coming back home, so I'm just excited because it's not often that you get a chance to add someone of his caliber. He's really a lot like (former linebackers coach David) Bowser — someone that's been a head coach ... but also, we're bringing someone on board that is a hometown hero from Charlotte."

Massey a longtime CIAA coach, resigned in November after going 25-34 over six seasons at WSSU after a 16-45 record in six seasons at Shaw. Although Massey is under .500



Massey

Youth baseball initiative aims to improve access

By Cameron Williams

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Dexter Hayes saw a need for baseball, and plans on filling it.

The game teaches fundamental principles for life. In west Charlotte, the lack of fields, interest and other issues has driven baseball out of communities. Hayes wants to bring it back.

"Back in the 1980s I had a Babe Ruth baseball program," Hayes said. "We did that for

about 10-12 years. And now I guess you could say I am coming out of retirement. Baseball is a good sport that a lot of inner-city kids don't take advantage of, and that is really the push behind me right now and what has driven me to come out of retirement."

Hayes is launching the Fellowship Royals, a 12-and-under travel team, because he feels a mission to instill the values baseball teaches and the foundation of teamwork. The goal is to start playing tournaments May.

"I'm going with the younger kids, so the kids can be introduced to the game of baseball," he said, "and then we can take the baseball and use it as somewhat as a tool to get the kids interested in some other things. Use it for other positive things that come about in their lives."

Hayes said the program, which would be affiliated with the North Carolina Amateur Athletic Union, is in the early phases but a

Please see YOUTH | 6A

Charlotte 49ers alumni await new direction in athletics leader

By Cameron Williams

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The Charlotte 49ers can't afford to miss on their next athletic director.

After the dismissal of Mike Hill in October, the fan base has been left in limbo with little transparency as to when his successor would be hired. For a school in the middle of ACC country, Charlotte can't afford to wait too long or run the risk of falling further behind the curve in fundraising.

Chancellor Sharon Gaber said there was no timetable set when Hill was fired as to when the next AD would be hired. Fast forward four months and fans and supporters are still in the dark as to when the hire will be made.

Jimmy Touchstone, an alumnus and donor, said he is more patient, but knows the department needs to get the hire right.

"I think everybody feels like we got to get this hire right," Touchstone said. "That might also be on [Gaber's] mind. Let's not move fast. Let's move right. And, quite candidly, I think those are the things that we have control over. ... Charlotte has a lot of opportunity and a lot of potential. They've done a lot with limited resources. But, at the end of the day, I feel like Sharon has shown she is a great chancellor in many regards. So, I put faith in her with this AD search."

Touchstone hopes the next AD will be in touch with the modern college sports landscape. One that understands name, image and likeness fundraising techniques that have been proven to work.

"I don't really have an exact ideal candidate in mind, but what I do know is that it needs to be someone that understands the NIL landscape," he said. "They have to either have fundraising in their blood or they know how to put people in place who have fundraising in their blood. What I don't know is if a person like that can make inroads in the Charlotte community without having had connections here before. So, I don't know how to gauge someone with previous relationships in the area, or someone new to come in and have fresh ideas and ways to engage the community."

Rodney Graves, a 1997 graduate, wants the administration to ultimately get this hire right, first and foremost, but would have liked to get a few more updates along the way.

Please see 49ERS | 6A

Massey a longtime CIAA coach, resigned in November after going 25-34 over six seasons at WSSU after a 16-45 record in six seasons at Shaw. Although Massey is under .500

Please see JC SMITH | 6A



Gaber



Charlotte Hornets forward Kon Knueppel has played beyond expectations as a rookie, averaging 18.9 points per game and second in three-point shots made, trailing only Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell.

Improved Hornets learn to expect winning effort

Continued from page 5A
mindset a little bit on the defensive end."

The Hornets return from the All-Star break to face Houston, Cleveland and Washington in their first three games. Charlotte won its first meeting against the Rockets in Houston and have won all three meetings with the Wizards. Cleveland — fourth in the East — has been an issue for Charlotte, which has won just one of three meetings.

Hornets center Moussa Diabate and forward Miles Bridges will miss all three games due to suspension for fighting Monday against Detroit. The NBA suspended them for four games while giving Pistons' centers Jalen Duren and Isaiah Stewart two- and seven-game suspensions respectively.

Grant Williams started in place of Bridges against Atlanta while Ryan Kalkbrenner started in place of Diabate. Center P.J. Hall also contributed big minutes off the bench with a double-double and leading the Hornets in rebounding with 10. Kalkbrenner had six rebounds and Williams added eight.

"I think we come into every game as the hunters, and I think that's kind of flipped from the beginning of the season," Knueppel said. "We were building good habits, but now we come in expecting to win games. I think that's what you need to be successful in this league. It's really hard to win, and so the appreciation of how hard it is, is something that I think we have a good grasp on right now and what it takes."

JC Smith hires former WSSU coach Massey

Continued from page 5A

as a coach, Flowers insists his resumé and experience are an asset to a program that won a school-best 10 games, the CIAA title and earned its first Division II playoff berth in 2025.

"You're getting somebody that's good, that's bringing so much credibility to the staff having sat in the head coach chair, someone that knows how to recruit and someone that knows the lay of the land in Charlotte," Flowers said. "The Charlotte area's a big-time recruiting area for Johnson C Smith University football, and you're bringing a guy that can coach the cornerback position like no other. He's been away from it for a little while having been a head coach, but I'm just so excited."

Massey's arrival gives the Golden Bulls three coaches in the secondary. Chi-Emeke Worthington will move from safeties to nickel corners while James Lott will move to safeties from cornerbacks. There are a couple of open coaching positions — linebacker, where Bowser worked before taking the top job at Albany State, and defensive line, where Kevon Fly moved on to pursue other opportunities.

Massey "is very familiar with our 4-2-5 system, and coach Lott, who's been our corners coach ... has been a defensive coordinator and a very successful one, so he now moves to the safety position," Flowers said. "And with coach Worthington going to nickels, it really is going to benefit our staff in a way that we're going to have more quality coaches that will be coaching our players, and that's what it's really all about."

Even with the staff transition, Flowers is excited about the arrangements.

"We're having some change in our program," he said. "But one thing's for sure — if you just look at what we've done, you know we have not (gone) backwards. Everything about us has been about moving forward and keeping positive productivity moving forward and that's what we've said about adding coaches."

"We might have lost a couple, but we're going to get better because we're not going to stay the same. We're not going to go backwards. We must keep getting better. And adding Robert Massey to the staff is a sign that we're getting better as a staff."

Youth baseball advocate works on making the sport accessible

Continued from page 5A

passion he will see through.

"Right now, the goal is to bring the kids together," he said. "And to be perfectly honest with you, right now, I only have access to a few kids. But that is OK. It is a start and we just got another coach. So, we have a few kids now and we just want to be able to bring them in, teach them the importance of teamwork and then run the team under these principles. We hope to teach them the proper behavior and ways to conduct themselves not just at games, but when they are out in the community as well."

A deterrent to accessing baseball is the monetary strain on families. Baseball is widely considered one of the most expensive sports with costs ranging from \$1,500 to upwards of \$7,000 to play on a competitive travel team. Much of that cost come from the money it takes to actually travel, but factoring in the cost of equipment, it drives the price up.

"Forty years ago, when I was doing Babe Ruth baseball, I have always worked on

this principle we put this league together for the kids," Hayes said. "I feel it is my obligation to hustle up this money so the kids can be provided for. I know a lot of times in travel organizations the costs can be really high. I have a little financial backing. I have been a professional waiter for about 50 years now. I have met some people amazed by [the program] and I will be hustling up some money, believe that."

Hayes added that 30-40 years ago there were registration fees — sometimes exceeding hundreds of dollars — that some parents couldn't afford. In those cases, kids couldn't play.

Not anymore.

"The money is not the purpose of this program," he said. "The purpose of the program is to get westside kids back playing baseball. If you want to play, we will make sure you can play. ... I know all of our fees will not be over \$75 but no kid will be turned away because of the lack of ability to pay to register. If kids want to come out and play, they will play. It is that simple."

49ers await new direction from AD

Continued from page 5A

"Would I, along with my fellow members of Niner Nation have liked a bit more transparency regarding the overall search process regarding a time frame, characteristics of what they are looking for an AD, and periodic updates? Of course," he said. "But at the end of the day, getting the hire correct is the only thing that ultimately matters to me."

Touchstone, a 1993 graduate, has seen the college athletics landscape change since then as well as the narrative of enrolling at UNC Charlotte as the last resort to becoming the top choice for some students.

He believes there are alumni to make significant strides in raising money for NIL — the school needs an AD that understands this.

"For someone who graduated in 1993, it wasn't cool back then to be a Niner," Touchstone said. "Sorry, but that's the truth. ... People didn't buy the gear; they didn't stick around after they graduated. We did. My friends and I tried to institute change. But it used to be called the suitcase school or whatever. It's

where you'd go to get your education and leave and go back home."

Touchstone hopes alumni don't get too discouraged. He understands the reality that it is hard to donate when you aren't seeing success. But, with the right person connecting with the corporation community, the future has a chance to be bright.

"The new AD is going to have to have a full understanding of where we are right now [financially]," he said. "The second thing is that they absolutely must tap into those people that do know Charlotte and the people that have connections. The new AD, he or she needs to leverage the resources we do currently have to strengthen the relationships we have with the current donors, whether they give \$49 a year or \$49,000 a year. And I think third, they need to have a strong conviction as to what their plan is to leverage the city."

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