

Life!

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2026 SECTION B

Health insurance for foster kids leave some without help

By Andrew Jones
KFF HEALTH NEWS

Ollie Super has moved in and out of cancer treatment since she was diagnosed with neuroblastoma as a toddler in foster care. Now 8, the second grader is dealing with it again. Her cancer came back late last year.

Ollie's parents, who adopted her in 2020, tried to sign her up for a clinical trial using CAR T-cell therapy — which genetically reprograms a patient's white blood cells to help them fight cancer — at UNC Health in Chapel Hill, an hour-and-a-half drive from their home in Eden.

Her mother, Britany Super, described it as Ollie's "last option."

But in early March, Super recalled, UNC Health's financial office told them the bad news: The state's new insurance for kids in foster care wasn't going to pay for the treatment.

In December, Ollie became one of hundreds of thousands of kids nationwide enrolled in a special kind of public health insurance for people served by the foster care system. That insurance, known as a specialized managed care plan, is part of Medicaid, the federal-state program that covers health costs for people with low incomes or disabilities.

North Carolina is one of 14 states with such specialized foster care plans, according to the National Academy for State Health Policy. The plans differ by state, but each is meant to expand coverage for children in the foster care system — and for kids who were adopted out of it, such as Ollie and her siblings.

Yet, as in other states that have struggled when adding such plans, North Carolina families have faced hurdles obtaining care. Thousands of doctors whose services were covered under Medicaid were not included in the specialized plan — which is costing the state \$3.1 billion over four years — when it rolled out on Dec. 1. That left guardians and parents of kids adopted out of the system scrambling to figure out whether they would have to find new health care providers or new insurance.

In North Carolina, the insurance plan's stumbles have added another layer of complication around

Please see **STATE** | 3B

Population growth fuels change across North Carolina's business landscape

By Corrie Kelleigh
UNC MEDIA HUB

North Carolina's rapid population growth is transforming the state's business landscape, while testing the very assets and infrastructure that are enticing people to move. Since 2015, with the exception of 2020, North Carolina's population has grown by more than 1 percent annually, roughly double the national average, driving rapid economic expansion and transforming the state's business landscape. That growth has propelled North Carolina to the top of national business rankings for the past five years. In 2025, CNBC named the state the best in the country for business, citing its economy, workforce and business-friendly climate. But the same forces fueling that success are testing the state's infrastructure, affordability and the long-term sustainability of small businesses.

To keep North Carolina at the top of the rankings, continued investment is needed, said Dana Magliola, senior director of infrastructure competitiveness at the state Chamber of Commerce.

"We have consistently high grades in everything, but there's room for improvement," Magliola said. "We can't take our foot off the gas."

Dana said that continued push is focused largely on infrastructure, particularly energy, transportation, water and broadband.

As those systems expand, businesses on the ground are beginning to feel the effects, especially

Please see **POPULATION** | 2B

«RIDES

Ford's Explorer drives with authority and sports a handsome profile to boot

By Winfred Cross
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Ford's sixth generation Explorer is nearing the end of its run.

The 2027 model may be the beginning for the seventh generation or just a minor refresh. Until that mystery is solved, the 2026 Explorer is going about its business as if it's not being updated soon.

The Explorer has been around since 1991 and has grown up quite a bit. It now seats seven and has a 2.3-liter turbo charged four-cylinder Eco-boost engine that makes 300 horsepower with 315 pounds of torque. The engine is smallish but packs enough punch to make the

hefty SUV feel light on its feet. The Explorer has no problem navigating suburban neighborhood streets or barreling down open highway. The vehicle's 10-speed transmission shifts quickly and smoothly, making it easy to get up to speed. My version was also all-wheel drive which improved the vehicles grip on dry and wet surfaces.

I took the Explorer on a 250-mile round trip and found it enjoyable. It's a great highway cruiser that stretches its legs with authority. With the air blasting I still got about 27 miles to the gallon, with which I was well pleased. No complaints. Nope, not one.

The four-wheel inde-

pendent suspension soaks up unpleasant bumps and road imperfections to give a smooth, controlled ride. There is enough sound deadening to keep the ride relatively quiet. There's wind noise around the big mirrors but not a lot. Also, engine noise is muted.

The Explorer is a good-looking truck. The increase in size and length has given it a sleeker look. The wheelbase is now 119 inches to accommodate seven passengers. There isn't as much room as in some competing vehicles, but the rear seats are relatively comfortable. There is 16.3 cubic feet of storage space behind the rear seats; fold them and you

get a hefty 85.8 cubic feet. My test vehicle was the Active trim level, which was once the entry level trim. That honor now goes to the Active A trim, which is slightly less expensive.

There is a lot of standard equipment in Active trim, especially driver's assist tech. Forward collision warning with automatic braking, adaptive cruise control, lane centering system, intersection collision mitigation, blind-spot warning and evasive steering assistance are all part of Ford's Co-pilot360 Assist+ suite. The stuff works and is not as intrusive as similar offerings from other companies.

A bench seat for the sec-



FORD MOTOR CO

The 2026 For Explorer has loads of standard equipment as well as room for seven passengers.

ond row is standard if you want to seat seven, but I'd suggest the Captain's Chairs, which reduces passenger capacity to six. Three-zone climate control, digital instrument cluster, 13.2-inch touch screen, built in Google - based Navigation, wireless

Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, LED accent lights, 10-way power driver's seat, heated front seats USB ports in the third row, power lift gate, roof rails, heated front seats and keyless entry are also standard.

Please see **EXPLORER** | 2B



VALERIE PATTERSON

Valerie Patterson of Charlotte owes her life to a 2023 heart transplant. "If anyone is looking to become an organ donor, it is the easiest way to make a difference in someone's life," she said.

Organ donation and overcoming hesitancy

Disproportionate need for transplants among Black Americans

By Cameron Williams
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Organ donation can be the difference between life and death.

April is National Donate Life Month, and organ donation is of the utmost importance. More than 100,000 people are on transplant waiting lists nationwide.

"I've had several people that I've known that have been direct recipients and I can see how it has a trickle-down effect that has directly affected their lives," said Matthew McKinney, hospital donation liaison at LifeShare Carolinas. "It's real gratifying and to see that

— that's what's kind of driven me over the past 20-some odd years with LifeShare is to know that there is some light at the end of the tunnel and that someone's life could be changed in a positive form or fashion by way of someone saying yes to donation."

For 18 years McKinney was LifeShare's family support coordinator and knows the challenges families face when a loved one dies. He's seen both sides of the donation process with grieving families and the people in need of transplants.

"I want [families] to feel good on

both sides of it," he said. "Whether it's a family that's grieving at the time, that's giving, and the family that standing in need. And then when you can make that type of combustion and bring those two things together, that's a beautiful thing."

Understanding the process

The donation process for large vital organs such as hearts starts once someone dies. If the person is a donor, it will be indicated on their driver's license. If not, the family decides.

The United Network for Organ

Please see **ORGAN** | 2B

UNC still battleground for Black interests

By Kylie Marsh
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

CHAPEL HILL — African American students did not win the legal right to attend the University of North Carolina School of Law until 1951.

While some may regard the landmark McKissick vs. Carmichael case as far behind us, current events reveal not as much progress as a society since then.

The "Desegregating Carolina: McKissick vs. Carmichael" program at the Chapel Hill Public Library featured a retelling of the efforts to integrate the law school, spoken word poetry, and a panel discussion of Black civil rights law professors from UNC and North Carolina Central University.

Donna Nixon, UNC clinical professor of law and electronic resources librarian, presented the events of McKissick vs. Carmichael, which evaluated the current landscape for Black

people in the United States. While North Carolina had four law schools between 1940 and 1951, only three were accredited by the American Bar Association: Carolina Law, Wake Forest University School of Law and Duke University School of Law.

The state created the North Carolina College School of Law (now North Carolina Central University School of Law) in 1939 for Black legal education. However, it was severely under-resourced compared to the white law schools. In 1949, Harold T. Epps and Robert D. Glass filed Epps v. Carmichael in federal court after rejection letters from UNC's chancellor cited the applicants' race as grounds for denial of admission.

A powerful team of African American attorneys, including the NAACP Legal Team, Thurgood Marshall, Conrad Pearson and others, argued that segre-



UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Harvey Beech, James Lassiter, J. Kenneth Lee, Floyd McKissick and James Robert Walker enrolled in the UNC School of Law in 1951, following a court order that said the Law School must admit Black students.

gated higher education violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. The case moved at a snail's pace. Epps graduated from North Carolina College School of Law before the case was settled, and Glass was dismissed on the grounds that he was not a

North Carolina resident.

Despite North Carolina College School of Law receiving upgrades at the order of the state, which gained the school an ABA accreditation in 1950, it did not make up for segregation. Floyd McKissick, J. Kenneth Lee, Solomon Revis, James Lassiter and

Please see **BLACK** | 2B

Organ donation and overcoming hesitancy

Continued from page 1B

Sharing keeps track of patients awaiting a transplant. It also matches organs with candidates based on factors most related to body composition to ensure success.

Once a person is registered for a transplant, they are added to the list and whenever a match is found they're called based on where they are on the list. The order of candidates can change based on factors such as severity of need.

In the Black community, there is a disproportionate need for organ donation, which is exacerbated by cultural hesitancy and a history of abuse by the U.S. medical community. According to the Office of Minority Health, about 27% of those on the transplant waiting list are Black, while only 13% of registered donors are. McKinney said the process assures organ allocation and harvesting are done properly.

"Some of us are still stuck on that same principle and concept of what was instilled in them at a younger age," McKinney said, "as opposed to embracing the advancements that have been made from a medical standpoint, and it's hard to get them off that rock. Sometimes education comes at a time in a crisis situation, so now we're trying to educate you about the importance, the great need of it, and how it could be the greatest gift that you could give to someone else."

A personal perspective

Valerie Patterson, a heart recipient from Charlotte, said organ donation changed her life.

"I'm here because of either the generosity of someone who had the vision to say, 'Yes, I will be an organ

donor,' or family who made a very hard decision to say, 'Yes, we would allow someone to in the event our loved one has passed, we are more than happy to allow his or her organs to be used to help save someone's life,' she said."

Patterson, 57, was diagnosed during a colonoscopy with an issue that indicated she would need a new heart.

"When I came up from under the procedure, my gastroenterologist and his anesthesiologist were sitting right beside my bed, and he goes, 'Miss Patterson, you have an irregular heart-beat,'" she recalled. "You need to go see a cardiologist."

Patterson said her heart failure was rapid. After the 2022 diagnosis, she had a pacemaker for about a year, but her health continued to decline. After finding out she needed a transplant, it took just 10 days to get a match in July 2023.

"My heart failure was pretty drastic, and I was very fortunate," Patterson said. "So, within 10 days of getting admitted to Sanger Heart Institute, I had a new heart. ... I am very fortunate."

Because one person made the decision to donate, Patterson has a second chance at life, and she now advocates fiercely for it.

"If anyone is looking to become an organ donor, it is the easiest way to make a difference in someone's life," she said. "Actually, it is the easiest way to make a difference in many people's lives. People's organs can be used to save different people. Just from one person alone, I got the heart and I am hoping this person was in good health and that their other organs went to other people to help save their lives as well."

Explorer drives with authority and sports a handsome profile

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My vehicle had the Active Comfort package, which gives you remote start, power-adjustable passenger seat, fake leather seats, heated steering wheel and climate controls in the second row. A twin-panel sunroof was another option as well as all-wheel drive.

MSRP for the Ford Explorer Active is \$42,585. Throw in the options and destination charges and the as-tested price was about \$51,365.

Did I mention this Explorer also has a five-star rating from the National High-

way Transportation Safety Administration? It does.

Pros:

- Small, but powerful engine
- Impressive handling for size
- Great fuel economy
- Lots of standard tech
- Spacious interior

Cons:

- Not as much room in second and third rows
- Self-driving Blue Cruise needs subscription

Black Americans still battle for inclusion at UNC-Chapel Hill

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Harvey Beech became plaintiffs that year.

A judge on the United States District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina dismissed the case; his opinion was that the upgrades to NCCU made the schools "substantially equal," and no white person was likely to hire an African American lawyer, so the plaintiffs were better off with their network from NCCU.

In 1951, the Court of Appeals of the Fourth Circuit unanimously overturned the decision, citing that making Black students attend a segregated law school simply because they were unlikely to have white clients was not an appropriate response.

Still, Black students faced difficulty gaining admission. In 1955, John Brandon, and brothers' Leroy and Ralph Frasier received rejection letters from Carolina Law stating there was a Black college they could attend.

Another lawsuit had to be filed, rejected on appeal and then reinstated before

the first African American students enrolled at UNC Law.

In 2024, the UNC Board of Governors voted to repeal its diversity, equity and inclusion policy, replacing it with "Equality Within the University of North Carolina." Last year, the Upendo Lounge, a space dedicated to Black students, was revoked from the Black Student Movement.

Samuel Scarborough, who is a descendant of enslaved people by the university, is a third-year student at UNC and the youngest member of the Durham Community Safety and Wellness Task Force. He said the UNC Board of Governors is appointed by the General Assembly, which, in turn, appoints the boards of trustees at all publicly funded institutions in the state.

"When you look at our board of governors now, I ask you to see how many Black faces you see up there. I ask you to see how many faces of color you see up there. I ask you to

see how many women you see up there, and I ask you to see what politics are represented on that board and how that matches onto the state of North Carolina," he said.

"When I was first getting in, it was 7.8% of the student population being Black. The most recent class is just over 5%. Black North Carolinians are at least 20% of the state. That doesn't sound like balanced representation," he said.

Former state Sen. Floyd McKissick Jr. said there will never be an election when civil rights are not at a risk of being revoked.

"We've got to do it...we have to be active and engaged, because if we don't get active and engaged, there's so much to lose," he said. "We have to think about that path that we're on...We have to say to ourselves, 'how do we continue this battle? How do we continue this fight? How do we strategize? How do we organize and how do we carry on and pass that proverbial baton to the next generation?'"



ADOBE STOCK

Rapid population growth is fueling changes in North Carolina's business community from towns like Chapel Hill to urban centers like Charlotte, above.

Population growth fuels change across NC's business landscape

Continued from page 1B

in fast-changing commercial districts.

Some businesses are expanding to adapt to shifting customer habits, including higher foot traffic from new residents and increased demand near campus-centered locations. Meantime Coffee Co., a nonprofit, student-run coffee shop in Chapel Hill, expanded in November 2024, opening a second location on Rosemary Street after outgrowing its original space in the Campus Y at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"We have this new customer base coming in, doing tabs with us at our other location that we wouldn't normally see at the Y location," Sofia Nyiri, chief marketing officer at Meantime Coffee Co., said.

For other businesses, location and proximity to accessible infrastructure play a more direct role in whether growth translates to consistent sales. Afeef Ul Hassan, store manager at King Tobacco and Vapor, previously worked at the store's higher-traffic Franklin Street location and moved to help open the company's newer Rosemary Street storefront, where he has faced ongoing parking challenges.

He said the lack of designated parking near the commercial building has made it difficult to accommodate customers who drive, forcing the store to rely more heavily on foot traffic in a less-frequented area.

"We can't do anything because there are no parking spots designated to this commercial building," Hassan said. "We had customers coming from faraway places, but they won't stop here because it's not possible with the traffic."

King Tobacco and Vapor isn't the only business facing these challenges, particularly in urban areas such as Raleigh, Chapel Hill and Durham. In Chapel Hill, the recently built East Rosemary Street parking deck cost the town more than \$51 million, yet businesses are still struggling to grow a customer base that isn't built solely on foot traffic.

"Population growth means more pressure on the systems already in place," Magliola said.

As North Carolina's population continues to grow, that pressure is increasingly concentrated in the real estate market. Rising demand for commercial space has turned property ownership and leasing into one of the state's most powerful economic forces. In 2024, real estate accounted for 14.4 percent of North Carolina's private-sector economy, trailing manufacturing by just 0.1 percentage points.

For small businesses, that shift has reshaped not only where they can afford to operate, but how they compete for increasingly limited retail space. The Wall Street Journal has reported that tight retail supply and rising rents have led many landlords to favor creditworthy national chains, making it more difficult for independent businesses to secure prime locations.

That dynamic is visible along Chapel Hill's Franklin Street, a dense commercial corridor that blends local establishments with national brands. In recent years, Raising Cane's replaced the longtime Spanky's Restaurant and Bar, while Purple Bowl, a locally owned açai shop, relocated farther from campus as demand intensified for high-rent storefronts near university foot traffic.

Momo's Master is one of seven dumping restaurants on Franklin Street. Owner Ramesh Dahal said the clustering of similar businesses extends across cuisines downtown, creating an oversat-

urated market that makes long-term sustainability difficult.

Dahal said the issue is not competition itself, but repetition driven by economic caution. As rents rise, landlords and developers tend to favor businesses that mirror existing successes, reducing risk but also limiting innovation. The result, he said, is a downtown area that increasingly rewards sameness over originality.

"We have seven dumpling places," Dahal said. "That should be limited, because at the end of the day, out of eight, five are going to close their doors. Focus on local and the uniqueness of the business and the concept."

Not all businesses view saturation as a threat. Meantime Coffee Co. operates among several other cafés on Franklin Street, and Nyiri said competition has not altered the organization's mission.

"We hope our audience sees that we are remaining true to our authentic core within the competition of all these other coffee shops on Franklin Street," Nyiri said. "There's purpose behind us using local suppliers and local businesses."

But even businesses able to withstand competition are not immune to the realities of rising property values and increased oversight. For some owners, the greatest challenge is not attracting customers but navigating the entities that control commercial space.

Hassan said his store has faced ongoing issues with the homeowners association that owns the building. He said the HOA attempted to terminate the lease after the shop renovated the space, citing the nature of the operation, despite having approved the lease beforehand.

He said the decision felt inconsistent, noting that the same HOA previously housed another smoke shop in the same location and currently rents space in the building to a tattoo parlor, a spa and a hair salon. For small business owners, he said, increased scrutiny from homeowners' associations and property managers has added another layer of instability.

As property values rise, disputes like this have shifted leverage toward property owners and associations, leaving small businesses with little room to absorb risk.

As North Carolina continues into 2026, state leaders and business owners agree that continued growth is inevitable. The question is whether the systems supporting that growth can keep pace.

For small business owners navigating rising rents, shifting infrastructure and increased oversight, that uncertainty has become a defining feature of operating in North Carolina's fastest-growing cities. As Magliola put it, "Risk is heightened when businesses have uncertainty."

Magliola said sustaining North Carolina's position as a top destination for business will require proactive investment at the state level, particularly in infrastructure, housing and long-term planning, before local owners begin to feel relief.

The North Carolina Chamber of Commerce has outlined sustained, strategic investment in infrastructure and economic policy in their legislative agenda, as they've deemed it necessary to support long-term growth and community prosperity.

Without those adjustments, experts warn that the same growth driving the state's economic success could strain local infrastructure, small businesses and overall quality of life.



The Creatives:
A podcast about
Charlotte's most
creative people

On SoundCloud, Apple
Podcasts and Spotify



DANIEL COSTON

Danny and Adrienne Dixon enjoyed the annual Wish Ball, benefiting Make A Wish, held at the Revelly on March 6.

State insurance for foster kids leave some without

Continued from page 1B

health care issues. The state — like many others — is already grappling with uncertainty over expected Medicaid cuts in the wake of congressional Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill Act. A separate Medicaid funding shortfall also prompted a push to cut care providers' reimbursement rates.

Texas, which established its plan 18 years ago, found in recent years that its foster families also had a hard time finding doctors on the insurance. In Florida, researchers for the state reported as early as 2016 that there was a lack of providers accepting its plan.

Illinois' plan prompted an investigation by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services over a lack of access to care. Research concluded that California's plan did not provide children with adequate mental health services. Georgia's access problems alarmed state officials enough to prompt pending legislation calling for children to be removed from the plan and put back on other Medicaid plans.

But such specialized plans for kids in foster care continue to gain traction. Four states have started their own plans in the past five years, said Karen VanLandeghem, the senior director of children and family health at the National Academy for State Health Policy, and she said it's likely more will adopt them soon.

Only a handful of states publish numbers showing how these programs are faring, Medicaid policy analysts said. It's therefore difficult to know why they've run into rollout problems or whether they've improved access to care. That makes the plans risky, said Andy Schneider, a research professor at Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families.

"The states that are going in this direction, unless they have data to support it, are experimenting," Schneider said. "They're putting all their eggs in one basket, so they need to pay close attention."

Rough rollout

North Carolina's specialized insurance plan for foster kids experienced problems the day it rolled out.

The state automatically enrolled Ollie and about 32,000 other people in its specialized plan, called Healthy Blue Care Together. North Carolina officials had said the program would improve health care access for foster children, who often have medically complex needs and move frequently.

But foster families quickly began hearing that their health care providers were not taking the insurance, according to several families who recounted their experiences fighting to get their children's procedures covered under the plan.

UNC Health, a state-run health system that is one of the largest care providers in North Carolina, with nearly 4,400 physicians, would not sign on to the state's plan initially, which is why it told Super that Ollie's CAR T-cell treatment wouldn't be covered.

After more than two months of limbo for families, UNC Health ultimately reached an agreement in mid-March with Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, which runs the plan.

But some North Carolina doctors still don't accept Healthy Blue insurance.

Melanie Bush, interim deputy secretary for North Carolina's Medicaid

program, said her office has been pressing Healthy Blue to expand its network, even though it already has what she called an "adequate" number of providers. North Carolina's health department and Blue Cross Blue Shield did not answer KFF Health News' questions about how many providers are covered by the new insurance.

"We welcome qualified providers who want to join," said Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina spokesperson Sara Lang.

Other problems persisted. As thousands of health care records move over to a statewide database managed by Healthy Blue, children's doctors are struggling to track their patients' medical histories, said foster care advocates and pediatricians. Parents reported problems seeing health records, finding themselves locked out of online portals.

Others couldn't access prescriptions. Surgeries got delayed. Appointments were canceled.

"Network management for any plan is an ongoing process," Lang said.

All this meant added red tape and headache for the caregivers of children like Ollie with complex medical needs — those the plan was intended to help the most.

Gearing up

Cancer has been part of Ollie's life since she was 2. She was in the process of getting adopted out of foster care when she began chemotherapy and radiation treatments, then received two stem cell transplants, Super recalled.

Surgeons installed temporary tubes in a vein near her heart and a feeding tube in her abdomen. Her hair fell out as the treatment intensified, and a thin layer of skin peeled off, forcing her new family to wear surgical gowns and gloves when they wanted to be close.

"She doesn't remember life outside of going to doctors and being in a hospital," Super said.

Ollie still has a port in her chest ready for whenever she needs intravenous medicine, and her monthly doctor appointments are about to become weekly. During an emergency room visit in mid-March, doctors told Super her daughter's cancer had spread. Ollie will need more chemotherapy before her body is ready for the more advanced treatment.

But the Supers, thrown into uncertainty for more than two months, still feel some relief. They're preparing for back-and-forth drives for the CAR T-cell therapy treatments in Chapel Hill. And they're grateful, even if it means Ollie will spend at least five more weeks in and out of a hospital.

Reliable health insurance will be vital for Ollie, and Healthy Blue leaders said they are talking with doctors, parents, and others to make sure the plan is working. Her procedures carry multimillion-dollar price tags, her mother said, but having her bills seamlessly covered allows the family to focus on Ollie's treatment.

"The biggest challenges for her will be in the first few months of the study," said Super, who knows the therapy's side effects include fever, fatigue, and confusion. "But I'm hoping that after that, the CAR T-cells will do their job and fight the cancer and she can continue to have a playful, active life."

Driving techniques to reduce fuel costs

FEATURE IMPACT

If you're feeling pain at the pump, you're not alone. However, it's not just rising gas prices that can impact your wallet — it might be your own habits on the road that negatively impact fuel efficiency and add extra strain to your vehicle.

With gas prices fluctuating by more than \$1 per gallon nationally in recent years, Mercury Insurance is highlighting how driver behavior can significantly influence fuel costs.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, aggressive driving — rapid acceleration and hard braking — can reduce fuel economy by up to 40% in city driving and 30% on highways, increasing annual fuel expenses by hundreds of dollars.

For the average American driver, that inefficiency adds up quickly. AAA estimates that annual fuel costs can exceed \$2,000 depending on vehicle type and region. A 30-40% reduction in fuel economy can translate into hundreds of dollars in additional fuel expenses each year — before factoring in the added wear on key vehicle components.

"Most drivers think of aggressive driving as a safety issue, but it's also a cost issue," said John Dicken, director, material damage claims at Mercury Insurance. "From a claims standpoint, we see how habits like hard braking and rapid acceleration accelerate wear on brakes, tires and suspension components. Smoother driving isn't just more efficient — it helps reduce preventable damage over time."

The cost of driving aggressively

Fuel is only part of the equation.

- Brake replacement can range from \$300-800 per axle, depending on the vehicle.

- A new set of tires can cost \$600-1,200 or more.

- Poorly maintained or underinflated tires can lower gas mileage by roughly 0.2% for every 1 PSI drop in pressure, according to federal transportation data.

Over time, inconsistent maintenance and aggressive driving habits compound these costs.

"Driving behavior directly impacts how often certain parts need to be replaced," Dicken said. "When drivers anticipate traffic, maintain steady speeds and keep up with routine maintenance, they reduce strain on their vehicle and potentially avoid unnecessary repair expenses."

Tips that make a measurable difference

Consider these strategies to improve efficiency and reduce wear:

- Accelerate gradually: Avoid rapid starts and jackrabbit acceleration, which significantly reduce fuel economy.

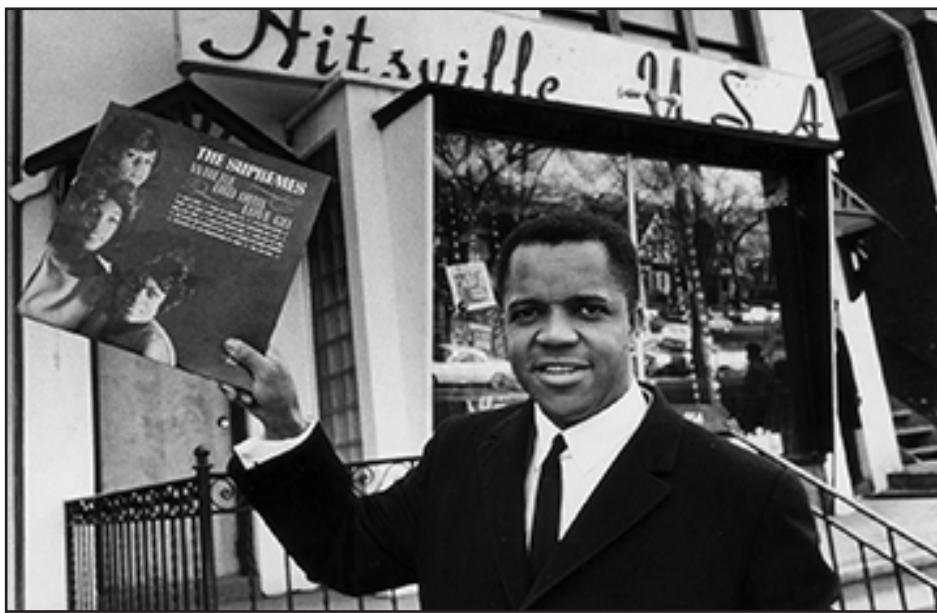
- Brake smoothly and anticipate stops: Looking ahead and easing into stops reduces stress on brake systems.

- Maintain consistent speeds: Using cruise control on highways can help improve fuel efficiency.

- Keep tires properly inflated: Check tire pressure monthly and before long trips. If you're unsure what your tires should be inflated to, locate the sticker inside the driver's side door jamb for the proper PSI inflation or refer to the owner's manual.

- Remove excess weight: Extra cargo and unused roof racks reduce efficiency and increase drag.

« BLACK BRILLIANCE »



MOTOWN RECORDS

Berry Gordy built Motown Records into the most successful Black-owned music company in the United States.

Berry Gordy: Visionary behind Motown Records

BRITANNICA

Berry Gordy (born Nov. 28, 1929) in 1959 founded the Motown Record Corporation, which became the most successful Black-owned music company in the United States.

Through Motown, he developed the majority of the great rhythm-and-blues (R&B) performers of the 1960s and '70s, including Diana Ross and the Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Marvelettes, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, and Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5. Gordy was said to have masterminded the popular "Motown sound," a ballad-based blend of traditional Black harmony and gospel music with the lively beat of R&B.

Gordy dropped out of Northeastern High School in Detroit and pursued a featherweight boxing career before joining the Army (1951-53). Shortly thereafter he returned to Detroit to open a record store and begin producing recordings of his own compositions.

By the time Gordy founded Motown, he was at the apex of Detroit's Black music scene and had already discovered Smokey Robinson. During the early 1960s Motown produced a string of hits that included Martha and the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Street" and the Temptations' "My Girl."

Also about this time Gordy developed

the Supremes, Motown's first superstar act. Powered by Diana Ross's sweet voice and quiet grace, the group went on to become one of the most successful female singing trios of all time.

In the early 1970s Gordy relocated the company to Hollywood and began producing films, including "Lady Sings the Blues" (1972), featuring Ross in her film debut as Billie Holiday. By the mid-1980s the company boasted annual revenues in excess of \$100 million, and Motown acts had recorded more than 50 number one hits on the Billboard pop singles chart.

Facing increasing competition from large media conglomerates, however, Gordy sold the record company in 1988. He later wrote the book for "Motown: The Musical," which premiered on Broadway in 2013 and debuted in London's West End in 2016.

Gordy was honored for lifetime achievement at the American Music Awards in 1975, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 and received the President's Merit Award from the Recording Academy in 2008. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2016, and five years later he received a Kennedy Center Honor.

An autobiography, "To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown," was published in 1994.

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Hezekiah Walker Supports Barber-Scotia College



Barber-Scotia Family, Alumni, Friends, and Supporters, join us for **Scotia Rising: The Gospel Experience**, Featuring **Grammy Award-Winning Gospel Artist Hezekiah Walker**

When: Friday May 1, 2026

Where: Friendship Baptist Church, 3400 Beatties Ford Rd.

Time: Doors Open at 7:00pm

Cost: \$50 per ticket, \$80 for two, Sponsorship available.

Purchase Tickets or Sponsorship at: www.B-SC.edu

Every ticket purchased and every seat filled moves Barber-Scotia College one step closer to securing accreditation and strengthening the College's future.





DAVIDSON COMMUNITY PLAYERS

Luna Mackie and Donte Darko in Davidson Community Players production of "Actually" April 25-May 3 at Armour Street Theatre in Davidson.

'Lifespan of A Fact' at Armour St.

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

The latest events, stage productions and exhibits in Charlotte and beyond: Through April 26

Davidson Community Players presents "The Lifespan of a Fact" at Armour Street Theatre (307 Armour St. in Davidson). The comedy-drama based is on the book by co-authors John D'Agata and Jim Fingal. The play explores the boundaries between artistic truth and objective journalistic facts.

Tickets are on sale at davidsoncommunityplayers.org/main-stage or by calling the box office at (704) 892-7953 during business hours. Tickets are \$15-\$27 plus state tax and fees.

Through May 21

SouthPark After 5, a free evening entertainment series, returns over six Thursdays at Symphony Park at the corner of Barclay Downs Drive and Carnegie Boulevard, adjacent to SouthPark Mall.

Live music and free community events run from 5-9 p.m.

- April 23 - Bourbon Sons with Caroline & Omar.

- April 30 - Java Band with Rod Fiske.

- May 7 - On the Border Ultimate Eagles Tribute with Ryan & Woody and the United States Navy Band.

- May 14 - Landslide tribute to Fleetwood Mac with Square Roots.

Please see **IN PURSUIT** | 6B

Jay Ward on the South and responsibility of place

By Corrie Warren
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

For Jay Ward, storytelling is not casual. It is a responsibility.

"I'm going to tell a story," he said, his voice measured and intentional. "But I want to get it right."

Raised in Rich Square, North Carolina, Ward carries the rhythms, contradictions, and complexities of the South into every line he writes. Today, as a poet, performer, and Charlotte's inaugural poet laureate, his work reaches national audiences—but it never loses its sense of place.

Because for Ward, place is not just where a story happens.

It is the story.

To understand Ward's urgency, you have to understand the history he writes against.

For generations, the South — and Southern writers — have been misunderstood, dismissed, and misrepresented. Early critics like H.L. Mencken once reduced the region to a cultural void, describing it as intellectually barren and artistically lifeless. Those words, and the mindset behind them, helped shape a narrative that Southern writers have long had to confront.

Ward does not simply respond to that narrative.

He rewrites it.

"When I talk about place," Ward said, "I don't just mean landscape. I mean something that feels real. Something lived in."

That distinction is everything.

In Ward's work, place is not a back-

Please see **POET** | 6B



CHILDREN'S THEATRE OF CHARLOTTE

Children's Theatre of Charlotte's casting Nonye Obichere as Elsa in "Disney's Frozen: The Broadway Musical" has drawn criticism and kudos, but company leaders are committed to hiring on merit.

Stage company leans into casting for intent, talent

Children's Theatre steps out on 'Disney's Frozen: The Broadway Musical'

By Nikya Hightower
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Inclusion is intentional at Children's Theatre of Charlotte.

The diverse casting of "Disney's Frozen: The Broadway Musical" April 18, 19, 25 and 26 at 300 E 7th St. isn't meant to make a statement but reflects the company's priorities of representation, inclusivity and accessibility. Its production of "Disney's Frozen" has received positive and negative feedback from audiences, mostly about casting a Black woman, Nonye Obichere, as Elsa. However, when it comes to casting, artistic director Adam Burke said it's about choosing the best person for the role.

"The artists that are working on any given show reflect the community that we live in," he said. "We ensure that when any child is going to come and see the show, they see people that they believe reflect their community, however they define that, up on stage."

Casting actors relies on more than appearance and physical characteristics, but professionalism and accountability. While the choice of Obichere, as Elsa challenges traditional expectations of the char-

acter's appearance, the priority was on talent and opportunity.

"I thought, do I take this opportunity away from an actor, let's say this child who showed up, did their work, is fantastic, great for the role, because of that confusion possibility, or do I assume that we live in a world where an audience will accept that, will buy that?" Burke said. "We just chose to cast the best possible people."

Obichere is not the only person of color in the cast, which features a diverse group of local actors. Burke shared that race is only considered when it is essential to the story.

"This show is not about something having to do with race," he said. "Whereas if we were going to cast Jackie Robinson, we would not cast a non-African American as Jackie Robinson because race is core to what that story is."

The theater's goal is that when children and adults see the show, they feel a sense of empowerment and see that age, race, or other physical characteristics are not limitations. The commitment to inclusion isn't new. Alongside productions like "Frozen," the company has initiatives like sensory-friendly shows,

including its 10th year of "Peter Pan's Adventure."

"Ensuring that all the young people that come here feel comfortable, feel seen, and feel that they can see themselves reflected on stage is a value that we hold," Burke said. "We're going to do that whether we get criticism or not."



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Children's Theatre of Charlotte artistic director **ADAM BURKE**

Choreography tells Charlotte's civil rights story

By Nikya Hightower
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The No Tears Project brings Charlotte history to the stage.

On April 25, the program hosted by UNC Charlotte assistant professor of dance Ashley Tate, will use movement to honor the city's civil rights history. The production will take place at UNCC's Anne R. Belk Theater in Robinson Hall and admission is free.

Founded in 2017 by jazz vocalist Kelley Hurt and pianist Christopher Parker, in collaboration with Oxford Magazine, the No Tears Project has traveled to New Orleans, Memphis and St. Louis, showcasing history through art.

Tate, who joined the troupe in 2023 along with the co-founders and 15 UNCC students and alumni, put together a performance inspired by the 1971 Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education case that implemented busing to desegregate public schools. The project is about creating choreography that responds to music and explores historical narratives.

"The goal with my contribution as a movement artist in this ensemble is to offer another entry point into the work, one that's physical and emotional and immediate for the audience," she said.

Introducing the project to the students gave them the opportunity to triangulate art, academia and activism.

"So much of civil rights history is told through speech and documentation, and that is important as well," Tate said. "But dance allows us to enter a different register. I'm interested in how movement can hold tension, endurance, grief, resistance, care, all these things all at once, without needing to translate them into words."

Rather than retelling history, Tate wanted the performance to focus on how it felt, which allows the audience to connect on a different level. Combining movement, music and activism, Tate said art is a different starting point for engagement.

"Dance allows us to move beyond



NO TEARS PROJECT

The No Tears Project, which uses dance to tell local civil rights stories, will debut April 25 at UNC Charlotte's Annie R. Belk Theater.

just retelling history; it gives us that opportunity to experience it," she said. "The music carries the narrative, but the body holds the weight and the tension and the resonance of those stories."

In rehearsals, that process requires dancers to engage not only with technique but emotional depth. The work challenges them to think about how movement communicates ideas that cannot always be articulated through language.

The choreography uses repetition, stillness and moments of improvisation, combining individualism and shared storytelling.

"This particular type of work calls for just true authenticity, and carrying that history with that authenticity," Tate said, "where it is not about necessarily

what you're doing, how it looks, shape and line, but how does it feel, and is it resonating with the audience?"

No Tears Project is about how each place carries history that can be felt as well as studied and researched. Tate hopes the performance will spark curiosity and that the audience will leave asking questions about stories in their community that may have been overlooked.

"History is still present in everyday life," she said. "It's not distant, it's not resolved, but it's something that continues to shape how we live and how we move. One of the conversations is about place. In each city we perform, it carries its own civil rights history. I want the audience to start to think more critically about the ground they stand on."

'In Pursuit of Home' at Harvey B. Gantt Center

Continued from page 5B

May 21 - Captain Mike & The Shipwrecked with Drew Nathan Duo.

April 25-May 3

Davidson Community Players present "Actually" at Armour Street Theatre (307 Armour St., Davidson). "Actually," a drama that navigates truth, perspective and consent.

Tickets are on sale at davidsoncommunityplayers.org/main-stage or by calling the box office at (704) 892-7953 during business hours. Tickets are \$15-\$27 plus state tax and fees.

Through April 26

"In Pursuit of Home" at Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Levine Center for the Arts, 551 South Tryon St.

Artist Mario Moore's exhibit encourages viewers to reflect on how the meaning of home is changing in modern America and the inequalities intertwined with its pursuit.

The exhibition explores the desire for homeownership in the United States, particularly among people in their 20s and 30s, and the barriers that make achieving it more challenging.

For more information: ganttcenter.org/exhibitions/in-pursuit-of-home.

May 1

Grammy Award-winning gospel music artist Hezekiah Walker in concert, Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, 3400 Beatties Ford Road.

Doors open at 7 p.m. for the program, in which proceeds benefit Barber-Scotia College. Half of proceeds will go toward accreditation

preparation; 25% to scholarships and 25% to sustain operation needs. Tickets: <https://tinyurl.com/BSC-concert>

Mint to Be: The Feminine Body as Costume Art, Mint Museum, 6-10 p.m. The exhibit is a living runway where fashion, identity, and self-expression collide. Created by Professor Perrine DeShield-Jenkins, the Met Gala-inspired event invites guests to experience femininity as both art and narrative.

General admission: \$45.

May 2

R&B performers October London and Lalah Hathaway take over Ovens Auditorium, 2900 E Independence Blvd. for a concert event celebrating love, soul and timeless music. Showtime is 8 p.m. Tickets at Ticketmaster.com.

May 5

The Robert Cray Band, 7:30 p.m. Carolina Theatre, 230 N. Tryon St.

The blues guitarist first picked up a guitar after seeing The Beatles on TV then after watching Jimi Hendrix perform in Seattle, determined his destiny would follow a similar path. Cray is one of American music's top artists of the last half century.

Tickets range from \$55-\$174 and available at ticketmaster.com.

June 6

Grammy-nominated R&B singer Ari Lennox brings her North American tour to Skyla Credit Union Amphitheatre. The show is in support of her third studio album Vacancy. Tickets available at livenation.com.

Family movies take over moviegoing, one at a time

By Jake Coyle

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — As "The Super Mario Galaxy Movie" landed in theaters, coloring stations, collectible popcorn containers and mascot Marios are all in place to entice arguably the most prized moviegoers to Hollywood today: kids.

Universal Pictures expected the five-day opening of the "Super Mario" sequel to reach \$186 million domestically, and around \$350 million worldwide. That would make it easily the biggest hit of the year, surpassing a pair of successes that also launched with young moviegoers in mind: Pixar's "Hoppers" (\$297 million worldwide) and Amazon MGM's "Project Hail Mary" (\$300.8 million).

It's not the start of a new trend but the culmination of one. In 2024, PG-rated movies outgrossed any other rating for the first time in decades, with \$3.18 billion in domestic ticket sales according to Comscore. Five of the top six movies worldwide were PG movies: "Inside Out 2," "Moana 2," "Despicable Me 4," "Wicked" and "Mufasa: The Lion King."

Last year was no different. PG-rated films amassed \$2.96 billion, again besting the longtime leader, PG-13. The top draws globally were "Ne Zha 2," "Zootopia 2," "Lilo & Stitch," "A Minecraft Movie" and the PG-13-rated but not exactly kid-adverse "Avatar: Fire and Ash."

Good news has been hard to come by in Hollywood. Contraction, most recently with Paramount Skydance's planned purchase of Warner Bros. Discovery, has added to the anxieties of an already jittery industry. While ticket sales are up so far in 2026, they remain more than 20% below pre-pandemic levels. In February, AMC, the nation's largest exhibitor, said it would continue to shutter underperforming theaters.

But despite a lot of talk about the imperiled future of moviegoing, future moviegoers — kids — are turning out in droves.

"There's a recognition that this is an increasingly important group of movie fans and we're doing everything we can to make sure their experience is wonderful," says Michael O'Leary, president and chief executive of Cinema United, the trade group for theater owners.

Gen Alpha, those aged 12 or younger, may even be the movies' best hope. A study last year by the National Research Group found that no generational group wanted to watch movies on the big screen, as opposed to at home, more than Gen Alpha.

"We're emboldened by some of the re-

search that indicates younger folks are the fastest growing demographic of people going to the movies," O'Leary says. "We're very much focused on the fact that we have to build the next generation of movie fans."

Mario, Minions and more

In 2023, "The Super Mario Movie," part of Universal's collaboration with Nintendo and "Minions"-maker Illumination, grossed \$1.36 billion. Its sequel is likely to get close to that, and add to a mounting string of \$1 billion kids movies. The most recent was The Walt Disney Co.'s "Zootopia 2," which became the highest-grossing Hollywood animated film of all time with a whopping \$1.87 billion.

Increasingly, a generation that grew up with smartphones, iPads and Netflix is propelling today's biggest blockbusters.

"What's been true for a long time and is maybe even truer today: Families want to be out," says Jim Orr, distribution chief for Universal, which recently announced the expansion of its exclusive theatrical window from three weekends to five. "They want to do things. They want to make memories."

"No one talks about: Remember that great time when we sat on the couch?"

And this year may be the most kid-catered year at the movies yet. There are 26 wide-release PG movies slated for 2026, up from 24 in 2025 and 18 in 2024.

That includes a summer lineup that's family friendly on a nearly week-to-week basis. Potential blockbusters lined up include "Toy Story 5" (June 19), "Minions & Monsters" (July 1) and the live-action "Moana" (July 10). Though currently unrated, "The Mandalorian and Grogu" (May 22) and "Supergirl" (June 26), not to mention "Spider-Man: Brand New Day" (July 31), will all also target young moviegoers.

A PG comeback

The PG surge comes several years after most family movies detoured to streaming during the pandemic, a shift that some, at the time, feared would become permanent.

"The family film has literally come back from near-extinction," says Paul Dergarabedian, head of marketplace trends for Comscore. "The one genre that really took a major hit with the pandemic was the family film."

But kids increasingly count among a key category for theaters: the habitual moviegoer. That's considered going to six or more movies a year. And it's not just younger kids. Last year, 41% of Gen Z moviegoers went to the movies at least six times, according to NRG, up from 31% two years earlier.



CHOWAN UNIVERSITY

Jay Ward, Charlotte first poet laureate, works to counter long-established narratives about the South as a backwater. When I talk about place, I just don't mean landscape. I mean something that feels real. Something lived in." Chowan University bestowed the Mary Frances Hobson Prize for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters for his commitment to telling the South's more nuanced story.

Poet Laureate Jay Ward on the South and responsibility of place

Continued from page 5B

drop — it is a living presence. Built through memory, voice, and detail, it reflects the people who shape it and the stories they carry. His poetry resists stereotype, replacing it with nuance, complexity, and truth.

For Ward, this is more than craft. It is obligation.

"As a Southerner, sometimes we feel the need to explain the South," he said. "But as a Southern writer, I think we absolutely feel an obligation — to explain it and to do it right."

That commitment has not gone unnoticed.

In recognition of his powerful voice and lasting contributions to the arts, Ward is named the recipient of the Mary Frances Hobson Prize for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters at Chowan University.

Established by the Hobson Family Foundation in memory of journalist and poet Mary Frances Hobson, the award honors individuals whose work has made a meaningful impact in the arts and literary world. Each year, the recipient is invited to deliver the Mary Frances Hobson Lecture, sharing insight and inspiration with the university community and the citizens of Hertford County.

For Ward, the recognition is both an honor and an extension of his mission.

His work already speaks to audiences far beyond the page—through performance, mentorship, and community engagement. Now, through the Hobson

Lecture, that voice reaches even further, inviting listeners to reconsider how stories are told and whose stories are heard.

Today, Ward stands as one of North Carolina's most resonant contemporary voices — not only because of what he writes, but because of what his work represents.

Through collections like "Composition" and "Sing Me A Lesser Wound," and through his performances on national stages, he reclaims the narrative of the South. He replaces outdated perceptions with lived experience, inviting audiences to see the region not as it has been labeled, but as it truly is — layered, complex, and deeply human.

He shows that Southern writing is not something to defend. It is something to understand.

Ultimately, Ward's message is simple—but not easy.

To tell a story is to carry responsibility.

To write about place is to represent people, history, and memory all at once. To do it carelessly is to flatten something rich into something hollow.

To do it well is to preserve it.

"We are telling the story," Ward said. "It is our name. It is our place."

And getting it right matters.

Because for Ward, storytelling is not just about expression. It is about truth.

It is about legacy.

And it is about making sure that the places that shaped us are not just seen—but understood.

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