



Mint Hill's Lamar Richardson earns a spot in theater history as youngest Black producer to win a Tony Award

THE VOICE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY SINCE 1906

The Charlotte Post

WEEK OF JULY 2, 2026

VOLUME 52 NUMBER 40

WWW.THECHARLOTTEPOST.COM

\$1.50



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Black Americans – native-born or naturalized immigrants like these people at a 2024 citizenship ceremony in Charlotte, navigate a country that has often treated people of African descent as second-class citizens while holding hope for advancement and a better life.

Black in the United States: Potential and reality collide

As the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, there's progress and uncertainty

By Nikya Hightower and Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

As the United States prepares to celebrate 250 years of independence, Black Charlotteans are reflecting on what the experience looks like for them.

They are both proud and disappointed. Tamika Williams, a 51-year-old truck driver, said she believes this country has fallen short when it comes to equity, erasing history and the overall quality of life that Black Americans have dealt with. She said those experiences are ultimately why she and her family plan to move out of the country.

"I don't feel so great," she said. "America has definitely shown me that this is not the land of the free, especially for a Black woman or Black man, in my opinion. I have traveled to other countries and got more respect without the racial profiling that I've encountered and endured living here in America."

America's relationship to people of African descent is complicated. At the nation's founding in 1776, slavery was prevalent in all 13 colonies, consigning an estimated 500,000 Black people – a quarter of the country's population – to bondage while the nation's founders declared "All men are created equal" upon

independence from England. The Constitution, ratified in 1787, declared enslaved Africans as three-fifths human.

Some of the nation's darkest legacies – racial terror violence, segregation by law and social custom as well as economic inequity – continue, although progress has been halting but measurable.

Williams said after traveling abroad she saw a contrast when it comes to how she was treated. This sparked a realization that she will never be seen as an equal in the U.S. In 2020, Williams visited Ghana for the first time and said that not being in the minority and welcomed as

Please see **FOR BLACK** | 2A

JCSU probation extended to 2027

Accreditor wants another year to monitor process

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Johnson C. Smith University is on probation for another year as its accreditor measures the school's progress in resolving fiscal responsibility concerns.

The Atlanta-based Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges opted to maintain the sanction for good cause after ruling the school hasn't satisfied its standards for financial responsibility and sustainability. JCSU was placed on probation last year after the board reviewed a monitoring report originally initiated in 2023.

Two years is the maximum allowed for such reviews before the agency declares a school in full compliance or impose stiffer penalties, including loss of membership and accreditation.

JCSU remains accredited, meaning students are eligible for federal financial aid.

"We welcome this journey of continuous improvement," President Valerie Kinloch said in a statement. "Over the past year, our faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, and supporters have worked together to strengthen the University while remaining focused on student success and institutional excellence. We are proud of the progress we have made and are committed to building upon that momentum."

SACSCOC voted to continue probation at its June meeting after officials visited the campus in May.

Please see **JCSU** | 2A



Kinloch

Groups adapt to get teens registered to cast ballots

By Jonathan Shorman

STATELINE

American teens are driving less than in previous decades, prompting civic advocates to warn that fewer young people may register to vote.

Yet at least one state — New Hampshire — offers insight into how civic groups can work around a lack of registration opportunities to ensure young people can register, as well as the challenges that remain.

Since Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act in 1993, nearly all states must allow residents to register to vote at motor vehicle offices. But fewer teens are obtaining driver's licenses today, translating into fewer trips to the local Department of Motor Vehicles and more missed chances to register.

More than 7.5 million people ages 16 to 18 don't have a driver's license, according to data compiled by The Civics Center, a non-partisan group focused on boosting youth voter registration. Three million of those youth will

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North Carolinians drop Obamacare in record numbers as cost soars

By Andrew Jones

KFF HEALTH NEWS

Year after year, Ross and Rebecca Tobiassen saw their healthcare costs rise, having relied on the Affordable Care Act for federally subsidized health insurance since its start in 2014. Year after year, the couple in western North Carolina kept their coverage, believing the peace of mind was worth the cost.

But in December, that changed. The Tobiassens decided to cancel their insurance when Rebecca saw the cost of their monthly premiums would jump from \$130 to more than \$550.

"It makes no sense," she said. "It's not worth it anymore."

The couple own and are the only employees of a small auto shop just west of Appalachian State University in the North Carolina mountains. Rebecca worries about her husband, whose work as a mechanic can be dangerous. A spring once shot a metal ball joint into their garage wall like a gun. A heavy object crushed Ross' thumb. In 2020, Ross became mostly blind in one eye after repeatedly getting metal shards in it and developing an infection in his cornea.

The Tobiassens are among the Americans who canceled their ACA coverage after Congress allowed enhanced tax credits that helped pay for insurance plans to expire at the end of 2025. The Tobiassens benefited from those tax credits — like millions of other enrollees expected to drop or be dropped from their coverage as the year progresses, unable to keep up with the higher costs.

Please see **NORTH CAROLINIANS** | 2A



JOEKILLIAN | NC NEWSLINE

The St. Augustine's University marching band played outside Raleigh's Tarboro Road Community Center polling site in 2020 while students voted.

Proposed ban on music outside NC polling places draws criticism

By Lynn Bonner

NC NEWSLINE

A proposal by the North Carolina Board of Elections to ban amplified sound outside polling places is aimed at discouraging voting by Black and young voters, critics said Monday.

When the state board debated the proposed rule in April, members did

not mention any specific complaints about music or bullhorns outside polling places. No one spoke in favor of the rule Monday. Written comments on proposed rules will not be released until the comment period ends.

The idea was controversial before it reached the public comment stage. Democrats on the state board voted

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For Black Americans, promise, reality collide

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an equal was a culture shock.
“I actually fit in – that’s where I found my peace,” she said. “Over here in America, it’s almost like you’re on pins and needles.”
Williams isn’t alone in her view on race. In a 2024 Pew Research study, 75% of Black adults surveyed reported they have experienced racial discrimination, with 13% saying it impacted them regularly and 62% reporting from time to time. Most said those experiences make them feel like the system is set up for their failure. Many also say Black people have to work harder to achieve success.
Eighty percent of Black Americans 65 years of age and older say they experience racial discrimination, compared to 71% of Black adults under 30, 76% of people age 30-49 (76%) and 75% of respondents age 50-64. Black men 50 and older (82%) were most likely to say they face racial discrimination compared with 73% of men under 50 and 75% of Black women of any age.
Christopher Massey said he finds opportunity in America and believes the country has been fair to him through its ups and downs.
“I don’t get stereotyped, he said. “I know some people have, but thank God, I have never experienced it,” Massey said. “I feel like it’s an opportunity out here. There’s money out here. I love being Black.”
Leroy Shingu, 31, who works in the music and film industry, contends the Black experience is about having to constantly explain yourself and that two people can experience the same thing and have two different perspectives.
“Being Black in America is having enough stories for a lifetime and still being expected to explain the joke to everybody else,” he said. “We get good at reading rooms, reading faces, reading what wasn’t said. We had to be translators before communicators for survival.”

According to Pew, 77% of Black adults born in the U.S. are more likely than Black immigrants (65%) to say experiencing racism made them feel angry. Also, 80% of Black adults who went to college – regardless of their degree level – are more likely than those with a high school diploma or less (70%) to agree.
Black Americans have influenced everything from music and fashion to language, entertainment and pop culture. Shingu focused on how Black culture is constantly appropriated by the larger culture and the people who created it are often not credited.
“This country will borrow your flow bar for bar and not understand your story,” he said. “It’ll quote your slang, wear your style, play your music, and still ask you to explain.”
Despite going through the challenges of feeling American and still having to explain Black culture and navigating expectations, Shingu said he is proud of what Black Americans have been able to hold on to.
“We’ve always been experts at making life liveable,” he said. “Turning our struggle into language. Turning language into culture. Turning culture into something undeniable that eventually it’s a part of everyone’s everyday life. “Black people still managed to keep our humor, our style, our music, our family traditions, and our ability to make something out of nothing.”

“We’ve always been experts at making life liveable. Turning our struggle into language.”

Charlotte resident **LEROY SHINGU**

North Carolinians drop out of Obamacare in record numbers

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Established by the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan Act during the covid pandemic, the expanded subsidies reduced monthly premiums for many families and prompted a tidal wave of new sign-ups, doubling ACA enrollment to about 24 million.
The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is expected to soon release complete data on how many people are no longer covered under the ACA, but an early analysis from KFF, citing Wakely Consulting Group research, showed enrollment could drop from over 22 million at the end of 2025 to as low as 16.5 million in 2026.
In North Carolina, individual ACA sign-ups for 2026 were down 22% compared with the year before, a greater drop than any other state, amounting to a decrease of more than 213,000 people, according to enrollment data. While the Tobiaassens’ two teenage daughters remain on Medicaid, Rebecca said the new prices showed that the federal government doesn’t care about families like hers.
“We’ve known that you don’t care about us,” she said, “but you’re making it plain and simple now.”
The couple’s insurance hadn’t helped them cover all their medical needs. When the pain from Ross’ eye infection worsened five years ago, Rebecca insisted he go to a specialist, who told them that fixing the eye through cornea replacement surgery would cost them up to \$30,000 and require Ross to take six months off.
Ross chose a less expensive treatment to kill nerves in the eye instead.
The couple know they’re taking a risk by not being insured. If something were to happen, they could face an enormous medical bill.
Ross, 47, said the blindness in the one eye doesn’t significantly affect his job. He works long hours, sometimes into the night to keep up with demand.
“I try not to think about it too much,” he said. “I just work.”
Katie Alexander oversees volunteers for Pisgah Legal Services, a western North Carolina nonprofit that helps low-income people secure health insurance. Alexander has helped North Carolina and Tennessee residents try to get ACA marketplace plans since Obamacare’s launch. She said she’s never seen anything like this year.
Nearly 100 Pisgah clients, out of about 700 that Alexander’s team worked with during open enrollment, decided to drop insurance this year, and many others chose cheaper ACA plans with less coverage, Alexander said.
Alexander said the people who have dropped their coverage include Lyft and Uber drivers. They’re trying to start their own businesses. They are artists and people who can work only part-time, because they’re chronically ill. Some are unable to get insurance through their employers, or they make too much to be

on Medicaid.
“Even for folks who don’t have chronic illnesses,” Alexander said, “there’s just this nagging at the back of your mind, kind of constantly, of: ‘Don’t get hurt. Don’t get sick. Because you can’t afford that.’”
ACA premiums and deductibles steadily increased for years starting in 2022, then spiked during the enrollment period for 2026 plans, according to data analyzed by KFF. The Tobiaassens have seen every dip and rise in plan costs since 2014 when the plans launched. They joined immediately and paid about \$30 a month, Rebecca Tobiaassen said.
“You actually felt like you were benefiting,” she said.
But through the years as the marketplace became more expensive, the couple made concessions, switching at one point from a silver plan — historically the most popular — to a bronze. The plan mostly provided for the couple’s basic needs.
As they saw their deductibles and premiums rise over more than a decade, Rebecca feared the day would come when they could no longer afford even the cheapest plan.
“Plans are unaffordable, no matter how you cut it,” said Risha Gidwani, a health-care policy researcher at the University of Colorado Anschutz School of Medicine. “It’s just who is shouldering the unaffordability.”
Gidwani and health economist Cheryl Damberg, in a study published earlier this year, found that most bronze plans, the cheapest ACA options for many, would be unaffordable without subsidies for the average person using the federal health-care coverage.
Without subsidies, many families using these plans don’t make enough to afford premiums or deductibles, Gidwani’s research shows.
People who drop health insurance also change what’s known as the “risk pool,” Gidwani said, when a group of people share financial hazards.
If healthier people drop out of the risk pool, fewer people subsidize the people who get sick, Gidwani said. That means premiums for the people who get sick will increase again in the future, she added.
“That becomes what we call a death spiral,” Gidwani said.
Even if the subsidies hadn’t expired, taxpayers would have borne an estimated \$350 billion burden over the next decade to cover them, Gidwani’s study noted.
After dropping coverage they’d relied on for 11 years, the Tobiaassens have no plans to return to the ACA marketplace. They looked into alternative options through a faith-based healthcare organization but decided to go without.
For now, they don’t have a plan B. They’ve set aside some money for a medical emergency. And if their savings run out, Rebecca Tobiaassen said, they have a couple of last resorts to lean on: credit cards or family members.



Johnson C. Smith remains on probation for good cause until 2027 after the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges ruled the school hasn't satisfied its standards for financial responsibility and sustainability.

JCSU on probation until 2026-27 academic year

Continued from page 1A
JCSU leaders presented documentation of progress in the 2025-26 academic year, including new policies and procedures, reporting processes, and accountability measures. They also cited a clean financial audit, improved internal controls and fundraising initiatives.
JCSU will be required to submit a fourth monitoring report after SACSCOC determined the school was not yet in compliance with standards for fiscal responsibility, financial controls, sponsored research/external funds along with federal and state responsibilities.
Probation for good cause is the accrediting agency’s most severe sanction short of loss of membership.

As part of its initiative to emerge from probation, JCSU leadership is focused on training faculty and staff on new policies and procedures through a series of workshops to document compliance with SACSCOC rules. The next accrediting review is in June 2027.
“This work is about creating lasting change,” Kinloch said. “Our goal is to continue moving forward, strengthening our systems and ensuring that the improvements we make today position Johnson C. Smith University for success for years to come. We are addressing challenges that developed over many years, and while the work is difficult, it is necessary. The benefits will be felt by our institution long into the future.”

Voter advocacy groups adapt to get teens registered to cast ballots

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be old enough to vote this year and all will be eligible by 2028, the organization said in a June research report on how declines in teen driving, spurred in part by the rising cost of obtaining a license, could affect voting.
Young people represent a large pool of potential voters for candidates ahead of the midterm elections this November and the presidential election in 2028. Still, voting advocates worry barriers to registration will keep many of them from the polls.
“Our goal is to help people debunk these myths that it’s somehow young people’s fault that these systems aren’t working well for them,” said Laura Brill, founder and CEO of The Civics Center.
Low registration rates
In recent years about 60% of 18-year-olds have held driver’s licenses, according to the Federal Highway Administration. By contrast, in 1994, the year after the National Voter Registration Act was passed, about 74% had licenses.
Even without declining visits to the DMV, registration rates among the youngest voters are low. During midterm election years, the percentage of 18-year-olds registered to vote typically remains under 30%, according to The Civics Center, compared to about 75% of Americans 45 and older.
Some civic groups are pushing for more in-person voter registration drives, including in high schools, which may help offset the effects of fewer trips to the DMV. Without significant action, they fear registration rates will dip even lower.
The League of Women Voters announced a partnership with The Civics Center in April to promote high school voter registration. The groups are offering state-specific training and toolkits to help members of the League, which has hundreds of chapters across the country, help students, teachers and school administrators hold registration drives.
They also want states to provide teens more time to register before they can vote. About half of teens currently live in states that allow voter pre-registration at 16 or earlier, according to The Civics Center.
The states include California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia and Washington.
“Young people have a very short window of opportunity,” said Jeanette Senecal, chief of civic learning and impact at the League of Women Voters. “So when we increase that window of opportunity to allow for preregistration at 16 and 17, there’s a much longer kind of runway in order for us to get them registered to vote for that first election.”
The focus on voter registration drives reflects, in part, an acknowledgment that online voter registration isn’t a panacea for fewer in-person DMV visits. Thirty-six states either offer no online voter registration option or allow voter registration only with a driver’s license or state-issued identification, according to information compiled by The Civics Center.
“Paper forms, typically you only need a

Social Security number and not a driver’s license. That’s one of the reasons that in-person efforts can be so effective,” Brill said.
SAVE America Act
Voter registration drives are under threat, however. President Donald Trump’s signature election legislation, the SAVE America Act, would effectively prohibit drives held by third-party organizations like the League of Women Voters because it would require individuals to present documents proving their citizenship, such as a passport or birth certificate, to government officials in person to register to vote.
The bill has stalled in the U.S. Senate amid opposition from Democrats and a handful of Republican senators. Trump is still urging lawmakers to pass the measure and posted on social media recently that he opposes unrelated foreign surveillance legislation unless it also includes the SAVE America Act.
As of late 2024, 24 states and the District of Columbia placed no restrictions on third-party voter registration drives, according to the Movement Advancement Project, a Colorado-based think tank. An additional 24 states impose some limits, while Wyoming and New Hampshire prohibit them.
What worked in New Hampshire
Because of its voter laws in the early 1990s, New Hampshire is one of six states exempt from the National Voter Registration Act, or NVRA, along with Idaho, Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The exemption means New Hampshire isn’t required to offer voter registration at motor vehicle offices.
In New Hampshire, everyone — teens and older adults alike — registers in person with election officials and can also register at the polls on Election Day.
Open Democracy, a New Hampshire voting rights group, has spent several years working to improve the registration rate among 18-year-olds.
The organization hired an employee focused on high school voter registration and held 41 high school voter registration drives in 2024, said Olivia Zink, the group’s executive director. To hold the drives, it had to assure election officials were present to accept paperwork.
In December 2023, an election off year, just 9% of New Hampshire 18-year-olds were registered. After the November 2024 election, nearly 64% of 18-year-olds were registered, according to data compiled by The Civics Center. Zink acknowledged that the presidential election was a major motivator, but she emphasized the importance of registering students every year.
State laws can play a major role. Registrations plummeted last year, Zink said, after state lawmakers removed the ability of residents to sign an affidavit as proof of citizenship. She attributed the drop to students not regularly carrying their birth certificates or other documents proving citizenship with them.
“Even with education and posters that are hung up at school and announcements and letters home to parents — we still saw so many fewer students register to vote in 2025 due to that law,” Zink said.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Beatties Ford Road area is one of six Corridors of Opportunity the city of Charlotte and environmental organizations are partnering with to address environmental inequities.

Charlotte initiative takes on environmental injustice

By Zamone Perez
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

The city of Charlotte and environmental organizations are working to revitalize communities with clean energy infrastructure and other projects aimed at addressing environmental inequities.

The GreenPrints initiative is using community input to identify solutions across the city. In partnership with the nonprofits CleanAIRE NC and SolNation, the initiative asked residents in six “corridors of opportunity” what kinds of projects they want to see in their communities.

Kennedy Williams, environmental justice manager for CleanAIRE NC, said residents shared a wide range of ideas.

“People understand that we’re in a climate crisis, and I think that because of that, they want to be able to equip their homes to be able to kind of be sustainable and be more green,” Williams said. “Sustainable housing was the biggest one. Another priority was electrification, so people were really

interested in EVs.”

The initiative is focused on issues including unequal tree canopy distribution, urban heat, sustainable housing and legacy pollution. Two neighborhoods have already completed feedback on what kinds of projects they want to see.

The work has centered on urban shade, sustainable housing, clean air and transportation. Williams added the nonprofit organizations are helping bridge efforts between the city and Charlotte residents.

“They also acknowledged and knew that they did not have the best relationship with communities historically because there is distrust,” Williams said. “This is not the first time communities have been saying, ‘I want sustainable housing,’ ‘I want the trash picked up in my area,’ ‘I want more air monitoring.’ This isn’t new.”

More than \$200 million has been invested by the city, federal government and corporations to help the corridors of opportunity.

Proposed ban on music outside NC polling places

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against putting the proposal before the public for comment.

Speakers at a public comment session on the proposed rule said it would stifle voter engagement activities such as Stroll to the Polls, Souls to the Polls, organized by Black churches, and DJs at the Polls.

Music outside polling places doesn’t disrupt elections, but is a celebration around voting that encourages participation, said Madison Belin of Raleigh, a rising junior at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro.

Collective action and civic participation are deeply rooted in HBCU history, Belin said, and events that include music and bring people to the polls are a continuation of that legacy.

No one is asking to disrupt voting or compromise the integrity of elections, she said.

“We are simply asking to preserve the spaces and traditions that make people excited to participate in them. Removing elements that make voting engaging and fun just further inconveniences people and pushes young voters away,” Belin said. “I would hope and pray that is not the goal.”

Banning amplified sound is one in a collection of new rules the board is considering.

Monday’s in-person comment session is one of four on proposed election and ballot-counting rules. The board will hold a repeat session on July 9 on how county boards of elections should handle absentee ballots with deficiencies. Board members watch recordings of the sessions, but don’t attend them. A problem with the June 22 recording of the public’s comments on absentee ballot rules requires a new session, the state board said in an email Monday.

Public comment sessions were also held earlier this month on a rule that would make it easier for county boards to throw out ballots when people don’t have photo ID. People who come to vote without a photo ID have to cast provisional ballots,

and those who don’t have an acceptable photo ID have to fill out forms explaining the reason. As it is now, a local board has to decide unanimously that a voter lied on their form to throw out their ballot. The proposed rule would change that so a majority vote would be enough to throw out ballots.

The board is also considering a rule on recounts following close races.

Andy Jackson, director of the Civitas Center for Public Integrity at the John Locke Foundation, has spoken at all the public comment sessions. He supported the proposed rule changes on photo ID, absentee ballots and recounts.

But on Monday, he recommended abandoning the rule banning amplified sound.

Jackson did not center his criticism on race or voter age, but said the proposed rule “does not narrowly serve the state’s compelling interest” in enforcing peace and order in and around polling places. “If the sound is not audible within the voting enclosure, it should be allowed,” he said.

Jackson also recommended rewriting a proposal on when a chief judge at a polling site can tell someone outside to turn down the volume so it can withstand charges of subjectivity.

Brian Kennedy, senior analyst with Democracy North Carolina, said the proposed ban on amplified sound is “in the same spirit” as North Carolina’s previous voter suppression efforts.

The rule targets community-led voter mobilization efforts that bring Black, brown, and young voters to the polls, he said.

“Community mobilization events that use music, energy and joy” strengthen democracy, Kennedy said. “These events are not disruptions to the electoral process. They are an electoral process working as it should.”

After the state elections board reviews written and recorded comments, it will vote on proposals to send to the Rules Review Commission. Rules are not final until the commission approves them.

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Working to undo damage of medical debt in North Carolina

By Lucas Thomae
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

In 2018, postpartum eclampsia kept Jessica McIntyre in the hospital for a week after the birth of her son. McIntyre, a school social worker in Beaufort County, had health insurance, but her plan required her to pay 20% of the cost of her stay.

In total, she owed thousands of dollars in medical debt to Vidant Medical Center (now ECU Health).

However, as a new mom, those hospital bills were the last thing on her mind, McIntyre told Carolina Public Press. Eventually, she fell behind on her monthly payments and stopped altogether. That was, until she contacted the hospital some time later to ask about making another payment.

Vidant told McIntyre that it had deemed her debt unrecoverable and sold it to a collections agency. Soon after, her credit score took a plunge.

“With me having been sick and us not making a lot of money, it was a struggle,” McIntyre said about living with medical debt.

Last year, McIntyre received a curious letter in the mail. It was from a nonprofit organization called Undue Medical Debt, which claimed to have erased all \$3,200 of her remaining debt. At first, she was skeptical.

“I was like, ‘this stuff doesn’t happen to me,’” McIntyre said. “This can’t be real.”

But it was very real. McIntyre’s debt had been wiped clean and her credit score rebounded. Her 8-year-old son is happy and healthy, too, she added.

Debt relief at a national scale

Undue, the nonprofit organization which relieved McIntyre of her debt, has bought and erased more than \$40 billion of medical debt across the country.

It does so by purchasing large portfolios of unpaid debts for pennies on the dollar — the types of distressed assets that commonly end up in the hands of collections agencies, which attempt to recover the debt at a profit.

People who have their debt erased by Undue don’t need to apply. They are simply notified that they no longer owe that money once Undue has purchased and paid off the debt.

Eva Stahl, who leads policy, engagement and research at Undue, said the impacts of medical debt relief range from the emotional to the pragmatic.

For some, it provides a path toward previously inaccessible lines of credit, such as a home or auto loan. For others, it simply means being able to go out to dinner or buy a Christmas gift free from anxiety or guilt over their medical bills.

“We hear from (recipients) all the time about how, in small and big ways, that really helped them move their life forward and open windows of opportuni-

ties,” Stahl said.

“And, importantly, it gives them a sense of hope and relief.”

Medical debt and affordability

Data on medical debt in the United States is limited but suggests a large-scale, pervasive problem.

A 2024 KFF report estimated that Americans were carrying at least \$220 billion in debt. That same analysis found that 13.4% of adults in North Carolina reported having medical debt between 2019 and 2021. That was the third-highest percentage among all U.S. states, behind only South Dakota and Mississippi.

Still, those numbers are likely an undercount, Stahl said. The data in the KFF report doesn’t include people incurring credit card debt to pay their medical bills or borrowing from their friends and family.

“Those debts, even though they’re medical debts, tend to be hidden,” Stahl said, “so we know that the scale of the problem is much bigger than that.”

The problem of medical debt could worsen nationwide as forthcoming changes to Medicaid and rising premiums drive up the number of people without health insurance.

But even those who have insurance and are gainfully employed are struggling to keep up with the rising costs of healthcare.

Nearly half (46%) of working-age adults said their families faced difficulties affording healthcare in 2025, according to recent research from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Although the problem was most prevalent among uninsured adults, it wasn’t much better for those with Medicaid or ACA marketplace plans. Even 39% of respondents with employer-sponsored insurance struggled to pay for their families’ health costs.

Katherine Hempstead, a policy advisor at RWJF, said there are widespread misconceptions about medical debt and who incurs it.

“There’s a tendency to think about medical debt as something that happens to people who are uninsured,” Hempstead said. “A lot of times, it’s because people are not able to pay for something that’s their responsibility because of their deductible.”

An unexpected visit to the doctor or emergency room could result in a bill that’s unpayable for someone living paycheck-to-paycheck. A debt relief program can alleviate the resulting financial pain, but it’s not a fix for a broken system.

“It’s very much like treating a symptom,” Hempstead said.

North Carolina’s unique approach

Stahl readily acknowledged that debt relief is a “Band-Aid,” but Undue’s partnership with North Carolina’s Depart-

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The Charlotte Post

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Gerald O. Johnson | CEO/PUBLISHER

gerald.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

André P. Johnson | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

andre.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

Herbert L. White | EDITOR IN CHIEF

herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

Published weekly by The Charlotte Post Publishing Company Inc., 5118 Princess Street, Charlotte, NC 28269 (USPS #965500). Subscription is \$65 per year. Periodicals postage paid at Charlotte, NC. Postmaster: Send address changes to The Charlotte Post, PO Box 30144, Charlotte, NC 28230

What wielding a vacuum has taught me about power

When people see me serving as mayor — leading council meetings, hosting community events, or delivering speeches — I am usually in a suit. But before I was ever elected, I started cleaning buildings at night when the world slept in far different clothes.



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BLAKELY

My family owns a janitorial business. It is the work I spent countless nights doing with my parents growing up. It is the work I continue to do, and it is the work that has shaped my leadership.

Politics teaches you how to talk. Janitorial work taught me how to listen.

Throughout America, millions of janitors serve our schools, hospitals, offices, and town halls. They stay after hours and make sure facilities are safe and clean for the next day.

But janitors are often overlooked and underpaid, despite their necessity. The median wage is around \$17 an hour. This reflects the lack of dignity our country provides janitors, especially if you are trying to support your family.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics asserts there are more than 300,000 janitorial openings each year. Not because this is an expanding industry, but because turnover is incredibly high. It is a job that will burn you out.

This is more than a statistic for me. It is my family's and my life. My parents founded Quality Janitorial Group, and we have been at it for 35 years. We've made a living for ourselves and other community members. Growing up, my evenings and weekends looked different than my peers. I recall being frustrated as a child because I hauled trash and vacuumed carpets while my friends went home.

As an adult, I carry so much pride and ownership as I do this work with my family. We care for clients. We want the floors spotless. Every detail reflects my parents' reputation and sacrifice.

When you clean after business hours, it is quiet. You notice so much that most people miss. The paperclips that were dropped under the desks. A continuous stream of coffee on the walls next to the trash cans. The evidence that people worked hard throughout their day.

Our work goes unnoticed, especially when tasks are completed correctly. Invisibility teaches you many lessons that politicians need, like humility, consistency, listening, and work ethic. You are not honored for vacuuming a large room. You must find the pride and value in the work for its own sake, not for attention. If you cut corners, eventually the mess shows. When you're in a still, empty building, you see the details. And when it is your family's business, you cannot just call out. The work is there daily; the floors get dirty daily. Just as in public service, the problems continue, and so must you.

In America, being blue-collar comes with pride and struggle. Rarely do politicians create policy that returns dignity to blue-collar workers. And when you clean buildings at night, you realize that perhaps the working class does not have the dignity they deserve. Janitors work multiple jobs, stretch paychecks, or work nights while still getting up for their kids in the morning.

That is why Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign existed. The Memphis Sanitation Strike draws comparisons for working-class people today. The workers proved how much their labor should have been valued and respected.

American politics often forget that fact. However, it has taught me more than any committee meeting ever has.

I am 31 years old. I am Black. I am the mayor of Fletcher, N.C. Additionally, I have cleaned bathrooms for my family business. I want to lean into it, not gloss it over.

Most people in America relate more to cleaning bathrooms than cutting ribbons. We deserve a society where more leaders can come from jobs like these. Our politics would look vastly different. Janitors, bus drivers, warehouse workers, and many other blue-collar workers make everything possible. Without them, the world does not go 'round as well. Just as those sanitation workers in Memphis proved.

I still work with my family business at Quality Janitorial Services, but I also carry the responsibility of serving as mayor. Both roles are service-oriented and require you to show up with humility, patience, and a willingness to deal with recurring problems, even if you are tired.

I am so proud to bring lessons from janitorial work into the mayor's office. Whether I am cleaning a bathroom or leading a Council meeting, the goals remain constant: create a safe space where people have dignity and are cared for.

So, each morning when you walk into a clean building, take a moment to take it all in. There was someone there working when nobody was watching. Perhaps that is the purest form of leadership there is.

Preston Blakely is the mayor of Fletcher, North Carolina.

The real reason we're told to hate Pride

Editor's note: This column, first published in 2024, has been updated from its original version.



GWEN
FRISBIE-
FULTON

ing places of laughter and energy.

There is something distinctly charming about a small-town Pride festival, less commercialized than those in big cities. Like all parades and community events in our small towns, there's something more organic and homegrown, with small local businesses, families, and church groups working to create wonderment together.

I've eaten a rainbow-shaped sugar cookie from a bakery in Elkin so buttery that it melted in my mouth; I've helped a young child reattach their glittery fairy wings before prancing off after a parade around a barn in Pittsboro; I've listened to a sermon in Kinston where the pastor told us we are all designed to love one another, no exceptions.

To some, these rainbow-drenched barbecues, festivals, dance parties, and church services may feel new. That doesn't mean gay and lesbian and trans folks haven't been here all along.

An estimated three million or more people who identify as LGBTQ call rural

America home; they were born here, build their families here, and run businesses here. Growing up, my dentist in rural Virginia was gay, my middle school math teacher was lesbian, my great-aunt was trans.

Queerness is as old as humankind—so why are some people acting so surprised it's here?

Pride has been celebrated in the United States and North Carolina for decades now, but it's meeting new resistance. Nationally, anti-LGBTQ demonstrations and violence rose high over the last decade. In 2024, law enforcement agencies sharing data with the FBI reported 2,278 hate crimes based on sexual orientation and 527 based on gender identity. Those numbers are down from record-breaking numbers in 2023, but remain high historically, according to The Advocate.

In North Carolina, this has looked in recent years like extremist groups such as the Proud Boys showing up to disrupt a family storrytime in Wilmington and neo-Nazis showing up to protest drag queens in Sanford. In South Carolina, a man shot up a gay nightclub in Myrtle Beach in April and has been charged with a hate crime.

UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC-Greensboro, institutions once known for crusading for civil rights, posted and then took down online posts expressing support for Pride because of new restrictions by the Board of Governors.

What did UNC-Chapel Hill's post say? "The Tar Heels are for everyone."

For a country that prides itself on freedom and progress, where does this

backlash come from- and why now?

Because to explain away a faltering economy, to make Americans peck at each other instead of at failed leadership, they need to find someone to blame. Anti-LGBTQ legislation is being pushed at the state level. In many states, lawmakers have introduced bills that would prevent transgender children from participating in sports and from seeking gender-affirming medical care. As Pride month started this year, the American Civil Liberties Union is tracking over 500 anti-LGBTQ bills across the nation, including 9 in North Carolina.

Even when they don't pass, introducing this legislation and adding them to public discourse alone is harmful. They feed false narratives about "groomers" and "indoctrination," and imply that it is normal to legislate and control each others' identities, choices and lives in both private and public spaces.

All of this casts a dark cloud over otherwise sunny and festive Pride celebrations. There has been backlash against the queer community before, both with oppressive legislation and violence, but nothing at this level of political coordination and strategy. So, again, more than 10 years after marriage equality became the law of our land and as more Americans than ever join in Pride celebrations, why is this happening now?

The answer is as old as time: divide and conquer. Instead of appealing to our greater selves and bringing

solutions to any of the real pressing issues of the day, some politicians are forever looking for ways to keep us apart, so we don't vote and act together. With election margins razor thin in places like North Carolina, many have given up on trying to persuade voters to their side and have resorted to rallying voters against each other.

Politicians rarely bully someone their own size. The queer community is an easy target, with only 7 percent of adults in the United States identifying as LGBTQ. The trans community is an even easier target; while 70 percent of Americans say they know someone who is gay, only one in five say they know someone who is trans, and those who are transgender make up an estimated 1.7 percent of the population.

The truth is, these communities are being singled out as politically advantageous boogeymen.

We have seen this divide and conquer scheme work, but I know that people where I come from care about their neighbors and each other's rights.

Right now, I'm glad to see small towns all across North Carolina pull out their bubble machines and rainbow tutus and turn up the music to play a little joy. Pride celebrations represent and benefit all of us in North Carolina, the state where we want everyone to call home.

Gwen Frisbie-Fulton is a North Carolina storyteller and organizer who writes about race, class, gender and politics in the South. Follow her work on Substack at Working Class Storytelling.

Juneteenth is my Fourth of July

Juneteenth is my Fourth of July. It comes with all my favorite things: barbecues, commemorations, elders standing up on stages with kente cloth and canes, and drum circles. I love it all. It's my day of remembrance.



MARTIN
HENSON

came a federal holiday. But there are still many who don't acknowledge it, and I wouldn't be surprised if that designation is taken away someday.

But the United States didn't give this holiday to me, and, at least for me, it can't take it away.

I'm celebrating Black freedom from chattel slavery that African American people demanded for ourselves. The U.S. government reluctantly acknowledged this freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation was a peace treaty from a nation at war with Black bodies. The Civil War was the front where this exchange took place, when frequent plantation uprisings made Black bondage untenable and a tool used by the Union to help win the war.

I celebrate Black people, not the document delivered by Abraham Lincoln, the same man who stated in his letter to Horace Greeley of the New York Trib-

une, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it."

To America, Black freedom, my freedom, was a chess move to undermine the Confederacy.

I have the day off on the Fourth of July. I see my family. Sometimes we pop a few fireworks. But I have never celebrated the American Revolution against the British, that independence complicated by the fact that both countries enslaved African people.

I'm also reminded of the complexities of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday. It came right alongside the concessions of a Black uprising in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd — we were offered this day as some sort of peace offering. The day is always in danger of being forgotten, always under duress.

We are reminded that our freedom can be removed in an instant: through gerrymandering, through conservative policymakers steadily dismantling the racial and justice-oriented formations that we fought for — the right to be free, the right to vote.

Cabarrus County Commissioner Larry Pittman called Juneteenth "a lie," as of this writing, just a few days ago.

The country prepares to celebrate its own version of freedom that runs in stark contrast to the contested freedoms the descendants of slavery enjoy.

This year, President Donald Trump demanded that Republican states — sup-

posedly run by GOP lawmakers who say they care about states' rights — make unprecedented changes to congressional voting maps to eliminate many Black districts entirely to benefit his party's chances at a majority in the election.

In my state of North Carolina, Greene, Lenoir, Wayne, and Wilson counties, which have significant minority populations, will see that impact this fall as they are gerrymandered from one U.S. House district to another where their votes can be diluted.

Gerrymandering isn't the only vestige of racial attitudes promoted by the Confederacy. For one example, Fayetteville's Fort Bragg briefly changed its name to Fort Liberty in an effort to escape its Confederate history, before being reassigned its previous title to another, according to officials at the time, non-confederate military hero by the same name.

I remember joking to my friends that Juneteenth may become illegal, receding back into the moonlight celebrations of our ancestors. But I will not allow my freedom to be seen as so small that it can be gobbled up or deleted by a federal designation — I must remind everyone of American history, the conquest, the blood, and the rusted chains of ships sunk and bodies lost in the sea.

That is the legacy of Juneteenth that we celebrate: not that we are to-

tally free now, but what was done to us will never happen again. It's a recognition that complicates the history of how America wants to see itself.

The reminder is ever-present, but my holiday, our holiday for those who want to join, is not doom and gloom. My Juneteenth trades "Resistance, Reunion, and Remembrance" for the 4th of July's pop culture mantra of "Boating, Barbeque, Beer, and Blowing Things Up."

Some find beauty in the Fourth. For me, Juneteenth surrounds me with joy. My fireworks sound like drumming. My BBQ comes with spades on the table. My tradition welcomes all to join in our celebration of history.

Some days Black folks are tired, and the fleeting recognition marking the end of our bondage is not a deterrent. The holiday was ours first. If it is taken away, Black celebration, Black joy, will never be.

In my family, we may wave a flag or two on the Fourth, but Juneteenth is a sacred reminder just as much as it is a celebration. America's revolution began in 1776, but my ancestors' ended in 1865.

It is the most American of things to celebrate freedom. For me, and so many others, Juneteenth is our Fourth of July.

Martin Henson lives in Raleigh. He is an advocate and executive director of BMEN Foundation, which convenes Black men to address issues in their lives and communities.

Working to undo the damage caused by medical debt

Continued from page 3A
ment of Health and Human Services sought to accomplish more than that.

Launched in 2024, the program required participating hospitals to relieve all medical debt for individuals who were enrolled in Medicaid or fell under certain income thresholds. Hospitals also agreed to provide discounts to low-income patients and to create a system to automatically screen and enroll them in financial assistance.

Another part of the deal barred hospitals from selling low-income patients' unpaid debts to collection

agencies.

Stahl said these stipulations not only allowed Undue to eliminate \$6.5 billion of medical debt in North Carolina, but it also created guardrails meant to protect patients from incurring future debt.

The statewide program erased certain debt owed to hospitals, but plenty of medical debt is held elsewhere, like with ambulance services or physicians' offices. That's where smaller, locally focused relief programs come into play.

For example, Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chatham County recently organized a cam-

paign with Undue which so far has raised more than \$22,000 for debt relief.

That was enough to retire \$1.8 million of medical debt in Chatham with some left over, according to Jeff Olson, who leads service initiatives for Chapel in the Pines.

After the campaign quickly surpassed its initial fundraising goal, an anonymous donor further pledged to do a "three-for-one" match of every dollar raised. Together, that's enough to erase up to \$7 million of debt, Olson said.

Any leftover money that doesn't go to Chatham County residents will help

pay off the worst cases of medical debt from across the state.

Olson said the campaign's success reflects how people resonated with the issue.

"It's personal for people in the church," he said, "because we all know somebody who's had an unexpected medical expense affect them."

"It may not have thrown some of these folks into bankruptcy or cast them out of their homes, but everybody can identify with the fact that unexpected things happen and can drag people's financial situations down."



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Guard LaMelo Ball, who helped the Charlotte Hornets to a 25-win improvement in 2025-26, has been traded to the Minnesota Timberwolves along with Josh Green for forward/center Naz Reid and numerous draft picks and pick swaps through 2033.

Hornets lean toward the future

With Ball and Bridges traded, Charlotte is remaking the roster for an Eastern Conference playoff run

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

The Charlotte Hornets have tied their future to shedding 40% percent of last season's starting lineup.

Point guard LaMelo Ball is off to Minnesota along with backup guard Josh Green for forward/center Naz Reid, a 2033 unprotected first round pick, three first round pick swaps (2028, 2029 and 2030) and three second round picks (2029, 2032 and 2033).

Charlotte will also get a \$40.7 million trade exception with the deal.

The dealing didn't stop there, with Charlotte shipping forward Miles Bridges, a 2027 second round draft pick and 2029 first round pick to Phoenix for guard Grayson Allen, forward Royce O'Neale and a 2033 first round pick

The Hornets were looking to add frontcourt depth and did it by adding Reid, who averaged 14.2 points per game on 46.2% shooting and 37.9% from three-point range last season, in 80 games played.



White

Meanwhile, the Hornets lose their onetime franchise player despite recent reports suggesting Charlotte was centering its core of forwards Brandon Miller and Kon Knueppel. Ball played 72 games last season, averaging 20.1 points, 4.8 rebounds and 7.1 assists per game.

Will Ball out, the Hornets resigned guard Coby White, who was their sixth man last season after coming over from Chicago via trade at the deadline.

Ball's annual salary was just over \$40 million with three years on his contract. Reid's contract pays \$25 million annually and he recently signed a five-year deal in 2025 for \$125 million — all guaranteed — that runs through the 2029-30 season.

The salary savings paved the way for Charlotte to re-sign White as the lead point guard.

The roster remake continued with the Bridges trade to Phoenix. The Hornets will pay Allen (\$18.1 million) and

Please see **WITH** | 6A

Playing time awaits draft picks Steinbach and Anderson

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

The Charlotte Hornets addressed needs and added depth with their two first round picks.

Charlotte selected forward/center Hannes Steinbach from Washington with the 14th pick and followed it up with selecting guard Christian Anderson Jr. from Texas Tech with the 18th pick after a week of speculation of whether they would stay put with their current picks or look to trade up or down.

"Going into the draft you're constantly trying to figure out how you can continue to get talent into this building," Hornets vice president of basketball operations Jeff Peterson said, "and both of those guys, again, they're certainly not finished products, they're still young, they're going to continue to get better, because they're about the right things. They work, they put the time in, and they want to be great."

Steinbach (6-10, 220) brings some diversity to the position as a big who can rebound at a high level but also score

in different ways.

Steinbach averaged 18.5 points and 11.8 rebounds per game last season at Washington, which led the Big 10. He was a 2025-26 All-Big 10 honoree and named to the All-Big 10 freshman team. Steinbach shot an efficient 57.7% from the floor and 75.9% from the free throw line in his one season with the Huskies.

"He's a guy that [is the] best rebounder in the draft," Peterson said. "He's someone who is just continuously trying to get better. He's a very skilled, very high I.Q. player. He fits us

from a D.N.A standpoint, continues to try to get better with just his work ethic, his values are aligned with what we're trying to accomplish. We are excited to have him. I know he's going to make us better on both ends of the floor."

Steinbach is just 20 years old, but Peterson feels he has potential to make an impact as he continues to develop and adjust to the NBA.

Anderson (6-2, 165) was one of the best three-point shooters in the coun-

Please see **PLAYING** | 6A

Royal goes 'country' with Marshall committment



CAMERON WILLIAMS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Hough High quarterback Ethan Royal (center), who led the Huskies to the North Carolina public schools 8A title as a junior, is committed to Marshall.

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Hough High quarterback Ethan Royal is heading to Marshall.

Royal, a 6-1, 205-pound senior, narrowed his list to six schools before picking the Herd. He led Hough to its first football state championship in school history in 2025, going 14-0 and shutting out West Charlotte and Millbrook in back-to-back games to claim the 8A state title.

Royal, who is originally from a small town in eastern North Carolina, said Marshall felt like home to him.

"The area of Huntington [West Virginia]," Royal said. "I'm originally from Clinton, North Carolina, back in the country, so it kind of gave me a country vibe. ... But it is also kind of like the city 'cause it's like a college town so the vibe really felt like home."

Royal added part of his decision came down to the offensive scheme and how his skills would fit.

"I know [Marshall] was just ranked No. 1 in the Sun Belt in offense for the upcoming season," he said. "I know that is a high expectation to handle, but I know when I get there in January, I will be able to handle that type of expectation."

Please see **HOUGH** | 6A

Extreme heat could be factor at World Cup

By Ann Blythe
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

As the largest FIFA World Cup in history continues across North America, the most menacing wild card for the competing countries might be the stifling summer heat.

Over the monthlong marathon leading up to the July 19 championship match in New Jersey, relentlessly high temperatures and humidity will put millions of soccer enthusiasts at risk. While elite athletes endure at least 90 minutes on the pitch, spectators, match officials and workers in many of the 16 stadiums across the U.S., Mexico and Canada could be highly vulnerable to heat-related illness and exacerbation of chronic health conditions.

Teams from Norway, Scotland and Germany have gotten a taste of the "wet blanket" extreme heat here at their base camps and training sites in Greensboro, Charlotte and Winston-Salem.

When Norway opened its practice to the public on June 10 at the UNC Greensboro soccer stadium, temperatures climbed close to 90 degrees Fahrenheit that afternoon. The next day, the National Weather Service issued a heat advisory,

Please see **HEAT** | 6A

Moore and Canales build on player-mentor relationship

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

If Dave Canales has a locker room soulmate, it would be David Moore.

When the Seattle Seahawks drafted Moore in the seventh round in 2017, Canales, then a wide receivers coach, started mentoring the small-school prospect. The relationship ex-

tended to Tampa Bay in 2023 when Canales was promoted to Buccaneers' offensive coordinator, and the last two seasons in Carolina with Canales as head coach.

"We can always count on D-Mo," Canales said Tuesday. "David Moore is a guy that I have known for a long time. We go way back, got a lot of trust in D-

Mo."

The eight-year veteran showed why Canales trusted him with taking first-team snaps at the opening practice of mandatory minicamp in May. He replaced sophomore Tetairoa McMillan (foot), who did not run routes during 7-on-7 and 11-on-11 drills.

"(Moore) can really play all of

the positions, and he stepped in and did well," Canales said.

On a Bryce Young pass during 11-on-11 drills, Moore caught the ball over several defenders. They connected again on a highlight reception during 7-on-7 routes.

Panthers loaded with young receivers Outside of Moore, the Panthers' wide receiver room is

Please see **DAVID** | 6A



TEXAS TECH ATHLETICS

Christian Anderson Jr. was one of college basketball's best three-point shooters at better than 40% beyond the arc for Texas Tech. He averaged 18.5 points and 7.5 assists with the Red Raiders in 2025-26 to earn All-Big 12.

Playing time awaits draft picks Steinbach, Anderson

Continued from page 5A

try in 2025-26 at over 40% while attempting eight three-pointers per game. He comes to a team that loves to shoot the three, averaging 43.3 shots beyond the arc per game last season.

Anderson was on the 2024-25 All-Big 12 freshman team and followed it up by being selected as part of the 2025-26 All-Big 12 team. He averaged 18.5 points and 7.4 assists per game last season while shooting 47.2% from the floor and 80.5% from the free throw line.

"[Anderson] is one of the best shooters in the draft," Peterson said. "He shot above 40% from three on just right under eight attempts a game, shoots him off the bounce, catch and shoot, spot-ups, just in various ways, and then his IQ as well. He's one of the best pick-and-roll players in the draft, too. He does a tremendous job of valuing the ball and getting his teams involved. I'm really excited to have [Steinbach

and Anderson] with us."

How do they fit?

The Hornets needed some versatility at center, which they found in Steinbach. Charlotte has Moussa Diabate and Ryan Kalkbrenner, who shared most of the load in 2025-26. While both were serviceable defenders and rebounders, neither has an offensive skillset — yet — that could keep defenses honest.

Adding Steinbach to the mix adds some offensive threat to the middle of the floor and help create looks for LaMelo Ball and Brandon Miller to work off the dribble or even in catch-and-shoot situations.

The addition of Anderson provides another ball-dominant guard who can create for himself and others. The Hornets also want to re-sign free agent Coby White, who like Anderson, can create for others and shoot at a high level.

Overall grade: A

With Ball and Bridges out, Hornets lean toward future

Continued from page 5A

O'Neale (10.8 million) to come off the bench while adding to a plethora of future picks that can be used as trade leverage.

Bridges, whose expiring contract carries a salary cap hit of \$22.8 million in 2026-27, played 77 regular season games in 2025-26, averaged 17.1 points, 5.8 rebounds, and 3.2 assists per game. He shot 46.0% from the field and 82.2% from the free-throw line. Ac-

cording to Michael Scotto, an NBA insider for Hoops Hype, the Hornets held exploratory trade conversations for Boston Celtics forward Jaylen Brown despite prior reports that Brown to Charlotte wasn't an option.

With Bridges gone, it opens a forward spot that could potentially be used for Brown if the Hornets are willing to deal. But with a large cache of future picks and pick swaps on hand, Charlotte has a ton of leverage at their disposal.

David Moore boosts receiver corps with an elder's presence

Continued from page 5A

comprised of prospects and unproven talent. Outside of the two first-round draft picks (McMillan and Xavier Legette), 2022 second-round draft choice John Metchie III, 2026 third-rounder Chris Brazzell II and 2025 sixth-rounder Jimmy Horn Jr., the seven remaining occupants are undrafted free agents, including Jalen Coker.

Canales said he remains confident the group will continue to make strides and grow with Young, whose fifth year under contract is guaranteed and aiming to open negotiations on a long-term deal after guiding the Panthers to an 8-9 record and NFC South title last season.

McMillan, the 2025 NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year, led Carolina with 70 catches, 1,014 yards and seven touchdowns. He also accounted 55 first downs, 269 yards after the catch and 58 more targets.

Assuming he can start the regular season healthy, Coker, who enjoyed a strong finish to 2025, is expected to capture the WR2 role, followed ideally by Legette, who continues to catch praise from Canales despite two inconsistent campaigns.

"We had great meetings going out of the

season, great meetings when he came back in April," Canales said. "Talked about his plan and the things he's working on and all that. He's just aware of all the things he needs to continue to improve upon to be the player that we know he can be, and that he knows he can be."

Brazzell also ran routes from the "X" position at the practice fields behind Bank of America Stadium. His breakaway speed is expected to add another dimension to the Panthers' run-first offense.

"He's made some plays over the last couple of weeks," Canales said. "Really excited about where he's headed with his development."

One of six former East Central (Okla.) players to become NFL draft picks, Moore understands the Panthers' offensive game-plan nearly as well as Canales. He grasps his role as a quasi on-field coach.

"It certainly does give him an advantage," Canales said. "At the same time, it is our jobs as coaches to evaluate how they perform given that one person might know a little bit more about the system. We can't fault young players that can help us because they don't have all of the answers."



CAROLINA PANTHERS

David Moore is the most experienced of Carolina Panthers receivers and has the confidence of coach Dave Canales, who has coached him at three NFL stops.

Hough QB Ethan Royal goes 'country' with Herd

Continued from page 5A

Royal admitted he was anxious at the start of 2026 with just eight offers, but as winter turned to spring, they started coming in droves.

"The recruitment process was a little crazy," he said. "I went from having only eight offers in January to over 35 in March. It was just really a blessing for me. I know I am a late bloomer with my first year of varsity being last year, my first year starting. We went 14-0 and had a good season, so that is what really spiked my recruiting."

Huskies coach DeShawn Baker said Marshall is getting one of the hardest workers he has worked with.

"Having Ethan has been a pleasant surprise for us," Baker said. "He was an athlete that could throw the ball when he first got here but he didn't know much about [playing quarterback]. He just didn't know much about the position. He came in and learned a lot under Trey [Blakeney]. He taught him a lot when he came in as a freshman. He is a film junkie now. He is a

leader; he is the leader of our team. ...

"I am just happy for him and that the process is over because he was stressing out every single day. Not going to lie to you, the Marshall thing was a bit of a surprise, but he is going to do great things."

With Royal's college commitment behind him, he and Baker can turn their attention to trying for another championship.

"[We have to] just stay consistent," Royal said. "We can't get complacent with the results of last year. So, that is the main thing, just keep me and my guys level-headed and not get too big-headed and let someone come in and take our throne."

Said Baker: "It is like I told people last year; it is about the family bond that we have. We can't worry about who is getting the credit, who is getting touchdowns or who is getting interceptions. It doesn't matter. We have to be one team. That is the thing for us, because we have the talent. We just have to make sure that the talent doesn't supersede what we are trying to do with this program."

Heat remains World Cup factor

Continued from page 5A

which is based primarily on the heat index, or the "feels-like" temperature that takes humidity into account too.

As Ashley Ward, director of the Heat Policy Innovation Hub at the Duke University Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability, will tell you, though, there's a lot more than the number on an analog thermometer and humidity level to consider when thinking about heat safety. For years, Ward has been advocating for use of the wet bulb globe temperature, developed and used by the military for decades, as the standard measure for public heat safety.

"It incorporates not only air temperature and humidity, but also wind speed and solar radiation, and because of that it gives us a better predictor of when conditions outside are particularly dangerous to humans," Ward told NC Health News. "It's not just about getting hot. It's also about how humid it is. Is the wind blowing or not blowing? Are there clouds in the sky, not in the sky? Are we standing on asphalt? Or are we standing on grass, and so forth?"

Is FIFA's heat policy adequate?

FIFA, the worldwide governing organization for soccer (or football as most countries call the sport), uses wet bulb globe temperature to set parameters for postponing matches. Delays are considered when the wet bulb temperature hits 32 degrees Celsius, or 89.6 degrees Fahrenheit — a threshold that's caused controversy among some scientists and players' unions.

In an open letter to FIFA on May 13, 21 doctors, climate researchers and scientists from universities and research institutes here and abroad said FIFA's heat safety protocols were highly inadequate and put players and spectators at severe risk. They wrote that science had shown more accurate wet bulb globe safety thresholds to be 25 degrees Celsius (77 degrees Fahrenheit) for high exertion, 28 degrees Celsius (82.4 degrees Fahrenheit) for moderate exertion, 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) for light work and 33 degrees Celsius (91.4 degrees Fahrenheit) at rest.

FIFA protocols also rely on two mandatory three-minute hydration breaks midway through each half, but the scientists contend that neither that nor a wet bulb protocol that entrusts match postponement decisions to competition organizers are sufficient protections.

The scientists acknowledged that though professional athletes are likely to have "higher resilience compared to the baseline population," it still "is impossible to justify" FIFA's heat policy as adequate for health safety.

"We respectfully urge FIFA to adopt heat-management protocols that prioritize prevention over response, and that align

with contemporary exercise physiology, occupational health principles, and duty-of-care standards expected in elite sport," the scientists wrote.

The hydration breaks aren't long enough, they contend, to sufficiently cool core body temperatures and therefore "the risk of exertional heat illness increases sharply."

"Player health and safety must remain the non-negotiable foundation of football governance, and the heat risks for the upcoming World Cup make this question more urgent than ever," the scientists added.

Although FIFA did not respond directly to the scientists' letter, according to The New York Times, a spokesperson wrote in a statement the organization is "committed to protecting the health and safety of all players, referees, fans, volunteers and staff."

Lean into it'

Ralph Vuono, chief business officer for the North Carolina Courage, the National Women's Soccer League professional team based at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary, knows firsthand what it's like to have to address extreme heat issues from the spectator side.

When Vuono moved to North Carolina from New Jersey about four years ago, he hadn't yet started working for the Courage. But he quickly heard about the recent years' record-setting extreme heat.

"All my neighbors, and the folks that I met when we moved down here, all said the same thing: 'It's ridiculously hot here in the summer,'" Vuono said. "It's beautiful in the spring. It's awesome in the fall. We get a little bit of a winter for about a month or so, but then the summer is really hot."

"So that narrative, that seed, was planted with me pretty early on."

When he started working for the Courage about a year later, people in the organization had the same message: "It gets really hot here during the summer," they told him. "Our stadium," he said, "we don't have the traditional canopies that you see at other soccer facilities. We don't have concourses and things like that. So having shade and things like that was a bit of a challenge."

Instead of acknowledging what everybody knew during his first full season in 2024 — that some game days would be scorchers — the organization avoided that narrative. That didn't work.

"We ended up having not a great summer in attendance perspective," Vuono said. "We had a really good spring. We came out strong. Then summer happened and we fell off a cliff. Then we had a rally, and we ended up having a really strong fall."

Things had to change, though, and Steve Malik, the Courage owner, made a suggestion that would launch a new course.

"His message to me was

we've got to stop hiding from it because it's never not going to be hot in the summer in North Carolina," Vuono recalled. "We're always going to have games in the summer; there's not going to be a time when we don't have games in the summer."

Even if the team were to move into new facilities, they wouldn't have a dome like five of the 2026 World Cup stadiums have. Players and fans would inevitably be exposed to the heat and elements. So Vuono turned to a different kind of venue for tips.

His family visits Disney World multiple times a year, he said, and one of the weeks they typically go is in mid-June. "Orlando's hot in the summer, but the parks are packed."

While summer visitors might save money by not going during peak periods, Disney offers other amenities too — free access to a water park at hotel check-in and cooling merchandise like freezable neck rings that can make a stay more comfortable.

"They do all these little things to not hide from it, to lean into it," Vuono said.

That lesson played into the launch of the Courageously Cool Summer initiative, which leans into the obvious.

"It is hot and we know that, but we can't let the weather or the temperature dictate when we support these players," Vuono said. "If we're going to support this team — if we're going to be on the forefront of advancing women's sports — it can't be contingent on everything's got to be perfect."

"Rain or shine, 95 degrees or 65 degrees, we're showing up and supporting this team."

In addition to developing different ticket bundles, the organization provided shade cooling zones and shaded zones around the stadium. They allow fans to bring empty water bottles and fill them free of charge at hydration stations. They sell Courage-branded cooling merchandise and hold special events like Margartaville Night and summer-themed halftime shows with dunking games.

"We did that last year, and we ended up having the largest attended summer in club history," Vuono said.

FIFA didn't ask the Courage for advice, but had the organization reached out, Vuono would have told them: "Don't try to hide from it. There is an advantage that the games are played at world class venues and stadiums that have canopies over a lot of the sections. There's shaded concourse areas. There's a lot of advantages that they have that we don't necessarily have at the current venue, but lean into it."

Get more people talking

Ward, whose research at Duke focuses on the health impacts of climate extremes and community resilience, said it will be important for FIFA to make sure the athletes and conditions for play are safe.