

MELINDA MYERS

A Pearl Crescent butterfly on a firefly petunia.

## Less maintenance and embrace your garden enjoyment

By Melinda Myers

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Every gardener has personal reasons for gardening whether it be the hope that their garden brings joy, productivity, beauty, or peace throughout the growing season.

Embrace what makes you happy as you tend, view, and enjoy every aspect of your garden.

Weather, busy schedules, and life in general can interfere with the best laid plans for any garden and landscape. Take some time now to evaluate what is working so you can do more of that and decide what needs changing in your garden plantings, designs, and maintenance.

If you are feeling overwhelmed with the maintenance but still want seasonal interest, consider filling garden beds with shrubs. Look for low maintenance varieties suited to your growing conditions and climate. Select those with multiple seasons of beauty from flowers, foliage, fall color, and interesting form and bark. Include some that provide birds with food, shelter, and protection from predators. You'll appreciate the beauty and motion

Please see **REDUCE** | 2B

## Enjoy that bountiful harvest long after growing season

By Heidi S. Skinner

COASTAL REVIEW

The vegetables have been planted, grown and harvested.

Now what?

Well, for starters, take advantage of all the fresh produce and eat yourself silly. And then ... if you want to enjoy the summer's bounty later, you have options.

Some fruits and veggies, like potatoes and onions, will keep, at least for a while on their own, given the right conditions. The ones that won't keep can be canned, frozen, dried or preserved in other ways. Canning is probably the most labor-intensive method, but oh, so worth the time and effort.

You will need canning jars, lids and rings, and a pressure canner. Canning is time-consuming because of the prep and because it takes a while to heat the jars and contents to the right temperature, and then you have to leave the filled jars in the canner for the prescribed length of time, then they have to cool.

Please see **ENJOY** | 2B

### «RIDES

## Lexus RX450h+ hybrid crossover has the finest of appointments and manners

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Lexus RX is the granddaddy of crossover vehicles. The vehicle's introduction helped shape the current automotive landscape of nearly an endless sea of SUVs, EUVs and crossovers.

The current RX was introduced in 2023 and is part of the fifth generation of the vehicle. It's been around for a while and looks to stay for years to come.

The RX 450h+ is powered by 2.5-liter four cylinder that is coupled with a pug-in hybrid power train. The combo makes 304 hp which can propel the RX to 60 miles per hour in 6.2 seconds (according to

Lexus). The transmission is variable, and all wheels are driven.

The RX 450h+ can travel 37 miles as an EV when fully charged.

Not much has been done to the RX450h+ for 2025. The sportier RX 500h gets a Black Line Special edition which adds a bunch of stuff to the F-Sport model.

Luckily, not much was needed on the 450h+ because of the recent redesign. I love the extremely handsome exterior, especially the grille with gem-like headlamps. The creases in the hood flow back to the A-pillars which slope back to the roof which eventually drops down to a hatch opening. The taillights are l-shaped

and are connected by a light bar that stretches across the hatch.

The interior is finely crafted - what you expect from Lexus. All the materials feel expensive and good to the touch. The leather seats are comfortable and can be adjusted to suit nearly every driver. The open-pore wood trim is gorgeous and makes this interior something special.

The interior design is top-notch, spoiled only by some of the tech. I love the touch screen's sharp, clear display and it's response. I even love the digital dash, but the controls can be a bit daunting. Lexus doesn't label the buttons on the excellent-feeling steering wheel because they are

multi-function. The functions are shown in the head-up display which can be distracting. I chose to concentrate on the touch screen which works fine.

The interior space isn't as spacious as some of the competition, but it is comfortable. Storage is good but could be better.

The interior is certainly a quiet place to be once the car gets rolling. The hybrid engine can be coarse under hard acceleration but quiets when up to speed. There is some wind noise around the mirrors but not much.

The independent suspension soaks up all bumps without a problem. Occupants won't notice bad road conditions unless you



LEXUS

The 2025 Lexus RX 450h+ hybrid crossover.

hit some potholes, or maybe not.

The RX 450h+ is easy to drive but don't look for a lot of excitement. The suspension is more comfort biased, so getting aggressive is not the vehicle's forte. The AWD system gives it a serviceable amount of grip, but there is

body roll while cornering. The steering, however, has a very direct feel and is nicely weighted.

My test vehicle only comes way - loaded as a Luxury model. This includes the panoramic sunroof, ambient light, 14-inch touch screen infotainment

Please see **LEXUS** | 3B



UNSPPLASH

A new federal law signed July 4 by President Trump will curtail or eliminate health insurance access for millions of people in the United States as well as rural healthcare providers who serve low-income communities.

## The ‘domino effect’ of health insurance limits

New US tax and funding law impacts Americans of all incomes

By Herbert L. White

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Access to health insurance in the United States will undergo seismic changes before year's end.

New federal tax and budget signed into law by President Donald Trump on July 4 will impact health insurance and by extension health care. To understand what the impact of government-funded

insurance programs Medicaid and Medicare, as well as private insurance through the federal marketplace via the Affordable Care Act, The Post interviewed Joyce Palmer, founder and owner of JP Financial Group LLC in Charlotte. Estimates by nonpartisan and apolitical organizations as well as economists, predict millions of working class and low-income Americans, and hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians, will lose coverage. The cost of private insurance through the federal marketplace will also rise and the enrollment period will be cut in half to 45 days. Options for people

who miss the deadline will be limited as well.

Responses are edited for brevity and clarity. Video of the interview is on The Post's YouTube page as well as Facebook.

TCP: What's in the law, marketed by Trump as One Big Beautiful Bill, and how does it affect access health insurance moving forward?

JP: It is a big bill. I won't say it's beautiful, but it is big. As it pertains to health care, we can expect everything that we know and understand about the health care world right now to change. Right the landscape will be affected across the board, not just Medicaid, where the biggest cuts are coming from, but the health care marketplace, the Affordable Care Act, is being chopped up as well.

It's going to be affecting people that are under 65 and then it's also going to spill over to everyone. As far as health care costs is concerned, because a lot of the costs will transfer and trickle down to private pay insurance, no one will get around not being affected by it. So, we're looking at 9.1 million people projected to be uninsured by 2034, that's ... going to be a

huge federal cut as far as saving money. But the question is, at what costs?

The bill is further going to impact the state of North Carolina. I think we're looking at hundreds of thousands of people that will be losing health insurance coverage. It's taking a step backwards in that we just got the North Carolina expansion of Medicaid for North Carolina. We fought so hard to get that, and so that will practically be reversed.

TCP: North Carolina law entails a claw back, where, if the federal government decreased its share of Medicaid coverage, the state would correspondingly cut money off as well. Can you explain a little bit further in terms of how that may impact people?

JP: The first part of it is Medicaid expansion. They're adding additional requirements in order to even be eligible for Medicaid. They're adding the work requirement, so if you're a non-disabled adult between the ages of 19 and 64, you've got to work 80 hours or take some form of education, or schooling or something in order to

Please see **THE DOMINO** | 2B

## Survey: Confusion over mammograms

PENN NEWS

Mammograms can find cancer early before symptoms appear.

Regular screening decreases the risk of dying from breast cancer. But a recent survey question by the Annenberg Public Policy Center shows that some Americans appear to be confused about when women with an average risk of breast cancer should begin a regimen of regular mammograms.

Women with an average risk of breast cancer should begin to have mammograms every other year beginning at age 40, according to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, which issued an updated recommendation on April 30, 2024, in the Journal of the American Medical Association, formalizing an earlier draft proposal. The recommendation applies to women from ages 40 to 74.

Founded in 1984, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is "an independent,



NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE

A survey by Annenberg Public Policy Center show that some Americans – especially young women – are unsure of the appropriate age to start mammogram testing for breast cancer.

volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine." It offers guidance to federal health agencies and, through the Affordable Care Act, essentially determines which preventive services should be covered by insurers.

Guidance from major medical organizations on what age to begin regular mammograms has changed over the years - from 40 to 50 and then back to 40 again. While a start date of age 40 is widely recommended, some medical organiza-

tions have put forth other recommendations. The American Cancer Society, for instance, advises that women with average risk have the option to start screening every year from age 40 to 44, then should have mammograms an-

Please see **MAMMOGRAM** | 3B



# The ‘domino effect’ of health insurance limits

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keep your Medicaid. So that’s going to affect probably, just nationally, millions. I think the number was 4.8 million they expect to basically not be able to enroll or get disenrolled because of that.

The frequency of checks ... to make sure you're continuously eligible for Medicaid, right now, they do it annually, so they're going to increase that to every six months. The whole idea is to make it more difficult for you to maintain the coverage. They're going to have some address verification process that you're going to have to go through to verify your address and if you move frequently.

So, really, just adding extra layers of qualifying for Medicaid, and then, of course, taking people off Medicaid.

The federal matching contributions to help people that are getting coverage, they're going to discontinue that or reduce it. Therefore, states like North Carolina that has the expansion would not be able to get that matching dollar, which means they're going to pull back on the enrollment. They're going to limit services.

This one is still trying to be determined, but a lot of the medical procedures like for women's health, for example, is being impacted greatly. Facilities that provide women's care or women's services like that, if they were getting funds from Medicaid, they're not going to be able to get those funds anymore, even for the non-abortion type procedures.

TCP: The poor, low-income folks in the rural residents of North Carolina, those are the folks who get hit hardest?

JP: What I share with people is that it's a domino effect - somewhere, somehow that cost has to be made up. So, what ... we're already seeing with insurance companies, you're going to see your premiums go up. You're going to see more things not covered ... because they're going to have to make up the funding they're losing from the federal government.

In order to do that and keep their doors open, they're just going to charge private fee insurance persons more."

TCP: What's the difference between if you work for, let's say, a Bank of America or Duke Energy, and a smaller business that has less than 20 employees? What's the difference between working at the corporation and getting health insurance and working

for a smaller company?

JP: The smaller companies will definitely not be able to sustain a lot of the cuts and expenses, because they don't have the large pool of people to help keep the cost down. So now that cost has got to be spread among the few people, if they're going to take any increases. The large corporations, they can leverage a little better because of the law of large numbers. They have more people. They can spread the cost around. The smaller companies are not going to be able to do that.

TCP: What happens if you miss the enrollment window?

JP: You have no coverage because there's no special enrollment period. That's the other thing. Before, if you didn't get (enrolled) during that time period, you had another window of opportunity to get a special enrollment done based on your circumstances. Well, they're going to minimize the special enrollment period, so that's going to be shortened as well, and they're going to take out a lot of the reasons where you could do a special enrollment.

It's going to be limited to something like you just lost coverage, or you move to a new location, so a lot of the special enrollment provisions will go away.

TCP: What are people telling you, whether it's clients or just interested bystanders, in terms of what does it mean, or what do I do now?

JP: I think a lot of people are not yet paying attention enough. So much is happening so fast, and this is just one facet of the Big Beautiful Bill. There's a lot of other things like taxes, and then there's all the other things the administration has going on that it's hard sometimes to know where to focus and where to where to put your energy to pay attention.

The first thing I share with people is do your due diligence, pay attention. Read and seek out information. The more knowledge, the more understanding you have, the more you hear about it, the better equipped you're going to be able to respond to it.

The next piece is I'm getting a lot of, how will this affect me personally if I'm not on Medicaid, or if I am on Medicaid, or if I live in a rural area, or if I have the Affordable Care Act, how will it affect me personally? And that's where we've got to get out and educate. We've got to get out and offer assistance. We're all hands on deck.

# Enjoy harvest’s bounty long after growing season

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If you're going to do a lot of canning, more than one canner is advisable, since you can only put so many jars in at one time. Also, the cooldown before you can safely remove the lid takes a good while. Knowing how much time all this takes, I asked my Daddy how his Mom, my Grandma, managed to put enough up to feed their large family, with Daddy being the seventh of 10 children. I couldn't imagine her doing a few jars at a time, especially on a woodstove in a small cabin or later, a larger farmhouse.

His answer: Grandma didn't worry about using a pressure canner inside. Instead, she built a fire outside and situated a large galvanized washtub on rocks so it was balanced over the fire. She then put her jars and enough water to cover them in the tub. This method, called water-bath canning, has been frowned upon and has fallen out of favor — especially for certain foods — because of the chance of botulism.

Grandma would keep the fire going and take out jars or put more in as needed. None of my aunts or uncles starved to death or died of food poisoning, so Grandma must've done something right.

The reason pressure canning works better and is safer for nonacidic foods is that, while water-bath canning will seal the jars, it can't kill botulism or other deadly organisms that may be present. Pressure canning heats the contents of the jars hotter than boiling alone, hot enough to kill all the odorless, tasteless, invisible nasties that might be waiting to cause severe illness.

Despite the work, there's nothing more satisfying than listening to jar lids "ping" as the jars seal while resting.

Chill out

Preserving your produce in the freezer also takes a bit of prep. For instance, corn can be frozen whole, on the cob, but this takes up a ton of room in your freezer. A better way is to cut the corn off the cob, cook it, cool it, and then bag it before moving it to the freezer.

A very smart person, probably more than one, figured out you can put the whole shucked and silked cobs in a pot of boiling water for about two minutes — outside, using a gas burner works great — throw them in cold water, and then cut the corn off. This way, it can be bagged and go straight into the freezer - a huge time saver.

When the whole cob method is so much quicker and easier, why do we do it the old cut-cook-cool way? Because that's the

way we were taught, and that's the way our moms and grandmas were taught. Humans tend to get stuck in a rut about some things — in a rut with blinders on.

Fresh blueberries can be frozen as-is. Simply pick them, put them in a container, and freeze. So how come some things can go straight in the freezer and others have to be blanched, or thrown into boiling water for a couple minutes?

Blanching stops the natural ripening process and keeps the veggies at their peak of taste and freshness. It also kills any insects you might have missed while picking and preparing. Some veggies and fruits are better canned, some better frozen. Much of it comes down to personal preference.

And there are other considerations as well. If there's a hurricane or other reason for a prolonged power outage, canned items will be just fine, whereas frozen food could thaw and be ruined.

Other methods

Another method of preserving harvests is drying. Natural drying is tough to do around here, simply because of the humidity. There are tons of dehydrators and canners out there in all sorts of sizes and price ranges if you want to go that route.

Yet another method of food preservation that's become popular is vacuum-sealing. Vacuum-sealing removes all the oxygen from the package, so freezer burn and bacteria can't spoil your food. This method will keep food tasting fresh for a long time. You have to decide whether it's worth it to you to purchase canning or dehydrating or other equipment you might only use a couple times a year.

Of course, if you actually use the items, quite a bit of money can be saved. You can grow your own and put it up, go to a farmer's market and buy produce to put up, or just keep what you already purchased from spoiling as quickly. Look for units that can do double duty, such as a dehydrator that you can also use to make yogurt.

With your own produce, you can always know what was sprayed on it, how it was picked and transported, or where it came from. Our farmers and truckers do an amazing job growing and getting food to us, but germs happen.

There are lots of ways to enjoy fresh-tasting produce for longer than the short harvest season, also including pickling and fermentation. So, eat a bellyful, and when you can't stand the thought of one more zucchini or cucumber or tomato, put some up for later.

# Genetic testing in critically ill

PENN NEWS

Genomic testing—sequencing an individual's entire genome or all of their genes—has become affordable and accessible enough to serve as a key diagnostic tool.

In fact, its use in infants and children with suspected genetic disease or with complex medical histories has been shown to lead to wide-ranging health-care cost savings and improved outcomes.

Despite well-documented benefits in the pediatric population, genomic testing is not commonly used in adults, largely because it is believed that the likelihood of finding undiagnosed genetic conditions decreases with age.

Now, a team of researchers led by Theodore G. Drivas of the Perelman School of Medicine has challenged this idea, finding previously unknown genetic diagnoses in a large percent of adults admitted to intensive care units at Penn. The findings are published in The American Journal of Human Genetics.

“Our study shows that genetic disorders are a surprisingly common reason people end up in the intensive care unit—even in adults,” says Drivas. “Genetic disease does not only affect pediatric patients and young adults but appears to be important — and underdiagnosed — across the life span.”

The researchers retrospectively analyzed whole exome sequencing data—which captures the protein-coding regions of DNA known as exons—from 365 adults aged 18 to 40 years who had been admitted to an ICU in the University of Pennsylvania Health System. Two physicians board

certified in both medical genetics and internal medicine reviewed each WES report and patient chart.

According to Drivas, they found that nearly one in four patients in this study had a genetic condition related to their ICU admission, which was unknown to nearly half of those patients and their doctors. Additionally, for over 75% of these patients, these diagnoses call for specific management guidelines.

“Importantly, we found no correlation between patient age and the likelihood of having a genetic diagnosis,” says Drivas. “This means that older adults were just as likely as younger adults to have a genetic diagnosis causing their critical illness, which is contrary to what many assumed would be true.”

The study also found “striking” race-based disparities in access to genetic testing.

“Black patients are significantly less likely to have known/documented diagnoses,” write the authors, noting that while diagnoses were documented for 63.1% of white patients and 100% of Asian patients, they were only documented for 27.7% of Black patients.

“This disparity cannot be explained by demographic differences or differences in overall diagnostic rate of exome sequencing between these different groups,” write the authors. “It is likely that these disparities reflect biases in physician referral practices for patients of different backgrounds and societal barriers, including long wait times and limited hours for genetics clinic evaluation.”

Drivas notes, “In addition to diagnosing genetic dis-

eases, when we also consider the added benefit of exome/genome sequencing in providing care teams with valuable pharmacogenomic information that can help direct medication dosing to ensure efficacy and prevent adverse events, our data suggest that the majority of critically ill patients could benefit from such testing. However, such testing is only very rarely performed in critically ill adults.”

But Drivas and his colleagues have a solution. They recommend offering genetic testing to all adults admitted to the ICU.

“Genetic testing costs little compared to an ICU stay, yet it's rarely offered to adults,” says Drivas. “Our findings strongly suggest that we should consider offering broad genetic testing to patients as part of their ICU admission; knowing a patient's genetic diagnosis can mean better care, better survival, and fewer health disparities.”

Drivas and his team are collaborating with the My-PennGenome project, led by Bogdan Pasaniuc of Penn Medicine, to help with this goal.

“We are hoping to prospectively sequence the genomes of ICU-admitted Penn patients and return these results to the patients and their treatment teams as part of a pilot study,” Drivas said. “Our hope is that as the utility of broad genetic testing in the critically ill adult patient population continues to be proven through studies like these, the health system will adopt it as part of routine patient care.”

“We have the tools and the data,” he says. “Now we need to make genetic testing standard practice.”

# Reduce garden maintenance while embracing enjoyment

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these winged visitors provide.

Consider using fewer species of low-maintenance perennials and more of each. You'll have fewer plants to try to identify as the garden comes to life in spring and as you weed throughout the growing season.

Look for those that are disease and insect-pest resistant, need minimal or no deadheading and pruning, and attract and support pollinators as well as provide winter interest and food for songbirds in the winter.

Then add season-long color with pockets or containers of annuals. With fewer to buy and maintain you may decide your schedule and budget will allow you to change them out as the seasons change.

Accept and embrace the beauty of a less-than-perfect garden. Most visitors won't notice the imperfections unless you point them out. Plus, faded flowers and seed pods can provide unique texture and food for songbirds.

Do minimal cleanup that is better for the plants, pollinators and songbirds. Do remove or cut back diseased and insect-infested plant material as needed. Leave fall leaves in the garden to serve as mulch, a home for some beneficial insects, and insulation for toads, queen bumblebees, and others that overwinter underground.

Allow perennials to stand for winter, increasing hardiness, providing homes for beneficial insects, food for songbirds, and adding winter interest. Leave some of these stems standing throughout the upcoming growing season to serve as homes for some of the

native bees.

Ask for or hire help if needed. As much as you love gardening, securing help for some of the larger tasks or those that just aren't getting done can help boost your enjoyment. It can be hard to find gardening help so you may need to get creative.

Consider sharing your gardening space with someone who loves to garden but lacks a garden. Barter your knowledge and skills for help in your garden. Or plan a round robin of fun and gardening with a few friends.

Take turns visiting and tending each other's gardens. You'll enjoy the time spent together in each other's gardens as you tackle a gardening task or two. Then top off the visit

with a favorite beverage and snack or meal.

Don't let your list of unaccomplished tasks or weeds stop you from enjoying your garden and what you have accomplished. Relish every bloom, fresh tomato, or visiting bird or butterfly.

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including the *Midwest Gardener's Handbook, 2nd Edition* and *Small Space Gardening*. She hosts *The Great Courses' "How to Grow Anything" instant video series* and the nationally syndicated *Melinda's Garden Moment radio program*. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for *Birds & Blooms* magazine and her website is [www.MelindaMyers.com](http://www.MelindaMyers.com).



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# Why are travelers making such a mess this summer?

By Christopher Elliott  
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

Sharmistha Das says she didn't trash her Lyft.

But her driver claims she dragged her bicycle helmet along the side of his door, leaving several long scuff marks.

Lyft charged her credit card an \$80 cleaning fee, and she's not alone. More travel companies are billing their customers for leaving a mess behind. The question is, are travelers becoming more careless or are businesses seeing a profit motive? And what, if anything, can you do about it?

Shortly after Das, a research scientist from Boston, returned from a trip to the grocery store, she received an email from Lyft. "Your driver, Dmitry, notified us that repair is needed after your ride," it said. "An \$80 charge has been applied to your default card."

But the photos Lyft sent were problematic. Dmitry claimed that she scraped the car with her bicycle helmet. But the helmet had no edges that could have inflicted the scratches. "When I asked for proof of the time or location of the images taken, none were provided to me," she adds. And the photos didn't match the location she'd visited.

Das' experience is common and not just with Lyft. Travel businesses hit their customers with extra cleaning fees, often with the flimsiest of evidence. And some companies simply charge their customers' credit cards without their permission.

No one is keeping track of the number of cleaning fees in the travel industry or even measuring the cleanliness - or lack thereof. But based on extensive interviews with travelers and the cases I receive at my nonprofit consumer advocacy organization, it's fair to say there's been an upswing in both. "This issue appears to be escalating," says Carla Bevins, who teaches business management communication at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business.

Why? Bevins suspects that part of the reason is that there's no consistency in cleaning standards. "For instance, a guest might stay at one vacation rental and feel like a quick sweep is enough, only to find themselves hit with a hefty cleaning fee," she says. "Or a rental car might seem fine to a guest but falls short of the company's cleanliness standards."

But there's more to this issue. Travelers are less respectful now - and messier. Fact is, the pandemic changed travelers. And people have noticed the mess.

I saw some of the most careless tourists in the world when I lived in Rio de Janeiro last year. Many visitors showed no respect for the beautiful beaches, discarding trash and often using the medians to relieve themselves after a long night of drinking. But the worst I've ever

seen was in Dublin. I lived in Temple Bar, a historic part of the Irish capital known for its pubs. Every morning, the cleaning crews had to make several passes through the narrow cobblestone streets to remove empty beer bottles, trash and human waste.

It cuts across all classes. Sharon Sybrandt, a fraud investigator from Cedar Creek, Texas, recalls a recent flight from Austin to London. As she was disembarking, she says the economy class section was relatively clean. Then she got to business class. "There was trash all over the floor," she says. "I couldn't believe it."

What's going on? Behavioral experts say people want to live a little and there's a sense of entitlement, as if they paid for an experience and someone else should clean up after them. As you might guess, that's not going over well with hotels, car rental companies or vacation rental owners. "I think they're fed up with travelers leaving ridiculous messes," says Jo Hayes, an etiquette expert. So, instead of quietly cleaning up after them, they're charging them.

Hang on. What about travelers like Das who are getting hit with fees for allegedly scuffing up the side of their rideshare? Well, there's another perspective on this, which is that some travel companies are charging more fees to increase their revenues.

Travel expert Dean Rotchin says some companies are charging fees that far exceed actual cleaning costs. It's particularly true for vacation rental owners, who charge \$200 to \$300 to clean a small property - more than double the going rate. And he's noticed that car rental companies have embraced a far stricter view of what constitutes a messy return. That way, they can charge cleaning fees as high as \$400.

"They've really embraced this trend," says Rotchin, who is the CEO of a private jet company.

There's no question that cleaning fees can be a significant source of revenue for the travel industry. Unscrupulous vacation rental hosts can enrich themselves by padding their fees - and as a bonus, they can often separate these fees from the base rate, which makes the rental look cheaper.

Drivers for ride-sharing companies also know that a vague damage fee can bring in an extra \$80 or more. Perhaps the worst are hotels, which simply charge guests for cleaning their rooms after they check out without providing any evidence that the customers were responsible for the mess. That's a scam.

How do you avoid cleaning fees? Easy, says Joe Cronin, CEO of International Citizens Insurance. "Just clean up after yourself."

Treat the space like it's your own. Also, read the fine print and reviews - that way, you know what your host or hotel expects.

And what about Das? Well, I asked Lyft about her case, and a few days later she received an email from someone on Lyft's executive escalations team. Without addressing her questions about the missing timestamps and problematic locations, Lyft claimed that the evidence against her supported the charge, even after a second review.

"We understand you have adamantly denied this damage occurred," the representative added. "As an act of good faith, I have refunded the damage fee of \$80 back to your payment method for this case."

*Christopher Elliott is an author, consumer advocate and journalist. He founded Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps solve consumer problems.*

# Mammogram confusion

**Continued from page 1B**  
nually from 45 to 54 years old, and then continue with mammograms every other year.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's health survey, conducted with a sample of over 1,600 U.S. adults in April, finds that nearly half of those surveyed (49%) know that age 40 is when women at an average risk of breast cancer should begin to have mammograms every other year. But 10% say they should begin at age 20; 21% say age 30; 8% age 50; and 11% are not sure.

"Confusion can arise when medical guidance about detection or treatment changes, as it has in recent years with mammograms," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. "Our data suggest that the recommendation that such screening ordinarily start at 40 years old is not yet widely enough known."

In an April 2024 survey, conducted before the task force lowered its recommendation from age 50 to age 40, the overall finding was the same: 49% thought the correct age was 40. That was not the recommended age at that time, though it is today with the updated medical advice.

**More uncertainty among younger women**

Among the women surveyed, nearly three-quarters (72%) who are ages 40-49 years old know that regular mammograms should begin at age 40. About 6 in 10 women age 30-39 years old (63%) and 50-74 years old (59%) know this as well (the percentage difference between them is not statistically significant). Younger women are the least well-informed about when to begin mammograms - among women 18-29 years old, just over a third (37%) know the correct age.

In addition, more younger women say they are not sure what the correct age is. The survey finds that 16% of women 18-29 years old and 11% of women 30-39 years old are not sure at what age to begin having mammograms. There is no statistically significant difference between those two age groups - but both differ significantly from the very small percentage of women 40-49 years (1%) who are not sure of the age to being having mammograms.

Among 18- to 29-year-old women, the most commonly selected incorrect age for when to begin regular mammography is 30 years old (selected by 27%) - a decade earlier than recommended.

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## Lexus RX450h+ hybrid

**Continued from page 1B**

system, head-up display, 21-inch wheels, adaptive cruise control, blind spot warning, lane departure mitigation and triple zone auto climate control.

The base price was \$71,260. I'm not sure of the as-tested price but I'm sure it was considerably higher due to options like the 360-degree panoramic backup camera, 21-speaker Mark Levinson audio system and digital rear view mirror.

Honest you can buy something faster, bigger and even cheaper and be satisfied. What you would miss is the RX's build quality and solid feel of luxury.

Pros:

- Handsome styling
- Luscious interior
- Excellent fuel economy
- Abundance of standard features
- Comfortable ride
- Quiet ride
- Strong brakes
- Easy entry/exit
- AWD

Cons:

- So-so handling
- Pricey
- High learning curve for some controls



**Classified Deadline: Monday at noon, prior to Thursday's edition**



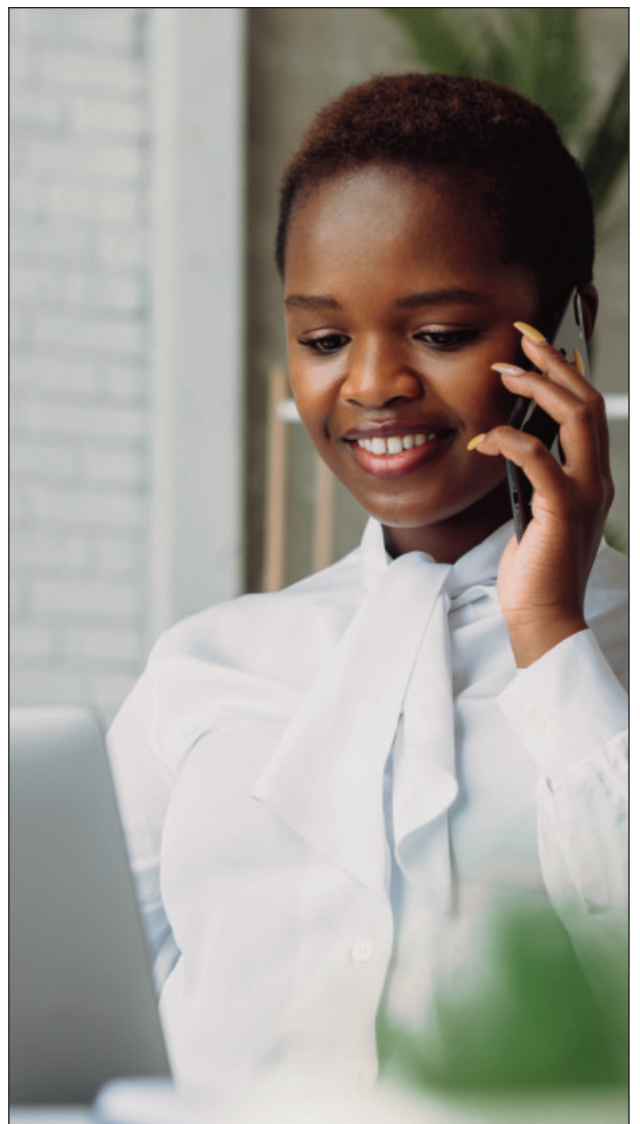
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The romance novel finally gets some love as book genre

By Tracee Herbaught  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Romance novels have always spiced up quiet nights.

Now, a genre that has sometimes been dismissed as a guilty pleasure is bringing readers and writers together through social media, book clubs and a growing number of romance-specific bookstores.

At a recent launch party for Nora Dahlia’s enemies-to-friends romance “Pick-Up” at Lovestruck Books, a romance-dedicated store in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a crowd of women sipped cocktails from the bar-café as they browsed the shelves.

After Dahlia’s reading, patrons stuck around to mingle, swap contact info and trade author recommendations.

It was a particularly social event for a book talk. But the communal atmosphere is typical of events for romance fans.

Dahlia likened romance readers to “Comic-Con folks,” referring to the deep-rooted passion that defines comic-book fandom.

“They’re educated on the genre in a real way,” Dahlia said. “Many of them started reading romance — Danielle Steel, V.C. Andrews, Jude Deveraux — as teenagers.”

At The Ripped Bodice bookstore in Brooklyn, New York, manager Katherine Zofrea said romance fans who have connected online frequently come into the store to meet in person. Along with author events, the store hosts three different book clubs and a romance comedy night.

“We’ve had a couple proposals here, we’ve had a wedding here which was really fun,” Zofrea said.

She said customers range “from teenagers who are starting to really get into the romance genres to older folks who have been romance readers for their entire lives and remember way back when they were reading the Harlequins and romance wasn’t as widely accepted.”

“Now they’re loving seeing how widely accepted romance has become.”

A boom in romance bookstores

Bookstores like Lovestruck and The Ripped Bodice (which has a flagship store in Los Angeles) have begun popping up all over the U.S., from Wichita, Kansas, to Wilmington, North Carolina, to Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Of the 157 romance-dedicated bookstores in the American Booksellers Association, more than half opened within the last two years, said Allison Hill, CEO of the trade group for independent sellers.

“Romance books have been one of the fastest growing book sales categories in recent years, driven by a number of factors including the need for escape reading and BookTok,” Hill said.

And the genre has evolved. “The romance genre is more diverse in every way including character identity and plot,” she said.

Lovestruck’s owner, Rachel Kanter, called the boom “incredible — and honestly, overdue. Romance has always been one of the most commercially successful genres, but for a long time it didn’t get the respect or space it deserved in the literary world.”

Romance-specific bookstores, she says, “are places where readers can feel joy, comfort, and connection — and where love is taken seriously as a literary theme.”

A lifeline during COVID

As with many hobbies, romance fandom solidified and expanded after the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The pandemic had pushed so many people toward reading for escape and comfort, and romance became a lifeline for a lot of folks,” said Kanter.

“At the same time, there was a wider cultural shift happening — people were rethinking what mattered, craving joy and softness, and looking to support indie businesses that reflected their values. Romance, with all its hope and heart, met that moment beautifully,” she said.

Reimagining the romantic bond

Romance has countless subgenres — hockey romance, Western romance, LGBTQ romance, even romance set on prison planets. But a common theme is their “inherently hopeful storylines,” says Elizabeth Michaelson Monaghan, a 52-year-old freelance writer and editor in New York who said she’s read “hundreds” of romance novels.

“Romance must have a happily-ever-after — or at least a happily-for-now. Romance writers and readers are very clear on this,” she said.

Romantic fiction that doesn’t end that

Please see ROMANCE | 6B



BLUMENTHAL PERFORMING ARTS

A scene from “Immediate Family,” Paul Oakley Stovall’s semiautobiographic take on the dynamic of family, racial and sexual identity. The play runs July 29-Aug. 31 at Blumenthal Arts.

‘Immediate Family’ finds humor in a heavy subject

Playwright Paul Stovall’s production on race and relationships at core

By Nikya Hightower

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Paul Oakley Stovall can identify with the dynamics of humor, race and sexuality.

Stovall’s play “Immediate Family,” which takes the stage at Blumenthal Arts July 29-Aug. 31 is directed by Phylicia Rashad. Productions will be held at Booth Playhouse, 130 N. Tryon St. Tickets are \$27.89, with showtimes every day except Mondays.

The story takes place when a Black family gets together for a wedding and is shaken when one of the characters introduces his white boyfriend. The audience will watch events unfold as the family navigates issues surrounding race and homophobia.

The themes explore the conversations and dynamics within a family, showcasing the importance of self-discovery and leaning on each other through thick and thin. Stovall, whose credits include “Hamilton,” describes “Immediate Family” as “an exploration of what happens when we don’t allow ourselves to live in our

full truth out of fear of what could befall us and an examination in what can happen when we do, and what great things can come our way when we do stand up and show our true selves to those that we love.”

The play’s inspiration comes from experiences Stovall went through in his own life and says the play is “semi-autobiographical.”

“I challenged myself to write my own story, and that’s when ‘Immediate Family’ was born,” he said. “Now since then, of course, I write about many different topics, but that first play was absolutely born out of a necessity. And not just to see myself or people like me on stage, but the people that I knew and loved to see those people on stage.”

Although the production includes heavy topics, Stovall did not want to tell the story from the same point of view in which these conversations are normally told. “Immediate Family” adds a comedic tone inviting their viewer to laugh with the characters.

“I think that we get caught up in the idea that talking about these subjects

should inherently be difficult,” he said. “That was never something I had to find the humor in it all. I think we can all be kind of ridiculous about the things we believe so hard in.”

Stovall’s mission is not to force a point of view but rather reach the audience one by one.

“My hope can be someone sees the show, and if one person goes home and speaks kindly to their child when they haven’t in a while, and that relationship begins to shift, and then that child who may have been bullying some kid at school speaks kindly to that child the next day,” he said. “And then that child can finally study because they’re not worried about getting beat up, and they start improving their grades, and they end up in college, and they succeed in this profession or the other profession, and they do something to the world. That’s the way I can do it now.”

“That’s an intense leap of faith, right? Because I’ll never see that. I’ll never know if that happens. But that’s my artistic journey right now, is to have faith that that’s out there happening.”

I think that we get caught up in the idea that talking about these subjects should inherently be difficult. That was never something I had to find the humor in it all.

‘Immediate Family’ playwright PAUL OAKLEY STOVALL

Art tells story of America’s segregated beaches

By Jennifer Allen

COASTAL REVIEW

For the last few years, Rik Freeman’s art has been telling the story about African American beach communities during the Jim Crow era.

His series, “Black Beaches During Segregation,” features several vibrant paintings representing different historically Black beaches on the Atlantic, including Ocean City on Topsail Island.

“Pretty much all my paintings tell a story,” said Freeman, who lives in Washington, D.C. “When I was growing up, my grandmother used to say I would eavesdrop on grown folks’ conversations because they were just always so colorful and talking. I would see images in my head of what they were talking about and everything said.”

Freeman’s exhibit was part of the 15th annual Ocean City Jazz Festival July 4-6 in North Topsail Beach. The theme of the three-day music festival was “Celebrating History Through the Language of Jazz and Unity.”

The festival was first held in 2009 to mark the 60th anniversary of Ocean City’s establishment. Now a part of North Topsail Beach, Ocean City was established in 1949 “as an African-American-owned community 15 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Ocean City was a unique community as it was the first residential beach community with Black home ownership in the state,” according to the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, which sponsored the exhibit with Ocean City Jazz Festival.

Freeman, who spent his youth in



RIK FREEMAN

Rik Freeman’s “Ocean City Beach” is an homage to the North Carolina community founded in 1949 for Black residents.

Athens, Georgia, said he began drawing as a young child but really got into murals in his 20s, after college. He moved to Washington, D.C., in 1985 when he landed a job at the airport while he was visiting family for Thanksgiving. He returned to art a few years later at 32.

“It was in ’88. My father died — this is about to sound like an old blues song — my father died. I got fired from my

job. My girlfriend left me, so I started working back with my art again,” he said.

The D.C. Commission of the Arts and Humanities posted in the newspaper an ad looking for artists willing to work with children during a summer program painting murals. Freeman applied and was accepted.

Please see ARTIST | 6B



# Romance novel finally gets some love as genre

Continued from page 5B

way? That's just a love story. Traits of the romance genre also include strong character descriptions, attraction, conflict, and a satisfying resolution and emotional growth. Expect plenty of steam — some authors deploy it explicitly, others are more tame. There's a long-standing culture of (mostly) women reading and sharing these books across generations. "It is pleasurable to reimagine courtship or the romantic bond," said Jayashree Kamble, professor of English at LaGuardia Community College and president of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance. "There is limited risk involved." Kamble has been a voracious romance reader since her teenage years in India, where she devoured Harlequin romances.

Romance novels, she said, are "a lovely reminder that individualism and companionship can go together. These are basic bonds." Community: online and in real life Podcasts, too, have become a source for discovering what's trending. Andrea Martucci, creator and host of the romance-focused "Shelf Love" podcast, said romance bookstores have become places of connection akin, in some ways, to churches — for the romantically devoted. "I can go to a bookstore and not just find people who love books," she said, "but find people who love the very same books I love." As Annabel Monaghan, author of several love stories including "Nora Goes Off Script," puts it, "People who read romance want to feel good. And when you gather a bunch of people who want to feel good, it's magic."

# Artist Rik Freeman tells the story of segregated beaches

Continued from page 5B

"It started from there," he said. The idea for the "Black Beaches During Segregation" series was sparked when he learned that a Black-owned beach in California, which was taken from the family owners in the 1920s, had been returned to the descendants. "I thought about that and that couldn't have been the only one," Freeman said, so he began researching. He came across Chicken Bone Beach, an African American beach in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He asked Honfleur Gallery owner Duane Gautier, who is from the Garden State, if he knew about the beach, but hadn't heard of it. "And so I started telling them about others." Freeman's work is shown at Honfleur Gallery in Washington. Gautier was interested and told Freeman to write a proposal for the gallery's Artist in Residence Program. This was in 2022. He started with six beaches along the Atlantic Seaboard to research and paint, including Ocean City. He's up to 14 or 15 beaches now, and he wants to represent at least one beach in every state south of the Mason-Dixon Line. During his visit to Ocean City, Freeman met with people of the community, including Ocean City Jazz Festival co-chairs Carla and Craig Torrey. Carla Torrey, originally from Fayetteville but now residing in Durham, is a second-generation homeowner in Ocean City. Her father was the principal builder when the community first started. When she and others met Freeman in person, Torrey said that he explained how his series "uses art to visually document and celebrate the historical and cultural importance of places like the Ocean City Beach community, which played a crucial role in providing spaces for leisure and community for African Americans during a time of systemic racial discrimination. "We are a perfect match." The exhibit features two paintings honoring Ocean City. One is based on a photo Torrey gave Freeman of herself as a young girl walking with her father on the pier with Ocean City Terrace in the background. Built in 1953 from an abandoned Navy missile observation tower, the restaurant is no longer standing. "It's so special to me, because my father really loved this community," Torrey said. "I'm very grateful to Rik for doing that." She said that after talking to Freeman, the jazz festival organizers felt the series should be brought to the county, "so that they could see the other communities that he had visited and that existed and learn a bit about their legacy in history." The other painting features two men playing instruments with a modern-day interpretation of the Ocean City Terrace in the background. Freeman said he thinks they eventually want to get restaurant rebuilt, so he took artistic license when painting the building. The piece on St. Augustine Beach in Florida, Freeman said, is the only piece that directly confronts the racism of the era. "Because in June '64 in St. Augustine, they had, instead of sit-ins, it was a wade-in because you're wading into either a pool or a segregated beach, and a riot broke out, and a lot of people got injured. It was on the news," Freeman said. Around the same time, a motel owner

threw sulfuric acid in a pool where high school kids were swimming because they wouldn't get out of the water. "Those two incidents led (President Lyndon Johnson) to sign the Civil Rights bill less than a month later. So, I figured I wanted to do at least one piece that did show that out-and-out racism, but most of the pieces are based on showing the joy, the camaraderie, you're in a safe place, and people just having a good time," he said. "But the underlying thing is," Freeman said, is that when somebody's looking at the work and they say, 'why is it just all these Black folks at the beach?' Is this somewhere in the Caribbean, or is it Brazil, Africa? No, this is United States of America, and the beaches were segregated." In his painting depicting Atlantic Beach in South Carolina, "you can barely see it. You have to look for it. There's a little orange rope that goes out into the water. And a lady down there was telling me that rope was basically the color line, and she just kind of laughed. She said, 'What did they think that the water that touched us wasn't going to come and touch them?'" Ultimately, Freeman wants people who see the exhibit to see the camaraderie and look at the histories of these beaches. "I want people to kind of look and see as it's very commendable what people were able to do to be able to create those beaches and safe places. And you know, some of them had a little bit of trouble and everything, but by and large, they were safe," he said. Torrey said that the Ocean City Jazz Festival "provides the perfect historical setting and audience for Rik Freeman's impactful art, while the NC African American Heritage Commission brings its expertise and mandate for preserving and promoting the rich, often untold, stories of African American heritage in North Carolina." North Carolina African American Heritage Commission Director Adrienne Nirdé has been with the state commission since 2020, acting as director for the last two years. The commission has sponsored the Ocean City Jazz Festival for several years now, which Nirdé said is important for the division within the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. "When talking about segregation and Civil Rights, that's often associated with lunch counters and schools, and that's a big part of the history that people learn about, if they learn about it at all, but when you dive into deeper, in a place like North Carolina, this was something that touched every aspect of life," Nirdé said. "People were recreating. They wanted to go on vacation, they wanted to go to the beach. They wanted to golf and experience swimming pools and all of these different types of spaces. This is just really an important way to share the other layer of this story." Council For the Arts of Jacksonville Onslow County Executive Director Kandace Quintero said she and the council's executive board "are extremely excited to have this exhibit be the kick-start to the festival this year." During Freeman's talk on Saturday, he said he will discuss the work he curated for this exhibit. "I really want the visitors to understand how important these paintings are. The stories behind each one and how generations have been affected even in today's world," she said.

## OUT & ABOUT

PHOTOS BY DANIEL COSTON | FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST



Charles Craig was among the musicians paying tribute to Latin jazz at the Bechtler Museum's monthly jazz showcase on June 6.



Etienne Charles brought his Gullah influenced jazz sounds to the Jazz Room on June 20-21.



Chefs from the Village On Morehead were awarded honors at the annual Shepherd Center Chef Wars, held at the Providence United Methodist Church on June 18.



The Soul Of Philanthropy exhibit opened its doors with a private event at the Charlotte Museum Of History on July 12.

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