

Life!

THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2025 SECTION B

International students struggle with homeland separation in US

By Deborah Walker
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

SALISBURY — Shambhabi Sinha arrived at Livingstone College as part of an exchange group from India.

When the others returned home after a semester, she enrolled as a full-time student. That's when the separation from her homeland became an issue.

"I grew up moving often, so I thought I'd be OK, until they left," the senior business administration major said. "Then homesickness hit me. I missed speaking my language, celebrating festivals, and being understood."

July is BIPOC Mental Health Month, a time dedicated to amplifying the unique mental health challenges faced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities. At Livingstone, where 86.7% of the student population identifies as African American, international students can be weighted by the heaviness of cultural displacement, immigration stress, and academic pressure, all converging to shape the mental health of students who are doing more than just adjusting, they're trying to find a sense of home while navigating two worlds.

Homesickness isn't just anecdotal; it's nearly universal. According to a 2017 study published in the journal Emotion, about 94% of college freshmen reported feeling homesick at least once during their first 10 weeks on campus.

Additional research suggests that around 70% ex-

Please see **SEPARATION** | 2B



A well-maintained air conditioning unit will be more efficient at cooling your home.

Stay cool, save loot

FAMILY FEATURES

As temperatures soar during the summer months, many homeowners find themselves relying heavily on air conditioning to stay cool.

Comfort doesn't have to come at the cost of high energy bills, however. With a few smart strategies and routine maintenance, you can efficiently and affordably keep your home cool.

Here are some top tips to maximize your air conditioning system's energy efficiency this summer.

- 1. Schedule regular HVAC maintenance
- Just like a car, your AC unit runs best when it's well-maintained. A dirty or poorly functioning system uses more energy to do the same job.
- Maintenance checklist:
 - Inspect or replace air filters every 2-3 months. The frequency of air filter replacement depends on several factors, including the type of filter, the system and living conditions.
 - Check and clean the evaporator and condenser coils.
 - Clear debris from around the outdoor unit.
 - Have a professional HVAC technician inspect

Please see **STAY** | 2B

«RIDES

Toyota's burly Sequoia Capstone has creature comforts, urban driving manners

By Winfred Cross
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Toyota reintroduced the mammoth Sequoia in 2022 and continues to tweak the beast with updated package offerings.

If Texas is your flavor, there is 1794 trim level. Get the tow tech package and a Wi-Fi trailer camera is now included.

Let's talk about the top-dog Capstone model, which sits at the top of the Sequoia lineup. It's nice enough to be a Lexus (and nearly costs as much) and it offers a lot of high-tech features buyers are clamoring after.

All Sequoias are powered by a hybrid V6 powertrain that makes 437 horse-

power and 583 pounds-feet of torque. That's enough to get the Sequoia to 60 miles an hour in about 6.0 seconds. The engine is mated to a 10-speed transmission that sends power to all four wheels.

The Capstone trim level gets a honey-comb grille that's massive. This helps give the vehicle a very brawny, but polished look that is quite handsome. The 22-inch dark chrome alloy wheels are a nice finishing touch.

The interior is where the Sequoia excels. The capstone trim upgrades the leather used on the seats and other surfaces. The wood and metal and elegance to a very clean and

modern looking design.

The dash has a digital gauge cluster that can be configured to your liking. A large head-up display projects into the windshield. To the right is a 14-inch touchscreen that has crisp graphics and provides a high-def looking picture for your backup camera. The two-tone dash and seats also help to elevate the look.

Apple CarPlay looked great on the 14-inch screen and worked well for me. I didn't try the Navigation system because I'm a CarPlay guy.

The front seats are ventilated, heated and power operated. You can find a good driving position for

outward view and comfort, and multi adjustable. The second row Captain's

third row bench is a little cramped and set close to the floor. It's probably best chairs are also comfortable

The 2025 Toyota Sequoia Capstone.

Please see **TOYOTA'S** | 2B



UNSPASH

North Carolina is seventh in the United States for sexually transmitted diseases at 925.9 new cases per 100,000 people according to analysis by Invigor Medical using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

NC among leading states in STD rates

Seventh in sexually transmitted disease; 4 southern states in top 10

By Herbert L. White

herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

North Carolina is a national leader in sexually transmitted diseases.

The Tar Heel State is among four southern states — Alabama, South Carolina, and Arkansas are the others — in the top 10 according to analysis from Invigor Medical identifying U.S. counties and states with the highest STD infection rates. Researchers analyzing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention focused on chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV.

North Carolina has the seventh-highest rate of STD infections nationally at 925.9 newly reported cases per 100,000 residents.

The states tend to face persistent challenges in STD prevention, including gaps in healthcare access, limited sexual health education, and structural barriers to screening and treatment.

There were approximately 2.5 million new STD cases reported in 2023 alone, and researchers found disparities in age, race, and region.

Cases spiked during the summer, when increased travel and social activity drive higher transmission.

There were 65,867 new chlamydia cases reported in North Carolina in 2023 — seventh highest in the nation and 26,353 new gonorrhea cases, No. 6 nationally. There were 6,475 syphilis cases and 1,394 new HIV cases, or 15.1 per 100,000 residents, the country's ninth highest.

The number of newly reported sexually transmitted infections has climbed sharply over the last 10 years. In 2023, health officials recorded approximately 2.5 million new cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV — up from 1.8 million a decade earlier.

Chlamydia is still the most prevalent STD, with more than 1.6 million new cases in 2023, while gonorrhea nearly doubled over the decade, reaching almost 595,000 cases.

Syphilis saw the sharpest increase with a sixfold spike from 34,279 cases in 2013 to over 205,000 in 2023. Part of the increase reflects a change in CDC re-

porting — before 2018, late-stage and unknown-stage syphilis cases were not included in national totals.

But even when excluding later-stage cases, syphilis diagnoses still tripled over the decade. In contrast, HIV diagnoses remained relatively flat over the same span, reflecting the impact of expanded testing, prevention tools like PrEP, and earlier treatment.

Although the long-term trend shows a sustained rise in STDs, data suggests the epidemic may be slowing. Although syphilis infections remain at record highs, reported cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV have declined from peak levels in previous years.

Nationally, women are about 10% more likely than men to be diagnosed with an STD and across all age groups 13 years and over, there were 902 reported cases per 100,000 women, compared to 819 per 100,000 men.

The gender gap is more pronounced among young adults,

Please see **NC** | 2B

Gathering ideas for next year's garden

By Melinda Myers

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Summer is a time when many gardeners begin making plans for new additions to next year's gardens. You may already be doing ongoing evaluations of your own plantings and may want to include tours of others' gardens.

A walk around your neighborhood can provide inspiration and a chance to observe plants thriving in the same or similar conditions that exist in your landscape. Local garden tours allow you to take a closer look at both front and backyard gardens filled with plants, garden art and more.

Whether you tour alone or with a group of friends, it is a great opportunity to meet the gardener, gather ideas, exchange gardening secrets, and get inspired. Many of the garden tours are sponsored by garden clubs, libraries, beautification groups and other similar organizations. The proceeds from the event usually support a worthy cause in the community.



An AAS trial garden at Boerner Botanical Gardens.

You'll find local garden tours promoted online, in local publications, garden centers, botanical gardens and other similar venues.

The Garden Conservancy's Open Days program is a one-of-a-kind private garden tour. Participating gardens are located around the country in small and large lots that feature a variety of styles, plants and features. All you need is a little time and a ticket to participate in the self-guided garden tours. A listing of the Open Days

gardens, their location and dates for each garden is listed on their website.

Visit your local or nearby public botanic gardens and arboreta. They feature plants in gardens and natural settings with similar

Please see **GATHERING** | 2B



The 2025 Toyota Sequoia Capstone.

Please see **TOYOTA'S** | 2B

NC among STD leaders

Continued from page 1B

namely in biological differences that make women more susceptible to infection. In addition, women are more likely to be screened during routine reproductive health visits than men, who are typically only tested when symptoms are present, which leads to lower reported rates.

As a result, females ages 13 to 24 have the highest STD diagnosis rate of any demographic group, with more than 3,000 cases per 100,000, nearly double the rate for males in the same age range. After age 25, STD rates decline significantly for both sexes.

Among women, the rate drops by nearly half in the 25-34 age group and continues to decline steeply with age. For men, diagnosis rates peak slightly later—between

ages 25 and 34—before following a similar downward trend.

Racial and ethnic disparities in STD cases remain a persistent and pronounced feature of the epidemic. In 2023, Black Americans had a reported STD rate more than seven times higher than their white counterparts at 2,249.7 cases per 100,000 compared to 319.

The gap reflects long-standing inequities in healthcare access, prevention resources, and social determinants of health.

Higher STD rates are also observed among indigenous and Alaska Native populations (1,442.6 per 100,000) and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander groups (1,057.2 per 100,000). By contrast, Asian Americans report the lowest rate at 195.5 cases per 100,000.

Stay cool and save money with these temperature-lowering tips

Continued from page 1B

your system annually, ideally before peak usage.

2. Install and use a smart thermostat

Smart thermostats are one of the easiest and most effective upgrades you can make to your home's cooling system. For example, Carrier's Smart Thermostat allows you to control your home's temperature remotely via smartphone and comes with learning features that adapt to your schedule and preferences.

Set your smart thermostat to raise the temperature while you're away and cool the home down just before you return. Even raising the thermostat by 7-10 degrees for eight hours a day can save up to 10% a year on cooling costs.

3. Seal and insulate your home

Cool air escaping through leaks or inadequate insulation forces your air conditioner to work harder. Ensuring your home is sealed and insulated properly can significantly improve efficiency.

Quick fixes:

• Use weatherstripping on doors and windows.

• Seal leaks around

ducts, vents and pipes.

• Add insulation to attics and walls, if needed.

4. Use ceiling fans wisely

Ceiling fans don't lower a room's temperature, but they help circulate air, making you feel cooler.

Efficiency tip: Use ceiling fans in occupied rooms only and make sure they're spinning counterclockwise in the summer to push cool air down.

5. Block out the sun

Sunlight streaming through windows can significantly increase your home's indoor temperature.

Simple solutions:

• Close blinds or curtains during the hottest parts of the day.

• Consider installing reflective window films or insulated blackout curtains.

• Use awnings or plant shade trees to block direct sunlight.

6. Upgrade to an energy-efficient unit

If your AC system is more than 10-15 years old, it might be time to consider upgrading to a newer, energy-efficient model. Look for units with a high SEER2 (Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio) rating and the Energy Star label. As a leader in modern day air

conditioning, Carrier offers some of the most innovative and efficient central air conditioning units available.

Many manufacturers and utility companies offer rebates for installing high-efficiency systems and some tax credits may still be available.

7. Avoid heat buildup

Reduce the amount of heat your home generates during the day by being mindful of appliance usage.

Tips:

• Cook with a microwave or grill instead of the oven.

• Run dishwashers and dryers at night.

• Switch to LED light-bulbs, which produce less heat than incandescent ones.

By combining smart technology, routine maintenance and simple home adjustments, you can enjoy a cooler home without sacrificing energy efficiency.

You can help lower monthly bills but also extend the lifespan of your air conditioning system, keeping you comfortable all summer long. Find more information, including additional rebate information, by visiting Carrier.com.



LIVINGSTONE COLLEGE

Students of color face unique mental health challenges, especially foreign-born scholars dealing with the stress of cultural displacement, academics and immigration uncertainty.

Separation pronounced for foreign-born students

Continued from page 1B

perience symptoms of homesickness that significantly affect their daily lives. These emotional issues are not isolated; they thread through regular moments, such as when a holiday is missed, a favorite meal is unavailable, or language becomes a barrier to interaction.

One festival in particular honoring the Goddess of Education and celebrating the arrival of spring, knowledge, wisdom, and the creative arts was especially difficult to observe alone, as Shinha's used to celebrating surrounded by friends and family.

"I went to a Hindu temple in Charlotte," she said, "but it still felt empty."

Presidential scholar Bright Osei Karlkari, a sophomore biology major from Ghana, echoed that longing.

"I thought I'd be strong, but I really miss my parents," Karlkari said. "Their hugs, their love. We talk at midnight, but nothing replaces presence."

For sophomore Nancy Siopong, who is also from Ghana, homesickness reveals itself in subtle, quiet ways.

"It sneaks up... music, food scents," she said. "It reminds me that I'm alone, even after talking to my family. I especially miss my twin sister, and we do everything together."

While current students navigate their daily transitions, Livingstone alumnus Colline Ajidra from Entebbe, Uganda offers a retrospective look at how the journey left a lasting impact.

Recruited to play on the golf team, Ajidra arrived right after Christmas 2019 to begin the spring semester, in freezing weather wearing the wrong clothes, eating processed food unfamiliar to his garden-fresh life back home.

"I didn't have friends when I arrived. I didn't even have the right clothes; it was freezing, and I wasn't prepared," he said. "The food tasted unfamiliar, and I didn't realize why it was affecting me so much until I learned that most of it was processed. Back home, everything comes straight from the garden."

Ajidra's homesickness ran deeper than just environmental adjustment—it was tied to grief and emotional experiences he had never had space to explore.

"When my father died, I fought. I didn't know it was grief," he said. "In Uganda, people keep moving. We don't really stop to think about how we're feeling."

Livingstone provided him with the words and assistance he needed to begin processing it.

"My mind opened up: I learned grief, anger, anxiety, they all have names. Naming them made them less scary. America takes mental health seriously, and I respect that. But I also think the media here needs to be more careful. Constant exposure to traumatic news can be just as damaging."

According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, only 9.5% of international students who present to counseling centers report social isolation as a concern, compared to 6.7% of domestic students. Moreover, international students face stigma, cultural unfamiliarity, and language barriers that further reduce their use of mental health services.

Ajidra noted he'd never feared police until moving to the U.S. In Uganda, only law enforcement carries guns.

"That was a new and honestly, frightening reality," he said.

Cultural differences and the overwhelming responsibility of starting a life in a new country add to the emotional toll. From dealing with school stress in the absence of a familial safety net to navigating strange time zones, adolescents are forced to mature quickly. Ajidra and his international peers are just entering their early 20s, carrying the weight of im-

migration, independence, and identity at an age when many are just beginning to figure out who they are.

"In India, my parents handled everything: bank accounts, scholarships, everything," said Sinha. "Here, I have to do all of that by myself. It's empowering to see how much I'm capable of, but it's also extremely overwhelming."

Karlkari echoed that statement, noting that international students must be emotionally resilient to succeed.

"If you're not mentally strong, this experience can break you. That's why mental health is so important."

Students are embracing the concept of mental health in new ways. In many of their home nations, emotional difficulties are not freely mentioned.

Karlkari noted that mental health conversations in Ghana have only recently gained momentum. "In Ghana, mental health wasn't taken seriously until recently," he explained. "But now, with advocates like Ambambila—a social media influencer who creates content discussing spiritual wisdom with psychological insight, people are beginning to speak up and recognize how essential mental wellness really is."

"In India, it depends on who and where you are," Sinha said. "In some places, therapy is still seen as strange and looked down upon. But I believe Western culture and social media is slowly changing how people view it."

Despite the distance, these students find creative ways to connect with their cultures. Food, music, and clothing function as anchors. Some people visit religious sites or engage in virtual cultural encounters. At Livingstone, instructors and staff have made a significant difference.

"There aren't many Indian students here, but I stay connected through food, traditional dress, and visits to the temple. I also love sharing my culture with many of the students. They are always wanting to learn more about where I come from, and that has made me fall in love with my culture even more," said Sinha. "Even small moments of understanding from the staff mean a lot."

Karlkari shared that on his toughest days, a smile from Jacqueline Davis, Livingstone's first lady, shifts his spirit reminding him that he isn't alone.

"Her smile felt like a mom from home. That warmth...it gave me strength."

Davis, who also serves as the Wellness and Well-Being Coordinator on the college's Mental Health Task Force, an extension of the college's counseling services program, emphasized the importance of creating a supportive campus for all students, especially those far from home.

"When students leave their countries and families to come to Livingstone College, our goal is to ensure they feel seen, valued, and cared for every step of the way."

Students also share concerns about the uncertainty of immigration policies. The constant stream of news about deportations and visa restrictions has added a layer of fear to their daily lives.

"We've built a life here and we just want stability," one student shared. "It's exhausting to carry that fear while trying to focus on school."

As Livingstone continues its efforts to support mental health through its Mental Health Task Force, students say they would benefit from additional resources tailored to their unique needs: on-campus advisors who understand immigration, mentorship for new international students, more cultural events, and clearer access to mental health services.

"We're all just trying to build something better," Karlkari said. "And that takes courage."

Gathering ideas for next garden

Continued from page 1B

growing conditions to nearby home gardens. They often feature new and unique varieties, traditional favorites and garden designs, providing inspiration to all who visit.

All-America Selections' Display Gardens are another valuable resource for gardeners. AAS is a non-profit organization that trials and evaluates plants for outstanding qualities suitable for the home garden. They have been helping gardeners grow award-winning flowers and vegetables since 1932.

New never-before-sold plant varieties bred for home gardens are planted, observed and evaluated at various trial gardens throughout North America. Trial gardens are located at public gardens, seed companies, or universities. The potential plant introduction is observed and its performance evaluated throughout the growing season.

Volunteer judges rate the plants on improvements in characteristics such as aesthetics, performance and productivity as well as pest and disease tolerance. A plant must have significantly improved

qualities to be considered for an AAS award.

Display gardens feature the newest AAS winners in a well-maintained setting where you can view the winners. There are nearly 200 display gardens in the United States and Canada located in public botanic gardens and arboreta, municipality gardens, garden retailers, university gardens and more. Some locations also offer related educational opportunities, open houses or field days during the growing season.

Take some time to enjoy and evaluate your gardens. Then set aside some time to visit local gardens for ideas and inspiration.

*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.*

Toyota's Sequoia Capstone is a winner

Continued from page 1B

used for short trips, but it and the second row are easy to exit and enter.

The Sequoia has large door openings and a side step to make it easy to get in. There are enough grab handles for boost assist as well.

The interior's drawback is its limited space. The Sequoia is large, but like most body-on-frame vehicles, passenger space can be limited. Actually, it's more storage starved. There is about 22 square feet of space behind the third row, but you can push the third row forward.

You can also fold the third row, but it will not fold completely flat because of the hybrid battery storage. This may be off-putting to some but Toyota more than makes up for lack of space with super

towing capacity. The Sequoia can tow up to 9,250 pounds. That should allow you to tow a variety of things without a problem.

The four-wheel-drive system allows you to tow through a variety of terrain, but at this price, I'd stick to the highway.

Speaking of highway, I found the Sequoia to be well suited for urban driving.

The hybrid engine delivers power with authority, propelling you through traffic with ease. The steering feels good, responsive, and surprisingly stable in aggressive turns.

The ride is comfortable and relatively quiet.

The engine does get noisy under hard acceleration, but the Capstone trim gets sound insulated windows to keep a lot at bay.

This is a large hybrid vehicle, but fuel economy is

19 miles per gallon in the city and 22 mpg on the highway, which is great for something this large and heavy.

If you want the Capstone version of the Sequoia, you'll fork over a lot of cash for a vehicle that starts at \$83,915. You can get bigger for about the same price and above.

Can you get better? That depends entirely on your definition of better.

Pros:

- Handsome styling
- Stout engine
- Lavish interior
- Lots of standard tech
- Easy entry/exit
- Large towing capacity
- Comfortable ride
- Excellent transmission
- Solid handling

Cons:

- Limited interior space
- Expensive

According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, only 9.5% of international students who present to counseling centers report social isolation as a concern, compared to 6.7% of domestic students. Moreover, international students face stigma, cultural unfamiliarity, and language barriers that further reduce their use of mental health services.

Ajidra noted he'd never feared police until moving to the U.S. In Uganda, only law enforcement carries guns.

"That was a new and honestly, frightening reality," he said.

Cultural differences and the overwhelming responsibility of starting a life in a new country add to the emotional toll. From dealing with school stress in the absence of a familial safety net to navigating strange time zones, adolescents are forced to mature quickly. Ajidra and his international peers are just entering their early 20s, carrying the weight of im-

According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, only 9.5% of international students who present to counseling centers report social isolation as a concern, compared to 6.7% of domestic students. Moreover, international students face stigma, cultural unfamiliarity, and language barriers that further reduce their use of mental health services.

Ajidra noted he'd never feared police until moving to the U.S. In Uganda, only law enforcement carries guns.

"That was a new and honestly, frightening reality," he said.

Cultural differences and the overwhelming responsibility of starting a life in a new country add to the emotional toll. From dealing with school stress in the absence of a familial safety net to navigating strange time zones, adolescents are forced to mature quickly. Ajidra and his international peers are just entering their early 20s, carrying the weight of im-



Southwest black bean-lentil burgers with charred grape salsa.

Elevate summer hosting with tasty grape recipes

FAMILY FEATURES

Gearing up for outdoor entertaining this summer calls for seasonal decor, plenty of seating, yard games and more, but just about everyone's favorite element is the main attraction: the food.

Make fresh, delicious grapes from California the star of your summer show to elevate celebrations and get-togethers ranging from your nearest and dearest to entire crowds. Grapes are perfect for incorporating into warm-weather recipes as a flavorful addition to main courses, sides and desserts. Or you can simply serve them as an easy, compatible snack that complements an array of your favorite summer dishes.

For a plant-forward option that's anything but ordinary, vegetarians and burger lovers alike can enjoy Southwest Black Bean-Lentil Burgers with Charred Grape Salsa. Hearty black bean patties are perfectly complemented by the smoky-sweet flavor of homemade charred grape salsa. Plus, added spice from cumin and chili powder mixed with fresh avocado and cilantro make a satisfying mix of Southwest flavors.

Keep guests' appetites at bay with fresh, tangy, visually stunning Dill Pickle Marinated Grapes and Cheese that let the natural sweetness of grapes shine through. Each bite pairs that familiar sweet flavor of grapes with the creaminess of Havarti and savory pickles to create a vibrant yet easy appetizer.

A welcome addition to the menu on those hot summer days, Frozen-Yogurt Grape and Coconut Bites are fun, simple to make and refreshing. Each bite features a sweet California grape dipped in creamy Greek yogurt and rolled in shredded coconut so you'll feel like you're on a tropical retreat. All it takes is three ingredients for a cool healthy snack you can share with loved ones.

Discover more summertime recipe solutions by visiting GrapesFromCalifornia.com.

Southwest black bean-lentil burgers with charred grape salsa

Servings: 8

Grape salsa:

4 cups red or black Grapes from California

3/4 medium white onion, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch-thick slices

1 medium jalapeno pepper, halved, stemmed and seeded

1/3 cup lightly packed cilantro leaves

1 1/2 tablespoons lime juice

1 clove garlic, minced

Burgers:

2/3 cup cooked black or green lentils

2/3 cup cooked brown rice

1/2 cup walnut pieces

1/2 cup chopped onion

1/3 cup dry breadcrumbs

3 tablespoons lime juice

1 tablespoon chili powder

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

2 cans (15 ounces each) black beans, rinsed, drained and patted dry

2 eggs

olive oil cooking spray

8 wheat burger buns, toasted

lettuce leaves (optional)

2 ripe avocados, peeled, pitted and sliced

To prepare salsa: In grill basket over medium-high heat, grill grapes, onion and jalapeno pepper 10 minutes until

lightly charred, stirring occasionally. Let cool then place in food processor with cilantro, lime juice and garlic. Process until finely chopped.

To prepare burgers: In food processor, pulse lentils, rice, walnuts, onion, breadcrumbs, lime juice, chili powder, cumin, beans and eggs until coarsely chopped with some small pieces still visible, scraping down sides and moving mixture from bottom of bowl to top to blend evenly.

Using wet or lightly oiled hands, shape into eight patties. If mixture is too soft, freeze briefly to firm. Coat on both sides with olive oil spray and, in two skillets over medium heat, cook 10 minutes, turning occasionally and coating with additional olive oil spray. Burgers should be browned and cooked through.

Place lettuce on bun bottoms and top with burgers, avocado slices, grape salsa and top buns.

Nutritional information per serving (with bun): 480 calories; 17 g protein; 75 g carbohydrates; 15 g fat (28% calories from fat); 2 g saturated fat (4% calories from saturated fat); 0 mg cholesterol; 290 mg sodium; 15 g fiber.

Dill pickle marinated grapes and cheese

Servings: 8

3 cups whole grapes from California
1 1/4 cups dill pickle juice
3 tablespoons minced red onion
1 1/2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 package (6-8 ounces) dill Havarti cheese, cut into bite-size cubes
1 pinch crushed red pepper
toothpicks or small skewers
fresh dill leaves, for garnish (optional)

In medium bowl, combine grapes, pickle juice, onion, olive oil, Havarti cheese and red pepper. Stir well then cover and refrigerate overnight, or up to 24 hours, to marinate, stirring occasionally.

Remove from refrigerator and let sit at room temperature 1 hour, or until olive oil has softened. Stir again then thread grapes and cheese onto decorative toothpicks or small skewers. Garnish with fresh dill leaves, if desired, and serve.

Nutritional information per serving: 170 calories; 5 g protein; 11 g carbohydrates; 11 g fat (58% calories from fat); 7 g saturated fat (37% calories from saturated fat); 20 mg cholesterol; 240 mg sodium; 1 g fiber.

Frozen-yogurt grape and coconut bites

Servings: 10

Bamboo skewer
60 medium Grapes from California
1 individual cup (5.3 ounces) vanilla or lemon Greek yogurt

3/4 cup unsweetened coconut flakes
Using bamboo skewer, pierce one grape on tip and swirl stem end into yogurt, covering about 3/4 of grape to show color. Sprinkle with coconut, turning skewer to coat all sides.

Place on waxed or parchment-lined tray and remove skewer. Repeat with remaining grapes, yogurt and coconut. Freeze several hours, or overnight. Transfer to tightly covered container and store in freezer.

Nutritional information per serving (6 bites): 80 calories; 2 g protein; 9 g carbohydrates; 4 g fat (45% calories from fat); 3.5 g saturated fat (39% calories from saturated fat); 0 mg cholesterol; 10 mg sodium; 1 g fiber.

To prepare salsa: In grill basket over

medium-high heat, grill grapes, onion and jalapeno pepper 10 minutes until

National survey: More people need to know how to prevent SIDS among babies

PENN NEWS

Sudden infant death syndrome, or SIDS, is the unexpected, unexplained, sudden death of a child younger than a year old.

Although the number of babies born in the United States who die from SIDS annually has declined in recent decades, it is the most common cause of death among infants between a month and a year old, and some 2,300 babies die of it each year, according to Boston Children's Hospital.

Yet new health survey data from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the

University of Pennsylvania finds that many people do not know two consequential facts that could help reduce the number of SIDS deaths: First, babies under one year old should be put on their backs to sleep at all times, including naps. Infants sleeping on their backs are much less likely to die of SIDS, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Second, babies exposed to secondhand smoke in a home are at greater risk for SIDS, the CDC reports.

Babies should sleep on backs

The APPC health survey, conducted in April with a

nationally representative sample of more than 1,600 U.S. adults, finds that two-thirds (65%) know that ordinarily, a baby should be put to sleep on its back.

But a third of those surveyed don't know this: 12% say a baby should be put to sleep on its side, 9% say on its stomach, and 13% are not sure.

Adult women of childbearing age (18-49 years old) are more likely to know that the correct way to ordinarily put a baby to sleep is on the infant's back. The survey finds that 76% of women in this age group say this, a signifi-

cantly larger proportion when compared with men and older women: just 54% of men age 50 or older know this; 64% of men 18-49 years old; and 66% of women age 50 or older.

"Parents, grandparents, and anyone else caring for infants should know that it's safest to place an infant on their back when putting them to sleep," says APPC research analyst Laura A. Gibson. "Our data suggest that some potential caregivers may not be well-informed about this recommendation."

Smoking at home is a risk for SIDS

Over half of those sur-

veyed (56%) know that smoking in the home of a baby increases the chances that the baby will die from SIDS. But 15% incorrectly think this is false and 29% say they are not sure if it is true.

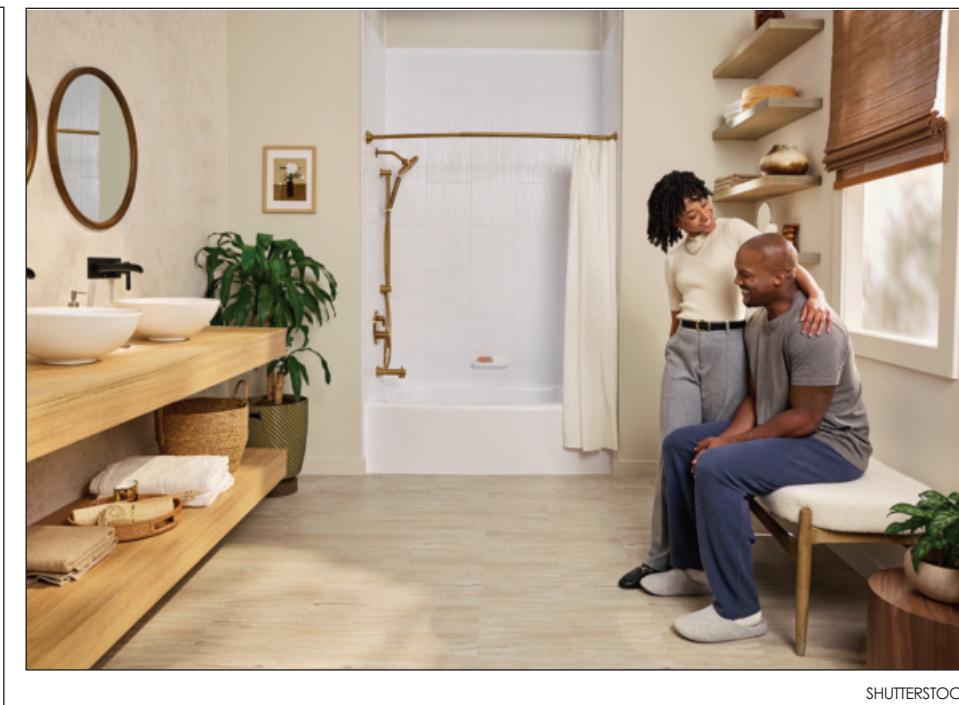
Encouragingly, the percentage of those who believe this is definitely true rose from 18% in our June 2023 survey to 23% in April 2025, a statistically significant increase.

"Family discussions of the effects of secondhand smoke need to include the reminder that its effects on infants can be profound," says Ken Winneg, APPC's

managing director of survey research.

Younger adults (18-49 years old) are more likely than older adults to know that smoking in a home increases the risk of SIDS. The survey finds that 67% of women 18-49 years old and 64% of men in this same age group know this is true, significantly larger proportions than the 53% of older women and 36% of older men who know this.

Notably, 40% of older men say they are not sure whether smoking in the home increases the risk of SIDS deaths among infants, more than other groups.



A few practical touches can make significant upgrades to the bathroom concept.

Explore the benefits of a bathroom upgrade

FAMILY FEATURES

A freshly remodeled bathroom is a welcome addition to any home, from aesthetics that reflect your personal style to the glossy, untouched surfaces and the refreshing scent of a newly finished space.

Done right, even more rewards come from the practical touches that enhance your everyday use and how they make you feel.

Bathrooms are among the most common spaces for home renovations, whether you're updating outdated fixtures and decor or reimaging features to better suit your lifestyle. In a world where every dollar matters, transforming your bathroom into a personal haven that blends your style with functional purpose makes it a smart investment you'll appreciate long after the renovation is complete.

For a renovation that not only represents a worthwhile investment for today and tomorrow but also delivers emotional ROI, consider these ideas from the experts at Bath Fitter, a leader in stress-free custom bath and shower remodels.

Quality

Of all the rooms in the house, the bathroom may be where quality materials and workmanship matter most. Because it's a confined space that sees a great deal of moisture and humidity, it's essential that you use quality materials that stand up to the task and enlist professionals who know how to incorporate effective measures to prevent mold, mildew and other water-related damage.

Paying attention to quality throughout your renovation is also likely to bring you greater functional benefits, as well as increased home value and an overall more pleasing result.

Durability

Especially if you're planning to be in your home well into the future, it's a good idea to plan for durable features that can stand the test of time. Be sure to select premium materials and consider their durability and maintenance requirements.

Some of the latest design options offered by Bath Fitter deliver the perfect blend of beauty and functionality, ensuring long-lasting durability. For example, the Lucca wall, a sophisticated textured and seamless Chevron tile pattern, offers the ideal combination of modern design and classic charm.

Another design-forward selection is the Sorrento wall, a large-scale 12-by-24 grout-free tile pattern featuring a textured design and a durable, easy-to-clean surface. Unlike tiles and grout, these walls combine on-trend beauty and innovative materials so homeowners can enjoy their bathrooms rather than stress about maintenance.

Perfect for minimalist designs and traditional bathrooms alike, Ovation is a sleek and stylish skirted tub. The full line of brushed gold accessories, from trim kits and shower rods to doors and grab bars, can add a sense of warmth to your space.

Aging in place

Wet and slippery surfaces in bathrooms

can lead to injuries. While the risk can affect anyone at any age, bathroom safety is especially important for older adults with reduced mobility.

Planning ahead for your retirement years, or considering the needs of a future buyer, can help create a safe environment and reduce the risk of serious injuries. Some potential problems can be fixed with simple adjustments like rearranging the shelving, installing grab bars, adding seating or increasing lighting levels. In addition, a bathtub's edge can be hard to navigate, but walk-in showers have a narrower edge, or can even be edge-less, making it easy for wheelchairs to roll in and out the shower.

Ease of installation

Another important consideration is how the installation process will be carried out in your home. Installing a beautiful tub or shower doesn't have to be complicated.

A custom solution designed to fit your space and requirements may be more attainable than you expect. For example, with an option like Bath Fitter, you can have a premium-quality tub installed right over your existing one so there's no demolition or mess involved in the remodel whatsoever. It's the perfect blend of beauty and functionality without the stress and disruption of a traditional bath or shower remodel.

Because a local expert is with you every step of the way – from dreaming up the concept and selecting finishes to measuring, manufacturing and installation – there are no surprises. The result is a tub or shower with a seamless, grout-free watertight wall system that's easy to keep looking great for years to come. All backed by a transferable lifetime warranty to provide peace of mind.

"As a renovator, I've seen firsthand how a bath or shower upgrade can completely transform not just a space but the way people feel about their homes," said Scott McGillivray, HGTV star and home renovation expert.

"That's why Bath Fitter has been my go-to. Their installers provide high-quality workmanship while homeowners are left with the consistency, reliability and durability of beautiful products with lifetime warranties."

Safety

A well-placed grab bar can mean the difference between a confident step and a dangerous slip in the bathroom for those aging in place, young children and everyone in between. Knowing where to place grab bars in the shower and around the tub creates a safer, more accessible space for everyone. Proper placement reduces the risk of falls and can bring added peace of mind and confidence to you and your family.

Professionals can guide you through selecting the best grab bars for your bathroom by considering the layout, your needs and design preferences, as well as ensuring your grab bars are installed at the correct height and securely anchored for maximum safety and convenience.

Discover more inspiration and design ideas to boost the long-term value and enjoyment of your bathroom renovation at bathfitter.com.

The Charlotte Post

THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2025 PAGE 5B



PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

Beyoncé's the headliner for the Cowboy Carter tour, but daughter Blue Ivy is a growing stage presence.

It's Beyoncé's tour, but Blue Ivy's become the stage star

By Sarah Jones-Smith
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"Who they came to see?" Beyoncé asks as she performs her 2023 single "My House" during the Cowboy Carter tour. For many, the answer has been Blue Ivy.

Blue Ivy Carter, the Grammy-winning artist's 13-year-old daughter, is more present than ever on stage, and fans are impressed by the growth from her first performance years ago to now.

Isabella Kerr, 15, has admired Beyoncé for years, but said she attended the Cowboy Carter tour specifically to experience Blue Ivy's moves in person.

"People are saying, 'Oh, she's a mini Beyoncé,' but no, I think she's the first Blue. Everything about her when she's on stage is electrifying," said Kerr.

The Cowboy Carter tour concludes Saturday in Las Vegas. The tour's 30 previous shows have had fans buzzing that Blue Ivy is well on her way to being a next generation powerhouse.

Blue Ivy's presence grows on Cowboy Carter tour
Blue first graced the stage at 11 years old during her mother's 2023 Renaissance tour, appearing during the legacy-celebrating anthems "My Power" and "Black Parade." Supporters anticipated her performance at each stop.

She performed again during "Beyoncé Bowl," the NFL Christmas Day Halftime Show that was just nominated for four Emmy Awards. She danced alongside the icon as she performed songs from the "Cowboy Carter" album for the first time.

"Even the difference between the Renaissance Tour and now, you can tell she's really grown in her confidence," said fan and artist Olivia Ellis. "You can

Please see IT'S BEYONCE'S | 6B

Rough times for broadcast networks in new landscape

By David Bauder
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Two milestones revealed this month illustrate the diminishing power of broadcast television in the media world — one fueled by the habits of young people and the other by their elders.

During June, viewers spent more time watching streaming services than they did for broadcast and cable television combined. That happened for the first time ever in May, by a fraction of a percentage point, but the Nielsen company said that gap widened considerably in June.

Also, for the third straight week, Nielsen said that Fox News Channel had more viewers in prime-time on weekends than any of the main broadcast networks ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox entertainment.

For years, the mantra of media executives was that streaming represented the future for in-home entertainment. Now, that future has clearly arrived.

Broadcast TV slips below 20% of total. In June, 46% of Americans' TV time was spent on streaming services, led by YouTube and Netflix. Cable television networks represented 23.4% and broadcast was 18.5%, for a total of just under 42%, Nielsen said. It was the first time broadcast TV had ever slipped below 20% of total TV viewing.

"It kind of felt like the right time," said Brian Fuhrer, Nielsen's senior vice president for product strategy and thought leadership. "A lot of people thought it

Please see ROUGH | 6B



Banners line the hallway to "The Soul of Philanthropy" exhibit at the Charlotte Museum of History. The exhibit returned to Charlotte after a 10-year national tour.

Black philanthropy is good for every soul

After a 10-year national tour, 'The Soul of Philanthropy' exhibit is home

By Nikya Hightower
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

"The Soul of Philanthropy" exhibit is back in Charlotte, where it started.

The exhibit, which traveled across the country for 10 years and more than 35 cities, is now at the Charlotte Museum of History through Oct. 19. The exhibit was started by Valaida Fullwood and Charles Thomas with the goal of changing the narrative that Black people don't give back to their communities.

Fullwood authored the book "Giving Back" that combined storytelling and imagery to showcase Black philanthropy. In search of a photographer who could capture the stories Fullwood wanted to tell, the collaboration with Thomas began. The exhibit combines visuals, audio and interactive art along with Black voices throughout history who led in philanthropy.

"The Maya Angelou quote that opens it, 'I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver,'" Fullwood said. "That quote really helped ground and give name to the title to the ex-

hibit, 'The Soul of Philanthropy.' Just that question, liberating the soul of the giver. And as we all seek to be free and to feel like liberated people, recognizing that a key to that is giving in our generosity."

"I didn't want stoic images or headshots in the most conservative, conventional way. And time and time again, one name came up. It was Charles Thomas."

Thomas, a Charlotte Post alum who is program director at the Knight



We wanted to reclaim the root meaning – love – and really to show the soulful ways people engage, and so it was a matter of listening to their stories on why and how they give and what motivates the giving that they do.



VALAIDA FULLWOOD

Foundation in Charlotte, had a history of creating work in Black communities and was thrilled to take on the project.

"What intrigued me about the project was that it was going to be kind of more documentary style, more what we call kind of portraiture, as people are doing environmental portraiture, as they're doing their own projects or their work versus this kind of studio light standard."

That really fits with the idea around the giving back project and the soul of philanthropy, which is to reframe how we think about philanthropy. Most people think of philanthropy in one kind of way, that you got to have a lot of money, you got to look a certain way. And here we're showing philanthropy across generations, the many ways that the Black community gives, and therefore, the images are a reflection of that."

Capturing the act of giving and turning it into art came from understanding and holding a mirror up to what is already there.

"We wanted to reclaim the root meaning – love – and really to show the soulful ways people engage," Fullwood said, "and so it was a matter of listening to their stories on why and how they give, and what motivates the giving that they do."

"Charles, being able to capture that

Please see BLACK | 6B

MOVIE REVIEW

'Fantastic Four: First Steps' a tale that's worth rooting for

By Dwight Brown
NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

The Fantastic Four: First Steps

2.5 stars

"I will not sacrifice this child for the world. I will not sacrifice this world for my child."

Hard to understand what could drive anyone to say that. Hard to understand what could put anyone in that position.

That's the core of this film's very thoughtful screenplay, as created by Josh Friedman, Eric Pearson, Jeff Kaplan and Ian Springer. Through their perceptive and creative efforts, this film's emotionally compelling script turns superheroes into approachable people with issues. Which turns this Marvel entry into something more than just another money grab.

This one feels like a superhero think tank merged ideas and created a story with heart.

A fated trip into space turned four folks into a fantastic foursome with superpowers. Reed Richards/Mister Fantastic (Pedro Pascal) is a brilliant scientist who can stretch his body beyond recognition. Sue Storm/Invisible Woman (Vanessa Kirby) is his strong-willed wife. Johnny Storm/Human Torch (Joseph Quinn) is her rambunctious younger brother. And Ben Grimm/The Thing (Ebon Moss-Bach-



Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby and Joseph Quinn star in "The Fantastic Four: First Steps."

rach), a strong man with a rocky-looking physique, rounds out the quartet. Somewhere, sometime during the mid-century, the four are ensconced in their city's culture, providing protection and justly being hailed as local heroes.

And so, when a metallic looking emis-

sary named Shalla-Bal/Silver Surfer (Julia Garner) flies into their community, it's no wonder that the squad jumps into action. She warns them: "Your planet is now marked for death." As the messenger for Galactus (Ralph

Please see FANTASTIC | 6B

Black philanthropy is good for every soul

Continued from page 5B

environmental portraiture of people engaging with other people and demonstrating love in all the ways and being thoughtful and reflective and considerate and caring, and all the ways that can show up visually."

The exhibit was launched in 2015 and received grant funding in 2016 to go on tour. Throughout the years, Fullwood and Thomas have encouraged others to tell their stories to combat misrepresentations about Black people in philanthropy.

"While the development of the book

was an experience in and of itself, and we learned a lot during those almost five years of developing the book, and then over the course of the last decade, we've learned even more," Fullwood said.

"The power of our giving, much of it may be initially, was showing respect and deference to our elders and ancestors and lifting up and celebrating stories of Black philanthropy. And increasingly we see it as a catalyst in reflecting back and finding our power in that history and helping us chart our path in the future."

It's Beyoncé's tour, but Blue Ivy's become the stage star

Continued from page 5B

tell she has a different vibe about her."

On the Cowboy Carter tour, she can almost be mistaken for one of Beyoncé's professional dancers. She is on stage for nearly every song and has a solo recreation of her mother's choreography from her 2006 "Déjà-vu" music video, a nod to the undeniable similarities between the two.

An inherited professionalism

Online videos of Blue display professionalism comparable to her mother's during the Cowboy Carter tour. During a rainy New Jersey stop, she brought out towels to dry her area of the stage before nailing her "America Has a Problem" choreography.

In another unexpected moment during a Chicago show, her earring got caught on Beyoncé's hair. Blue remained calm, removed the jewelry and motioned to the singer that it was safe in her hand as they both seamlessly continued.

"It's the family business," said Kinitra D. Brooks, an academic and author of "The Lemonade Reader," a collection that explores the nuances of Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, "Lemonade." "She is literally studying under the best person doing it out there today. Why wouldn't she take advantage of that opportunity?"

Blue Ivy's fans dub themselves as the 'Ivy League'

In "Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé," fans were given a behind-the-scenes look at the decision-making process the first time Blue was allowed to perform. Beyoncé expressed how nervous she was about her child being in front of thousands of people made her, revealing she initially said no.

"I did not think it was an appropriate place for an 11-year-old on a stadium stage," she said in the documentary. "I made a deal with her, and I said, 'If you practice and you show your commitment, I'll let you do one show.'" Blue Ivy fulfilled her end of the deal, and a fan base was formed: the "Ivy League."

Kerr says Blue's accomplishments inspire her to work harder to achieve her own dreams. "She worked to be on stage, and look at her now. If I work to what I want to be, I can be killing it like her."

At last month's Cowboy Carter Paris stop, members of the Beyhive and Ivy League finally got what they had been asking for — Blue Ivy merchandise. Shirts with the teen's face and the phrase "Déjà Blue" plastered on the front were available for purchase.

Prior to that, fans were creating their own custom pieces that highlighted Blue

and Beyoncé's connection.

At the MetLife Stadium show, Ellis wore a custom corset top she painted, showcasing Blue Ivy and her 8-year-old sister, Rumi Carter, on stage with Beyoncé during "Protector," a track from the "Cowboy Carter" album that Rumi is featured on.

"I thought that would just be a really fun moment to highlight on a corset," she said. "It's just really cool to see her as a mom because we've all grown up with Beyoncé, and now it's like her show is kind of like a family affair."

Mother-daughter duos resonate with Beyoncé and Blue Ivy's bond

Blue Ivy's confidence and professionalism are not only a testament to her hard work, but Beyoncé's motherhood.

Mother-daughter duos around the globe filled stadium seats, excited to watch Beyoncé and her daughter display their strong bond for the world to see. In many cases, the mothers have been Beyoncé fans for years and are excited for their daughters to grow up with Blue Ivy, a high-flyer for their generation.

Tanazha Baylis took her now 11-year-old daughter, Aria Brown, to the Renaissance tour, where she did not miss a beat dancing along to Blue Ivy's "My Power" choreography.

Brown was so determined to attend the Cowboy Carter Tour that she started selling popular toys, such as slime and Squishmallows, and saving her money.

"She literally was like, 'Mom, I don't know what you're going to do, but I have to go to this concert,'" said Baylis. "I just had to make it happen after that."

Brown became a Beyoncé fan after participating in a dance recital with a theme centered around the superstar's career throughout the years. Baylis, who says she has always been a big fan, is happy to share these experiences with her daughter.

"It just showed her a cool mom and daughter, and it's just something that she can do as well. Beyoncé is a little older but, with seeing Blue there, it made it tangible for her."

Although there is no solid answer for what the future holds for Blue Ivy, it is widely recognized that the possibilities are limitless.

"We couldn't imagine that Beyoncé would do all of these things that she could do. All we saw were people trying to put limitations on her," said Brooks. "I think one of the things that Beyoncé wants us to do and what she wants for Blue is for us to not put those limitations on Blue."

Rough times for TV broadcast networks in media landscape

Continued from page 5B

would happen more quickly."

The driving force in June was school ending for young people, meaning they had more time to watch TV, where Netflix series like "Ginny & Georgia" and "Squid Game" were big hits. Roughly two-thirds of people aged 6 to 17 watched streaming ahead of conventional TV, Nielsen said.

In June 2024, the numbers were roughly reversed — 47.7% of people were watching conventional TV in an average minute, with 40.3% logged on to a streaming service.

While the direction is clear, it's not a death knell for conventional TV. June

and July are fallow months, and their viewing will increase when football season begins and original episodes of comedies and dramas return, Führer said. Content is distributed over more platforms

It's also not a strict either-or situation; media companies are doing a better job spreading their content out on different platforms to give viewers a choice, he said. The growth of YouTube, which many consumers can access for free and is a portal for "traditional" TV, has also fueled streaming services.

Fox News has occasionally eclipsed the broadcast networks in viewership before, but last week represented the sev-

enth week it has done so in 2025, already more than 2024 and 2023 combined.

It averaged 2.4 million viewers in prime time on weeknights last week, Nielsen said.

Fox News is also taking advantage of what is traditionally the least-watched time of the year for broadcast networks, when summer nights and barbecues keep people outside. The difference this year is it has won a few weeks outside of the summer, during President Donald Trump's inauguration week in January, for example.

Its audience — among the oldest of all television networks — tends to stay pretty steady throughout the year.

Follow The Post on social media



The Charlotte Post



thecharlpost

Fantastic Four saga is an epic story worth pulling for

Continued from page 5B

Ineson), an evil, power-hungry space god who intends to destroy earth, she knows what she's talking about. But there's a hitch. That ominous being wants more than just the world. It wants something far more precious, and closer to the heart of the Fantastic Four. Now, they're in the fight of their lives for humankind and a vulnerable soul who's barely been born.

The general premise is older than the galaxies. Heroes fighting for earth's future is formulaic to the point of being cliché. The difference in this Marvel chapter is that a lot of time is spent on developing and nurturing the relationship of this extended and non-traditional family. That personal angle overrides some of the film's imperfections. It's a choice too few superhero movies make these days. The exception being the new "Superman" movie.

Hard to think of a sci-fi, superhero, action, adventure film that includes pregnant characters. Harder still to fathom a superhero giving birth in space. Yet Sue is having contractions aboard a spaceship that's under attack and the audience is watching like they're in a gallery surrounding a hospital's birthing room. It's like the movie is giving a free Obstetrics 101 intro course. This innovative scene is almost worth the price of admission. Credit the writers for dreaming this stunt up. Wish there were more scenes that were this unique. Also, having different countries across the world unite for a common cause is such a needed message. It's a theme that's so relevant these days at a time when selfish alienation has become the norm.

Equal praise should be heaped on the cast for humanizing four oddballs who are trying to save the world, protecting a baby and balancing work and home life, just like everyone else.

Pascal is the actor of the moment. His ability to bring humanity and vulnerability to Reed is uncanny. Kirby seems stoic as the mom who is making the toughest decisions. The two actors behave like a couple feeling their way through life. Figuring out their relationship and trying to make things right. Sue to Reed: "Sometimes you being you hurts me." The rest of the cast, including Sarah Niles as Lynne Nichols a press secretary, are sufficient to good with their roles.

Script, characters and acting are the strong points. The weak points add up too. The direction by Matt Shakman, whose base is TV, cable and streaming

series ("WandaVision"), isn't innovative or stylish. Feature films are not in his wheelhouse, and it shows. What's on view feels like a series of strung-together vignettes and generic action scenes. With obvious sets (Kasra Farahani), cartoonish costumes (Alexandra Byrne), a conventional score (Michael Giacchino) and special effects (Scott Stokdyk) that aren't memorable.

Fortunately, the editors (Nona Khodai and Tim Roche) nip scenes at the right moment. But who cares if the scenes are long or short if what you're watching isn't all that eye-catching? And when Galactus finally makes his appearance, he's not that scary looking.

Big and foreboding, but not astonishingly so. It's a missed opportunity. His image should have scared the daylights out of everyone.

Much has been said about the Marvel Cinematic Universe overextending itself and becoming flat. That's a just criticism and worthy conversation. At some point it feels like those in charge are running out of ideas and have lost their way, artistically. To the credit of these writers and actors, this edition has a soul, while some others in the Marvel canon don't.

It's easy to like the main characters. Their predicaments become the audience's problems, too. Right up until the end. Until tough choices must be made, or else.

Knowing that these four are part of a much larger family is not a prerequisite for enjoying parts of this film. If you stumbled into a theater playing "The Fantastic Four: First Steps," and knew nothing about Marvel, you'd still enjoy the storyline, even without knowing its background. That's because this film feels like a self-contained unit. It has a beginning, middle and end and will be quite watchable on cable and streaming services for viewers who like the genre.

Getting back to the hearts of characters may let the MCU live to fight another day. If they could just get the directing, production elements and stunts to fly as high as the script and acting, maybe there's still life in this saga about four heroes.

But audiences shouldn't have to sacrifice eye-catching stunts and imagery for great writing and acting. Nor sacrifice great writing and acting for eye-catching stunts and imagery. They should have it all. Should, but won't in this case.

Visit film critic Dwight Brown at DwightBrownInk.com.

«MOVIE REVIEW

Figure what this movie did

By Dwight Brown

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

I Know What You Did Last Summer

2 stars

They had it coming. The negligence and callousness they showed that night set them up for a karma payback. Evil sought them out.

That was the premise of the first "I Know What You Did Last Summer," which dates to 1997 and starred Jennifer Love Hewitt, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Ryan Phillippe and Freddie Prinze Jr. They were reckless teenagers covering up a car accident in which someone died. A slasher stalked and killed them in return. Several follow-up films later, the franchise gets a reboot with writer/director Jennifer Kaytin Robinson ("Do Revenge") at the helm.

What's on view seems vapid and stale, but scary too. It's like watching "Beverly Hills, 90210" with a killer on the loose, trickles of blood staining main street and everyone is frightened.

Attention-hungry Ted (Tyriq Withers, "Atlanta") and self-involved Danica (Madelyn Cline, "Glass Onion") are engaged. Their gaggle of friends reunite one night in Southport, North Carolina, for a bridal shower and then go for a ride. She drives, he's in the passenger seat, and drunk. In the back seat are Milo (Jonah Hauer-King, "William Tell"), his ex, Ava (Chase Sui Wonders) and a girl who was on the outs with the group but is now back in their good graces, Stevie (Sarah Pidgeon).

The car stops on a bend in the road, and the group gets out. Ted is horsing around in the middle of the lane, when out of nowhere a car swerves around him and goes off a cliff. Responsible twenty-somethings

would stay at the scene of the accident until the police arrived. They don't and their actions haunt them. One year later, a raincoat, rainhat wearing slasher, whose favorite weapon is a hook, stalks them. Bludgeoned, bloody bodies pile up. Those who walked away that fateful day are being gored. Danica wonders, "You think this is some kind of Karma for what we did?"

Read the room! You're being hunted. The better questions? Who's surviving?

The director, cinematographer (Elisha Christian), editor (Saira Hader, "Creed II") and composer (Chanda Dancy, "Blink Twice") combine forces to scare the f--- out of audiences. You may know how this is going to go down, based on the film's history. Yet, as the murders mount and friends are slaughtered, it's traumatic to watch, regardless.

Audiences who come with a pack of buddies or on a date night holding hands will jump when the sound effects dictate it and shield their eyes when someone's body is being pierced like a trout on a hook. With a little more forethought and better writing, what's on view might have felt like it was more than a film that belongs on the CW network.

There was a great opportunity to create murder scenes that boggle the mind and few to none do that. Except the sequence with Danica in a filled tub with red bath salts upstairs while her beau downstairs is being turned into a pin cushion with arrows.

The way the characters are written and presented, they're largely unsympathetic, oblivious and self-centered protagonists. People who don't deserve to breathe another breath.

Even the killer sees it that way. Adding a link to the past is a nice break from the predictable and uninviting storyline. When some of the stalked seek advice from Julie (Hewitt) and Ray (Prinze Jr.), who endured similar circumstances years ago, it's a welcomed diversion. Especially for those who are nostalgic.

Surprisingly, Prinze Jr. is the best actor in the bunch. His interpretation of Ray seems more rounded and crucial. He gives that survivor more depth than the rest of the cast gives their characters. Ray: "This isn't the first time something like this has been done in Southport. It's not going to stop!" Thanks, dude, for sounding the alarm.

As audiences try to figure out who knows this friend group well enough to track them down and knock them off, the film finds better footing. That kernel of intrigue is sustained, surprisingly so, until the final reveal when viewers find who's behind it all. Proving horror mixed with mystery is more potent than either genre alone.

This particular chapter is not a credit or detriment to the franchise. Largely because the franchise was never that stellar. Just pop culture lore. So, bringing any of these characters forward in an upcoming movie becomes iffy, unless the box office dictates otherwise.

Serviceable horror. Nothing that's memorable. Nothing that's awful. Stay for the credits, the filmmakers are trying to milk this franchise down to its last drop.

In the end, some won't care what they did last summer. Or autumn, winter or spring.

Visit film critic Dwight Brown at DwightBrownInk.com.

The Charlotte Post