

‘This is why I’m here’

New Garinger High football coach Jupiter Wilson is determined to reverse decades of futility by showing the campus he cares

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AHMED JALLOW | NC NEWSLINE

Raleigh barber Reggie Winston uses his training in mental health first aid and suicide prevention to help customers who may be in crisis.

Meeting youth mental health needs in barbershops, churches

Longtime safe spaces add new role: Helping North Carolinians navigate anxiety

By Ahmed Jallow
NC NEWSLINE

Editor's note: September is Suicide Prevention Month. If you or someone you know needs help, the national suicide and crisis lifeline in the U.S. is available by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org

On a Tuesday afternoon in July, inside The Bar Ber Shop in Raleigh, Reggie Winston, 41, talks about a subject many of

his young clients rarely discuss anywhere else: mental health.

Winston, who is trained in mental health first aid and suicide prevention, remembers battling depression in high school without realizing it. “I had no clue what I was experiencing was depression,” he said. It wasn’t until he heard someone else’s story that he recognized his own, a realization that led him to therapy and, eventually, a mission.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Winston expanded the community work he’d started years earlier with free blood pressure screenings in his shop. This time, he turned to mental health, founding Grooming Resources and Opportunities, a nonprofit that trains barbers to spot signs of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

His method begins with seemingly casual conversations. Please see **MENTAL** | 2A

Tops for business, not for workers

North Carolina at bottom of national rankings for labor

By Clayton Henkel
NC NEWSLINE

In July North Carolina won bragging rights as the Top State for Business in 2025, according to CNBC. But what’s best for business may not always be best for those carrying out the work.

To coincide with the Labor Day holiday, Oxfam America released the Best States to Work Index, and the Tar Heel state is far from the top.

Patricia Stottlemeyer, senior domestic policy adviser at Oxfam America, notes that North Carolina came in 52nd in its new analysis that examines labor policies in all 50 states as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico.

A key reason is that North Carolina lawmakers have not raised the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour for 16 years.

“That minimum wage has been in place since 2009,” Stottlemeyer told NC Newsline. “What that means in North Carolina is that the state minimum wage only covers 18% of what it would [need] to support a family of four. It’s woefully inadequate when it comes to enabling families to support them-

Please see **NC TOPS** | 3A

Elections bill simmers in the General Assembly

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

You Can Vote executive director Kate Fellman breathed a sigh of relief when a bill effectively banning voter registration drives died earlier this legislative session after bipartisan pushback.

But now, one of a multitude of provisions in the latest version of this year’s elections omnibus bill would do the same thing, albeit in a different way.

The omnibus bill would require registrants to provide their full Social Security number on their voter applications. Under current law, applicants have an option between giving the last four digits of their Social Security number or their North Carolina driver’s license number.

This session’s elections bill began as a “correction to the rush job” the legislature passed last year after the elections, Senate Bill 382, said Mark Swallow, an advocate for left-leaning Democracy Out Loud. Last year’s bill tightened

Please see **STATE** | 2A

The Post earns honors in NC journalism awards

STAFF REPORTS

The Charlotte Post earned four awards at the North Carolina Press Association journalism contest.

The Post took prizes for news and sports reporting among the state’s largest community publications, with three individual awards between Herb White and Kylie Marsh as well as the staff in sports journalism. The presentations will be made Sept. 18 at the press association’s annual convention in Cary.

“The awards are testament to the talent of the men and women who power our newsgathering team and the readers we’re working for,” White said.

White earned two prizes - first place in Sports Feature Writing for a profile of Johnson C. Smith football coach Maurice Flowers and second in Election/Political Reporting for an article on a North Carolina bill that stripped powers from Democrats elected to the Council of State.

The Dec. 12, 2024, article “Trail of a ‘coup’ by legislative authority” reports on legislative Republicans’ drive to pass a bill authored as disaster relief for communities im-

Please see **THE POST** | 2A



White



Marsh



CLEANAIRE NC

Daisha Wall, CleanAIRE NC’s community science manager, installs an air monitor in Historic West End. Charlotte-based CleanAIRE NC launched the AirKeeper Dashboard, a platform of real-time air quality and information to empower community advocacy for clean air.

Environmental advocates launch an interactive online academy platform

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

A Charlotte nonprofit is taking the mystery out of environmental science.

CleanAIRE NC launched CleanAIRE Academy, an interactive online learning tool that gives residents access to

expert-driven information and resources to advocate for healthier communities. The initiative’s courses are tailored for easy use to track air quality and its health impacts.

“The CleanAIRE Academy aims to transform understanding into action,” said Daisha Wall, CleanAIRE NC’s community science manager. Please see **ONLINE** | 3A

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Mental health outreach in barbershops, churches

Continued from page 1A

sual questions when someone climbs into his barber chair. Instead “How are you?” he’ll ask, “What time did you wake up? What are your plans today?” As he snips and shapes, his clients reveal pieces of their lives they rarely share anywhere else.

Slowly, in the safety of his barber chair, these simple inquiries allow clients to reveal what’s really happening in their lives, Winston said.

“Once they get comfortable and start trusting you with their haircut,” Winston said, “they start trusting you with their mind and their heart.”

From 2013 to 2022, 377 Black North Carolinians ages 10 to 24 died by suicide, according to data. Nearly 17% of Black high school students said they had seriously considered suicide. Among middle schoolers, more than a third reported the same. The numbers peak at age 24 — and are especially stark for Black girls questioning their sexual orientation, who now report the highest rates of suicide attempts in schools statewide.

“The myth that Black people don’t die by suicide has been dangerous,” said Bettie Murchison, a longtime advocate who runs the Village of C.A.R.E. in Wake County. “We’ve had to fight against that in our families, in our churches, and in our schools.”

Winston’s effort is a key part of North Carolina’s response to rising suicide rates among Black youth. This year, the state health department launched the Black Youth Suicide Prevention Action Plan, a five-year initiative that leans on trusted community spaces, including barbershops and churches, to expand support and prevent suicide among Black youth and young adults. Unlike the state’s broader suicide-prevention strategy, this plan focuses on the unique needs of Black youth.

Dr. Sonyia Richardson, a UNC Chapel Hill researcher and one of the plan’s architects, said it was built on listening sessions with young people and their communities. “This is not a top-down plan,” she said. “It’s community-led, community-driven, community-implemented.”

One of its guiding principles: young people in crisis often turn not to doctors, but to trusted adults in familiar places — coaches, pastors, aunts, barbers.

“We’re meeting the needs of communities where youth are more likely to seek support. From local YMCAs, churches, and community centers rather than traditional mental health providers,” Richardson said.

Barbershops and churches

That’s where Winston and his longtime friend, counselor Rodney Harris, come in. This year alone, he and Harris have trained more than a dozen barbers in mental health first aid training. These programs teach them to spot warning signs of mental distress and suicide, as well as how to safely talk with clients about limiting access to firearms and other deadly means. They’ve trained barbers across Raleigh, Wake Forest and Durham. Soon they’ll be in Rocky Mount.

“Barbers often know more about their clients’ lives than anyone else,” Harris said. “When a clinician approaches, youth might be skeptical. But when a barber speaks, they listen.”

Barbershops have become hubs for this work well beyond North Carolina. The Confess Project, for example, has trained barbers across the country in mental health advocacy.

What’s different with GRO is that they train barbers to become community leaders themselves, Harris said. “What we saw as a gap in the research is to make the barbers trainers and then have them go into the community, offer additional trainings, and then they can also offer recruitment,” Harris said. That work, he added, includes expanding mental health first aid and counseling on access to lethal means, known as CALM.

The same approach is playing out in churches. Through Murchison’s Village of C.A.R.E. program, she trains pastors and faith leaders to act as first responders. “If we can get them to understand this is as much a part of their ministry as teaching the Bible,” she said, “we can reach a generation of

youth who don’t see a therapist as their first line of defense.”

Building trust beyond the shop

State officials have identified 17 counties in North Carolina that are in urgent need of suicide prevention efforts. These counties, which range from major metropolitan areas like Durham, Wake, and Mecklenburg to smaller, rural communities such as Edgecombe, Halifax and Hoke, have the highest rates of Black youth suicides and the highest volume of 988 crisis calls. In each of these communities, Black residents make up at least 25% of the population.

Still, many young people don’t trust the 988 Lifeline. Black youth are underrepresented among callers, even though they show up disproportionately in emergency room visits for self-injury. Officials say building confidence in the hotline is essential to reaching young people before a crisis escalates.

Kelly Crosbie, director of the state’s Division of Mental Health, said fear and mistrust keep many from using the hotline. “There’s just personal shame, not knowing who’s on the other end, and what’s going to happen,” she said. Some families worry that calling could trigger involuntary hospitalization or even police involvement. “Some of these young folks, their families have already experienced trauma when they’ve tried to engage with treatment systems or government systems,” she added.

Mistrust can run even deeper for LGBTQ youth. In North Carolina, Black girls who are questioning their sexual orientation now report the highest rates of suicide attempts in schools statewide. At the same time, the federal government eliminated funding for the 988 “Press 3” option, which connected LGBTQ and transgender callers to specialized counselors. Advocates warn the loss strips away a culturally competent lifeline that has reached more than a million young people nationwide.

State officials say they have begun training local crisis counselors to handle calls from that population and are working with communities to ensure that 988 operators are equipped with inclusive, culturally aware training. “We’re losing that specialized national line,” Crosbie told NC Health News last month, “but we are making sure our 988 here is well-trained and ready.”

The state has also launched a youth-led awareness campaign, called “Stronger Together” initiative. Messaging, visuals, and formats are being created by Black youth themselves to make the hotline feel credible and relatable. “We need to get the messaging straight from young people,” Crosbie said. The effort includes training peers and trusted community figures—like pastors, coaches, and barbers—to recognize warning signs and encourage youth to seek help.

Current data shows texting and chat are the most utilized 988 services among North Carolina youth. Crosbie said that makes it even more important to meet young people where they are—whether that’s on their phones, in churches, or in barbershops. “We need to make sure the help is in places and spaces that people trust,” she said.

In addition to breaking cultural stigmas surrounding mental health discussions, other strategies include reducing access to lethal means and providing gun locks, and hosting community trainings.

The first Black youth suicide prevention conference is scheduled for September in Rocky Mount, which is one of the high need areas. Richardson hopes the plan will serve as a national model for suicide prevention among diverse populations. “We are focusing on those populations most impacted in our state... and I think this also provides a blueprint for how to create [prevention strategies] across the state.”

Back at The Bar Ber Shop, Winston says he sees that trust forming every day. Kids sit in his chair for a haircut and end up sharing the things they don’t tell teachers or parents.

“Barbers are the bridge for people to get the help they need,” Winston said. “We are the trusted few.”

working-class residents face from the pressures of gentrification.

The Sept. 19, 2024, article also reported on the Redress Movement, a national nonprofit that organizes communities for smart growth initiatives and address the legacy of housing segregation and corresponding loss of generational wealth.

The staff earned second in Sports Coverage for March 2025, which included Jeff Hawkins’ reporting on the Carolina Panthers’ talent evaluations ahead of the NFL draft; Cameron Williams on the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball tournament; White on JCSU football, Charlotte FC and FIFA’s announcement of Charlotte as a host city for the Club World Cup.

State elections omnibus bill simmers, draws critics

Continued from page 1A

ballot counting and curing deadlines, amongst other election changes, while this year’s bill loosens them a bit.

However, as the session progressed, it quickly became a grab bag for the Republican majority’s election priorities.

While much of the legislature’s policy work is paused until next year, the elections omnibus is on a different timeline. It may see movement as early as September, according to bill sponsor Rep. Hugh Blackwell, R-Burke.

In Swallow’s view, it’s come a long way, but still has a ways to go.

And in an increasingly uncommon move in North Carolina’s GOP-led legislature, Blackwell is taking in everyone’s feedback on the omnibus before moving forward.

Social Security number, please

Fellman does a lot of voter registration as part of You Can Vote, a civic organization focused on voter education and empowerment.

She already hears concerns about the security of providing the last four digits of registrants’ Social Security numbers. Some of the younger registrants don’t know their number offhand, and have to call or text their parents to get the information, which raises further security issues, she added.

“Nobody would give (their full SSN) to a stranger just out on the street,” Fellman said. “... I just don’t know how you could actually do paper voter registration form collection.”

Jim Womack, president of the conservative North Carolina Election Integrity Team, said having a full Social Security number, as the omnibus would require, would make list maintenance easier, as the only true unique data point among voter registrants.

NCEIT is a chapter of the Election Integrity Network, founded by former Trump lawyer Cleta Mitchell. Mitchell helped Trump in his failed bid to overturn the 2020 election. Now Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, and several others think North Carolina lawmakers are following her election policy playbook.

Womack, for his part, said providing a full Social Security number is no more dangerous than providing any other information at a voter registration drive.

“If it’s the full Social, they’ve got to protect it the same way they do the last four (of the SSN) or the driver’s license number, because both of those are protected as well,” he said. “So I mean, there’s always risk in allowing voter registration drives.”

‘How it should be’

At a late June House Election Law committee meeting, Harrison posed a concern to Blackwell about a provision of the omnibus bill that would have barred boards of election from “encouraging or promoting voter turnout in any election.”

The provision seemed “a bit vague” to her. Didn’t they want the county boards to encourage turnout? Wasn’t part of their job to promote voting?

Blackwell assured Harrison that there was more work to do on the bill before it was ready for a vote.

“The idea is that we want the State Board to focus on the conduct of the election, and that the responsibility for turnout is better handled by other folks,” he said. “We were trying to draw a line, and we may not have gotten it just at the sweet spot.”

The next time the omnibus bill was heard in committee, the turnout provision was axed. And instead of moving straight from the elections committee to rules, where the bill would have likely been expedited to a floor vote, the bill was assigned an additional committee hearing.

After that committee meeting, where Harrison raised other concerns, Blackwell’s staff emailed her to ask further questions. While Harrison still has a list of issues with the omnibus bill, she gave credit to Blackwell for being amenable to changes, and giving the bill time to improve.

“I’d rather them do it out in the open, in a committee, than to go into a back room and figure out what’s going to work,” she said. “This is actually a better, more public process. This is how it should be.”

The omnibus bill has undergone a number of other changes since its debut.

Instead of offering State Board of Elections executive director Sam Hayes the ability to make 25 political hires — which he said were needed to ensure “the folks that are surrounding me, certainly my direct reports and I, are aligned on the vision for the agency” — the latest version gives him five positions.

An initial campaign finance provision limiting foreign nationals’ ability to contribute to referendum committees has turned into a broader ban on foreign national contributions for any candidate, political committee, party or treasurer.

The latest version officially takes back the ability of so-called “Never Residents” to vote in state elections, in line with recent court rulings, and limits the acceptable photo ID documents for overseas and military voters.

And of course, it changes some deadlines.

‘Humanly not possible’

Last Election Day, the Wake County Board of Elections received 4,800 absentee ballots before the 7:30 p.m. cutoff.

Staff checked ballots, conducted data entry and reviewed the voter and two required witness signatures on each envel-

ope before adding them to the tally.

If last year’s Senate Bill 382 had been in effect, Wake County’s count would have begun at 5 p.m. on Election Day and run continuously until there were no ballots left, with no leaving the room allowed, except in case of an emergency.

That would have meant spending one or two nights in the office, Wake County Board of Elections Democrat Gerry Cohen said. It wasn’t a realistic ask.

Last year’s bill also moved up deadlines for counting and curing provisional and absentee ballots. Before its passage, county elections staff had until the day before county canvass, nine calendar days after the election, to count and cure all the ballots. Senate Bill 382 gave staff just three business days after the election to do so.

This year’s omnibus bill takes it back — kind of. It would give election officials five business days after the election to complete the job.

Lee County Board of Elections Republican Jay DeLancy, who founded the right-leaning Voter Integrity Project, said the deadlines set under SB382 were “humanly not possible” without a hiring surge.

As an election integrity advocate, DeLancy liked the idea of the count being “continuous,” but as a board member, his perspective has shifted slightly.

“The things election integrity people like me have been complaining about were not all put there for nefarious purposes,” he said. “Now we’re having to see, oh, it was done for a pragmatic purpose, just so we have time to count them.”

However, DeLancy wants stronger penalties for those who share ballot count results before the polls close to avoid any possibility of fraud.

What else is in the omnibus bill?

North Carolina absentee voters must attach a copy of their photo ID to their ballot, and either get two witnesses or a notary to sign the envelope.

Last year, the State Board of Elections was supposed to try a third security measure — signature verification — but the pilot program never quite got off the ground due to issues finding an acceptable vendor.

Signature verification requires the use of a machine to detect whether a voter’s signature belongs to them. If North Carolina implemented it through the omnibus bill, it would be the only state to require three security measures for absentee voters.

Hayes’ chief of staff Brian LiVecchi told lawmakers they’ve discussed potential vendors to avoid and seek out with other states. The pilot program wasn’t made a priority under the previous State Board of Election administration, he said. They would like to change that.

Harrison isn’t a fan of the idea.

“They’ve been wanting to go down this road for a while, but we know that there’s a long history of folks getting thrown out because of their signature,” she said. “And anybody who’s watched their signature change from age 18 to 40 or to even 80. I mean, nothing looks the same.”

Hayes, who worked in the legislature as House Speaker general counsel until a few months ago, has fingerprints all over the elections omnibus bill.

Besides the signature verification piece, Hayes was clear that securing positions exempt from the North Carolina Human Resources Act, which bans political hiring and firing, was a top concern. Under the current bill, the State Board would also be able to hire private counsel for legal matters, removing the Democratic attorney general from the picture and shielding any documents from the public records law.

Swallow trains elections workers, and he said these provisions violate one of his golden rules.

“One of the things we tell our poll workers is that the only people that can be partisan in our elections are the candidates, and that’s changing with this bill,” he said.

Even bipartisan sections of the elections omnibus bill face obstacles. The provisions attempting to block foreign influence in elections and campaign finance aren’t quite across the finish line yet, according to Womack.

“They’re struggling to find language that would allow them to restrict referendums or foreign funding of referendums and that sort of thing without infringing on First Amendment rights,” Womack said.

No language change is going to be effective unless the legislature repeals two recent laws that make it easier to cover up the origins of funds, Harrison said.

And some of the omnibus bill’s provisions don’t do anything at all, except maybe send a message, Cohen said.

The omnibus bill bans ranked choice voting, a process by which voters rank candidates instead of choosing just one, and no winner is crowned until they earn a majority. The election method is lauded by supporters for producing more moderate consensus winners and criticized by opponents for being too confusing for voters.

But ranked choice voting already doesn’t happen in the state, and it would take express permission by the legislature for any localities to allow it. Laws that allowed ranked choice voting experiments in Cary and Hendersonville years ago have expired, Cohen said.

A ways to go on omnibus

The Post earns state journalism awards

Continued from page 1A

pacted by Hurricane Helene that included a provision to shift the governor’s authority to name the chair of the state Board of Elections to the state auditor. Then-Gov. Roy Cooper vetoed the bill, but Republicans overrode it.

Another Dec. 12, 2024, article “JCSU coach takes hometown approach to football relevance” tracked Flowers’ approach to turning the Golden Bulls program from a perennial loser 50 years before his arrival to one of the top Black college teams.

Correspondent Kylie Marsh earned third in Beat News Reporting for “I don’t have any roots:’ the pain in housing displacement,” an examination of struggles

NC tops for business, not workers

Continued from page 1A
selves.”
By comparison, Virginia leads the Southeast region in compensation with a minimum wage of \$12.41 per hour.

Stottlemyer said it’s a common misconception that when states support workers, that means bad things for the economy. “That’s just not true. Our index actually looks at several metrics of community well-being, including economic measures and finds that there’s a strong positive correlation between states that have a healthy and robust labor policy landscape.”

In CNBC’s annual business ranking, North Carolina received its lowest marks for quality of life (earning a C-minus) and cost of living (earning a C-plus) – an acknowledgment of the rising cost of living in the state.

Beyond compensation, Oxfam underscores that North Carolina lacks critical workplace protections.

North Carolina does not provide a heat safety standard for outdoor workers, nor does it provide specific protection for warehouse workers, according to Oxfam.

The Heat Policy Innovation Hub at Duke University’s Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability recognizes heat as an escalating crisis with a need for governance to protect workers from heat-related illness.

Workers would also benefit from fixed and fair scheduling. Unpredictable hours can be especially problematic for those whose duties include providing care for children, the elderly, or family members with disabilities. Leave time is another fac-



ADOBE STOCK

North Carolina ranks last in a national ranking of Oxfam’s Best States to Work. The Tar Heel State was 52 in the survey of labor policies among 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

tor. “There’s no guarantee that workers have access to paid family and medical leave or paid sick leave,” notes Stottlemyer.

North Carolina is also held back in this year’s index for its “right-to-work” laws. The state ranks at the bottom with South Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Texas and Utah for having no support for workers organizing, whether by public or private employees.

In Oxfam’s companion report on the best states for working women, North Carolina is just edged out of the last spot by Mississippi. Again, a lack of paid family leave for working women causes the state’s ranking to bottom out.

“Black mothers in particular are disproportionately likely to be heads of their households and breadwinners. So, if they have access to paid leave, they’re able to stay in the

workforce and juggle their caregiving responsibilities as well,” Stottlemyer said.

State access to paid sick days was a key recommendation in a new report released last month by the North Carolina Department of Administration’s Council for Women and Youth Involvement.

The report, “Investing in Economic Opportunity for Women in North Carolina,” found that while the gender wage gap for women has improved over the last seven years, fewer mothers are in the workforce compared to fathers. And North Carolina women working full-time spent 20% to 26% of their annual income on infant childcare.

The cost of childcare posed the greatest burden for Latina and Native American women in North Carolina, based on their earnings.

“Today’s findings reflect the disparities and discrimination women in

North Carolina and across the country continue to face, especially women of color,” said Jesseca Boyer, vice president for policy and strategic initiatives at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

And there is a ripple effect for the next generation.

North Carolina ranks lowest nationally in preschool enrollment for 3-year-olds, and second lowest among Southeastern state for the enrollment of 4-year-olds in preschool.

Oxfam and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research come to the same conclusion in their respective reports: North Carolina would greatly benefit from raising the minimum wage, indexed to the cost of living, and by enacting legislation to require employers to provide workers with paid time off for short-term illness or to care for the health of a loved one.

Online academy platform launches

Continued from page 1A

tion,” Rafi Vaca, CleanAIRE NC’s education manager, said in a statement. “Air pollution is an invisible and often understated problem, yet its impact on public health is profound. We created this platform to demystify complex issues and inspire meaningful engagement.”

The online academy is the latest in a series of recent initiatives launched by CleanAIRE NC. In July, the nonprofit debuted the AirKeeper Dashboard, an interactive mapping tool that tracks air quality in real time.

The dashboard, developed in partnership with AirKeepers, or community scientists who host a network of air monitors used on the map, provides access to environmental data, demographic information, and health statistics.

Growing concerns about North Carolina’s readiness to handle potential environmental emergencies as well as legal changes have raised greater awareness on informed community engagement. As the federal government rolls back support for environmental protections – especially in at-risk communities that tend to be low-income and predominantly Black or brown – a grassroots approach is necessary.

“As someone passionate about environmental justice and community health, the CleanAIRE Academy greatly expanded my knowledge of air quality and advocacy,” said Naomi Abbey, a UNC Charlotte student and an early user of the platform. “The self-paced courses made learning so much easier, deepening my understanding of air quality and how to turn concern into meaningful action for environmental justice.”

On The Net
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That wage has been in place since 2009.



Oxfam America senior domestic policy advisor **PATRICIA STOTTELMYER** on North Carolina’s statewide minimum wage



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A Nobel Peace Prize for Trump? Inconceivable

By Mel Gurtov
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Four U.S. presidents have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, and Barack Obama.

Donald Trump is determined to be the fifth. He has been campaigning for a Nobel (decided by a Norwegian committee appointed by its parliament) the same way he sells his merchandise—with a great deal of advertising, some pressure tactics, and plenty of false claims.

It's hard to imagine that a man who is a convicted felon, an admirer (and imitator) of dictators, and an enemy of humanitarian aid and international institutions (including the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice) could be a candidate for the award. Yet he is—and the leaders of Israel, Pakistan, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have put him up for it.

Let's for the moment take Trump's candidacy seriously. His case rests on seven conflicts he claims to have resolved just months into his second term. Here is a brief review of those conflicts and Trump's role in them.

• Congo-Rwanda: The U.S. did help bring this conflict officially to an end when the foreign ministers signed an agreement in Washington in June. However, a key player in the conflict, the M23 rebel group backed by neighboring Rwanda, was not part of the agreement.

M23 claims that participants in the 1994 Rwandan genocide fled to Congo and are working with the Congolese army. Efforts to bring M23 and Congo into negotiations have thus far failed.

• Egypt-Ethiopia: This conflict, which has gone on for over a decade, concerns the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile River. Power generation has caused friction between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan.

Egypt, whose farming depends on the Nile, and Sudan, which fears flooding, oppose the dam. In July, Ethiopia declared the project complete and set September for it to open. Trump's claim that the dispute — it's not a war — is over thanks to his intervention is simply incorrect.

• India-Pakistan: The longstanding conflict centered in Kashmir never reached the stage of a war. Pakistan supports Trump's claim that he helped broker a cease-fire (in return for tariff concessions), while India disputes Trump's role altogether and bristles at Trump's tariff hikes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi refuses to talk Nobel with Trump, and their onetime bromance has soured.

• Kosovo-Serbia: Although tensions persist between Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008, there is no war. But the two countries do not have diplomatic relations. Peacemaking is now largely in the hands of the European Union.

• Armenia-Azerbaijan: Both countries' foreign ministers went to the White House to initial a peace agreement, and they hailed Trump's role. But a formal treaty to end their long-running conflict over Nagorno Karabakh remains to be signed and ratified. Trump's real role was to secure a corridor in southern Armenia that links it with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

• Cambodia-Thailand: U.S.-backed talks resulted in a cease-fire, not necessarily an end to their border conflict. Trump exerted trade pressure on both countries. Malaysia and China are also credited with helping secure the cease-fire.

• Israel-Iran: Trump's claim comes down to dropping bunker-busting bombs to prevent a nuclear war. The evidence does not support the view that Iran was on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon. The U.S. launched attacks on Iran's nuclear sites in support of Israeli policy, which has long wanted a green light from Washington to eliminate Iran's nuclear capability. .

On the evidence, Trump has a very weak case for a peace award. In only one conflict, Armenia-Azerbaijan, can he be said to have played a central role — and even then, for personal gain as much as for peace. In all the others, fighting and disputing temporarily halted. No final settlements were reached—and in most of them, other countries besides the U.S. were involved in peace efforts. If Trump really were interested in peacemaking, he would be strengthening the State Department's diplomatic initiatives and trying to turn cease-fires into lasting agreements rather than cutting its staff and budget.

The most glaring contradictions to Trump's claim are the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars. In both, Trump has touted his peacemaking role but has failed to use U.S. influence to force the central war-making leaders, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, to accept a cease-fire and join peace talks.

Only in a world turned upside down could Donald Trump be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize or, for that matter, any prize that recognizes human decency and peace building.

Mel Gurtov, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is professor emeritus of political science at Portland State University.

Medicaid, SNAP and school leaders

Growing up, there was a period when my family relied on food stamps to survive.

At the time I admittedly felt some embarrassment about that fact, yet I found a way to use the foundation provided by that public assistance to achieve several important goals in life. Recently, I learned that my story is similar to that of a popular podcast host whom I'd never imagined I shared much common ground with. While our financial success and political views differ drastically, I would argue that our shared experiences with the public safety net show how vital a resource it is for families who are experiencing financial strife and adversity.

That shared experience between us and so many others underscores why I am seriously concerned about the recent budget bill passed by Congress and signed by President Trump, which many argue will threaten programs like Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (i.e. SNAP) benefits for many Americans.

As both Democrats and Republicans debate the feasibility of the bill and the toll it could take on the American people, I can't help but think about the implications of this bill for schools and the people who run them — principals

and assistant principals.

Principals and assistant principals are often asked to deal with crises in schools ranging from things like paper shortages to devastating gun violence. On a day-to-day basis, these leaders are often engrossed with tasks that directly involve children and families, some who rely on the very healthcare systems and SNAP benefits Congress just agreed to eliminate. This does not make the already complex jobs of school leaders easier.

Rather, passage of this bill will only add to the running list of external factors that complicate running schools in the United States.

In North Carolina roughly 1.4 million children rely on Medicaid and nearly 600,000 rely on SNAP benefits alone. For children attending schools in every community, but especially low-wealth communities in North Carolina, changes to these programs could have devastating effects since health and nutrition are deeply tied to things like attendance, academic performance and engagement in schools.

Relatedly, principals in North Carolina are compensated based on their school's size and ability to show growth on academic metrics. However, with all that is going on in our country and the shift away from protecting the very basic needs of our most vulnerable, i.e. children, it is time for a new metric that considers the complexity of leading schools

that are constantly asked to do more with less.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, nearly 60% of children in North Carolina were eligible for free lunch during the 2019-2020 school year, which translates to about 900,000 children in the state. One way that children can qualify for free school lunch is often tied to their eligibility for SNAP benefits.

The proposed legislation currently states that a portion of funding for SNAP benefits will be shifted to states. However, there is no guarantee that states will be able to shoulder this cost and may eventually need to cut benefits or change eligibility requirements. This could mean that children who once benefitted from SNAP could lose their automatic eligibility for free school meals.

Legislators have also said that families with children under the age of 14 will not lose their SNAP benefits.

Even if policy plans are executed perfectly, and history has taught us that they won't be, we can still assume that this will have resounding impacts on children and schools since neither is isolated from the collective challenges a community faces.

Schools already deal with community issues like food insecurity and psychosocial problems like disengagement, which directly and indirectly impact children and families and makes it more difficult for school leaders to do their jobs.

Organizations like the

North Carolina Principal and Assistant Principals Association have been calling for legislators to consider how difficult it is to be a principal. Even before the proposed changes to programs like SNAP, they've asked legislators to do something to counterbalance the impending leader shortage where nearly 50% plan to leave their roles in the next three years.

Specifically, they have asked for the legislature to consider the complexity of a school, which includes size of a school, characteristics of students served — like housing status, income levels, and languages spoken, in hopes of retaining effective leaders. Simply put, it takes a significant amount of resources and planning to run some schools and leaders should be recognized for that.

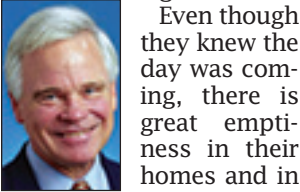
Several years ago, I served as the director of community schools for a nonprofit in New York City public schools. Legislators may not realize this, but I saw firsthand that school leaders do more than just oversee classrooms.

They are often one of the first points of contact for families who are in need. These cuts impact everyone, including our school leaders and if we must live with the changes, then it is time our lawmakers recognize and support leaders in the incredibly multifaceted role they play.

Tiffany Lewis-Durham is assistant professor of educational leadership at UNC Greensboro

Losing grandchildren before finding them

In some North Carolina houses, this is a time of empty rooms and empty spaces. Children, so long ever-present, are now suddenly gone away to college.



D.G. MARTIN
—

Even though they knew the day was coming, there is great emptiness in their homes and in their hearts. This is true especially for parents, but also for grandparents, even though all knew that the day was coming.

One of my grandsons is in college far from home in Colorado. And both my granddaughters just graduated from college far away-- one in Vermont and the other in Scotland. After some time at home, one is heading even further afield, to Alaska, and the other back to Scotland. These "grandbabies" are so far away I will seldom see them.

My own children stayed reasonably close to home in North Carolina at Davidson and graduate school at UNC. Still the break was painful.

How much more so when the distance is more than a

long drive away?

Each year I watch young parents bring their children to Chapel Hill.

So much is the same every year: Heavy trunks to carry up long stairways on the first day.

Waiting for them are professors — giants of teachers — whose love of scholarship and service is exceeded only by their commitment to the opening and nurturing of the minds of their students. Will they be worrying about the meaning of life, or something more important — like a broken date?

What makes taking or sending a child to college such a milestone for parents — such a passage? Is it the sudden freedom from the hour-to-hour worries of child rearing? No more waiting up past midnight — waiting and worrying. No more strain of daily negotiation for the use of cars, time of meals, attendance at church, volume of the music or use of the bathroom.

Or is it the extra worry and uncertainty that comes with an absent child so far away in distance and independence?

Suddenly, the house is peaceful — and so empty. Gone is the daily joy of

their companionship. Gone is the excitement of their new ideas. Gone is the richness and seasoning that their growing up brought to our lives — every day.

You wonder, "Does life have meaning without children to watch over?"

The answer is not certain. But the question remains.

My grandchildren will live in the future, but the occasion draws me almost 100 years into the past when, in 1928, my father entered Davidson. When these men, (it would be 50 years before women were allowed at Davidson) first came to college in the fall of 1928, they brought everything they needed in a suitcase or small trunk.

Things were different in the 1980s when my children entered college. Most students arrived in cars driven by their parents and loaded down with the students' "things." Former Davidson President John Kuykendall welcomed them with a short "freedom and responsibility" sermon to help explain what this business of leaving home for college is all about.

He reminded them that colleges and universities no longer pretend to take the place of parents or im-

pose strict parental rules to dictate how the students will act. At 18, they must seek and find their own moral guides. And freedom means the freedom to fail.

Kuykendall would then talk about responsibility, explaining that free people have the responsibility to develop and accept rules if they are to live together in harmony and dignity. Our freedom to make choices makes us responsible for those choices. Freedom gives us the free choice to serve others. Freedom gives us the opportunity and the responsibility to search for the truth.

That quest brings us towards the goal of a college education: a liberated mind, a mind that never stops searching, and never stops learning.

If our grandchildren's college experience helps make them partners with us in a search for truth, then the pain of physical separation and giving them up to their own freedom can bring us together in a way that gives our lives rich new meaning.

D.G. Martin is a former UNC system vice president and former host of PBS NC program "North Carolina Bookwatch."

Independence High alumni give back to neighbors

By Ken Koontz
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Black alumni of Independence High School Class of 1980 returned to their old west Charlotte neighborhood to feed disenfranchised residents.

Most of the estimated 200 Independence graduates grew up in the Lincoln Heights community. But court-ordered busing to desegregate local schools took them away from their home communities near West Charlotte High and along the former Cummings Avenue (now Catherine Simmons Way), LaSalle Street, Beatties Ford and Newland roads to Independence High in Mint Hill.

Black student alumni club president Dorenda Metz said they felt compelled to do something in the neighborhood where they grew up, which has fallen into a substantial segment of poor, underprivileged, low-income and economically disenfranchised residents.



KEN KOONTZ

The Independence High School Class of 1980 served meals to more than 100 people who live in west Charlotte neighborhoods on Aug. 23.

"We felt a sense of responsibility to reach back and help improve the plight of those in our old neighborhood," Metz said.

"We wanted to celebrate those early friendships because many people now having things so tough in this area were friends who grew up with us. Our classmates feel comfortable being here."

In addition to feeding more than 100 people, the event featured voter registrations, gift bags and music.

"From this event, we identified several persons we will be helping to find housing and various other

social services they might need," Metz said. "And when we think about all of this and how most of us have succeeded and survived, the son that we play and reminds us of our own achievements is Marvin Sapp's popular hit 'Never Would Have Made it.' So, we give back."

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2025



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jupiter Wilson, Garinger High's first-year football coach, led the Wildcats to a win in their season opener on Aug. 22 against Winston-Salem Prep – the program's first after a 46-game losing streak.

‘We want more’ for Garinger football

New Wildcats coach Jupiter Wilson excited by challenge of changing program’s culture and attitude

By Cameron Williams
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Jupiter Wilson has his calling. After leaving Hickory Ridge High — where he had several successful seasons as football coach — Wilson had a few options. He could have applied for vacancies at Chambers or Hopewell; become an assistant coach to close friend Sam Greiner at West Charlotte or take on one of the least desirable jobs around.

Wilson opted for the latter and Garinger, a program that has gone through six coaches in the last 10 years. It also matched their win total

during that span, but he sees an opportunity to change the culture. The Wildcats (1-1) are already reaping the reward — they beat Winston-Salem Prep in the season opener for their first win in six years.

“I think because nobody else would probably want to take on that role of being a seasoned head coach,” Wilson said. “A lot of guys have done it from a standpoint of ‘this is my first job. Here’s my opportunity to do it.’ I feel every day more and more this is why I’m here. There’s no ‘Man, why am I here?’ I get to do this. Sometimes I pinch myself in a good way, sometimes

I pitch myself in a bad way. But (opening) night was the culmination, even as I prayed, the manifestation of something that we knew was going on, honestly since January.”

Garinger athletics director Brian Borque said the biggest culture shift has been accountability.

“Jupiter is making sure the kids are getting to practice on time,” Borque said, “and now that classes have started, making sure they get to class on time and attending class and doing their work. If they miss class or practice, you bet they are doing burpees and so I think accountability is the

main key. I can’t speak to before I got here, but just since Jupiter has been here the accountability piece has been very present.”

Offensive/defensive lineman Angel Vasquez, a four-year starter, said after losing every week as a Wildcat, that first win in a Garinger uniform brought him to tears as time ticked away.

“I was just very emotional,” he said. “I may have started crying a little. It is just because I have been putting in all of this work for four years and it hasn’t amounted to anything until that win. It felt really good, and I think I speak for

Please see **COACH** | 6A

Hough leads rankings; Chambers debuts at No. 7

By Herbert L. White
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Hough and West Charlotte are still running things in the Magnificent Seven while there’s a newcomer in the rankings.

Hough, West Charlotte and Mallard Creek remain the top three while Chambers breaks in at No. 7 and Independence drops out. The top-ranked Huskies routed Independence 35-0 in Mint Hill while West Charlotte’s Lions routed Monroe 47-0 to bounce back from a season-opening loss to Greens-

boro Grimsley.

Independence’s demise at home against Hough opened a spot at No. 4, which is occupied by Charlotte Catholic, followed by Palisades and Butler taking a step up in the process.

This week’s Magnificent Seven, with overall record and previous rank:

1. Hough (2-0, first). Easy peasy for the Huskies in a muscular 35-0 wipeout of No. 4 Independence. Next up is an interstate trip to Highland Springs (Va.).

2. West Charlotte (1-1, second). The Lions’ 47-0 win at Monroe proved that

opening-day loss to Greensboro Grimsley didn’t keep them down.

3. Mallard Creek (2-0, third). Is it inappropriate to call the Mavericks a dark horse contender? Their gutsy 3-0 win against Warwick (Va.) shows Mallard Creek could be a factor should the frontrunners slip.

4. Charlotte Catholic (2-0, fifth) The Cougars took down Charlotte Christian 16-7 to keep a successful start going. The next challenge awaits in private school power Providence Day.

5. Palisades (2-0, sixth). The Pumas

handled Olympic 26-0. Next is a trek to South Carolina for a game at Clover.

6. Butler (2-0, seventh). Give it up for the Bulldogs and coach Brian Hales. They took down Corvian Community 14-9 in a real slugfest and now turn their attention to another nonconference contest, this time at Irmo (S.C.).

7. Chambers (2-0, unranked). A newcomer joins the ranks. Chambers opened the season with wins against Clover (35-34) and Hopewell (34-17). Can they meet or exceed the 34-point output when they go to Harding?

WR Jalen Coker’s versatility solidifies Panthers roster spot

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jalen Coker didn’t complain.

The Carolina Panthers wide receiver didn’t schedule a meeting with general manager Dan Morgan and coach Dave Canales to voice his concerns over new players getting preferential treatment on the developing depth chart.

Coming off a seemingly out-of-nowhere productive rookie campaign, Coker understood the front office didn’t owe him anything. With Tetairoa McMillan drafted in the first round last April and a swath of free agents joining the fold last offseason, the former Holy Cross standout didn’t waste time pouting over the situation. He just went to work.

“I think it’s easy to kind of fall into that and be like I’ve kind of proven myself,” Coker said. “But I try not to think about that because

Please see **WR JALEN** | 6A



DONALD WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jalen Coker, an undrafted free agent as a rookie in 2024, was a surprise asset for the Carolina Panthers with 32 catches for 478 yards and two touchdowns.

Veteran coaches glad to be in the frat

Southern head football coach Terrence Graves began his student-athlete career as a freshman at Wake Forest in 1989.

He transferred to Winston-Salem State a year later and played under legendary coach Pete Richardson. He never left.

HBCUs, that is.

Graves graduated WSSU in 1992 after leading the Rams to two CIAA football championships. He began his coaching career as a Ram also, coaching defensive backs.

Since 1993, he’s traveled the HBCU coaching circuit in various positions to Southern, Norfolk State, back to Southern, Mississippi Valley State, Grambling State and back to Southern for a third time. Graves also has been recruited by predominately white institutions during his 32-year career — for much more money — but, as the popular saying goes, “All money ain’t good money.”

“HBCUs mean everything to me,” Graves said. “I grew up near Norfolk State, went to school in the ACC and when that didn’t work out, I knew I



BONITA
BEST

Please see **VETERAN** | 6A

Charlotte 49ers turn to recovery after stumbling in opener

By Cameron Williams
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That was rough.

Stagnant offense led to a gassed defense, which ended in Charlotte’s 34-11 loss against Appalachian State in the Duke Mayo Classic. After the first quarter, the 49ers couldn’t sustain drives, which correlated with a tired defense.

“Offensively we had no rhythm,” Charlotte coach Tim Albin said. “We had through I believe three quarters, nine series. I think on four or five of those we started with a penalty on the first play of the drive. We didn’t overcome [penalties] in any of the four or five

drives, so we were off schedule, we struggled, and we just couldn’t get in any sort of flow.”

The 49ers held Appalachian State scoreless in the first quarter punctuated by a great hustle play by Charlotte defensive back Ja’Quirious Conley. He tracked down Mountaineers receiver Jaden Barnes and punched the ball out just before he crossed the goal line for a touchback and 49ers possession.

“It was obviously a very impressive play,” Albin said. “[Barnes] made a very acrobatic catch to field the ball, but [Conley] didn’t quit on it. They do drill work in practice on stripping the ball from behind and he was able to fall on the ball. It was a big turning point.”

When Charlotte’s offense was able to sustain drives it was in large part due to the ground attack. C.J. Stokes, the primary running back, finished with 15 carries for 49 yards, but Albin said overall the run game wasn’t very good. Running back Henry Rutledge, who is expected to share carries this season, did not play as he recovers from injury.

“He’s got a lower body injury,” Albin said. “He’s eligible and he was cleared to play, but he just hasn’t practiced. We’ve got to get him where he is practicing again so he can contribute.”

Please see **CHARLOTTE** | 6A



MAIT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Garinger High football coach Jupiter Wilson leads a video session with his players on Aug. 26, 2025. The Wildcats are a calling for Wilson, who sees possibilities in a program that has churned through coaches and losing seasons since the dawn of the 21st century. "I just want them to see I am serious when I say that things are going to change at the G," he said.

Coach: ‘We want more’ for Garinger football

Continued from page 5A

everyone when I say we want more."

Wilson admits he felt apprehensive about taking the job, but after conversations with his wife and pastor and prayer, he knew it was the right thing to do.

"My last conversation I had was with my pastor," said Wilson, who was hired in January. "He said, 'If you want it comfortable, you'll go to West Charlotte. If you want stress, you'll go to Chambers.' But he said, 'If you want security, you'll go to Garinger. ...What I mean by that is you'll get to do it exactly how you want to do it. You don't have to worry about what people may say.' I think that just calmed my nerves."

Borquez said many factors affirmed his decision to hire Wilson.

"With Jupiter, I think he needed the kids as much as the kids needed him," he said. "I think that has really come to light. He has started to develop a tight relationship with the kids already, and he loves the kids. The feeling is reciprocal. You can see it day in and day out at practices. ... the camaraderie that is happening is great to see amongst the players and coaches. It is nice to see the players are starting to believe in themselves and believe in what is being done here."

There have been speed bumps, but Wilson's determined to pour into his team that showing faith in the process would encourage players to buy in and believe he's different from previous coaches.

"I just want them to see I am serious when I say that things are going to change at the G," Wilson said. "I think over the course of the spring and into summer a lot of the players have seen the intentionality and started buying in. The biggest thing I have seen change is their approach to work. When I first got here, to get them to lift weights was very difficult, because they never had consistency with it. ... In March they started doing it regularly and now we are seeing a lot of the kids wanting to work."

Vasquez, who is also a team captain, agreed.

"One thing I have seen is that there are way more guys willing to be

coached by coach Wilson," he said. "From the first day of spring we had more players, up to 35 to 40 players. We kept that number going into summer. No one wanted to quit, everyone stayed bought in and that is one of the biggest changes I have seen with coach Wilson."

Vasquez said he wants to use football to bring the entire Garinger community together.

"I want to see everybody more bought in together," he said. "I want to see more of a community because right now it is very distant. Nobody comes to games, not even for the soccer team, and they are very good. They always go to conference championships, but no one even shows up for them. So, I just want the school to be more in tune with Garinger pride as a whole and know what it means to be a Garinger Wildcat."

Wilson believes setting a new standard of excellence will go a long way in bringing the campus together – not just one the field, but the classroom and beyond.

"Actually, two of my better players ... walked into third period, and then they missed first lunch," he said. "I was like 'y'all are supposed to be in class,' and they kind of look around said 'we know.' And I told them, 'You know that will be 50 burpees, and they're like, 'yes coach.' This is just one of them deals where they understand, from my standpoint, that this is part of what we're going to do. I said we're going to hold you to a standard of doing the right thing."

Wilson insists he is in for the long haul.

"People say, 'Oh, how long are you gonna stay here,' he said. "'You gonna stay here for a year? You're gonna leave?' And then they joke with me like, 'yeah, you're not gonna be here for a year, because if you keep on winning games, somebody's going to take you somewhere.' But I tell people all the time I really enjoy it and I love being here. I couldn't see myself, especially in the North Carolina area, to say, 'Hey, man, I'm going to leave and go to whatever that school may be."

"No, I'd just rather be here at Garinger."

Charlotte 49ers look to get right with Tar Heels next

Continued from page 5A

49ers' quarterback Conner Harrell was shaky, connecting on 13-of-24 passes for 142 yards, a touchdown and interception. He left for a series in the second half due to cramping. Backup Grayson Loftis went 0-for-1 in relief.

"[Harrell] said he was fine," Albin said. "He showed some grit and toughness. He battled and didn't want to leave the game. We've got to get some guys around him that can help him and the run game wasn't very good today. It is not fun to play quarterback when you don't have a run game. It is not fun to call the plays when the run game struggles. I think we averaged less

than 4 yards a carry if I saw [the stats] right."

Charlotte gained 76 yards on 29 carries – an average of 2.6 yards per attempt.

The 49ers were unable to generate pressure on Appalachian State quarterbacks, who threw for 404 yards. Charlotte usually dropped defenders into coverage and Mountaineers quarterback A.J. Swann was able to sit in the pocket and pick them apart. He finished 31-of-46 for 368 yards and three touchdowns.

For Charlotte, it is time to rinse and not repeat with a tougher test coming to Jerry Richardson Stadium in North Carolina's Tar Heels.

Veteran coaches love the frat

Continued from page 5A

was going back to an HBCU at Winston-Salem State. I started my coaching career at WSSU."

So, forgive Graves if he has a big chip on his shoulder when it comes to the perception of HBCU coaches. Not the coaches who come calling only for a quick year or two of paychecks before heading elsewhere, but those who are proud to be members of the HBCU family – with no apologies.

"When it comes to HBCU coaches, they like to put a negative stain on us," he said. "People think we're only here because we can't go anywhere else, but we're

here because we choose to be. I've had opportunities to coach in the SEC, the NFL, the Big Ten, but this is where my heart is. I don't regret it one bit."

Graves and North Carolina Central coach Trei Oliver both said at the MEAC-SWAC Challenge press conference that coaching at HBCUs is about so much more. Yes, you've got to win but while you're there, it's about being a positive role model for young men who may not know what that's like.

Which brings up another sticky topic – the prevalence of former professional athletes with little to no coaching experience getting

HBCU jobs.

"Those guys can help bring in some exposure and that's good for the league," Oliver said. "But there are a lot of really good coaches out there that are getting overlooked, and it's their time."

Graves concurred with a bit of shade on the side.

"A lot of good coaches put the time in and the work, and all they need is the opportunity," he said. "[Veteran coaches are] not going to lay down. Just because we came up through the ranks, we ain't taking a backseat to nobody."

Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.

How good is JC Smith? D2 titan Valdosta State a challenge

By Herbert L. White

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It won't take long to learn where Johnson C. Smith stacks up in Division II football.

The Golden Bulls, who play No. 14 Valdosta State Saturday at McGirt Field, warmed up with a 45-9 rout of Morehouse. The Blazers, who advanced to the 2024 national title game, beat Clark Atlanta 31-28 in coach Graham Craig's debut. Valdosta State, which went ahead for good on Matt Rolader's 24-yard field goal with 8:03 in the fourth quarter, outgained Clark Atlanta 423-355, with 188 yards on the ground.

Potent from the start

JCSU didn't have much trouble against Morehouse, jumping to a 26-3 advantage at intermission and cruising in the second half. Offensively, the Golden Bulls racked up 512 yards, with 303 passing. Among their 68 plays, 45 were runs, which was the opposite of what coach Maurice Flowers' offensive tendencies. It didn't matter much since JCSU had its way in every phase.

The ground attack was efficient, with the Golden Bulls averaging 4.6 yards per try as Avante George (13 carries, 63 yards, TD) and Bobby Smith (12 carries 70 yards, TD) getting most of the carries. Kamarro Edmonds added a score on seven rushes for 36 yards.

Quarterback Kelvin Durham was as good as pledged in his JCSU debut, connecting on 15-of-19 passes for 270 yards and three scores. A capable runner as well, Durham, a transfer from Fort Valley State, added 25 yards on four carries and another score.

Durham wasn't perfect with an interception among the four misfires, but he spread the ball around, made the right reads and benefited from a clean pocket that didn't yield a sack.

The Golden Bulls were close to flawless against Morehouse. Eight JCSU receivers caught at least one pass, and none of them were two-time All-CIAA Brevin Caldwell. Newcomer Brian Lane led the pack with six receptions for 163 yards and a touchdown while Deandre Proctor added four catches for 39 yards and a score. Reggie Daniel grabbed a pair with a touchdown as well.

Defensive dominance

The standouts for JCSU, which allowed 327 yards and forced four turnovers, were numerous. Elijah Wilson accounted for half of the Golden Bulls' four interceptions along with four tackles and Daryl Taybron led the way with seven tackles.

The new linebacker pairing of Harding High graduate Quavaris Crouch (three tackles and an interception) and Vincent Hill (three tackles, half-sack) were solid. Defensive end Jalen Alexander (South Mecklenburg) grabbed an interception to go with three tackles.

Cleanup needed on a couple of aisles

There's plenty for the Golden Bulls to work on with Valdosta State coming to Charlotte for the second of three road games to open their season. JCSU committed 11 penalties for 110 yards and went 3-for-7 on point-after kicks against Morehouse. Both could pose problematic against the Blazers if there's a repeat.

WR Jalen Coker's versatility solidifies Panthers roster spot

Continued from page 5A

it's a new year every year, and everyone in the league will say it, they're trying to replace you every single year."

Morgan attempted to replace him with veteran Hunter Renfrow and undrafted free agents Jacoby George, Kobe Hudson or T.J. Luther. Outlasting the cut contenders, Coker earned a spot on the Panthers' initial 53-man roster.

There wasn't much Coker, an undrafted free agent who started last season on the practice squad, would not attempt to maintain his roster spot for the season opener at Jacksonville on Sept. 7.

With an opening on special teams during the summer, Coker raised his hand.

Coker going special teamer route

In the preseason opener against Cleveland, Coker cradled a touchdown pass from quarterback Bryce Young and executed a one-handed grab deep downfield that was called back because of a penalty. Canales highlighted Coker's effort during his postgame comments but not just for two athletic receptions. Coker's performance on special teams also drew his attention.

"I can't wait to watch a special teams reel because he was on a couple of the teams and was available most of the night to help out that way too," Canales said, "so, I'm really proud of him."

As a rookie, Coker participated in 31 special teams plays last season. With a crowded receiver room this summer, he anticipated additional work on kickoffs

would be a way to get on the field.

As a top receiving option in college, toiling on special teams was not a craft Coker concerned himself with. His professional attitude matured.

"Coming out of college, you want to be a receiver, you want to be a starter and all that stuff, so I think I didn't take it as seriously," Coker said last month. "To come into this year [in a] bigger room, I've got to make an impact in a different way, so really buying into special teams, become a better blocker, all around just a better athlete."

A lift from young receivers

Coker's spot on the depth chart was elevated after Adam Thielen was traded to the Minnesota Vikings.

Morgan's maneuver provided a bit of elbow room and lifted Coker into the starting slot receiver role before a quad injury landed him on injured reserve. He'll miss at least four games.

By jettisoning Thielen, Morgan said the front office had confidence entering the season with a young receiver corps.

"I think when you see the way TMac works out there, when you see the way XL works out there, Jalen Coker, David Moore, Jimmy Horn," he said. "We feel like we have a really good young stable of wideouts that were mentored by a guy like Adam Thielen."

"They're more mature than their age and more polished than their age too. I don't see any reason why they can't go out there and step up and have a great season."

