

Life!

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2025 SECTION B

Get proactive with eye health

FAMILY FEATURES

Glaucoma, one of the leading causes of permanent blindness, often does its damage silently, with no noticeable symptoms, as vision is lost. Glaucoma affects an estimated 3 million Americans, but most people don't know they have the condition until it's revealed in an eye exam.

Once vision is lost, it cannot be recovered. If left untreated, glaucoma can cause blindness. That's why when it comes to detecting and treating glaucoma, the earlier, the better.

Glaucoma is an eye disease caused by increased pressure in the eye, which can damage the optic nerve and reduce vision, sometimes making objects look blurry or dark. Early on, most people don't notice what's happening, but as glaucoma progresses, you may notice some loss of peripheral vision. By this point, the disease has progressed significantly toward blindness, and treatment options may be limited.

"Many patients are surprised to learn glaucoma often presents with no initial symptoms," said Oluwatosin U. Smith M.D., glaucoma specialist and ophthalmologist at Glaucoma Associates of Texas. "That's why routine, comprehensive eye exams are so vital. These screenings allow us to detect glaucoma in its earliest stages, often before any vision loss occurs. Early diagnosis and treatment are the cornerstone of effective glaucoma management, and it empowers us to take proactive steps to protect

Please see PEEP | 2B



SPENCER DAVIS | UNSPLASH

Changes in federal vaccination advice has led to confusion nationally, but it's vaccine season in North Carolina for flu and COVID-19.

What's happening with shots in 2025?

By Jane Sinik Sartwell

NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

The weather is starting to cool in North Carolina, bringing with it the joys of fall.

There's just one thing that could ruin your pumpkin spice latte, apple picking and hayrides: coming down with the flu or COVID-19. This year, there could be some changes to the way you get your annual shots.

Last year's flu season was the deadliest in North Carolina since the state began recording in 2009, resulting in more than 500 deaths statewide.

Now, U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is making headlines with the controversial decisions coming out of his overhauled vaccine advisory panel. Here in North Carolina, that has resulted in confusion about the availability, effectiveness and necessity of vaccines against both of these common respiratory illnesses.

Questions abound. Should I get the flu shot? If so, when? Am I going to be able to get it if I want it? What about COVID? Is access going to be limited? Do I need a prescription?

Flu shots

In August, Kennedy's panel voted to recommend

Please see WHAT'S | 2B

«RIDES

Volkswagen ID Buzz brings a new age rendition to automaker's classic minivan

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Volkswagen microbus is one of the most iconic vehicles ever to roll on American roads.

From campers to hippies, from campsites to protest marches, the Bus was everywhere. Volkswagen ditched the Bus a couple of decades ago but has brought back the icon as the ID Buzz.

If you are familiar with current VW nomenclature you know all the ID is used on its electric vehicles. That's right, it's all electric. Ironically, this feature is the Buzz's best idea and most limiting feature. I'll have more about that later. The ID Buzz has a lot

going for it. It's large enough to hold six or seven people, depending on how it's configured. Regardless, everyone will have loads of space. The rear seat is cavernous, of which VW claims to be the best in the industry.

The best of what, you may ask. It was called a bus before there were minivans. That's what VW is calling this now. That makes this the coolest minivan on the planet.

The ID Buzz simply looks cool. VW took the original shape and updated the look. It now has a motorized rear gate, electric sliding side doors and all-wheel drive provided by a dual motor setup. With

both motors, horsepower is rated at 335 horsepower. This combo can get you to 60 miles per hour in 6.0 seconds, about the quickest you can get to 60 mph in a minivan.

The ID Buzz is taller and wider than most minivans but shorter, despite having a longer wheelbase. That does cut down on space behind the third row, but there is a sturdy shelf and storage bins which can be used to carry groceries.

While the outside is retro cool, the interior is modern minimalist. The dash is sparse with just essential space for gauges and screens. The gauge cluster can be changed to display various readouts. The



VOLKSWAGEN

Volkswagen's ID Buzz is an electric version of its iconic van. A touch screen is mounted at a good height but has a few back buttons can be laggy and sometimes not work properly. The screen itself

is fine. It's bright and displays sharp, crisp images. Please see VOLKSWAGEN | 3B



KRISTY BEKE

Christine Beke turned her interest in haircare into a sprawling series of businesses and hair expo over two decades of entrepreneurship.

Hair today, path to sustainability always

Entrepreneur Christine Beke builds empire over two decades

By Charles K. Harris

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Christine "Kristy" Beke has endured as an entrepreneur.

Over two decades Beke has managed to grow a single chair hair braiding operation in Uptown into what is now a small haircare empire featuring two salons, a beauty supply store, a beauty academy and national entrepreneurial speaking engagements.

According to data from the Pew Research Center, in general 20% of small businesses fail within the first year; half fail within the first five years. Sixty-five percent never see the 10-year mark and only 25% pass 15 years. The same data reports that among Black women small business owners the survival rate beyond 15 years is 3%.

How has Beke, 46, managed to excel against the odds?

"I wouldn't call it a rigid formula," she said, "but I believe my strength has come from faith, resilience, and discipline."

Beke, a native of Benin, reports the two main hurdles she's faced are being a Black woman and an immigrant.

"Speaking with a French accent sometimes caused people to dismiss me or not take me seriously," she recounts. "On top of that, access to funding and resources was always limited."

But it didn't slow Beke down. She relates that success means more than financial gain.

"I treat my businesses like ministries, they must serve people, not just profit," she said, adding she also emphasizes the value of adaptability and continued education. "I reinvest in my vision, keep learning, and build multiple streams of income that sustain each other."

Beke said her love for haircare, particularly braiding, was nurtured in her home country where decorative designs are not just functional but an intrinsic part of West African culture. It was where

pervasive economic challenges played an important role in crafting her entrepreneurial buoyancy.

"Poverty was part of daily life and even basic needs were sometimes out of reach," she said. "I watched my mother's resilience and leaned on my faith in God. Those experiences gave me a fire to build, uplift, and create opportunities, not just for myself, but for others."

At 16, Beke immigrated to the U.S., first in Maryland before relocating to Charlotte, where she worked at ADE African Hair Braiding.

"Charlotte revealed itself as a city full of diversity, community and space to grow," she said. "[Charlotte] became the true foundation of my entrepreneurial journey."

After accepting a management position at ADE, Beke rented a small suite of her own at Salon Central. She also took steps to ex-

Please see HAIR | 2B

Hair today and the path to sustainability always

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pand her reach as an entrepreneur.

"At the same time, I enrolled at [Central Piedmont Community College], studying English as a second language and business," she said. "Balancing classes with managing growing clientele wasn't easy, but my determination carried me forward. As my demand grew, I expanded into larger suites, began hiring contractors, and started empowering other women to use their talents for financial independence."

After outgrowing her rented suite, Beke opened her own salon on North Tyron Street, became a licensed hair braider and developed her signature Tree K Braids, a one-of-a-kind technique that gives the illusion of a weave while protecting natural hair.

"It allows the scalp to breathe, prevents breakage and creates a lightweight, versatile, natural look," she said. "Our clients look and feel glamorous."

The response to Tree K technique has been such that Beke reports some clients travel from outside the U.S. But her vision extends beyond an in-demand haircare specialist to pay her success forward. To that end, she mentors other stylists. Her efforts culminated in the recent opening of Bignon's Natural Hair Beauty Academy. Bignon is part of Beke's Beninese name which means "God is Great" in the Fon language.

"For me, the greatest reward is the impact," she said. "Mentoring men and women who have gone on to open their own salons, and now seeing students graduate with licenses and careers, that's legacy. That's empowerment."

While there is no secret formula for business success, Beke does offer some advice to people with entrepreneurial designs.

"Start with your why," Beke admonishes, adding, "your purpose is what sustains you when the challenges come."

Beke also cautions that jumping into business without the proper scaffolding threatens sustainability.

"The biggest pitfall is skipping the foundation," she said. "Too many hustle without setting up LLCs, business credit, contracts, or systems. Get your legal and financial foundation in place, structure your business, and create a plan that includes marketing,

finances, and growth strategies."

It's business acumen like this paired with her enthusiasm that has earned Beke speaking and mentoring opportunities on a national scale.

"I've been honored to mentor and speak at events such as the PA Hair & Fashion Expo (in Pittsburgh), the Extension Expo in Newark, New Jersey, and other venues across New York, the Carolinas, and beyond," Beke explains.

Inspired by these events, in 2018 Beke launched the Charlotte Braiding Expo at the Hilton University Place. Although the showcase was suspended due to the COVID pandemic, Beke says that a revival is in the works.

"It was designed as a platform to showcase the artistry of braiding while educating, motivating, and inspiring professionals," she said. "We brought in celebrity guests, hosted live demos, and featured speakers."

Beke sees great value in the positivity that embracing and promoting natural haircare has on Black women and girls.

"Natural hair care is about embracing our authentic selves unapologetically," she said. "It gives Black women freedom, confidence, and pride in their own beauty. It's more than a beauty trend; it's a cultural movement."

Beke praises the Black haircare industry's work to change the historically underrepresented and derogatory view of Black beauty in modern media.

"Young girls can see themselves as beautiful, regal, and worthy," she said. "Through braiding, natural styles, and products created for us, we affirm that our hair isn't just acceptable, it's extraordinary. That affirmation builds confidence from childhood to womanhood."

Despite a very full plate, Beke shows no signs of slowing down. More expansion is in the works.

"Last year we opened our first 360 Salon Suites in Greenville, South Carolina," she said. "This year we launched Bignon's Natural Hair Academy and we're working on expanding Tree K Braids globally."

According to Beke, being a visionary is part of what has allowed her to excel over the years.

"My mind is always working on the next venture," she said. "The dream doesn't die."

What's happening with shots in North Carolina for 2025 season?

Continued from page 2B

the flu vaccine this year. The shot remains widely available in pharmacies, medical offices, health care centers and county health departments across North Carolina.

The flu shot is recommended for everyone six months or older, including pregnant women and seniors. The best time to get your shot is in September or October, according to North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services, or DHHS.

"Flu season is deadly," Fabrice Julien, a professor of health science at UNC-Asheville, told CPP. "People forget that."

Beyond individual protection, flu shots serve a broader public health function.

"Vaccines remain an important part of overall health and well-being and are one of the most effective means available to prevent serious illness, hospitalization and death," reads a statement from DHHS. "They help protect the health of children, their families and the entire community from the spread of infectious diseases."

COVID vaccinations

As COVID rates spike in North Carolina, access to vaccines is changing. Restrictions on the federal level are being countered with measures to expand access on the state level.

Kennedy announced in August that COVID vaccines are not approved for all healthy adults: only those with at least one high-risk condition. That holds true in North Carolina. Even for folks over 65, there is no blanket recommendation for the vaccine, Kennedy's vaccine panel voted on Friday.

High-risk conditions include obesity, diabetes, asthma, pregnancy, depression and former or current smoking, among many other common conditions.

This fall will be the first without blanket COVID vaccine recommendations since the product hit the market in 2020. Last year, North Carolina recorded more than COVID-related 120,000 emergency department visits and 21,600 hospitalizations.

This month, DHHS is seeing an extreme

spike in viral activity for COVID-19 in wastewater surveillance, bringing it to one of its highest points all year.

Officials here in North Carolina are working to expand access to the vaccine for those eligible under federal restrictions.

In years past, North Carolina was one of only 10 states where a prescription was required to receive the COVID vaccine. But no longer. On Sept. 12, Gov. Josh Stein issued a standing order that does away with the prescription requirement.

"The standing order from our governor is incredibly brave and necessary for the maintenance of public health," Julien said.

"Still, more can be done. The standing order takes care of people with underlying conditions. For those who do not have an underlying condition, but still want to get the shot, there's a lot of frustration."

Local health departments are stepping up across the state to help provide information and, hopefully, vaccines.

"We are working with state and local partners to do all we can to make it easy for our community to get the vaccines they need," Melissa Bracey, spokesperson for App Health Care, which serves Alleghany, Ashe and Watauga counties, told CPP.

"We are closely monitoring the federal landscape to determine how we are able to administer COVID-19 vaccines locally... We have ordered COVID-19 vaccines but have not received any yet. We are hopeful to have them soon."

The best time to get vaccinated against COVID at your local pharmacy is in September or October, just like the flu and RSV.

More decisions coming

This week, the COVID vaccine advisory panel — the one Kennedy completely overhauled — is meeting to determine further recommendations for who should receive the shots, and whether those shots will be covered by insurance.

The panel will also vote on recommendations for measles, mumps and Hepatitis B vaccines.

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Peep this: Get proactive protecting your eye health

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your vision."

To check for glaucoma, your eye doctor tests your eye pressure, peripheral vision and overall eye health. The painless screening is the only way to accurately diagnose the condition and determine appropriate treatment.

Although prescription eye drops are commonly prescribed and generally effective at lowering eye pressure, they can cause challenges and unwanted side effects, including redness, irritation, burning, stinging or difficulty putting them in the eye. In addition, patients may find it difficult to remember to take their eye drops every day, and missing doses — even by accident — can put vision at risk by allowing eye pressure to rise unchecked.

When prescription eye drops are unsuccessful at controlling eye pressure or managing glaucoma, an eye doctor may change treatment by prescribing additional prescription eye drops, which can make the challenges and inconveniences associated with prescription eye drops worse.

Modern glaucoma management is evolving with a shift from reactive — that

is, take prescription eye drops and "watch and wait" until glaucoma progresses before exploring alternative treatment — to proactive management. Taking a proactive approach means choosing a minimally invasive procedure earlier in the treatment journey to help slow the progression of glaucoma and minimize vision loss while reducing the challenges of daily prescription eye drops.

Procedural pharmaceuticals, or drug delivery systems, may include tiny, FDA-approved implants that deliver medication continuously to help lower eye pressure and protect vision.

Micro-invasive, or minimally invasive, glaucoma surgery involves less-invasive procedures, devices (such as stents) and techniques with faster recovery times than traditional surgeries.

Laser treatment commonly involves a laser being aimed through a special lens onto the drainage system of the eye, triggering a natural change that helps fluid drain from the eye to lower pressure.

These treatments may be used in combination with prescription eye drops or on their own. Visit livingwithglaucoma.com to learn more and help manage the condition.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Lemony California grape and beet salad. Foods like grapes can help you avoid sniffles and sneezes by boosting the immune system.

Support your immune health with some everyday habits

FAMILY FEATURES

your diet doesn't require a complete overhaul — small steps such as swapping in fresh California grapes for processed snacks or simply adding a handful of fresh grapes to your day will add these beneficial compounds to your daily routine.

Although it's impossible to guarantee you won't get sick, adopting a few healthy habits can go a long way toward avoiding the sniffles and sneezes.

Start by talking with your health care provider about any concerns you may have then follow these lifestyle recommendations for natural immune system support.

Wash your hands: While it's probably the first rule you learn about getting sick as a child, washing your hands remains a critical first line of defense.

Use warm, soapy water and rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds. Don't forget the backs of your hands, wrists and under your fingernails. Rinse off the soap then dry with a clean towel.

Commit to healthier eating: Foods like fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes and whole grains are recommended by experts as essential foods for optimizing your immune system. Consider fresh grapes, a prime example of food that contains beneficial plant compounds linked to health benefits in humans.

Healthy cells are the foundation of good health, and the antioxidants and other polyphenols naturally found in grapes help protect the health and function of cells. The good news is that improving

hands and clean commonly used surfaces like doorknobs or conference room keyboards.

Prioritize hydration: Even during cooler weather, staying hydrated remains important for immune health by keeping the body's defenses functioning properly. Drink water throughout the day, and for an extra dose, increase hydration by eating foods with high water content like grapes, which contain about 82% water.

Find more health and nutrition information at grapesfromcalifornia.com.

Lemony California grape and beet salad

Servings: 6

1/4 cup, plus 1 tablespoon, extra-virgin olive oil, divided

3 tablespoons lemon juice

1 tablespoon honey

2 cups peeled and sliced (1/8-inch thick) raw red and yellow beets, cut into small half-moons or triangles

1/2 teaspoon sea salt

3 cups halved red Grapes from California

1/2 cup roasted salted pumpkin seeds

2 green onions, thinly sliced

4 cups (3 ounces) baby arugula

freshly ground pepper, to taste

Heat oven to 400 degrees F and line baking sheet with parchment paper. In large bowl, whisk 1/4 cup olive oil, lemon juice and honey; set aside.

Place sliced beets on prepared baking sheet and

Please see SUPPORT | 3B



A chemical used in some weed killers, called glyphosate, has been identified as a possible carcinogen, although there are different interpretations of the scientific evidence.

Groups oppose 'Cancer Gag Act' funding in bill

By Mark Richardson
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

Health and safety advocates are opposing the parts of the Trump administration's Make America Healthy Again plan which would shield pesticide manufacturers from liability lawsuits.

Republicans in Congress are sponsoring legislation to roll back consumer protections against what are often called "forever chemicals," which may cause cancer.

Rebecca Wolf, senior food policy analyst for the nonprofit Food and Water Watch, called the Agricultural Labeling Uniformity Act, also known as the "Cancer Gag Act," a gift to industrial agriculture.

"What we're seeing is a concerted effort or a real campaign from Bayer, pushing this campaign to shield pesticide manufacturers from health-related lawsuits," Wolf said. "As well as hamper the EPA's ability to better regulate these toxic chemicals."

The measure was also introduced as part of the North Carolina Farm Act and was still pending at the end of this year's legislative session, although it passed both the state House and Senate in different versions. Pro-

ponents of the legislation argue it provides relief from lawsuits for overburdened manufacturing companies.

Wolf noted Bayer Corporation's weed-killing product, RoundUp, has been linked to a range of health problems, including various forms of cancer and birth effects. She added Bayer has already spent \$11 billion to settle thousands of cancer-related lawsuits and is seeking refuge from future liability from the Trump administration.

"It's very much out of the 'Big Ag, Big Chemical' playbook that has brought us things like 'right to farm' and 'ag-gag' laws," Wolf said. "Preemption, we've seen, has long been part of kind of a pro-corporate strategy to reverse hard-fought public health victories."

Bayer said its herbicide products are safe when used as directed.

The Cancer Gag Act has been proposed and defeated in nine states and passed in two, Georgia and North Dakota. Wolf argued federal legislation would have a devastating effect on public health.

"What I'm seeing is a very dangerous deregulatory agenda that is set to make us very, very sick," Wolf said.

Support your immune health with some everyday habits

Continued from page 2B
drizzle with remaining oil. Add salt and toss well to coat. Spread in single layer and bake 25 minutes, or until tender; let cool.

Add grapes and pumpkin seeds to bowl with dressing and toss well to coat.

Add cooled beets, green onions and

arugula. Toss lightly, season with pepper, to taste.

Nutritional information per serving: 250 calories; 5 g protein; 25 g carbohydrates; 16 g fat (58% calories from fat); 2.5 g saturated fat (9% calories from saturated fat); 0 mg cholesterol; 320 mg sodium; 3 g fiber.

Volkswagen ID Buzz brings new rendition to minivan class

Continued from page 1B

There are plenty of USB ports, wireless charging, electric child-proof locks and dual climate zones. Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are also standard.

Driving the ID Buzz is a lot of fun. Its size prevents it from being a cornering champ, but it holds its own when you get aggressive. There is plenty of passing power and the vehicle is easy to maneuver. Braking power is also very good.

The driver's seat gives a commanding view of the road. There's almost no front overhang so judging distances between you and a car in front is easy. The doors are big and wide with lots of window space so visibility on both sides is excellent.

The ID Buzz delivers a smooth and comfortable ride. The suspension soaks up bumps and road imperfections nicely. There is some wind and road noise but not as much as I thought.

This is an electric vehicle so range and charging quickness are important. The ID Buzz has a range of about 264 miles on a charge. That's OK, but that's if you charge to 100%. Most EVs recommend charging to 80% to preserve battery life.

Volkswagen is going to have to work on getting the range well about 300 miles

per charge if it wants to beat the competition. Charging speed is fairly quick. You can charge from 20% to 80% in about 26 minutes on a fast-charging network.

My test vehicle was an ID Buzz Pros S Plus with 4Motion (all-wheel drive). Its feature list included a retractable tow hitch, 13-speaker Harmon Kardon audio system, head-up display, heated windshield, second row captains' chairs, overhead view camera and massaging front

seats.

The MSRP was \$67,995 before taxes and destination charges.

Pros:

- Iconic VW is back
- Tremendous amount of space for all passengers
- Brisk acceleration
- Comfortable ride
- Easy entry and exit
- Excellent outward visibility
- All-wheel drive

Cons:

- Not enough range
- High price

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JENNIFER UPENDAHL | UNSPLASH

The Trump administration wants people to consider health insurance plans that include less generous benefits and larger deductibles.

Answer to Obamacare cuts: Less coverage

By Julie Appleby
KFF HEALTH NEWS

Trump administration officials, looking at the possible impact of large insurance premium increases for millions of next year's Obamacare customers, want more people to consider plans with less generous benefits and high deductibles.

The agency that oversees the ACA announced early this month that it would expand eligibility for "catastrophic" plans sold in Affordable Care Act online marketplaces. The plans require people to spend more than \$10,000 a year on deductibles before the policies pay most medical costs but carry lower monthly premiums than other Obamacare policies.

The move reflects growing concern among Republicans about political backlash if Congress doesn't extend larger tax credits put in place during the covid-19 public health emergency to help consumers pay their premiums. The extra subsidies are set to expire at the end of the year, resulting in an average 75% increase in the amount people pay for coverage, according to KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News.

A small, bipartisan group of House lawmakers introduced legislation to extend the enhanced covid-era subsidies for one more year, which would keep them in place through midterm congressional elections in fall 2026.

But the fate of that legislation is uncertain, with many Republicans opposed to extending the extra tax credits, with a permanent change costing at least \$335 billion over 10 years. Without an extension, tax credit amounts would revert to prepandemic levels.

"They spent the last 15 years against the ACA, so a lot will be steadfast, but others are worried about the effect of massively spiked premiums on their constituents," noted a Democratic Senate staffer who asked not to be identified because they weren't authorized to speak to the media.

Republicans currently control Congress by slim margins, raising the stakes if voters who lose their ACA tax credits blame them at the ballot box.

Catastrophic plans are a little-known type of Obamacare policy that have previously been limited mainly to people under age 30. While they come with lower monthly premiums than other types of ACA plans, the coverage has higher annual deductibles, which are set at the out-of-pocket maximum for the year: \$10,600 for individuals in 2026 or \$21,200 for families.

A deductible is the amount patients must spend on health care before insurance plans pay for most services. Catastrophic plans do cover three primary care visits a year without having to pay the full deductible and, as with other ACA policies, policyholders pay nothing for preventive services such as some cancer screenings and vaccines.

The catastrophic plans will automatically show up on the federal marketplace, healthcare.gov, for consumers who lose tax credit coverage entirely next year due to their household income. Another category of consumers — people who continue to qualify for tax credits but not for subsidies that reduce out-of-pocket costs — may also be eligible but would have to send in paperwork.

"By expanding access to catastrophic plans, we are making sure hardworking people who face unexpected hardships can get affordable coverage that protects them from devastating medical costs," Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Administrator Mehmet Oz said in a statement.

It isn't clear whether the policy changes will make the plans more attractive to consumers. Catastrophic plans aren't available in all states, and the size of the deductibles can be off-putting.

"It's a ton of money," said Louise Norris, a health insurance analyst and broker who writes regularly about the ACA. "A full-price catastrophic plan is still more expensive than some people can afford, but they're doing this to offer a slightly more affordable option."

Catastrophic plans have had limited appeal, with only about 54,000 out of Obamacare's 24 million enrollees currently opting for the coverage, according to government data, Norris said.

"Uptake has always been quite low,"

said Katie Keith, director of the O'Neill Institute's Center for Health Policy and the Law at Georgetown University. "It's not a bad option if it is the only option you have. I question whether consumers are looking for this kind of coverage."

CMS plans to grant people a "hardship" designation to enroll in catastrophic plans if they lose eligibility for ACA tax credits next year. Most likely to qualify are people earning more than four times the federal poverty rate (\$62,600 for an individual this year, or \$106,600 for a family of three), who will lose access to all premium subsidies if Congress does not extend the current enhanced tax credits. It's also unclear how much premiums will cost. Insurers, reacting to the new administration guidance, might seek to recalculate their rates based on what they estimate may be an influx of older people into the plans, Norris said.

AHIP, the insurance industry lobbying group, is pushing hard for the larger tax credits to be extended. It did not comment specifically on how the new guidance might affect catastrophic health plan premiums. Still, AHIP spokesperson Chris Bond said that "while catastrophic plans can provide important coverage for specific needs, they are not a replacement for affordable comprehensive coverage."

There are other hurdles. Norris said insurers don't offer plans at all in 10 states: Alaska, Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, and Wyoming. And where they are available, options are few. This year, for example, a 25-year-old in Orlando, Florida, had a choice of 61 "bronze" plans, the cheapest level of coverage available to all ACA shoppers, but just three catastrophic plans.

Policy experts say the expanded eligibility for catastrophic plans makes it more important than ever for consumers to consider all options when shopping for ACA coverage during the annual open enrollment period, which starts Nov. 1. In addition to the catastrophic and bronze plans, there are also "silver" and "gold" plans, each with varying premiums and deductibles.

Bronze plans have the lowest premiums but the highest deductibles; the average bronze deductible this year is \$7,186, which is still lower than the catastrophic plans, according to KFF.

Catastrophic plan deductibles, while high, are comparable to some bronze plans, Norris noted. People who choose catastrophic plans are not eligible for any ACA tax subsidies to help pay monthly premiums.

A pending court battle may provide lawmakers concerned about voter pushback on Obamacare changes an unintended reprieve.

In late August, a federal judge in Maryland temporarily put on hold some changes the Trump administration had ordered for next year. Those changes, included in a June regulatory filing by the administration, would have added additional verification paperwork requirements for some people enrolling in ACA plans, and were challenged by several cities, which cited government estimates that the changes could cause up to 1.8 million people to lose their insurance in 2026.

The court ruling stayed several provisions of the Trump administration rules, including income verification requirements that would affect people below the poverty level and those without tax return information. The move also paused verification requirements affecting people who apply outside the annual open enrollment period and blocked a \$5 monthly charge for people who are automatically enrolled into plans in which subsidies cover the entire premium — unless they contact the marketplace and confirm their selection.

The Trump administration is appealing the decision, but the case may not be settled until next year, said Keith at Georgetown University.

That makes it likely that the pause of the new requirements will stay in place for this year's open enrollment season.

Keith said the ruling was a "bigger deal" than expanding eligibility for catastrophic plans. "Consumers all across the country won't have to deal with red tape the Trump administration rushed to put into place ahead of the new plan year," and the ruling also "helps people keep their coverage."

Classifieds

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

BID

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HOME

Fall in Love With Your Backyard This Fall – Here's How!

(StatePoint) Just because fall is here doesn't mean your backyard fun has to end! Fall is the perfect season to breathe in crisp air, sip something warm under the stars, watch an outdoor movie, and make the most of your outdoor setup. With the right tools and a few seasonal upgrades, your backyard can stay the place to be long after Labor Day. Here's how.

Blow Away the Mess: "Leaf" It to the Pros

Those golden leaves look lovely on trees, not so much on your lawn. A good leaf blower (especially a cordless or battery-powered model) like the Greenworks 80V Cordless Leaf Blower can keep your yard tidy and pathways safe. But to take it up a level, look no further than the Mammotion Yuka robotic mower with sweeper kit. It doesn't just trim your lawn, it also collects fallen leaves as it goes.

Bring the Heat: Stay Toasty on the Patio

With propane or electric patio heaters, you can keep the chill at bay and enjoy those al fresco dinners well into the season. Try the Dr. Infrared Heater Outdoor Patio Heater for electric convenience or the Hampton Bay 48,000 BTU Patio Heater for classic propane warmth.

Cover Up: Furniture that Survives the Season

Fall weather can be unpredictable, but with water-resistant covers for patio chairs, tables and lounge sets, your stylish setup won't suffer. Brands like Vailge and Duck Covers make highly rated all-weather options in multiple sizes and styles.

Pool Days Aren't Over Yet

If you're one of the lucky ones with a pool, you might be able to stretch swimming season into September, especially with a pool heater. A reliable robotic skimmer like the Bubblle BuVortex V5 will spin around your pool, clearing it of fallen leaves, bugs and branches.

Backyard Movie Magic: Outdoor Projectors

Cooler nights are made for blankets, popcorn and movie marathons under the stars. Outdoor projectors turn backyards into a private cinema. One of the best is the Valerion Vision Master Pro 2, which delivers ultra-bright, cinematic 4K laser projection even in ambient light.

Fall Clean-Ups are Easier with the Right Tools

Pressure washers, trimmers and gutter vacs are great tools to prep your home for colder months. The Sun Joe SPX3000 Pressure Washer is a fan favorite. When paired with a gutter cleaner like the WORX Universal Gutter Cleaning Kit, you're ready for seasonal upkeep.

Don't Let Mishaps and Malfunctions Ruin Your Fall Fun

Outdoor gear works hard all year—but colder weather puts added stress on everything from leaf blowers to lounge chairs. When something breaks, it can be expensive to replace. The good news? Many of these items can be protected. The surprise? Most Americans don't know it.

An Allstate Protection Plans survey found:

- Only 9% know patio tables can be covered
- Just 7% know about patio chairs and umbrellas
- Only 6% realize lounge chairs qualify

And awareness is also low for leaf blowers (34%), robotic pool cleaners (28%) and patio heaters (22%).

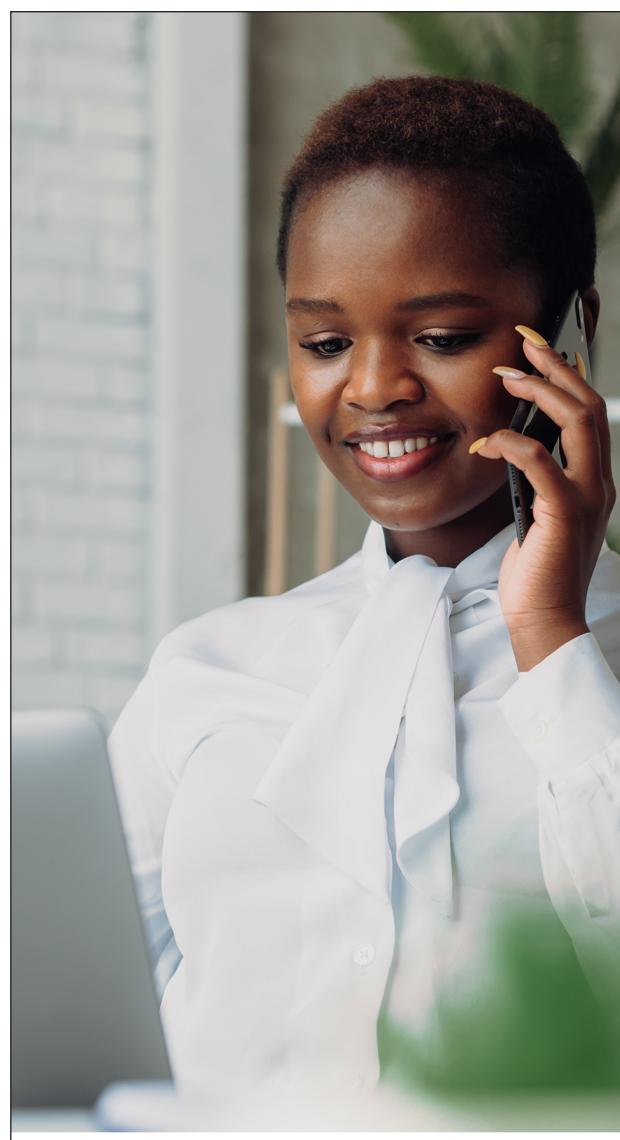
Don't wait for a breakdown. A protection plan helps keep backyard essentials working longer and saves you from surprise repair costs. Visit www.allstateprotectionplans.com for more fall outdoor living tips.

By performing a few maintenance tasks and protecting your gear, you can stretch backyard season into sweater weather.

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Novelist on tour stalked by stranger

By Bruce DeSilva
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Author Hank Phillipi Ryan has written a crime novel titled "All This Could Be Yours" about an author on tour to promote a crime novel titled "All This Could Be Yours." As Ryan says in an endnote, it's very meta.

The fictional author is Tess Calloway, a woman and mother who quit a well-paying corporate job where she felt "invisible" in order to pursue her dream of becoming a novelist. The hero of Tess's book is Annabelle, a woman who defies the limitations society places of women in order to do what she wishes with her "one life."

As Tess's book tour opens, her debut novel is already on The New York Times bestseller list. At each stop, she is greeted by adoring crowds, mostly women who chant "One life!" and proclaim that Annabelle inspired them to change their own.

Nevertheless, the tour is exhausting. Every day takes Tess to a new city, a different hotel, a fresh crowd of admirers. She has to rely on FaceTime to keep in touch with her husband and two young children, and her vivid imagination tortures her with fears about what could be going wrong at home.

Before long, however, odd things start happening on the tour. She finds a mysterious locket in a hotel room nightstand. At another stop, someone breaks into her room and leaves a pair of earrings. A sheet of paper with a vaguely threatening message is slid under her door. Someone takes her carry-on from an airplane overhead bin.

Worse, Tess starts getting uncomfortable personal questions about her past at bookstore appearances and on social media — uncomfortable because she has long harbored a dark secret. It's one that she fears would destroy her new career and her family if it were ever revealed.

In Tess, Ryan has created a likeable, compelling, complex character who struggles to come to terms with her past and finds the courage to confront the danger she faces. The story starts slowly, the tension building page by page toward a series of twists that readers are unlikely to see coming.

Bruce DeSilva, winner of the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award, is the author of the Mulligan crime novels including "The Dread Line."

'Him' fumbles a very potent premise for football horror

By Jake Coyle
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

American society probably puts more pressure on producing a good quarterback than anything else, which makes it all the more confounding that the Jets can never have one.

OK, OK. So that's not necessarily the takeaway from "Him," a new horror thriller about the religious fervor that goes with football. For some of us long-suffering fans, football inspires less Messianic zeal than an annual reminder that this is a dark and cruel world and any delusional preseason hope will be quickly and thoroughly snuffed out.

But Jets fan or not, "Him" has a decent point to make about QB hero worship. These are modern gladiators. But if the issue of some thrillers is that they have nothing to say, the problem with "Him" is that it has exactly one thing to say, which it does again and again and again. "Him" does have some style, though. Directed by Justin Tipping ("Kicks") and produced by Jordan Peele, "Him" was made with the potent premise of bringing the kind of dark, satirical perspective that characterizes a *Monkeypox* production to our violent national pastime. But that promise gets fumbled in an allegorical chamber play that grows increasingly tedious.

Cameron "Cam" Cade grew up idolizing Saviors quarterback Isaiah White (Marlon Wayans). As a boy, he watches White win a game on a highlight-reel play that also leaves the QB with a career-threatening injury. "That's what real men do," his father (Don Benjamin) tells him. "They make sacrifices."

Fourteen years later, Cam (Tyriq Withers) is on the cusp of entering the pros as a top draft pick. Just before the combine, though, Cam, while practicing

Please see **HIM** | 6B



Sisters-in-law Hannah (left) and Shardae Hasan are founders of Epoch Tribe, a community-based theater production company.

EPOCH TRIBE

Real stories. Real people. All on a community stage.

Epoch Tribe production company grows outreach with new initiatives

By Nikya Hightower
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Epoch Tribe turns real life stories into art.

Founders Hannah and Shardae Hasan started the community-based production company to put Black stories at the forefront of the stage. The idea for Epoch Tribe began when the sisters-in-law hosted a master class in Allentown, Pennsylvania where rising leaders in the community learned how to tell their own stories, followed by an open mic night.

"It was such a sort of magnetic experience," Hannah said. "Right then, Shardae and I decided this is a thing. This is more than the open mic nights with our artists in a group. This feels like a business."

Epoch Tribe takes a different approach to theater. The sisters-in-law connect people with their own

stories and teach them how to articulate them with others. Their goal is supporting Black artists on and off the stage.

"We wanted to build tribe around stories," Hannah said, "so we don't just do an individual story here or there. We build community with the people who participate in our work, and we create community around stories as well."

"I Am Queen: Charlotte" is one of the works by the company where hundreds of women have shared their stories.

"Those women aren't just connected to us," Shardae said. "They're also connected to each other. There's an entire community of women who are in relationships together based on their experience as being part of I Am Queen."

For an upcoming project, "Summer 25," the production company will

highlight stories and archive them at UNC Charlotte.

"We just had a group of individuals who are leaders from our community leave our studio," Hannah said. "They sat for two hours and shared their story of Summer 25, what the summer has been like for them, especially because this is such a polarizing time and there's so much happening in the world. We wanted to make sure that we're documenting that."

A key part of storytelling for the Hasans, especially when it comes to the stories of Black women, is handling them with trust and building relationships with the community.

"The reputation that we've built for handling people's most intimate moments, sometimes secrets, you know, holding them with a lot of responsibility because we don't take lightly

Please see **REAL** | 6B

We wanted to build tribe around stories so we don't just do an individual story here or there.

Epoch Tribe co-founder HANNAH HASAN

« MOVIE REVIEW »

From the ashes, a drama that blazes to life

By Dwight Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

The Lost Bus

3.5 stars

It started with a spark, and no one knew how it would end.

That's how the deadliest fire in California history went down on Nov. 18, 2018, in Butte County, California.

A town named Paradise was destroyed, burned to the ground and 85 people died. This based-on-fact story got pulled out of the ashes. They say a faulty Pacific Gas & Electric tower ignited the first flames. Bone-dry terrain and strong winds led to fire, smoke and an inferno that threatened this Northern California community.

Word was slow to get around that flames were marching across the hills and could pin locals in if they didn't evacuate.

It's an alarm that disrupted school bus driver Kevin McCay's (Matthew McConaughey) already stressed-out day. His rebellious teen son (Levi McConaughey) is home sick from school and testy: "I wish you were dead!"

His elderly mother (Kay McCabe McConaughey) can barely take care of herself. So, in a disaster, they'd be stranded. Also, Kevin's divorced wife is harassing him over his parenting skills, his job is tenuous at best and his boss Ruby (Ashlie Atkinson), the school bus



TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Matthew McConaughey in "The Lost Bus."

dispatcher, is ticked off that he's missing scheduled maintenance appointments.

Then out of the blue the evacuation notices come, everyone's terrified and people are in their cars trying to escape overcrowded roads that look like parking lots. They bang on their horns, and nothing moves. That's when the emergency request goes out for a bus driver to pick up 22 stranded kids and their elementary school teacher, Mary Ludwig (America Ferrera).

The mission? Drive them to safety as the land burns around them and save their lives.

Meticulously, director Paul Greengrass ("United 93") sets up the story, all the necessary special effects, places the characters in position and lights a blaze under it all. A sustained chaos lasts for two hours and nine minutes. Incessant danger that's ready to overpower an imperfect working-class dad who's just trying to make ends meet. That's the

Please see **FROM** | 6B

Real people and stories on a community stage

Continued from page 5B

the fact that people are willing to open up and share with us," Shardae said.

The projects Epoch Tribe produces aren't traditional theater. The founders pride themselves on upholding their values in what it means to be a storyteller from a Black woman's perspective. "Every part of who we are and the way that we show up in the world is tied to our identity," Hannah said. "And we don't shy away from that in the work that we produce, even if it is stories that are not about Black women. We are still, we're going to be looking through that lens."

"Because of that, we create great work, right? But that does not take away from, especially during this moment in time, people feeling afraid of what we might say."

The Hasans are not new to preconceived notions on their work. However, showing up authentically is their focus.

"We are curators of high art and that is something that we have had to establish and ground ourselves in and really educate other people in when it comes to us presenting our work and creating opportunities," Shardae said. "So, are the challenges there? Yes. Are we up to it? Always. Are we tired of it? Also, yes."

Said Hannah: "We want to create space for professional, creative careers that are paid well and that are treated with respect and dignity. We want to be known for that. We believe that we can do that, and that is what we're building up to."

OUT & ABOUT

PHOTOS BY DANIEL COSTON | FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST



BET co-founder Sheila Johnson was interviewed by Gigi Dixon at the UNCF Maya Angelou luncheon held at the Charlotte Convention Center on Sept. 13.

From the ashes, 'The Lost Bus' is a drama that blazes to life

Continued from page 5B

goal of screenwriter Brad Ingelsby, co-screenwriter Greengrass and this fiery hecat. Establish the protagonist, make mother nature's fury the enemy and let it play out based on the facts that were written in Lizzie Johnson's book "Paradise: One Town's Struggle to Survive an American Wildfire."

The whole situation is even more haunting to watch now, after the early 2025 wildfires that destroyed parts of Southern California. That tragedy is barely off the news cycle, and this frightening film puts you in the center of what it must have been like to face those blazes. Like this might have been what homeowners felt as they ran for their lives and lost what they left behind.

Credit Greengrass, the producers and production designer David Crank for the canvas they created. Costume designer Mark Bridges for clothes that look lived in. Cinematographer extraordinaire Pal Ulvik Rokseth ("22 July") for capturing the mayhem from afar and up-close. He and the special effects department blur the lines between what's real and wizardry, like it's a magic trick.

Sound effects make the fire roar like a bear on the attack. Add in James Newton Howard's nerve-fraying musical score and it feels like you're on a battlefield in a war zone. So traumatizing at points, that viewers won't realize how anxious they are until after the film, when they watch its movie trailer on a TV commercial and experience a PTSD effect.

There are some telltale flames that don't look as real as they should. But because the editing is so tight (Peter Dugdow, William Goldenberg, Paul Rubell), it's

just noticeable not a hindrance. The only scenes that seem lax are the ones when the film slows down to dig into Kevin's psyche. These moments become strained. Once the footage establishes him, his issues and reasons to want to succeed at something, there is no point in beating a dead horse.

McConaughey has made a fine career playing guy-next-door types. His persona is relatable, his accent and phrasing homey. Easy to root for this down-on-his-luck guy who's being bullied by his ex-wife, boss and a treacherous fire. Ferrera's understated but strong performance is the perfect balance to the not so educated Kevin character.

When the duo brave smoke, heat and flames, you're on their mission too. Atkinson, as Ruby the increasingly concerned dispatcher, plays the character in the most realistic way. Superb, dramatic acting.

This is an adrenaline rush. Creepy in ways because so much seems real. Ways that will tweak audiences' emotions. They'll be hooked in theaters. Even more engaged at home, when this film crosses over from cinemas to Apple TV+. From the comfort of their couches, they won't notice the footage's visual imperfections. They'll be so riveted, there will be no bathroom breaks, trips to the fridge or answering of phones.

As one character puts it, "Every year the fires get bigger and they're more of them." It's a scary thought. One that lingers. Just like the frayed nerves audiences will feel after the final credits roll. From a spark to a disaster. Wow.

Visit film critic Dwight Brown at Dwight-BrownInk.com.



Original Charlotte Hornets player Muggsy Bogues was honored by City Council with Muggsy Bogues Family Foundation Day on Sept. 8.



Marlon Wayans is professional football quarterback Isaiah White with primal underpinnings in "Him."

'Him' fumbles a very potent premise for football horror

Continued from page 5B

alone at night, is struck in the head by a strange pagan spirit-slash-mascot that emerges out of the shadows. The trauma to the head adds a new risk to Cam's football playing. But if you're expecting a horror version of 2015's "Concussion," that's a small part of what "Him" aspires to be about.

The Saviors reach out to Cam's agent (Tim Heidecker) and offer a unique opportunity: Come to Isaiah's Texas desert compound to train with him for a week. Isaiah is still in the league and by now, despite the long-ago injury, has gone on to win a Tom Brady-like haul of championships. After a week, the Saviors will decide if they'll draft Cam.

But what follows over seven days is less a boot

camp than a disorienting psychodrama -- a kind of football ayahuasca -- in which the very intense Isaiah pushes Cam to extremes to test whether he has it in him to be the GOAT. The atmosphere is surreal and the editing hallucinatory. Cam is injected with unknown serums, blood gets transfused and pocket-passing drills turn grisly. This is not a game, Cam is told more than once. To paraphrase Dani Rojas, football is life (and maybe death, too).

By settling the movie into Isaiah's Brutalist estate, "Him" takes what could have been something grander and turns into effectively into a battle for QB1 -- albeit one with more primal underpinnings than your average depth-chart contest.

But it's probably a bad

sign for your satire if you have to take reality completely out of it and instead hole up inside a haunted house. There are a few folks around, including Isaiah's influencer wife (Julia Fox), but somewhere far outside of the frame of "Him" is an enormous football world of arenas, screaming fans and broadcasters -- the world that a movie like "Any Given Sunday" rushed to capture, not evade. "Him" ends up feeling like a gladiator movie that forgot the Colosseum.

"Him," a Universal Pictures release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association for strong bloody violence, language throughout, sexual material, nudity and some drug use. Running time: 96 minutes. One and a half stars out of four.

Carowinds season for festivities



Carowinds' annual Scarowinds program brings out the ghoul in everyone -- including clowns.

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

It's fall, which means seasonal celebrations at Carowinds.

The theme park will transform with three events: Tricks and Treats, Scarowinds and Oktoberfest.

Tricks and Treats and Scarowinds will run on select nights and weekends through Nov. 2, while Oktoberfest goes to Nov. 23.

All three events are included with a single admission ticket.

From day to night, we've created an unforgettable experience with three can't-miss events, Carowinds park manager Brian Oerding said in a statement.

"With all your favorite rides, great weather and a variety of unique seasonal experiences, it's the perfect time to visit the park with friends and family."

With Camp Snoopy ex-

pansion complete and the addition of Tricks and Treats on select weekends from 11 a.m.-6 p.m. through Nov. 2, young and old alike can check out the Trick-or-Treat Trail, Patch's Pumpkin Patch and Mask Maker's Mash.

Oktoberfest is back for its second year. The menu includes premium quality beer, authentic German cuisine, live music and family-friendly activities like a Stein holding competition and keg tapping ceremony. Oktoberfest will be held on weekends from 11 a.m.-7 p.m. through Nov. 23.

A longtime favorite at Carowinds is the park's conversion into Scarowinds for the 25th year. The season includes five haunted mazes, four scare zones, five live shows and more than 300 monsters around the scream park.

Three new haunted attractions have been introduced as well as Glitch, a new scare zone and DepRAVed, a live show through Nov. 2.

Headlining the new additions is "The Conjuring: Beyond Fear," which is based on New Line Cinema's horror flick franchise. The program combines characteristics of a haunted maze and escape room.

At more than 20 minutes to navigate, guests can check out scenes from the Conjuring Universe to lock away cursed artifacts before supernatural chaos ensues.

"The Conjuring: Beyond Fear is unlike any haunted attraction we've ever had at Scarowinds," Oerding said. "The size, special effects, theatrical elements and storyline make it an ultra-immersive experience guests won't forget. We've raised the bar with this one."