

# Life!

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2025 SECTION B

## The bottom line on credit scores

By Brad Briner

SPECIAL TO THE POST

How do you know when to trust someone? You know the answer right away with certain people - family, close friends and others with whom you have regular contact. You've seen them keep their promises even when it was painful for them to do so... or you have seen them take advantage of other people's trust. Either way, you know whether you can put your trust in them.

But what about strangers? I grew up in the 1980s, and I remember my parents telling me repeatedly about "stranger danger." The big lesson from that: it is good to be skeptical of people you don't know, particularly if they are asking you for something.

That's the position that banks and other lenders find themselves in - strangers asking them for something. In this case, it's money. Perhaps a loan for a house or car, or to entrust them with a credit card. In any of these scenarios, the lender needs to figure out if they can trust this stranger.

Enter the credit score. Historically, banks made determinations of who they would lend to based on reputation, leading to incredibly subjective outcomes and far too much lending to people they knew, instead of to people who were more likely to pay them back.

Fair Isaac Corporation was a pioneer in the credit scoring industry, and the acronym FICO score that you may have heard comes from that company (as an aside, if you have a mental image like I do of

Please see **BOTTOM LINE** | 2B

## Juice labels that are making you sick

By Derrick Lane

BLACKDOCTOR.ORG

Juice is supposed to be good for you, right? For example, you've probably been told that drinking juice one cup of 100% orange juice is an excellent source of vitamin C and a good source of potassium, folate and thiamine. Plus, 100% orange juice naturally contains the phytonutrient hesperidin, which research suggests may help maintain a healthy blood pressure and blood vessel function.

But your body may never feel the health benefits of 100% fruit juice if you're buying the wrong juice.

See, some food manufacturers add sugar to balance the tart flavor of some juices. Mixed juice drink blends tend to have added sugar or are made from concentrate. They either don't provide many nutrients or have more sugar than necessary. And all of this is carefully hidden on the label in slick marketing terms. But here's what to look for and what the terms really mean:

Juice labels that are making you sick

6. Vegetable juices or vegetable 'cocktails' Some tomato, carrot, or "vegetable cocktail" juices are loaded with salt (sodium). This raises blood pressure and causes water retention.

Labels that say "fruit drink," "fruit cocktail," or "juice beverage" often have less than 20% real juice. The rest is water, sugar, and flavoring.

Even though the sugar in fruit juice blends occurs naturally, it's just as bad for you as sweetened drinks, according to a study that says drinking too much fruit juice can increase the risk of an early death by as much as 42%.

5. 'All natural'

This phrase is probably one of the biggest misleading phrases in the food industry. It has almost no meaning but it is used all the time. When you buy it you think that it means that it hasn't been changed.

All it really means is that there have been no "synthetic substances," artificial flavoring or colors added. The food may still have salt or other ingredients added, including high fructose corn syrup. Plus, those "natural" ingredients may be from animals.

4. 'Concentrate'

Some juice companies sabotage your body by using shelf-stable juice concentrates instead of real

Please see **THE FRUIT** | 2B

## «RIDES

## Toyota re-imagines 4Runner to refresh the design and features

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Toyota struggled with redesigning the 4Runner, but not how you think.

Heck, the design was 14 years old, but buyers bought them in large numbers and loved it. Toyota did mild updates but essentially left the vehicle unchanged.

That was 2024. The 2025 4Runner is new - brand new. It has a familiar look but miles ahead of the vehicle it replaces. Everything has been retouched and improved.

The new 4Runner can seat up to seven on certain models, can be equipped with part time or full-time all-wheel drive and even gets

the i-force Max hybrid. My test vehicle was the Trailhunter which had 4WD and the i-force engine standard. It would only seat five because the third row is not an option on the Trailhunter. This vehicle also gets a different suspension and can breathe through a snorkel on the right side, enabling it to drive through deep water.

Most 4Runner's get a turbo charged four-cylinder engine that make 278 horsepower and 317 pounds-feet of torque.

The i-force Max hybrid makes a total of 323 horses on the Trailhunter and 465 pounds-feet of torque. This is a lot of twist from this engine for rolling

through a variety of terrains or towing a lot of stuff. The hybrid system does cut in on the 15 cubic feet of storage, but the back seat can be folded.

The Trailhunter also gets Old Man Emu off-road shocks, bronze-finished wheels, steel skid plates, Rigid Industries color selectable foglight, integrated air compressor and frame-mounted ride rock sliders.

The Trailhunter was surprisingly comfortable on the highway. The suspension allows the vehicle to attack each bump and road imperfection, but I didn't find the ride bothersome. This is a true truck - body on frame - and that's what most 4Runner owners

want. The Trailhunter is built for the weekend warriors who want to take their \$60,000 truck out into the woods for across a few streams on occasion.

The big mirrors and 20-inch tires can be heard during highway travel, but, again, not so much to be troubling.

The 4Runner's looks are still rugged. Rough edges have been rounded and smoothed over but its looks are more updated than radically changed. The grille looks like the current Toyota family. The fenders are wider as is the entire vehicle and the rear has a more tailored look. The rugged theme continues inside with buttons

and switchgear having a stuff takes a bit of time getting acclimated.

If the interior has a fault, it's the lack of legroom in the second row. The vehicle reacts quickly but finding



Toyota's 2025 4Runner is a refresh of its longtime design. and switchgear having a stuff takes a bit of time getting acclimated. Everything is more modern looking but not slick. There is a huge touch screen that reacts quickly but finding



KYLIA MCGHEE

From left to right, Kyla McGhee, Sydney Barker, Indya Nivar, Bobbi Smith and Reychele Douglas pose for a playful photo after going undefeated in the Wake Forest team camp's ninth grade bracket as sixth and seventh graders on June 18, 2017.

## Girls' unbreakable bond built by NC basketball

Garner program built legacies on the court and as teammates

By Emma Unger

UNC MEDIA HUB

Even among North Carolina's long history of great basketball, one team stands out: The Carolina Flames.

The Amateur Athletic Union program in Garner has produced several athletes who went on to play Division I college and WNBA basketball.

But, the Flames did more than produce elite athletes and play great basketball. It formed unbreakable bonds. In 2014, the Flames' elementary school team became home to five girls who would soon consider themselves more like sisters.

Indya Nivar, Bobbi Smith, Kyla McGhee, Sydney Barker and Reychele Douglas didn't start playing basketball knowing it would bring them their closest friends or their path to college. But when each one walked into the gym in 2014, they began a journey of companionship and excellence on and off the court.

'Click'

"As far back as I can think, we always did things together," said Barker, now a guard at UNC-Chapel Hill. She can't remember a time when she wasn't best friends with Nivar, Smith, McGhee and Douglas.

The five girls joined the Flames

around the same time in 2014, all with their unique basketball beginnings, but each one with a growing passion for the game. Though some of the girls were nervous at the start, they became fast friends. "It was just kind of a click," Barker said.

AAU basketball was a higher level than they had played before, and their coach, Jorden Davis, said he thinks the intensity helped them form a strong bond. "They started molding their friendship because they would help each other when they weren't at their best," he said.

And by helping each other, the

Please see **BOND** | 2B

## Focus on Black youth mental health

By Jennifer Fernandez

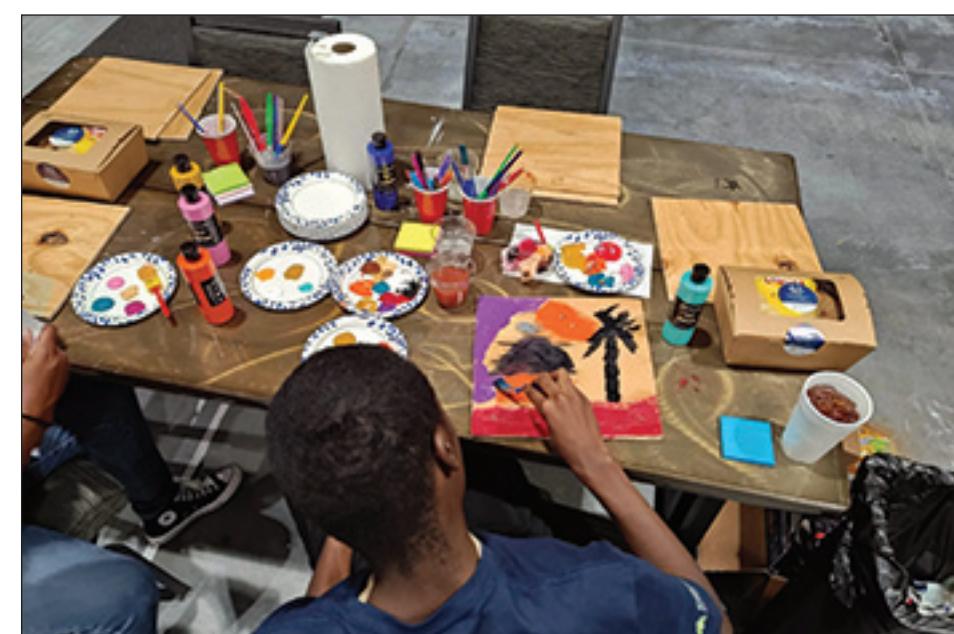
NC HEALTH NEWS

ROCKY MOUNT — In the Black community, families don't talk about suicide or depression, one student said. Black men don't grow up in homes where they can express themselves, another student added.

Those were some of the sentiments expressed by a panel of college students on Saturday at the inaugural Stronger Together conference, which shone a spotlight on Black youth mental health in North Carolina.

The students agreed that while resources are available to help, many of their friends and families don't know about them.

That's even though research shows Black youth are overrepresented in suicides and suicide attempts but are underrepresented in calls to the 988 suicide hotline, particularly in urban counties, state health officials said in a recent news release announcing North Carolina's first suicide prevention plan aimed primarily at the



JENNIFER FERNANDEZ | NC HEALTH NEWS

A volunteer at the Stronger Together conference paints a scene on a piece of plywood on Sept. 20, 2025, in Rocky Mount. Participants were encouraged to share their feelings by painting something. All of the pieces were attached to a wooden arch dubbed the Expression Tunnel.

Black community.

State officials released the five-year plan to address the rise in suicides among Black youth and young adults this summer.

That increase reflects a na-

tional trend, according to a recent report published in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

State data from 2023 also

showed that Black youth, ages 10 to 24, were particularly overrepresented in emergency department visits for suicidal thoughts or self-injury, officials said.

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Toyota's 2025 4Runner is a refresh of its longtime design. and switchgear having a stuff takes a bit of time getting acclimated. Everything is more modern looking but not slick. There is a huge touch screen that reacts quickly but finding



From left to right, Indya Nivar, Bobbi Smith, Kyla McGhee, Reychele Douglas and Sydney Barker eat brunch together on May 24, 2025.

## The fruit juice labels that are making you sick

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juice. Juice concentrates are made from fruits and vegetables that are heated down to syrup and then have water added back in.

So "concentrate" is just a fancy name for syrup. The concentration process involves both adding in and subtracting chemicals and natural plant by-products in order to condense the juice. During the concentration process, fruits and vegetables lose flavor and this is one of the reasons why companies have to re-add "flavoring" to make the juice taste fresh.

The concentration allows some juice companies to keep their juice shelf stable, preserved longer and allows them to save money during fruit processing.

### 3. 'Not from concentrate'

You would think that if the label explicitly states "not from concentrate," it means it's fresher, more real and better for you, right? Well, not necessarily. When most commercially available orange juices are made, according to the book "Squeezed: What You Don't Know About Orange Juice," many companies store juice in giant tanks and have the oxygen removed from them, which allows the liquid to keep for up to a year without spoiling.

This storage makes the orange juice lose flavor. So the industry uses "flavor packs" to re-flavor the juice. Even if your juice says "100% juice" or "premium" on the ingredient label, it can still have these flavor packs, because they are not required to be listed on the ingredient label because technically they are derived from orange essence or oil.

### 2. Pasteurized'

According to FoodBabe, most juice companies use traditional pasteurization or flash pasteurization to destroy harmful bacteria, viruses, molds, and other mi-

croorganisms to safeguard our health by heating the juice (this would be the second time your juice is heated if you are drinking juice from concentrate). During this process, pasteurization also kills raw enzymes, minerals and vitamins - the reason that we are drinking the juice in the first place. Heat kills the bad stuff and good stuff, making the juice pretty much worthless of nutrients.

Most companies create vitamins by chemical manipulation and synthesis, not from actual fruits and vegetables.

### 1. 'Citric acid'

Many juice companies use an ingredient called citric acid to extend the shelf life of their product. Most people would think this citric acid comes from citrus like lemons, oranges and limes, but not always. The ingredients most food manufacturers use to create citric acid are genetically engineered corn and sugar beets, by synthetically fermenting the glucose from these crops in a laboratory.

Also, some juice companies go as far as adding sugar (that could be from GMO sugar beets), high fructose corn syrup (from GMO corn) and/or other ingredients that could contain GMOs. Most GMOs have never been tested long term on humans, and are just now being linked to the rise in allergies, infertility and some auto-immune disorders.

### What kind of juice should you buy?

Besides 100% organic juice, cold pressing is the most nutritious way to obtain juice. First, the produce is ground into a fine pulp. Then a press applies thousands of pounds of pressure to the pulp, extracting every ounce of juice that the fruit or vegetable has to give. This process gets all the vital nutrients from the pulp into the juice.

Cold-Pressed juices have a longer shelf life than centrifuge or slow juicers.

## Focus on youth mental health

Continued from page 1B

right kind of access."

### Speaking out

As part of the daylong conference, youth and audience members were invited to share their talents, from poetry and singing to spoken word and dance.

One trio of young women danced to Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" wearing shirts with the words "trauma," "pain" and "worry" taped to them. At the end of the song, they ripped the words away and walked off stage.

Another woman sang a song she wrote about meeting a young man on the top of a parking deck as he contemplated suicide.

"I know it hurts, but it ain't worth taking your life," she sang. "You're worth more than the pain you're feeling inside."

Briannah Billings was 24 when she met "August," the young man in the song of the same name. She said she spoke to him as someone else called 911. He decided not to jump and was taken to a hospital for treatment. Billings never saw him again, but the experience stuck with her.

The more she shared the story, the more friends began to tell her about their own bouts with depression and mental health issues, Billings told NC Health News.

Being able to discuss mental health freely is important, said Judith VanBoven, one of the college panel members.

Part of the state's efforts to address Black youth suicide include training laypeople — from families to youth club participants and leaders — to recognize the signs and symptoms of someone struggling with mental health, said Kelly Crosbie, director of the state's Department of Health and Human Services Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services.

Not everyone will want to go to a professional, or be able to access one, Crosbie told NC Health News. And there's always going to be a shortage of professional providers, she said. So it is important to equip the spaces where youth are going to go.

Even if there is a professional in the community, cultural differences can create a barrier if the young person can't connect with them, she said.

"It can be especially hard to earn the trust and open up and think that they can help you," Crosbie said.

"They don't really know where to go," he said.

If people aren't exposed

to what help is available, they may just feel hopeless, said Quest's father, Day Allen, 46.

"You think this is just how it is," he said.

Crosbie told the audience it is important for the state to find ways to reach the Black community, to make sure residents know the resources available to them, and to ensure that those resources meet the community's needs.

The 988 suicide helpline, for example, is underutilized by the Black community, health officials have said.

"We know we have to emphasize that it is confidential. It is free. It is not calling 911," Crosbie said. "It is about calling a mental health counselor who's there to help you in any way that you need. This is not a punishment. It's not a penalty, and it's nothing to be ashamed about."

Quest said he appreciated some of the coping techniques shared at the conference. In one, participants were taught how to wrap their arms around themselves in a self hug.

He said events like Saturday's conference are needed.

"It's important because we're losing lives," he said.

Social media affects mental health

The panel of college students delved into social media's growing influence in the lives of youth and their mental health.

"If you put too much stakes in social media, it always has the opportunity to disappoint you," said Nas Issoufou, a graduate student at UNC Charlotte. "What happens if you don't get those likes? What happens if you don't like how this picture turned out?"

Nautica McCoy, a Gardner-Webb University student, said social media can take away from when young people do have accomplishments, because there's a constant focus on what has to come next.

"We need to take a break from the media and seeing all these things," VanBoven said.

"Know when it is time to take a break and step away from the phone to sit to give yourself peace of mind."

There are so many voices of influence on social media and so much overstimulation, Day Allen said.

"It's like handing your kids cocaine," and they become addicted, he said.

## Bond built by basketball

Continued from page 1B

girls helped strengthen the team. At one point, Davis said, the team's overall record was 63-2, and they went two and a half years without losing a game.

"For years, teams were terrified to play us," Davis said. "We had to enter tournaments under fake names - I kid you not - just so we could play and get reps in."

Even during breaks from the AAU season, or when the girls eventually split to different teams, they continued to play together. "We always played pickup together, we always trained together," Barker said. They girls agreed they continued to encourage each other to strengthen their skills, all the while strengthening their friendship, which extended far beyond the basketball court.

"We went to the lake, went out to eat, all the things," Barker said. Though their friendship has changed dynamics over the years as they have spread farther apart, Barker said they continue the foundation they built more than a decade ago.

As the girls grew older and became more serious about their pursuit of basketball, they helped hold one another accountable, said Bobbi Smith, a senior guard at East Carolina University. "We understood the importance of training hard and preparing yourself for the next level," she said. "And so, I think that fueled our workouts."

Their presence of just one girl at a workout or training was enough to get another girl to join, Smith said, and not just for the purpose of improving their skills. Smith said, "Getting to go to practice every week and see them was another playdate, honestly."

Around middle school, the girls started getting notices from college coaches, and they also moved together to play for Team Wall coached by Zenita Hill. Their group motivation was paying off. "The knowledge and the IQ that they had, the foundational skills and then some that they had," Hill said. "Oftentimes we were playing up because they would just devour people their age."

The girls kept their off-court friendship just as strong, and they made sure they had fun amidst the grind of training. On weekends, they would go to the movies, go bowling, take a trip to the N.C. State Fair - anything to spend some time together.

"Our parents, they knew it was coming," Smith said. "They would always have either the money ready or have the car ready because they knew they'd have to take us somewhere to see each other."

### Who wants to win more?

Coaches from top college programs filled the stands as the girls, already several-time state champions, played throughout middle and high school, both when they played together and when they split off to different teams. No one was surprised when offers started rolling in. "Once I got to seventh or eighth grade, I got my first offer," said Reychele Douglas, now a guard for the University of Alabama. Nivar, McGhee, Smith and Barker all started considering schools around the same time.

Douglas said girls' friendship helped them during recruitment, both by continuing to push each other and finding the lighthearted moments throughout the process. When the five girls split off to different teams in high school, the separation provided

them the opportunity to see each other from a different perspective - the other side of the court.

Some of the girls faced off on their individual AAU teams, but Douglas and Nivar also competed on their high school teams. "At the end of the day, y'all know y'all are best friends, but when we get on the court, it's like 'Who wants it more?'" Douglas said. "I feel like it brings out that competitive side of both of us."

As proof, Nivar later said of the matchups, "My team wins the most."

Though they were now opponents instead of teammates, the girls continued training with each other, and Douglas said just talking about recruitment helped them all through the process. "Having those funny stories to share with each other," Douglas said, "rather than it being all business as it is."

The group's support didn't stop at basketball recruitment. McGhee said that when she opted not to pursue collegiate basketball, her friends supported her fully through her college application process, and the four girls tracked when application decisions would be released. "They were the ones who told me when the UNC decisions came out and texted the group chat," McGhee said.

In her junior year of high school, Douglas committed to play at the University of Alabama; Nivar spent her first year of college ball with Stanford University, before transferring to UNC-CH her sophomore year; Smith chose to spend her four years with East Carolina University; Barker started at UNC-CH as a walk-on and earned a scholarship in her sophomore year; and McGhee studies sports journalism at UNC-CH.

### Truly sisters'

Through all the years of basketball and life moments, the five girls have piled on accolades and memories, and they have never faltered in their support of one another. "We grew together," Nivar, a guard for UNC-CH, said. "We grew as people, as basketball players, and just developed a relationship that's going to last forever."

The girls hold fond memories of surprising Nivar at the airport when she returned home after winning gold in Argentina with Team USA at the 2022 FIBA U18 Americas Championship and traveling to Chicago when she was named a McDonald's All-American the same year. "Having them there to celebrate another accomplishment that I had," Nivar said, "it just meant the world to me."

That same love and support is extended to each girl, and it doesn't stop during hard times. Nivar struggled with the adjustment when she transferred to UNC-CH her second year, and even then, all four girls were there to support her. Barker said she believes it helped to have two of the girls in close proximity to Nivar.

Today, Nivar, Barker and McGhee live together at UNC-CH, but they miss their two counterparts. "Hopefully we can have all five of us together soon," Nivar said.

To memorialize their friendship and remember each other when they're apart, the group got matching tattoos in December 2022 - five hearts, one for each girl.

Despite uncertainty about what might come after college, the girls know they will have each other. "I just see us sharing a lot more life memories with each other," Nivar said. "Being there, supporting each other through the milestones."

## Toyota re-imagines 4Runner to refresh design and features

Continued from page 1B

hicle is a bit wider and taller, but cabin space is only marginally larger. Front passengers have better room and a nearly panoramic view of the road.

The 2025 Toyota 4Runner has been improved in nearly every aspect. The Trailhunter version starts at \$67,400 before destination or options or accessories.

Base vehicles start at \$41,270 with a good bit of standard equipment. Every 4Runner comes within eight-speed transmission and a plethora of advanced

driver's assist features.

### Pros:

- All-new design
- i-Force Max hybrid engine
- Rugged, handsome looks
- Modern interior
- Excellent off-road capability
- OK fuel economy
- Impressive towing capacity

### Cons:

- No V6 option
- Cramped second row

Even if there is a professional in the community, cultural differences can create a barrier if the young person can't connect with them, she said.

"It can be especially hard to earn the trust and open up and think that they can help you," Crosbie said.

"They don't really know where to go," he said.

If people aren't exposed

## Bottom line on credit scores and their impact

Continued from page 1B

some all-knowing person with a long grey beard named Isaac who is very fair in his assessments, that isn't quite right, the name comes from the two last names of the founders).

So, how do these scores work and why do they matter? They are designed to provide relevant information to the basic question a lender wants to know - is this stranger going to pay me back? It makes sense then that your history of paying other people back would be very relevant. As would your income level and the consistency of what you have made in income over time.

As would be what you are buying with the loan, and so forth. The more information they have about your financial trustworthiness, the higher

the score.

Today, these scores are incredibly important in whether the lender lets you borrow money, and the interest rate they charge if they do. If you are able to come up with a down payment, most people will be able to find a lender to buy a house. But what that lender charges for your mortgage can vary by 2% or more depending on your credit score.

If your interest rate is on the low side, it is because you are considered more likely to pay it the loan back than others; the opposite is true as well, of course. Simply put, a better credit score means more money in your pocket and less money on interest payments.

*Brad Briner is North Carolina's state treasurer.*



SHUTTERSTOCK

The Share the Mana, Share the Table initiative encourages people to get together for bonding of spirits.

## Share Mana and the table

FAMILY FEATURES

Sometimes the most meaningful conversations happen with people you've just met, especially when gathered around a shared table.

With its new initiative, Share the Mana, Share the Table, Teremana Tequila - the premium small-batch tequila founded by Dwayne Johnson - is proving joy multiplies when people open their doors, pull up a few extra chairs and make space for others. At a time when many are craving deeper bonds with those around them, the campaign is a powerful call to turn entertaining into something more meaningful: a chance to spark connections and spread positive energy.

**From 113 distillations to 113 seats**

The movement launched in Los Angeles with a community gathering at Skylight ROW DTLA. In a nod to the 113 distillations Johnson personally tasted while developing Teremana, the brand invited 113 strangers to sit together for a shared meal at one long table. The result was an evening of togetherness filled with conversation, laughter, great food and cocktails, where countless stories were shared and 113 strangers became friends - a living example of Mana, the brand's guiding philosophy of sharing good energy.

**The case for connection**

Recent Pew research suggests Americans are feeling less connected than ever - only 54% reported feeling a bond with their local community in 2024. At the same time, studies from the University of Chicago show people consistently underestimate the joy of simply talking to a stranger. In other words: Humans are hardwired for connection but often forget how much it lifts them up.

A simple dinner party, a potluck or even a casual get-together can be enough to create those moments of connection. Here are a few ideas to try:

• Instead of sticking to the usual guest list, invite neighbors, colleagues or friends-of-friends who might otherwise eat alone.

• At Teremana's kickoff event, strangers were encouraged to sit side by side. Try mixing your seating chart to encourage fresh conversations.

• Begin the meal with a toast that acknowledges everyone at the table, not just for showing up, but for sharing their energy and spirit.

• You don't need a five-course menu. A signature cocktail, hearty dish and warm atmosphere are often enough to spark connection.

Remember Mana isn't about perfection, it's about presence. It's the positive spirit you bring into the room and the openness you share with others.

**The toast that travels**

While Teremana's community tables

will continue popping up across the country, it is also rolling out a global social media campaign, encouraging fans everywhere to join in. With a few simple posts, you can spread your own ripple effect of good energy, sharing what it means to you to share the Mana.

Of course, there's no table without a toast. To help kick off your gathering, consider The People's Margarita and the Mana Paloma - crowd-pleasing drinks that are approachable and full of character. Whether you're hosting a cozy dinner for four or a neighborhood gathering for 40, these drinks are designed to be shared.

**More than a meal**

At the heart of Share the Mana, Share the Table is a reminder that gathering isn't really about the menu or the drinks - it's about the connection. When people pause to share food, conversation and good energy, they create moments that last long after the plates are cleared. The next time you gather friends, neighbors or even strangers, take a cue from this movement. Pour something delicious, pull up a few extra chairs and remember: when you share the table, you share so much more.

For more ways to embrace the spirit of Mana and to find cocktail recipes for your next celebration, visit Teremana.com and follow on social media @teremana.

**The People's Margarita**

Servings: 8-10  
2 cups Teremana Blanco  
3/4 cup lime juice  
1/2 cup agave nectar  
1 cup pineapple juice  
lime wheels, for garnish (optional)  
pineapple leaves, for garnish (optional)  
sea salt, for garnish (optional)  
ice

In large pitcher filled with ice, gently stir tequila, lime juice, agave nectar and pineapple juice.

Pour into rocks glasses and garnish with lime wheels, pineapple leaves and sea salt, as desired.

**Mana Paloma**

Servings: 8-10  
2 1/4 cups Teremana Reposado  
9 ounces grapefruit juice  
6 3/4 ounces lime juice  
4 1/2 ounces simple syrup  
club soda  
lime wheels, for garnish (optional)  
grapefruit slices, for garnish (optional)  
ice

In large pitcher with ice, gently stir tequila, grapefruit juice, lime juice and simple syrup to combine.

Pour into highball glasses over fresh ice then top each glass with club soda. Garnish with lime wheels or grapefruit slices, as desired.



UNSPASH

A first-rate floor doesn't have to be left to professionals if you're willing to put in the work.

## Lay flooring like a professional

FAMILY FEATURES

Updating the flooring can help infuse new life into tired, outdated bathrooms.

For an upscale, polished look that doesn't have to break the bank, consider installing tile flooring.

Before you get started, you'll want to make some decisions about the look and feel of your flooring:

Ceramic or stone? Weigh factors such as porosity, how slippery the surface may be when wet and how well it retains heat or cold. Ultimately, your decision hinges on the needs and uses of your family.

Complement or contrast? Define the overall style you want as well as the colors and tones that will help best achieve your vision.

Big or small? Generally, the larger the tile, the fewer grout lines, and too many grout lines in a smaller space can create the illusion of clutter. However, smaller tiles can eliminate the need to make multiple awkward cuts, and small tiles are perfect for creating accent patterns or introducing a splash of color.

When you've got your overall look and materials selected, keep these steps in mind as you begin laying the flooring:

1. Prepare your subfloor. Use a level to check for uneven spots; you need an even surface to prevent cracks in the tile or grout as well as rough spots that could pose tripping hazards. Use patching and leveling material to create a consistent surface. Apply a thin layer of mortar then attach your cement backer board with screws. Cover joints with cement board tape, apply another thin layer of mortar, smooth and allow to dry.

2. To ensure square placement, draw reference lines on the subfloor using a

level and carpenter square. Tile should start in the middle of the room and move out toward the walls, so make your initial reference lines as close to the center as possible. Mark additional reference lines as space allows, such as 2-foot-by-2-foot squares.

3. Do a test run with your chosen tile by laying it out on the floor. There are color variations in most tile patterns, so you'll want to verify each tile blends well with the next.

4. Mix tile mortar and use the thin side of a trowel to apply mortar at a 45-degree angle. Use the combed side to spread evenly and return excess mortar to the bucket. Remember to apply mortar in small areas, working as you go, so it doesn't dry before you're ready to lay the tile.

5. When laying tile, use your reference lines as guides. Press and wiggle tile slightly for the best adherence.

6. Use spacers to create even lines between one tile and the next, removing excess mortar with a damp sponge or rag.

7. As you complete a section of tile, use a level and mallet to verify the tiles are sitting evenly.

8. Let mortar dry 24 hours before grouting.

9. Remove spacers then apply grout to joints, removing excess as you go.

10. Allow grout to dry per the manufacturer's instructions then go back over tile with a damp sponge to set grout lines and clean grout residue.

11. Once grout has cured - usually at least a couple weeks - apply sealer to protect it.

Find more ideas and tips for updating your bathroom at eLivingtoday.com.

## She found a lump in her breast. Then her doctors made the experience worse.

By James E. Causey

MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

answer. When I requested a second opinion, my concerns were met with condemnation. It was a horrible experience that left me wondering if I would ever return," she said. "They really made me feel like a (racial slur)," said Gamby-Turner, 51.

Along with being spoken to disrespectfully, she felt that the white team of doctors tried to rush her into having her breast removed. They also told her that they couldn't perform the procedure without a substantial out-of-pocket cost due to a high deductible.

One doctor even suggested that she find a job at a grocery or convenience store that offered better insurance before she returned.

By the time she left the hospital, Gamby-Turner was in tears.

"I didn't want to go back," she admitted. "I actually lost faith in modern medicine after that."

Overwhelmed with the news of cancer, Gamby-Turner would proceed to get a second opinion, which confirmed her original diagnosis.

"They would not listen to me at all. Every time I tried to ask them a question so they would see me as a person and not just a number, I wasn't given an

points of my life because it was about my health. This was about life or death, and I just needed time to process," she said.

**Black women experience delays**

Black women are 38% more likely to die from breast cancer than white women, despite having a 5% lower incidence of the disease.

A study conducted by the UNC-Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health found that Black women are more likely than white women to experience delays of 60 days or more before starting breast cancer treatment.

The study connected these delays to systemic factors, including barriers to accessing care within the health care system, financial difficulties, and social issues, like not being able to take time off work without the stress of strained finances.

Another study published in 2017 identified four main factors that explain the higher mortality risk of Black women from breast cancer: the absence of private health insurance, more aggressive tumors, and disparities in their access to high-quality screenings as well as treatments.

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# Classifieds

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

## BIDS

Sealed, hand-delivered proposals will be received until **2:00 PM, on Thursday, November 13, 2025**, in the office of Mecklenburg County Asset & Facility Management Department, 3205 Freedom Drive, Suite 6000, Charlotte, NC 28208, for the construction of **VCW DC FAST CHARGERS. Single prime Electrical Contractor**, lump sum bids will be taken for construction as indicated in the bidding documents. The project is located at 3205 Freedom Drive, Charlotte, NC 28208. A mandatory pre-bid meeting shall be held on at **10:00 am on Wednesday, October 15, 2025**, at 3205 Freedom Drive, Suite 6000, Charlotte, NC 28208. Mandatory means any company not in attendance will not be allowed to bid. Prime Electrical Contractors wishing to submit a bid for this project must provide a **MANDATORY written Letter-of-Interest** to the County's authorized Design Consultant **at least 48 hours** in advance of the bid opening in order to be placed on the Official Bidders List for automatic distribution of potential addenda and offered consideration by the County as a responsive bidder. **5% Bid, 100% Performance, and Payment & Material bonds** shall be required for this project. NC law and applicable regulations of various licensing boards apply. Mecklenburg County reserves the right to reject any or all proposals and to waive informalities or technicalities, as it may deem to be in its best interest. For Drawings with Specifications, please contact the design consultant: **Contact: Daniel Boland | dboland@cmta.com | (704)-376-7072 | JC Edwards | JC.EDWARDS@cmta.com | (704)-376-7072 | CMTA, Inc. | 8801 J.M. Keynes Drive, Suite 240, Charlotte, NC, 28262.**

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LendingTree, LLC - Senior Manager, Business Analytics (Charlotte, NC): will define data elements and structures for analytics and reporting; collaborate with engineering and data warehouse teams to ensure key data capture; and streamline reporting needs for efficiency. Role requires 10% of domestic travel. Position permits remote work up to 5 days per week throughout the U.S. Mail resume to: LendingTree, LLC, Attn: Caroline Adams-Lewis, 1415 Vantage Park Drive, Ste 700, Charlotte, NC 28203. Reference job# AJ056800.

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## BOOK REVIEW

## 'AI actor' Tilly Norwood stirs outrage in Hollywood

By Jake Coyle

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Like thousands of actors, Tilly Norwood is looking for a Hollywood agent.

But unlike most young performers aspiring to make it in the film industry, Tilly Norwood is an entirely artificial intelligence-made character. Norwood, dubbed Hollywood's first "AI actor," is the product of a company named Xicoia, which bills itself as the world's first artificial intelligence talent studio.

Since the Dutch producer and comedian Eline Van der Velden launched the digital character's prospective career, Tilly Norwood has been all the talk in Hollywood.

But not in a good way. Guilds, actors and filmmakers have met the Xicoia product with an immediate wave of backlash, protesting that artificial intelligence should not have a starring role in the acting profession. In a statement Tuesday, the Screen Actors Guild said that "creativity is, and should remain, human-centered."

"To be clear, 'Tilly Norwood' is not an actor, it's a character generated by a computer program that was trained on the work of countless professional performers — without permission or compensation," the guild said. "It has no life experience to draw from, no emotion and, from what we've seen, audiences aren't interested in watching computer-generated content un tethered from the human experience."

Van der Velden, founder of the AI production studio Particle6, last weekend promoted Tilly Norwood at the Zurich Summit, the industry sidebar of the Zurich Film Festival. She said then that talent agencies were circling Norwood and that she expected to soon announce a signing.

Many in Hollywood, though, hope that never happens.

"Hope all actors repped by the agent that does this, drop their a\$\$," wrote actor Melissa Barrera ("In the Heights," "Scream") on social media. "How gross, read the room."

"Any talent agency that engages in this should be boycotted by all guilds," wrote Natasha Lyonne on Instagram. The "Russian Doll" star is directing a feature titled "Uncanny Valley" that pledges to use "ethical" artificial intelligence in combination with traditional filmmaking techniques. "Deeply misguided & totally disturbed," she added. "Not the way. Not the vibe. Not the use."

Artificial intelligence is often used as a tool in film production, though its implementation is hotly debated. It was a major bargaining point in the lengthy strike by SAG-AFTRA that concluded in late 2023 with some safeguards put in place to protect the use of actors' likenesses and performances by AI. A yearlong strike by video game actors hinged on AI protections. In July, video game actors approved a new contract that mandates employers obtain written permission to create a digital replica.

But there have been numerous controversies over the use of AI in acting. The Oscar-winning 2024 film "The Brutalist" used artificial intelligence for Hungarian dialogue spoken by Adrien Brody and Felicity Jones' characters, the revelation of which prompted debate in the industry.

Van der Velden responded to the stir around Tilly Norwood on Instagram.

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Van der Velden responded to the stir around Tilly Norwood on Instagram.

## MOVIE REVIEW



A24

Emily Blunt and Dwayne Johnson in "The Smashing Machine."

# Blood, guts and The Rock fuel 'The Smashing Machine'

Dwayne Johnson pulls off his career-best starring role in a familiar arena

By Dwight Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

**The Smashing Machine**

3 stars

"Am I going to hurt him before he hurts me?"

That's what's on the mind of mixed martial arts champion fighter Mark Kerr before every match. He developed that aggressive stance early in life. Born in Toledo, Ohio, to an Irish dad and Puerto Rican mom, as a kid he was a World Wrestling Federation fan who wrestled in his backyard. Years later becoming a high school state champion, winning wrestling awards at Syracuse University and earning a silver medal at the 1995 Pan American Games.

Kerr's amateur wrestling experience helped when he transitioned into mixed martial arts. He famously became a pioneer of the full-contact fighting sport that embodies striking, grappling and other combat sports from around the world. That set the stage for him becoming one of the first stars in the Ultimate Fighting Championship world. They called him "The Smashing Machine," because of his brutal fighting style.

That's Kerr's backstory. In his biofilm, indie writer/director Benny Safdie ("Uncut Gems") catches Kerr (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) at the heights and depths of his fame. He's partnered with his girlfriend Dawn Staples (Emily Blunt), has a deep friendship with fellow MMA fighter Mark Coleman (Ryan Bader), and is coached by Bas (Bas Rutten, MMA champ; "Paul Blart: Mall Cop"). Kerr knows how to kick ass and holds the record for the longest winning streak for an MMA Bellator heavyweight champion.

During his high-profile career, Kerr garnered fans around the world, particularly in Japan, where martial arts is extremely popular. The wins have come at a price for the big gregarious man who's surprisingly soft spoken outside the ring. The chronic pain he suffers from countless injuries has

made Advil about as effective as a cough drop.

It's a big boy pain that's only soothed by narcotics. Drugs that are changing Kerr's personality and starting to drive a wedge between him and Dawn. Now they're fighting a lot. Romantic bliss is overshadowed by scream fests. In fairness to him, sometimes when he needs to concentrate just before a match and block out extraneous stimuli, she becomes an unwanted distraction. She's there to support him ostensibly but making her feelings dominate the conversation. Dawn: "I just need you to let me in." Kerr exasperated and trying to block her whining out: "It's always about you. Only about f---ing you!"

Safdie's surprisingly deep script takes audiences into the nooks and crannies of the MMA world. It de-glamorizes the sport, goes behind the spectacle and introduces audiences to the humans that are taking punches and kicks to the face for money, the joy of fans and an adrenaline rush.

The involving, docudrama, *cinema vérité* style reveals a lot, similar to the way filmmaker Darren Aronofsky showcased the wrestling world with his 2008 film "The Wrestler," starring Mickey Rourke. You can almost smell the sweat on Kerr's body. When he shoots up opioids, you wince because it looks just real enough to be repulsive.

Safdie and cinematographer Maceo Bishop, with his grainy, video-looking, fly-on-the-wall camerawork, never intrude on the actors. They hover over shoulders and bring you into their lives. The Phoenix, Arizona, homes and arena locker rooms seem real (production designer James Chinlund). What they wear fits them, whether they're glammed up or dressed down (costume designer Heidi Bivens).

Between the brutal fighting, tense arguments and moments of exaltation, the footage is pretty lean be-

cause Safdie as an editor makes judicious cuts. Jazz interludes and Elvis' bellowing of "My Way" display a full array of musical tastes that are complemented by Nala Sinephro's musical score.

Johnson is just one of many wrestlers who've jumped into acting. However, he distinguishes himself from others because he gets under a character's skin and emotes in ways that are believable and touching. But there's a key difference with this characterization. He isn't a larger-than-life hero. He doesn't have all the answers and likely won't come to save the day. That's not the life Kerr led. He was a champ who became a broken man, then found a way to survive his physical and emotional scars. Johnson plays him that way. No frills.

Scenes in the ring are up Johnson's alley. However, surprisingly, he excels more in the dramatic sequences with his emotional tug-of-wars with Dawn. He handles the weird blend of happiness, fear, sadness and anger well. Well enough for Blunt to build off those volatile feelings and turn her version of Dawn from a supportive, mouthy spouse to a ball-busting, self-centered saboteur. This is one of Blunt's best performances. Also, MMA fans may be surprised to see Bader go far deeper into his Coleman character than they could ever fathom.

This is an intriguing sports movie. Certainly not as uplifting as popular pugilist films like "Rocky" or "Creed." Different. Filled with ups and downs. And the downs go deep into a world of addiction.

Those who see his gritty biopic will learn that you can take the dog out of the fight, but you can't take the fight out of the dog. They'll know because the director, Johnson and the cast and crew told them so.

Visit film critic Dwight Brown at [DwightBrownInk.com](http://DwightBrownInk.com).

## Carlos King talks bigotry and building reality TV empires

By Jonathan Landrum

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — Carlos King is the face of Black unscripted storytelling without ever needing to be the star of his hit shows.

Dubbed by fans and peers as the King of Reality TV, the Detroit-born producer has built franchises that travel beyond the coasts. His "Love & Marriage" franchise has turned Huntsville, Alabama, Detroit and Washington, D.C., into must-see television along with "Family Empire: Houston." His other hit "Belle Collective" put Jackson, Mississippi, on the cultural map and returns with a new season on OWN.

As a former "Real Housewives of Atlanta" producer, King is showing that compelling stories thrive wherever real people live, love and grind. Through his company, Kingdom Reign Entertainment, he says more than 60% of OWN's original programming carries his imprint, crediting the network's top executives such as Oprah Winfrey, Tina Perry and Drew Tappon for backing his vision.

Beyond television, King has expanded his reach with the popular podcast "Reality with the King" and on-camera hosting, cementing his status as both creator and voice of the culture.

In a recent conversation with The Associated Press, King opened up about independence, building generational

wealth, navigating racism and homophobia as an openly gay Black man.

AP: What does the "King of Reality TV" mean to you?

KING: It solidifies my place in this business of unscripted television. Having a successful production company, Kingdom Reign Television, having the No. 1 show on Oprah Winfrey's Network, "Love and Marriage Huntsville," to a number one podcast, "Reality with the King," so all those things are underneath me, my brand and my empire. The title means a lot to me and my brand. The audience understands I'm multifaceted and multitalented. It holds a lot of weight, but I'm definitely somebody that understands the assignment.

AP: Why is ownership such a priority for you?

KING: In our business, unfortunately, you create a show and you're at the mercy of the network, which is just our business. And that's just the way things are, right? You do the work and once you sell the show to the network, you don't own the show anymore. I'm all about ownership and the fact that if I put in the sweat equity, then I want all of the profits. I want all of the margins coming to me because I did the work, I created the idea, I found the cast, I developed the show. I want to own everything that I do, and that's where my vision is right now.

The beauty of my podcast is the fact that I own it. No one can tell me what to do with it. Those opportunities of ownership is fantastic because you're able to really create your own destiny and look for partnerships that makes sense versus doing the archaic way of this business that I just don't have the desire to do anymore.

AP: How have you navigated systemic barriers?

KING: I have seen it all, I've been through it all: homophobia, racism. I've seen that all of my life, personal and professional. However, for me, I never allowed that to be my disadvantage. I found ways to make that my superpower. I found ways to make sure that I stood up for myself and for my people in meetings, in conversations, and inappropriate discussions where shade was thrown very subliminally. I allowed myself to be a disrupter in a very different way.

I didn't feel the need to be super outspoken in the moment and made a scene out of it. Because I knew that if I did that, I wouldn't be asked back to do the job. I knew to stand up for myself and my community in a way that was digestible to them.

But I always knew that you have learned a valuable lesson, and you take these conversations that are happening around you, and you allow that to fuel you into being an agent of change in other situations.



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