

Health bills get bigger, but will anyone help?

By Elizabeth Rosenthal

KFF HEALTH NEWS

A cancer patient might live in a town with four oncology groups, but only one accepts his insurance — the one owned by his insurer.

A young couple could see huge bills after their child is born, because their insurer agreed to the health system’s rates in exchange for a contract with obstetricians across the country.

A woman might have to pay a big sum she can’t afford for basic lab tests at a hospital — inflated rates her insurer accepted so its customers have access to the system’s children’s hospital elsewhere in the state.

And even well-insured patients receive unaffordable bills in this era of high-deductible health plans, narrow insurance networks, and 20% cost sharing.

Health systems, doctor groups, and insurers are merging and coalescing into ever-bigger giants. While these mergers are good for business, studies show the escalating consolidation in health care is driving up prices, harming patient outcomes, and decreasing choice for people who need care.

A recent study found that six years after hospitals acquired other hospitals, they had raised prices by 12.9%, with hospitals that engaged in multiple acquisitions raising their prices by 16.3%.

These new deals are “mutually enforced monopolization,” said Barak Richman, the Alexander Hamilton professor of business law at George Washington University. “It’s not competition. It’s more like collusion. They don’t care about price.”

Those market factors contributed to a landscape where a dose of the antiviral Paxlovid given in a hospital costs \$4,500; magnetic resonance imaging costs \$15,000; and joint replacements cost \$100,000.

President Donald Trump has talked about the bur-

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Turmeric soap for Black skin: Miracle skincare or hype?

BLACKDOCTOR.COM

Turmeric soap is everywhere — TikTok, Instagram, your cousin’s bathroom.

These bright yellow bars promise to treat acne, fade dark spots, and give you that “I drink 3 liters of water a day” glow.

But does turmeric actually work on melanin-rich skin — or is the internet playing in our faces again?

We spoke with skincare expert Yetunde Alabi and cosmetic chemist Manuela Valenti to weigh the claims against science. Here’s what you need to know about turmeric soap, including safety tips, proper use, and what actually works for hyperpigmentation.

What is turmeric soap supposed to do?

Turmeric’s star ingredient is curcumin, known for being:

- Anti-inflammatory
- Antioxidant-rich
- Bacteria-fighting

That’s why turmeric is tied to acne support and helping calm redness. For Black skin, the bigger issue is post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation — the dark marks acne leaves behind.

But here’s the catch: rinse-off products don’t stay on the skin long enough to deliver major results. So, formulation matters a lot.

The case for turmeric soap

For Alabi, founder of Majenye, turmeric delivers real value when it’s used the right way.

“Turmeric soap offers powerful natural benefits thanks to curcumin,” she says. “It helps soothe irritation, reduce redness, and even out skin tone.”

Her Carrot + Turmeric Brightening Bar combines:

- Carrot-infused olive oil
- Kojic acid
- Shea, avocado, and coconut oils

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«RIDES

GMC puts a jolt into Sierra lineup with the electrified AT4

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The GMC Sierra is one of the most popular pickup trucks on the planet and possibly the best looking. Its prowess as a work truck is nearly legendary but what happens when you make it fully electric and more off road capable? I’d call it something wonderful.

The GMC Sierra EV AT4 is certainly something wonderful. It has all the regular Sierra’s goodness with the added bonus of zero emissions and whisper-soft operation.

The Sierra EV debuted in 2024. For 2026 the vehicle gets two new trim packages and standard range

battery. My AT4 version is one step below the top-dog Denali version but lacks nothing that you need or possibly want. It’s a very handsome vehicle. The grille is massive and rugged looking. The truck body is square with sharp creases that scream masculine. The overall look is bold and exciting.

The interior is near luxury. Quality materials abound in this design. The massive upright touch screen is the center of attention, catching your eye as soon as you open the door. There is a lot of screen space, but the bottom quarter of the fixture has a lot of physical buttons and switches, which is

a good thing. The screen is exceptionally clear. It contains a Google Assistant that allows total voice control of lots of functions. It does not accept Apple CarPlay or Android Auto. Bummer.

A massive center console separates the two extremely comfortable front seats which are very supportive, heated and cooled. The driver’s seat can be adjusted to nearly any position with power controls located on the side of the seat cushion. The large mirrors are power adjustable and fold. The rear-view mirror has a live video feed so if you have your backseat or truck bed filled

Please see **GMC** | 2B



NUJU CAFE

NuJu Juice owners Eugene and Ayanna Williams endured a wreck that left Eugene partially paralyzed and the death of his father to keep the shop open. Their children, neighbors and church family were essential to keeping the business afloat.

How entrepreneurs turned catastrophe into triumph

Family, community pull together to keep Concord juice bar afloat

By Cameron Williams

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Eugene and Ayanna Williams wouldn’t let circumstances hold them down.

The owners of NuJu Juice, a juice bar in Concord, recently celebrated the shop’s one-year anniversary, but it was far from easy. In March, Eugene was in a serious car wreck that left him partially paralyzed.

“It was March 15 when Eugene had his accident,” Ayanna said. “He had actually left one Saturday morning on his way to the gym before work, when an oncoming car on a two-lane highway ran off the road and over-corrected. Eugene told me that he saw the car flip and when he saw it flipping, he came to a stop and the car flipped

on top of him. It caused a spinal cord injury from the C3 to C6 area.”

As anyone might imagine, trying to run a business while also rehabilitating from an accident posed of challenges.

“After my accident I was rushed to the emergency room,” Eugene said. “And, this is just six months into us being opened, the juice bar that is. We had just opened in October of 2024, so we were new to the Concord area and just starting to get familiar with the community and everything. I am not able to do much and my wife is taking care of me, so she isn’t able to do much other than that, either.”

Eugene was in intensive care for 11 days followed by five weeks of

rehab.

“At the beginning of that phase, all I was focusing on was my recovery,” Eugene said. “Then, my pastor and first lady asked us, ‘What are you going to do with the cafe?’ I told them that at the time I hadn’t even thought about it. They stepped up and helped take over while I was recovering.”

The Williamses have six children: ages 22, 21, 17, 14, 11 and 8. Eugene said most of them know the operation processes, and with the guidance of pastor Ronnie Parson from Living Ministries Church in Charlotte, the cafe has remained open.

“My pastor told me that he was going to take care of it,” Eugene recalled. “They facilitated a schedule

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We saw God bring us through this year of many tests, hard tests. Some of the hardest in our lives.



NuJu Juice owner **AYANNA WILLIAMS**

Travel tips to overcome holiday hurdles

FAMILY FEATURES

A trip to visit loved ones or a holiday-themed vacation with your nearest and dearest can create magical memories, but first, you’ve got to get there.

If the thought of holiday travel makes you nauseous, rest assured - a little planning and the right resources can help your festive getaway go smoother.

Overcome the hustle and bustle of the busiest travel season of the year with this expert advice.

Protect yourself from illnesses

The holidays intertwine with cold and flu season, meaning staying healthy on your trip is a must. Travel can be physically draining, which makes you more susceptible to common illnesses. However, some general health tips can go a long way, such as:

- Wash your hands: Between plane rides, rental cars and hotel rooms, you’re going to handle



SHUTTERSTOCK

Holiday travel can be less stressful by taking precautions to maintain your best health.

frequently touched objects in public spaces. Carry hand sanitizer and be sure to thoroughly wash your hands regularly with soap and warm water.

- Pack medications: It’s critical to pack prescribed

medications, no doubt, but consider bringing along over-the-counter vitamins and cold medicine so you’re prepared for anything.

- Consult your doctor: Ask your doctor about any

vaccinations you may need, especially if traveling internationally. It’s important to get all recommended shots and treatments prior to departure.

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GMC

GMC’s Sierra AT4 has the chops for off-road driving along with a pair of electric motors.

Community shepherded juice bar in its first year

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for volunteers from the church to come work at the cafe and make sure the doors stayed open. Then, when other friends and family started hearing that this was going on, they started helping out as well. Pretty much the whole community started to pitch in and help. We even had some loyal customers that pitched in to cover some shifts from time to time. From March 15 until now, we've truly been blessed. Ayanna was able to stay focused on helping me with my recovery and we've not had to shut down."
To compound the turmoil, Eugene's father was murdered five weeks prior to his accident.
"My dad was killed during an armed robbery," Eugene said. "He was at the car wash and was vacuuming out his car when some young boys approached him to rob him. They ended up shooting him and taking his life.

My dad was an instrumental part of our family. He lived in South Carolina, but he would often come up and have dinner with us. He was my best friend. I talked with him every day. Then the accident happened and it was really tough."
But, through their faith and support from their friends, family and other believers, the family has gotten through and is moving forward.
"We saw God bring us through this year of many tests, hard tests," Ayanna said. "Some of the hardest in our lives. But we've also seen God bless us tremendously, He's brought us through this. He's healed. He's healed and continues to heal Eugene's body. He's worked a miracle in Eugene's process of recovery. And I said that to say this; we've seen him do too much. So, there is nothing that we believe that we can go through that God cannot bring us out of."

Turmeric soap for Black skin: Miracle skincare or just hype?

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Because the bar is cold-processed, she says nutrients remain intact, meaning gentle exfoliation and better brightness without stripping melanin-rich skin.
Alabi specifically focuses on post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, a major concern for Black and brown skin tones.
"There's a difference between brightening and bleaching," she says. "We want radiance, not erasure."
There's also scientific support: a 2016 PubMed review found turmeric can help acne, eczema, and psoriasis, especially when the active compound remains strong.
The case against turmeric soap
Valenti, head formulator at By Valenti, says turmeric soap doesn't do nearly as much as the marketing suggests.
During the soap-making process, she explains, turmeric's key benefits can be neutralized, turning the ingredient into more of a natural colorant than a skin solution. She also notes kojic acid and other popular additives may lose power in highly alkaline soaps.
Healthline agrees: turmeric does have skin benefits, but in soap bars, "there's not enough contact time for the ingredients to deliver lasting results."
Valenti also reminds us: soap cannot legally claim to treat acne or fade scars; those promises belong to FDA-regulated drugs.
So yes, turmeric soap can be nice, but it is not a miracle worker.
Which turmeric soap actually works best?
Look for these green flags:
· Cold-processed
· Contains real turmeric or turmeric extract
· Hydrating oils like shea, olive, and grape seed
· Transparent ingredient list
Skip these red flags:
· Promises to "erase" scars
· Uses fragrance as the first ingredient
· Neon-yellow bars that look like high-lighters
Pro-tip: Bars with turmeric extract tend to stain less and deliver more consistent benefits than raw powder.
For melanin-rich skin: What to expect
Turmeric soap can help:
· Calm inflammation
· Brighten dull areas
· Support an even skin tone over time
It won't:
· Replace retinoids, niacinamide, or

azelaic acid
· Lighten your natural complexion
· Work overnight
Think of this soap as the supporting cast, not the main character.
How to use turmeric soap for best results
Apply to damp skin and let it sit for 60 seconds. Don't rush
Use once daily to start, increase if tolerated
Follow with a pH-balanced moisturizer
Add targeted treatments for dark spots:
· Niacinamide
· Vitamin C
· Azelaic acid
· Stabilized turmeric serums
A 2023 PubMed review shows topical curcumin works best when delivered in leave-on products, not soaps.
Safety tips
· Patch test behind the ear or on the inner arm
· Avoid raw turmeric if your skin stains easily
· Skip if you're having an eczema or rosacea flare
As Valenti puts it, soap should clean, not burn.
FAQ about turmeric soap
Does turmeric soap lighten dark spots?
Not directly, but it can reduce dullness. Pair it with leave-on treatments, but do a patch test first.
Is turmeric soap good for acne-prone skin?
Mild support? Yes. Acne cure? No. Can I use it "down there"?
If it's a well-balanced, gentle formula. Avoid getting it inside your intimate areas.
Will it stain my skin?
Possibly. If the yellow lingers, switch formulas.
Final word on turmeric soap
Turmeric soap can support glowing, even-toned skin when used properly, especially for melanin-rich complexions. Its effectiveness depends on the formulation — cold-processed bars with active ingredients intact provide the most benefit.
For many, turmeric soap is best appreciated as a ritual cleanser: calming, nourishing, and a nice upgrade to your skincare ritual. It can complement your glow, but it won't transform your skin overnight.
With that in mind, a mindful turmeric soap can definitely earn a spot in your routine.

GMC Sierra AT4 electric pickup

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you can see following traffic.
The Sierra AT4 is powered by two electric motors — one each at the front and rear, which allows for four-wheel drive. There is also four-wheel steering and a crab-walk function that allows you to drive over treacherous terrain. Skid plates protect the underside.
My test vehicle was a max range, which means the battery could hold a charge capable of 478 miles. Also, total engine output is a whopping 760 horsepower with 785 pounds-feet of torque. Drop this thing into Max Power mode and you can get to 60 miles per hour in 4.5 seconds. Impressive. Very impressive.
I'm not your bash-through-the-woods kind of guy so I can't tell you how well this truck performs in the outback. I'm sure it's fine. There are a lot of set-

tings to allow you to go anywhere. I was concerned as to how this vehicle works in everyday life. It's built for four-wheeling, but can it handle everyday traffic and highway duty?
Yes, this Sierra EV At4 is very capable for everyday use. It is surprisingly quiet on the highway. Get it up past highway speeds and you will hear some wind and tire noise but not bad. The ride is comfortable but firm. Bumps and humps don't get into the cabin much unless you get a badly maintained stretch of highway.
The excellent Bose stereo system is powerful enough to overcome the mild amount of noise.
The Sierra EV AT4 comes with lots of standard equipment such as Super Cruise (it can drive itself), electric E-trunk, multipro tailgate, 16.8 Infotainment system, Bose stereo, dual zone climate control, eight-way power driver's seat

Travel tips to overcome holiday season hurdles

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Be prepared for delays
Spontaneous moments are often the most memorable, but sometimes unplanned events aren't so welcome. Because it's nearly impossible for an entire vacation to go as scripted, consider purchasing a travel protection plan from World Nomads that includes the travel inconvenience benefit. This benefit may compensate you for unforeseen circumstances like tarmac delays or ski resort closures. Hang on to receipts that show dates and payments to make the claim process a breeze.
Overcome jet lag
Air travel can disrupt sleep patterns, particularly if you're flying across multiple time zones, causing difficulty sleeping and irritability. Be mindful of caffeine and alcohol intake, which can further impact sleep patterns. Exposure to light at the appropriate times can help reset your circadian rhythm while a low-dose melatonin can produce mild sleepiness if you're having trouble catching some Z's.
Traveling west is easiest on your internal clock as you "gain time" heading westward; in contrast, flying east requires shifting the timing of your body clock to make up for the "lost time." Leading up

to eastward travel, try going to bed and waking up earlier.
Have a backup plan
You simply can't predict everything. Standard trip cancellation coverage may only apply to specific events like unexpected illness or injury, or natural disasters. However, the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) benefit from World Nomads may fill the gaps. As a U.S. resident (except if you live in New York), you can add CFAR coverage when you purchase the Explorer or Epic Plan. CFAR may be particularly useful for expensive travel with non-refundable expenses (like cruises or international trips) or trips taking place during economically or politically volatile times.
For those booking multiple trips in addition to holiday getaways, the annual plan from World Nomads means one purchase for an entire year's worth of protection. Trip cancellation, emergency medical expenses, rental car damage and more are covered to ensure your plans aren't ruined by the unexpected.
To find more information and a full list of what is and isn't covered, visit WorldNomads.com and check plan documents for maximums, terms, conditions, limitations and exclusions that may apply.

Health care bills get bigger, but will federal government step in?

Continued from page 1B
den of health care costs since his first campaign, but he has signaled that his administration's regulators are less inclined than his predecessor's to intervene in health mergers.
This summer, he revoked President Joe Biden's 2021 directive that all federal agencies make sure markets remain competitive, reversing course from Biden's more expansive interpretation of antitrust law. And in a scathing statement upon taking over the Federal Trade Commission, Trump-appointed chair Andrew Ferguson blasted his predecessor, Lina Khan, implying that she had overstepped the agency's legal authority, as well as criticizing what he called her "clumsy" and "breathless" rhetoric and her focus on the incursion of private equity into health care.
What this will mean in practice is unclear.
In an interview with KFF Health News, Daniel Guarnera, the director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition, said that the leadership at the FTC and the Justice Department has endorsed guidelines issued by the Biden administration, which he characterized as a "framing device" for companies contemplating a merger.
The expanded merger guidelines, issued in 2023, focused for the first time on a wide variety of new types of anti-competitive practices that had become common in health care, such as hospitals and private equity firms buying doctors' practices and insurers owning what are known as specialty pharmacies to dispense complicated and often expensive drugs.
Guarnera noted that regulators' strongest enforcement tool is convincing a judge that mergers violate the Clayton Antitrust Act, a statute that is the foundation of antitrust law. But administrations can interpret this statute differently, and it's unclear what cases the Trump administration's FTC will choose to bring.
"The Biden administration tried to be more innovative," said Erin Fuse Brown, a professor of health services, policy, and practice at Brown University's School of Public Health. "The Trump administration has signaled a more traditional approach — that it's unwilling to push the envelope."
In the battle for profits between insurers and providers, each side insists it needs to grow bigger to hold sway in the negotiations that determine health care prices. But evidence shows the prices that make sense in industry-level dealmaking have little to do with the actual value of

the services involved. Instead, they're merely a data point in large-scale calculations that, at best, reflect the power balance between opposing parties.
Under Trump, the FTC has already sued to block two mergers of medical-device makers and has continued the Biden administration's challenges of individual drug patents.
"Helping improve the health care system though ensuring that there is more and better competition are very, very high priorities for us at the FTC," Guarnera said, noting that health care has "enormous effects on both Americans' pocketbooks as well as well-being."
But it is far more difficult to take on the more massive entities, and though the number of new mergers dipped early this year as companies navigated the uncertain effects of tariffs and interest rates, consolidation continues.
A recent Becker's Hospital Review article identified "28 large health systems growing bigger," noting, "This is not an exhaustive list."
For example, in May, Northwell Health of New York merged with Connecticut's Nuance to become a 28-hospital behemoth with over 1,000 outpatient clinics. That was a more traditional merger, where hospitals in the same region joined to extend their reach and increase their market power.
Meanwhile, companies are creating powerhouses not previously seen in health care, by racking up smaller purchases that aren't expensive enough to trigger federal review. They include what are known as vertical mergers, which combine companies that provide different functions in the same industry — most commonly, hospital systems or insurers buying doctors' practices or specialty pharmacies.
For instance, UnitedHealth Group, the world's largest health care company, now owns health insurance plans; physician practices and other providers; data and analytics services; payment processors; a pharmacy benefits manager; and pharmacies themselves. Jonathan Kanter, the competition czar in Biden's Justice Department, has likened the UnitedHealth amalgamation to Amazon.
Likewise, hospital systems and private companies — often private equity firms — are increas-

ingly expanding their reach to different regions, gobbling up hospitals, medical practices, and surgery centers. This kind of consolidation, known as a cross-market merger, allows companies to accumulate huge collections of doctors — and significant market power — across the country in particular specialties, such as gastroenterology, ophthalmology, pediatrics, or obstetrics.
Research shows a change in ownership means a change in prices. While pediatrics and obstetrics have traditionally been poorly paid specialties, for instance, they represent a land of opportunity to investors because parents are willing to pay more when it comes to care for their kids.
It used to be relatively simple for regulators to discern when a hospital that merged with its nearby competitor gained monopoly power, rendering it anti-competitive and driving up prices. Health researchers say these new, more complicated types of deals, creating a more complex interplay between insurers and medical providers, have made that tipping point much harder to define.
In health care, even more traditional, vertical consolidation can be problematic, Richman said. "Economic theory says it could be innocuous, like a suit manufacturer opening a store, even though studies show in health care it's dangerous — higher prices, poorer quality, less choice," he said.
For example, patients who have Cigna health plans and need an array of more expensive, often injectable prescriptions must use Accredo, the specialty pharmacy the insurer bought in 2018, even though a different pharmacy may have a better price.
Economists have developed computer modeling to predict when patients will experience higher prices and less choice because of these new types of consolidation. But judges who could nix the transactions are so far "not convinced," said Daniel Arnold, a health economist at Brown's School of Public Health.
Experts such as Fuse Brown say new laws and enforcement tools are needed.
"The old laws," she said, "are just not calibrated to the complexity and novel types of mergers."

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UNCG student Taniyah McCormick, a 21-year-old from Hillsborough, looks at what is available in the Spartan Open Pantry on Nov. 6, 2025, in Greensboro.

SNAP snafu affects nearly 85,000 NC college students

By Jennifer Fernandez
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

UNC Greensboro junior Taniyah McCormick grabbed a couple of plastic bags to fill as she perused the shelves at the Spartan Open Pantry on Thursday.

She used to stop by once a month, but with rising prices — and now a delay in her November federal food benefits — she said she’s coming by more often.

McCormick, 21, of Hillsborough, said she receives \$52 a month from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a program that’s been on hold since the beginning of November because of the federal government shut-down.

That monthly amount doesn’t sound like a lot, she said, “but every little bit helps.”

She’s not alone. Nearly 85,000 college students in North Carolina receive SNAP benefits, according to estimates by the Student Basic Needs Coalition, a national organization dedicated to addressing food and financial insecurity on college campuses.

A recent study of food insecurity at five North Carolina college campuses showed nearly 30 percent of students at the four public and one private four-year schools reported low or very low food security status.

McCormick knows other students struggle with accessing food. She sees how many ask about the campus food pantry on the college social media app Yik Yak.

“The Spartan Pantry is here to help us, especially in this time of need,” she tells students who ask about the pantry.

At her Thursday visit, McCormick picked up cereal, cheese, toilet paper, eggs, water, sweet potatoes, green beans, spaghetti sauce, a couple of snacks and the staple of college students everywhere — ramen.

Tens of thousands of North Carolina college students are affected by the food benefits delay. More concerning to researchers like UNC Chapel Hill’s Jessica Soldavini is that tens of thousands more may not know they are eligible to receive that help.

‘An overlooked issue’

In North Carolina, 33 percent of all college students are eligible for SNAP, according to estimates by the Student Basic Needs Coalition, but more than half of those eligible to receive the food benefits aren’t signed up for them.

That’s 99,572 students at North Carolina colleges who could be getting help but aren’t.

“Food security among college students has been historically ... an overlooked issue,” said Soldavini, an assistant professor at UNC’s Gillings School of Global Public Health.

She said students are either told or think that they can’t get the federal food benefits.

There’s another big barrier for students, said Andrew Mails-Saine, executive director and campus min-

ister of the nonprofit Wesley-Luther, which runs the Spartan Open Pantry.

“It’s not the easiest thing in the world to apply for,” he said.

An initiative launched in the state in January aims to increase awareness and participation in SNAP among college students.

NC College Food Benefits, a statewide campaign by the Carolina Hunger Initiative, provides information on SNAP, as well as links to North Carolina’s statewide 2-1-1 assistance line and other sources that can connect students to aid. More importantly, it has an eligibility screener that is geared toward answering the questions students might have, said Soldavini, who is also a research specialist with No Kid Hungry NC and Carolina Hunger Initiative.

“A lot of the specific questions and information a college student would have wasn’t always addressed in your general SNAP outreach materials or if you were to look it up online,” Soldavini said.

For example, if a student has a meal plan, does that disqualify them? What if they are in work-study? How many credit hours do they need to be taking to meet the student exemption? (Not necessarily, no, and at least six hours for undergraduates and four and a half hours for graduate students.)

Answers to those and more college-oriented questions are in the NC College Food Benefits Q&A and in the SNAP screener.

“It is a really important issue, and unfortunately, this population also tends to have less food assistance resources available to them,” Soldavini said.

She said there are programs to help younger students, from the federal free breakfast and lunch programs to free summer meals.

“Then they get to college, and they lose access to those programs,” Soldavini said.

A ‘challenging’ situation

Research shows that food insecurity has negative effects on college students, just as it does on younger students, according to Soldavini.

It can affect academic performance, dietary intake and mental health, she said.

“It can be really challenging to be able to focus during classes,” Soldavini said.

She was part of the team that studied food insecurity among North Carolina college students. The researchers surveyed 3,043 students on five campuses in the state during the spring 2023 semester. All were four-year schools, which is one of the limits of the study — it doesn’t calculate food insecurity among community college students, the authors wrote.

The study found that, consistent with earlier research, lower food security was associated with poor sleep quality, poor perceived health and elevated stress.

Food insecurity rates were higher among Hispanic students, LGBTQ stu-

dents, first-generation college students and undergraduates, the study showed.

The study’s authors suggested that colleges and universities should “develop targeted and tailored interventions” for at-risk students.

Many North Carolina campuses already have.

Meeting basic needs

At UNC Pembroke, 53% of students receive a Pell Grant, a sign of economic disadvantage. Across the entire 16-campus UNC System, 36.9% of students receive the federal tuition aid.

The university offers a suite of resources for students: food and clothing pantries; an interactive online map to help find resources in the area; support for homeless students; help with housing, transportation and child care; and a link to the state’s Food and Nutrition Services site, which administers SNAP.

Student peer leaders are trained to guide students through the SNAP application process, said Christie Poteet, assistant vice chancellor for student affairs. Students can also fill out an online application for aid, which is followed up by a call from a case manager who works with them to find the resources they need, she said.

Poteet said UNCP has worked to create a culture and space on campus where students know they can ask for help.

“All of this is a community of care,” she said.

At UNC Greensboro, 54% of students received a Pell Grant in 2024-25, the latest data available. The university has programs to help students struggling with basic needs, such as housing and unexpected or short-term financial emergencies. A list of resources available to students includes the Spartan Open Pantry.

The pantry is run by a combination of paid staff and volunteers, most of them students or former students who have received help from the pantry in the past, Mails-Saine said.

Earlier this month, Kris Perdue, a senior classical studies student from Winston-Salem, stocked shelves with food the pantry received from a recent WFMY-Channel 2 and Second Harvest Food Bank food drive.

He said food donations are great, but financial donations go a lot further. Food pantries get discounted prices when they buy in bulk or from organizations like Second Harvest, he said. Plus, they can target what is most needed or requested by students.

The pantry gives out a little over 2,000 pounds of food each week. He expects that will increase to 3,000 to 4,000 with the rise in food prices and more people needing help.

Many of UNCG’s students are the first in their family to attend college, Mails-Saine said. Some students work two jobs. Some send money home to help their families who are struggling financially.

What the air you breathe may be doing to impact brain function

By Paula Span

KFF HEALTH NEWS

For years, the two patients had come to the Penn Memory Center at the University of Pennsylvania, where doctors and researchers follow people with cognitive impairment as they age, as well as a group with normal cognition.

Both patients, a man and a woman, had agreed to donate their brains after they died for further research. “An amazing gift,” said Edward Lee, the neuropathologist who directs the brain bank at the university’s Perelman School of Medicine. “They were both very dedicated to helping us understand Alzheimer’s disease.”

The man, who died at 83 with dementia, had lived in the Center City neighborhood of Philadelphia with hired caregivers. The autopsy showed large amounts of amyloid plaques and tau tangles, the proteins associated with Alzheimer’s disease, spreading through his brain.

Researchers also found infarcts, small spots of damaged tissue, indicating that he had suffered several strokes.

By contrast, the woman, who was 84 when she died of brain cancer, “had barely any Alzheimer’s pathology,” Lee said. “We had tested her year after year, and she had no cognitive issues at all.”

The man had lived a few blocks from Interstate 676, which slices through downtown Philadelphia. The woman had lived a few miles away in the suburb of Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, surrounded by woods and a country club.

The amount of air pollution she was exposed to — specifically, the level of fine particulate matter called PM2.5 — was less than half that of his exposure. Was it a coincidence that he had developed severe Alzheimer’s while she had remained cognitively normal?

With increasing evidence that chronic exposure to PM2.5, a neurotoxin, not only damages lungs and hearts but is also associated with dementia, probably not.

“The quality of the air you live in affects your cognition,” said Lee, the senior author of a recent article in JAMA Neurology, one of several large studies in the past few months to demonstrate an association between PM2.5 and dementia.

Scientists have been tracking the connection for at least a decade. In 2020, the influential Lancet Commission added air pollution to its list of modifiable risk factors for dementia, along with common problems like hearing loss, diabetes, smoking, and high blood pressure.

Yet such findings are emerging when the federal government is dismantling efforts by previous administrations to continue reducing air pollution by shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy

sources.

“‘Drill, baby, drill’ is totally the wrong approach,” said John Balmes, a spokesperson for the American Lung Association who researches the effects of air pollution on health at the University of California-San Francisco.

“All these actions are going to decrease air quality and lead to increasing mortality and illness, dementia being one of those outcomes,” Balmes said, referring to recent environmental moves by the White House.

Many factors contribute to dementia, of course. But the role of particulates — microscopic solids or droplets in the air — is drawing closer scrutiny.

Particulates arise from many sources: emissions from power plants and home heating, factory fumes, motor vehicle exhaust, and, increasingly, wildfire smoke.

Of the several particulate sizes, PM2.5 “seems to be the most damaging to human health,” Lee said, because it is among the smallest. Easily inhaled, the particles enter the bloodstream and circulate through the body; they can also travel directly from the nose to the brain.

The research at the University of Pennsylvania, the largest autopsy study to date of people with dementia, included more than 600 brains donated over two decades.

Previous research on pollution and dementia mostly relied on epidemiological studies to establish an association. Now, “we’re linking what we actually see in the brain with exposure to pollutants,” Lee said, adding, “We’re able to do a deeper dive.”

The study participants had undergone years of cognitive testing at Penn Memory. With an environmental database, the researchers were able to calculate their PM2.5 exposure based on their home addresses.

The scientists also devised a matrix to measure how severely Alzheimer’s and other dementias had damaged donors’ brains.

Lee’s team concluded that “the higher the exposure to PM2.5, the greater the extent of Alzheimer’s disease,” he said. The odds of more severe Alzheimer’s pathology at autopsy were almost 20% greater among donors who lived where PM2.5 levels were high.

Another research team recently reported a connection between PM2.5 exposure and Lewy body dementia, which includes dementia related to Parkinson’s disease. Generally considered the second most common type after Alzheimer’s, Lewy body accounts for an estimated 5% to 15% of dementia cases.



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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2025 PAGE 5B

No need for humbugs in ‘Scrooge!’

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

A re-imagined classic Christmas tale is returning to the Matthews stage. Matthews Playhouse of the Performing Arts’ production of “Scrooge! The Musical” is back for its fourth year with a Dec. 12-21 run. The musical adaptation of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is story of redemption, compassion, and the holiday spirit. Shows take place at Matthews Playhouse, 100 McDowell St. Tickets are available at matthewsplayhouse.com or by calling (704) 846-8343.

In addition to the eight regular performances, Scrooge! The Musical will feature a “Pay What You Can” performance on Dec. 11 at 7:30 p.m. Proceeds will benefit the Women’s Health and Resilience Foundation, which advocates for women’s health from the inside through knowledge, inspiration, and support.

The play, directed by Mary Lynn Bain, is set in 19th-century London and includes an award-winning music score by Leslie Bricusse and songs like “Father Christmas,” “December the 25th,” and the Oscar- and Golden Globe-nominated “Thank You Very Much.” Lauren Smith is the music director and Anna Eve the choreographer.

The production tells the tale of miserly Ebenezer Scrooge (Korey Risley), who despises Christmas and lives a life of greed and isolation. Scrooge, who treats his underpaid clerk, Bob Cratchit (Bradley Wolke), with indifference, gets a Christmas Eve visit by the ghosts of former business partner Jacob Marley (Silas Fincher), Christmas Past (Mary Elizabeth Johnson), Present (Mike Carroll), and Future (Leighton Stall and Charlotte Thomson).

The spirits reveal the consequences of Scrooge’s selfishness, including the struggles of the Cratchit family: Mrs. Cratchit (Hannah Marks) and their ailing son Tiny Tim (Tobey Fincher). Moved by the haunting spirits, Scrooge embraces generosity and the Christmas spirit to bring joy to himself and those around him.

New home, format for ‘Sesame Street’

By Mark Kennedy
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — New home. Some format changes. Same monsters.

“Sesame Street” launched its 56th season on Nov. 10 with NASCAR champion Bubba Wallace as a guest, a slightly tweaked format and a new way to watch — via Netflix.

“There you are, hi,” Elmo invites viewers at the top of the show. “Elmo so happy to see you.”

The popular children’s staple will be offering an 11-minute main story at the top — up from 9 minutes last year — and a few new segments mixed with favorite returning ones.

“In the history of ‘Sesame Street,’ we’ve always reinvented in some sort of way over our last 56 years,” says Sal Perez, the executive producer. “We’re always looking for ways to modernize — have the look and feel of the show feel really engaging for kids today.”

The 11-minute main story in the first episode involves Elmo, Abby and Zoe having three kinds of races in the neighborhood, joined by an alarming amount of puppet chickens and Wallace offering sideline commentary.

First up is a sprint with a chicken on each of their backs — “poultry in motion,” Wallace offers — then a race with a chicken on a spoon and, last, a sack race with chickens also in the sack. Elmo gets discouraged when he doesn’t win initially but soon realizes that he didn’t have lunch so is low on fuel, the lesson of the day.

“I just love when we get to bring celebrities to ‘Sesame Street’ because they bring their own flavor, they bring their own point of view and experience. And so much of that Elmo racing episode was just heightened by Bubba being there,” says head writer Halcyon Persson. (Miley Cyrus is also an upcoming guest.)

Persson says expanding the main story even by a few minutes gives her and her team more runway to add elements she thinks connects with kids.

“That extra two minutes may not

Please see **NEW** | 6B

« ON THE MARQUEE »



NOVANT THANKSGIVING EVE PARADE

The annual Novant Thanksgiving Eve Parade is Nov. 26 in Center City.

Novant Thanksgiving Eve Parade kicks off holidays

Uptown staple returns for the 79th year of floats, bands and balloons

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Three Bone Theater presents “Eureka Day” through Nov. 23, The Arts Factory, 1545 W Trade St. Written by Jonathan Spector, directed by Tonya Bludsworth.

Advance tickets online at threebonetheatre.com are \$30, \$35 at the door and \$20 for students and educators.

The Eureka Day School in Berkeley, California, is a bastion of progressive ideals: representation, acceptance, social justice. In weekly meetings Eureka Day’s five board members develop and update policy to preserve a culture of inclusivity that reaches decisions by consensus.

But when a mumps outbreak threatens the Eureka community, facts become subjective and every solution divisive, leaving school leadership to confront the central challenge: Build consensus when no one agrees on truth.

The production is recommended for ages 14 and older due to references of illness and death in children, public health crises and vaccine hesitancy.

Nov. 21-22
· **Ruben Studdard** sings Luther Vandross at 7:30 p.m. at Knight Theater, 430 S Tryon St.

“American Idol” winner Ruben Studdard brings to life the songs that shaped a generation. Studdard brings out the warmth and romance in Vandross songs like “Here and Now,” “Dance with My Father,” and “A House Is Not a Home” backed by the power of the Charlotte Symphony.

Tickets range from \$30.48 to

\$114.71 and available online at tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Nov. 22
· **Western Piedmont Symphony** presents “Masterworks: Italian Inspirations” at 7:30 p.m. at P.E. Monroe Auditorium on the campus of Lenoir-Rhyne University at 625 7th Ave NE, Hickory.



ADRIAN CRUTCHFIELD

Adrian Crutchfield will perform “For You at Christmas ... With Love and Jazz” at Middle C Jazz.

The evening will start with Arvo Pärt’s “If Bach had Been a Beekeeper” and Bach’s “Air on the G String.” The concert continues with Sammartini’s Recorder Concerto arranged for trumpet and Haydn’s classical Trumpet Concerto featuring internationally acclaimed trumpet soloist Ashley Hall-Tighe. The evening concludes with Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 4, “Italian.”

Tickets are \$20-\$58 for adults. Student tickets are \$10 with a valid ID. Students can buy \$10 tickets in sections A and B only when accompanied by an adult who also buys a ticket in the same section.

For tickets, visit wpsymphony.org, call (828) 324-8603, or go to the Western Piedmont Symphony Box Office at 243 Third Ave. NE. Box office is open Wednesday-Friday from 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Nov. 23
· **Josh Lee**, a North Carolina native, will appear for a screening of the award-winning documentary “Lucha: A Wrestling Tale,” 4-7 p.m., at 4237 Raleigh St. Tickets: General admission \$9.31 (under 18) and seniors (65-plus) \$5.04.

The film follows four girls from the Bronx who formed New York City’s first all-girls high school wrestling team — and the educators who help them fight for their futures. “Lucha” premiered at DOC NYC, where it won the Grand Jury Metropolis Award, one of the festival’s highest honors.

Lee, a native of Dunn, N.C., moved to the Bronx to teach special education and started the all-girls Lucha Wrestling Club. The nonprofit pro-

Please see **ON MARQUEE** | 6B

« MOVIE REVIEW »

‘The Running Man’ can’t get up to speed

By Dwight Brown
BLACK PRESS USA

The Running Man
2 stars

He’s running as fast as he can in a film that’s going nowhere.

There isn’t one “wow” moment in this entire remake of the tepid 1987 movie of the same name, which starred Arnold Schwarzenegger. Blame the writing, direction and production elements for the inability to make any of this footage truly exciting or visually stunning. But don’t fault the cast, especially Glen Powell. He’s doing the best he can with what he’s been given.

And where did it all begin? In 1982 the prolific sci-fi writer Stephen King wrote a book about a totalitarian society with televised violence. The setting was 2025. Ben Richards, a man down on his luck and money, becomes part of a reality show called “The Running Man.” Participants are given a head start as hitmen track and try to kill them—on live TV. The winner gets a bundle of cash. The losers, well, death.

The eerie fascist, nihilist theme was mindboggling 43 years ago. It’s timely and scary today. But never as scary as it should be in a film adaptation that should’ve learned from the mistakes of its predecessor. So, aside from name recognition, why shake the dust off this story? Dystopian themes couldn’t be more apocyp.

Ben Richards (Glen Powell) and his wife Sheila (Jayme Lawson, “Sinners,” “The Woman King”) live on the wrong side of the tracks in poverty in a place called “slum side.” But they aren’t



PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Coleman Domingo plays Bobby Thompson, the TV emcee in “The Running Man.”

alone. Many are suffering while the wealthy few don’t. Their little daughter has serious health issues, and they can’t afford the medicine she needs. Perhaps their Obamacare has run out? Or they can’t afford the new 100% premium hikes? Mom is willing to take on more shifts, but dad decides that bringing in more money is on his shoulders. “The Running Man” TV show offers big bucks to those who can outrun killers for 30 days. Sheila warns, “People on these games never come back.” Against his wife’s wishes, Ben signs up.

Thrust into the world of the media giant “The Network,” Richards is

shocked to learn how callous the show’s producer Dan Killian (Josh Brodin) can be. And the emcee, Bobby Thompson (Coleman Domingo), is just as eager to see contestants get hunted like prey by a killing force: “Bloodlust is our birthright!”

Eying the money, Ben becomes friendly with two fellow contestants: Laughlin (Katy O’Brian, “Twisters”) a hard partying type and the very nerdy Jansky (Martin Herlihy, “Saturday Night Live”). The game is on. Those who dally die. Those who don’t stay steps ahead of an evil posse led by Evan McCone

Please see **THE RUNNING** | 6B

On marquee: Carriage rides at Gaston Museum

Continued from page 5B

vides mentorship, athletic training, and college access for girls across the city.

Following the film, Lee will participate in a Q&A and discussion about the making of the documentary and the club's continued impact on young people.

Nov. 26

Novant Health Thanksgiving Eve Parade returns to Tryon Street for the 79th year. The procession step offs at 5:30 p.m.

The holiday classic kicks off the season looking to build off 2024's parade, which organizer say drew more than 46,000 attendees, 1,000 volunteers, and 85 units. The parade is free and VIP tickets are available near the performance zone at www.novanthealththanksgivingparade.com/tickets.

Organizers are also looking for volunteers to walk as costumed cast members in the parade, handle the balloons or serve as parade marshals. To sign up, or for more information about the parade, visit www.novanthealththanksgivingparade.com.

Dec. 5

The Gaston County Museum of Art & History kicks off the holiday season with the annual open house and carriage rides from 6-9 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.

Carriage rides, which start from the parking lot of the Museum's Daniel Stowe Carriage House on West Church Street, are free. The event coincides with Carols on the Square, presented by the Town of Dallas, which begins at 6:30 p.m. on the Historic Court Square in Dallas.

The museum is free and open to the public Tuesday-Friday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday from 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Dec. 6

"Backstage With Louis Armstrong," an off-Broadway musical drama, is 7-9 p.m. at The Arts Factory, 1545 W. Trade St. Admission is \$20 and available at Eventbrite. Danny W. Mullen Sr. portrays the legendary jazz trumpeter.

• **Middle C Jazz** is all in for De-

ember.

The club is hosting a series of music celebrations from smooth jazz artists to R&B favorites throughout the month. Tickets for all December performances, including the exclusive New Year's Eve event, are available immediately.

A major highlight of the month is the two-night run with the smooth jazz artists Peter White, Mindi Abair, and Vincent Ingala Dec. 12-13. It also includes an optional VIP pre-show wine and jazz tasting with Mindi Abair.

Among the highlights:

(Dec 4) "Happy Holidays - A Soulful Christmas" with Jay D Jones (R&B and holiday soul)

(Dec. 11) Ray Singleton Holiday Party Night (R&B favorites and holiday classics)

(Dec. 12-13) Peter White Christmas with Mindi Abair & Vincent Ingala

VIP Pre-show Wine & Jazz Tasting with Mindi Abair

(Dec. 14) Adrian Crutchfield: "For You at Christmas ... with Love & Jazz!"

(Dec. 17-18) "A Charlie Brown Christmas" featuring Lovell Bradford and Tyra Scott, family-friendly celebration of the Vince Guaraldi Trio

(Dec. 19) Joey Santo Sings Christmas Classics of Sinatra, Crosby, & Martin perform vintage holiday standards

(Dec. 21) Jingle Jazz Tour featuring B.K. Jackson, Erin Stephenson and Gino Rosaria

(Dec. 31) New Year's Eve celebration with the Voltage Brothers

For tickets, showtimes, and schedule, go to www.middlecjazz.com.

Not too early for planning

Tickets are on sale for 2026 The Blues Is Alright Tour.

The eighth annual Queen City Blues Festival is at Ovens Auditorium on March 7 at 7 p.m. The Southern soul and modern blues scene blend old-school storytelling with contemporary R&B. with performances by King George, Pokey Bear, Lenny Williams, West Love, Tonio Armani, Mike Clark Jr., EJ Jones, Stephanie Luckett & the YP Band, and Henry Welch.

Tickets go on sale Nov. 21 at 10 a.m. at Ticketmaster.com.



Race car driver Bubba Wallace was the guest for the reimagined "Sesame Street."

New 'Sesame Street' vibe

Continued from page 5B

seem like much for our audience, but it allows us to have a song in every episode which we know our audience loves," says Person, whose credits include "Dee & Friends in Oz" and "Karma's World."

"We get to have even more animation, even more comedy, more time for physical humor. We know when kids are laughing, they're learning. So, we just love when we can get them laughing so that our salient messaging can come through loud and clear, too."

The deal with Netflix is a game-changer for "Sesame Street" since the streamer gives it a worldwide reach — the new season will be streamed in 30 languages — while keeping it on its long-standing home, PBS Kids and the PBS Kids Video app, at the same time. Episodes will be available on both Netflix and PBS on the same day.

"The partners themselves have been amazing and really supportive and

allowing us to do what 'Sesame Street' does," says Perez. "They know that we've got a history of knowing how to produce content. So, they've really just been supportive and elevating the brand."

"Sesame Street" will also lean into breaking the fourth wall, with creatures turning to the viewer and perhaps confessing their feelings or asking for advice.

"I think this season, we wanted to just play that up and make it really an expected feature of the show — the characters are not just talking to you, but they're really pulling you in," says Person.

"This is just another way to really build that relationship and make children feel like they're a part of the action, that none of what's happening in the story could happen without them and that our characters really need them."

Segments like "Cookie's Foodie Truck" and "Abby's Magic Beasties" will make

the transition, and there's the introduction of a new one — the animated "Tales from 123," which takes viewers into the apartment building where the furry monsters live.

"This gave us an opportunity to get a peek inside. You have our amazing cast of characters living in an apartment building, with Elmo and Tango having really physical comedy adventures throughout, really zany adventures," says Perez.

In the inaugural "Tales from 123," Elmo wants to meet Grover for a playdate, but both get mixed up, so they go in elevators and race up staircases until Tango saves the day. Finally reunited, they naturally play hide-and-seek.

It's like a backstage pass to "Sesame Street" and, of course, one gruff monster will be complaining. "No New York apartment could be complete without Oscar as the superintendent," says Perez.

OUT & ABOUT

PHOTOS BY DANIEL COSTON | FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST



Frenchy Brown emceed the Dress For Success gala, held at the Ruth on Oct. 23.



The annual International House Charlotte's Tapas & Testimonials at the Revelry on Oct. 24.



Andre and Kecce Collins at the Sullenberger Aviation Museum's first Masquerade Ball on Oct. 25.

'The Running Man' plods along

Continued from page 5B

(Lee Pace). Incidentally, Evan wears a mask, just like ICE agents. Coincidence? Run for your life!

An interesting premise. A very timely look at a modern world desensitized and dehumanized by reality TV. The plot even has a show called "Americanos," a vapid "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" knockoff. Poor people on defense. Exploiters and villains on offense. The media's warped attention to Ben's deeds and misdeeds are hyper inflamed mis-sives like sensationalized headlines from the New York Post or seedy clips from TMZ.

Somewhere in this collage of ideas, visions and tonal missteps are hard truths about the wicked world we live in.

That's what the audience would relish if the film's other aspects weren't so sub-par.

Every scene looks like it was shot in a poorly lit studio. Cinematographer Chung-hoon Chung worked on the classic Asian thriller "Oldboy," but his talent is either wasted here or he's off his game. Production designer Marcus Rowland's dingy, staph-infection looking sets are shockingly telltale, which is a surprise because his work on "Last Night in Soho" superbly meshed style and color. Costumes by Julian Day are slightly more tuned in, but Sheila is way over dressed for a poor person—and over made-up too. The musical score doesn't leave a lasting impression or feel (composer Steven Price), while editor Paul Machliss's work is sufficient. Not more.

It's hard to edit a film well if the scenes you're combining aren't that interesting. The body count is high in this movie. The actions scenes plentiful. None are mesmerizing.

The gutsy, innovative action/thriller "John Wick: Chapter 4," set the bar high. Its stunt choreography was astonishing. No rumble, chase scene or gunfight in this production is near that level. Though there was one sequence that had promise: Ben finds refuge in a booby-trapped

home owned by Elton (Michael Cera), an anarchist with a grudge against The Network. This weird house scene could have been the blast the film needed. It fizzles.

Director Edgar Wright displayed a great sense of design, movement and intrigue with "Last Night in Soho." Had his finger on the pulse with the crime/thriller "Baby Driver." Knew how to accentuate consistent outrageous humor in "Shaun of the Dead." None of the flair, grit or drollness from those gems is evident or well executed here.

This sci-fi/action/thriller mishmash is an ugly duckling. Unimaginative. Not an improvement over its 1987 predecessor. The script by Michael Bacall ("Inglorious Bastards") and Wright may have aimed for something higher, but the writing and any lofty ideas haven't firmly translated to the screen.

Glen Powell, as Ben, is billed as a nice guy trying to save his daughter. But really Powell is a superman tasked with saving this film from the junk heap. An overwhelming assignment for most actors.

But this leading man finds ways to make his character interesting even when the script is not. That's what superstars do. Tom Cruise does it. Now, Powell is learning how to give movies that have virtually no redeeming qualities one saving grace.

His performance. He's stalwart. Belligerent. Delivers lines with conviction. Consistently expresses his plight and emotions well for 133 minutes. Cera is interesting too, but his character's role is truncated. Emilia Jones as Ben's sidekick, Danile Ezra as a podcaster, O'Brian and Herlihy are all fine.

Sandra Dickinson plays Cera's deranged mom like she's on furlough from an insane asylum. She and Domingo chew up the scenery in the most grandiose yet delightful ways.

The filmmakers should be grateful that Powell is running as fast as he can while carrying their dead weight.

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

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