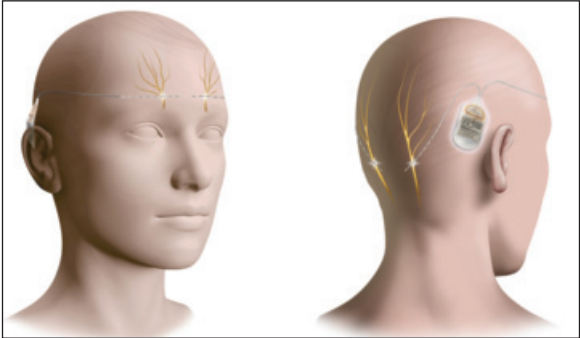


Life!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2025 SECTION B



QUEEN CITY CLINICAL RESEARCH

An experimental medical device that's implanted under the skin of the scalp stimulates nerves in the brain linked to migraine. The has been found to cut days with migraine headaches per month in half.

An innovative way to cope with chronic migraine

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Migraine headaches are no fun. Arguably the most severe type of headache, migraines consist of throbbing pain usually in one pinpoint spot in your head that is accompanied by nausea and sometimes disturbed vision.

Dr. Leo Kapural, a pain physician at Queen City Clinical Research, is leading a national study testing a new method of migraine treatment in which small implant placed under the skin of the scalp gently stimulates nerves in the brain linked to migraine.

"I've been doing neuromodulation for treatment of various chronic pains for the last 26 years," Kapural said. "This really neat new approach to how to control pain from severe migraines is in its trial period. With neuromodulation it is important to emphasize that we are stimulating peripheral nerves that have multiple electrodes on them so we can properly capture the nerve when we put the implant under the skin."

The Food and Drug Administration is overseeing the trials and if successful, will go about approving it for further implementation.

"The FDA has to approve the device," Kapural said. "This is research and we don't have any claims unless the research shows that we were correct in our hypothesis. So, the improvement of the pain sources, improvement in headache days and so on.

Please see **AN INNOVATIVE** | 2B

Warm up with winter activities

By Nikya Hightower
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Winter does not have to be boring. As the sun sets earlier and the air gets colder, there are several activities that will keep everyone entertained through the holidays.

Plant House is hosting a holiday workshop for kids to build their own terrarium. It's different from a traditional holiday event but can be a festive addition to the season. The workshop is Dec. 21, 1:30-2:30 p.m. General admission starts at \$29.75 and all materials are provided.

- Children's Theater of Charlotte is showing a musical adaptation of the holiday classic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." The production is showing weekends and for two extra days Dec. 22 and 23. Tickets start at \$40.
- Carowinds' WinterFest is for all ages with shows, food and drinks, and of course the rides with a festive twist. WinterFest runs through Jan. 3. Tickets are regular park admission.
- Restoration Place is having their annual Single Parents Christmas Mall at Carolina Union Volleyball Club on Dec. 21 9 a.m. Each family is allowed a shopping voucher with up to three children registered. Open for single parents looking for gifts and toys for children ages 5-12.

Please see **WARM** | 2B

«RIDES

Lexus opens distance on SUV competitors with the TX 500h

By Winfred Cross
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Lexus has lost a bit of its shine. The company still builds some of the best cars in the world, but the competition has caught up. In my opinion it hasn't been surpassed but companies have gotten close, real close.

The TX gives Lexus breathing room. It improves on the company's version of the three row SUV by providing more room and improving ride quality.

The TX was introduced last year to very good reviews, including my own. There is far more useable spacing this vehicle than

any other SUV Lexus has built. It's class-leading in passenger space and cargo area. My test car was the F Sport hybrid version. It had Lexus' Direct4 AWD system which basically is an electric motor on the front and rear axles. The combined output is 366 horsepower and 406 pounds-feet of torque. Power is sent to all four wheels through a six-speed transmission.

Six adults can fit into the TX comfortably. You can get a good amount of stuff in it as well with seats up and a huge amount with the seats down. There is more standard equipment, and this F-sport handling package. This package was once cosmetic only but

now actually improves handling and ride quality. Lexus will tell you this vehicle isn't really for off-roading, but I've never understood the need to take a \$70,000 vehicle through the woods.

The interior may be the vehicle's weakest spot. Some have complained there is too much plastic for a vehicle which costs this much. Once you move up trim levels it improves. There are more luxury touches like wood and metal.

Leather seating is standard in the F-Sport luxury along with a panoramic sunroof and a 21 speaker Mark Levinson premium sound system. It's still one



LEXUS

The 2026 Lexus TX 500h F Sport gives the automaker an SUV that separates Lexus from competitors. of the best original equipment systems available. There is a standard 12.3-inch touch screen that controls most of the functions but some of the controls can be a bit overwhelming. Let's talk about the TX's ride and handling prowess. This is a top-heavy SUV so it's not a sports car. Ho-

Please see **LEXUS** | 3B



DENISE SPARKS

Denise Sparks, owner of Sparks A/C-Heat and Home Improvements, is launching a 20-week job training program to open a pipeline for women in the industry.

Jobs program opens new opportunities to women

20-week initiative's aim is transformation through self-sufficiency

By Charles Harris
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Denise Sparks has spent the last several decades blazing her own career trail. Now she's turned her focus to jumpstarting the ambitions of women. Sparks, owner of Sparks A/C-Heat and Home Improvements in Charlotte, plans to start a free intensive 20-week job training program.

"The mission is to ignite hope and transformation in the lives of women in recovery [and] women with disabilities by equipping them with the tools, training, and

opportunities they need to rebuild their confidence, master their craft, and achieve lasting self-sufficiency," she said.

The skillsets are home improvement and tailoring, mending and garment construction. Training will also include job search workshops on etiquette, appropriate dress, self-care, technology and financial wellness.

"These opportunities are designed so that our trainees are well-prepared to provide essential services to homeowners, commercial businesses, and renters," Sparks said.

Sparks, who was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised primarily in Louisville, Kentucky, developed her work ethic, industrious nature and desire to support others early on.

"My entrepreneurial spirit and love of community stem from my parents, teachers, and grandparents who were self-made or self-employed," she said.

Sparks' father worked for Ford Motor Co., where he was the first Black foreman at the Louisville plant; her mother was a community outreach specialist for the

Please see **JOBS** | 2B

'Game of chicken' at NC turkey plants

By Jane Winik Sartwell
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

If you are having a turkey this holiday season, do you know where it was processed?

If it came from certain North Carolina processing plants, it may have been processed on dirty equipment, records obtained by Carolina Public Press show.

Federal inspectors found black residue on conveyor belts, accumulated waste on production floors and documentation failures at three major turkey processing plants in North Carolina during the peak production season leading up to Thanksgiving.

The most recent non-compliance reports from the U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service, or FSIS, show systemic sanitation violations throughout October at Prestage Foods and Butterball processing facilities.

Such conditions persist across the poultry industry because federal inspectors lack meaningful enforcement tools, Thomas Gre-



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Turkeys processed at North Carolina poultry plants could be slaughtered on dirty equipment without consequence from federal food inspectors, according to record obtained by Carolina Public Press.

million, director of food policy at the Consumer Federation of America, told CPP.

"We don't have a good poultry inspection system because there's not an effective enforcement mechanism," Gremillion said. "The inspectors can take the nuclear option and shut down the plant. Other than that, it's a game of chicken. They don't have good tools. There are no big penalties for dirty establishments. Inspectors point out noncompliances and then get ignored."

Prestage Foods sanitation issues
Prestage Foods owns and operates a turkey processing facility in St. Pauls, in Robeson County. On Oct. 23, an inspector with FSIS visited Prestage and found:

- Black and brown substances and particles of fat "too numerous to count" on multiple conveyor belts, suggesting the establishment had not removed

Please see **GAME** | 2B

Jobs program opens new opportunities to women

Continued from page 1B
board of education.

Sparks frequently accompanied her mother during her canvasing, an experience that first kindled her desire to help.

“I learned a lot about the stories, hardships, and achievements of the people in my community,” she recalled.

From that moment Sparks committed to using her success to support others.

Sparks eventually found work with a property management company in the Houston area. It was where her entrepreneurial ambitions were manifest.

“As property manager...I interviewed an applicant for an available HVAC position at my property,” she said. “The company offered the HVAC tech \$30 per hour more than my manager’s salary.”

Stunned by the financial discrepancy, Sparks immediately told her husband James, who in turn enrolled in a local HVAC program. But it wasn’t enough. She wanted a turn, too. The couple studied together each evening after James’ classes. In time she was confident enough to take the certification test. Sparks passed and became a certified EPA Universal HVAC technician, which qualified her to work with refrigerated appliances. James also completed the HVAC course.

“I was the only female in the room,” she said.

Upon completion, Sparks was promoted as a HVAC tech by the very company she had been working for as a property manager.

“Sometimes the best man for the job is a woman,” she said.

Certification was just the beginning. The couple set their sights on starting their own business, which they did after relocating to Charlotte in 2000.

“I built [a company] here in the Queen City...because of its diversity, progressive acceptance, fairness, open-mindedness, and the immense opportunities for women,” Sparks said. “I have to be fair and say that, as a woman of color, I have always been encouraged to grow, and the community has embraced our services.”

Sparks A/C-Heat & Home Improvements has progressively expanded over the last 25 years, and in 2008, Sparks established SACHHI Design and Couture, which allowed her to channel her creative passions into a business.

After transferring ownership of SACHHI to her two sons, Sparks created SACHHI Women Home Improvements in 2020, which offers HVAC service and repair, interior/exterior painting, all phases of flooring installation, kitchen and bathroom renovations, specialized tub-to-walk-in shower conversions, drywall hanging and finishing, basic lighting, plumbing, ce-

ramic tiling, and large home clean outs.

Sparks’ work as a contractor has been featured on HGTV’s “Flip This House” for several years. And her creative fashions have graced runways and red carpets. She also invests in helping people in addiction recovery, a motivation that springs from a very personal place.

“I became a member of Al-Anon (a support group for the friends and family of people battling substance abuse) in support of my oldest brother, who later died of alcoholism,” she said.

Sparks became active in supporting the women she met through Al-Anon. Besides building empathy and understanding, it put a human face on the women behind substance abuse disorder.

“I have met the most incredible women who are now living beyond addiction and obstacles,” she said. “Over the years, I have helped... women transitioning out of treatment and have hired and trained them to work with me on my renovation jobs.”

Over the years, Sparks has trained and employed men and women transitioning from rehab to sober living as well as people living with disabilities.

“The transformation I’ve witnessed in these women — from overcoming personal challenges to wanting to become skilled professionals — is truly inspiring,” she said, which encouraged her to develop a nonprofit earlier this year, SACHHI Women Skills Build, Empower. Nonprofit status allows Sparks to apply for federal, state and private grant funding for future similar training programs. SACHHI is currently seeking \$80,000 to provide a 20-week course to 20 participants beginning in January. Sparks explains that expenditures include renting a commercial space for classes, procuring the necessary insurance, sewing machines, textbooks, supplies, tools and professional accounting services.

“Creating my nonprofit, which provides training for full-time employment opportunities, has allowed me to take one step further in helping enhance the lives of women who have been underserved and marginalized,” she said. “Someone is struggling with addiction, abuse or disability in every family. [Most] people have somebody, know somebody [or] have lost somebody to addiction.”

Sparks hopes to empower women of all backgrounds to chart their own course.

[We want them] to flourish as trailblazers of change, living independent, purpose-driven lives,” she said. “My hope is that [the community] will understand and give freely.”

To contribute, go to: gofund.me/e568785cc.
Donations can also be made directly via CashApp (\$cashtag) \$Sachhi56

On The Net
www.sachhi-enterprise.com

‘Game of chicken’ at North Carolina’s turkey plants

Continued from page 1B

product residues from previous production runs

· A turkey trachea approximately 3.5 inches long left on equipment, indicating the equipment hadn’t properly been cleaned

· Condemned product barrels on the production floor

The facility was allowed to resume operations that same day after addressing the violations. In response to questions about the failed October inspection, Prestage Foods responded:

“Our commitment to providing safe, wholesome turkey products drives our daily operations at Prestage Foods. As a result, maintaining high standards when it comes to food safety is a priority — in fact, it’s essential to our business,” said Deborah Johnson, communications director for Prestage Foods.

“We operate with federal oversight in our facility at all times and our daily operating procedures and plans are required to be in compliance with USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service. When any issue is identified, our quality assurance team acts swiftly to correct it and prevent recurrence.”

Butterball turkey plant violations

Butterball processes ground turkey at two locations in North Carolina: one plant is in Mount Olive in Duplin County and another is in Raeford in Hoke County.

Both Butterball locations violated their Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures in October, according to FSIS reports. The Raeford plant is the second-largest employer in Hoke County. It also is a hotspot for salmonella, according to ProPublica’s Chicken Checker tool. A concerning 21.6% of the turkey samples from the Raeford plant tested positive for salmonella.

That’s all the more unsettling in light of the current atmosphere of deregulation. The Trump administration withdrew pro-

posed standards that would have prohibited companies from sending products with high levels of salmonella to stores, according to Gremlillion.

On Oct. 27, an FSIS inspector visited the Butterball plant in Raeford. The facility failed inspection, but much of the non-compliance report is redacted. The report appears to center less on dirty equipment than on a lackluster documentation system.

Because of recordkeeping failures, employees could not prove that critical sanitation steps were actually performed. The inspector found:

· Monitoring activities were not performed at required intervals

· Quality Assurance supervisors and managers were not properly informed of compliance issues

· Records on Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures were not kept adequately

Earlier in the month, on Oct. 15, the Mount Olive Butterball location failed inspection. On Oct. 17, the inspector went back to the plant and wasn’t appeased. They found:

· An “excessive” amount of turkey drumsticks and bones along the back wall

· A failure to properly notify the Ground Turkey Supervisor about unsanitary conditions

“Butterball takes food safety very seriously, and our production facilities have numerous USDA personnel onsite continually monitoring the production process,” said Alice Johnson, senior vice president of food safety, quality and animal care at Butterball.

“The instances noted are from daily observation and are considered minor issues needing attention and remediation. These are promptly addressed, and the USDA verifies that we are back in compliance.”

Warm up with these winter activities across the region

Continued from page 1B

· Daniel Stowe Conservancy is a great place to view Christmas lights. The gardens are turned into a holiday light show where families can enjoy hot cocoa, cocktails, live music, and Santa on Saturdays. General admission tickets are \$20 for children 2-12, \$28 for adults and \$22 for seniors.

· Through Feb. 1, Discovery Place Science, located in uptown, is showcasing a new indoor winter experience named snow days. The experience includes a view of Aurora Borealis, sock skating rink, and a look into arctic life. Admission is \$23.95 for adults, \$18.95 for children and \$20.95 for seniors. They also offer a welcome admission for people with EBT or WIC benefits from the Carolinas for \$3.

· For adults looking for some holiday spirit, Charlotte has a great selection of holiday pop up bars. Backstage Lounge

and Humbug CLT offer holiday themed drinks and decor.

Here are some options for the perfect way to ring in the new year:

· New Year’s Eve at Winterfest is a family friendly option to count down to the new year and enjoy a fireworks show.

New Year’s in South Park is offering food and drinks. Attendees can reserve online for a new year’s dinner at Bentleys or DTR.

· Blume Studios and Su Casa are hosting a New Year’s Eve party that will include house sounds with a lineup of DJs, dancing, art and immersive vibes from 8 p.m.-1:30 am. Tickets start at \$55.75.

· Truist Field is ringing in the new year big with fireworks, music and champagne. General admission is \$16 with access to all Light the Knight activities \$46.

An innovative way to cope with chronic migraine is in process

Continued from page 1B

So, it is not readily available for the public yet. People can however sign up for the trials if they have severe migraine headaches that aren’t otherwise responsive to medical management.”

Migraine sources can be linked to a lot of things, some neuronal and some vascular.

“We know that the migraines have genetic predisposition,” Kapural said. “Number two, there is something called CSD that has been very popular for the last many years, and this is what is called cortical spreading depression. This is sort of like a wave of electrical activity that can cross the cerebral cor-

tex, and it can actually contribute to this formation of the aura before migraine, severe pain comes along, and we know that this is trigeminal nerve activation. This is the trigeminal nerve system that controls the front and the occipital complex controls back. That’s why we stimulate on both sides, so that both of those get activated.”

The study’s early results found the implant can cut monthly migraine days in half.

Charlotte is among the places where people can participate in the trial. Once the hypothesis is proven, Kapural says they will start the process of getting insurance to help cover the procedure and

go from there.

“Once the trial is over, then comes the approval process,” he said. “Once fully approved if [the FDA] is happy with the results and lack of side effects, the next step is implantation through insurance companies that cover migraines. The FDA’s priority is safety but also efficiency that is comparable to standard of care or better. That is where we are now with the study.”

If you or anyone you know suffers from migraines, information on the trial, the study and where to sign up can be found at ShiraTronics.com/clinical-trial.



STOCK PHOTO

The Trump administration has stripped nursing of professional status, meaning the federal government is reducing the amount of financial aid for students.

Federal law strips American nurses of professional status

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

The Trump administration has declared that nursing is not a professional degree, striking directly at the heart of America’s healthcare workforce and landing hardest on Black women, who make up nearly 13% of the national healthcare labor force and almost 10% of registered nurses.

The administration frames the move as a technical adjustment to loan classifications. For Black women and the communities that rely on them, the consequences are far more severe.

“This is a gut punch for nursing,” Patricia Pittman of George Washington University stated. “Education from ADN to BSN and beyond is the single best way to retain nurses, especially in underserved communities.”

Under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, nursing, physical therapy, physician assistants, and other front-line health professions have been stripped of professional degree status. Students in these fields can borrow only \$20,500 per year with a total cap of \$100,000. Students in law, dentistry, medicine, and other protected fields can

borrow up to \$50,000 per year and \$200,000 total. Nursing students report tuition and clinical training costs that far exceed the new caps, leaving many unable to continue their education.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing issued a direct warning. “Excluding nursing disregards the rigorous education, licensure, and direct patient care that define our profession,” the organization stated. “This decision threatens the healthcare of patients in communities across the country.”

The nation already faces a shortage of hundreds of thousands of nurses. Graduate degrees are required for advanced practice roles. Without meaningful access to federal loans, fewer students will enter or complete these programs. Black women, who rely on student loans at far higher rates than white students, now face a barrier to financial mobility and advancement in the nursing profession.

Research shows that Black nurses often serve in underserved rural and urban communities. Studies of Black nurse practitioners describe persistent racism, heavy work-

loads, and limited institutional support. Participants in one national qualitative study described taking additional time to address inequities and care for patients facing social and economic barriers while contending with organizational barriers and burnout.

Kim Brundidge, a doctoral nursing student and practicing nurse, described the consequences for the next generation of providers. “If students are not able to afford advanced education, the quality and number of nurses entering the workforce will decline,” she said.

Local and national nursing groups are preparing challenges to the reclassification. Leaders across the field warn that the bill undermines the country’s ability to meet basic healthcare needs.

“In many communities across the country, advanced practice registered nurses ensure access to essential and high-quality care that would otherwise be unavailable,” Jennifer Mensik Kennedy of the American Nurses Association said. “Limiting nurses’ access to graduate education threatens the very foundation of patient care.”



ADOBE STOCK

Regular exercise and proper nutrition are key to limiting the effects of aging.

Advice for healthy aging as NC grows older

By Eric Tegethoff
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

As North Carolina's population ages, the focus turns to preventive health strategies that can add quality to later years.

Experts stress that regular physical activity and proper nutrition are critical for managing chronic conditions and protecting brain health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, physical activity can help prevent or manage many health issues common in older adults, such as heart disease and diabetes, while also boosting cognitive function.

John E. Lewis, founder of Dr. Lewis Nutrition, a plant-based nutrition and supplement company, and an advisor for the Medical Wellness Association, said the power to change one's health trajectory remains firmly in an individual's hands, regardless of age.

"If you've been diagnosed with some type of cancer or heart disease," he said, "you still, as long as you are alive and in control of yourself, have

the ability to change that by using proper nutrition and exercising every day and using key dietary supplements."

Lewis pointed out that despite a national trend toward sedentary lifestyles, even small amounts of daily movement can start a positive chain reaction for health.

North Carolina's older adult population is expected to double by 2040.

For those unsure where to begin, Lewis' advice is refreshingly straightforward: Start small and be consistent.

"The easiest thing that somebody can do is have a good pair of sneakers and just simply start walking around in their neighborhood," he said, "even if it's only five minutes the first time."

Beyond exercise, hydration and key nutrients such as Vitamin D are also pillars of a healthy aging strategy. Experts agree that a comprehensive approach, combining movement, whole foods, quality sleep, and stress management, is the true path to vitality after 50.

Lexus opens distance on competitors with TX 500h

Continued from page 1B

wever, the F-Sport version gets an adaptive suspension which improves ride quality and makes it handle more like a crossover than an SUV.

The ride is certainly comfortable, giving you the impression you are driving something expensive. It's firm, but in a good way. Bumps are soaked up before they enter the cabin and it takes a big bump to upset the suspension.

There is some engine and wind noise, but the ride is mostly quiet than not.

The TX 500h F Sport comes with a lot of standard equipment including Apple CarPlay, hands-free lift gate, trim-zone automatic climate control, wireless smartphone charging, Wi-Fi services, adaptive cruise control, lane keeping assist, adaptive sport-tuned suspension and

the aforementioned equipment. That comes at a price of \$71,810. There are a few packages with add self-parking, digital rearview mirror, panoramic view camera and head's up display.

The as-tested price of my test car was \$77,255.

Pros:

- Stylish exterior
- Comfortable, roomy interior
- Impressive power
- Good gas mileage
- Comfortable, quiet ride
- Above average handling
- Lots of equipment

Cons:

- Subpar Interior trim on lower trim levels
- Some confusing controls



MELINDA MYERS

Spending time in nature, like in this Milwaukee Domes Conservatory, can have a positive impact on mental and physical health.

Experience the many benefits from time in nature

By Melinda Myers
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Take a break in nature from the stresses of everyday life and the hectic holiday season. Research has found spending time in nature, conservatories, botanic gardens and other green spaces can have a positive impact on mental and physical health.

Work, school, and other aspects of daily life may have you suffering from a bit of mental fatigue. Surrounding yourself with plants and spending time in green spaces can serve as a distraction and help reduce this fatigue. Being immersed in nature elevates your mood and helps reduce the risk of developing and experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Scientists also found a strong correlation between green space and illnesses in a community. The more green space that's available, the lower the level of disease in a community.

Spending time in gardens and nature is also good for the youngsters in our lives. It helps them develop social, emotional and cognitive skills. "Green Time" can also reduce symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder in children and can act as an effective supplement to traditional medicinal and behavioral treatments.

Finding access to nature can be challenging in some locations and at certain times of the year when harsh weather tends to keep us indoors. Parks, botanic gardens and conservatories help improve

access to nature.

Many botanical gardens and parks host year-round events encouraging everyone to get outside, move and enjoy nature. You will find yoga classes, walking groups, gardening classes and nature walks offered at many of these public green spaces. Encourage youngsters in your life to join you in nature and participate in youth-focused activities.

Conservatories provide year-round access no matter the weather. Collections of plants are housed under glass, providing opportunities to immerse yourself in greenery.

The Mitchell Park Domes is a great example of providing the public with green space. In its original charter Milwaukee County stated: "Let us provide for the public the ultimate in experiencing nature in the city. Plant life of many kinds must be sustained throughout all seasons..." The conservatory continues inspiring people through plants with its permanent collection of over 1,800 plant species from around the globe. These are housed in three domes, featuring desert, tropical and temperate zone plants. Visitors not only can immerse themselves in greenery but can experience the climate and vegetation of various locations around the world. This along with the changing displays in the floral dome encourages year-round visits.

Take time now and all year to experience the benefits of green space. Add a few indoor plants to your home. You will enjoy

the added greenery while elevating your mood. Walk in a nearby park or botanic garden and if you are near a conservatory, make this a routine part of your schedule.

Make it easy and affordable to visit botanic gardens and conservatories in your community and around the country. Consider becoming a member. You'll help support their mission and are likely to visit more often and take advantage of all they have to offer.

No matter where you live, becoming a member of the Milwaukee Domes Alliance, provides free access to over 360 other botanical gardens and conservatories across the country, including the Mitchell Park Domes. It's a great way to save money as you explore other gardens and conservatories across the country.

Take a break today and enjoy the many benefits that connecting with nature provides. Once refreshed you will be better able to tackle the daily demands and handle the stresses of everyday life.

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including the *Midwest Gardener's Handbook, 2nd Edition* and *Small Space Gardening*. She hosts *The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything"* streaming courses and the nationally syndicated *Melinda's Garden Moment* radio program. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for *Birds & Blooms* magazine and her website is www.MelindaMyers.com.



DUKE UNIVERSITY

Dr. Margeaux Marbre (center) and her team at Duke University School of Medicine are researching the impact of e-cigarettes on pregnancies.

Vaping dangers to pregnancies seen in North Carolina study

By Eric Tegethoff
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

A new study found hazards to pregnancies from vaping, and the worst part may not be the nicotine.

The research from Duke University looked at the effects of e-cigarettes on the embryo development and fetal growth of mice.

Dr. Margeaux Marbre, assistant professor in obstetrics and gynecology at the Duke University School of Medicine, who led the research, said the nicotine from e-cigarettes led to smaller fetal weights for the mice. However, the additives in vapes, such as thickening agents or flavoring additives, had effects too.

"There was actually an increased rate of fetal mis-

carriage, such as baby loss, fetal loss early in pregnancy," Marbre said. "This implies that even in the absence of nicotine, just the flavoring can be really toxic to the pregnancy and to the baby."

Marbre recommended people who are pregnant should avoid both cigarettes and e-cigarettes because of the effects they have on developing fetuses, and, if necessary, seek nicotine replacement therapies.

Marbre noted e-cigarettes are seen as nicotine cessation tools, and research shows up to 15% of pregnant women use them.

"There may be women that are cigarette smokers and when they got pregnant, they wanted to switch

to something that they thought was safer," Marbre said. "They are implied to be safe but it's these unknown additives that could really be toxic for the pregnancy and for the baby."

When it comes to the flavoring additives in some vapes, Marbre added the Food and Drug Administration has approved them for eating but not for inhaling.

"We don't know if they're going to be bad until they're heated, aerosolized and inhaled and then people die or they're hospitalized," Marbre said. "Unfortunately, there needs to be more regulation and we need to have more knowledge about how these food additives, when heated and inhaled, could be toxic."

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Call 704-376-0496

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

BIDS

ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS

Sealed bids for a qualified engineering firm for the Preliminary Engineering Report, Design and Construction for the Foothills Reginal Airport Industrial Sewer Project will be received by Caldwell County (Owner) at Caldwell County Chambers, 905 West Avenue NW, Lenoir, NC 28645, until 2:00 p.m. (local time) on January 16th, 2026. At that time and place, bids will be opened and read aloud in public.

Caldwell County is seeking a qualified engineering firm for the Preliminary Engineering Report (PER), Design and Construction Services for the Foothills Regional Airport Industrial Sewer Project. The airport is located on Highway 18, 8 miles north of Morganton and 9 miles south of Lenoir, NC.

The County requires a PER to evaluate options for installing public sanitary sewer to the Foothills Regional Airport and the surrounding 1,054 acres owned by the airport authority.

The selected firm will be employed by Caldwell County and will coordinate with staff from the Foothills Regional Airport and the City of Lenoir Utility Department. Caldwell County is the official selection entity.

The Owner reserves the right to reject any or all bids or any part of a bid, and to waive informalities and technicalities in the bid.

Publish Date: December 18, 2025

Closing Date: January 16, 2026, at 2:00 PM (Proposals received after this time will not be considered.)

Submittal Format: TWO (2) hard copies of the proposal (no more than 30 pages double-sided) and ONE (1) electronic copy on a flash drive.

Submission Details and Requirements

Contact for Specific Questions:

Ashley Bolick, Economic Development Director

Telephone: (828) 728-0768

Email: abolick@caldwellcountync.org

Submit To: Heather Cox, Purchasing Agent:

Mailing Address: RFQ 26-0116 Physical Address: RFQ 26-0116

PO BOX 2200 905 West Ave., NC

Lenoir, NC 28645 Lenoir, NC 28645

Caldwell County encourages small, female, minority and local contractors to bid on this project. The County also promotes fair housing, is an equal opportunity employer, and encourages others to provide equal employment opportunities.



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The City of Hendersonville has the following out for bid: RFQ # 250031014001 for IFB # 267555001 for 2026 Stormwater Improvements. Visit the following link for full details: <https://www.hendersonvillenc.gov/rfp-q-bid/invitation-bid-267555001-2026-stormwater-improvements>

EMPLOYMENT

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ASKAR-ABAYEV | PEXELS

Kwanzaa, the celebration of African culture, started in 1966 in Los Angeles.

Time for Kwanzaa celebrations

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

Kwanzaa season is almost here. Kwanzaa Charlotte will host daily in-person programming with historical, cultural and educational programs with artistic expressions of drumming, dance and spoken word. Daily celebrations will be held 7-8:30 p.m., Dec. 26-Jan. 1 at Greenville Memorial AME Zion Church, 6116 Montith Drive. Other celebrations from Dec. 27-31 will be held at Movement School Freedom Elementary Campus, 2701 Freedom Drive. All events are free and open to the public. An African Marketplace will precede and close celebrations from 6-7 p.m. and 8:30-9:30 p.m. Dec. 26-31. Kwanzaa is an African American celebration of family, community, and culture. Founded in 1966 by Maulana Karenga in California, the pan-African observance includes a weeklong series of events are non-heroic and non-religious commemorations celebrated across the diaspora. "Kwanzaa brings a cultural message, which is both particularly African and definitively human," Karenga said. Kwanzaa is based on African "first fruits" harvest celebrations, which were "ingathering of the people, reverence for the Creator, commemoration of the past and a recommitment to our highest cultural ideals." The Kiswahili language is used to express the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles), which as Karenga said, "have a universal value in their call for thoughtful and practical applications 365 days of the year." Kwanzaa celebration dates, times and Nguzo Saba principles (in parentheses). All programs are at Movement School, 2701 Freedom Drive.

- Dec. 26 Umoja (Unity)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:30-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Dec. 27 Kujichagulia (Self-determination)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:3-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Dec. 28 Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:30-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Dec. 29 Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:30-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Dec. 30 Nia (Purpose)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:30-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Dec. 31 Kumbamba (Creativity)**
6 p.m. - African Marketplace
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
8:30-9:15 p.m. African Marketplace
- Jan. 1 Imani (Faith)**
7-8:30 p.m. Kwanzaa program
Day of reflection and contemplation



« ON THE MARQUEE »



INDIGUE

R&B/pop legend and 10-time Grammy Chaka Khan will join Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight and Stephanie Mills for "The Queens! 4 Legends. 1 Stage Tour" Feb. 13 at Spectrum Center Feb. 13.

It's the holidays, but music will ring in the new year, too

From Charlotte Symphony to R&B queens on tour, 2026 opens with bang

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

There's plenty of holiday-related activity in December, from concerts to musicals. Then, it's time to turn the calendar for music the bring in the new year. Here's what's on tap: Through Dec. 21 Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux's Nutcracker performed by Charlotte Ballet at Belk Theater. Weeknight performances are 7:30 p.m., weekend shows at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Tickets available at charlotteballet.org or call (704) 372-1000. Matthews Playhouse of the Performing Arts' production of "Scrooge! The Musical" is back for its fourth year. 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 on sale at matthewsplayhouse.com or by calling (704) 846-8343. Through Dec. 23 Children's Theatre of Charlotte presents "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" at McColl Family Theatre. The holiday classic soars in a musical adaptation of the beloved television special. Filled with hits like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "A Holly Jolly Christmas," the program features all the favorite characters: Santa and Mrs. Claus, Hermey the Elf, Bumble the Abominable Snow Monster, Clarice, Yukon Cornelius and Rudolph. The one-act musical is approximately 70 minutes.

Tickets: ctcharlotte.org
Dec. 23-28 "Dr. Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical" takes the stage at Belk Theater at Blumenthal Arts Center. Limited tickets remain for Dec. 23 (2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Showtimes are Dec. 24 (2 p.m.) and Dec. 26 (2 p.m., 6:30 p.m.), Dec. 27 (11 a.m., 3 p.m.) and Dec. 28 (11 a.m.). Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.
Middle C Jazz 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. Among the highlights: (Dec. 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.
Jan. 9-10 Charlotte Symphony Orchestra presents Strauss' "Blue Danube" at Belk Theater, 130 N Tryon St. A sweeping tribute to Vienna and the rich tradition of the waltz, the program includes virtuosity to start the new year. Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" evoking Vienna's famous river. Grammy-winning conductor Michael Christie will lead the symphony. Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.

famous river. Grammy-winning conductor Michael Christie will lead the symphony. Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.
Jan. 17 The Philharmonik with Bobby Carter at Booth Playhouse, 8 p.m. Black Notes Project Music Week-end kicks off with the ensemble, which fuses classical orchestration with hip-hop's energy and contemporary groove. Christian Gates, known professionally as The Philharmonik, is an American vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, lyricist, music producer and genre defining artist. Special guest Bobby Carter, producer of NPR's Tiny Desk concerts, opens with a live DJ set. For tickets: blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/the-philharmonik.
Feb. 13 Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight, and Stephanie Mills are extending their "The Queens! 4 Legends. 1 Stage" tour to Spectrum Center. The tour brings together four trailblazing R&B/pop giants for a celebration of legacy, sisterhood, and music. Tickets: bpctickets.com.
March 7 The eighth annual Queen City Blues Festival is at Ovens Auditorium 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., E.J. Jones, Stephanie Luckett & the YP Band, and Henry Welch. Tickets: ticketmaster.com.

Put 'Sinners' on list of 2025's best movies

By Dwight Brown
BLACK PRESS USA

These 10 best films floated to the top of the pack in 2025. All are Oscar worthy on some level, in some category. Screen them in theaters or stream them and you'll see for yourself. **Hamnet** 4 stars A woman in a forest has a lot to learn about life and forgiveness. Watching her metamorphosis is transfixing. It becomes a wondrous and increasingly enchanting narrative that segues into one of the most famous plays ever written. Scripted and directed by Oscar winner Chloé Zhao. Expertly acted by Jessie Buckley and Paul Mescal. Features drama of Shakespearean proportions. A catharsis that will leave audiences spent and in a meditative state. **A House of Dynamite** 4 stars "Object remains inbound!" Those aren't the words you want to hear when a nuclear missile is headed your way. Yet that's the ominous news that bombards government officials in this pulse-quickening thriller. Oscar-winning director Kathryn Bigelow ("The Hurt Locker") skillfully offers three perspectives of the same astounding incident. The sterling, lock-step ensemble cast includes Anthony Ramos, Rebecca Ferguson, Jason Clarke and Idris Elba. Bigelow, Noah Oppenheim's script and the talented actors take you there. By film's end you'll need a stiff drink, some strong weed or a calming walk around the block. That's the mark of a riveting thriller. That's what's coming



WARNER BROS

Michael B. Jordan and the cast of "Sinners," which earned plenty of buzz in 2025.

inbound. **The Lost Bus** 3.5 stars It started with a spark, and no one knew how it would end. That's how the deadliest fire in California history went down on November 18, 2018, in Butte County, California. School bus driver Kevin McCay (Matthew McConaughey) swings into action and tries to save lives. Meticulously, director Paul Greengrass ("United 93") sets up the story, coordinates the genius special effects, places the characters in position and lights a blaze under it all. A sustained chaos lasts for two hours and nine minutes. Dread and fear linger. That's why your nerves will be

frayed long after the final credits roll. **Marty Supreme** 3.5 stars He's reckless and ambitious. A loser who never gives up. Born poor but has big dreams. Ping-pong becomes his way up and out of his low-income Jewish American community on New York's Lower East Side. Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet) tries desperately to become a table tennis champion in the '50s and '60s. Writer/director Josh Safdie ("Uncut Gems") has chosen a worthy subject and the perfect, brassy young actor for the lead. It's as if every role Chalamet has ever done was a building block to this moment. Kinetic. Chaotic. Please see **AMONG** | 6B

Among 2025 best movies: Ryan Coogler’s ‘Sinners’

Continued from page 5B
Continuously barreling towards disaster. Innovative direction. Pretty good script. Koto Kawaguchi, Gweneth Paltrow and Odessa A'zion costar. If only roller coasters were this exciting.

My Father's Shadow
4 stars
"May the four colors of the earth bless me. I will see you in my dreams." Writer/director Akinola Davies has a poetic way with words.
Also, a great feel for sensitive and compelling storytelling in this father/son alchemy. Two young bickering Nigerian brothers, the extroverted Remi (Chibuike Marvelous Egbo) and introverted Aki (Godwin Chiemezie Egbo), live in a rural town. The day they reunite with their estranged dad Folarin (Sopé Dirisu, "Gangs of London") in Lagos, there's a monumental shift in their father/son relationship. Reminiscent of the Oscar winning film "Moonlight."

A touching meditation on fatherhood, political strife and the frailty of life.

On Becoming a Guinea Fowl
3.5 stars
Dead uncle in the middle of the road. Do you hit the brakes or accelerate? British writer/director Rungano Nyoni has her own take on the #MeToo movement as it concerns her home country, Zambia. She prefers a modern fable. One in which the protagonist must find her voice to speak her truths. Susan Chardy plays the twentysomething with a lesson to learn and abuse that must be exposed.

A mirrored mask with imbedded sunglasses is her headwear, a black balloon-type costume is her garb. It's an indelible image. One of many in this modern, feminist allegory. Finally, guilt is heaved off the victim onto the perpetrator. It's a revelation.

The Secret Agent
4 stars
"I am under a death threat... it's a dangerous situation."
Marcelo (Wagner Moura, "Narcos"), a tech research scientist at a university is being hunted. During Brazil's infamous military dictatorship in 1977, he and throngs of others are fleeing from those who'd kill them.

Kleber Mendonça Filho artfully writes and directs this historical political/thriller that blends genres and defies expectations. His thoughtful, intelligent and forewarning script drifts in and out of time periods. Those who're victimized and those who perpetrate evil will be revealed or exposed. That's what this masterpiece tells all who will listen.

Sentimental Value
4 stars
Absentee dads and the repercussions of their behavior drive the storyline in this Norwegian family drama.
A large imposing red house in Oslo is the setting. Oscar nominated screenwriter Joachim Trier ("The Worst Person in the World") directs from a poignant script co-written with Eskil Vogt. A wayward father (Stellan Skarsgård) tries to reconnect with his two grown and embittered daughters, Nora (Renate Reinsve) and Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas). Expect friction. Be surprised by the ending. Perfectly directed, written, produced and acted. It's like watching group therapy—and you're in the group!

Sinners
3 stars
Writer/director Ryan Coogler digs into the horror genre and brings a formidable production crew with him.
Cinematographer Autumn Durald Arkapaw ("Black Panther: Wakanda Forever"), production designer Hannah Beachler (Oscar winner "Black Panther"), costume designer Ruth E. Carter (Oscar winner "Black Panther") and others. Twin

brothers Smoke and Stack (Michael B. Jordan) return to rural Mississippi to open up a juke joint. Vampires won't leave them alone.

Dazzling imagery, audio effects, skilled direction and strong performances. Somewhere in this hefty, 137-minute, audacious supernatural film is a more phenomenal 120-minute movie.

Wicked: For Good
3.5 stars
"I've heard it said. That people come into our lives for a reason..."
Figuring that out is the main task for Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) and Glinda (Arianna Grande). But the Wizard of Oz (Jeff Goldblum) and his henchwoman Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh) are out to destroy Elphaba and stopping them won't be easy. The narrative gets richer and more fanciful with every frame and swirls to an ending with enough twists to surprise everyone.

Jon M. Chu's direction and the excellent production elements are extraordinary. Though, the film's strongest elements are the two leads. A touching lesson about friendship gives them both room to shine.

Best of the Best
This year's great performances, smart directing and behind-the-lens talent deserve recognition.

Documentaries, animation, first films and honorable mention movies should be lauded too. That's why they're in this "Best of the Best" listing. Let it be your guide to the best in film in 2025.

- Honorable mention films: "28 Years Later," "Black Bag," "The Choral," "Dead Man's Wire," "F1," "Father Mother Sister Brother," "The History of Sound," "Is This Thing On?," "Nuremberg," "One of Them Days," "The Smashing Machine," "Sorry, Baby," "Superman," "Warfare," "Weapons"
- Best directors: Jon M. Chu ("Wicked: For Good"), Ryan Coogler ("Sinners"), Akinola Davies ("My Father's Shadow"), Josh Safdie ("Marty Supreme"), Chloé Zhao ("Hamnet")
- Best first films: "East of Wall" (Kate Beecroft) "My Father's Shadow" (Akinola Davies), "One of Them Days" (Lawrence Lamont), "Sorry, Baby" (Eva Victor), "Warfare" (Ray Mendoza)
- Best foreign language films: "My Father's Shadow," "An Officer and a Spy," "On Becoming a Guinea Fowl," "The Secret Agent," "Sentimental Value"
- Best documentaries: "Orwell: 2+2=5," "The Perfect Neighbor," "Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk," "Seeds"
- Best animation: "Arco," "K-Pop Demon Hunters," "Zootopia 2"
- Best actors: Timothée Chalamet ("Marty Supreme"), Sope Dirisu ("My Father's Shadow"), Joel Edgerton ("Train Dreams") Dwayne Johnson ("Smashing Machine"), Wagner Moura ("The Secret Agent")
- Best actresses: Jessie Buckley ("Hamnet"), Julia Garner ("Weapons"), Renate Reinsve ("Sentimental Value"), SZA ("One of Them Days"), Tessa Thompson ("Hedda")
- Best supporting actors: A\$AP Rocky ("Highest 2 Lowest"), Delroy Lindo ("Sinners") Paul Mescal ("Hamnet"), Anthony Ramos ("House of Dynamite"), Leo Woodall ("Nuremberg")
- Best supporting actresses: Emily Blunt ("The Smashing Machin"), Rebecca Ferguson ("House of Dynamite"), Amy Madigan ("Weapons"), Teyana Taylor ("One Battle After Another"), Mari Yamamoto ("The Rental Family")
- Best screenplays: "The History of Sound" (Ben Shattuck), "House of Dynamite" (Noah Oppenheim), Marty Supreme (Josh Safdie), "My Father's Shadow" (Akinola Davies and Wale Davies), "The Secret Agent" (Kleber Mendonça Filho)

«OUT & ABOUT



BYRON PUTMAN

The Kappa Alpha Chapter and Psi Kappa Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. hosted their annual Founders Banquet on Nov. 23 at Winthrop University. This event marked the culmination of Achievement Week, a national observance honoring the fraternity's founding in 1911, at Howard University.

The banquet celebrated the fraternity's enduring commitment to service, scholarship, and leadership, recognizing both chapter members and local citizens for their outstanding contributions to the York and Chester County communities. Achievement Week winners: Sean Golden, KA Omega Man of the Year; Maurice Sanders, Founders Award; Austen Cummings, Psi Kappa Omega Man of the Year; George McKoy, Members vs Men Award; Torrence Robinson, Superior Service Award.



DANIEL COSTON

Former Mayor Harvey Gantt was among the guests at the Jazzy Gantt Gala, held at the Center on Dec. 5.



DANIEL COSTON

Former Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Johnny Jennings and Charlotte City Manager Marcus Jones were among the attendees at the annual Good Fellows luncheon, held at the Charlotte Convention Center on Dec. 3.

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