

The News Reporter's
FIFTEEN
Under
40

Class of 2024

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The News Reporter's FIFTEEN *Under* 40

After a hiatus of more than three years, The News Reporter has revived its Fifteen Under 40 program with the Class of 2024. The newspaper launched the initiative eight years ago to recognize and celebrate young professionals in Columbus County.

The News Reporter put out the call for nominations during the month of November in the newspaper, at NRcolumbus.com, in the email newsletter, and on Facebook and Instagram. Members of the public nominated more than 60 young people making an impact in Columbus County.

Five community leaders who are not affiliated with The News Reporter made up the judging panel. In December, judges reviewed all nominations individually and then together selected this year's class.

Congratulations to the fifteen impressive young people featured in this publication!

Thank you to our judging panel

Angie Williamson Benton

Lead Data Manager, Columbus County Schools/West Columbus High School

Martin Scott

Attorney, Williamson, Walton & Scott, LLP

Serena Smith

Teacher and Coach, Whiteville City Schools

Dr. Dan Strickland

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Shenicka Banks, 34

Residence: Chadbourn
Hometown: Whiteville
Employment: Whiteville City Schools, school social worker; SAGEipsum, esthetician
Education: Whiteville High School, N.C. A&T State University – BS, University of South Carolina – MSW
Family: Maj. Marquette Banks, husband; Darlene Mccolum, mother
Pet: Bailey Banks, Rottweiler
Enjoys: Traveling, running, line dancing, lashing and spending time with my family and friends

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

Aside from my family and personal life, my greatest accomplishment has been my entrepreneurial endeavor as a licensed esthetician, which I pursued while maintaining a full-time career. I am the owner and operator of an all-natural skincare brand and maintain a Grade A salon, SAGEipsum.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

My career allows me to create initiatives that bridge the gap for my students and their families. Additionally, I participate in initiatives with other philanthropic organizations, so I am able to give back to the community that supported me. As a member of the Whiteville Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, I am also able to work collectively with a group that has the mission of service in our heart.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Columbus County is, and always will be, my home, and it gives me a great pride to serve the community that made me who I am. I love that living here allows me the opportunity to be available to my family and friends. An added bonus is access to the beautiful beaches nearby!

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

I would tell my 16-year-old self that people don't have to like or love you; that's your responsibility!

What do you do to relax?

Self-care is one way that I relax! In my free time, I indulge in activities that bring me joy and pleasure such as relaxing massages, shopping, spending time with family and friends and exploring the world through travel!

What did you want to be when you grew up?

As a child, I aspired to pursue a career as a teacher and as a school social worker. My 7th grade English teacher helped me discover that my passion for helping others and my other qualities were better suited for a career as a social worker.

Favorite movie:

"The Lion King"

Favorite food:

Seafood

Favorite book:

"You Owe You" by Eric Thomas

Favorite drink:

Alkaline water with Fruit Punch Crystal Light

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**Latoya
Beatty, 38**

Residence and Hometown: Bolton
Employment: Columbus County Partnership for Children, partnership engagement coordinator
Education: East Columbus High School, Mercer University – MPH, Howard University – MD
Family: Nathan Beatty, father; Beverly McDowell, mother; Latonya Beatty, sister; Elijah Corbett, brother
Pet: Puppy ‘Lando’ on the way
Enjoys: Reading, traveling, cooking, swimming and spending time with loved ones

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I was a Gates Millennium Scholar and have both a medical and a public health background. In my current role, I lead parenting classes to help reduce adverse childhood experiences, co-lead the Resilient Columbus coalition and lead workshops on resilience. I serve on the Columbus Co. Community Health Assessment 2024 Steering Committee and completed the Homegrown Leaders program and the Rural Economic Development Institute program. I co-led the Columbus County Health Leadership Forum “Increasing Health Coverage in Rural N.C.” at Southeastern Community College. My interests are rural community health, pediatrics and health equity.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

I love giving back to Columbus County, particularly the east end. Community projects that I am involved with include Youth Food Policy Advisory Council of Men and Women United for Youth and Families, Communities Connected 4 Success, Columbus NAACP (Health Chair

Assistant), Alumni in Action: Bolton & Neighbors Recovery Team following Hurricane Florence (Founder), Girl Trek Chapter on the east end of the county (Founder), Bolton LEADERS (Leading Exceptional Adolescents in Dialogue to End Racism), Columbus County Guardian Ad Litem, Davis Academy Board and Bolton Safe Haven.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Community and lower cost of living. My family is close by, and I can see them more conveniently. I feel like I can make a huge difference here versus in the city. I frequently travel, so I still get a taste of the city life, but it’s certainly nice to come back to peaceful living.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Don’t rush growing up. Enjoy your teenage years with fewer responsibilities. And don’t forget where you come from as you might come back.

Tell us about your family:

I have a fraternal twin sister and a large extended family on both sides. I have one living grandparent left who is 91 and still drives and cooks for himself.

What do you do in your free time?

You can find me visiting historical sites, doing mini road trips, attending cultural events or trying new food dishes. I am such a foodie, and I love cooking new, healthy dishes.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a doctor since I was around age 4. It came with many challenges but I never gave up.

Favorite book: “Before I let Go” by Kennedy Ryan

Congratulations

**DR. LATOYA BEATTY, MADISON WARD,
GRANT MERRITT, JOSH HARRIS AND THE ENTIRE
FIFTEEN UNDER 40 CLASS OF 2024.**

**Shenicka Banks, Marquise Blanks, Brittany Edwards,
Larry Everette, A. Nicole Jenkins, Brian Locklear,
Christine Long, Brianna Monroe, Darren Norris,
Wade Stanaland and Miranda Thompkins**



**The Columbus County Partnership for Children Team,
Dr. Selena Rowell, Executive Director.**

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Marquise Blanks, 34

Residence and Hometown: Farmers Union
Employment: City of Whiteville, lieutenant firefighter
Education: East Columbus High School
Family: Brianna Blanks, wife; Malachi Wright and Memphis Blanks, children
Enjoys: Hunting, fishing, and being outdoors

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I currently serve the citizens of Whiteville as a lieutenant at Whiteville Fire Department. Throughout my career, I have obtained multiple certifications: Firefighter I and II, Swift Water Rescue, Fire Officer I, Emergency Medical Responder, and Child Passenger Safety Technician. I also own and operate a successful and growing business, Ladder One Lawn Care and Landscaping, LLC.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

Aside from my career, I volunteer at Hallsboro Volunteer Fire Department, White Marsh-Welches Creek Volunteer Fire Department, Nakina Fire and Rescue and Whiteville Rescue Unit.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

To me, the best part is the closeness of the commu-

nity. Throughout my career, I have seen this county during its best and worst times. And watching everyone come together in a time of need is truly heartwarming

Tell us about a moment that changed your life.

My life was changed the most when my two boys were born. I have many titles and wear many hats, but there's nothing like being a daddy. It's a love like I had never experienced until then.

Tell us about your family.

My wife, Brianna, and I have two boys: Malachi, 2, and Memphis, 10 months. I don't have much free time, but when I do, it's spent with my family. We enjoy hunting and going fishing

What did you want to be when you grew up?

Growing up, I always wanted to be a truck driver because that's what my granddaddy did.

Favorite movie:

"Forrest Gump"

Favorite food:

A Ward's Grill cheeseburger

Favorite drink:

Sun Drop

Congratulations Marquise & Madison
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Marquise Blanks



Madison Ward



Congratulations

TO THE 2024 CLASS OF **15 UNDER 40**

Heartfelt congratulations to the exceptional individuals who have earned a place in the prestigious "15 under 40" list of 2024! Your outstanding achievements and dedication to your respective fields have not only garnered well-deserved recognition but also inspire admiration. This honor is a testament to your hard work, innovation, and the positive impact you've made at such a young age.

Here's to celebrating your success and looking forward to the incredible contributions you will continue to make in the years ahead. Congratulations on this remarkable achievement!



**Brittany
Edwards, 34**

*Residence: Whiteville
Hometown: Ayden, N.C.
Employment: Columbus County Schools, East Columbus Jr./Sr. High School counselor
Education: Ayden Grifton High School, East Carolina University – BS, Salem College – MED-SC
Family: W.T. Edwards, husband; Gray and Avery Edwards, daughters
Pet: Cooper, dog
Enjoys: traveling, watching movies, spending time with family*

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I am not one that looks for a spotlight, so my students are my greatest accomplishments. Seeing them succeed solidifies why I love doing what I do.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

My job is to serve our school community. We are constantly trying to find ways to involve our community members within the school functions at ECJSHS. My favorite events include ones where our students are introduced to future employers or scholarship providers. We hold many events to educate our students and families on student development, higher education and job fairs. I also volunteer with my church, Clarendon Baptist Church. We try to find ways to serve our surrounding community as much as possible.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Living in Columbus County is the best of so many worlds. We are close to the beach, but far enough away that our towns are not too crowded. Living near some extended family is also nice because my girls have so much support and care.

Tell us about a moment that changed your life.

I met my husband while we were both N.C. teaching fellows at ECU. We were both striving to be math teachers, but we did not know each other prior to starting college. W.T. and I happened to be in the same calculus class our first semester and joined the same study group. We became inseparable from that point on, and that definitely changed my life trajectory.

Tell us about your family.

My family is my everything. My husband, W.T., is also a passionate educator. Our beautiful daughters, Gray and Avery, keep our lives active and interesting. My mother and father, Cindy and Peter, still live in Ayden, along with my brother Spencer. They love and support everything I strive to accomplish. My in-laws are a family full of educators: Kim Edwards (mother-in-law), Worley Edwards (father-in-law), Bryant and Kaitlyn Edwards (brother- and sister-in-law) with my niece and nephew (Isabella and J.B.), and Allison Edwards (sister-in-law). I am most relaxed when I'm traveling to fun places with my family. We love to travel and try new things or visit new places. That time together creates memories for us all. Time is a thief, so I want to relish the fun times we can spend together.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I always wanted to be a teacher. My poor brother was forced to be my student in many different classroom settings while we were growing up.

Favorite food:

Bread with olive oil

Favorite drink:

Water with lemon

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**Larry
Everette, 32**

Hometown & Residence: Lumberton
Employment: Southeastern Community College, examiner/recruiter; The Balloon Plug & Klassic Korner Event Center, owner

Education: West Columbus High School, UNC Pembroke – BS, Strayer University – M.Ed, Strayer University – MPA

Family: Larry Everette, father; Tehesia Maulsby-Richardson, mother; La'Saysha Everette-Faulk, sister

Pet: Sarah, dog

Enjoys: traveling, watching movies, spending time with family

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

In 2017, I started my own balloon decor service: The Balloon Plug. It has given me the opportunity to make extra money and also to put smiles on many faces — with just a simple balloon! I have provided balloon decorations for a number of folks in the county for many different occasions. This has led my mom and sister and me to open up our own family business together in 2023: Klassic Korner Event Center. I have worked as an educator for Columbus County Schools at West Columbus and Edgewood Elementary.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

In addition to providing the community with thousands of balloons, I also serve as the current president for the H.E.A.R.T.S Foundation. With my organizations, I have helped coordinate a vast number of events for the area. I am extremely proud of our recent Community Trunk or Treat, which we were fortunate to collaborate on with Southeastern Community College and the Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department. I also serve as a volunteer for the

N.C. Strawberry Festival. I am a member of Lumberton Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. and provide community service and support to the youth.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County? The food. No matter where I go in Columbus County...I can always expect the food to be good. Whether it comes from family, a local restaurant or even in-home caterers, the food will always be good!

Tell us about a moment that changed your life.

Back in 2016, a close friend reached out to me and another friend to provide some balloon decorations for a big party she was hosting. At that time, neither one of us had ever done anything dealing with balloons. So we researched online and created a few things. The decor we provided for the party had to be the worst work I've ever done! Somehow, she thought it was beautiful and told me that this would probably be my calling....and now here we are!

Tell us about your family.

My family is definitely my support system. My parents have always been go-getters and looked for different ways to help others. That mentality trickled down to me and my little sister, giving us the same knowledge and experience to start up our small businesses. I hardly get any free time because I work a lot! However, I enjoy spending time with my family and friends whenever I can.

Favorite movie:

"The Conjuring"

Favorite food:

Lasagna

Favorite drink:

Coffee

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15 UNDER 40

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**Josh
Harris, 32**

Residence: Whiteville
Hometown: Bolton
Employment: Ronald's Body Shop, manager
Education: Bladen Community College
Enjoys: Traveling and spending time with my daughter

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I completed training for my Intermediate Certificate through the N.C. Criminal Justice Training and Standards. I am a Fall 2022 graduate of the N.C. Institute of Political Leadership in Raleigh. I'm also a recipient of the 2022 Spirit Of Columbus Award from Columbus Regional. Also, in November I was elected to the Whiteville City Council.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

I find great satisfaction in advocating for policies that benefit the community, and collaborating with constituents to address specific needs. Additionally, volunteering at local events, supporting educational programs and working on community development projects are also important to me.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

The best part of living in this county is the vibrant sense of community and the simplicity and authenticity of local

traditions and events. The tight-knit community allows for meaningful relationships, and the sense of familiarity creates a supportive environment where people genuinely care for one another.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

I would tell myself to embrace curiosity, explore various interests, and don't be afraid to make mistakes—they're valuable lessons. Build strong relationships, and remember that it's okay not to have everything figured out. Stay true to yourself, be open-minded, and enjoy the journey.

What do you do to relax?

During my free time, I like to sit in my recliner and watch "Andy Griffith" or "Sanford and Son."

Tell us a little-known fact about you.

I am a huge Andy Griffith fan. I enjoy yearly trips to Mount Airy during Mayberry Days.

Favorite movie:

"Rush Hour"

Favorite food:

Chinese

Favorite drink:

Sun Drop



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**A. Nicole
Jenkins, 38**

Residence & Hometown: Cerro Gordo

Employment: Doctor of Physical Therapy LLC, Shoreland Nursing Home, Premier Living Nursing Home, Liberty Home Health & Hospice, and Southeastern Regional Medical Center as a doctor of physical therapy

Education: West Columbus High School, East Carolina University – BS, Howard University – DPT

Family: Shelia (Darrell) Riley, mother and stepfather; the late Jackie (Geraldine) Jenkins, grandparents: John Pittman, godfather; Jimmy Johnson, father; the Jenkins Girls, aunts; Antoine Edge and Randy Dossie, uncles

Enjoys: Softball, cake decorating, mentoring youth, and going to the beach

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

Owner of Doctor of Physical Therapy, LLC; Columbus County Chamber of Commerce member; 2022 Leadership Columbus graduate; Fayetteville Tech Community College Advisory Board member for physical therapy assistant program; member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; co-founder of H.E.R. Mentors; chair and founder of BDJ Scholarship.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

Offer reduced rates and pro-bono PT services; offer free hip adjustments and stretching to WCHS basketball team and other high school athletes in the county. Organized community activities: talent shows, basketball tournaments, pageants, community health awareness events, hurricane relief initiatives; assisted with organizing a Stop the Violence Program held in Chadbourn. Help organize annual healthcare symposiums for Mt. Tabor Missionary Baptist Church, hosted a Community Healthcare Awareness Program that served over 100 participants with free blood pressure and glucose readings and free HIV tests. Host student leadership and educational workshops;

Offer job shadowing opportunities and college tours. Founder of BDJ Scholarship: helping award 14 Columbus County students and one Robeson County student with monetary donations. Mentor girls ages 10-18 from Columbus, Robeson, Wake and Horry counties. Host vision board workshops and render many motivational speaking presentations.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County? Small-town hospitality

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Stay focused and never allow doubt or negativity from others to steer you astray or cause you to give up on your dreams.

Tell us about your family.

I come from a huge and very close-knit family that embodies the phrase “It takes a village.” Every adult woman is like your mother and all the men are father figures. I have a 1-year-old son who is precious and already experiencing that “It takes a village” vibe.

What do you do to relax?

I like to go to my condo at the beach and do absolutely nothing! Best relaxation and feeling every time!

What are people surprised to learn about you?

People are most surprised to learn that I can play the piano and I deliver packages and serve as an Amazon Hub — in addition to gourmet cake decorating, teaching cake decorating courses, renting condos, and mentoring.

Favorite food:

Pizza

Favorite book:

“I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou

Congratulations to all recipients of 2024 Fifteen under 40



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**Brian
Locklear, 32**

*Residence: Whiteville
Hometown: Delco
Employment: Country Village Farms LLC, owner
Education: East Columbus High School, Grand Canyon University – BA and currently working on MDiv
Enjoys: Serving others*

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

Army veteran of 10.5 years; owner of Country Village Farms LLC; ordained with Chaplain Fellowship Ministries; treasurer/chaplain for McMullen House for Heroes, Inc; chaplain/firefighter for Old Dock Cypress Creek VFD; member of the Columbus County Honor Guard.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

My farm donates portions of each rotation to local non-profit organizations in Columbus County. As a volunteer firefighter and fire chaplain, I do my best to bring a sense of peace to those who are having the worst day of their lives. As a chaplain for the McMullen House for Heroes, I strive to care for and support those who at one point decided another person's life was more valuable than their own.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County? There are a plethora of people in Columbus County who constantly go out of their way to ensure others are protected and safe, sometimes without consideration for

their own safety. I have stood at veterans' meetings, car wrecks, structure fires and food drop-offs with the best Columbus has to offer.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Stop pulling away from Christ. Accept his will, and regardless of how the situation looks, being on the morally right side will always pay off.

What do you do to relax?

Relaxing is hard when you have so much going on. However, one thing I wish I had learned much sooner in life is to take one day a week and rest. Limit electronics as much as possible and relax, take a walk, just breathe.

What are people surprised to learn about you?

People are sometimes surprised to learn how caring I am. I have been told many times that I look mad when people see me. However, I do not try to seem mad. Oftentimes, I am trying to solve all the world's problems in my mind.

Favorite food:

I enjoy food from all over the world.

Favorite book:

The Bible

Favorite drink:

Sun Drop

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The News Reporter's

FIFTEEN *Under* 40



Class of 2024





**Christine
Long, 38**

Residence and Hometown: Chadbourn
Employment: Pineview Veterinary Hospital, doctor of veterinary medicine and owner
Education: West Columbus High School, N.C. State University – BS, N.C. State University – DVM
Family: Dustin Long, husband; Keylin, Derek, and Ella Long, children; Jeanne McPherson, mother; Fred McPherson, father
Pets: Lucky and Charlie, dogs; Wren and Yoda, cats; Terry and George, turtles
Enjoys: Spending time with family, going to the movies, traveling, cross stitching and reading books

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

In high school, I played multiple sports, led in the band and held numerous Future Farmers of America offices and leadership positions. Becoming a veterinarian was my first and only career path, and God blessed me with the opportunity to pursue it. My greatest accomplishment has been to return to my home community, raising a beautiful family while purchasing and continuing to run a successful multi-doctor veterinary practice.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

The staff of Pineview Veterinary Hospital touch the lives of countless citizens in Columbus County and beyond through farm visits and appointments in our local hospital in Bolton. My staff are a blessing every day with their compassion, empathy, hard work, determination and grit. I also enjoy coaching friends and family in health and wellness, mentoring young aspiring college students tracked for veterinary school and teaching the youth at Beaverdam Original Freewill Baptist Church.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Columbus County's large footprint makes it very diverse and capable of supporting a large variety of economies and

cultures. At its core, Columbus County continues to maintain a down-home, comfortable feeling.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Be great at one or two things instead of trying to be just good at many things. Burnout, anxiety and fatigue are real, and we live in a fast-paced, instant-gratification, need-it-now, have-it-all culture. So slow down just a bit and enjoy this one life God has given you to live. You'll only have one shot at it.

Tell us about your family.

My husband and I have been married for 17 years. I met him when I was 16, and we have been together ever since. Creating three beautiful children while keeping God at the center of our marriage, careers and lives has been our greatest accomplishment. Our twins, Derek and Keylin (11), are amazing, and their baby sister Ella (5) is precious in every way. In our free time we go to the movies, go out to eat and travel to our daughter's gymnastics meets.

Tell us a little-known fact about you.

I have collected spoons all my life from all my travels around the world. I have spoons from Australia, almost all 50 states and the majority of the tropical islands. However, I do not have one from Ireland, which is on my travel bucket list.

Favorite movie: "Rudy"

Favorite band: Mercy Me

Favorite food: EVERYTHING

Favorite book: The Bible

Favorite drink: Water: the source of life



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**Grant
Merritt, 35**

Residence and Hometown: Whiteville
Employment: Southeastern Community College, multimedia content specialist
Education: Whiteville High School, UNC Pembroke – BS
Family: Phyllis Merritt, mother; Randy Merritt, father
Enjoys: Brazilian jiu jitsu, photography, nature hikes, video games, anime, weight lifting

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I have won several awards in the N.C. Press Association Contest for photography and writing. I am a blue belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu. I have been an event and sports photographer in Columbus County since March 2015. I worked as a regular part-time photographer and writer at The News Reporter for eight years. I am working full-time at Southeastern Community College, where I shoot photos and video, write news articles and create content for social media advertising.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

I have volunteered at Community CPR in Whiteville with loading and unloading furniture, clothes and emergency supplies. I have helped pack and ship shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child at Whiteville United Methodist Church. I have read books to classrooms in Columbus County during Read Across America week for several years. I helped teach kids Brazilian jiu jitsu classes at a local martial arts school. I help with audio equipment and social media content at Crossroads Church. I helped raise money for the Whiteville Junior Woman's Club by participating in the Arctic Alligator Plunge fundraiser.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

The relationships I've made and experiences I've had through my career. Making those connections and experiencing what each area of Columbus County has to offer through sports, parades, festivals, concerts and new businesses makes it an excellent place to live.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Pick up a camera and learn how to use it. Prepare for all the crazy adventures you're about to go on with this little device.

What do you do in your free time?

I'm kind of a technology and fitness nerd. In my free time, you can find me on the couch enjoying some movies and video games, at the gym or on the mats at jiu jitsu class. I like hiking through the woods, on the beach, or around campus at SCC.

What are people surprised to learn about you?

I am kin to the Merritts who own Merritt's Sporting Goods. I get asked that all the time.

Favorite movie: "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix"

Favorite band: Tears for Fears

Favorite food: Grilled chicken

Favorite book: "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" from The Chronicles of Narnia

Favorite drink: Water

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**Brianna
Monroe, 25**

Residence and Hometown: Lake Waccamaw
Employment: CrossFit LKW, CrossFit coach and co-owner
Education: East Columbus High School, UNC Wilmington
– BS, ACSM certified exercise physiologist, CrossFit Level 1 trainer

Family: Tom and Julie Monroe, parents; Danielle Nolan, sister
Pet: Oliver, Golden Retriever

Enjoys: CrossFit, coaching, rucking, coffee shop adventures with friends, writing and spending time with family.

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

In July 2021, my business partner, Donnie Hamilton, and I opened our gym, CrossFit LKW. Over nearly six years, CrossFit has taught me so many things about myself. Every day is a competition against yourself to be better than the day before, and that translates to life far beyond the gym doors. Building a community — of the most amazing humans I have ever had the privilege of knowing — has been a beautiful and humbling experience.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

When I was a sophomore at UNCW, I was in a lecture on the health of North Carolina citizens and learned that Columbus County was one of the least healthy counties in the state — and had been for several years, with a few years being last place as the most unhealthy. That lit a fire inside of me to come back home to try to do my part to help the residents of our county regain their health. With time and consistency, I believe we will see massive changes in the years to come.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Columbus County is full of opportunity for growth. We have one of the most beautiful places to be active in our region: Lake Waccamaw. I absolutely loved growing up here and still enjoy it

today. It makes it easier to stay active with the beautiful nature we have!

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

The hard seasons don't last. They are just that: a season. Be confident enough to stand alone, and own your ideas and uniqueness. You'll know who the right people are for your life.

Tell us about your family.

My parents have been business owners since before I was born, so entrepreneurship runs deep in my veins. They lead by example in all they do, and their unwavering faith in themselves and in me has taught me how to lead and believe in myself and my dreams. My sister is one of the most knowledgeable humans I know. As I was growing up with her, she taught me how to be the strong, independent and resilient person I am today.

What do you do in your free time?

I love to spend my free time with my dog, Oliver. He loves finding sticks, playing outside and getting into the lake in the spring and summer. My small circle of friends are so close to my heart. I love catching up, adventuring to new coffee shops and just getting to be in one another's presence.

What are people surprised to learn about you?

It's no surprise that I love to make people smile and laugh: it's my life's mission. I always joke with members in the gym and tell them that I have a small goal of seeing everyone dance a little bit while they're in there. There's something so amazing about providing a space that allows people to feel comfortable being completely themselves, and drop the burdens of life at the door whenever they get there.

Favorite movie: "Bohemian Rhapsody"

Favorite food: Pizza

Favorite book: "The How of Happiness"

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bring jobs and prosperity to a growing county.



Darren Norris, 35

Residence and Hometown: Tabor City
Employment: Southeastern Community College, lead EMS instructor
Education: South Columbus High School, Bladen Community College – AAS, currently enrolled Western Carolina University – BS
Family: Kristin Norris, wife; Madalyn and Dalyn Norris, children; Casey Norris and Judy Nance, parents
Enjoys: working, camping, and going to church

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

With 15 years in Emergency Medical Services, I have advanced through every certification level, currently serving as a skilled paramedic. For seven years, I've been an EMS Educator, currently leading the EMS programs at Southeastern Community College. This role involves not only guiding aspiring EMS providers but also shaping the future of emergency medical services through innovative education. My educational journey also included a six-year tenure teaching at the high school from which I graduated (South Columbus). I have also been a part of Tabor City Emergency Services for 15 years and have served as the chief for the past nine years.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

As a seasoned EMS professional, I've played a significant role in providing essential, life-saving medical care, adapting to numerous roles and participating in multiple committees to enhance service quality and efficiency. I also contribute to community safety and preparedness by teaching CPR classes, equipping residents with crucial life-saving skills. Through my role at the SCC, I am involved in numerous projects that range from health fairs to public health education, all aimed at improving community well-being.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Living in Columbus County offers the unique charm and warmth of a small-town atmosphere. Walking into a store or business feels like visiting family, not just a routine transaction. There's a profound sense of reward in living and working in the place where I grew up. This tight-knit community spirit, where everyone looks out for one another, truly makes Columbus County a special place to call home.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Cherish your teenage years, because those years are fleeting and irreplaceable. However, keep an eye towards the future and make education a priority. Spend more time with family, particularly with grandparents. The moments spent with them are invaluable, and once they are gone, those opportunities for connection and learning from their wisdom cannot be recaptured.

Tell us about your family.

For the past 13 years, I've been happily married to Kristin Norris, and together we are blessed with two wonderful children. We love camping at local seaside spots and taking road trips to experience new places and adventures. These trips let us enjoy each other's company, stepping away from the daily grind to create family memories.

What are people surprised to learn about you?

I am a registered barber — a passion that I pursued under the guidance of Ronnie Faulk at the Men's and Ladies' Den in Whiteville. Behind the barber's chair, I discovered a different kind of fulfillment — the joy of helping people feel good about themselves through their appearance. Though my time for barbering is limited, it's a serene and enjoyable escape from my regular duties. I dedicate at least one day a week to hair styling at my own salon, Darren's Hair Studio.

Favorite movie: "Home Alone"

Favorite book: King James Bible



Congratulations on being chosen for Fifteen Under 40!

You are well-deserving of this recognition! Your work ethic, eagerness, passion for self-growth and serving others is like no other. Your dedication and endless hours committed to our community does not go unnoticed. We are so proud of you!

Love, Kristin, Madalyn and Dalyn

Congratulations



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**Wade
Stanaland, 37**

Residence and Hometown: Whiteville
Employment: Agriculture entrepreneur, Northwest Land and Cattle, co-founder
Education: Whiteville High School, Southeastern Community College, N.C. State University – BS
Family: AJ Stanaland, wife; Sawyer Jean and Weston Stanaland, children
Pet: Loretta, Aussie Doodle
Enjoys: hunting, fishing and riding horses

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

Earned Eagle Scout. Participated in the American Peanut Leadership Academy, a two-year leadership program bringing growers and shellers together to gain knowledge of all aspects of the peanut industry across its vast growing regions. Currently serving on the Board of Directors for N.C. Soybean Growers Association; served on the N.C. Peanut Growers Executive Board representing Columbus County. Earned license as a drone pilot and launched a drone solution business specializing in multispectral imagery and aerial spray applications. Co-founded Northwest Land and Cattle: a direct-to-consumer beef and pork retail business, helping to bridge the gaps between our farm products and consumers.

In what ways do you give back to your community?
I have volunteered for 21 years with the North Whiteville

Fire Department. I also serve on the department's board of directors as president.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County? The people. We still have that small-town America feel.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

Don't get distracted by the small things. Keep your eye on your goals and give it your all: You will make it.

What do you do to relax?

To relax, I enjoy spending time at Lake Waccamaw with family and friends. In the little free time I have, you can find me hunting, fishing and traveling with my twins as they compete in the N.C. Young Gun Rodeo Association.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

When I was young, I wanted to be a lawyer.

Favorite movie:

"8 seconds"

Favorite band:

Whiskey Myers

Favorite food:

Rare Northwest Land and Cattle bone-in ribeye

Congratulations, Wade!



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and your
accomplishments.

Thank you for
all you do.

Love,
Mama & Bill

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**Miranda
Herring
Thompkins, 36**

Residence and Hometown: Tabor City
*Employment: Ooh La La Gift Boutique & Apparel, co-owner/
 manager*
Education: South Columbus High School
*Family: Kevin (Dabber) Thompkins, husband; Weston and
 Mason Thompkins, sons; Ranzlee Thompkins, daughter; Bren-
 da Watts, mother; Patrick Herring, brother*
Pet: Sadie, Golden Doodle
Enjoys: family vacations and shopping

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

I am co-owner of Ooh La La Gift Boutique and Apparel in downtown Tabor City. We have been in business for over 19 years and recently purchased and moved into a larger location. I strive to keep up with the trends and to keep our customers satisfied. I love when customers tell me that I have a good eye for style as well as quality merchandise. Being a small-town business owner has its challenges, but it is definitely rewarding.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

My family has a history of supporting our personal church activities and our local sports programs. My children are involved in recreational sports, as well as school sports and clubs. I stay involved in their education and extracurricular activities and have been a member of the PTO at their school for over 10 years.

As a business owner, it's important to me that my community is active and vibrant, and I decided to dive deeper into volunteering in our community. In 2018, I became a board member of the North Carolina Yam Festival. In 2019, I began my first year as a member of its board of directors. I was soon asked to serve as the chair of the Crafts, Direct Sales, Retail, Information and Concessions Committee. This has been a huge undertaking, but few things are more rewarding than seeing our

downtown bustling with thousands of visitors on that fourth Saturday every October.

In 2022, I was asked to serve as a board member of The Greater Tabor City Chamber of Commerce. I began my first year as a member of that Board of Directors in February 2023 and stay busy helping with various events throughout the year.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County?

Columbus County offers a unique charm with its small-town feel. Columbus County provides a more relaxed and less hectic environment. The slower pace allows for genuine interactions and a stronger sense of community, making everyday outings a pleasant experience, which I love as a business owner!

Tell us about a moment that changed your life.

The moment that I received the definitive diagnosis that my son was on the autism spectrum was life-changing. At that moment I questioned God, "Why me?" Looking back now I say, "Why not me?" I see the world differently now. I'm more understanding, kinder, stronger, tougher and more educated than before. My faith is definitely stronger, and I know there is no obstacle that I can't overcome.

Tell us about your family.

I have a loving husband who supports me in all that I do. My oldest son, Weston (14), has autism and is non-verbal but is a big teddy bear who loves with all he has! Mason (13) loves football and anything to do with hunting. Ranzlee (12) loves anything girly, cheering and shopping. My mama is my best friend and the one that I can call on for anything. I have one sibling, Patrick, who works in law enforcement. We are a very close-knit family!

Favorite movie: "Sweet Home Alabama"

Favorite food: Shrimp

Favorite drink: Starbucks White Chocolate Mocha



We need empowered leaders to drive solutions and create change for our community and businesses to prosper. We cultivate and equip leaders with the skills and knowledge to make meaningful impacts on our community.

The Chamber offers leadership development opportunities for any stage of your career. Whether you are a young professional or a seasoned executive, our program will provide the information and resources to take your career to the next level.

Through community awareness, education, and hands-on experience, our leadership program aims to provide the region with an ongoing source of leaders who are prepared and committed to serving as catalysts of positive change in Columbus County.



For more information on Leadership Columbus, contact the Chamber at 910-642-3171 or at www.thecolumbuschamber.com



**Madison
L. Ward, 34**

*Residence: Whiteville
Hometown: Tabor City
Employment: City of Whiteville, economic development director and N.C. Main Street director
Education: South Columbus High School, Southeastern Community College, UNC Pembroke – BS, UNC Pembroke – MBA
Family: Nelson Lee and the late Jeanene J. Lee, parents; Nash and Noxx Ward, sons
Enjoys: the beach, music, dancing, traveling, and spending time with my children.*

Tell us about your professional/personal accomplishments:

After graduating from high school I attended N.C. State University for a short period but decided to come home to help my dad run our family business, The Todd House. I learned so much from him and quickly realized I loved the business world. When we closed the business in 2018, I began my journey in local government working for Columbus County Economic Development under Gary Lanier, who was a wonderful mentor to me. I lost my mother during this time, and before she passed, she made me promise her that I would finish my bachelor's and master's degrees and not let anything stop me.

In 2020, I started the journey back to school — keeping her in my mind as my motivation. I started a new position with the City of Whiteville in 2021 and then went on to graduate with my BS degree in 2022. In December 2023, I completed my MBA while working full time and having two small kids. In my current role, I have helped Whiteville earn national accreditation as a Main Street America city. I love Whiteville and Columbus County, and that is why I have devoted my life and my professional career to our community's future.

In what ways do you give back to your community?

I work very hard in my job to provide events within the city for

families to enjoy here without having to go out of town. I am a strong believer in “shop local!” I can shop, eat and be entertained here in my town, and I want others to have that opportunity as well. Last year, we hosted more than 35 events in downtown Whiteville. We have so much going on that is free to the public! I am currently working with my colleagues on designing a beautiful park for people of all ages to enjoy within our downtown district that will be an absolute game changer.

What is the best part about living in Columbus County? Our love of all things sports in this county is fantastic, we have the best hamburgers and hot dogs in the world, when people say “bless your heart,” they mean it and we’re only a short 30 minutes from being able to put our toes in the sand any time we like.

What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

I know you may think things are rough now, but enjoy every minute while you are young. Love on your mama, your Aunt Wendy, and your granny every chance you have. You will make your family proud with your education and career, and you will have two little boys you adore who will keep you very busy! You will encounter a lot of change in your life. It will not be easy, but stay the course and you will see it through to the end.

What do you do to relax?

I love to sit on the beach and listen to the ocean. In my free time, I like to do home improvement projects.

Tell us a little known fact about you.

I am deathly afraid of frogs.

Favorite movie: “Nacho Libre”

Favorite band: Eagles

Favorite book: “The Last Song”

Favorite drink: Strawberry lemonade

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Jared Worthington



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Sid Miller • Justin Smith
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Gore • Donnie Hamilton • Eric
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Dylan Newman • Justin O'Ferrell
• Jimmy Price • Angela Y.
Thompson • Melissa Williamson

Kudos... from the community



Shenicka is continuously looking out for ways to serve others - through her job and in the community. At work, **Ms. Banks** is always thinking of the welfare of Whiteville City students and finds creative ways to meet their needs. Not only does she help families in the short-term, she also empowers our students and their families to improve their own lives.



Brittany is determined to give all students at East Columbus an opportunity to find a career to succeed. She has been loyal to her school through many obstacles - never giving up on her students. She leads the county in taking students to universities as well as job sites to give students a chance to see possible opportunities. I can't think of anyone more deserving of this award than **Mrs. Edwards**.



Dr. Jenkins is a true leader who consistently gives back to her community. I can call on her for anything, whether it be medical advice, therapy advice, to come over to my house to review my medication with me, or just to be a listening ear. **Nicole** wears a lot of hats and is a prime example for our community of how great we could be if we have hope and apply ourselves. She is the best Columbus County leader that I've ever seen and has a heart for the elderly and leading children!



Dr. Beatty loves children and regularly assists with youth activities in Columbus County. She truly values people, giving back to children and families. **Latoya** is a remarkable young lady! We are fortunate to have Latoya choose to utilize her energy, time and talents for the benefit of her home community. Latoya is a 'people person' and willing to go the extra mile to make sure the project is successful completed.



Larry is an awesome person with an amazing heart. He has never been afraid or hesitant to give a helping hand and always believed in bringing the community together for a good cause. His optimistic attitude and positive spirit have always made it easy for people to gravitate towards him. **Larry** has given countless hours to help the less fortunate families in our community.



Brian goes above and beyond for everyone he meets. He works a full time job along with running the farm, helping first responders in need, and volunteering on the fire department. With all this on his plate, he still makes sure his family comes first. **Brian** is a very community-oriented individual. He has a heart for those in need.



Marquise has dedicated his life to serving his community. He is driven to make a difference in the lives of others. **Marquise** is constantly serving others, through his work and as a volunteer within the county. He deserves recognition for the hard work he does.



Josh represents the spirit and life of our community! He always goes above and beyond expectations and is willing to work to make our community better no matter what it takes. **Josh** is very optimistic and outgoing. You never see him without a smile on his face and he is always there at local events to support our community and its projects.



Since **Dr. Long** was a child growing up on a farm, she has always had a love for animals. She transformed that love into a thriving veterinary practice. **Christine** supports anyone who needs assistance with their animals out of complete love and care. Her willingness to care for those who can't speak is uncompromised.

Kudos... from the community



Grant enjoys living in Columbus County and giving back to the community where he grew up. He enjoys getting out in the county, meeting people, and helping tell their stories. **Grant** continues to work hard to make sure Whiteville, Southeastern and Columbus County are successful!



Darren's unwavering dedication and selflessness make him a truly deserving candidate for this honor. He devotes himself to his work and volunteer activities each day, putting others' needs before his own. **Darren's** commitment to giving and helping others is undeniable, and his work and training have helped save countless lives in Columbus County.



Miranda is an outstanding mother of three children while also running a very successful business with her co-owner. She gives her all in everything she does and this year's Yam Festival proves how hardworking she is - with more craft vendors than ever in its history. **Miranda** is always willing to share her creative ideas to better our community.



Brianna has always gone above and beyond for her community. From the kids classes to her senior fit class at CrossFit LKW, she takes great pride in helping people be the best version of themselves. She is a youth leader at church and always goes above and beyond to volunteer and help in the community. **Bri** loves people and loves to see people do good for themselves!



Wade is passionate about his livelihood and the desire to help others. After graduating from N.C. State University, he returned to Columbus County to live and work. He chooses to donate time and effort to help others through his volunteer work. As a fireman and emergency medical responder, **Wade** provides support to ensure the safety of others in our community.



Madison has worked really hard to push and make events happen to help form a thriving downtown. She has brought a new and different energy to the City of Whiteville. Through much determination and hard work, **Madison** has become a valuable asset to Whiteville and Columbus County.





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