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"I arrived in first grade prepared to peel my own oranges. I was also prepared to raise my hand and ask a question. Mrs. Huggins had shown me that learning something I needed to know was usually worth braving the embarrassment. This is a lesson I have to relearn every so often, but Mrs. Huggins laid the foundation for building up the courage to ask."

— Mari B. Thompson

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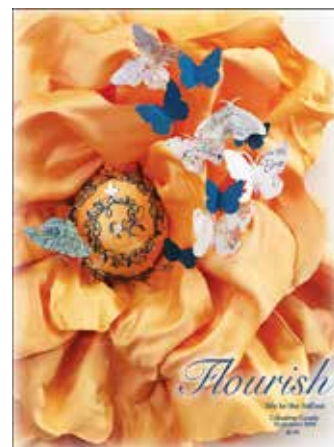
'Another Assignment' Art Exhibit

This issue of Flourish contains five articles about teachers and other mentors who help children and adults to flourish. While reading them, I reflected that, decades ago, I'd had teachers of my own who, like Mr. Brooks and Mrs. Huggins, took a kindly interest in my growth as a human being while they were teaching me academics.

I had a piano teacher who nurtured my brain and character with lots of scales and exercises. I had coaches who managed not to yell at me — enough said about my sports career. As an adult, I've had role models who, like Pamela Young-Jacobs, have helped me become successful professionally and personally.

My college advisor used to say teaching consisted of "challenging and encouraging." That is, setting high goals for students and reinforcing their steps toward reaching them. I salute all those who make a career of teaching, mentoring and coaching, and I hope the school year now well underway is the best yet.

— Diana Matthews



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Get to know our cover artist

PAST MEETS PRESENT IN JENNIFER SAMS' ART

STORY BY TONNYE WILLIAMS FLETCHER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER SAMS AND NR FILES



Inspiration comes from emotion,” Jennifer Sams, visual arts teacher at West Columbus High School, said about her work. Sams is not only an artist but also a veteran educator in Columbus County Schools, a mom and a woman of faith. She’s an active part of Crossroads Church, the Columbus County Arts Council and Columbus County Parks and Recreation.

Flourish: the project

Sams says that, as she began the art for the cover of this issue, she spent some time meditating on the magazine’s title. She said that, to her, “flourishing” means “receiving things in order to become what you’re supposed to be.”

She related our experience as humans to that of flowers, which became the impetus for the art you see on the cover. Sams said, “We are who we are because of the people in our lives and the circumstances and the places we’ve been and different experiences we’ve had.” That concept served as the backbone for the deeply personal art she created to share with us.

Sams was going through a divorce at the time she created the sculpture, using her wedding dress for the flower’s petals. As she cut, dyed and even singed the fabric, she turned a relic of a past time into a representation of “something bigger” that would have meaning for her new stage of life.

Sams says art is more about process than product and requires a lot of research. For this project, she had to research how to dye the fabric properly, what to use to make it stiff enough to manipulate into petal shapes, how to attach the petals to the base and how to incorporate the details in a way that wouldn’t take away from the flower.

For instance, after several attempts at dyeing the fabric, she finally settled on a color that seemed right for the project. Peach signifies gratitude and friendship, she said.

Why butterflies?

Since Columbus County is part of the “Butterfly Highway,” and home of the N.C. Honey Festival, Sams wanted to integrate references to pollinator insects into her cover art for Flourish. Reflecting on the symbiotic relationship of flowers and pollinators, Sams noted that bees and butterflies don’t just take what they need — they also help the flowers to flourish.

Sams attached delicate paper butterflies to the flower, denoting life experiences that have helped her to flourish. She cut the shapes out from personal memorabilia representing trips to New York City, studies in Paris, her marriage, a card sent to her grandmother when her mom was born and her first communion.

Sams said that, even when those experiences have flown away, they leave parts of themselves behind.

Often in art, as in the life cycle of butterflies, the product changes throughout the process. “Originally there were going to be images printed on the petals, but I had to think a lot about the fact that this was going to be photographed,” Sams said. “I didn’t want it to be super-detailed where [the images] got lost in the photograph, but I also wanted it to have colors and dimension. There was a lot of thought that went into it.”

‘Lots of choices’

Sams’ thoughtfulness, creativity and attention to detail are evident in her personal art, which you can find locally at Farmacy on Main or Mercantile on Madison under the name Red Pig Pottery. It is also something she strives to cultivate in her students, as is evidenced by her innovation grant with Columbus County Schools, bringing art and music together to inspire students to respond creatively.

In her classroom, Sams hopes to instill in students the idea



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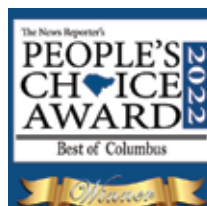
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MEET THE ARTIST

that art isn't always about sitting down and immediately creating something beautiful.

"I believe art can be created spontaneously," she said, "but I think there's a misconception with youth that it all just comes naturally or without some sort of perseverance. I try to help my students understand that, whether you're a painter or a sculptor, there are lots of choices that you have to make in the creation process.

"Sometimes those choices require you to experiment first, make mistakes and problem-solve before you get the outcome you envisioned," Sams said. She estimates that 80% of a project is thought, research and development.

Sams is in her seventh year of teaching, having served originally with Columbus Charter School, and then with the middle school grades at Evergreen and Cerro Gordo elementary schools.

She is excited now to be sharing her process and cre-

ativity as the visual arts teacher at West Columbus High School. Sams said she feels that this position will allow her to challenge her students, but she also looks forward to their challenging her.

Present meets future

This summer found Sams flourishing with many new "butterfly" experiences: trips to New York, getting her son settled in at Appalachian State, creating this piece for Flourish and preparing for a brand new school year for her younger son at East Columbus Jr.-Sr. High School and for herself at West Columbus. Those experiences will probably wing their way into Sams' future pieces of art.

In Sams' words, "For someone that was not raised here in Columbus County, I feel so at home in this community, and I am so thankful for all the opportunities this county has provided me to grow as a mom, an educator and an artist."



1st Photo: Fabric from artist Jennifer Sams' wedding dress became the flower seen on the cover of this issue of Flourish. 2nd & 3rd Photos: Sams studied the forms of peony and camellia blooms when deciding how to shape the petals of her larger-than-life fabric flower. 4th Photo: The white polyester fabric steeps in a dye bath on Sams' stove.



Sams chose a peach color that she said represents gratitude and friendship.

Sams spread her materials out on her dining table. The fabric sculpture took a week to create, "but several weeks of planning and sourcing inspiration," she said.

Sams used a Cricut as well as printed templates to cut a variety of butterflies out of paper memorabilia that was meaningful to her.

Sams used a running stitch to bunch the base of each petal and added floral wire to create volume. She built the flower in three layers of petals on a wooden base.

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'Into the right hands': 1932 diploma returns to educator's daughter

STORY BY JOSEPH WILLIAMS | PHOTOGRAPHY SUBMITTED



Cheryl Brooks Akuma holds her father Booker Benjamin Brooks' 1932 high school diploma underneath a framed photograph of him in her home in Atlanta, Georgia.

Last September, a package arrived at Cheryl Brooks Akuma's home in Atlanta, Georgia. What was inside made her speechless.

It was the framed 1932 high school diploma of her father and longtime Columbus County educator Booker Benjamin Brooks.

The Whiteville City Schools system discovered the diploma during a transition between superintendents in the summer of 2023.

Akuma, 68 and Brooks' only child, was overcome by the fact that she now owns her father's decades-old diploma that started him — and, in a way, Akuma herself — on their lifelong careers in education.

"To think that I have this now," Akuma said, "all I can do is get emotional."

'Couldn't help but love him'

Born in Whiteville in 1909, Brooks grew up and taught during segregation and through integration in Columbus County. Nevertheless, Brooks approached the education of each child with special attention and care regardless of their background.

"It didn't matter what race you were. It didn't matter if you were rich or poor. It didn't matter if you were a boy or girl. He just loved kids," Akuma said. "And they loved him."



This photo, labeled "High School Days," depicts a young Booker Benjamin Brooks. Akuma said that some of Brooks' friends have told her how good a basketball player her father was back in the day. "He was tall," Akuma said.

Brooks would have been about 23 years old when he graduated from Whiteville Colored High School, mak-

ing him older than high school graduates nowadays. Akuma said she was unsure how her father could've been 23 at the time he graduated, speculating that maybe he had started school later in life.

After finishing high school, Brooks went on to earn his bachelor's degree from Fayetteville State Teachers College and his master's from North Carolina A&T State University. Both degrees were in education. He came back to Columbus County, where he taught school — primarily fifth grade — for about 35 years, according to Akuma.

According to his 1993 obituary, Brooks served in a number of schools around the county, including his high school alma mater, which had become Central Middle School. He also taught at Acme-Delco Elementary School, Armour High School and Williams Township High School, from which he retired in the 1970s. He also served as principal of the Diamond Branch Elementary School south of Whiteville.



Brooks is seen here standing at the back of an all-Black classroom at Central High School, as his alma mater had then been renamed. The board in the background is divided among three subjects: geography, history and music.

As a teacher, "His aim was to see that everybody succeeded," Akuma said.

In addition to other subjects he taught, Brooks incorporated musical instruction into each of his classes. Himself a clarinet player, Brooks made it a point to procure recorders for all his students and to teach them how to play before graduating from his class, Akuma said.

Brooks' care for his pupils went beyond the classroom as well. Akuma recalls how her father would stop to talk with students and their parents on the street, and sometimes he would share his change with the child.

"The kids loved my dad. He was just that kind of man," Akuma said. "You couldn't help but love him."



Brooks, on the right end of the back row, stands alongside his sixth grade class at Williams Township School in the 1970s. That decade, Brooks retired after an approximately 35-year career in education in Columbus County.

‘His giving heart’

Brooks was heavily involved in the community in other ways besides education as well.

Brooks attended First St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in Whiteville, where he served on the trustee board, in the choir and as a Vacation Bible School director, according to his 1993 obituary. He was a member of EverReady Lodge #765, a Masonic Lodge in Whiteville, as well as a scoutmaster for the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts.

“If you came to him for any help, he’d do whatever he could,” Akuma said. For instance, elderly people in the community would sometimes need transportation to and from their medical appointments, and Brooks “wouldn’t charge them anything.” Likewise, he was willing to help young people and their families in their move off to college. “That’s just the way he was,” Akuma said.

“The most that I remember of my dad is his happiness, his giving and his loving heart,” Akuma said. “He just wanted everybody to be happy.”

Akuma’s life, Brooks’ later years

Although Akuma herself never had her father as a teacher, she said she knows in her heart that his insistence on the importance of getting a good education had an influence on her life that continued well after she moved out of Columbus County.

Halfway through her schooling, Akuma was chosen to participate in Whiteville City Schools’ pilot in-



In addition to his duties as a teacher, Brooks also served as scoutmaster for local Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. Brooks “wanted to encourage young boys to make something out of themselves and guide them,” his daughter said.



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tegration program, which transitioned to full integration the following year. “We had no problems,” she said. “We bonded. We came together and started being friends and getting along. To this day, I think we have one of the strongest classes at Whiteville High School.”

After graduating in 1974, Akuma attended Winston-Salem State University, where she received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She returned to Columbus County and worked as an assistant reading specialist at Williams Township School. Later she taught elementary school in Pennsylvania.

Akuma moved to New Jersey and settled into a career directing the College Board’s SAT, PSAT and Advanced Placement programs, also earning a master’s degree in educational administration in 2001. After retiring in 2011, she moved to Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband, Ezikpe Akuma, who’s from Nigeria.

Cheryl Akuma became concerned for her father’s welfare as he developed dementia in his later years. She took him to live with her and her husband, but, after about a year, Brooks decided to move back to Whiteville to be close to his friends and church family.

“I didn’t want him to go back,” Akuma said. Not long after, Brooks developed congestive heart failure and died in 1993. He was 84 years old.

Illustrating her father’s generosity, Akuma described a time she took her father to a shopping mall in New Jersey. Brooks noticed some children walking with their parents and stopped to give them a bit of change — as he would back in Columbus County. Akuma stopped him, saying, “Dad, this is New Jersey. This is not North Carolina. You can’t do that. People will think you’re trying to take their children!”

‘Where? Why? How?’

Thirty years later, in the summer of 2023, Whiteville City Schools was transitioning from one superintendent’s administration to another. During the transition, the incoming superintendent, Jonathan Williams, discovered Brooks’ diploma in the superintendent’s office. Once city school system officials confirmed that Akuma was Brooks’ daughter, the district shipped it off to her.

Akuma said she wondered how, after all these years, her father’s diploma ended up in the office.

“Where? Why? How? When? All these questions come into my mind,” Akuma said. “Maybe somebody saw it years ago, and it didn’t mean that much to them,” she said, “so they didn’t do anything about it.”

However, despite her unanswered questions, Akuma is thankful that, at long last, her father’s diploma finally got “into the right hands.”



Brooks “always liked to present himself as a distinguished man,” Akuma said. “He loved his suits. He loved his ties. He loved his shirts.”



After meeting Akuma’s Nigerian husband, Brooks “loved to dress up in traditional African clothing,” Akuma said. Here, Brooks is seen relaxing in an armchair at the Akumas’ residence in New Jersey, dressed in a kufi and danshiki.

Keep this legacy going'

Superintendent Williams himself is unsure as to how Brooks' diploma could have wound up in the city school system's central offices. But nevertheless, Williams said he was glad that the family now has it again "to remind them about the great impact Mr. Brooks had on our county."

Williams, himself a former teacher and principal, said he understood the impact that educators can have on students' lives. "From personal experience, it is a wonderful feeling when someone walks up and tells you what a difference your family member, a former educator, made on his or her life."

From something as simple as a "warm smile" to providing "life lessons" to their students, teachers are long remembered in the minds of the students whose lives they've touched, Williams said, even after they're gone.

"Mr. Brooks has passed into eternity," Williams said, but "the benefits of his teaching and mentorship are still being appreciated."

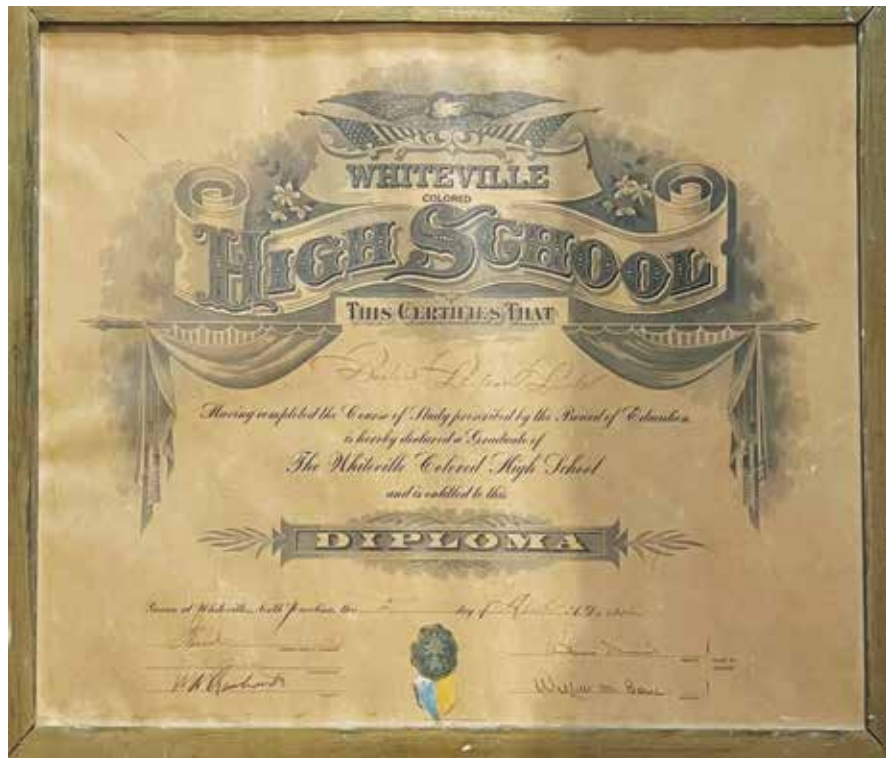
Akuma herself had such a life lesson moment with her father despite never having him as a teacher. One day, a teacher of Akuma's dropped by to visit her and her father. While the teacher was speaking, Brooks apparently noticed that Akuma had her head downcast. "Hold your head up," Brooks told a young Akuma. "Look at someone when they're talking to you," he said. "There's nothing down there but the ground."

Akuma would go on to incorporate this life lesson into a line in a poem she composed for her father's funeral, titled "I love you, Daddy."

Now that Akuma has her father's diploma, "We have to keep this in the family," she said.

Akuma said she's keeping the already-faded diploma in storage to prevent it from deteriorating further, and plans to one day make a copy of the original to display in her home to look on and continue to be inspired by.

"We have to keep this legacy going," Akuma said.



The 1932 diploma from Whiteville Colored High School, in a wooden frame, was found in the summer of 2023 in the Whiteville City Schools superintendent's office.

Cheryl Brooks Akuma composed this poem for the funeral of her father, Booker Benjamin Brooks, who died in 1993.

I Love You, Daddy

*If there ever was a Daddy as good as can be,
You, Daddy, I'm proud to say, were the best to me.
I thank you for the lasting memories,
Of the continuous years of devotion,
You were always there for me,
And never stopping for a second notion.
The values of life you instilled in me,
The love for giving you shared with me,
To have a mind and strength to endure,
These will always be with me, for sure.
To reach for the sky, and not look down,
For only our feet should touch the ground.
I thank God for you, Dad,
Because you've left me, right now I'm sad,
But Joy I know is coming in the end,
For God promised, Daddy, that I'll see you again.*

Love, Your Daughter



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BAZLEY HAS EVERYTHING TEA LOVERS NEED FOR A FLAVORTFUL EXPERIENCE

STORY BY DASHUAN VEREEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DASHUAN VEREEN AND SUBMITTED



Two of Bazley's tea blends

When Clare Bazley moved to North Carolina from California two and a half years ago, her main focus was helping her husband, Gary Neubert.

Before long, she would use her business acumen to transplant a successful West Coast enterprise in Columbus County as well.

In 2007, while living in Columbia, California, Bazley had opened Columbia Kate's Teahouse. There she served food along with teas and other beverages. Bazley named the establishment after her friend, Kathryn McMahon, who passed away from brain cancer.

The full-service restaurant offered all the food that the couple created in their nearby bakery. "We offered homemade bread, sandwiches, chicken pot pie and all the tea delicacies," Bazley said. They also owned a boutique.

But after Neubert began to experience some health issues, the two started to look for places closer to his family in Florida.

The couple had a friend who had moved from California to Chadbourne, so they searched for places nearby. They stumbled upon the town of Brunswick, and they quickly bonded with the community.

"We love it here," said Bazley. "It has been great getting to know the community. We love the area and the friendly community. We are building up a nice group of friends — it has been a blessing being here."

After a year in the area, Bazley decided she wanted to bring her tea expertise to Whiteville, since the South is renowned for its sweet tea.

"This part of the country loves their sweet tea," said Bazley. "I love not only serving the community, but also educating people about tea."

That passion led her to open Clare's Cup of Tea, located in Mercantile On Madison in downtown Whiteville.

Bazley's background in tea

Bazley said that she developed an infatuation with tea

during several months she spent in England, preparing to start a career in the horse racing business. She brought that passion back to this country with her.

In the late 1980s, after Bazley had become a professional horse trainer, “English-style tea parties started to become very popular” in the U.S., she said.

When Bazley retired from training horses, she shifted her focus to starting a restaurant. During that time she said she “spent a year fully educating myself about tea.”

Eventually she ran into an issue with one of her tea suppliers, which led her to start blending her own tea.

She attended the World Tea Expo, which offered “a menu of classes” for business owners to partake in, and there she further educated herself on the art of blending tea.

She began developing her own custom blends to offer at her restaurant. “I really enjoyed having tea at my business that people couldn’t get without me,” Bazley said.

‘Clare’s Cup of Tea’

At Clare’s Cup of Tea, Bazley offers loose tea leaves and instructions to help those new to the tea brewing process.

“I have around 14 varieties of loose tea blends,” said Bazley, “that are packaged small, but you can make 15 cups of tea out of it. And I also sell everything you need to make it. I keep it simple. So whatever the comfort level, you can have your tea without worry.”

Bazley also sells English teacups. She said she thinks drinking from a traditional teacup “improves the experience and makes a tea party complete.”

She also offers instruments for steeping and brewing, tea towels, mugs, handmade jewelry and more.

“I just want to show and educate people about the variety of loose teas,” said Bazley. “I want them to know you can enjoy your iced tea in so many different ways. You can make it hot. It doesn’t have to be plain black — there’s white, green and other versions.

“The Carolinas have one of the United States’ only existing tea plantations, located in Charleston. It was started because the early settlers wanted tea, and they decided to grow it themselves because tax made it expensive to import from England.

“That’s interesting because it’s regional and part of the history here. So my goal is to continue to educate people and show different ways to embrace more than sweet tea.”

You can stop by and visit Clare’s Cup of Tea during Mercantile On Madison’s normal business hours. Bazley added that, if anyone wants to meet her and learn more about teas, there is a private event space in Mercantile On Madison that can be rented for tea parties.

Tea can also be purchased at Bazley’s website, columbiakates.com.



Clare Bazley sits inside Clare’s Cup of Tea, located in Mercantile On Madison in downtown Whiteville.



Bazley’s assortment of tea blends (in yellow packets on shelves) are surrounded by decorative towels and other specialty items at Clare’s Cup of Tea.



Jewelry, mugs and kitchenware can be found at Clare’s Cup of Tea.



Chadbourn native LaShoney Frink Southern gives back the way she was raised

STORY BY JOSEPH WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LASHONEY FRINK SOUTHERN AND SUBMITTED

As a social worker with the Columbus County Schools system, LaShoney Frink Southern sees students' needs firsthand every day. So when she sees how many students walk the halls carrying backpacks given out by her Chadbourn-based nonprofit, the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation, "It makes me smile," she said. "I'm just glad I can do what I can do."

The H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation's backpack drive celebrated its 10th anniversary this July, giving out nearly 1,000 backpacks brimming with school supplies to area students in need.

Running a nonprofit has its fair share of challenges too, Southern said. "I get a lot of 'nos,'" Southern said, but, as a testament to the broader community's support of her work, "I've had more 'yeses' than 'nos.'"

Although she's been running the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation for over a decade, "I'm still growing," said Southern, 37. "There are still some things that I'm learning how to perfect. But the words of encouragement from the community — that's what keeps me going."

Southern recently sat for an interview with 954 magazine. The excerpts below were edited for brevity and clarity.

What was your upbringing like, and how does that inform your work?

I grew up in a single-parent home and was raised by my

mom, Shirley Mason. I was the youngest of my mom's three children and the only girl. Growing up in Chadbourn was hard, but I never lacked food. I had my basic needs met. My mom kept me active in piano lessons and in fast-pitch softball growing up. I never knew what she was doing until I got older — she was just trying to keep me out of the streets.

My mom was like a safe haven for other children, too. She took in so many kids over the years who needed somewhere to stay. She just had a heart to do that. Seeing that over the years, I wanted to do it in a professional way. I wanted to make a career out of it.

Who was a community role model you looked up to growing up?

One person I looked up to in Chadbourn was Carolyn Reynolds. She was a community activist who I saw firsthand helping a lot of at-risk children in Chadbourn. She would coach us on how to present ourselves and gave us the history of the town. She would take a handful of us kids in the community on a lot of educational field trips, like to Washington, D.C. She spent a lot of time with us and promoted togetherness and unity. She was just a lady I looked up to. She didn't do what I do with the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation, but seeing what she did impacted me and encouraged me to do something similar.



Volunteers pause to take a selfie during one of the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation's backpack drives.



The H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation continued its backpack drive through the COVID-19 pandemic, taking precautions by wearing masks and implementing a drive-through backpack pickup system.



The backpack drives aren't all business. At past drives, the foundation has set up a rock climbing wall, a mechanical bull and a dunking booth. The 10th anniversary backpack drive this year featured a foam pit, which was "a hit" with the children, LaShoney Frink Southern said.



Backpacks are filled with school supplies appropriate for the targeted grade levels.

How'd you come up with the name for the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation?

"H.E.A.R.T.S." stands for "Helping Everyone Achieve Rewards Towards Success." I feel like, to do what I do, you have to have a heart. I wanted to bring a lot of like-minded people together who see and want to address the needs of the community. I wanted to create an organization where everybody has the same goal to give back to the community and where everyone's heart is in the right place to do so.

How does the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation's backpack drive support students?

One of our biggest outreach efforts each year is our back-to-school drive, where we provide free backpacks to elementary, middle and high school students.

The basics, depending on the grade level, include paper, notebooks, binders, pencils, pencil sharpeners, crayons — and, of course, a backpack. We may have cute butterfly prints on some of the backpacks for the little girls and trucks and dinosaurs on some of them for little boys. It's just a little starter pack to get them on the right foot for the school year.

Our 10th annual backpack drive went well this year. This year we returned to our walk-up system after using a drive-

through system since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had our biggest crowd yet to show up, and we gave out nearly 1,000 backpacks this year.

And our impact isn't just in Columbus County. We have people from surrounding counties come to our backpack drives as well.

I'm glad we can touch so many people and all races through our backpack drive and that everyone can benefit through this program. I'm grateful. I know it ain't nobody but God.

What other outreach efforts does the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation do?

Before the backpack drive each year, we host our annual kickball tournament fundraiser. We have teams from all over Columbus County and across the state sign up to participate and battle it out for the championship trophy. All of the money from the fundraiser is poured back into the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation to purchase school supplies for the backpack program.

Our Trunk or Treat held on the Southeastern Community College campus every year is huge. It's a safe place for kids to collect candy around Halloween. We give out prizes for the best children's costume and for the best-decorated trunk.

Every year, we go Christmas caroling and visit with senior citizens at Berry Courts Apartments in Chadbourn. We sing "Jingle Bells," "Silent Night" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." We also give them little goodie bags. They just light up and clap along while we're there. It warms my heart.

How is support from volunteers essential to your work?

It's very essential because I cannot execute my plan without extra hands. We're a machine. Each part of the machine is doing different things to meet our goals. We have those



One of the ways the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation raises money to support its operations is through an annual kickball fundraiser tournament. Teams from across the county and even the state participate, Southern said.



The H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation's annual Trunk or Treat, held at the Southeastern Community College Campus, is a "huge" event every year that offers a safe place for children to go trick-or-treating, LaShoney Frink Southern said.



LaShoney Frink Southern was a member of The News Reporter's 2019 Class of Fifteen Under 40, recognizing young adults making positive changes in Columbus County. Seen at right during the recognition ceremony is her mother, Shirley Mason. "She's the wind beneath my wings," Southern said.



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Everybody has a talent. We bring all those talents together and make everything work. And to me, that's what makes the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation stand out from any other organization.

All of us have a mutual respect and love for the community and know that education is a gateway to a lot of things that the youth may need.

My immediate family members are my number one supporters. They started with me on the first backpack drive, and we've grown to where we are now. I appreciate all the community support over the years. I couldn't have done it without them.

What keeps you motivated to continue the work you do?

The people in the community who are always giving me words of encouragement. Hearing them tell me how proud they are of me and that they thank God for somebody like me means a lot. When you hear people talk like that, it sparks something inside you, and I feel that's what has kept me motivated. Also, being an example for my children to follow and knowing that they're watching motivates me.



Chadbourn Mayor Phillip Britt, who volunteers with the H.E.A.R.T.S. Foundation, recognizes LaShoney Frink Southern during a backpack drive in 2019. Southern received a plaque in appreciation of her nonprofit's work in the community.

I know God gave me a gift to bring the community together. That's the unique thing about God, he gave everybody a different talent. For God to give me this talent and for the community to give me those words of encouragement, I'm grateful.

—F—


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Pamela Young-Jacobs reflects on the path 'that got me here'

STORY BY DIANA MATTHEWS | PHOTOGRAPHY DIANA MATTHEWS,
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Pamela Young-Jacobs holds a framed photo of her father, Jimmy Lee Young. He was the Waccamaw-Siouan Tribe's first assistant chief; after seven years serving on the Tribal Council, she now holds that office.

Pamela Young-Jacobs has achieved numerous “firsts” in her career. “I am the first Native American female to serve as Small Business Director at Southeastern Community College,” said Young-Jacobs. In 2022 she was elected the first female assistant chief of the Waccamaw Siouan Tribe, “following in my father’s footsteps,” she said.

The 56-year-old Buckhead woman has become a go-to spokesperson for issues relating to business, Native American identity and women in southeastern North Carolina.

Young-Jacobs is proud of her Waccamaw-Siouan heritage. “Some of my favorite things about my community,” she said, are “that we are close knit; we are woven together like the fabric of a quilt. We all live next to each other, [and] if your neighbor needs a hand, we all pitch in. We are there for each other through death and life’s celebrations.”

Although she has achieved prominence in several areas, Young-Jacobs said that, “Most important to me are my faith, my family, and my service to the community’s youth and businesses.”

Chosen for honors

In 2022 Gov. Roy Cooper appointed Young-Jacobs to the N.C. Council for Women. The 20-member council advises the governor, his cabinet and the General Assembly on issues related to women and youth.

Young-Jacobs described the committee’s role as “making sure legislation is fair and women are able to thrive eco-

nomically and socially.” She said she hoped to “bring a Native voice to the conversation” about problems such as violence against indigenous women.

She was the first Native American woman to be crowned Pecan Harvest Festival Queen in 2021 and presided over the festival again in 2022.

Young-Jacobs describes herself as a person who’s not afraid of hard work and who doesn’t make excuses. She’ll also be quick to say that her path to the leadership roles she has today hasn’t been an easy one.

Early memories

Young-Jacobs credits members of her family with setting the examples she strives to follow.

“My early years were spent in the tobacco fields, bell pepper fields and cucumber fields, and in church with my grandmother,” she said. “Some of my earliest memories are standing on a stool in my grandmother’s living room singing, lying under the pew in Mt. Sinai Holiness Church during the night services and standing beside my dad in my regalia at Lake Waccamaw during one of our first Pow Wows.”

Her mother, Judy Young, now Judy Bass, “was a Native activist who worked with Chief Priscilla Jacobs, Ms. Eileen Spaulding, Mr. Gather Patrick and others during the early years of our tribal formation,” Young-Jacobs said. “My mom left tribal work to become a teacher at Booker T.

Washington School until my dad started his own construction company."

Her father, Jimmy Lee Young, "was very tall," she said. "I remember thinking of him as my hero when I was only 4 years old. He was the first assistant chief of the tribe, appointed by Chief Clifton Freeman."

"When he started his business venture, 'It didn't matter that I was a girl; he had me driving dump trucks, backhoes and tractors, and I loved it.'"

Family business

"I began my journey into the small business world around 13 years old," Young-Jacobs said. Before going into construction, "My father owned a small landscaping business, and my job was to keep payroll by hand on a very large ledger. I learned the importance of hard work, early mornings, managing projects, hiring employees and a strong work ethic," she said.

In 1984 her father started a construction company, J.L. Young Enterprises. Young became "a very successful federal contractor, overcoming many obstacles of discrimination, lack of education and limited access to funding," his daughter said. "This is where I get my love of business and drive to help others succeed."

Young had an "impeccable" reputation for good work and "always had a very profound word of wisdom," Young-Jacobs said. "My favorite was 'Always leave the world better than you found it.' This is what I live by in all things in my personal and professional life."

Still, Young-Jacobs said that one of "many obstacles" she's faced in her life was the fact that, "My dad was an alcoholic." To "get away" from home, she got married at age 18, but she continued to work in the family business part-time while bringing up three sons.

A full schedule

Among a series of varied career and volunteer commitments, Young-Jacobs coached East Columbus High School's cheerleading squad for six years. She grew the team from 16 to 25 girls, helping them win a state championship in 2017 and place at nationals two years in a row.

Now she's a cheerleader for small businesses.

When Young-Jacobs became director of the Small Business Center at SCC in 2021, she called small business owners "some of the most hard-working individuals you will find because their livelihoods are based upon the success of their company. My goal is to help our small business owners achieve that success," Jacobs said.

In July 2023 she was named Sandhills regional director for the SBC Network. Young-Jacobs now coaches small business center directors at seven other community colleges in the region. The network is a state agency and provides services free of charge to clients.

"My workday is filled with doing what I love the most and what my dad instilled in me, leaving the world better than I found it," she said. From morning to evening, she is counseling clients, viewing prospective business locations, attending meetings or ribbon cuttings and holding strategy sessions. During the school year, she gives presentations in schools and helps teach interviewing skills.

On Tuesdays she operates from the SBC's satellite office in Tabor City. Sometimes she meets clients at community cen-

ters, town halls or fire departments. Not all are starting new businesses: some clients are looking to expand or improve existing businesses.



Young-Jacobs has an office in the Cartrette Building at Southeastern Community College, but she's often out in the community, consulting with small business owners, teaching classes or celebrating ribbon cuttings.

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Young-Jacobs represents the Waccamaw-Siouan Tribe at the 2023 National Congress of American Indians, which was held in Louisiana. She spoke about promoting unity between state and federal tribes. She's proud of her tribe's accomplishments that preserve traditions and educate the next generation.

Practical support

"The most rewarding part" of her SBC work is witnessing a client's plan "come to life," Young-Jacobs said. "There are so many amazing individuals in our county who just need a little guidance, encouragement and opportunity."

She said the biggest needs of prospective entrepreneurs are knowledge, money and a well-thought-out business plan.

Writing a business plan "brings out a lot of what [clients] don't realize they didn't know."

In addition to having a plan, "You have to know you love the work you're going to do," she said, because once your start-up is launched, "You can't call in sick. You are the one who makes your business work. You have got to motivate yourself. It takes hard work and dedication and planning."

Young-Jacobs has helped launch business operators from ages 18 to 72. Some recent clients have opened a computer shop, a manufacturing facility, bakeries, a beauty salon, a florist business and a transportation company.

Cooperation helps solve the puzzle

May marked Young-Jacobs' third year as SBC director.

She provided statistics on area small-business growth rate over those years:

Business startups aided by the SBC have increased by 138%, with 33 in the past fiscal year; jobs created by 202%; and jobs retained by 108%, she said.

Young-Jacobs has formed partnerships with other business-promoting organizations. "This past year I worked with the Columbus Jobs Foundation in the creation of a micro loan program," she said. "We were able to fund two businesses this year and assist them in opening their brick-and-mortar locations."

Also, "Joan McPherson has been such a great asset at the Columbus County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. We have worked very closely on numerous projects this past year, including the formation of a Small Business Co-op."

City and county officials in the group are helping create a start-up guide for the many steps of gaining government approvals; the process can be "like putting a puzzle together," Young-Jacobs said.

'Full circle'

Young-Jacobs said her father "turned his life around as I got a little older," and, in 1995, "I decided to leave my job and join the family business full time. I had worked with my dad part time, but I was always afraid to commit because of unresolved feelings of my childhood."

From 1995 until 2001, "I got a crash course in business ownership, management and government negotiations," she said. Once Young took his daughter to visit what was then Fort Bragg. "That day I sat at the table with my dad and watched him negotiate with army captains on the upcoming project and thought how amazing he was," she said.

In 2001, "Just as we became as close, as a father and daughter should be, and I was learning so much, he passed away," Young-Jacobs said. "His diagnosis was very quick and unexpected."

It was only after Young's death, and after 21 years of her own marriage, that Young-Jacobs "realized I was living a life similar to what I had witnessed as a child, and we could not continue this path," she said.

She and her sons moved into "the old office building my dad had left us," she said. "I was a single mother to three teenage boys. Even after my dad had passed on, he was still looking out for me."

Young-Jacobs carried on the business, keenly aware that she lacked important experience her father had

possessed. While negotiating her first major government contract, she faced questions she didn't know answers to. Overwhelmed, she put the phone on hold and cried for a few moments; she said then she heard her father's voice say, "You'll figure it out." She went on to find the necessary facts and win the five-year, \$10 million contract at Charleston Air Force Base.

"Everything I learned from business conception to expansion came full circle on that day, and it became my goal to help others achieve the success that our company had been afforded," Young-Jacobs said.

"My workday is filled with doing what I love the most and what my dad instilled in me, leaving the world better than I found it," Young-Jacobs said.

'Thankful for the tears'

"In 2018 I got remarried to Mr. Velton Jacobs, who is an avid sports lover and coach," she said. "He is known today as 'the Voice of the Gators' for his captivating announcing voice during football and basketball games at East Columbus Jr.-Sr. High School over the past seven years. Together we had six children: I had three boys, and he had three girls. We were known as the modern-day Buckhead Brady Bunch."

"My favorite song is 'Here' by Rascal Flatts,"

Young-Jacobs said. The lyrics look back on a life of heartbreak and mistakes, saying, "I wouldn't change a thing; I'd walk right back through the rain...I'd relive all the years and be thankful for the tears I've cried with every stumbled step that led to you and got me here."

Young-Jacobs said that, "Life can throw many curves at



Young-Jacobs said her Native Girls Rock program empowers girls to gain confidence and "achieve whatever goals they have." Shown left to right are Valerie Pedro, Chloe Pedro, Young-Jacobs, Laiken Lowery and Faith Jacobs.

REFLECTING ON THE PATH

us." Still, "I hold fast to the Scripture Romans 8:28: 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.'" Her favorite Scripture is the 23rd Psalm.

Shattered

Young-Jacobs said the most recent "and most impactful turning point of my life was the loss of my son Alex in 2019."

The January day when she learned that her son had died in his sleep "was the most devastating day of my life," she said. "My world shattered."

At the funeral, guest after guest told her, "Alex was my best friend."

That was because, "He made every single person feel like they were the most important person," Young-Jacobs said. Looking back on her son's life, she said, "I learned so much from him about loving others. If I expressed a critical comment



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about someone, Alex would say, 'You don't know what they've been through.' He changed the lens I see people through. Now it's more love and not judgment."

Young-Jacobs said she's "struggled to find my bearing and a new normal" in life without her youngest son.

During his 26 years, "Alex had a huge impact," his mother said. "He left the world better than he found it."

Moving forward

"My Christian faith has been the literal essence of my survival in life and to finding peace that passeth all understanding," Young-Jacobs said. "Without Christ, depression, anxiety and self-doubt would have destroyed me." In addition, "Tribal traditions of gathering, talking circles and ceremony have given me the support I need to move forward."

As someone who's willing to work long days, "I don't have a lot of down time," Young-Jacobs said. She likes talking with her husband "to sort out the day's stresses and future goals. This usually ends in a sports analogy," she said. "I'm thankful that the Lord put the right

husband into my life. He helps me stay grounded," she said.

If Young-Jacobs could speak to the 12-year-old version of herself, she would warn her that, "You are going to face some very difficult heartaches in your life, but trust God, be strong; this is the only way you will survive."

"Be sure to spend every moment making memories with your loved ones. Plan for your future and start early."

If she could talk to the 80-year-old version of herself, she would like to ask, "How will the world remember you? What was your legacy for your children, grandchildren and community? Did you accomplish the dreams within your heart of making the world a better place?"

Thinking about starting a small business?

You can learn more about the Small Business Center and register for free seminars at sccnc.edu/community/small-business-center/. The phone number for administrative assistant Lisa Nye is 910-788-6231.



Waccamaw Siouan Assistant Chief Pamela Young-Jacobs (front right) leads a friendship dance in November 2022 during which American Indian dancers invited spectators to join them for a song. The dancing demonstrations were part of a celebration of American Indian Heritage Month held at the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville.

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Phoebe and Lauren Wolff display a tray of microgreens ready for harvesting. Phoebe's former bedroom was converted to the growing room, where proper light and temperature can be controlled for proper growth.

Local cooks, popular eateries serve Wolff's 'Pretty Greens'

STORY BY GINGER LITRELL | PHOTOGRAPHY SUBMITTED

When Lauren Wolff tapped on an Instagram post three years ago, she couldn't have imagined how it would change her life. Wolff and her 7-year-old daughter, Phoebe, were enjoying country life on their 22-acre hobby farm when the new opportunity arose.

"A mother of three children in Washington was offering an online course in growing microgreens," recalled Wolff. "It was a way she could get her children to eat more vegetables, and Phoebe needed that, too."

Wolff says everything about their lives in Nakina is about nature, so it was a no-brainer to sign up and learn more about the growing method. After completing the course in only a week, she procured supplies, and Pretty Greens Microgreens was born.

Keeping focused

Wolff's strong faith gave her the courage to strike out on the new venture. "My faith in God is the foundation of my business," she said. "When I

started more than two years ago, I really prayed about it. Taking something on, like starting a business, is very stressful and filled with unknowns," Wolff said. Without God guiding her decisions, she said, it would have been too much for her to handle by herself. "Relying on God's promises" has kept her focused, she said. She can continue to work from home, where she homeschools Phoebe, and also be free to deliver her product and recruit new customers. "I only have a few more years with my daughter, and I want to spend as much time with her as I can."

Rewards

Wolff said creating Pretty Greens has had a positive impact on her relationship with Phoebe. "We've both learned a lot along the way," she says. "Phoebe has watched the whole process and likes to join in at times. She helps me prepare the soil and clean trays, goes to every event with me and helps me teach our kids' workshops."

In addition to growing know-how, Phoebe's "getting a front-row seat of what it takes to run a business," her mother said. That includes patience, time-management and hard work. Someday, Wolff says, Phoebe may want to be a microgreens farmer, but above all, she's learning the value of not giving up on a dream.

Wolff said the most satisfying part of her business is knowing that she is providing her customers with a fresh, nutritious superfood that she grows herself. Whether they use the greens in a salad or a smoothie, in cooking or just as a garnish, her customers are pleased that they discovered her product. "It's awesome when we see our customers smile because they are excited to see us when we deliver their order," she said.



Loyal customer Karen Gore, left, receives a weekly order from Wolff and Phoebe.

Reaching out

When Wolff set up as a vendor at the N.C. Honey Festival several years ago, she met Richard Gore of Old Dock. "He said his wife, Karen, would love microgreens, so he bought some for her," said Wolff. The relationship between Wolff and Karen Gore continues to grow, and Gore is an avid promoter of Pretty Greens. With Gore's diet of plant-based foods, she says microgreens are a daily part of her food regime.

"I've been getting microgreens from Lauren for two years now and can't imagine life without them," says Gore. "Before I officially met her in 2022 at the farmers market in Whiteville, I was trying to grow my own in the windowsill with little luck. I couldn't grow many at a time, and sometimes they just wouldn't turn out. Lauren cuts her microgreens on about the ninth day to optimize the nutrient peak. I eat them every day in my salads, ice cream and smoothies. I love the vision she has and am excited about her future with microgreens."

Microgreens on the menu

Wolff's confidence in her product gave her the



Summer salad creation from Penn's Grill with microgreens and edible flowers



Microgreens used at The Chef & The Frog

courage to reach out to two of Whiteville's most popular eateries. "Later that summer (2022), I reached out to Helen Holden at Penn's Grill," she recalled. "I stopped by her restaurant and asked if I could grow her some samples of my microgreens. After she tried them, she started ordering on a regular basis. Helen was the first person to take a chance on me! She's a great lady and a hard worker."

Wolff made the same offer of samples to Chef Sokun Slama of The Chef & The Frog. Now microgreens and edible flowers add a pop of color to a variety of the restaurant's dishes.

As her success grew, Wolff cast her nets to South Carolina, where popular restaurants began buying her microgreens. "When I go into a restaurant, I go directly to the chef," says Wolff. Her customers in Little River include The Brentwood Restaurant and Wine Bistro, Clark's Seafood and Chop House, Mako's Marina Bar and Grill, Blue Drum Waterfront and Filet's Waterfront. In Myrtle Beach, Snooky's Oceanfront and Hot Stacks Café are customers as well.



Left: Lauren and Phoebe Wolff work together to fill trays with new soil before planting. After harvesting a crop of microgreens, they add the used soil to a compost pile on the farm. Right Top: Wolff prepares the planting tray for the seeds. Right Bottom: Wolff scatters radish seeds before misting them with water.

What are microgreens?

Simply explained, Wolff says microgreens are the edible seedlings of vegetables or herbs that are harvested when they grow 1–3" tall. They are not to be confused with sprouts, she explained, because sprouts are harvested before they form leaves. Microgreens begin their life in darkness for a short sprouting time. Then they are placed under grow lights for 7–10 days while photosynthesis takes place, then harvested.

"I started the vertical farming process in my spare bedroom," said Wolff. "Microgreens have to be grown inside where you can control the temperature, humidity and bugs. My grow room is my happy place!" Although her products aren't certified as organic microgreens, Wolff uses non-GMO seeds and all-natural practices. "It's 'raw agriculture' like having unwashed eggs," she said.

Why eat microgreens?

Many studies have shown that microgreens are very nutrient dense compared to mature plants, Wolff said. "For example," she explained, "an ounce of red cabbage [microgreens] contains 40 times more vitamin E than an ounce of mature

red cabbage. Likewise 3.5 ounces of broccoli microgreens have double the amount of calcium in 3.5 ounces of adult broccoli."

An information sheet that Wolff hands out to new customers lists some of the benefits of eating microgreens: It says they are filled with antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds. The sheet says microgreens are also a good source of fiber and vitamins K, E and C; they may help reduce risk of heart disease and cancer, boost the immune system, improve eyesight, lower cholesterol and aid in weight loss. Microgreens support brain health with omega-3 and -6 fatty acids; aid in fighting Alzheimer's; and are a good source of iron, protein, selenium and manganese, according to Pretty Greens' information sheet.

"The health benefits are unreal," says Wolff.

Considering that full-grown broccoli can take up to three months to grow, but broccoli microgreens take only 7–10 days, it's no wonder that Wolff's customers have broccoli microgreens at the top of their shopping lists.

What's ahead?

Microgreens are not readily available in stores because of the short shelf life (7–14 days) and



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PRETTY GREENS



Phoebe's guinea pig and cats enjoy the wheat "pet grass" she grows. Dogs enjoy it, too, Phoebe's mother said.

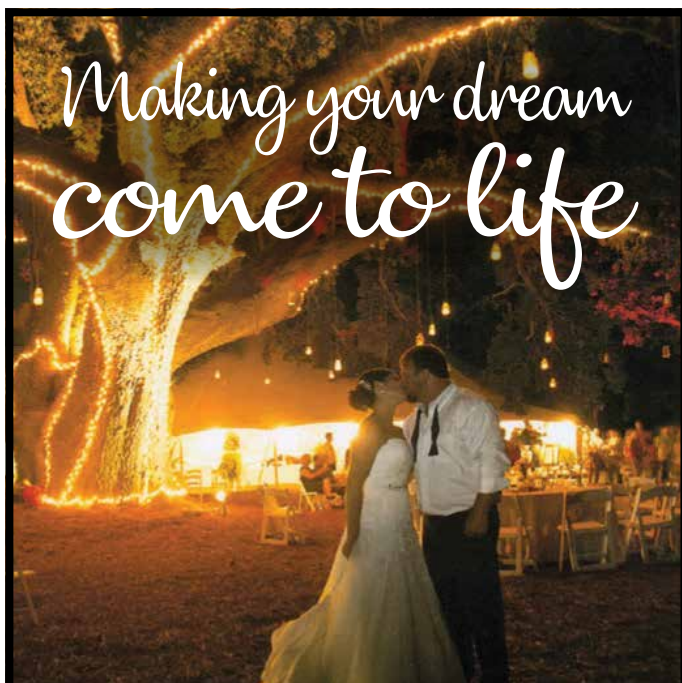
shipping costs. With a goal of keeping her products affordable, Wolff sells greens at \$2.50 per ounce. Her menu features broccoli, cabbage, speckled pea and sunflower shoots, Rambo radish and cilantro as well as edible pansies, violas and nasturtiums. Mini sunflowers are grown for food garnish. Kale, amaranth and cinnamon basil are some other options for use in cooking. Pets also get a treat with Pet Greens, grown from wheat grass.

Wolff has a goal to double her production from 40 trays of microgreens to 80 or more per week and raise edible flowers year-round. She's written a children's book, "The Adventures of Penny Pea Shoot," which she reads aloud at her workshops that teach children about growing and eating microgreens. Wolff speaks at community gatherings such as garden, civic and children's clubs, and she's working on a YouTube channel.

"I just want to get the word out!" she says.



To learn more about microgreens, to inquire about special programs or to purchase Wolff's products, the number to call or text is 910-899-6670. Wolff is on Facebook at Pretty Greens Microgreens. Her website is pretty-greens.com.



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Warm Colors For Fall

Fashion influencers are everywhere on Instagram, Facebook and in magazines. It's fun to check out their lookbooks and recommendations for inspiration, then shop locally for wardrobe updates. A new piece or two in a trending color or style is all you need to stroll into fall with your best foot forward.

Featured in Flourish Finds are a few of fashion influencer Jo-Lynne Shane's timeless fashion recommendations to give you a glimpse of the warm and rich colors and styles defining fall 2024 fashion. You can check out Shane's fall 2024 trend report plus her travel advice and home accessory recommendations @jollynneshane.



Flared jeans in light and dark washes paired with flat or low heeled shoes are a comfortable combo for casual workdays, Friday night football and community events.



Red is trending. Add a pop of color to your wardrobe with red sneakers, a slim belt or a baseball cap.



This mock neck top with a slim skirt in plum is a rich and modern look for work and corporate events.



It is hard to resist this puff sleeve dress in claret with tall black boots and a slouchy bag as a cool option for warm fall days.



Greens and short jackets, such as this classic bomber style, are a good investment this season.

Vests are making a comeback, and the shape pairs nicely with these high waisted pants in a fresh bronze tone.



Warm neutral tones such as this long A-line skirt in copper are a fresh update to timeless taupes and beiges.



Looking for a neutral pattern to dress up a bit? Think about adding a blouse, shoes or belt in a leopard print.

Finish off your fall 2024 wardrobe update with suede ankle boots, black tortoise eyeglasses or a chunky gold bracelet or earrings.



Teachers, coaches and the meaning of mentorship

BY MARI B. THOMPSON | PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THOMPSON FAMILY, SCC AND SUBMITTED



The author is seen in 1974 or 1975.

On a winter day in 1975, a little brown-haired girl filed into her school cafeteria with her kindergarten classmates. Each child had a lunchbox, some with Scooby Doo or Barbie designs. On the lid of this little girl's lunchbox, Holly Hobbie hid behind a calico bonnet.

Inside were a matching thermos, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich wrapped in foil and — a lunchtime favorite of the little girl — a big, bright, fragrant orange. However, the girl's little fingers had not learned to peel oranges quickly enough so that she could peel and eat one before lunch was over. When she was lucky enough to find the surprise treat in her lunchbox, her teacher, Mrs. Barkley, peeled it for her.

As the girl scanned the cold cafeteria for her teacher, the first-grade class began to file in and sit down nearby. The first-grade teacher spoke to the kindergarten class.

"Mrs. Barkley will not be here during lunch today," she announced. "I am Mrs. Huggins. If you need any help or have any questions, you may come and ask me at my table."

The girl sighed. There would be no orange for lunch. She opened the foil-wrapped sandwich and ate it as she and her friends chatted and laughed, swinging their little legs from the chairs.

"Mari B, why haven't you finished your lunch?" came a voice from above her. She looked

up to see Mrs. Huggins looking into her lunch box. "Lunch is half over. You should stop talking and eat your orange."

"But Mrs. Huggins," she stammered, "I don't know how to peel it." And then, in a burst of courage, "Would you peel it for me?"

Mrs. Huggins tsked. "No. I will not. You are old enough to peel your own orange."

The girl looked down in shame.

Mrs. Huggins softened. "You try to peel it yourself, and if you can't do it, bring it to me. But you have to try by yourself first."

The girl did not look up but nodded as the teacher moved along the table to other students.

She dug her little fingernails into the thick orange rind. Tiny flakes scattered over her tights as she worked around the fruit, frowning in concentration.

"Mari B," Mrs. Huggins called to her after a few minutes, "Have you finished your orange yet?"

"No ma'am," the girl responded.

"Bring it to me," Mrs. Huggins instructed.

The girl looked from Mrs. Huggins to the first graders staring at her from their tables. In her experience, first graders were mean, and she felt their eyes following her the same way her cat watched mice in the backyard.

Answering the teacher's summons, she presented the orange, with its scarred and shredded skin. It was a pitiful sight.

"Mari B, has no one ever shown you how to peel an orange?" Mrs. Huggins asked.

"No, ma'am."

"Well, today I'm going to teach you," Mrs. Huggins said. "When you are in my class next year you will know from the first day how to do

this for yourself."

When the teacher was done peeling, the little girl thanked her and went back to her table to enjoy her orange, not caring about the snickering first graders.

The little girl in the story is me, of course. I still love oranges, and each time I have had one in the

50 years since that day, I've thought of Mrs. Kay Huggins.

I did arrive in the fall of 1975 to her first grade classroom prepared to peel my own oranges. I was also prepared to raise my hand and ask a question. Mrs. Huggins had shown me that learning something I needed to know was usually worth braving the embarrassment. This is a lesson I have to relearn every so often, but Mrs. Huggins laid the foundation for building up the courage to ask.

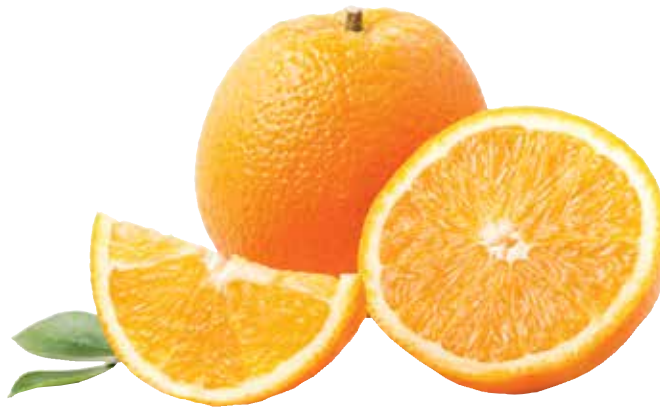
Teachers' roles extend beyond their classrooms and academics. They guide students through both academic and personal challenges, such as issues with peer pressure, self-esteem and career or college choices. Teachers are mentors, role models and cultivators of personal growth, influencing not just students' intellectual abilities but also their emotional development.

Teachers also encourage critical and creative thinking, challenging students to develop their own ideas. A classroom debate format, for instance, can enhance students' ability to articulate thoughts and engage in respectful discourse. John Peal was my government and economics teacher during my sophomore year of high school. Though we learned the material in our textbooks, our true guide was the daily newspaper he brought to work every day. Vigorous open debate was encouraged; disrespect wasn't tolerated.

The influence of coaches, particularly in sports,



Kay Huggins





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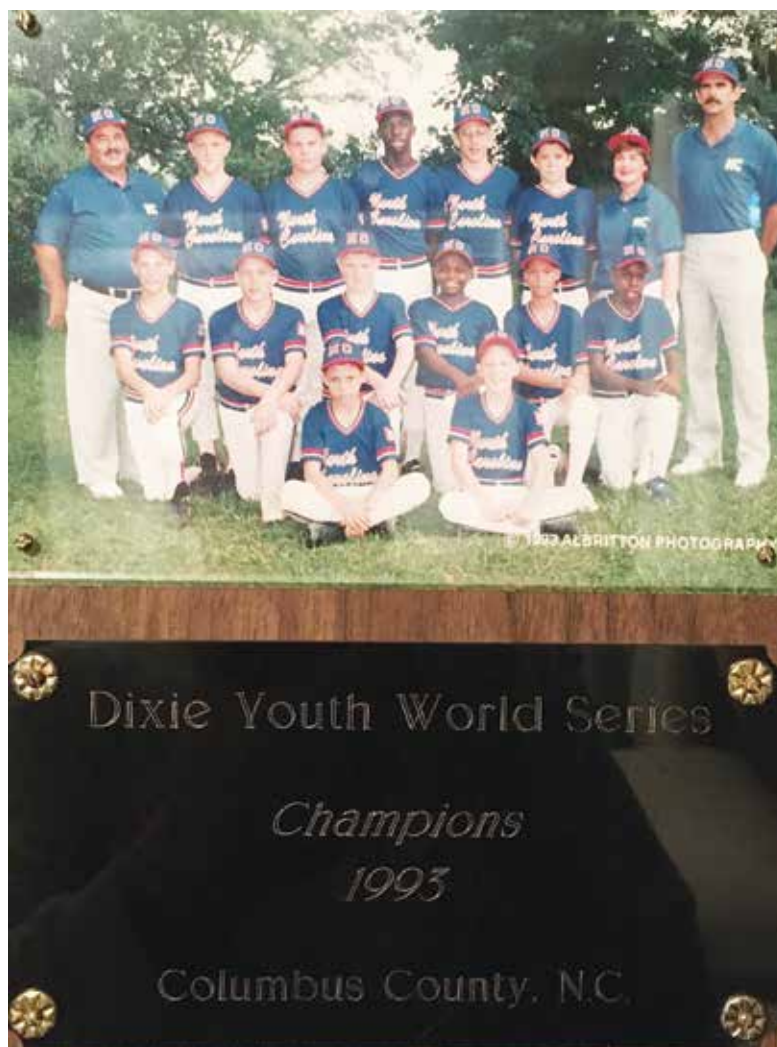


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The 1993 Columbus County Dixie Youth Baseball team that claimed the Dixie Youth World Series Championship

goes beyond physical training and includes life skills that shape character, teach discipline and foster community engagement.

Coaches teach athletes the importance of working together toward common goals. A coach can foster a sense of belonging and emphasize that success is a collective effort rather than just an individual achievement. They may help athletes develop resilience by encouraging them to face challenges, overcome setbacks, and learn from failures — skills that are important in both sports and everyday life.

Many successful athletes attribute their success to the mentorship of their coaches. Michael Jordan often speaks of his high school coach, Clifton "Pop" Herring, whose encouragement taught him perseverance after being cut from the varsity team. Serena Williams credits her father and coach, Richard Williams, for instilling the importance of hard work and mental toughness from a young age.

Pat Davenport of Lake Waccamaw, like many other men of all ages who grew up in Columbus County, credits Mike Mobley with tremendous influence in his life. "Mike Mobley was hands down the best coach I've had," says Davenport. "I've had some great ones. That is saying a lot."

Davenport goes on to say that Mobley taught him about more than baseball. "He taught me about life. How to work hard, dare to dream, and achieve. How to lose with grace and humility. He was there for me for the loss of my parents and my sister. He was at my wedding. He's been there for me for forty five years. The GOAT of coaches. A second dad. And a mentor. And a friend. And yes, he knows just what he means to me and that I love him."

Student-athletes are more likely to engage in community service compared to their non-athlete peers, underscoring the role of coaches in fostering civic responsibility. Similarly, student engagement in the arts has shown to correlate



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with positive outcomes, including increased community service participation and voter turnout.

Dr. Sharyn Edwards directed the children's choir at Lake Waccamaw Presbyterian Church and was my first voice teacher. My friend Amy Fox and I stood in the fellowship hall many afternoons under her direction as 9-year-olds learning to control our breathing while singing in Latin. I still think "In egg shell sees day oh" when a choir sings "In excelsis Deo" as it performs "Angels We Have Heard on High" at Christmas. Dr. Edwards taught us the importance of enunciating so that we could be understood during our solos and in our harmonies with the choir. We weren't responsible just for our individual success.

Debbie Conway was my first art teacher when my mother signed me up for summer art lessons in elementary school. She was my teacher again during my senior year of high school, and I have applied her lessons about art projects to many areas of life. Her classroom is where I learned about perspective. We can all look at the same fruit bowl to sketch, but your perspective is different from everyone else's depending on where you sit. Are you closer to the bowl than your neighbor? Then the bowl in your picture is larger. Are you sitting on the same side of the bowl? If not, you will see the light and shadows differently.

Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou both credited teachers for nurturing their talents and shaping their futures. Winfrey recalls how a high school teacher, Mrs. Duncan, saw potential in her when others did not and fostered her passion for communication. Angelou credited her mentor, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, for fostering a love of words by introducing her to authors and poets. Their experiences highlight the profound influence educators can have on personal and professional development.

Many teachers were inspired by their own teachers to pursue a career in education. Shanna Williamson, a graduate of West Columbus High School and a former teacher there, cites her mother, Gayle Williamson, also a teacher, as her first mentor, but adds that the example set by W.T. Edwards, the current principal at Whiteville High School, has informed and inspired her approach to teaching. She particularly remembers a basketball game Edwards was coaching at West Columbus when he put a student with special needs in the game. She was there to see the joy

and pride the student felt when he made a basket and was cheered by the crowd and congratulated by his peers. Witnessing that impact guided Williamson's teaching philosophy. "I want everyone to succeed. For some, that's not graduating from college. As an educator, I try to touch everybody, but if I only touch one, I've made my community better."

I cannot think of teachers without my mother coming to mind first. Claudia Thompson was always a

teacher even before she became an educator. The oldest sibling of four, she marshaled her sisters and brother through tumultuous childhoods and modeled herself after the mother figure of her aunt, Vivian Jones, who was a trailblazing educator in her own right. Nana, as I called her, opened one of the first privately owned preschools in North Carolina, Ding Dong School.

Mama followed in Nana's footsteps, graduating from Campbell College with a degree in English and jumping into teaching immediately. Over the years, Mama influenced many students both in and out of the classroom.

Once, when visiting Mama at school, I heard grumbling from students about her exacting standards and high expectations that some thought were unreasonable. However, after she passed, some of the same students who had complained in high school wrote to me and told how her influence had led to their success in life.



Longtime piano teacher Sharyn Edwards performed in the Piano Legacy concert May 5 at Southeastern Community College. Several of Edwards' past students performed as well. Some of them are now teachers themselves, and selected current students from their studios played in the program in honor of SCC's 60th anniversary.

MEANING OF MENTORSHIP

Many had become educators themselves or gone on to careers in law or medicine. They were thankful for the high standards she set that prepared them for the rigors of studies after high school. Some of her former students said they might not have graduated from high school at all without her persistence.

Former student Karen Austin considers Mama one of her favorite teachers. Austin says Mama created a lifelong reader in her even though she protested at the time “because she was having me read huge historical fiction books, and I know I saw somebody else doing a book report [for another teacher] on Harlequin romances.” Austin adds that, because of Mama, she notices every grammatical error and misspelled word she sees.

Teachers and coaches are indispensable in shaping individuals and our community. Although they face funding and burnout challenges that threaten their effectiveness, they continue to inspire and mentor.

By fostering a culture of appreciation and support for educators, we can help them continue to weave a strong and colorful fabric created here in our communities that supports us all.



Claudia Thompson

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FROM STORMS TO PANDEMIC, SMITH GUIDES COUNTY THROUGH HEALTH CHALLENGES

STORY BY ISABELLA HOPKINS / PHOTOGRAPHY NR ARCHIVES



Columbus County Public Health Director Kim Smith

At her annual family reunion under the hot July sun, inspiration struck 10-year-old Kim Lewis. Years later, she would remember the experience as the moment she found her calling.

On that day, the future Columbus County Health Director Kim Smith watched as her aunt, a nurse, simply looked at a person and detected an imminent health crisis.

Smith describes how a neighbor of her grandmother's walked up to her family's gathering, where her aunt took one look at him and said, "Are you sure you're all right?" Smith's aunt then asked someone to get him some water, and within moments, the neighbor fainted.

"Come to find out, he had diabetes," Smith said.

Smith recalls watching her aunt use everyday items like orange juice, sugar, and peanut butter crackers to restore the man to a more normal condition. That day, she saw what a good nurse could do with few resources in a health emergency.

"That's what made me want to be a nurse," Smith said. "Just how much she was able to do with what little bit she had."

She followed that path, graduating from East Carolina University with a bachelor's degree in nursing in 1984. A year later, she married Mark Smith, and her husband's job relocated them to Whiteville for what they thought would be a five-year period. At that time, Kim Smith was working in Pembroke as a clinic nurse at a Federally Qualified Health Center. Two years later,

their daughter was born. When she was 2 years old, she was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes, and Smith said the support their family felt here during that time led them to stay in Whiteville permanently.

'When, not if'

In Whiteville, Smith was one of the nurses who opened the then-named Southeastern Dialysis Center in 1986. After her time at the dialysis center, she worked in home health, and then at Columbus Regional Healthcare System. In 2005, she became the Columbus County health director, a role she has held for 19 years.

Smith said that, during her time in healthcare, she's always been cognizant of health-related threats and prepared for disaster to strike.

"It's always been when, not if," she said. "It's, when it's here, what are you going to do?"

Smith has faced crises like hurricanes during her career, but a pandemic was something she never expected. When COVID-19 became a threat to Columbus County, it introduced an entirely new set of challenges.

With the lack of research on the illness and unknown potential impacts, Smith said it was

difficult to convey messages to the public while doubts swirled on the internet about the credibility of scientists like Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former chief medical advisor to the president.

"COVID was not a Republican, and it wasn't a Democrat. It was a disease that we knew nothing about," Smith said. "To me, it really



Smith receives her COVID-19 vaccination in December 2020.

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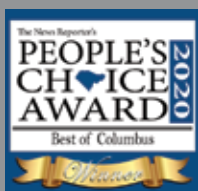
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didn't matter how it got here. It was here, we had to deal with it."

Since researchers were making new discoveries with each passing day, Smith said, the announcements of new, ever-changing findings didn't make "public health look so good."

"We were building the plane as we were flying it," she said. "You were finding out things at eight that morning that you had to implement within a two-hour period, and then it would change at four that afternoon."



Columbus County Health Director Kim Smith is pictured at a drive-through COVID-19 testing site.

Managing disasters

Even though Columbus County has faced a significant number of hurricanes, the extent of any particular storm's impact can never be fully anticipated. The Health Department's preparation helps bring order to shelters. Smith said

the National Weather Service is "always on the phone" in these situations, which helps her and her staff cover the bases and plan with as much foresight as possible.

Smith said when a storm is coming, county government departments work together to determine the opening of shelters, community resources and, in the health department's case, how to manage health-related situations in the middle of a storm. Two members of the health department are assigned to each shelter, equipped with basic first aid supplies, to pull shifts and provide assistance in the event of a health emergency. For example, Smith said, if someone were to experience chest pains, the nurse in the shelter would be able to provide basic care, but it is a much different scenario than what they are used to.

"You might be used to an ICU room where you can start an IV," Smith said. "We don't have any of that out there."

Behind the scenes, Smith sits in the county's emergency operations center, in communication with the nurse. She coordinates further assistance or transportation to the hospital for urgent care if possible given the travel conditions. "It can be very nerve-racking," she said.

Improved health

Under Smith's leadership, the county has moved up nine places in the statewide ranking of county health statistics, from being in last place at 100, to being at number 91 in 2023, the last year for which rankings are available. She highlighted health education as a possible fac-



Smith has been Columbus County health director for 19 years.



Smith addresses the Columbus County Board of Commissioners.



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60TH ANNIVERSARY OF SCC

As part of the 60th anniversary of SCC, we would like to RAISE THE BELL and create an outdoor space worthy of the history that the historic Chadbourne Bell represents.

We're creating an outdoor space that showcases the Bell and all it means to our community. You have an opportunity to make your mark on our campus by donating a brick for the pathway beneath and around the bell.

Your brick can:

Honor someone special - a teacher, graduate, classmate or friend. Create a memorial for someone who impacted your life. Or simply leave your name on a brick to show your love for SCC.



Questions? Contact Us!

Foundation Office: 910-786-6320
Scan the QR code for more info or visit
sccnc.edu/raise-the-bell

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tor in the climb, along with community members taking responsibility for their own health and implementing healthier practices.

Smith said she thinks the health department's teen pregnancy prevention class has helped lower rates of both teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The health department also offers educational exercise classes, and Smith said she would love to see a wellness center established in the future for Columbus County, ideally including a pool to help children learn how to swim.

Smith highlighted partnerships with various entities within and outside the county, like Port Health, which offers substance use and mental health treatment and has a location on the health department grounds. If a patient is in need of care from Port Health and is at the health department, Smith said the agency can accept immediate referrals.

Patients "just knock on the door, and Port Health opens the door and welcomes them in," Smith said.

A partnership with UNC Wilmington has also been valuable to the health department, Smith said. She has collaborated with many of the university's health-related departments and sees UNCW as an "unsung hero of public health."

Growth and responsibility

When Smith reflects on the most fulfilling aspects of her career working as health director, she said helping bring "healthy babies into the world" and ensuring they receive all their vaccinations are particularly significant.

Smith has also experienced "six or seven" instances when individuals were infected with tuberculosis and refused to take their medicine; they were charged with a crime and imprisoned for not complying. There, they were monitored to ensure they took their doses. Catching and treating diseases like this is important to Smith.

"It's always been when, not if," she said. "It's, when it's here, what are you going to do?"

- Kim Smith

"A lot of people think that tuberculosis is gone, and it's not; it's here in this county," Smith said.

With a growing population, Smith said she hopes to see more industry enter the county to provide more job opportunities that would lead to more insurance coverage — and hopefully, people going to more regular check-ups. To make that a reality, however, the healthier decisions lie in the hands of each individual.

"For our kids that are coming up now, if they see mom or dad taking those walks, they're going to incorporate that into their life," she said. "Everybody just needs to take responsibility."



Smith shown in her office in 2021



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Supported by the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services, with funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Opioid STR/Cures (Grant #1H79T000257) and SPFF-0X (Grant #1U79SP022087).



Jessica Hill



Josi Sellers



Laura Bernstein



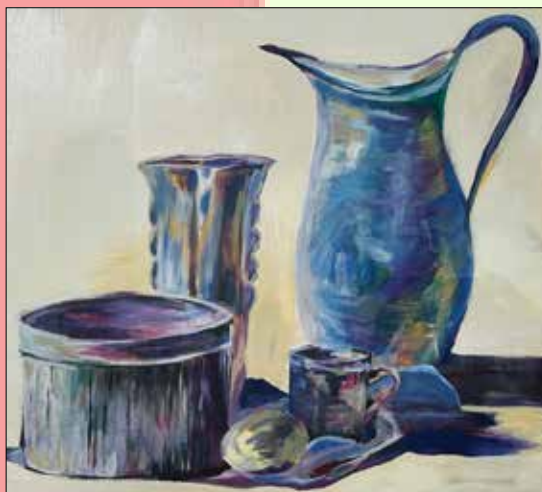
Krystal Hawkins-Small



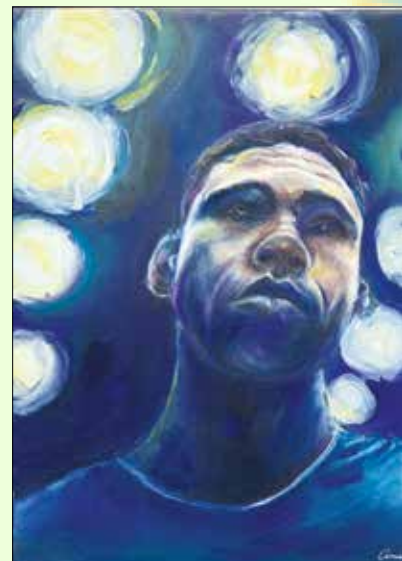
Mark Bannerman's well known class each year for a student a collection of scrap books Bann record student art events and



Josi Sellers



Peyton Young Earey



Anna L



Jessica Baldwin



on plow that he brought to
art project. On the table is a
nerman created each year to
achievements.



Holly Kern

THE DRAWING BOARD



Celia Barbieri



Emily Bannerman



Holly Kern

THE DRAWING BOARD

‘ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT’ ART EXHIBIT HONORS BANNERMANS’ INFLUENCE

In recognition of Mark and Mary Louise Bannerman and the impact they’ve had on the arts in Columbus County, in June and July the Columbus County Arts Council hosted an exhibit, “Another Assignment,” showing student-submitted artwork made under and inspired by the artistic husband-and-wife duo.

The Bannermans have been heavily involved in the arts in Columbus County as artists and as teachers in the Whiteville City Schools system since moving from Indiana to Columbus County in 1984.



Helen Holden

lynch

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In addition to offering services you'd expect from a community healthcare system, UNC Health Southeastern provides a number of specialized services that are unique to our healthcare system and not available anywhere else in the region.

Did you know –

UNC Health Southeastern provides:

- Obstetric services to many residents of Bladen County because they do not have a resource in their county for delivery services.
- Open heart surgery for patients in Bladen, Columbus and Scotland counties because this service is not available in these counties. UNC Health Southeastern also provides heart positron emission tomography, which is used to measure blood flow to the heart in order to diagnose heart disease, for patients in the region as an alternative to the Raleigh area.
- Inpatient behavioral services for the region, including Bladen, Columbus and Scotland counties, as this service is not available in these counties.
- High-level, advanced technology cancer diagnostic and treatment services for the region, including Bladen, Columbus and Scotland counties, as these services are not available in these counties.



Some additional specialty services that we offer that are unique to our local health system include:

- Interventional radiology, which uses minimally-invasive, image-guided procedures to diagnose and treat diseases.
- Thrombectomy, or the removal of a blood clot from a blood vessel.
- Weight-loss surgery, using minimally-invasive techniques for faster healing times.
- A growing vascular surgery program with the addition of a cardiothoracic surgeon, who performs vascular procedures.

It is our mission to provide exceptional care for our diverse region; offer the highest quality standards in a safe environment; and provide compassionate care provided by a committed team.

At UNC Health Southeastern, together, we will improve the health and well-being of the region we serve.

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