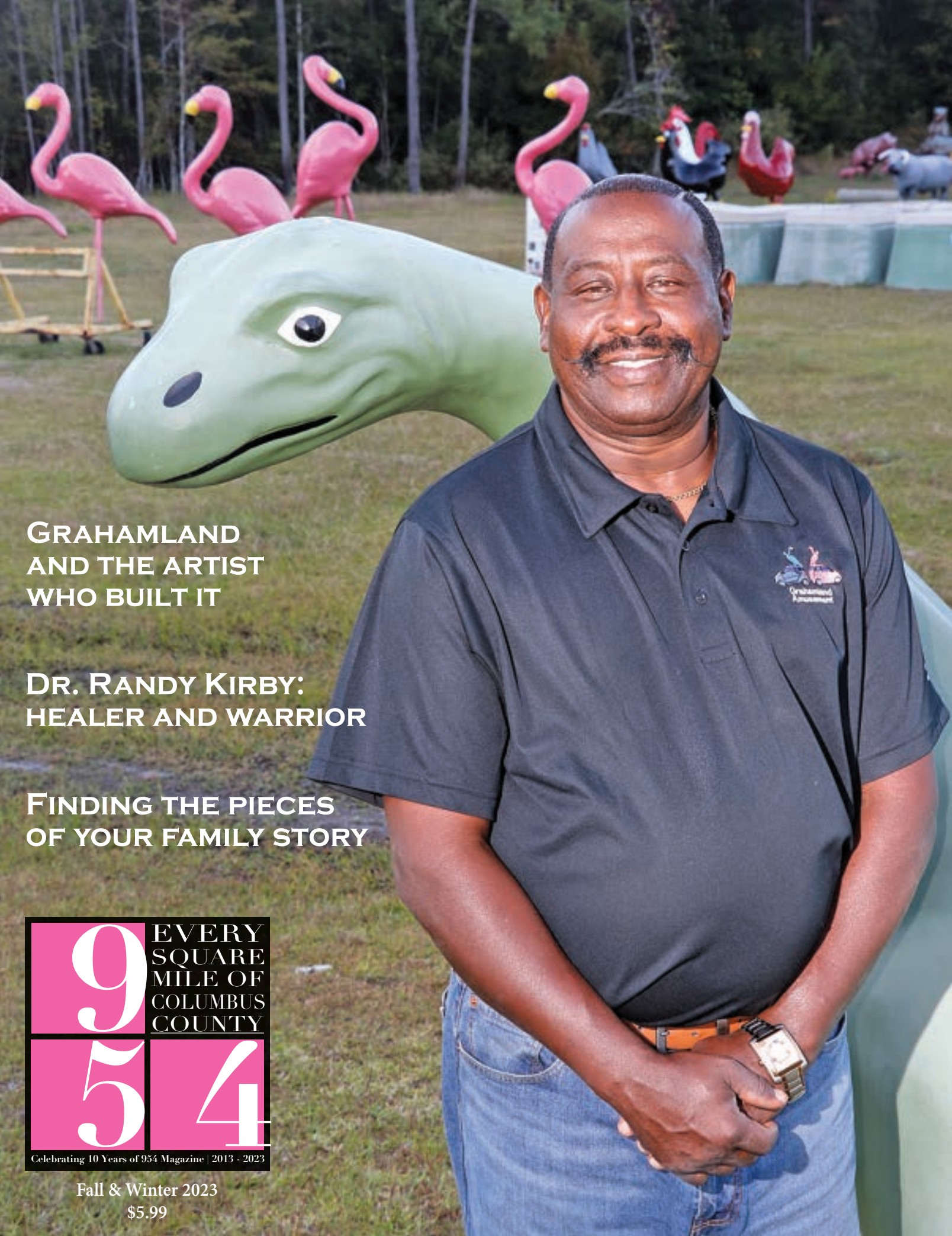




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COVER PHOTO BY JUSTIN SMITH

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Ethan Jordan, 27, is continuing his family's agricultural legacy in Columbus County. "It's really all I know," the seventh-generation farmer said. "I enjoy doing it. It's just something I love."

YOUNG FARMER SAYS 'THERE'S NOTHING BETTER' THAN WHAT HE DOES FOR A LIVING

STORY & PHOTOS JOSEPH WILLIAMS

"You don't judge maturity by the actual peanut," Ethan Jordan informed me as we stood in a freshly picked row on his family's farm on Jordan Road, nestled away in northern Columbus County. "You judge maturity by the hull."

Pulling a peanut from a plant lying atop the churned soil, he scratched away at its exterior with a pocket knife and cracked open its shell.

"See that black line?" Jordan asked. He gestured with the tip of his knife to a dark vein running along the shell's exposed interior. "That's mature," he said.

Jordan speaks with the confidence one would expect from a man who's been farming for decades. But actually, Jordan is just 27 years old — less than half the age of the average American farmer.

Since returning home from college, Jordan has helped run the

family farm owned by his mother and father, Tammy and Alex Jordan. In total, Jordan and his father work about 1,500 acres of farmland across Columbus and Bladen counties — some owned by the family, some rented.

Being a young man in the industry comes with its challenges, Jordan admits, but as a seventh-generation farmer of his family's land, he's got agriculture in his blood.

"There's nothing better to me than getting up and getting behind a 200-some horsepower tractor and going to work and running it," Jordan said.

'Something I love'

While born and raised in Columbus County, Jordan received most of his education a county over before going off to college.

Jordan attended Waccamaw Academy in Whiteville up to the

second grade, but his parents transferred him to the Bladen County School system, where his mother taught.

He graduated from high school in Bladen County and attended Bladen Community College for a year and a half before transferring to N.C. State University. In 2018, Jordan graduated with a bachelor of science in agricultural business management.

"The next day, I was right back home" on the family farm, he said.

In reality, Jordan had never stayed far from home for too long to begin with. There was always work to be done back home.

"I can probably count on one or two hands how many weekends I stayed in Raleigh," Jordan said. He even structured his course schedule so that all his classes finished by Thursday — that way, he could be home to work the farm both Friday and Saturday.

Jordan learned a lot during his schooling, but as the old adage tells us, experience is the best teacher.

And experience is something that Jordan already has plenty of.

When he was a boy, the only times he didn't accompany his father or the others working on the farm were when safety reasons prevented him. Otherwise, "I can't remember any time at all, if there was a tractor moving and I was home, that I wasn't right behind them," Jordan said.

He recalls with pride how, when he was in the sixth grade, he climbed aboard and piloted a tractor by himself for the first time in his life. Jordan's father wouldn't ever have let him do that at that age. However, Jordan confesses that, one day, while his father was away, a trusted farmhand gave him his opportunity — and supervised him, of course.

Jordan believes that these and other cherished childhood memories on the farm instilled "the passion for agriculture" in him and ultimately led him to pursue farming as a career.

"It's really all I know," Jordan said. "I enjoy doing it. It's just something I love."

'An opportunity to grow'

Although Jordan is now more than twice the age he was when he first drove his father's tractor, compared to the typical American farmer, he's still young.

According to the latest available



Farming doesn't look quite as it used to generations ago. Using technology like this GPS system mounted in a tractor cabin ensures that Jordan picks each row of peanuts on his family's farm in northern Columbus County with the utmost precision.



Jordan inspects a freshly picked peanut plant to estimate its maturity.

U.S. Census of Agriculture data, in 2017 the average farmer's age in the United States was 57.5 years old. In Columbus County, the average farmer's age was even higher, at 59.2 years old.

Being so young in the industry comes with its pros and cons, Jordan said.

"I catch a lot of flak sometimes because of how young I am," Jordan said. He sometimes encounters this issue in his side business, he said.

In addition to his duties on the farm, Jordan also buys and sells peanut byproducts to feed mills across the South. He can manage the entire operation over the phone, with a pen and a pad of paper from the seat in the tractor's cabin.

Occasionally a caller, after recognizing the youthful intonation of Jordan's voice over the phone, will incredulously ask him, "You do this yourself?"

"Yep," Jordan will reply into the phone. He keeps his answers to such questions short; he's got business to do, after all.

"The age thing, it bothers me," Jordan said, but he tries to be a good sport about people's skepticism. In fact, "I look at it as an opportunity to grow," he said.

With just a five-man operation, working the 1,500 acres of soybeans, corn and peanuts can be a lot to handle, Jordan said. "It's stressful. It's very stressful."

Farmers like himself have to constantly navigate changing economic, political and of course physical landscapes, Jordan said. And that doesn't even factor in his additional duties as a member of the Columbus County Agriculture Fair board of directors, among other board positions he holds.

But, at the same time, "I kind of live for the stress," Jordan said. "I just enjoy the adrenaline rush of it."

And, in this respect, his youth and energy may serve as assets, Jordan said. "If you're not making changes to adapt, then you're falling behind," he said. As a younger farmer, Jordan believes he's uniquely disposed to make those necessary changes to roll with the punches.

'Nothing makes me happier in the world'

Still, looking toward the future, Jordan has his concerns. He's aware of potential further urban development coming from Wilmington and Leland to the east and from Myrtle Beach to the south. He wonders how these changes could impact Columbus County farmers' and residents' connection to their agricultural heritage.

"I can remember riding with Daddy on the tobacco harvester, and going out with Daddy at night when he would check the barns while he was curing tobacco," Jordan recalls fondly.

However, so many young people are "dis-



Jordan loves working on his family farm. "There's nothing better to me than getting up and getting behind a 200-some horsepower tractor and going to work and running it," he said.



Jordan peers over his right shoulder to ensure that peanut plants are being properly pulled from the soil.



Seated in the cabin of a tractor or combine, Jordan can manage his side hustle, selling peanut byproducts to feed mills across the South, using just a phone, a headset, a pen and a pad of paper.

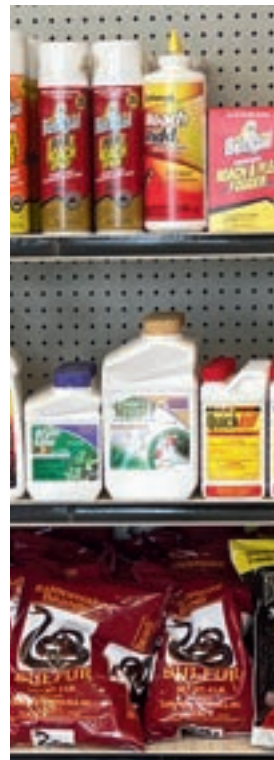
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placed” from the agricultural industry nowadays, Jordan said. He doubts many children in the county today could even identify a tobacco plant, which used to be the “main money-maker” for southeastern North Carolina.

In spite of the changes he anticipates coming to Columbus County, Jordan tries to stay positive about the future. There’s always a silver lining, sometimes where you’d least expect it.

Like when, chug-a-lug-a-lugging in his tractor one day behind a sedan on Jordan Road, he spots a child’s face, eyes filled with wonder, peering at him from the backseat.

“Nothing makes me happier in the world than when you pass by a car and you see a kid in the back just grinning and waving away at you,” Jordan said.

And who knows? Maybe that child will grow up to be a farmer one day, like Jordan.



Jordan holds positions on various boards, including the Columbus County Agriculture Fair’s board of directors. Here, two high school students assist Jordan, right, in raking shavings into the livestock show arena in advance of the 2023 fair.

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954 Finds

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Stop by the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville during museum hours for locally sourced jewelry and art as well as educational gifts. You'll find books, science kits coordinated with local schools' science curricula, and stuffed colorful dinosaurs, birds and wildlife creatures. Located at 415 S. Madison St., the shop is open Tuesday–Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



The gift shop at the Lake Waccamaw Depot Museum has a variety of gift items including work by local artists and authors, T-shirts, hats, children's toys and books, Lake Waccamaw themed ornaments, pottery, coasters, notecards and more. Proceeds fund depot restoration projects. The depot museum is located at 201 Flemington Dr. Hours are Wednesday–Saturday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.





The Fair Bluff Visitors' Center at 1140 Main St. in Fair Bluff has Watermelon Festival, River Walk and BBQ on the Bluff T-shirts for sale. For more information call 910-649-7202. Stop by Monday–Friday 9 a.m. to 5p.m and Saturday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.



The Boys and Girls Homes of North Carolina Country Store, located at 201 Top Tobacco Rd. at Lake Waccamaw, sells gently used items including clothes, accessories, children's toys, home decor and more. Stop by often to find new treasures. All proceeds from the Country Store go directly to the organization's programs. Shopping hours are Wednesday and Friday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Thursday 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to noon.



Sales of Lake Waccamaw State Park gift items support park needs and programs. Items include mugs, patches, scarves and custom walking stick or paddle medallions. T-shirts can be purchased at Lake Waccamaw Depot Museum. The state park visitor center is located at 1866 State Park Dr. Gift shop hours are Monday–Saturday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.



The Tabor City Library serves as Yam Festival headquarters. The library is home base for festival souvenir items including T-shirts, coin purses, mugs, pens, flags and Yam Man yard cutouts. All proceeds support Yam Festival events. The library is located at 101 E. 5th St.



Amber Bellamy, Columbus County DREAM Center executive director

LOVE OF FAMILY BRINGS AMBER BELLAMY HOME TO STAY

STORY STUART ROGERS

PHOTOS DREAM CENTER & NR ARCHIVE

Nurtured in a supportive family, church and school environment, Amber Bellamy developed the strength and empathy to guide children and adolescents as they choose their paths in the world. Bellamy, who has been executive director of the Columbus County DREAM Center in Whiteville for three years, says many people helped her find her purpose in life to serve and make a difference in her community.

Bellamy says she is “from Chadbourn” but explains that she actually grew up just outside the city limits in the Grist community. “Everyone there is like family,” she said.

Growing up

Her own immediate family has been a big influence in her journey to the DREAM Center. She is the daughter of Willie and Lisa Bellamy and is the youngest of their three daughters. Her sisters are Ebony Swinson of Chadbourn and Jennifer Ganus of Fayetteville.

Bellamy’s father is now retired, but for more than 30 years he worked near their home at the Swinging Tail Cattle Company owned by Bernard and Jaqueline Lennon, who are like Bellamy’s grandparents.

Amber Bellamy enjoyed farm life as a girl and says she still does. Her father taught her how to drive a tractor, mow the yard and “fix things.” Her favorite farm job to do was to sit beside her father on the combine while harvesting corn and help pull the unloading auger in and out. Lennon named a cow for her and gave her the proceeds when the animal went to market as a high school graduation gift.

At Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, leaders Willie J. Walls and Phylisa Kelly mentored Bellamy, and she credits Kelly with “getting me out of my shell” with opportunities to practice public speaking and leadership skills at church. Walls was a lifelong educator and the first African American to serve as the assistant superintendent for Columbus County Schools. He was also the general manager of WVOE 1590 AM radio station in Chadbourn, and Bellamy spent her summers volunteering at the station and cataloging the playlists.

Many teachers in the Chadbourn schools and at West Columbus High School encouraged Bellamy, she said. They helped her and her sister Jennifer successfully transition to UNC-Chapel Hill for their college degrees. Her sister Ebony is a Winston Salem



Carol Caldwell retired from Whiteville City Schools in 2008. She soon became DREAM Center executive director when Evelyn Troy retired from the position.

State University graduate and retired from a career serving in the U.S. Army.

Back home

Bellamy graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2008 with plans to pursue a career in the Triangle area in family therapy, but she says God had “a different plan” for her. After graduation, while keeping her apartment in Durham, she came home to help her mother recuperate after surgery. Before long she realized her community and home were where she wanted to be, and she accepted a position as the lay health educator in the Well Births program at the DREAM Center in March 2009.

There Bellamy found another homelike environment where she could learn from the supportive older women who had led the center since its founding.

Retired educator Carol Caldwell had become the DREAM Center’s executive director the previous year when the original director, Evelyn Troy, retired after serving 17 years.

Caldwell says the DREAM Center team fosters an atmosphere of family, and she is very proud of its work. Bellamy was her first hire as director, and Caldwell remembered her as a young girl in Chadborn volunteering in the community and serving in her church.

Bellamy turned out to be a good fit for the center, and over the years her responsibilities expanded from lay education into greater leadership.

“Amber is a marvelous young woman,” Caldwell said. “She has a knack for listening and providing a safe space, and she has the wisdom to nudge folks in the right direction.”



Evelyn Troy (left) congratulates Bellamy on her new position as DREAM Center executive director. Troy was the DREAM Center’s first executive director, serving from 1991 to 2008.



Children and their caregivers have the opportunity to relax and have fun at the DREAM Center in a nurturing and inclusive environment.

Bellamy stepped into the executive director role in 2020 when Caldwell retired. As executive director, Bellamy has surrounded herself with a staff that Caldwell says has wonderful ideas and clicks with all ages.

Caldwell says she, Troy and Bellamy still talk frequently, especially when one “needs an ear,” and the three women have “a lot of respect for each other.”

The center

The letters of the DREAM Center name stand for Developing Resilience through Enrichment, Awareness and Motivation. The organization was founded in 1991 under the name Alcohol and Drug Prevention Coalition (ADPC) when local leaders realized the critical need to address and treat the underlying causes of substance abuse in Columbus County.

The group changed its name to Columbus County DREAM Center Inc. in 1995. That same year Arthalia Bennett Spaulding donated the building that became its current location near Whiteville’s Central Middle School. DREAM Center programs and collaborations with local organizations serve children, families and young mothers in Columbus County. “Some of the kids in the program now, I worked with when they were infants in the Well Births program,” Bellamy says.

“The DREAM Center has always had outstanding leadership,” said DREAM Center Board Chairman Amon McKenzie. “There are so many good things I can say about Amber. She is excited about helping people. She is very smart, innovative and creative.” McKenzie also appreciates Bellamy’s ability to handle a wide range of duties that include day-to-day operations, grant writing, and anticipating needs in



The DREAM Center provides free testing for HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases and Hepatitis C. The program's goal is to break down the stigma attached to HIV and help those with a positive test result seek medical attention.



The tutoring program at the DREAM Center follows a holistic approach focusing on academics, health, nutrition, character education and building interpersonal skills.

the community. "She is a remarkable young lady," McKenzie said.

McKenzie feels that the DREAM Center's programs and community engagement give opportunities to those who might not have them otherwise and also help guide young adults with a plan and the tools to "head in the right direction" when they graduate from school. He emphasized that the DREAM Center's resources are available to anyone who needs them.

Future plans

Southeastern Community College (SCC) instructor Mary Baldwin has taught a computer skills class at the DREAM Center for years, and this year SCC is adding its Construction Academy program to the collaboration.

The newest program at the DREAM Center, launched in 2022, is called DREAM of Success and is for ages 13 to 18 years old. Funded by a state initiative to address the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) in the N.C. Court and health system,

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LOVE OF FAMILY

Quintin McGee, who was a judge at the time, along with JCPC Area Consultants Lance Britt, Kelly Cribb, and Bellamy, worked to create a pilot program in Columbus County that recognizes and uses ACE scores and the effects of childhood trauma to educate teens on healthy relationships and good decision-making.

The 13-week program ends with a “DREAM Big” banquet where teens share their plans and visions for the future. Boys and Girls Homes of North Carolina at Lake Waccamaw participated in the pilot program, and plans are to bring the program to the North Whiteville Academy this year.

Along with her work at the DREAM Center, Bellamy has given much of her time and talent to serve others as a member of the Columbus County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Board of Directors and as a graduate of the Chamber’s Leadership Columbus program. *The News Reporter* recognized Bellamy’s impact in the community as a member of the 2017 class of Fifteen Under 40 young professional and civic leaders. She has worked with adults and youth to teach financial management skills and was invited to attend the Cape Fear Leadership Forum through Duke University to address the issues of limited quality and safe housing in Columbus County and the Cape Fear region.

Appreciation and respect for her family and all who supported her while growing up in Grist make it possible for Bellamy to pass it forward to serve others at the DREAM Center. “The DREAM Center is a family,” she says. “My experience here has shifted my mindset, and I found my purpose. It all goes back to my upbringing where I was taught to serve and make a difference.”



In August, the DREAM Center hosted its first “Black, White and Vinyl” fundraiser. Guests were encouraged to bring their favorite vinyl records to play during festivities at Vineland Station. The event raised money to support the nonprofit’s programming across Columbus County.



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The Columbus County DREAM Center is located at 403 S. Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. in Whiteville. The center is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. You can support Columbus County DREAM Center programs with an online donation at ccdreamcenter.org.

Phone: 910-642-0633

Website: ccdreamcenter.org

DREAM Center programs

Safe Haven after-school tutoring program

Serving students ages 6–18, the program provides holistic assistance focusing on academics, health and physical activity, nutrition, character education and building inter/intrapersonal skills.

DREAM of Success

Focusing on ages 13–18, this program aims to reduce poverty and help adolescents and teens make wise relationship choices to achieve adult self-sufficiency.

Powerful Parenting! Program

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CELEBRATIONS TURN FALL INTO AUTUMN

COLUMN BY BILL THOMPSON

Many of us think of the months of September, October and November as “fall,” the third season of the year, coming between summer and winter. But if you listen to your senses, that time of year is “autumn.” Fall is finite, a certain number of days that recur each year. Autumn is intangible; it exists in different forms in the minds of those who experience it. It fastens itself to our memory, softens the challenge of each day, and whispers a promise of tomorrow.

School begins with what we call a “fall semester,” a time for the attainment of knowledge, a return to the classroom. In autumn, we go back to expand our world, to learn about places we’ve never seen and words we’ve never heard, songs we never sang and thoughts and creations that our minds never conceived. We go back to friendships that remain a part of us forever and create memories of times together that will stay with us long after our minds have forgotten much of what we learned at our desks.

Friday night is the fifth day of the week on the fall calendar, just as it is year-round. However, in autumn, Friday night has a special meaning because it’s football night. Football in what I call “My South” is more than a game, particularly in the small towns and rural communities. The small stadiums become the Coliseums where local athletes take on the trappings of gladiators, where crowds cheer with an enthusiasm not so much for the prowess or athletic ability of the participants but because of the personal relationships: the brothers, sons, grandsons and boyfriends and classmates. It is not about the combat; it is more about the connectivity of community.

Fall is harvest time, a time for harvesters and combines in the fields. It’s a time to finally get a return on the investment of time, labor and money. It’s a trip to the livestock market to sell those animals that have developed in the pastures and feedlots. Autumn is the sight of a column of dust drifting on the horizon as those machines move silently at a distance. Autumn is the chant of the auctioneer, the unique smell of the sale barn that is at once foul and aromatic.

Autumn in the fields is silence in the cut-over corn and soybean fields as the soil begins to rest and renew itself for the next planting. It is the companionship of a good hunting dog as the two of you walk across the silent field searching the sky or the brush for birds.

According to the calendar and the hunting laws, Oct. 14 is the beginning of deer hunting season in North Carolina. Autumn is sitting alone in a tree stand as the early morning sun creeps above the woods and shines the beam of light on a herd of deer grazing below you. It is fellow hunters gathered around a campfire to share the camaraderie of the hunt and perhaps a meal of venison or quail.

Autumn is picking muscadine grapes off a vine your grandfather planted over a hundred years ago.

In My South, celebrations can turn fall into autumn. In so many small towns, those autumn celebrations have always been a time to celebrate those things that make each one of them unique. Most



often, that had to do with agriculture since that was the primary element in the culture of the town. We celebrate every living thing: peanuts, watermelons, strawberries, spot fish, oysters, soybeans, yams, azaleas, chitlins and even wooly worms. Add dogwood trees and pine trees and just about every place where Francis Marion spent any time during the Revolutionary War.

Regardless of the day-to-day problems faced by the town — street repair, water and sewer problems, crime and politics — for one week or week-end, the community comes together to cheer something positive. Much of that positivity is expressed in a parade.

Riding in a local parade is a lot better than, say, riding in Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade. I have had the honor of riding in several such local parades and I count that among the greatest honors I’ve ever had. There is something special about a parade where people in the crowd are people you know, people who call out your name or run up to the car you’re riding in to shake your hand. I was riding in a parade in a small South Carolina town once when a lady I knew ran up to my car and placed her 2-year old son in the seat beside me as the car was going down the street. (She picked him up at the next block.) That only happens in a small town.

But Thanksgiving is not just a time for parades. Thanksgiving is a fall celebration held the fourth Thursday in November, often a prelude to the Christmas season. Autumn in My South is a time for lower-case thanksgiving, a time when families come together and thank God for all their blessings, not least of which is their good fortune to be living where they do.

Thanksgiving Day is often one great big reunion. But there are other autumn days in My South when churches and schools and families come together. It is a time to tell the old stories, to hug everybody, to remember those special times and people who are no longer with us, to hold the new babies, and to renew that special union, that sense of family, sharing something unique and continuing tradition.

One of those traditions is food. In My South, anything can be fried. But food at those special occasions is not just fried. There are all kinds of casseroles, plenty of chicken, potato salad, rice and gravy, squash and potatoes, and, particularly in autumn, venison and beef and, always, barbecue and enough desserts to satisfy every sweet tooth. And plenty of boiled peanuts.

I have often wondered why there are two terms for those three months of the calendar. It may have something to do with the fact



that leaves start to fall about that time of year. Indeed, fallen leaves play a large part in our autumn. We not only revel in the beauty of the colors on the trees that mark the changing season but we also add that activity of burning leaves, to the feeling of settling in for the winter as we rake our lawns and burn those leaves. The smoke from a pile of burning leaves is the incense we burn to pay homage to nature, to recognize that we are tied to the earth and the changing of the seasons. Autumn is when we reflect on that and the rest of our good fortune.

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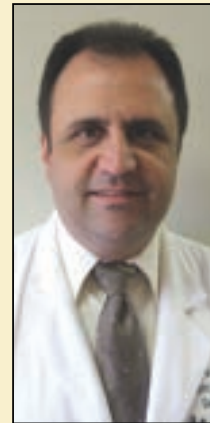
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Lester Frink and Martha McKoy share a conversation inside the WVOE radio station.

BROADCASTERS SAY ‘THE GRACE OF GOD’ HAS KEPT CHADBOURN RADIO STATION ON THE AIR

STORY DASHUAN VEREEN

PHOTOS DASHUAN VEREEN & NR ARCHIVE

Chadbourn’s WVOE 1590 AM radio station has been a staple of the community for more than six decades. Although many people have moved on from AM radio dials to Youtube and streaming apps, WVOE still has devoted listeners who enjoy tuning in every day.

Founded by T.M. Reynolds, WVOE started broadcasting to radios spanning southeastern North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina on April 24, 1962.

That date holds significant historical value, according to president Lester Frink.

“It was the first Black-owned radio station east of the Mississippi,” said Frink. “That’s the claim to fame that this station has

had since I can remember.”

Over that time frame, WVOE’s programming has consisted of Gospel, urban contemporary, rhythm and blues and jazz music, while also adding news, sports, weather reports, an obituary column and community and church news, to name a few programs.

Frink labeled the station as the “brainchild” of Reynolds and Willie Walls. As president of the station for many years, Walls played an important role for WVOE, or the “Voice of Ebony” as it is also called.

Walls, who also earned the distinction of becoming the first African American to serve as assistant superintendent for the Columbus County Schools, passed away in 2021.

Tough times

During his time as president, Walls hired Frink as vice president in an effort to “bring in some young blood,” Frink said.

“I just love the station,” added Frink. “It’s a hard life for an AM station — with everyone having phones. All the people who are here are here because they love the station. Times are tough sometimes, but a lot of their time is volunteering and trying to keep the station on the air.”

Two years ago, WVOE was in need of a new transmitter. It required a huge push to raise the funds needed to cover the \$11,000 price tag.

“By the grace of God we’re still here,” said WVOE President Lester Frink. “There have been times where the lights were cut off. There were times where payrolls couldn’t be met. But by the grace of God we’re still here.”

Frink said that, although the station was off the air for a little, “through the prayer and dedication of our employees here at the station, they were able to get it.”

“It is important to keep this station going,” Frink said. “It is a part of me. It is a part of this community.”

According to Frink, gospel DJ Tommy Brown played a major role in the station’s fundraising efforts. Brown said that “praising God” is the most important thing.

“We’re giving God the praise,” said Brown. “We try to reach people out there who may be sick and shut in at home. I like doing the Gospel program because we’re giving God the praise — it’s not about us, it’s about what we can send out to the public, and we love doing it.

“We want to keep WVOE on the air. So many people before us put in so much work to keep it going, so we want to continue the tradition.”



Willie J. Walls served as president of WVOE for many years.



Tommy Brown performs his role as Gospel DJ at WVOE radio station.





Joseph Monroe drives WVOE 2017 Gospel Queen Alice Frink and Willie Walls in the Strawberry Festival parade.

Community service

One major way WVOE continues to serve the community is by offering free advertising to area churches.

“Our community news section is free,” said Frink. “Sometimes community news is 20 minutes long. The information we run from funeral homes about deaths is also free.

“We do emergency broadcasting for the college and the town. We have done lots of things to serve the community since 1962, and we will continue those traditions.”

Martha McKoy, who serves multiple roles, including office manager and radio personality, stated that the radio station is working with the Columbus County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism to get WVOE recognized as a historical site.

“Our station needs an uplift,” said McKoy, who has served at WVOE for nearly 40 years. “We do the best we can. If we can get it designated as a historical site, we would be eligible to get help with the upkeep of the radio station.”

‘Through the grace of God’

On April 23, WVOE celebrated its 61st anniversary with a celebration at the Brunswick-Waccamaw Baptist Association building in Whiteville. Two local acts, “The Mighty Echoes” from Elizabethtown and the “Beaverdam Boys” from Chadbourne, as well as “The Alabama Gurlz” from Eufaula, Alabama, performed at the event. McKoy said it was “a packed house.”

“By the grace of God we’re still here,” said Frink. “There have been times where the lights were cut off. There were times where payrolls couldn’t be met. But, by the grace of God, we’re still here.”

McKoy said that WVOE’s journey has been “a task.” But, said McKoy, “I thank God that we’ve been able to keep this radio station going. It’s been a long journey, but God has been right here.”



“Our station needs an uplift,” said Martha McKoy, who has served at WVOE for nearly 40 years. “We do the best we can. If we can get it designated as a historical site, we would be eligible to get help with the upkeep of the radio station.”



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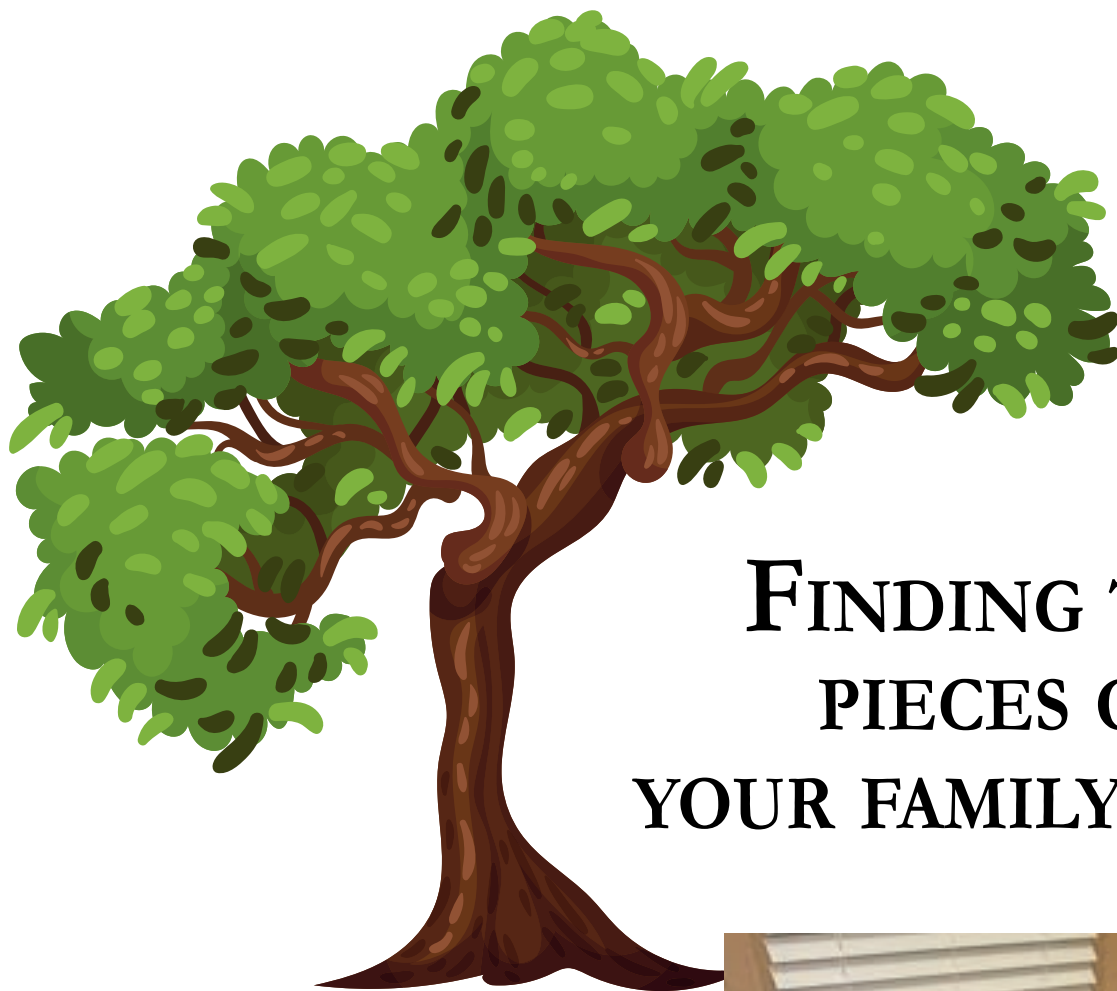


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FINDING THE PIECES OF YOUR FAMILY STORY

STORY TONNYE WILLIAMS FLETCHER

PHOTOS TONNYE WILLIAMS FLETCHER & SUBMITTED

“Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go . . .” As “the most wonderful time of the year” approaches, many of us gather with relatives, share family food traditions and swap a few recipes. We’ll re-tell favorite stories of the loved ones no longer with us.

During those discussions, perhaps someone will mention Granny’s old homeplace or the cousins will disagree about which war Granddaddy fought in.

Maybe one of your relatives will even ask a question no one around the table can answer. Maybe that question will ignite a desire in you to rediscover your family’s story — or to discover it for the first time. According to Shandi Williamson, North Carolina librarian at the Carolyn T. High Memorial Library, piecing together your family story is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. It requires patience, strategy, and the right resources.

Two experienced area genealogists and Williamson shared the following tips for getting started learning about “your people.”

Tip 1: Start with what you already have

Beginning to explore your family background may seem a little intimidating, like looking at a thousand puzzle pieces in a box. In that case, start by doing something manageable, the way you would assemble a puzzle’s edge pieces.



Photo by Shane Fletcher

Author Tonnye Fletcher works on a family tree and ephemera for her Smith ancestors: photos, deeds, war records, an old driver’s license, hunting and fishing licenses, a Social Security card and more.



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Photo by Rachel Spruill

Rachel Winstead Spruill holds a book of letters her mother (Val Thompson Winstead) wrote to her parents and others during her university years in New York and Wake Forest. The book was a gift to Spruill from her daughter Katherine, who transcribed the letters, adding photos, playlists of songs mentioned in the letters and more.

Rachel Winstead Spruill, genealogy hobbyist and longtime Whiteville resident, suggests that you look at home for items that may help you get started:

- birth certificates
- marriage licenses
- family Bibles
- military papers
- newspaper clippings
- baby books
- old letters
- scrapbooks
- photos
- diaries
- wills
- deeds
- life insurance papers
- family history books

Write down names, dates and any other details you know or can find, and save original materials or digital images of them for use in the future. Spruill offers this reminder: While names and dates are the basis of genealogy, much important research would not be possible without original records someone made and kept.

That's why preservation is the key to genealogy, she says. If you have old ephemera — that is, letters, photos, documents, etc. — they need to be preserved, even some you may not think important. A receipt from the 1800s can give a wealth of information from that time period. It may seem like junk, but to someone trying to understand their family history or the history of a community, ephemera can be invaluable. Spruill recommends storing ephemera in a fireproof lockbox.

"I always encourage people to scan and save memorabilia," she said. "If they can't or won't, I encourage them to donate to a history center in their area."

As you gather the facts about who is in your family now and who came before them, organizing those facts is important. There are many family tree formats online and free printables available at the websites listed at the end of this article so that you can add in the names and dates you discover.

Tip 2: Interview your storytellers

Once you've explored what you have available and filled in some of the basics on your family tree, prompt your family members — especially the older ones — to tell you their stories. Joanna Phillips, secretary for the Southeastern N.C. Genealogical Society adds, "There's nothing like a personal story. They are different when told from a person's voice. That puts flesh on the skeleton."

You may even want to record your relatives telling their stories in their own words. If you're not sure what to ask, Joanna suggests googling "questions to ask seniors" or "questions for aging parents/grandparents, etc."

Carve out some time and ask the important questions. Record the talk as audio or video to transcribe later and to save in its rawest form.

Tip 3: Visit the library in person

Finding information about past generations and how your living relatives descended from them will be like bringing together scattered pieces into a coherent picture. Sometimes the missing piece you need is available from your public library.

According to Williamson, "A library with a local history collection is, in my opinion, the best service offered for people to collect information. We here at Columbus County Library have access to Ancestry, HeritageQuest and NCLive (which has the digital collections of newspapers, DigitalNC, etc.) for our area."



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bemc.org/community-grants.

Tip 4: Use internet resources

There are many free sites and helpful groups to help you complete the puzzle; some are listed below.

Williamson recommended “a free version of Family Search that people should be able to access at home, as well as Access Genealogy, which could be helpful if a library is not available.”

Williamson and her colleagues are happy to help you access documents and other resources. Even with so many wonderful, easy-to-use resources, however, you may still face challenges when researching your heritage.

You may find that natural disasters have destroyed records you need, or the people you’re researching moved often, making them difficult to track. Sometimes the answers aren’t what you expected.

According to Williamson, you’ll “have to be patient to find all the puzzle pieces.”

“We here at Columbus County Library have access to Ancestry, HeritageQuest and NCLive (which has the digital collections of newspapers, DigitalNC, etc.) for our area.”

- Shandi Williamson

Tip 5: Share the love of genealogy with the next generation

After having done that hard work, you’ll want to share what you’ve learned to keep the family stories going. Phillips discovered that passion early on. When she was in school, her teacher assigned her the project of interviewing an elderly person to find out about their Thanksgiving traditions — that assignment planted the love of genealogy in Phillips’ life.

Later, when Phillips was bedridden during a season of illness, she decided to try ancestry.com’s 14-day trial, and she was hooked; there was no turning back.

Nowadays, in her role with the genealogical society, Phillips is passionate about sharing the value of genealogy with the next generation. She encourages parents to include their children in the process so they’ll grow up familiar with their family’s stories and be ready to take on the preservation job. The kids’ resources listed below will help pique their interest.

Like jigsaw puzzles, the stories are addictive, and once you start, like Phillips, you may be hooked. As she said, “The stories put things in context for characters and build empathy for our ancestors. It helps us develop compassion.”

“What makes genealogy the most fun for me is fleshing out the names on my tree,” Spruill said. “Digging through old newspapers to find out my great-grandmother made and sold hair jewelry tells me that she was not only creative but an entrepreneur as well. These little tidbits can help you get to know your ancestors. Also, when delving into the census records, it is possi-

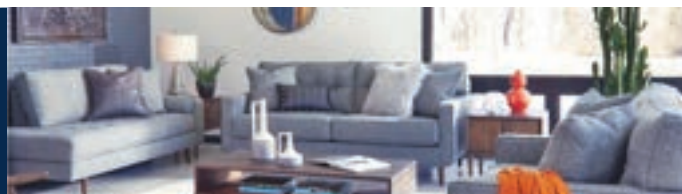
ble to build whole neighborhoods. It can be fascinating to watch old communities come back to life before your eyes.”

As you retrace the path to Grandmother’s house (or wherever you gather) next year, you may have many pieces of the puzzle in place, ready to share with that cousin or grandchild who will become the storyteller for the next generation.



Photo by Tonnye Fletcher

Joanna Phillips, secretary of the Southeastern N.C. Genealogical Society, is seen in the N.C. Records Room at the Carolyn T. High Memorial Library.



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LOCAL GENEALOGY RESOURCES

Carolyn T. High Memorial Library's North Carolina Records Room
The Southeastern N.C. Genealogical Society for bi-monthly meetings and a Facebook page
The Columbus County Register of Deeds Office for records of births, marriages, deaths and land transactions
Local churches for records of baptisms, marriages and deaths
Cemeteries for birth and death dates, identification of family relationships
Local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter for historical military service records, widows' pensions (https://www.ncdar.org/MajorGeneralRobertHowe_files/index.html)
Local veterans' services for more recent military records <https://columbusco.org/veteran-services>

ONLINE RESOURCES

Archives of *The News Reporter*, available at library.UNCW.edu (free)
NC Live - Heritage Quest, historic newspapers (free)
Google.com (free)
Ancestry.com
FamilySearch.com (free)
MyHeritage.com
Columbus County Public Library's genealogy room (free) ccplnc.weebly.com/local-history-genealogy.html
Facebook has four local genealogy pages:
Southeastern North Carolina Genealogical Society (SENCGS)
Southeastern N.C. Genealogy, covering Columbus County, Brunswick County and others
FindAGrave.com (free)

Legacy.com (free)
NC State Digital Archives (free) - digitalnc.org/
Fold3.com - military records
GenealogyBank.com
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Local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter ncdar.org/Major-GeneralRobertHowe_files/digitalcollections.uncw.edu/digital/collection/news_reporter
Register of Deeds (births, marriages, deaths, land records) columbusdeeds.com/
familysearch.org/en/blog/family-tree-templates-family-tree-make



Photo by Randy Spruill

Rachel W. Spruill is seen surrounded by genealogy resources and ephemera in her home in Kitty Hawk.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

Joanna Phillips recommends these books and online resources to help teach kids the power of genealogy and family stories.
"The Family Tree Detective: Cracking the Case of Your Family's Story" by Ann Douglas (Firefly Books)
"Me and My Family Tree" by Joan Sweeney and Emma Trithart
"Me and the Family Tree: Celebrate Family Love and Connection!" by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Ashleigh Corrin

WEBSITES FOR CHILDREN:

archives.gov/education/family-history
familytreemagazine.com/kids-genealogy/
familysearch.org/en/wiki/Family_History_Activities_for_Children:_3-11

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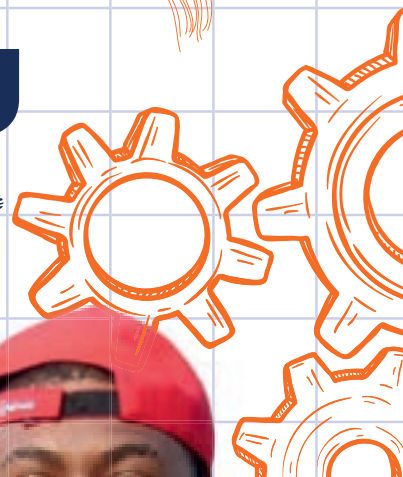
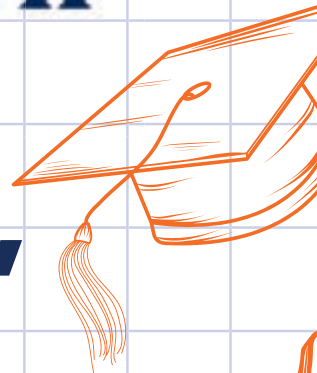
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For almost three decades, Dr. Randy Kirby balanced service in the Army National Guard and Reserves with his medical career and family in Whiteville. This photo was taken during one of his humanitarian aid assignments in Central America.

WHITEVILLE OPTOMETRIST IS COMBAT-SEASONED SOLDIER

STORY MAZIE S. SMITH

PHOTOS DR. RANDY KIRBY

“The explosion was something I was never going to be prepared for,” said Dr. Thomas “Randy” Kirby, a Whiteville optometrist and retired colonel in the Army National Guard. “In fact, it’s hard to describe the shock waves coming off a blast caused by 600 pounds of high explosive. Regardless, the morning of August 15, 2009, that’s exactly what I experienced in Kabul, Afghanistan.”

The following is Kirby’s recollection of a car bomb attack he survived on a deployment as part of the Global War on Terror.

“The morning started off normally. I was living at the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters and running late to join a colleague for our weekly meeting. I was focused only on getting to the meeting when a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) detonated about 80 meters away, near the front gate of the compound. The blast killed at least seven people instantly and injured nearly 100.

“I was fortunate in that I was only knocked down to one knee by the shock wave. Jumping to my feet, I ran towards the explosion site at the main gate, where I found multiple things on fire

and numerous people down, mostly civilians. As one of the few people present with the ability to take control of the situation, I decided that the first task was to secure the now undefended gate itself. Grabbing two US troops, I placed them at the far edge of what would be our new perimeter.”

That would not be the last life-or-death decision Kirby made that day. Years of experience had honed his ability to gauge danger levels and act decisively under pressure.

Aspirations

As a young child, Kirby used to love to play in his father’s old Army uniforms. In his imagination, he pictured himself as a soldier, and he was eager to join the Army himself when he was old enough.

However, he didn’t join as soon as he finished high school. Kirby chose to make a career in optometry, the same profession his father practiced.

Kirby had been born in Greenville, North Carolina, but he was reared in Wilmington. He earned a degree in biology and psychology at UNC Chapel Hill, graduating in 1989. During a



Drs. Randy and Cindy Kirby were guests of President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden for a Fourth of July celebration in 2021. During the event, Cindy Kirby shook hands and spoke with the president.



Kirby tends to a soldier wounded in a car bomb attack at the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan. The fatal attack is usually “not something I allow myself to think about,” Kirby wrote as he described that day in 2009.

skip year, he worked at his father’s office and attended basic training and infantry school, entering the North Carolina National Guard. He completed the Reserve Officer Training Course while in optometry school at the University of Houston, graduating in 1994.

Kirby moved back to North Carolina to enter private practice in Whiteville, and within a couple of years he met the love of his life, Cindy Mosley. She moved to Whiteville after completing her residency in internal medicine at New Hanover Regional Medical Center. With offices across the street from each other, it was not too long before the relationship progressed, and the two were married. They have three daughters: Elizabeth, who practices massage therapy in Blowing Rock; Kathryn, who attends N.C. State University; and Caroline, who is a member of the senior class at Whiteville High School.

During his years in the Army National Guard, Randy Kirby used his medical training in countries around the world. He was the lead optometry officer for missions to Panama, Guatemala, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Japan.

High stakes

Sept. 11, 2001, and the Global War on Terror changed the course of Kirby’s career as he transferred into special operations soon afterward. He believed special operations would play a large role in the years to come. He transferred to the Army Reserves and progressed through higher level units over the next 15 years. Starting at the 19th Special Forces Group, he moved to Special Operations Command Europe. His next role was to Joint Special Operations Command, and finally the United States Special Operations Command, where he served some time as a captain and the rest of the time as major and lieutenant colonel.

Kirby deployed twice to Afghanistan, the first time serving at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Headquarters in Kabul, and the second tour at Bagram Air Field. Both assignments exposed him to continual threats from suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices and 105 mm rockets.



This photo was taken after a training mission with the Afghan Army. Kirby is to the right of the flag, wearing a blue shirt.

A new script

The day in 2009 when the bomber took seven lives at the ISAF headquarters in Kabul, Kirby realized that the enemy had changed methods of attack. After securing the new perimeter to protect the soldiers on the base from further harm, Kirby began looking for a second bomber.

As he tells it, “You see, there was a new vehicle-borne IED tactic being used in the area. The script for this was to detonate a bomb, wait for the first responders to gather and then, in the midst of the confusion, bring in and detonate a second device that targeted them. This was our biggest risk at this point.

“After reminding the two troops [at the perimeter] of this fact, I ran back to the main gate to further assess the situation.

“A colleague of mine showed up when I got back and asked how things were. I told him what had been done, and then he smiled and matter-of-factly pointed to my left before asking, ‘Whose leg is that?’

“The shock of an event like this will do interesting things to your



Kirby, left, said this photo was taken “on the night of my last midnight run. [The other officer] and I ran a lot of missions together and we remain friends today.” At Kirby’s request, his friend’s identity is disguised for protection since he is still active.

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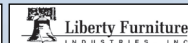
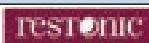


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Delivering humanitarian aid to civilians was an important part of Kirby's mission in Afghanistan.

thought process. That's likely why I was surprised and a little confused for a moment as I followed his finger to my left hand and found myself holding a human leg, still clad in an Afghan sandal.

"It took a second to remember picking the leg up and why I'd done so. I remembered seeing it and thinking, 'He might want this.' A moment after that, I realized that there was no way the leg's owner had survived the blast, but I still thought his family might want it. Based on that, I had picked the leg up and taken it with me.

"Looking at it in my hand, however, and with my colleague assuring me that he would handle it, I was willing to put the leg down. Once that was done, I went to secure the other end of the road."

Increased responsibility and rank

Between deployments, Kirby was practicing optometry in Whiteville. He said his most interesting deployment was as the chief of staff for a Combined Joint Interagency Task Force in the Middle East. In this position, he was second in command of a unit with worldwide responsibility and global reach, consisting of a Joint U.S. force, combined with personnel from 24 allied nations.

Kirby had served there once before as the information operations chief and was responsible for the coordination and synchronization of the efforts of all parallel intelligence units across the globe. Documentation accompanying Kirby's nomination for an award stated that, "His leadership directly added to the information dominance enjoyed today by the U.S. military."

Kirby was also deployed to the Republic of Djibouti as a subject matter expert for two classified programs. The country is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered by Somalia to the south, Ethiopia to the southwest, Eritrea in the north, and the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to the east. Kirby called it a very difficult place to live and work.

After Kirby was promoted to colonel, one of his assignments brought him to Washington, D.C. with the federal COVID-19 response known as Operation WARP Speed, later the Countermeasures Acceleration Group. He served as the executive officer to the White House chief of science and was based at the Health and Human Services Building. This effort was responsible for coordinating the development and distribution of vaccines and antivirals for the global fight against COVID-19.

One Fourth of July during that assignment, Kirby was able to surprise his wife with an extra-special night on the town. Kirby

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says, “I made up a great story about her need to come to Washington, D.C. for the Fourth, and even provided documentation that we were going to Arlington National Cemetery.” It turned out that President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden had invited others, including the Kirbys, to join them for the Fourth of July celebration at the White House. “It was a very informal affair where we hung out and ate hotdogs, drank beer, listened to the July Fourth concert on the White House South Lawn and watched fireworks,” Kirby said. He added that Cindy Kirby even chatted with the president for a while.

‘Remain calm’

Kirby says he learned an especially useful life lesson from General Gus Perna. “There was an incredible amount of stress and pressure and constant issues to work through,” Kirby said. “When things got difficult, Gen. Perna would always frame out the way forward in the same manner. First he would say, ‘We’re going to remain calm, and we’re going to make sure that everything we do is legal, moral and ethical.’”

Kirby stated that he found the general’s guidance to be a solid way forward for any difficult situation.

That day in 2009 when the car bomber brought terror and bloodshed in Kabul, Kirby remained focused and firmly resolved. When tested, he calmly took action to protect the lives of the rest of the soldiers on the base.

After handing over the dead man’s leg, the doctor went to the other end of the road where a number of Afghan soldiers allied with the American forces had been keeping watch. At an L-shaped intersection, Kirby said, “I was shocked to find a lone Afghan soldier standing there. All of his colleagues had run away at the sound of the explosion, but this one man had been brave and determined enough to stand his ground. He alone remained to secure that area, and I was impressed.

“We exchanged thumbs-up gestures and pleasantries in a combination of broken English and more broken Pashtu, and I was turning to leave when I saw what we all dreaded.

It was a white panel van, which turned onto the road about 50 meters away and stopped.

“Inside I could see the lone driver looking at us.

“You see, the iconic vehicle used for VBIEDs is a panel van, old and beaten, but with new tires and a single, military age male driving. To this day panel vans still catch my attention. This one only paused for a moment before it began to roll towards us. The driver had a very serious expression and all I can remember thinking is, ‘Where the hell does he think he’s going?’

“I was preparing to act when I was shocked by the sight of the Afghan soldier waving the driver towards us. Knowing that he might be unaware of the risk I had just explained to the US troops, we began an escalating argument back and forth.

—Me: Stop that!

—Him, while waving the van towards us: No no no. Okay.

—Me, grabbing him by his body armor and starting to shake



Kirby said he couldn’t remember where this photo was taken of him interacting with two children. “No matter where you go, the kids are always curious and fun.”

him: Stop it! Be quiet! Shut up!

—Him, still waving the van forward: No no no.

“Crazy with adrenaline, I’m shaking this guy so hard that he looks like a rag doll. The driver is staring, emotionless and still rolling towards us. At this point it occurs to me that in order to protect the compound, I may have to stop the driver in the only way possible, by killing him.

“I pushed the Afghan soldier away and tried one last time to stop the driver by using the international hand signal to stop, a closed fist.

“He still continues forward. Suddenly for me, everything is calm and begins to move in slow motion. I raise my M4 and align the crosshairs with the bridge of the driver’s nose. It felt just like at the range: sight picture, index finger firm but light on the trigger, breathe in, rotate safety to single shot, weapon hot and free. I took a deep breath as if taking a long, difficult shot, but really it would be hard to miss from that distance. I knew the windshield would probably deflect the first shot, so I would need to get another off within half a second. I began to breathe out and at the bottom of my breath cycle I was going to fire, already gently pulling back on the trigger.

“This he noticed. I saw the blood drain from his face and the vehicle stopped. He put his hands up in front of himself to show me, then put the vehicle into reverse and left. When I stopped and looked around, I was utterly alone. That had apparently been the Afghan soldier’s breaking point. He had fled.

“To this day I don’t know if the man in the van was the most intense delivery driver on earth or if he was a second bomber who was unable to get to his target area. All I knew then was that it was time to get to the aid station and help treat the wounded.”

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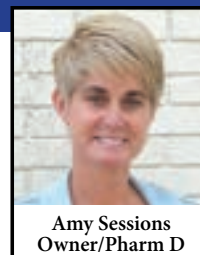
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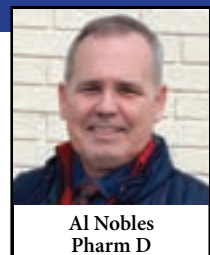
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'Privilege and honor'

Kirby finished his career with the Eighth Army in Korea as the ranking civil military operations officer on the Korean Peninsula until his retirement on June 1, 2022. At the time of his retirement, he was awarded the Legion of Merit, which is given for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services and achievements.

Kirby is also the recipient of over 40 other medals, ribbons and badges, including the Bronze Star, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Army Meritorious Service Medal, Humanitarian Medal, Parachutist Wings and Combat Action Badge.

As he reflects on his career, Kirby says, "I'm no hero, but it was always my privilege and honor to be among them."

Spending so much time away from home has not always been easy, but Kirby credits his wife and practice partners at Vision-World for making his service possible. "Cindy has held down the fort with the girls," he said. "Dr. Michael Geiger is a retired Army colonel, and Dr. Tiffany Jackson always managed the practice when I had to be away."

Meeting needs in Columbus County

Kirby has spent a great deal of his career as a soldier around the world, but he has also given back to the place he calls home. "I have served on the Columbus County Board of Health for many years, serving some time as vice chairman or chairman," he said. "I still enjoy working with this great board and the dedicated public health workers here in Columbus County."

He is also a longtime member and advocate for Lions Club International, a service organization that has been a special focus on helping the blind and others with sight problems. He

has served in various roles with the organization, including District Governor.

Kirby has also not forgotten the people of other countries. He has made several medical mission trips to Mexico, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Panama, Senegal and Guatemala. "The need is so great in other places, and the resources are often so few," he added. He also observes that, "Eye care makes a huge difference in people's ability to enjoy life, often at a small cost compared to other kinds of health care."

Kirby is also an author. In 2021, he wrote a children's book on human creation titled "Multipurpose Explorer: The story of how you became ME" with local artist Jeff Rudnik providing beautiful artwork.

In his free time, Kirby still loves sailing and being near the ocean. He spends as much time as he can on his sailboat at Wrightsville Beach, even living there on occasion. While he has no plans to retire from his medical practice anytime soon, he hopes his retirement from military service will afford him the time to go on a sailing trip around the world. He is also an avid reader, favoring historical books about sailing and the British navy.

Upon reflection, Kirby says his time as a soldier and world traveler has made him thankful to have been born in the United States. "We have so many opportunities here; without opportunity, no matter how smart you are or how motivated, it is difficult to be successful." He is also thankful to call Whiteville home. "The people here are so nice; it is pretty laid back, and it is a peaceful place to live. I value peace very highly."



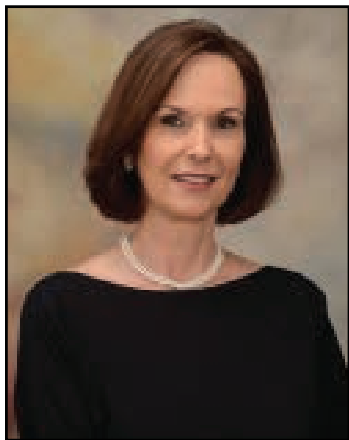
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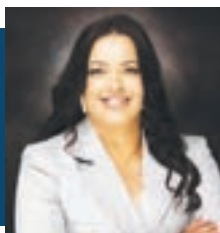
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Hubert Graham stands among some of his favorite animal figures.

FROM FLAMINGOS TO FLYING HORSES, 'WITH FIBERGLASS YOU CAN MAKE ANYTHING' *The man who built Grahamland (and is still building it)*

STORY DIANA MATTHEWS

PHOTOS DIANA MATTHEWS & JUSTIN SMITH

Grahamland is one of Columbus County's more eye-catching landmarks, yet most drivers fly past it with only a glance as they travel U.S. 74-76 between Bolton and Delco.

Owner and fiberglass artist Hubert Graham is planning to change that by offering ice cream, mini golf and more reasons for people to stop a while.

Currently, he said, even without any marketing, visitors spontaneously pull off the highway an average of 10–15 times per week. He's happy to let them roam around and admire his approximately 100 fiberglass animals, humans and mythical characters.

"Everything you see, I made," he tells them.

Many of the drop-ins tell Graham, "This is a fun place," and he wants to make it more so. He finds it rewarding to "make somebody happy besides yourself."

Back from disaster

The fiberglass sculpture business, long known as Graham Fiberglass, was closed for two years after Hurricane Florence in September 2018. Flooding sent Livingston Creek flowing over the backs of Graham's flamingos and to the hips of the bikini-clad woman near the highway. It shredded a long dress — 160

yards of cloth — off the Uniroyal girl near the rear of the property.

Vehicles, machinery, the house he'd built in 1989 were "gone in 30 seconds," Graham said, and a lot of his fiberglass pieces floated away. Afterward hunters told Graham, "There's a dolphin in the woods... there's an elephant's head here... there's a lion over there."

"It was a horrific scene," he said.

Graham reopened the business as Grahamland Attractions in 2020 and has been working to make it an entertainment destination and a source of retirement income.

Graham molds glass fibers with a mixture of resins to create what he calls "figurines" ranging from knee-high Smurfs to a 27-foot-long shark, all sturdy enough to withstand the elements for years. He took time to explain to *954 Magazine* how he found his creative outlet and what he envisions for Grahamland's future. Responses have been edited.

How did you learn to make fiberglass figurines?

I was making metal lighthouses to sell, but they would get dented by hailstorms. So I got Bill Sharp in Goldsboro to make them out of fiberglass.

Bill wasn't really into this, so in 1993 he told me, "Come up and stay with me for a week," and he taught me how to make them. Bill went out of business and sold me his lighthouse molds and flamingo molds.

After 20 years working for Carolina Power and Light company, I went to work for Southport Boat Works. That's when I really learned a lot more about monomers, hardeners and how to make molds.

In 2005 the boat company went out of business and gave me 200,000 gallons of resin and 400,000 pounds of glass for cleaning out their building.

I still have some of that fiberglass. All I have to buy now is the resin.

People think I have a lot of money in materials, but I don't.

All of this stuff was actually made from someone else's trash.

After the boat company closed, I worked for Corning until I retired in 2021 to make art.

What's the manufacturing process like?

You layer resin and glass fibers in a mold to make a hollow form. If it's a larger figurine, you make it in pieces. Then you cut it, strap it together, glass the pieces together on the inside, Bondo it at the seams, sand it two times, prime it, paint it with tractor paint and spray automotive clear coat on it.

From when I lay it in the mold until it's done is about seven–10 days.

Little figurines are harder to put together than big ones because you have to reach inside to glass the pieces together. Smurfs are hard to do.

Normally I'm working on five to seven things at one time. When one mold is drying or hardening, I work on another.

What are your favorite figurines you've made?

The bulldogs, Paul Bunyan, the flamingos and the shark.

What's the largest figure you've made?

Paul Bunyan, my two big women and my lighthouses have all been between 22 and 30 feet tall.

A shark I sold to DDT furniture outlet is 27 feet long and 8 feet wide, and with its inside steel supports, it weighed about 1,200 pounds. It's on Highway 17 on the way to Hampstead.

What's the largest thing you can make?

It's unlimited. With fiberglass you can make anything.

What's your most memorable job?

The "mulch monster" outside Jackson's Landscaping on Market Street in Wilmington.

What's the farthest you've shipped a figurine?

Texas, but I can't remember which town. It was probably 15 years ago.

Not many people do this work, do they?

This is a dying art for several reasons.



Customers can rent Graham's fiberglass creations.



All of Graham's figurines are hollow, even the flamingos' narrow necks. Because of the interior work needed to join sections, "Smurfs are hard to do," he said.

First, the materials are carcinogenic. It's also hot, dirty, dusty, itchy work. I have to throw away a lot of my clothes. Fiberglass gets into your shirt, especially if you're grinding or sanding. It blows into your hair, your eyes, your eyebrows. It gets all over your whole body, especially anywhere you get the sticky resin on you.

Another reason is that molds are expensive. A rearing stallion mold today probably costs \$25,000.

What does it cost to buy a UNC Ram figurine?

\$1,800. But I don't get a lot of sales. I prefer to rent things.

What does it cost to rent a dinosaur?

\$250 per day plus a delivery charge.

What else have you got planned at Grahamland Attractions?

If a business isn't making money five different ways, most of the time it's going to suffer. I'm getting ready to recycle unwanted boats. I'll sell the metal and glass components and mill up the

fiberglass to make other products.

I'm opening an ice cream stand with soft-serve and hand-scooped ice cream as soon as I can get the machinery installed and a handicapped accessible public bathroom.

I'm building a handicapped accessible mini golf course. It'll be Bluetooth equipped so when you putt into the mouth of an animal, it makes the sound of that animal.

I want to put in slides, swings, UTVs and ATVs with a track for little kids to drive on.

I'll have a stage for Country and Western performances. I'm also planning an escape room, a gift shop and a bar to sell tea and other drinks, but not alcohol.

I'm working on animals you can ride, based on hoverboards. I've already got flamingo cars to drive around the park.

I've got a spaceship that's totally solar with aliens inside and outside. There's a steel cable supporting it in the air. But that's just a prototype. I'm going to set up two spaceships that follow the wire, meet in the middle and back up.

You've got to have things that move. Otherwise it doesn't have any excitement to it.

I get a whole lot of people stopping now. It'll increase when I put the signs up.

Where do you get your ideas? Are you a kid at heart?

I've always loved to read. As a boy, I read Richie Rich comic books. Richie had robots,



Graham said fiberglass strands are a major hazard of his work because they get "into your hair, eyes, eyebrows" and "all over your whole body."



Graham's assistant, Isabela Carachure, sands the neck of a flamingo in a workshop on the Grahamland property.



Richard Farris of Marshville holds hands with the beach ball woman.

flying cars. All the things I read about as a kid, now you can make it happen, especially when you're creating it yourself.

And then, when you're seeing how happy it makes people, you want to keep doing it.

As Graham spoke, a couple from Marshville arrived, and the husband asked, "Do you mind if we look around?"

The wife explained that they pass by Grahamland while traveling to Topsail Island every year. This time she told her husband, "That's so cool; why don't we turn around and go back and look at it?"

Graham welcomed them to take their time enjoying what he's created so far but predicted that, "It's nothing like it's going to be."

Grahamland is at 24605 Andrew Jackson Hwy. E., Bolton.

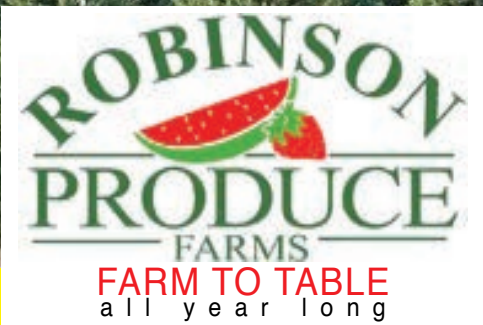
See more photos on Facebook at Grahamland.

The phone number is 910-427-3324.



Graham shows the legs of his Paul Bunyan figure to Farris, who stopped at Grahamland on the way to Topsail Island. Graham planned to join the figure's upper and lower halves together and install it in mid-October. The 27 foot-tall man would hold "an axe in one hand and an ice cream cone in the other," he said.

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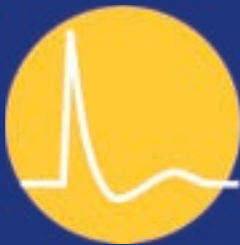


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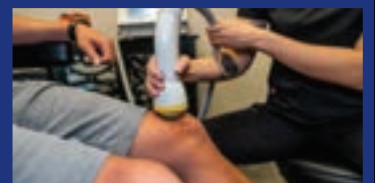
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ADJUST YOUR THERMOSTAT

Don't forget to adjust your settings to reflect
the cooler temperatures. Some have smart
features that learn your habits and adjust the
temperature accordingly.



CHANGE YOUR FILTER

You should change your filter every month or at
the very least, once every three months. It takes
more energy, and therefore more money, to run
a unit with a clogged filter.



REMOVE OBSTRUCTIONS

Remove any plant growth or debris deposits
that may have occurred during the summer
with a brush or vacuum. Make sure there is a
one-foot clearance at the front of the unit.



USE CEILING FANS

It's a great time of year to swap the air
conditioning for ceiling fans! This will save
money and energy and that means more
money in your pocket.



SCHEDULE MAINTENANCE

Cut down on future repair costs by scheduling
maintenance. A properly cared for machine
can run 10% more efficiently and extends its
life.



954 Events

SHOP OUR STORES DOWNTOWN WHITEVILLE

SATURDAY, NOV. 25, 10 A.M. UNTIL 2 P.M.

Shop local while enjoying live music, and enter to win one of four \$250 gift cards or a \$500 shopping spree. Have pictures made with Disney characters and local mascots. Start by picking up a free tote and a shopping "passport" at the Columbus County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism or at the Columbus County Arts Council.

WACCAMAW SIOUAN HERITAGE CELEBRATION N.C. MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCES IN WHITEVILLE

SATURDAY, NOV. 25, 10 A.M. UNTIL 2 P.M.

The celebration includes demonstrations of traditional indigenous dancing, drumming and singing. Learn about the cultural significance of the dances and regalia and about the Waccamaw Siouan culture from demonstrations on pottery, native tools, quilting, chemistry magic, and traditional education. Vendors will have indigenous crafts for sale.

LAKE WACCAMAW HOLIDAY EVENTS

TREE LIGHTING & CANDLE WALK FRIDAY, DEC. 1, AT 5:30 P.M.

The annual Lake Waccamaw tree lighting and candle walk is Friday, Dec. 1, at 5:30 p.m. The walk begins on Flemington Dr. at Town Hall and ends at the community Christmas tree just north of the Lake Waccamaw Depot Museum. Hot chocolate and cookies will be served at the museum.

CHRISTMAS PARADE SATURDAY, DEC. 2, AT 10 A.M.

The parade route follows Columbia Avenue, Lakeshore Drive and Flemington Avenue. Participants will line up at Elizabeth Brinkley Park at 9 a.m.



CHADBOURN CHRISTMAS EVENTS

TREE LIGHTING FRIDAY, DEC. 1, AT 6 P.M.

The Town of Chadbourne will host a Christmas tree lighting on Friday, Dec. 1, at 6 p.m. at the Chadbourne Historic Depot. A group "sing" and light refreshments will follow. A visit from Santa and breakfast will be held at the depot on Saturday, Dec. 2. Santa arrives at 9 a.m. followed by a breakfast that is free for children 0-12 and \$5 for children over 12 and adults. The Christmas parade is at 3 p.m. with a new route this year. It will start at the railroad, pass through downtown on N. Brown St. and end at 6th St. Contact Chadbourne Town Hall to register to be in the parade.



WHITEVILLE CHRISTMAS PARADE & EXTRAVAGANZA DOWNTOWN WHITEVILLE

SATURDAY, DEC. 2, AT 6 P.M.

The City of Whiteville will host the parade and extravaganza, followed by a Christmas tree lighting at 7:30 p.m. and carriage rides from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. Everyone is encouraged to decorate their cars, trailers, floats, etc. with lights and music to make this parade one to remember. The parade route begins at Webster Street and ends at the intersection of Madison, Lee and Franklin streets.



SOUTHEASTERN ORATORIO SOCIETY CONCERT VIVALDI'S "GLORIA," DURANTE'S "MAGNIFICAT" AND MORE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WHITEVILLE

MONDAY, DEC. 4, AT 7:30 P.M.

Southeastern Oratorio Society celebrates the holidays with a performance of Vivaldi's "Gloria," Durante's "Magnificat," favorite classical Christmas selections and an audience carol sing-along. The church is located at 511 N. Thompson St. Admission is free, and donations are gratefully accepted.

TABOR CITY HOLIDAY FESTIVITIES PARADE, TREE LIGHTING & SANTA VISIT THURSDAY, DEC. 7, 6 P.M. TO 7:30 P.M.

Festive holiday decorations and parade floats will light up downtown Tabor City during the annual Christmas Parade Through The Lights on Thursday, Dec. 7, at 6 p.m. After the parade, the Tabor City Chamber of Commerce invites everyone to a tree lighting event and visit with Santa around 7 p.m. behind the Town Gate. This is a free event. To enter the parade, call 910-653-4141 or 910-653-3149.

TABOR CITY CHRISTMAS COOKIE CRAWL FRIDAY, DEC. 8

TABOR CITY CHRISTMAS SOIREE SATURDAY, DEC. 9

Visit townoftaborcity.org closer to events for more details.

**FAIR BLUFF CHRISTMAS PARADE
DOWNTOWN FAIR BLUFF**

SATURDAY, DEC. 9 AT 6 P.M.

The always festive and fun annual Fair Bluff Christmas parade is Saturday, Dec. 9, at 6 p.m. in downtown Fair Bluff. For parade information, call 910-649-7099 or 910-649-7202.

**SECOND SATURDAY STORY TIME
N.C. MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCES**

SATURDAY, DEC. 9, 10 A.M. TO 11:00 A.M.

The museum hosts a special story time and hands-on exploratory activity the second Saturday of each month. Stop by for an engaging time of storytelling, sharing and creating. Storytime is recommended for children in preschool to kindergarten, but all ages are welcome. No reservation is required for this free program except for groups larger than 10. For more information, e-mail whiteville@naturalsciences.org.

**CHRISTMAS FROM THE HEART
COLUMBUS COUNTY COMMUNITY FARMERS MARKET**

SATURDAY, DEC. 9, 8 A.M. TO 1 P.M.

Stop by the last day of the 2023 farmers market season for the 15th Christmas From The Heart craft show and sale featuring local bakers, crafters, jelly makers and more. There will be free entertainment and door prizes. The farmers market is located at 132 Government Complex Rd. in Whiteville.

**CHRISTMAS WITH THE EMBERS
PRESENTED BY SCC FOUNDATION
SOUTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AUDITORIUM**

TUESDAY, DEC. 12, AT 7 P.M.

The SCC Richard F. Burkhard Performing Arts series invites the community to celebrate the season with The Embers, featuring Craig Woolard. The concert is Tuesday, Dec. 12, at 7 p.m. in the SCC auditorium. The Embers will perform songs of the Christmas season, beach music style. For ticket information visit scnc.edu/give.



**COLUMBUS COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
AND TOURISM ANNUAL MEET & MINGLE**

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 2024, 5:30 P.M. TO 7 P.M.

The chamber's annual social will be held at Union Valley Farm & Vineyard, located at 2641 Union Valley Rd., Whiteville. Cost is \$40 for members and \$45 for non-members. For reservations, call the chamber at 910-642-3171.



**COLUMBUS COUNTY YOUTH AND FAMILIES
ASSOCIATION TASTE OF COLUMBUS**

SATURDAY, FEB. 24, 2024, 5 P.M. TO 8 P.M.

Enjoy culinary delights from celebrity chefs and chefs-in-training at Western Prong Baptist Church. The evening includes food, music, photos, a silent auction and more. Proceeds fund SCC scholarships. Tickets are \$25 for adults, \$10 for ages 3 to 18, and free for children 2 and under. RSVP to Meleah Evers at 910-840-9295, Rhonda Dutton at 910-640-8080 or Selena Rowell at 910-445-6031.



**SOUTHERN FARM DAYS
BOYS AND GIRLS HOMES OF N.C. EXHIBITION
CENTER AND FARM, LAKE WACCAMAW**

FRIDAY, MARCH 15-17, 2024

The show will bring three days of family events, exhibitions, farming-based competitions, a swap sale and a big selection of craft and food vendors. Proceeds from the show benefit the Boys & Girls Homes of N.C. Visit the Southern Farm Days website at southernfarmdays.com closer to the event for up-to-date information and an event schedule.

**SOUTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE
PRESIDENT'S BALL
UNION VALLEY FARM & VINEYARD, WHITEVILLE**

SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 2024

The semi-formal affair, held at 2641 Union Valley Rd., will include dancing, live music by The Carolina Soul Band, delicious food and a silent auction fundraiser. For sponsorship and ticket information call 910-642-7141 or visit scnc.edu/give.

**SAVE THE DATE
N.C. ALLIGATOR FESTIVAL**

SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 2024

Planning is underway at Lake Waccamaw for the second festival celebrating the fascinating reptiles, with a potential kickoff featuring live music the evening of April 26. More details to follow.

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Omar Godwin, RPE Coordinator

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Southern Medical Associates	Loris	843-756-7885
McLeod Primary Care Seacoast	Little River	843-390-8320
McLeod Primary Care Little River	Little River	843-366-3030
McLeod Primary Care Sunset Beach	Sunset Beach	910-575-8488
McLeod Primary Care Partners North Myrtle Beach	North Myrtle Beach	843-366-2900
McLeod Family Medicine Carolina Forest 1	Myrtle Beach	843-646-8001
McLeod Family Medicine Carolina Forest 2	Myrtle Beach	843-646-8001
McLeod Dr. Lindaberry at Carolina Forest	Myrtle Beach	843-903-9993
McLeod Primary Care Myrtle Beach	Myrtle Beach	843-646-8350

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	Little River	843-390-0877
	Sunset Beach	843-390-0877
	Myrtle Beach	843-839-1201
McLeod Digestive Health Center Seacoast	Little River	843-366-3715
	Myrtle Beach	843-366-3715
McLeod Neurology Seacoast	Little River	843-646-8040
McLeod Nephrology Associates	Loris	843-716-7163
McLeod OB/GYN Seacoast	Loris	843-756-7090
	Little River	843-399-3100
	Myrtle Beach	843-399-3100
McLeod Oncology and Hematology Associates at Seacoast	Little River	843-366-3891
McLeod Orthopaedics Seacoast	Little River	843-390-0100
	Myrtle Beach	843-390-0100
McLeod Interventional Pain Management Seacoast	Little River	843-366-2953
	Myrtle Beach	843-366-2953
McLeod Pulmonary and Critical Care Seacoast	Little River	843-390-8302
	Myrtle Beach	843-390-8302
McLeod Rheumatology Seacoast	North Myrtle Beach	843-366-3060
	Myrtle Beach	843-366-3060
McLeod Seacoast ENT	Little River	843-366-3040
McLeod Vascular Care	Little River	843-366-3755
	Myrtle Beach	843-366-3755
Dialysis Access Center	Loris	843-716-7140
	Myrtle Beach	843-716-7140

General Surgery

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VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK OF AMERICA
Ribbon Cutting & Dedication Ceremony

May 26



COLUMBUS COUNTY JUNETEENTH CELEBRATIONS

June 19



34TH ANNUAL N.C. WATERMELON FESTIVAL

July 29



COLUMBUS COUNTY DREAM CENTER
Black, White and Vinyl

Aug. 17



MADISON STREET MUSIC FESTIVAL

Sept. 30



COLUMBUS COUNTY AGRICULTURE FAIR

Oct. 10-15



TROOPER KEVIN CONNER MEMORIAL RUN

Oct. 14



51ST ANNUAL WACCAMAW SIOUAN POW WOW

Oct. 21



Columbus County Fair Art & Photography

Sampling of Entries





FIRST PLACE
COLUMBUS COUNTY AGRI. FAIR
WHITEVILLE NORTH CAROLINA



FIRST PLACE
COLUMBUS COUNTY AGRI. FAIR
WHITEVILLE NORTH CAROLINA



FIRST PLACE
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SECOND PLACE
COLUMBUS COUNTY AGRI. FAIR
WHITEVILLE NORTH CAROLINA

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Left to right - Amber Robinson COTA/Rehab Director, Tara Birchall PTA, Caitlin Sykes COTA, Evelina Trost OTR, Allison Morin COTA, Navin Kingston DPT



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UNC Health Southeastern:

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In addition to offering services you'd expect from a community health care system, UNC Health Southeastern provides a number of specialized services that are unique to our health care 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 diagnostic and treatment services for cancer patients in the region.

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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Southeastern

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