

January/February 2022

GASTON L I F E S T Y L E S

**Cheryl Littlejohn:
A legacy to serve**



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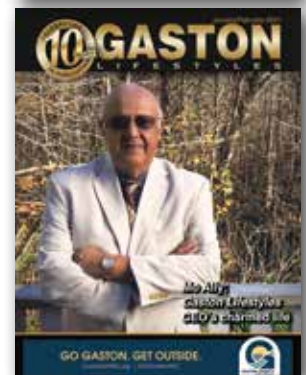
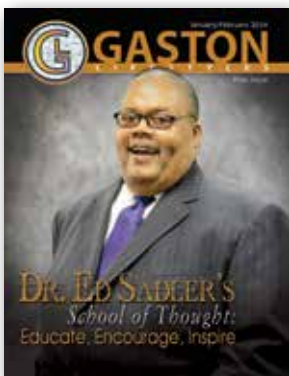
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PRESIDENT/CEO LETTER

Reflections on 2021 and '22

Ringing out the old; ringing in the new



Mo Ally

Happy new year to you all! As we look back on 2021 and ahead to 2022, it's time to say goodbye to two great and very notable men—one local and the other international.



Gastonia's own Bill Seabrook died last month at the age of 89. An inspiration to all who knew him, Bill loved his family, his Gaston County community and his *alma mater*, Clemson University. A member of the Order of the Longleaf Pine, he was known for his big smile; his work heading up Seabrook, Inc.; for being a Rotarian and a champion of the underserved; and contributing to the CDC's funding to reduce local teenage pregnancy. And yes, like most who knew him, I, too, have been "Seabrooked."



And also last month, in South Africa, noted theologian and Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu died at the age of 90. Tutu was world-famous for his courageous work as a human-rights activist and as a crusader against *apartheid*, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. My favorite quote from him is: "I can't control what happens to me, but I can control how I respond to it."

Elsewhere in our pages, you'll read about Frank Eshun and his remarkable journey from Ghana to living the American dream as a Gastonia-based builder. Plus, Gaston County Travel and Tourism's Melissa McCauley will tell you about Kings Mountain's new casino and its impact upon Cleveland and Gaston counties.

As always, thanks for reading *Gaston Lifestyles*. See you in the spring! **GL**



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Warlick Family YMCA, Robinwood Lake and the Y Chapel

Photograph by Butch Delatina

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Cheryl Littlejohn: an exemplary help to others

Plus: congrats to Donyel Barber, Jennifer Davis and Amber Wilson



Deborah Ally

Cheryl Littlejohn is a very special lady in our midst. Cheryl and I connected pre-COVID, which seems like ages ago, and we became fast friends. Her mission to help children and young people gives her the energy to do what she does for them, no matter what it takes, and financial hardships and tough times are no obstacles. We congratulate her on the upcoming "Restaurant: Impossible" appearance and the makeover of Smith's Soul Food Bistro, which is very elegant and welcoming.

Congratulations also go out to our friends, Donyel Barber and Jennifer Davis, the recipients of the 2021 Gaston Business Association awards. And you'll also read about Denise Price Thomas in this edition. With her sunshine spirit,

Kudos to Amber Wilson, the first *Gaston Lifestyles Magazine* Scholarship recipient.

Denise is such a joy and a pleasure to be around.

Elsewhere, Gaston Day School earned multiple athletic championships in 2021. The members of the school's sports department and its many outstanding athletes are definitely shining stars in Gaston County.

Finally, kudos to Amber Wilson, the first *Gaston Lifestyles Magazine* Scholarship recipient. We are so proud of you for taking steps to turn a new page in your life. Congratulations! **GL**

President/CEO & Advertising

Mo Ally
305-479-2878 (office) • 305 710-8640 (cell)
mally@gastonlifestyles.com

Publisher

Deborah Ally
dally@gastonlifestyles.com

Editor

Thomas Lark
tlark@gastonlifestyles.com

Art Director

Michele Warren

Digital Media Strategist

Kbiz LLC
admin@gastonlifestyles.com

Published By

Gaston Lifestyles Magazine
P.O. Box 550666 • Gastonia, NC 28055-0666

Contributing Writers

Thomas Lark • Kimberly Blaker
K. Renée • Melissa McCauley
Deborah Ally • Coach Casey Field
Gaston College Public Relations

Photographers

Howard Smith (cover) • Frank Eshun
Gaston County Travel and Tourism
Denise Price Thomas • Moe Hill • Casey Field
Gaston College photograph • Butch Delatina

Gaston Lifestyles major distribution outlets - Check locations for hours of operation

US Post Office

1882 S New Hope Road
Gastonia, NC 28054

US Post Office

301 W Main Ave
Gastonia, NC 28052

Covenant Village

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Gastonia, NC 28054

Millers Automotive Service

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Cheryl Littlejohn

Cheryl Littlejohn: A legacy to serve

A story of hospitality and food for the soul

By K. Renée, staff writer
Photographs by Howard Smith

A week in the life of Cheryl Littlejohn is extremely busy. After all, she sits at the helm of two Gastonia-based businesses: Smith's Soul Food Bistro and the Legacy Event Center. In 2018, the vision for the Legacy Event Center came to fruition as a way to honor the memory of Cheryl's late grandmother and mother. The concept for the restaurant came shortly thereafter. It was inspired by a "60 Minutes" episode that featured a nonprofit restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio.

Cheryl has always had a passion to empower, inspire and motivate young people. And pursuing the nonprofit restaurant idea provided her with the outlet to do so.

She refers to her style of encouraging and supporting youngsters as "developing champions for life!" With the restaurant's proceeds, Cheryl is looking forward to being able to provide financial support for young people that will assist them with their future goals and plans, such as attending

Cheryl is looking forward to being able to provide financial support for young people that will assist them with their future goals and plans, such as attending college or pursuing entrepreneurial ventures.

college or pursuing entrepreneurial ventures.

The restaurant is a place for youngsters to develop a work ethic and life skills, as well as to map out their career plans. When the restaurant opened, 10 amazing young people from the community stopped by, looking for an opportunity and they're still on the staff.



COVER STORY

Over the years, Cheryl has coached and been a mentor to many students. Here's a recent testimonial from Ashley Wilkes:

"My life is going to be different, because you gave me a second chance and didn't give up on me, Ms. Cheryl."

Cheryl's businesses are open six days a week, which means she is often putting in up to 16-hour days on a regular basis.

Where does she get the energy? As a woman of faith, she begins her day with a devotional. She loves the song "Same Grace" by Grammy Award-winning vocalist William Murphy. After her devotional, it's time to get dressed and head out to shop and pick up products for the businesses, which entails visits to local and regional suppliers.

Cheryl is eternally grateful for her sister, Deborah L. Currence, and her brother-in-law, James "JR" Currence, Jr., who always make themselves available to help out where needed and, as a close-knit family does, without being asked. Cheryl is also thankful for the partner companies that have worked with her to provide supplies. One is Choice USA, the Lowell-based distributor of "Sun Drop" and other beverages.

Creating memories

In March of last year, the Legacy Event Center hosted the "Women's Empowerment Luncheon." More than 40 businesswomen attended. The luncheon provided an opportunity for networking, and attendees received

advice and tips on how to sustain, promote and grow their businesses.

In May, Legacy hosted a prom for some 50 students from both Ashbrook and Hunter Huss high schools. Cheryl was committed to ensuring that the students didn't miss out on having a prom, and she wanted to provide them with a VIP experience. It was a spectacular day that began with a police-escorted procession from Eastridge Mall to Legacy. Once there, the red carpet was rolled out. The venue was decorated with the students' school colors, and they were treated to an exquisite meal. There was a lot of picture-taking and dancing. Legacy also provided a disc jockey to play their favorite songs.

The back-story

A Gastonia native, Cheryl attended Gaston County Schools, including Woodhill and Rhyne elementaries and Highland Middle. She is a proud graduate of Hunter Huss. After graduation, she received a full scholarship to attend the University of Tennessee, where she majored in political science.

Also at UT, Cheryl played on the NCAA Championship basketball team, the Lady Vols, under the leadership of the late renowned coach, Pat Summitt. The Lady Vols hold the title as the team with the most victories in NCAA Division I Women's College Basketball. Cheryl has fond memories





of Summitt, including learning the difference between a champion and a winner. The team won the championship in 1987: Cheryl's senior year. To commemorate their victory, the team's members were invited to the White House. They had the opportunity to meet then-president Ronald Reagan and first lady Nancy Reagan, as well as members of the cabinet and staff. With it being Cheryl's senior year, as she recalls, she did some employment-seeking networking during the celebration.

Her career journey began in law enforcement. This was followed by work as a college athletic recruiter and in head coaching stints at North Carolina State University, the University of Alabama, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Chicago State University. She was also an assistant director for Gastonia Parks and Recreation. She later worked as a national director for an education tutoring company. As a result of this, she developed educational material and a curriculum under her brand, "Operation Destiny," and she did some educational consulting for several years. Cheryl recently gave all the educational material to local and neighboring specialized school programs, as well as to families home-schooling their children.

Throughout her career, she has visited 49 of the 50 states, including Hawaii. Her travels abroad have taken her to Sweden, Canada, the Virgin Islands, Denmark and Israel. Her visit to the Holy Land was one of her most memorable experiences.

In 2017, Cheryl was inducted into the Gaston County Sports Hall of Fame. The hall's purpose is to annually nominate, elect, honor and award truly outstanding local athletes, coaches and others making significant contributions to sports.



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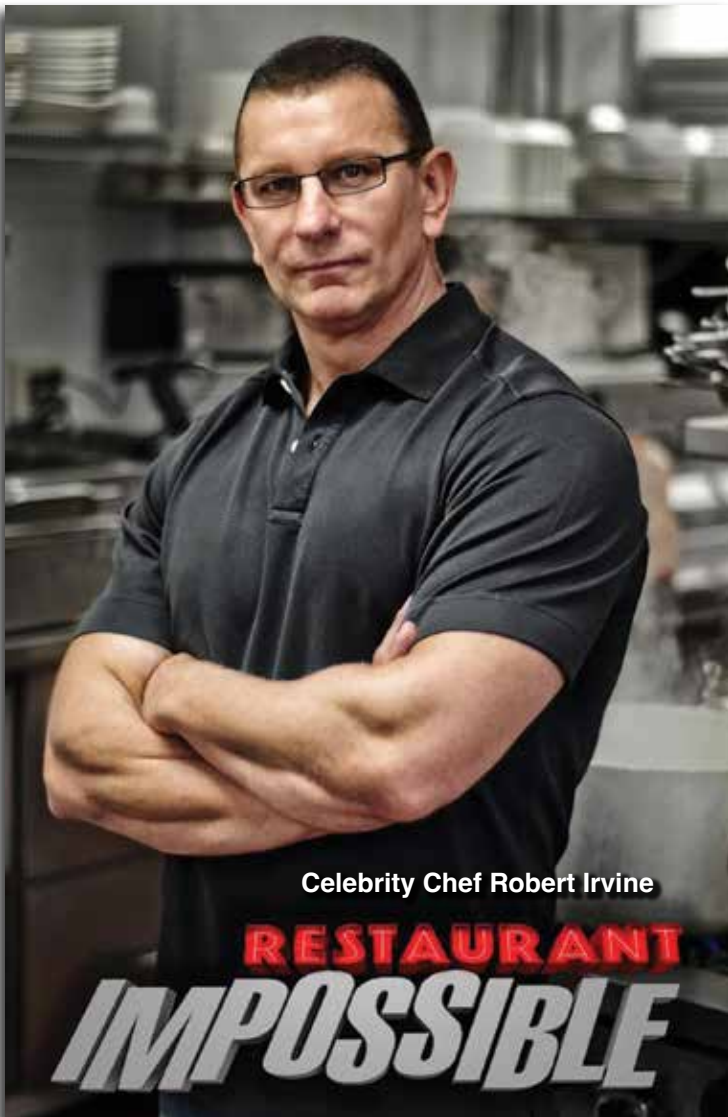
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As for what's next, Cheryl envisions collaborating with area community colleges and leading health-care providers to take the hands-on learning experience of youngsters at the restaurant to the next level by providing technical training and preparation for those interested in pursuing culinary arts careers.

Where it all started

Cheryl's entrepreneurial drive, hospitality spirit, networking skills, desire to serve her community and the DNA of being a true champion were ignited and fostered by her family's three matriarchs.

Her great-grandmother, Madame Charlotte Smith Means



Lowery (affectionately called "Mama Charlotte"), was a licensed cosmetologist, a manufacturer of beauty products and a floral designer. She was a *protégée* of Madam C. J. Walker, the famed businesswoman, philanthropist and political and social activist and the first female self-made millionaire in America, according to *The Guinness Book of World Records*. Madame Charlotte created pressing oil (a three-in-one hair and scalp cream), which holds a U.S. patent. Madame Charlotte is featured in the African-American Museum of History and Culture at Gastonia's former Loray Mill. Cheryl's grandmother, Lua Mae Davis Smith (affectionately called "Mama Tab"), worked for the Public Service Company and started a catering business. And Cheryl's mother, Delores Smith Littlejohn, was the owner of Smitty's Grocery and Grill, which was a neighborhood staple for many.

Now Cheryl is back home to continue carrying out her life's mission. She likens her return to the timeless and familiar quote of Dorothy in Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* stories: "There's no place like home."

What's new and what's next

The Food Network's hit show, "Restaurant: Impossible," recently came to town.

And Cheryl received some spectacular news from the show. In August, she got a phone call from one of its producers, indicating that Smith's Soul Food Bistro (named after her grandmother, Lua Mae Davis Smith) had been selected to undergo a renovation makeover courtesy of the show. Cheryl initially thought it was a prank call, because she had not previously been in contact with anyone from "Restaurant: Impossible." The show is known for connecting with failing restaurants that are struggling and need help to turn things around.


But in this instance, something extraordinary happened. Smith's Soul Food Bistro was chosen because of its philanthropic commitment to young adults and the community. In early December, celebrity Chef Robert Irvine

and the “Restaurant: Impossible” team began filming and completing the bistro’s transformation.

Are you as excited as we are to view the show’s episode featuring the big unveiling on the Food Network? Stay tuned. It’s coming in the spring!

As for what’s next, Cheryl envisions collaborating with area community colleges and leading health-care providers to take the hands-on learning experience of youngsters at the restaurant to the next level by providing technical training and preparation for those interested in pursuing culinary arts careers.

When you’re in the area, stop by Smith’s Soul Food Bistro at 209 S. Chestnut Street in Gastonia. You’re sure to receive a warm, heartfelt greeting from Cheryl. And you’ll experience one of the delicious, freshly-cooked dishes prepared by Chef Keith Lee!

And remember: the Legacy Event Center is right next door. This elegant, upscale venue is available to host your next special event. You can connect with both businesses on their respective Facebook pages. 



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Frank Eshun

Frank Eshun: that special X factor

From Ghana to America for Gastonia general contractor

By Thomas Lark

Photographs Courtesy of Frank Eshun

You might say that Frank Eshun really has the X factor.

As in Plannerx, LLC, his Gastonia-based company. Eshun, a native of Ghana, recently told *Gaston Lifestyles* more about himself and his work as a licensed general contractor for

both Carolinas.

Since 2016, Eshun, 52, has been the president of Plannerx, responsible for strategic planning, market penetration and managing the entire spectrum of operations and execution of the company's business plan. The demands of this position require leveraging more than 20 years of progressively broader and more complex construction management experience in the various project delivery systems to achieve a quick turnaround time for construction projects.

Eshun's story begins in the West African nation of Ghana, where he was born in the historical coastal town of Elmina. He was raised by his father, who was a traditional ruler/chief, a cultural custodian and a teacher.

"The Elmina area remains the tourism hub of Ghana," said Eshun, "being the cradle of colonialism and a trading post for the trans-Atlantic slave trade."

At Nkrumah University in Zambia, he studied for a bachelor's degree in architectural design and a graduate diploma, 1991-94 and 1996-98.

"My desire to explore *pro-poor* policy interventions took me to the University of Ghana," he added, "where I completed the coursework for a master's in development studies but had to abandon it to return to North Carolina to usher in the birth of my first daughter.

"My initial move to Gastonia in 2005 was precipitated by my wife, Eunice," he continued, "who, upon graduating from pharmacy school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was enticed with an offer by CVS Pharmacy in Gastonia. Having been married a few months prior, the plan was to help Eunice settle down, pay her student loan and have her join me back in Ghana, where I was nurturing my consulting career in architecture. I was therefore making periodic visits to the U.S. Our first daughter was born in that same year in Gastonia, and with the second daughter, it became obvious and indeed

"The next phase of Plannerx, LLC's outlook is to focus on development and capital investments, riding on the wave of the rapid population growth of the greater Charlotte region and the strategic position of Gastonia in that growth pole."

imperative for us to be together to raise the family, and I deferred to my wife's choice in 2009."

Next came the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

"Having moved finally to the U.S., the difficulty was the choice of a career pathway to get integrated into the system, since my architecture studies and practice were essentially tropical," Eshun said. "After months of swinging between a wide range of careers, I settled on construction as a way of bridging my architectural career past. I enrolled in the UNC-Charlotte College of Engineering to study for a master's degree in construction management and facilities management. While I was there, I worked as a research assistant (or RA), overseeing and reporting on the academic affairs-related projects on campus as an owner's representative.

"I worked with a couple of major construction companies that specialize in hospitality projects and built some Marriotts and Holiday Inn hotels," he added. "However, my natural call to private enterprise gave me restlessness, and so in 2016, I gave birth to Plannerx, LLC and passed the licensure to be fully accredited as a general contractor in North Carolina and later South Carolina, with unlimited status. As the owner and president of Plannerx, I have led this fledgling minority firm to grow, executing small and medium-size projects in the commercial and residential domains, with very healthy and pleasant outcomes. We have done industrial

BUSINESS CENTER

metal buildings, restaurant upfits, several health-care upfits, new homes and several home remodeling projects in North and South Carolina, building relationships and creating job opportunities for many trade contractors.”

So what’s next?

“The next phase of Plannerx, LLC’s outlook is to focus on development and capital investments, riding on the wave of the rapid population growth of the greater Charlotte region and the strategic position of Gastonia in that growth pole,” he said. “One of our upcoming projects currently in design phase is the Afrocielo Culture and Events Place on US-321 in the Highland district. This will be a major African-Caribbean culture and cuisine experiential address in Gastonia’s entertainment and socialization tapestry, offering an authentic taste of live-band jazz, calypso, reggae and Afrobeat as a social connection in our common quest for cultural diversity and inclusion in Gastonia. The strategic proximity and hospitality link to the FUSE District and the Two Kings Casino in Kings Mountain is not lost on us.

“Plannerx’s second investment in the planning stage is the West Garrison Entrepreneurs Park,” he continued. “This project, comprised of a strip mall and automotive service facilities, was initiated in response to calls by folks in automotive repairs and servicing who were economically displaced by rapid property appreciation on the Wilkinson Boulevard/Charlotte corridor fueled by the expansion of the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport and its ancillary linkages. These folks are largely minority businesses that needed suitable business spaces to continue to contribute to

the local economy. Besides the automotive business owner clients, this center will support other small businesses, such as take-out restaurants, a pharmacy, a barbering/hair salon, a Laundromat, a grocery and business offices to expand the local economy and create job opportunities.”

Then there’s Kendrick Custom Homes.

This project, said Eshun, is an “English cottage/European collection that will inspire coziness, nobility and tradition, still with a hint of contemporary style. The five-home signature collection will provide a peek into Plannerx’s *niche* in custom home delivery in the Gastonia environs.”

A busy schedule

Eshun is an early riser.

He awakens at 5:30 a.m. His morning activities include his Bible devotions and catching up on e-mails until 8 a.m. He’s in the office by 9 a.m.

“I do a mix of office work and site visits in no particular order, depending on the schedule,” he said. “I catch lunch along the schedule. I’m typically done by 6 p.m. and then head to the YMCA (a newly adjusted slot) for about an hour before retiring for the day.”

With wife Eunice Korkor Eshun, a pharmacist for Kintegra Health in Gastonia, he has three children: Segua, 16, Kwaaba, 14, and Adoma, 10. The family resides in Gastonia’s South New Hope area.

When not working, Mr. Eshun enjoys his hobbies.

“I love playing badminton,” he said, “but I enjoy watching soccer: a sport inherited by default by my African descent.

It’s a poor man’s sport in Africa. You can play it basically in any open space with a lightweight ball-like object, including stuffed socks!”

Eshun smiled at this. And he added that “Shark Tank” is his favorite TV show.

“I enjoy activities that promote community service and support the marginalized and the vulnerable,” he said. “I used to be active in Rotary back in Ghana, in voluntary work camps, *etc.* I enjoy Christian activities, including praying and interceding for others.”

Do you aspire to a career such as Mr. Eshun’s? He has some guidance for you.

“My advice,” he said, “is be always motivated by service to humanity. Seek to be fair, and show others the way.” **GL**



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Catawba Two Kings Casino opens

Plus: other fun local venues

By Melissa McCauley
Photographs by Gaston County Travel and Tourism



Melissa McCauley

Let the fun begin!
Now open in its pre-launch temporary facility, Catawba Two Kings Casino brings great gaming action with the newest slot machines and electronic table games in a smoke-free environment. As this facility continues to expand on the types of gaming and number of machines, it will quickly become North Carolina's premier gaming facility.

While they continue to work on towards the future as a \$273 million destination casino resort, it is expected to create as many as 2,600 permanent jobs, including thousands in the construction industry, providing a welcome boost to the local economy.

Officially located outside the county in Kings Mountain, this casino offers the newest machines in the industry,

including the most popular titles. From regular slots to high-limits and progressive jackpots, there is something to appeal to every guest, on any budget. The gaming action can't be beat! Ticket-in, ticket-out capabilities offer gamers the ability to cash out quickly and keep the fun rolling by moving on to their next favorite. Four automated electronic table game pods in a "stadium" set-up deliver a table games experience for both experienced players and beginners offering craps, blackjack, roulette and more.

Open round-the-clock, the fun doesn't stop at Catawba Two Kings Casino.

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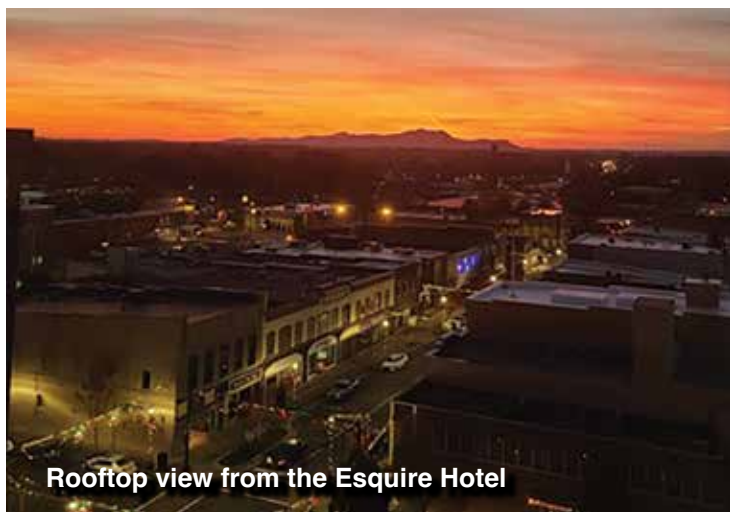
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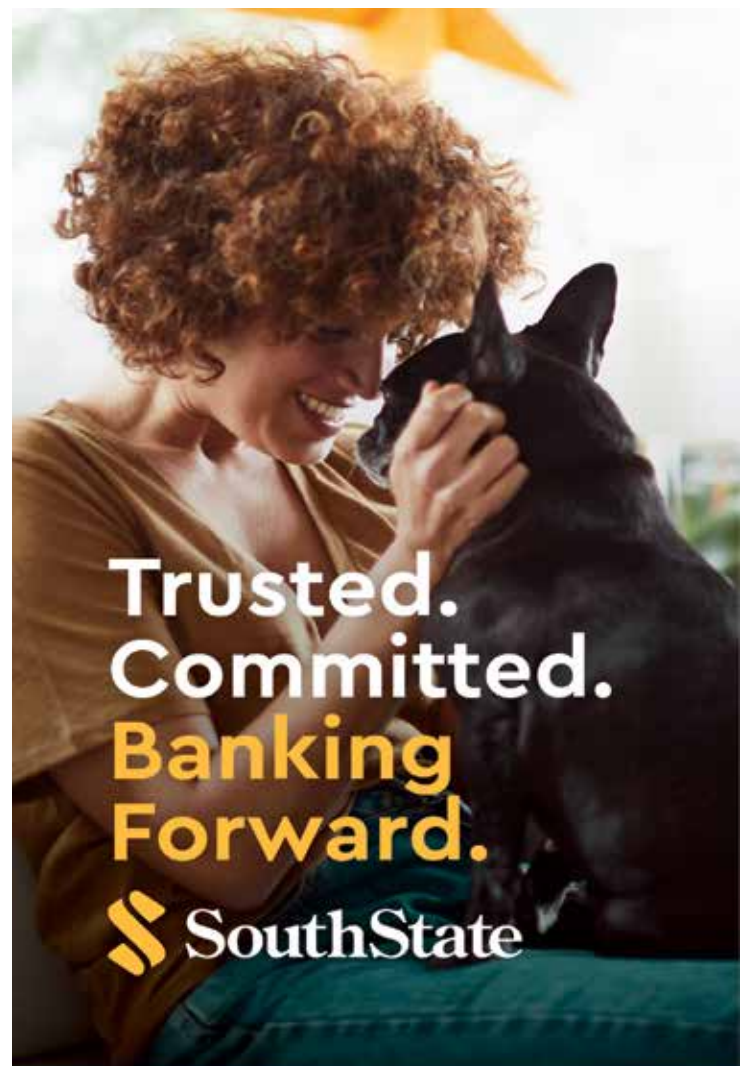
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Rooftop view from the Esquire Hotel



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Not getting enough zzzz's?

Try these 15 tricks

By Kimberly Blaker



Kimberly Blaker

For many, getting a solid night's sleep is as elusive as winning the lottery.

Getting too little sleep is so common that it's become almost a badge of honor to get through each day with sleep deprivation. Even if you feel like you can function on little sleep, it's actually debilitating, if not dangerous, to a person's health and mental faculties. Not getting enough sleep increases the risk of obesity, memory impairment, illness and even hallucinations or death. Falling asleep is a common problem. But sleep quality is also crucial for optimum brain function and recovery.

Fortunately, there are many ways to train your body and mind to fall asleep more quickly and improve your sleep quality. Create a relaxing nighttime ritual. Starting a routine to wind down every night creates an association between nighttime habits and sleep, preparing your body to relax and fall asleep more quickly. Try drinking a soothing tea, such as chamomile. Or use aromatherapy with scents, such as lavender, that promote relaxation.

Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day. This gets your body into a regular sleep-wake pattern, which regulates your circadian rhythm and makes falling and staying

Writing down your thoughts can help to keep them from swirling incessantly through your brain so you can relax

asleep easier. It may be tempting to sleep in on the weekends to make up for lost sleep. But this may actually hurt you in the long term.

Avoid alcohol at night. Though it may help you fall asleep, drinking alcohol before bed significantly reduces your sleep quality.

Be careful with naps. A long afternoon nap can make it more difficult to fall asleep at night. So keep naps short and as early in the day as possible.

Track your sleep. Different technologies are available to track your sleeping patterns, including restlessness, awake and sleep times and even how long you're in each part of the sleep cycle. This can help you find how many hours you individually need for optimal function.

Practice meditation and mindfulness. Regularly practicing these can help calm your mind and body. Progressive relaxation is one technique. Through it, you slowly focus on each part of your body, moving from head to feet, while releasing tension and consciously relaxing your muscles.

Avoid screens an hour before bed. Looking at the bright light is stimulating. Likewise,



so is much of the content on the screens. If you use screens at night, glasses are available to filter out the blue light to prevent eye strain.

Use breathing techniques. One popular method to fall asleep is known as four-seven-eight. First, breathe in through your nose for a count of four. Then hold your breath for seven, and exhale out your mouth for eight.

Listen to soothing white noise, music or podcasts. Many of these audio productions are designed to help put you to sleep.

Stop drinking caffeine after midday. Caffeine is a stimulant, which can affect your mind and body hours after consumption.

Make sure your room is dark for sleep and that you get natural light during the day. This regulates your circadian rhythm and provides external cues for your body.

Exercise in the morning. Being physically active, especially early in the day, is associated with better sleep.


Journal or keep paper by your bed. Do you have a hard time falling asleep because your mind is racing? Writing down your thoughts can help to keep them from swirling incessantly through your brain so you can relax.

Use your bed and bedroom for sleep only. This creates a

If you use screens at night, glasses are available to filter out the blue light to prevent eye strain.

specific association, so your body and mind know it's time to rest. Also, keep electronics out of the bedroom.

Try a natural supplement. Melatonin, magnesium and CBD are some of the options touted as supporting relaxation and sleep. Be sure to check with your doctor before taking any supplements to ensure you do so safely.

If behavioral changes aren't working, discuss your sleep concerns with your doctor. You may have an undiagnosed sleeping disorder that requires medical intervention. Depending on your doctor's findings, medications and breathing treatments may help improve your sleep. 



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Denise Price Thomas exhibition at the Bliss Gallery Belmont, NC



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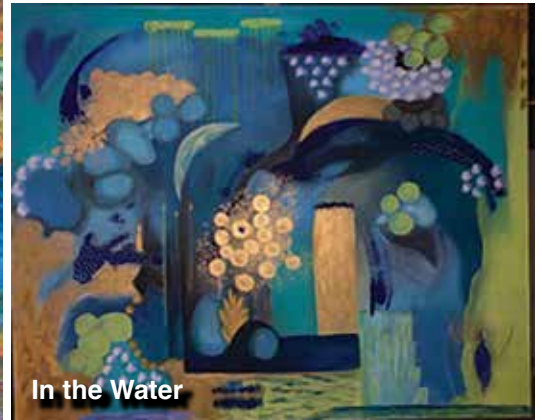
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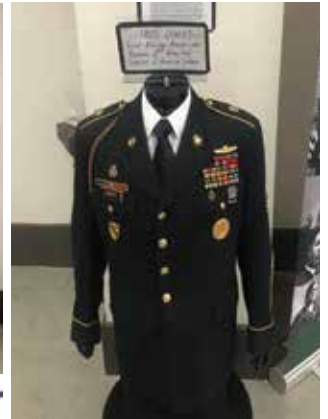


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Gaston Community Foundation groundbreaking



Denise Price Thomas is Gladys Friday and more!

Local painter/actress shines bright as cast of real characters

By Thomas Lark

Photographs courtesy of Denise Price Thomas

Denise Price Thomas is abundantly blessed with artistic ability.

Not only is Thomas an accomplished painter, but she's also a talented actress, public speaker and comedienne, having created her own characters of "Coco Claus" (her own unique and humorous spin on Mrs. Santa Claus), "Gladys Friday" (as in "I'm glad it's Friday!"), "Bernice Beauchamp," "Anita Walker" and more. Think Vickie Lawrence as "Mama." Trust us: Denise Price Thomas is a real *hoot*.

We recently caught up with this remarkable lady, and she told us more about herself.

Born and raised in Gaston County, she has lived in Belmont since 1995. She is the daughter of the late George and Louise Price. Thomas's big sisters are twins: Phyllis Price Walters and Freida Price Pollock.

"Growing up," Thomas recalled, "I understand that they were very shy. In fact, Mother said they hid behind her skirt. I, on the other hand, have never seen the back of my mother. Not shy at all!"

Her husband, Reg Thomas, is the owner of Thomas Siding, Windows and Sunrooms. They have three children: Brad Thomas, Julie Bowen and Brooke Boukather.

"And our grandchildren are truly *grand!*" Mrs. Thomas added.



Reg and Denise Price Thomas



Denise Price Thomas

A late-blooming fast starter

A graduate of Pfeiffer College, Thomas is certified in health care management. And remarkably, she only took up painting some 18 months ago.

"In 2009, I retired as the practice administrator of a surgical group after being employed there for 32 years," she informed. "Since then, I've spoken nationwide for health care conferences and provided undercover patient assessments, followed by training for groups. I also have a few *alter-ego* characters who provide entertainment for those conferences as well. With the 2020 pandemic, all conferences and training sessions had to be cancelled. Humor seemed to be placed on a shelf, with the door closed. I've always loved people. And for the first time in my life, I felt very much alone, and my heart was very sad."

Then one day, Thomas went to her grandchildren's closet, where paints were kept.

"As soon as I began to paint, tears were streaming down my face, hitting the canvas, and they formed a little heart shape," she revealed. "I have this painting framed. You can imagine how special it is to me. You see, what was being held tightly in my heart was now pouring out on to the canvas."

In this short time, Thomas has enjoyed a burst of creativity so great, it leaves her only guessing just how many paintings she has completed.

"Oh," she said, "how I wish I knew how many I've painted! There are truly hundreds! Many have found new homes, which makes me so very happy. When paintings were requested locally, I would personally deliver them, and that also helped with my people connection. Since I paint from my heart, I feel that a little piece of my heart now lives in their homes. Oh, how happy that makes me! I had *no* idea this would turn in to such 'therapy,' much less a career. I wish I had done a better job at noting my journey. I just want to paint. I could really use an assistant!"

"Since I was very young," she continued, "I've always written short stories, and my daddy would always let me read them to him. And he *loved* each one. Of course he did, right? Today, I seem to *paint* stories. Seems that every painting has a story, and therefore each one means something very special

to me. For instance, there is one that is the feature painting in Bliss Gallery (in Belmont), titled, 'In the Water,' and it's an abstract. The day I painted it, I had a very heavy heart and sat by the water alone. I was listening to music, hoping to quiet my mind, soaking up the sun, listening to every splash in the water, the birds chirping, dogs barking...I didn't want to *think*. I just wanted to *experience* it all. Well, wouldn't you know that a song came on, titled, 'Leave It in the Water' by Global Genius. I'd never heard that song before, and I came in and painted this abstract. I'd never really understood abstract until then. It seems you have to disconnect from *thinking* and connect with the *experience* of painting. There are no rules for me when I'm painting. I'll look at something in our garage and think, *I bet I could paint with that*, and I do! In fact, kitchen utensils are great, especially since I'm painting much more than cooking. My dining room is actually my studio!"

And Thomas has done it all despite never having had formal art lessons. The only lessons she ever had were during her senior year at Hunter Huss High School. She is a member of its class of '72.

"I certainly hope Mrs. Gray would be proud," she observed of her old art teacher. "I like to think of it this way: I painted as a senior in high school. And now, I'm a senior painting *again!*"

Like Grandma Moses, it's never too late to take up painting. And Thomas offers some advice for those who'd like to pursue this.

"Follow your heart," she said, "and take note of your journey and *enjoy* every moment!"


The Bliss Gallery

Thomas returned to the topic of the Bliss Gallery, which is located in downtown Belmont.

"It was such an honor to be invited recently as a guest artist," she said. "They are owned by Holy Angels. I've spoken for their conferences and training in the past, so to also have this opportunity is very humbling. Many of their residents are artists. They could actually teach the class!"

Thomas's exhibit runs through Jan. 22. She added that she is honored to donate 50 percent of every purchase to Holy Angels.

And when she recently popped into the gallery, as she recalled, "people were describing my paintings as 'happy,' which makes me very happy! One person said usually people paint a certain way: either abstract, landscape, objects, *etc.* But this person said that I paint in many different ways. I couldn't help but smile, wondering if perhaps those 'characters' are painting as well!"

Step into the gallery soon and check out Thomas's work. We think you'll agree that this compassionate lady personifies her own motto: "Together, we shine brighter." 

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WSGE gets generous gift from supporter

Estate of Robert McBurney donates \$100,000; biggest in station history

By Gaston College Public Relations
Photograph by Gaston College photograph



Cathis Hall

Gaston College radio station WSGE is benefitting from the extraordinary generosity of a longtime supporter. The estate of the late Robert McBurney of Lake Wylie, S.C. recently donated \$100,000 to the station. McBurney, who died in 2020, was a big fan of the station and its gospel and beach-music programming. A member of the WSGE Independent Music Society's Headliners and Hall of Fame clubs, McBurney made his first donation to WSGE in 2006 and consistently gave his financial support and issued matching-gift challenges during the non-profit station's fundraising drives. His estate gift of \$100,000 is the largest donation in the station's 41-year history. It follows nearly \$70,000 in support McBurney gave over the years.

Cathis Hall, WSGE's station manager for the past 15 years, said she was extremely honored and grateful for the generosity of this unique fan.

"Throughout my years of knowing Mr. McBurney, I found him to be a warm and giving person who truly desired to see the station prosper," said Hall. "He never wanted on-air recognition. He was a man who gave from his heart. With the financial blessings he has bestowed on us, I believe he was WSGE's angel."


The donation was presented to the station by John and Tracy Stiff, the executors of the McBurney estate. In a joint statement, the couple said:

"Bob loved the station so much, and he was a big fan of (WSGE disc jockeys) Kyle Beam, Johnny B. and Junior Norfleet for years. He was a

"Throughout my years of knowing Mr. McBurney, I found him to be a warm and giving person who truly desired to see the station prosper."

very generous man who left most of his estate to charity."

Gaston College Foundation Executive Director Luke Upchurch also commented.

"I am grateful for the legacy of giving by Mr. McBurney to the Gaston College Foundation," said Upchurch. "His generosity and dedication to WSGE through his estate gift, along with the contributions from WSGE's community of supporters, will ensure the financial stability of the station for years to come." 



From the left are Luke Upchurch, executive director of the Gaston College Foundation; John and Tracy Stiff, the estate's executors; and WSGE disc jockey Johnny B. and station manager Cathis Hall.

Wilson is *Gaston Lifestyles* scholarship recipient

Atrium Health practice manager for nearly two decades

By Thomas Lark



Amber Wilson

Amber Wilson is among the many fine staffers of Atrium Health. Wilson has been a practice manager for a very busy obstetrics-gynecology practice for the past 19 years. She recently told us more about her life and work and the *Gaston Lifestyles* scholarship that is making it easier to achieve her goals.

She also spoke of her family. Wilson and Steven, her husband of 19 years, have three wonderful children: Shane, 17, Ashlea, 16, and Hailey, 11.

“I started out working at the front desk and have worked my way up to practice manager,” Mrs. Wilson said of her job. “I have always wanted to further my education. However, with small children, it just wasn’t in the cards. I had thought about doing it several times. However, I just never took that first step. With the encouragement of my family and my supervisor, I

decided this past summer to take my first class in getting my degree in business administration.

“Before COVID, it wasn’t possible to take classes in person, because I am a full-time working mother,” she continued, adding that Gaston College’s Internet-based courses have been an excellent alternative, “and this has made a huge difference in my future. Being able to take these (Internet-based classes) has made it possible for me to pursue my educational goals. I can work my full-time job, cook dinner, attend my children’s ball games and school events and still complete my assignments on time.”

And to *Gaston Lifestyles*, Wilson expressed her gratitude.

“It has helped me financially to pursue these goals,” she said. “Being a mother, it can be difficult to put your education before anyone else, and finances were another reason why I didn’t pursue my goals. This scholarship has allowed me to take my courses and stay on track.” **GL**



Got a care plan in place for your pet in the event of a crisis?

Here's what you can do now

By Kimberly Blaker



Kimberly Blaker

If there's one thing the spread of COVID-19 has taught us, it's to expect and plan for the unexpected.

This doesn't just apply to preparing for yourself and the people in your life. In the event of an emergency, advance preparation for the care of your pet is vital to your pets' wellness.

COVID-19 hospitalization is just one of the many situations that could require last-minute care for your pets. But many other crises could also require arrangements for your pets' care. Examples include other illnesses requiring hospitalization, last-minute travel for emergencies or work, homelessness and eviction, financial hardship, rehab, natural disasters, military deployment, death and more. Your pets are important parts of your family. So make sure you have a sufficient plan in place for your pets before a potential crisis hits.

Who will watch your pets?

In times of crisis, especially community-wide or family

situations that affect other people as well, such as COVID-19, your first plan may not work out. Have a back-up plan, so you aren't left scrambling. There are many options available, depending on your financial situation, preferences for your pets and the length or type of care you may need.

Trusted family members and friends are excellent options, if any can watch your pets. Since you know them and likely so does your pets, family and friends may be likelier or better able to provide care in your home or take your pets into their own home. Family and friends offer pets familiar faces and perhaps even familiar places. This can be particularly helpful to ease your pets' stress. So ask if any friends or family members are willing to watch or take-in your pets, even if only until suitable options may be arranged.

Some shelters offer temporary foster placements for a specific amount of time with the intent to reunite pets with their owners. Dog and cat kennels, in-home boarding services and pet hotels are available to host your pets when needed.

Be sure to read reviews, tour the facilities and ask questions in advance to ensure your pets will be well-cared for and according to your preferences.

There are also pet-sitting or walking services available, depending on the situation and needs of your pets. These are good options for shorter-term situations and for when your pets don't need as much care or would just do better at home than in an unfamiliar place.

Your veterinarian may also be able to offer recommendations, since vets often know many of the local services. Veterinarians also know your pets and are likelier to be invested in making sure your pets are taken care of. And such non-profit organizations as Red Rover (www.redrover.org) offer



Your pet's stress level and other avoidable problems can be reduced if the caregiver knows your pet's training commands, personality quirks, behaviors, and things to watch for.

resources and ways to help in case of an emergency to make sure pets are cared for.

Whatever options you choose, get to know your emergency caregivers ahead of time, if possible. Also, let them get to know your pets and *vice versa*, and make sure the caregiver understands your pets' needs. In the event of a crisis, you'll feel more at ease knowing your pets are in good hands.

Maintain your pets' health

Emergency preparedness requires maintaining your pets' health.

Make sure your pets are up to date on vaccinations and



medical check-ups. You should also keep a sufficient supply of any prescriptions, special foods or other needs on hand to ensure your pets' health in unforeseen circumstances. Also, keep the documentation (proof of shots, spaying/neutering, *etc.*) in an accessible place, since such records may be required by kennels, shelters or foster services.

Prepare written instructions for your pets' care

Create instructions for your pets' care and keep both computer-based and printed copies.

Give one to anyone who may look after your pets. Also, post a copy on your fridge or in a conspicuous place in your home in the event you aren't able to point it out. Every pet is different, and keeping the same routine as much as possible will ease your pets' stress during a crisis.

You'll also want caregivers to know about any special needs, such as medications, and when your pets need to see the vet again. The caregiver should be aware of special foods your pets need or can't have. Your pets' stress levels and other avoidable problems can be reduced if the caregiver knows your pets' training commands, personality quirks, behaviors and things to watch for. The instructions should also include contact numbers for you, your vet and an emergency contact if something should happen.

Have a bag ready to go

Keep a bag packed for emergencies with the basic needs for your pets, such as food, toys and leashes.

Also, include a list of frequently used things you don't

Family and friends offer pets a familiar face and perhaps even a familiar place.

want to keep packed but want to make sure your pets have. This might consist of favorite toys or blankets to provide your pets some sense of normalcy and comfort when away from you. Also, include your list of instructions and routines in the bag. Then keep the bag easily accessible and near a crate or whatever you use to safely transport your pet.

Help caregivers ease your pets' stress

During a crisis, pets can experience anxiety or depression, just like people, especially if they're separated from their family and don't follow their regular routines.

Make sure your pets will be in a safe, comfortable environment with people you trust. Hopefully, the caregiver has interacted with your pets in the past, so they're familiar with each other.

Other things caregivers can do to relieve some of your pets' stress include:

- giving gentle physical affection at your pets' comfort levels;
- sticking to routines as much as possible;
- providing your pets the opportunity for regular exercise;
- sticking to your pets' usual diets;
- having a designated quiet space with comfort items from home;
- and playing classical music or turning on TV shows explicitly designed for animals.

Although you may not be able to predict when a crisis might turn your life upside down, one thing is within your control. You can have a plan in place for emergencies that ensures your pets will be adequately taken care of, leaving you one less thing to worry about. **GL**



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By Deborah Ally



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Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.
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The National Pan-Hellenic (NPHC), Council is a collaborative umbrella council composed of historically African American fraternities and sororities. *Six of the nine organizations have chapters in Gaston County providing service to our community. For more detail on each chapter visit our social media. 



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New year's resolutions

Why they fail and how you can succeed

By Kimberly Blaker



Kimberly Blaker

“The new year stands before us, like a chapter in a book, waiting to be written. We can help write that story by setting goals.” —Melody Beattie

The new year is a great time to take inventory, set goals and take charge of your life. But if you're like most people, making resolutions is much easier than keeping them. Rather than focus on the idea of a new beginning, which can lead to disappointment at the first slip, keep in mind that self-improvement is an ongoing endeavor. Setbacks are not failures; they bring wisdom and insight for future success.

Before making a split decision on this year's resolutions, make a list of goals and changes you'd like to make. Then review your list, and cross off any to which you don't feel genuinely devoted.

Maybe you want to resolve to spend more time with your family, quit smoking or lose weight. You're likelier to succeed if you feel a strong personal commitment rather than “I should.”

One reason people don't keep resolutions they make is that the resolutions are often made to silence the pestering of a loved one. If you decide to quit smoking to get your husband off your back, you're less likely to succeed. If you choose to quit smoking to feel healthier and be able to enjoy physical activity without being winded, you're likelier to experience success.

Choose one or perhaps two of the resolutions on your list to which you feel most committed. Then choose one or two you feel confident you can do with ease, and they can be used as positive reinforcement for the more challenging first choices.



**Setbacks are not failures;
they bring wisdom and insight for
future success.**

Next, make a clear plan for adhering to your resolutions. Put each in writing, and write down the steps to achieve them. Let's say your resolution requires a routine or schedule, such as an exercise routine, a new diet or steps toward completing your education. Create a goal chart, a detailed plan and a checklist to track your progress.

Also, post notes in strategic places such as the refrigerator, bathroom mirror or steering wheel as reminders of your resolutions with tips on how to overcome temptation.

Make sure your family understands the importance of your resolutions. Family support and positive reinforcement can be most helpful. If your resolution is something your family members have been nagging you about, ask for their encouragement. But explain that pressure and pestering, particularly during setbacks, could undermine your resolve. Determine how each family member can help you to achieve your goal, perhaps by taking on additional household chores or through affirmations of your continued success.

Adjust your environment to enable success. If eating healthier is your goal, don't fill the cupboards with junk food for other family members. Find healthy snacks they're willing to substitute. If you're trying to quit smoking, avoid people, places and things that remind or tempt you—at least until you have it well under control.

Don't go it alone. If you have a friend with a similar resolution, make a pact. Work together to create a plan, and then make a point to check in with each other regularly for encouragement, praise and support. If you resolve to get more exercise, do it together. Having a commitment and someone to accompany you will go a long way in helping you succeed.

Finally, reward yourself, not just once you've achieved your goal but periodically for your success so far. Small, periodic rewards can be motivation enough to keep you strong when you're ready to throw in the towel.

Remember, whatever new year's resolutions you choose, success awaits you if you resolve to never give up trying. **GL**

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Moe Hill still going strong at 74

Gastonia athlete is baseball legend

By Thomas Lark

Photographs Courtesy of Moe Hill



Moe Hill

Gastonia native and baseball legend Elmore “Moe” Hill does not sound 74.

“Age can be deceiving!” Hill quipped with a laugh when we recently caught up with him.

At six-two, this impressive first-baseman, outfielder, hitter and all-around baseball giant still remains around a trim 200 pounds.

“I’ve had a couple of surgeries,” the righthander revealed. “But I’m doing OK.”

Hill was referring to back surgery and, about a year ago now, triple-bypass heart surgery. But Hill is tough. This awesome athlete—a member of both the North Carolina and Gaston County sports halls of fame—has overcome adversity, racism and more to get where he is, so it would take more than mere surgery to tackle him. He just keeps on going.

“I’m chopping firewood now!” he revealed with a laugh, adding that maintaining your best physical conditioning is the key to a long, happy and healthy life.

According to *The Baseball Reference Bullpen*, Hill was a stand-out in the Midwest League, winning multiple titles. He earned four consecutively: one of only a select few players to do so.

Straight out of high school, Hill signed with the Baltimore Orioles.

“He began his career with the 1965 Fox Cities Foxes, batting .275/.323/.384,” as *The Bullpen* reveals, “not bad for an 18-year-old in full-season A ball.”

He later went on to play for the Miami Marlins, the Stockton Ports and the Batavia Trojans. Back in regular action in Miami in 1967, he capped his season with an impressive batting average of .377 and nine homers.

Looking back, sometimes even Hill himself is amazed.

“You know, you wonder,” he reflectively observed. “I just kept going, getting out there and playing.”

In Hill’s earliest days, baseball athletes—especially when they were young, black and talented—faced many obstacles, from the overt hostility of prejudiced fans in mostly white cities to subtler forms of discrimination from unsympathetic members of management.

“We might get \$100 bonuses,” he recalled, explaining how owners could have easily afforded much higher amounts and that, when adjusted for inflation, such numbers didn’t add up to much.

Contrast that, Hill remarked, with today’s Major League baseball players, who are quite often only mediocre at best, and yet they’re rewarded with lavish gifts and astronomical salaries.

“And you also find that today, there’s more players who go from AA than from AAA, going up to the Major League,” he added.

Days in the Midwest

In 1970, Hill was signed by the Minnesota Twins system.

He played for their farm team, the Orlando Twins. According to *The Bullpen*, he achieved a stratospheric batting average of .474; stole 18 bases in 21 tries; had 14 outfield assists; drove in 84 runs; smacked 22 homers (leading the league; only two other players hit 10 or more); and led in total bases (230).

Hill then finished up with the Wisconsin Rapids Twins: his home for most of the ’70’s. His top batting average was a whopping .641. In 20 games, he hit eight homeruns.

Hill credits just talking, not playing, with hall-of-famers Tony Oliva and Rod Carew with improving his game. In a mystical moment of Zen, the philosophical Hill reflected that sometimes the best baseball you’ll ever play is when you *don’t* actually play. Just sitting down with Oliva and Carew and merely talking about the game made Hill a better player, as he noted: if you can *envision* getting better, you *will* get better. But you have to *see* it before you can *be* it.

And he spoke again of how much things have improved in the past 50-plus years since the end of segregation. He recalled how Hank Aaron initially faced prejudice, moving with the Braves from Milwaukee to the newly desegregated Atlanta of the 1960’s. But when Aaron broke Babe Ruth’s record in 1974, he was lionized, and the city that had at first rejected him now embraced him.

“Times has changed,” Hill observed. “They really have. And today, Atlanta is a predominantly black city.”

Hill himself was among those helping break the color

barrier, overcoming unfair discrimination and propelling American blacks to go from adversity to diversity.

“I have a good friend up in Pennsylvania, a white guy, and he’s like a big brother to me,” he said of Howie Bedell. “He helped me get jobs throughout baseball.”

Hill credited Bedell for helping him get coaching work in Kansas City, Mo. It would be the countless instances of such friendships forged, fast and firm, that eventually brought America broadly and sports in especial to a higher, more enlightened plane.

An up-Hill battle

Looking back, Hill is filled with hard-won wisdom, not resentment. Yes, as he acknowledges, he was treated with repeated unfairness. Lesser players were promoted, while he was not, despite consistently high batting averages. But today, he’s a legend, more appreciated now than he was during his actual career, which also included an eight-year stint as a roving Major League hitting instructor for the Royals and later the Seattle Mariners.

“I like hitting!” Hill declared. “Hitting was my passion.”

Life was unfair. But he persevered. Call it an up-Hill battle.

“Everything I got in baseball, I *earned*,” he emphasized. “I wasn’t there to play politics. I wanted to play *baseball*.”

After retiring, Hill coached for the Gulf Coast League Royals in Sarasota (1980-82). He coached and scouted for the Chicago Cubs for eight seasons, then became the hitting coach of the Tulsa Drillers (1999-2002). He was the field coach for the Frederick Keys (2003-05) and then became bench coach of the Bowie Baysox (2006-10). He then moved to the Aberdeen IronBirds in 2011. Twenty-three years ago, Baseball America selected Hill as the greatest Midwest League player ever.


“I was a pretty good defensive player,” he observed, adding that he was noted for going 87 games, error-free, solidifying his rep as the best first baseman in the Midwest League.

Want to be in professional baseball? Give it your all, says Hill. Baseball is a jealous mistress, and there are no half-measures.

“You’ve got to be hungry,” he said.

Be prepared for injuries and chronic pain. Hill has sustained many injuries over his career. Once, a ball hit his right eye. Today, he’s losing his sight in it.

He credits his family—Fara, his wife of 54 years, and their sons, Moe, Jr. and Chris—with sustaining his journey throughout the years.

“I went out to play baseball the way it’s supposed to be played: *hard*,” said Mr. Hill. “Set high goals for yourself. And keep going!” 

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Gaston Day recognized for sports excellence

Three teams honored for athletic prowess

By Coach Casey Field
Photograph Courtesy of Casey Field



Gaston Day
School

Sports are about more than winning. And while recognition and winning have been central parts of Gaston Day School's athletic tradition, these outcomes have never been the focus or sole purpose of the program. Such was the case when the calendar flipped to 2021.

Spartan student-athletes and coaches were simply enjoying the opportunity to play sports in the midst of the pandemic. By the time the year wrapped up, Gaston Day had enjoyed one of the most successful athletic years in school history, highlighted by national recognition and three state championships.

In May, Gaston Day was recognized as a national finalist in the Aspen Institute's "Reimagining School Sports in America" initiative. Gaston Day was one of four private schools in the United States to receive this honor. "Reimagining School Sports" recognized the essential role that high schools play in preparing young people for life and the cognitive, educational and health benefits that flow to students whose bodies are in motion. The initiative aimed to make quality sport and physical activities accessible to all students by identifying strategies that all school leaders can adopt.

This process lasted more than a year, and the GDS Athletic Department was evaluated through an application, interviews and a formal roundtable presentation. In the Aspen Institute's final report, Gaston Day was commended for its upcoming partnership with Two-Four-One Sports. This sports sampling program will come to Gaston Day in the summer (June 13-17) in the form of a weeklong camp that focuses on playing and enjoying multiple

sports. The name "Two-Four-One" comes from the philosophy and tagline that "life's too short for just one sport."

During the fall sports season, all Spartan athletic teams represented Gaston Day with exemplary teamwork, togetherness and outstanding play. The season culminated with a day that everyone in attendance will remember for years to come. Saturday, Oct. 30, is likely the single greatest day in the history of Gaston Day School Athletics, as three teams won state championships. The best part of the day was that every victory took place in front of a home crowd. Due to new COVID-related tournament procedures and Spartan teams earning high seeds, Gaston Day hosted each event.

Championship Saturday started at the home of GDS Tennis, the Racquet Club of Gastonia. Gaston Day uses this facility through a multi-faceted partnership with the club's owners, Hank and Sharon Avants. The varsity girls' tennis team went 16-and-two on the season, winning the regular season and conference tournament for the third consecutive year. In the state championship match, the Spartans faced their toughest test of the season, competing against Davidson Day. With one singles match still in play, the outcome hung in the balance, four-to-four. Junior Jessica Nosike won a third-set tie-breaker, and Gaston Day garnered a narrow five-to-four victory. This was the school's first state championship in girls' tennis since 1990. Just as these Spartans were receiving their championship trophy, the second event of the day was under way and extremely close.

After finishing as state runner-up for three consecutive years, the 2021 team won Gaston Day's first-ever state championship in



volleyball. The team finished the season with a record of 30-and-nine and also won both the regular season and conference tournament championships for the third consecutive year.

According to Coach Derek Bing, this season's title was years in the making.

"We have a special group of current and former players, parents and coaches who have put the team first and joyfully pursued excellence with each other and for each other," said Bing. "Our team developed an uncommon grit. Winning the state championship was a by-product of our relentless pursuit of growth each day."

In order to raise the championship trophy, this team rallied from an O-and-one set-deficit and pulled out an amazing 30-to-28 victory in the second set, before winning in four sets over Davidson Day.

The day culminated at the Pharr Athletic Field for the state-championship soccer match. The varsity boys' soccer team finished the season with a 17-and-two record, winning both the MAC regular season and tournament championships along the way. In the state tournament, the Spartans were dominant, outscoring opponents 23-to-one through the semi-final round. In the championship match, the team defeated Trinity Academy of Raleigh with a decisive three-to-one victory. This was Gaston Day's second soccer state title in the past three years, which distinguishes it as one of the best programs in North Carolina, according to Coach Greg Lekavich.

"We had an amazing run," said Lekavich. "The guys trained incredibly hard. Everything went right: great group of players, parents and administration. Our school and athletic department have a winning culture, and I feel like this season was the result."

All three teams were honored in December with a celebratory "night of champions" dinner that concluded with each team's new championship banner being unveiled at the halftime of a basketball game. The evening allowed one last chance for the Gaston Day School community to come together, recognize these tremendous teams and close the books on an amazing year of Spartan Athletics. **GL**



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