

March/April 2022

GASTON L I F E S T Y L E S



**Rusty and LeeAnn Harris:
“We are back home!”**

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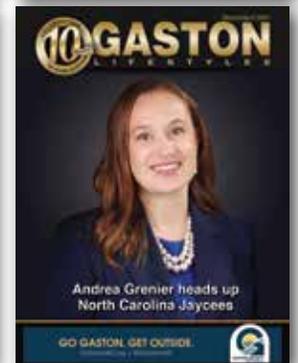
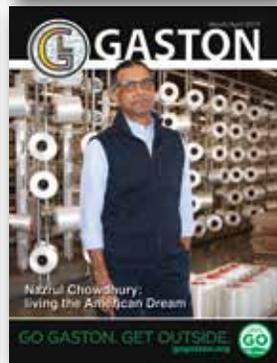
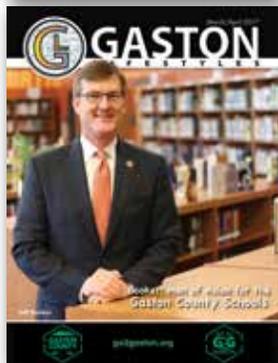
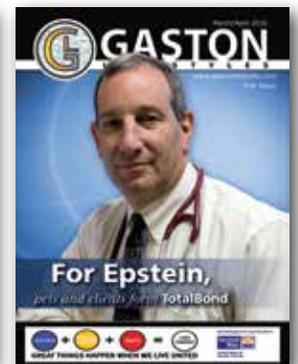
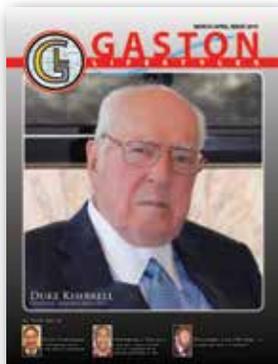
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PRESIDENT/CEO LETTER

Celebrating 175 years of Gaston County

Plus: a kind note of thanks



Mo Ally

Abelated happy birthday, Gaston County! Yes, in December, our county celebrated a milestone anniversary. That's 175 candles on one very big cake. Michelle McCauley of Gaston County Travel and Tourism will tell you how our community is observing this auspicious occasion.

But first, notes of appreciation from our January/February edition. They come to us from Cheryl Littlejohn and Alec Long both of Gastonia. Cheryl was grateful of the cover profile and reader Alec enjoyed the story of baseball legend Moe Hill.

Cheryl is thankful to you our readers who visited Smith's Soul Food Bistro with delight and enthusiasm.

Alec writes *"Outstanding article on Moe Hill. You did a great job in your article. This man is one of the finest people I*

know. I wish the USA could hear about his story. It would be great to get him more recognized nationally."

"Thank you for writing the article."

And thank you for reading, Mr. Long. We share your assessment of Mr. Hill, whose story truly should be more widely known, as this remarkable athlete is another Hank Aaron.

Back to that cake. Michelle will share with you, town by town and season by season, details on all the fun awaiting you in our beautiful county. We hope you'll get out there and discover why so many people are happy to call Gaston County home.

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

Make an Impact. Support your Y



Warlick Family YMCA, Robinwood Lake and the Y Chapel

Photograph by Butch Delatina

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Harrises make positive contributions

Plus: Tom Efird, Gaston Dance Theatre and more



Deborah Ally

Rusty and LeeAnn Harris are back in a big way. They're an amazing power couple, and they're among the movers and shakers making Gaston County great. They recently returned to Gastonia. Rusty is the vice president and chief operating officer of Dominion Energy Gas. LeeAnn is a homemaker and an accomplished artist. We think you'll agree that Rusty and LeeAnn make for an entertaining cover profile.

Elsewhere in our pages, Elizabeth Lowry of Gaston Dance Theatre takes a look back with you through the intricates steps of the troupe's 40-year history. The girls of GDT are presenting *Beauty and the Beast* at Gaston Christian School in May, so be sure to dance on over and catch one of the three performances. These talented tappers

will keep you on your toes, and you're gonna feel like dancing!

Dr. Sara Toner will tell you how she's settling in as one of the newest veterinarians at TotalBond Veterinary Hospitals. You might say that her inspirational story will give you *paws!*

Andrea Grenier recalls her year heading the North Carolina Jaycees. We wish Andrea well in her new job at Gaston College.

And we catch up with retired businessman Tom Efird of Gastonia. Tom was our cover profile on the very first *Gaston Lifestyles*, 10 years ago. He shares with us a bit about what he's been doing for the past decade and where he sees the community he loves so much going in its future.

Enjoy! **GL**

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Rusty and LeeAnn Harris

Rusty and LeeAnn Harris: “We are back home!”

Returning couple grateful to call Gaston County home

By Thomas Lark

Photographs by Howard Smith and the Harrises

They're a terrific team, and they're happy to make Gastonia their home again. They're Rusty and LeeAnn Harris, and they're among the folks eager to help make Gaston County even better. Mr. Harris is the vice president and chief operating officer of Dominion Energy Gas. Mrs. Harris is a homemaker and artist.

Gaston Lifestyles recently talked with them. They told us more about themselves and their return to the community they love.

“We want people to know we are thrilled and grateful to be back!” said LeeAnn. “And we're ready to come alongside our friends to help and contribute in any way we can.”

**They're Rusty and LeeAnn Harris,
and they're among the folks eager
to help make Gaston County
even better.**

Meet LeeAnn

Born in Nashville, Tenn., LeeAnn grew up in Summerville, S.C., the daughter of Ken and Peggy Haralson



the Harrises home

COVER STORY

of Columbia. LeeAnn's pastor brother, John Haralson, lives in Seattle with his wife and four children.

Rusty and LeeAnn have three children: Will, Jack and Carlisle Harris. A member of the Gaston Day School class of 2013 and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill class of '17, Will, 27, is in his final year of med school at the Medical University of South Carolina at Charleston. Jack, 25, is a member of the Hammond School class of 2015 and the Clemson University class of '19. He is an engineer for Michelin Tires in Greenville, S.C. Carlisle, 22, a member of Hammond's class of '17 and a graduate last year at UNC-Chapel Hill, works as a renewable-energy consultant for Guide House in Charlotte.

"Our adult children won't be moving back to Gastonia with us," LeeAnn revealed. "But they're just as happy as we are for our family's return to Gastonia. They have fond memories here of school, church, Scouts, sports and especially friends. They received a strong foundation in their learning at Bess Elementary, Gaston Day School, the Gaston School of the Arts and the Gaston County Library. Each of them spent time reconnecting with friends over Thanksgiving and Christmas."

LeeAnn earned a bachelor of arts degree in education at Clemson University. She's very proud of her *alma mater*, and she's big on the Tigers. She's also a graduate of the Citadel,

"I am a proud Clemson graduate. Most Saturdays in the fall, you can find me wearing orange and cheering for the Tigers."

where she earned a master's degree in education.

"I am a proud Clemson graduate," she said. "Most Saturdays in the fall, you can find me wearing orange and cheering for the Tigers. Rusty and I support academic and athletic programs at Clemson. We have a scholarship that provides money for engineering students to study abroad—an opportunity Rusty and our three children all got to experience and something we feel is important in a young person's education."

"I have been a stay-at-home mom for over 25 years," she added. "But now I spend my time on an Instagram resale business, the Carolina Curator, specializing in vintage and antique decorative items for home and entertaining. I am also an artist. I studied at the Gaston School of the Arts under Holt Harris and the Butler Studio under Curt Butler. I am represented by Over the Mantel Gallery in Columbia."

She and Rusty also actively contribute to local charitable



Jack, Rusty, Carlisle, LeeAnn and Will Harris



Clemson Tiger, LeeAnn & Rusty

efforts, including the First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia, the Community Foundation of Gaston County, the United Way of Gaston County and the Schiele Museum.

“I was the director of ‘Run for the Money’ (an annual fundraiser for many local nonprofits) when we lived here before,” LeeAnn continued. “Rusty and our children often walked or ran in the five-K (three miles; the major part of the ‘Run for the Money’ event). What a great way to bring *all* of Gaston County together! We missed the ‘Run.’”

She enjoys cooking, entertaining, travel, hiking and pickleball. The Harrises are members of the Warlick Family YMCA.

“What a *gem* of a gym!” LeeAnn quipped with a laugh.

Returning to the topic of hiking, she added that her family much enjoys this pastime.

“Most summers, we try to make a trip to one of our beautiful national parks,” she informed. “During the thick of the pandemic, we began hiking the Foothills Trail in segments. We are two-thirds of the way there and hope to get back on the trail soon. We are so glad to have Crowder’s Mountain as a local hiking option. When we lived here before, we spent many Saturday mornings hiking to the top.”

She also spoke of the historic home in which she and Rusty live. The Harrises purchased it from Chuck and



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“Some of my more favorite memories are related to the completion of projects and putting them into service, such as a large pipeline we built to Asheville a few years ago. Dominion Energy really values supporting the communities we serve.”

Lindsay Meakin.

“They lovingly cared for this piece of Gastonia history,” said LeeAnn, “and we intend to pick up where they left off as caretakers of this 98-year-old home. Sandra Garrison Hodges is the granddaughter of the Garrisons that lived here for more than 60 years. She came over and walked through the house and the yard soon after we bought the house. She shared so many memories about her grandparents and this house. What a treasure to hear her stories and hear from others that have a connection to our neighborhood! Many Gastonians grew up

in this neighborhood. Our neighbors have been so welcoming, and it’s clear this is a caring community.

“I can’t tell you how happy we are to return to Gastonia,” she added. “This is a special place. Our friends, neighbors and church family are dear to us. We are excited about being a part of Gastonia again. We are *home!*”

Meet Rusty

Like LeeAnn, Rusty also grew up in Summerville. The son of the late Bill and Norma Harris, Rusty has two brothers and a sister. Rick Harris is retired, living with his wife in California. Mark Harris owns a home inspection company in Orlando. Their sister, Kathy, is married and lives in Illinois. And their sister-in-law, Diane (widow of their late brother, Tim), lives in Niceville, Fla.

Rusty is also a Clemson grad. There he earned a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering. And at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, he earned a master’s degree in business administration.

In 2006, he was named president of PSNC Energy. He held that position until 2019, when Dominion Energy acquired the company. Afterwards, he was named vice president of gas distribution for the Carolinas.

“Most of my days are spent in meetings related to the operations of our natural-gas business in the Carolinas,” said Rusty. “I really enjoy getting out into the field to visit with our employees and see the work we’re doing. In the Carolinas, we have two of the faster-growing natural-gas businesses in the country, so we have lots of work going on.”

And what does Rusty most enjoy about his work?

“I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing our businesses grow,” he said, “and seeing the difference we’re making in the communities we serve. And I get to work with a lot of great people. Some of my more favorite memories are related to the completion of projects and putting them into service, such as a large pipeline we built to Asheville a few years ago. Dominion Energy really values supporting the communities we serve. I’d also include being with our employees when



Will, Jack, LeeAnn, Carlisle & Rusty - on ice with curling brooms



LeeAnn & Rusty Harris

they are giving back to the community, such as in ‘the Good Neighbor Fund’ and ‘Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?’ here in Gaston County.

“I’ve had the opportunity to be involved in a number of charities over the years,” he continued. “The United Way of Gaston County has been a big one for me, because through the UWGC, we see the work of a lot of different organizations. The Jaycee Burn Center at UNC has always been a favorite of mine as well. It’s a great resource for the citizens of North Carolina, and we’ve been longtime supporters. And church has always been a big part of our family.”

Rusty currently serves on the boards of the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce, the UNC Health Foundation and the E4 Carolinas (an energy-based organization in Charlotte).

Like the rest of his family, he enjoys hiking. He also enjoys paddleboarding, kayaking, traveling with the family and of course, going to Clemson football games.

Think you’d like to pursue a career path such as Rusty’s? He has advice for you.

“First,” he said, “education is the key to opening so many doors. My parents didn’t attend college, but as I was raised, there was never any question about it. One of the greatest gifts they gave me as parents was the expectation and opportunity to go to college. After that, it’s finding a career doing something you enjoy, that you feel is important and worthy of your time and that is at a place with people you enjoy working with.” **GL**

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David Williard

FIRE

Essic Sport Shop observes 75 years

Co-owner David Williard tells us all about it

By Thomas Lark

Photographs Courtesy of Howard Smith

Three-quarters of a century in business is a mighty long time.

And this year, that's just what the Essic Sport Shop is celebrating. According to co-owner David Williard, the Essic Sport Shop has been around for 75 years now, and it shows no signs of slowing down.

A Winston-Salem native, Williard recently told us more about this popular downtown Gastonia institution, which is known locally and regionally for its selection of sporting goods.

"In 1970," he revealed, "my father-in-law, Francis Essic—hence the name of the shop—bought Carson Sporting Goods, which was started in 1947. We were across from Tony's Ice Cream for seven years before moving to our current location. We had to move. The milkshakes were taking a toll on us!

"My business partner (Charlotte native Walter Phillips) came on board 25 years ago, when my father-in-law sold him part of the business," he continued. "We have been a good match, and we both have had the same drive to make a small business work. We both have loving wives that understand small business demands. Obviously, the past few years have taken a toll on us, as well as on many others. The old adage in sporting goods is, 'If you want to make a million, start with two million!'"

Williard expressed gratitude to the many patrons of the Essic Sport Shop.

"God has richly blessed us with countless faithful customers over the years," he said. "Our *mantra* has always been to 'help our customers buy,' rather than 'sell' them products. There is still a place in this world for friendly, courteous service. We want to treat people fairly, like we would want to be treated. Kinda the Golden Rule thing! Our main focus in recent years has been team uniforms, custom printing, trophy and plaque-engraving."

Williard was educated at Pfeiffer University and the University of Maryland, in the United States Army and at Gaston College.

"Go Rhinos!" he said, referring to the new mascot of Gaston College's recently revived sports program, the rhinoceros.

Phillips was educated at the University of North Carolina

at Charlotte. Williard played varsity tennis. Phillips played varsity soccer for the '49'ers.

Williard observed that all the years the Essic Sport Shop has been in business have meant a lot of good times.

"Some of my favorite memories have been all of the celebrities from the sports arenas I have been able to meet," he said. "My father-in-law was instrumental in introducing them to me as many stopped by the store to visit with him. He was a college coach at Pfeiffer and Wingate before getting into sporting goods. He also was the business manager for the ABA Carolina Cougars, so he knew many coaches and referees."

To name just a few, they include Bones McKinney of Wake Forest University, Dean Smith of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NCAA referee Jerry McGee; Chapel Hill basketball stars Al Wood and James Worthy; Georgetown basketball stand-out Eric "Sleepy" Floyd; and Florida State University basketball great Leonard Hamilton.



Walter Phillips and customer

Not sure precisely what it is that you're searching for? Don't worry.

Williard and Phillips will be happy to sit down with you and help you find exactly what you need, especially when it comes to uniforms.

"Not to mention the former athletes that have been our sales representatives over the years," Williard added.

Yep, the Essic Sport Shop has really made a slam-dunk in the world of local sports. Here's to another 75 years!

More about the Essic Sport Shop

The Essic Sport Shop features a complete selection of trophies, plaques, medallions and specialty items available at customers' requests. Once a selection is made, the shop's professionals engrave it with computer-aided, pinpoint accuracy.

And, as Williard continued, there's also a complete selection of athletic footwear for all sports. Do your kids play soccer, football, baseball or basketball? Maybe they're involved in track or wrestling. Whatever the sport, whether they're young kids, in middle or high school or even adults, bring 'em in to the Essic Sport Shop, and they're sure to find what they need. There are many styles and sizes in stock. Special orders can be tailored to meet your individual needs.

Of course, before you run, you must walk. And before the shoes come the socks, as Williard noted.

"We have a complete selection of socks to outfit and complement your team wear," he added.

Right now, baseball season is upon us. With that in mind, it's time to get kitted out for baseball and softball, from bats and balls to gloves and catcher equipment, as Williard informed.

"We even have equipment for umpires!" he observed.

And soon enough, before you know it, it'll be summer. That means soccer, of course. The shop has soccer equipment from balls to all accessories, from the youth-league level all the way up to the high school and college ranks.

The autumn brings football, followed swiftly by basketball.

"From the backyard and playground to the high school and college gym and field, Essic can meet the needs of all," Williard pointed out.

Not sure precisely what it is that you're searching for? Don't worry. Williard and Phillips will be happy to sit down with you and help you find exactly what you need, especially when it comes to uniforms.

"If we don't have it on the shelf, we will work with you and our numerous suppliers to find exactly what you are looking for," said Williard. "Team apparel is one of our specialties. If you can't come in, feel free to e-mail us your specifications, and we will work up exactly what you are looking for."

Talking of which, don't forget about the custom imprinting options available.

"Whether you need a completely new set of uniforms or a quick replacement, we supply the cloth and imprint names, numbers and logos to have you on your way," said Williard.

Got questions for Williard or Phillips? Maybe you have some specs for them to work up. E-mail them at david@essicsportshop.com or walter@essicsportshop.com.

The shop is located at 1320 E. Franklin Blvd. in downtown Gastonia. Call them at (704) 867-4491. **GL**



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Gaston County celebrates 175 years

Dodransbicentennial is big deal for big county

**By Melissa McCauley, Gaston County Travel and Tourism
Photographs by Gaston County Travel and Tourism**



Melissa
McCauley

It's a significant chapter in our colorful local history. It's the dodransbicentennial of Gaston County—its 175th anniversary—commemorating the date of Dec. 21, 1846, when it was carved out of Lincoln County and named for famed jurist, philanthropist and former congressman William Gaston of New Bern. Gaston County is one of the largest in the state, both in size and population, and there's always something fun to be found. As we commemorate this important milestone, it is very fitting to not only look back at where we have been but also to look ahead to what's on the horizon. Join us as we celebrate our many noteworthy attractions at big, local events and imagine the county's next 175 years.

All year long, we will be honoring our hospitality all-stars, including local hotels and other overnight accommodations, restaurants, bars, breweries, wineries, coffee shops, retailers, outfitters, attractions, museums, gardens, galleries, performing arts and music venues, parks, trails, waterways, golf courses and providers of information.

We need your help by nominating either a Gaston County hospitality business or employee that has wowed you! To nominate an all-star, check out the Website at www.gogastonnc.org/175, and submit your favorites.

As we get farther along into the year, we can't help but get excited. While the details have yet to be worked out, here's a list

of things to look forward to in the seasons ahead. Keep an eye on our aforementioned Website for up-to-date event listings.

Spring

When spring is in the air, people start to flock to the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden to see all the new blooms.

Spring is also the start of the race season at the Carolina Speedway, known as the Action Track. A few popular events include Gaston MAX (Multicultural Arts Xperience), held at the Rotary Pavilion in downtown Gastonia and showcasing art, music, literature, culture and more.

Then there's the Canine Carnival and Just Plain Dog Show. They take place at Dallas Park. And look for RiverFest, a family-friendly festival held on the banks of the Catawba River in Belmont. The Red Bull World Championship and Bike Fest will be held at Poston Park in Lowell in May. These latter two events feature not only incredible riding but also food vendors, bike demonstrations, local bike shop vendors, guided trail rides, a mountain bike skills clinic and more.

Summer

The fun really gets going during the summer!

Look for the outstanding athletes of the Gastonia Honey-Hunters baseball team, as they begin their second season at CaroMont Health Park.



The summer concert series takes place in our local downtown areas, providing fun for the whole family. And don't forget our local Fourth of July celebrations, with fireworks and more. Eastridge Mall is home to the Gaston All-American Fair: 10 days filled with rides, live music, games and more fireworks.

July also brings the Kids Catfish Tournament. This is an annual fishing tournament for kids, and it's the perfect opportunity to introduce your children to fishing.

Autumn

In the fall, look for Heritage Harvest Days. This event is held at Dallas Park in Dallas.

Other fall festivals are yet to be determined. But we look forward to some of our old favorites, especially during Halloween. The autumn is also a great time to visit our local farms to pick pumpkins, get lost in a corn maze (an amazing maze of *maize!*) and so much more.

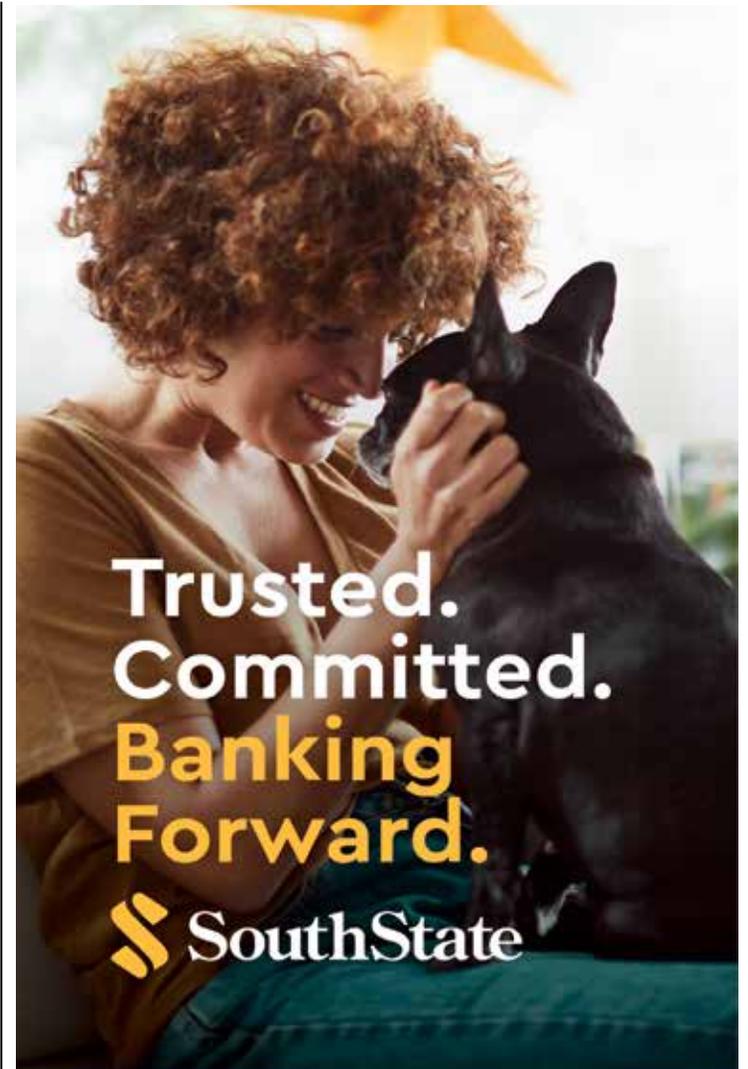
Winter

Finally, of course, there's Christmas.

This is always really big in Gaston County, and your delightful options abound, including the lights of Christmastown, USA in McAdenville. There's also "Holidays at the Garden" at the Stowe Garden.

Our local downtowns all put their own personal touches on the Christmas season as well. They deck their halls every year, and they host many fun events to celebrate the season. And also very big are snow-tubing over at Crowders Ridge and skating at the United States National Whitewater Center, located in rural Mecklenburg County, just over the Catawba River from Mount Holly.

Hopefully you are now pumped for the seasons ahead as we celebrate Gaston County's 175th anniversary! **GL**



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Staying healthy when flying

Reducing risks for COVID-19, discomfort, emergencies

By Kimberly Blaker



Kimberly Blaker

There are 6,500 in-flight medical emergencies nationwide on an annual basis.

A small fraction of these result in death, according to a *New England Journal of Medicine* study in 2013. Still, travelers can also experience a host of less serious health issues and discomfort, including COVID-19. But many of these problems can be avoided if travelers know the risks and take precautions.

The close proximity to others breathing the same air in such confined spaces increases the risk of COVID exposure. The best way to protect yourself and others is to avoid flying. If you must fly, research the safety measures each airline is taking, and choose the one with the most stringent. Protect yourself and others by wearing a fitted mask with multiple layers for added protection or better yet an N-95 mask. Carry a supply of hand-sanitizer and disinfecting wipes and use them as needed. Wash your hands immediately upon disembarking.

The humidity level of airplanes is extremely low, usually

under 10 percent. Combine this with the water loss caused by respiration, and passengers can become dehydrated enough to affect their health and mood. Drink plenty of water before, during and immediately after flying.

When flying, several factors can contribute to the risk of deep-vein thrombosis (a potentially deadly blood clot). Add tight clothes to the mix, and you could be in real trouble. I experienced this myself on an international flight. My legs swelled up just a couple hours into the flight, and this was aggravated by my skinny jeans. To reduce the restriction and prevent a blood clot, I had to slit the legs of my pants from top to bottom. Wear loose-fitting clothes, particularly on your lower extremities. Avoid high heels and tight shoes, which can also restrict blood flow.

Sitting too long can also increase the risk for deep-vein thrombosis. It's particularly problematic when flying because of the cramped seats that allow little room. Passengers should get up and move around after three to four hours in flight (sooner if you begin to experience swelling or discomfort), according to aerospace physician Fanancy Anzalone. Even just flexing your heels while seated can help.

Air pressure in your middle ear during the ascent and descent can make your ears feel clogged or even painful. Usually, chewing gum, yawning or swallowing relieves the pressure. But serious cases of airplane ear can lead to severe pain, hearing loss, vertigo, bleeding from the ear and more. In such cases, you'll need to see your doctor for treatment.

Relatedly, when you have a cold or sinus infection, it increases the risk for pressure-related middle-ear pain. This mightn't be a good time to fly. If infected, postpone your trip if possible.

Dehydration, skipping meals, illness, bad oral hygiene and eating certain foods



Passengers should get up and move around after three to four hours in flight (sooner if you begin to experience swelling or discomfort), according to aerospace physician Fanancy Anzalone. Even just flexing your heels while seated can help.

can cause in-flight bad breath. Prevention is self-explanatory for most of these contributors. As for foods to avoid before or during your flight, these include fish, garlic, onions, coffee and alcohol.

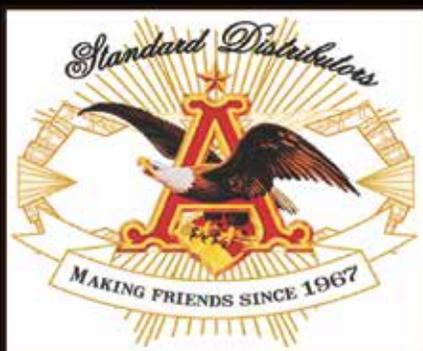
Sitting still for long periods, dehydration and a change in schedule that conflicts with your regular bowel movements can all contribute to flight-related constipation. Twelve or so hours before your flight, eat something high in fiber. Adjust your routine on the day of travel so your bowels can move before you leave for the airport. You can also take a stool-softener the day before your flight.

People with any type of lung condition—including, but not limited to, COPD, emphysema, severe asthma or a

lower-respiratory infection—are at a higher risk of serious complications when flying. That’s because oxygen in the air decreases at high altitudes. If you have any type of lung condition or even heart or circulatory conditions, consult your physician before scheduling a flight. Flying is often not recommended for such people.

According to Dr. Tatnai Bernett, flying is generally pretty safe before the 36th week of pregnancy. But flying can worsen any pre-existing pregnancy complications. If you’re more than 36 weeks along or have had any complications, consult your physician before flying. If you do fly, be sure to follow other health tips to reduce the risk of an in-flight emergency. **GL**

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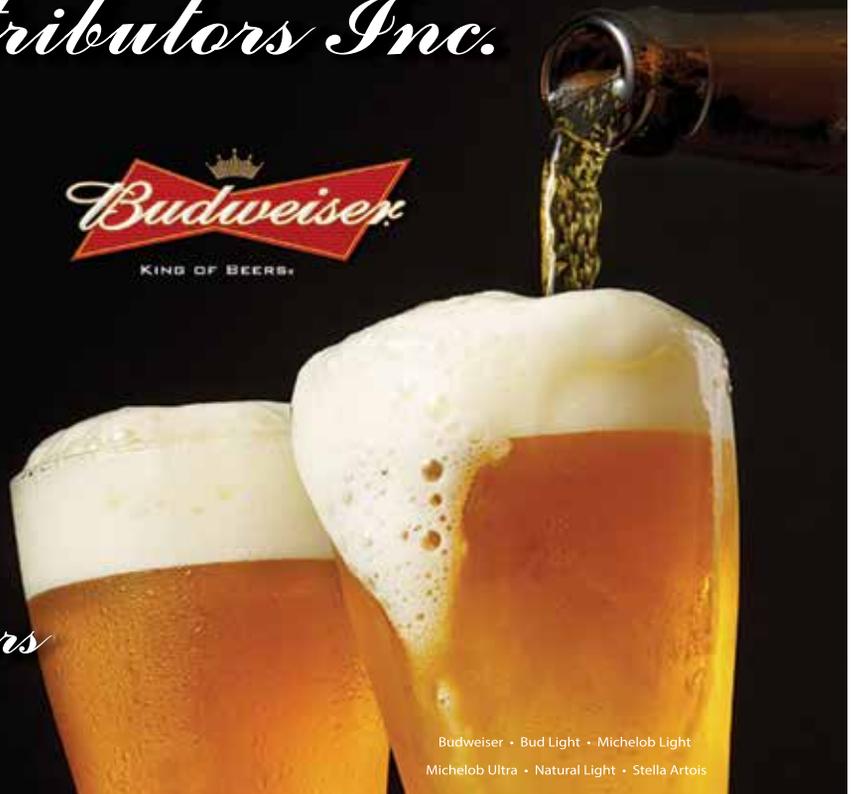
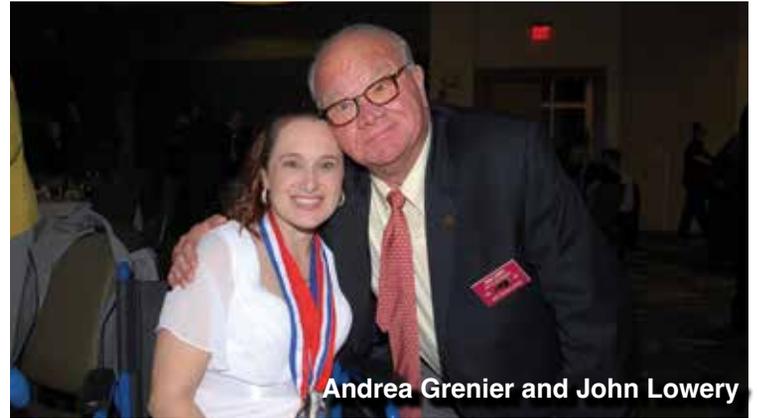


PHOTO GALLERY

NC Jaycees Convention 2022



Coach Sylvia Hatchell



Andrea Grenier and John Lowery



Chris Ashley, Chris Dellinger, Chuck Sim, Cole Stover, and Keith Bullard



Andrea's parents Ron and Coleen Grenier, Aunt Lynn Townsend, Joel and Renee Long, and Andrea



JCI USA National President Heather Danley, National Vice President Mary Anne Deal Jenkins, and South Carolina State president Jeremy Gordet



THS_Jaycees helpers

Gaston Dance Theatre celebrates 40 years



American Red Cross sees donation crisis

Worst in more than 10 years

Courtesy of the American Red Cross

It's an urgent appeal.

The American Red Cross is facing a national blood crisis—its worst blood shortage in more than a decade, posing a concerning risk to patient care. Doctors have been forced to make difficult decisions about who receives blood transfusions and who will need to wait until more products become available. Blood of all types and platelet donations are critically needed to help prevent further delays in vital medical treatments.

What is causing the blood shortage crisis? There has been:

- a 10-percent overall blood donation decline since March, 2020;
- a 62-percent drop in college and high school blood drives, due to the pandemic; student donors accounted for some 25 percent of donors in 2019, but they've accounted for just 10 percent during the pandemic;
- and ongoing blood drive cancellations due to illness, weather-related closures and staffing limitations.

Additional factors, such as a surge of COVID-19 cases and an active flu season, may compound the already bad situation.

At a time when many businesses and organizations across



The Red Cross, which supplies 40 percent of the nation's blood supply, has had to limit blood product distributions to hospitals as a result of the shortage.

the country are experiencing pandemic challenges, the Red Cross is no different. We are all learning how to live in this new environment, how we spend our time, where we work, how we give back and how we make a difference in the lives of others. And donating blood must continue to be part of it.

Supply of critical blood types

The Red Cross, which supplies 40 percent of the nation's blood supply, has had to limit blood product distributions to hospitals as a result of the shortage. In fact, some hospitals may not receive one out of four of the blood products they need.

Blood cannot be manufactured or stockpiled. It can only be made available through the kindness of volunteer donors. Less than a one-day supply of critical blood types has been available in recent weeks.

Potential donors are asked to please consider booking additional appointments further out in the year. This is due to the fact that while availability of drives may be affected, the need for blood remains constant, according to Red Cross Medical Director Dr. Baia Lasky.

A graphic of a white sign with a red border and a red background. The sign has the words "BLOOD SHORTAGE!" written in large, bold, red, sans-serif capital letters.

Blood donors needed now



“Winter weather across the country and the recent surge of COVID-19 cases are compounding the already-dire situation facing the blood supply,” said Lasky. “Please, if you are eligible, make an appointment to give blood or platelets in the days and weeks ahead to ensure no patient is forced to wait for critical care.”

Volunteers needed; safety ensured

In addition to blood donors, the Red Cross also needs the help of volunteers to support critical blood collections across the country.

Blood drive volunteers play an important role by greeting, registering, answering questions and providing information to blood donors throughout the donation process. Blood transportation specialists, which is another volunteer opportunity, provide a critical link between blood donors and blood recipients by delivering blood to hospitals in communities across the country.

Want to volunteer? See the Website at www.redcross.org/volunteertoday.

And each Red Cross blood drive and donation center follows the highest standards of safety and infection control,

and additional precautions, including face masks for donors and staffers, regardless of vaccination status, have been implemented to help protect the health of all those in attendance. Donors are asked to schedule an appointment prior to arriving at the drive. Donors can save up to 15 minutes at blood drives by completing the “rapid pass” computer/cell phone application at www.redcrossblood.org/rapidpass.

Donors need to bring a blood donor card or driver’s license or two other forms of identification required at check-in. Those who are 17 years of age in most states (16 with parental consent where allowed by state law), weigh at least 110 pounds and are in generally good health may be eligible to donate blood. High school students and other donors 18 years of age and younger also must meet certain height-weight requirements.

Make an appointment to give blood or platelets as soon as possible by using the “Red Cross blood donor” app; by consulting the Website at www.redcrossblood.org/donate; or by calling 1-800-RED CROSS (1-800-733-2767).

The local Red Cross is at 214 E. Franklin Blvd. in Gastonia. Call (704) 864-2623. 



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Gaston Dance Theatre marks 40 years

Local troupe presents *Beauty and the Beast*, May 6 and 7

By Elizabeth Lowry, Gaston Dance Theatre
Photographs courtesy of Gaston Dance Theatre



Camilla Bullard

Gaston Dance Theatre is this year marking four decades of excellence. Gaston Dance Theatre is the premier non-profit dance studio in Gaston County. Founded by Pat Wall in the autumn of 1982, GDT exists to stimulate interest in dance as a serious art form. For all these years, Gaston Dance Theatre has offered excellence in dance instruction and community performance opportunities for dancers trained in ballet, jazz, tap and modern dance.

As a non-competitive school, our focus is on teaching proper technique and the artistry of dance. We also encourage our dancers to engage with other community arts organizations through collaborative productions.

Gaston Dance Theatre takes great pride in its community productions. Our dancers are given the opportunity to

demonstrate their skills and share their passion for dance with audiences far beyond that of a recital. Each December, we perform the Christmas classic, *The Nutcracker*. In the spring, we have performed beautiful classical ballets as well as contemporary versions of classic tales, such as last year's *Journey to the Land of Oz*.

Weekly technique classes are offered in classical ballet, jazz, tap and modern dance. Creative movement and ballet/tap combo classes are available for our youngest dancers, ages 3-6. GDT offers small classes to best meet the specific needs and promote the individual growth of each student. Our goal is to provide proper technical training and discipline while promoting self-expression and healthy self-esteem. We work hard to keep the cost of lessons affordable, and scholarships are available to those who qualify.



A.S.P.I.R.E. program participants visit with Gaston Dance Theatre

As a non-competitive school, our focus is on teaching proper technique and the artistry of dance.

The GDT Company

The GDT Company, a long-standing part of the School of Gaston Dance Theatre, was re-established for the current dance year of 2021-22. It is designed to give our most dedicated students a deeper study of the art and practice of dance. Company members receive intense training in various styles of dance, requiring a commitment of at least five days and 10 hours a week. This program will help all dancers reach their individual goals, whether that goal is to become a professional, a working dancer, a high school or collegiate dance team member or acceptance into a university dance program. The GDT Company will build on all dancers' skills, strength and determination to follow their dreams. The group's members look forward to sharing their love of dance with the community.

Most individuals, businesses and organizations can explain how the pandemic has affected them. Gaston Dance Theatre is no exception. When we were given the stay-at-home order in March, 2020, our dance year effectively ended. Classes were cancelled, as was our spring production of *Sleeping Beauty*.

This was a huge blow for us as an organization but especially for our dancers, who had rehearsed so hard. We pushed forward with a few months of training *via Zoom* (an Internet-based application that essentially facilitates face-to-face conference calls). And we were so excited to return to the studio as soon as we were allowed. With stringent spacing requirements and cleaning procedures, we kept our classes running.

In 2020, our dancers persevered and performed *The Nutcracker* to an audience of just 25 people. Many of these dancers could not even have their entire families in attendance. Our productions normally serve as fundraisers for our organization, and without the usual ticket sales, of course the show did not meet that goal. Some would ask why we went to the trouble.

The answer is simple: our students love to dance. They love to perform, and even without an audience, the art of dance brings them joy and a sense of accomplishment.

The spring of 2021 brought us fewer restrictions and an almost normal production of *Journey to the Land of Oz*. This was the first spring production for artistic director/school director Camilla Bullard. The audience was entertained by the

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Gaston Dance Theatre's production, suitable for all ages and directed by Bullard, will follow many aspects of the fairy tale, but it will be unique in the addition of different characters and an adjusted storyline. One example is that the Rose is an actual character in our production, and she plays an integral role in the plot.

brightly colored costumes, elaborate sets and, most of all, the beautiful choreography. All three performances were sold out to the capacity allowed.

Last year's *Nutcracker* again required a limited capacity of 200 audience members for each show. All four performances were again sold out. Having the support of our community means so much to us. We have families who have made our *Nutcracker* part of their family Christmas traditions.

Going forward

Bullard grew up in Gastonia and trained under Wall.

Recently, Bullard said she feels strongly that Gaston Dance Theatre is part of a larger arts community in Gaston County. This is one reason she brought back the GDT Company. This group will represent us at events throughout the community

and share the art of dance with Gaston County.

So far during the 2021-22 season, the company's members have collaborated with the Gaston School of the Arts on two productions: *The Little Mermaid* and *Seussical, Jr.* With Gaston Christian School, they've also participated in *All Together Now!*, providing the dancing component to the school's talented group of singers and thespians.

The GDT staff and board of directors also see the importance of reaching out to underserved groups within our community. We are in our second year of participating with the Gaston County Schools in the A.S.P.I.R.E. program. This is an afterschool program that provides supplemental instruction to young students, and GDT is thrilled to offer them introductory ballet and jazz training.

Beauty and the Beast

GDT dancers will take the stage, May 6 and 7, for our spring production of *Beauty and the Beast*.

This classic fairy tale has many versions, with most people being familiar with the Disney cartoon. Gaston Dance Theatre's production, suitable for all ages and directed by Bullard, will follow many aspects of the fairy tale, but it will be unique in the addition of different characters and an adjusted storyline. One example is that the Rose is an actual character in our production, and she plays an integral role in the plot. There are also wolves and fairies as part of the forest scenes. We will also use a narrator, so the audience will experience the story through both dance and narration. Various dance styles will be featured, including ballet, jazz, modern and tap, and the choreography is by Bullard and Shonda Hooper. The cast is made up of 45 students and two adult volunteers.

Beauty and the Beast will be held Friday, May 6, at 7:30 p.m., and again, Saturday, May 7, at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., at the M.O. Owens Worship and Fine Arts Center Auditorium at Gaston Christian School, located at 1625 Lowell-Bethesda Road in Gastonia. Tickets go on sale April 11, via our Website: www.gastondance.com, and they are \$20 for adults; \$15 for students and for seniors, aged 60 and over; and \$10 for children 5 and under. **GI**



GDT dancers pose on the steps of St. Stephens AME Zion Church

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Confessions of a new veterinarian

Putting professional paws on a purrr-fect path!

By Dr. Sara Toner, TotalBond Veterinary Hospitals



Dr. Sara Toner

“How do you like being a veterinarian?” It’s a question I’m often asked by friends and family. The truth is, I have one of the most rewarding jobs out there. But just as with any job, it can have its challenges.

I started on my path to becoming a veterinarian as so many of us do: with a love for animals and a desire to help as many as I could. I was fascinated by watching my family veterinarian perform exams on her patients and being able to diagnose them without them ever saying a word to her. It was like watching a live-action mystery, and I wanted to be the detective to solve the case. After four years completing a bachelor’s degree and another four years of rigorous studies during veterinary school, I finally had my doctorate degree, my veterinary license, and I was ready to begin my new career.

Following graduation in May of last year, I’ve now been

in general practice, seeing small animals (cats and dogs), for about six months now. What a rollercoaster it’s been! A typical day begins roughly around 8 a.m., when I arrive at the hospital. I start by checking blood work and X-ray reports from the day before and get to work communicating those results to owners. Appointments start around 8:30 a.m., and I will see a variety of wellness and sick visits throughout the day.

In this profession, you must be flexible, because you never know what your day will bring. It might be a new puppy visit, where you discuss the importance of vaccines and offer advice on diets, potty training and how to curb biting behavior. It could be a sick patient who needs blood work and X-rays to determine what’s going on. Or it may be an elderly patient that you help to cross over the Rainbow Bridge and console the family members as they say goodbye to their loved one. You bounce around from room to room,



I was fascinated by watching my family veterinarian perform exams on her patients and being able to diagnose them without them ever saying a word to her. It was like watching a live-action mystery, and I wanted to be the detective to solve the case.

trying to give each patient and client your undivided attention. Some days are harder than others. But every day, I learn something new.

In my short six months, I have seen some amazing cases. I have worked with several patients diagnosed with lymphoma (a cancer of a type of the white blood cells) and have had the privilege of being part of their care team and performing chemotherapy. Among the most rewarding moments are the occasions when I can tell owners that their fur babies are in complete remission, knowing they'll get to hopefully spend another very good year or more together.

I have also found that I am passionate about surgery. Recently, we had a little dog brought to us after being attacked by a larger dog. The proudest moment of my career so far was watching her walk a few days after performing surgery to save her leg.

These moments make my job worth it. Being a veterinarian can be hard and emotionally taxing, as not every case turns out the way you expect. And the unfortunate reality is you can't save every patient.

I have learned that it is important to have a support system. My family, my mentors, my co-workers and my fellow new grads have kept me sane as I try to navigate these waters. It is difficult feeling as if you need to know everything when you start practicing. The truth is, it's impossible to know everything, and there is strength in asking for help when you need it.

I'm still learning how to be the best doctor I can be. Every day, I strive to learn a little more than I knew the day before. I'm six months in and excited to see where veterinary medicine takes me! 



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THOSE WHO SERVE

Andrea Grenier passes the torch with the NC Jaycees

Memorable year for former president

By Thomas Lark

Photographs Courtesy of Andrea Grenier



Andrea Grenier

The past year has been huge for Andrea Grenier. Formerly the director of communications and events at the Gaston Business Association and now the scholarship and donor relations specialist at Gaston College, Grenier, 38, is a graduate of Gaston Day School and Catawba College. She recently completed her post as the 86th president of the North Carolina Jaycees, becoming its board chairman. A 12-year Jaycees veteran, she'll also have a leadership role

in the Gaston County chapter, which in October merged with the Belmont-based Montcross Area Chamber of Commerce.

In a speech to the Jaycees at their state-level convention, held in February in Gastonia, Grenier extolled her local community.

"Gaston County is an awesome place!" she enthused.

Grenier also thanked the Jaycees themselves for the opportunity. It was, she observed, a year of adventures.

"In August, 2020, I ran on the theme of 'rise up, reach out and reconnect,' which quickly became 'rise up and roar!'" she said, adding, "I carried that theme throughout 2021. As chapter members, you all rose up and were recognized by your presidents as rising stars by taking the lead on projects or just leading by example."

Amongst others, she cited Taylor Furgalack of Winston-Salem and Greg and Nikki Stabler of Cary for their Jaycee-related work.

"After almost two years of little interaction amongst ourselves and our communities, we all had to overcome a lot of obstacles," said Grenier. "So I say, 'Thank you for rising up and getting your chapters back on the right track.' I witnessed a lot of you, as chapter presidents, rise up and find your voices as leaders.

"Rising up myself," she added, "I had to get out of my comfort zone and visit places I'd never been, a lot of the time by myself. I also had to find my inner voice and confront situations head-on instead of being my normal peacekeeper. By reaching out to the local presidents and being engaged, we were able to get three chapters back involved with the state. It's great to see support from the Jacksonville, Craven County and Spencer chapters. I'm particularly proud of one individual who saw something happening in his chapter and felt it wasn't right, so he reached out to the state to get some help. After some crazy turns of events, he is now the president of that chapter."

Making connections again

Being a Jaycee, as Grenier noted, is all about altruism.

"During my year, I reconnected with myself and



Andrea Grenier and her sons Ollie and Lincoln Schriff

During her presidency, Grenier drove more than 6,000 miles throughout North Carolina, visiting folks in various chapters and generally getting to know them all better. “And I had the privilege of visiting 12 out of 16 chapters.”

remembered why I’m a Jaycee,” said Grenier, adding that this means helping “others succeed. It brought me a lot of pride to be able to visit chapters and help their projects be successful, from helping manage the mac-and-cheese tables to picking vegetables in a garden. It felt good to reconnect with society in general this year.”

During her presidency, Grenier drove more than 6,000 miles throughout North Carolina, visiting folks in various chapters and generally getting to know them all better. “And I had the privilege of visiting 12 out of 16 chapters,”

she said.

It was, as Grenier continued, all in all, a time of positive connections, good vibes and real help to others in communities across the state.

“While I may be extinguishing my year as president,” she said, “I will cherish all of the memories, good and bad, from this year, I will have added more than 100 people to my Facebook friends, and I will continue to rise up in other ways. Thank you, everyone, for an adventurous year!” 



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THOSE WHO SERVE

N.C. YMCA's provide 2.5 million meals

Gaston County YMCA's make important contributions

By Michelle McKinley, N.C. Alliance of YMCA's
Photograph Courtesy of N.C. Alliance of YMCA's



Sheree Vodicka

They took a big bite out of local and regional hunger last year. They're the North Carolina YMCA's, and they provided nearly 2.5 million meals to children, adults and seniors in 2021, all in the fight against food insecurity in the wake of COVID-19. In addition, YMCA's donated more than 640,000 pounds of food, including more than 430,000 pounds of fresh, healthy produce, to nourish those in need. And Gaston County's YMCA's were big parts of that equation, according to CEO Sheree Vodicka of the N.C. Alliance of YMCA's.

"The Y continues to serve people across the state who are struggling to put food on the table as a result of the pandemic," Vodicka said recently. "As a nonprofit, the Y is a critical community partner and resource. We have proudly worked alongside schools, city and county social service agencies and other local organizations to meet the increased need in many different ways."

Many YMCA's served or delivered meals when schools

were closed to in-person learning, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some became USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) food program sponsors or sites. To help fill gaps, many expanded current efforts, including USDA programs, food recovery programs and food drives and food distribution sites in their local communities. Y's strengthened and developed new local partnerships and relied on dedicated volunteers and donors to support this community outreach, as Vodicka continued.

"Having access to food is foundational for children to learn and grow, for adults to perform well at work and to care for their families and for seniors to maintain health and well-being," she said. "Access to nutritious food is critical to successful outcomes. The Y is committed to strengthening communities through this work."

According to Feeding America, one in five children and one in seven adults in North Carolina face hunger. Thirty-two percent of seniors live in or near poverty levels. Twenty-six percent of the state's homes with children in them don't have enough food.

In Gaston County, every day during the summer, local YMCA's delivered 1,700 meals to four locations (apartment complexes and a mobile home community), according to Martha Baker, the on-site manager of one said complexes.

"The lunch program was a great help to the community, especially the kids," said Baker. "It helped them feel less isolated during the shutdown and provided much-needed meals. Even when a parent has the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), it isn't enough, and the food isn't always healthy. The Y also helped the kids form lasting relationships with their neighbors that they didn't realize were also classmates."

According to the Food Research and



Gaston games

Action Center, the rates of food insufficiency at the end of last year were higher than they were over the summer. And the price of food has increased through the year, making it more challenging for more people to afford to eat.

Want to support the YMCA's work in continuing to feed those in need? Please donate to your local Y. And to learn more about the Y's COVID-19 response and impact in North Carolina, be sure to check out the Website at www.ncymcaalliance.org/impact.

More about the North Carolina Alliance of YMCA's

The YMCA is a nonprofit community benefit organization. Since its foundation in England in the 1840's, it has spread its altruistic and salutary message and mission around the globe.

And here in North Carolina, YMCA facilities collectively serve about a million people across the state, including children, adults and seniors.

The North Carolina Alliance of YMCA's is a nonprofit corporation that represents the 25 independent YMCA associations in the state. Its purpose is to build the capacity of all the state's YMCA's and, through effective partnerships, to foster collaboration on both local and statewide initiatives. It advocates on behalf of the YMCA's mission and cause with elected officials and stakeholders at the local, state and national levels, and it co-ordinates communication to build consensus, thus ensuring that YMCA's are recognized as leaders in youth development, healthy living and social responsibility.

For more information, be sure to check out the Website at www.ncymcaalliance.org. 



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By Kimberly Blaker



Kimberly Blaker

Summer will be here soon. Whether you're seeking enrichment for your children; a way to keep them occupied and supervised while you work; or you just need a short reprieve from parenting, there's sure to be a summer camp right for your children and family. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, many summer camps will be up and running, either offering alternative programs or following safety protocols to reduce the risk to campers and staffers.

Summer camp offers kids plenty of benefits, and many kids are thrilled with the idea of going away to camp. Still, for some kids, particularly those who are shy, introverted or homebodies, the thought of going away for a night, let alone a week or more, can cause considerable anxiety. When kids are adamantly opposed to it, forcing summer camp on them may not be in their best interest.

But for kids who are eager—or at least willing to give it a shot without much fuss—summer camp offers opportunities that they may not have elsewhere. Summer camp provides kids such benefits as:

- fostering independence;
- a place to develop new and lasting friendships;

- the development of new skills;
- the discovery of new interests and hobbies;
- the opportunity for creative expression;
- a break from being plugged in to electronics;
- daily exercise;
- improved self-esteem;
- working well with others;
- being a part of a community;
- and preventing or reducing summer-related learning loss.

Before you begin looking into summer camps, create a list of the criteria you're looking for. Here are some things you'll want to consider.

- What is the purpose of sending your child to summer camp?
- Do you want a resident (overnight) or a day camp?
- Are you looking for a short-term (week or two) or summer-long program?
- Do you want a very structured camp or one that provides your child with lots of freedom and choices?
- What are your child's preferred sports, hobbies or other interests?

Once you've narrowed down some of the criteria, you can begin your search. An excellent place to start is your local parent-themed magazine. Many summer camps advertise in

such publications, available at newsstands and over the Internet. You may also consult the Website at www.summercamps.com, where you can search by ZIP code or category.

The American Camp Association accredits summer camps. So this is another excellent resource to check. The ACA educates camp owners and directors in health, safety and program quality for both staffers and campers as



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well. It then accredits camps that meet ACA standards.

Is this camp a safe option for my child and family during the pandemic?

Many summer camps are now offering Internet-based programs so kids can avoid the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19. Such programs range from a couple of hours a day to all-day camps with a broad range of activities led by counselors. These options may range from the free to several hundred dollars.

Perhaps you're considering sending your child to an in-person summer camp. If so, the Centers for Disease Control offers suggestions on how summer camp programs can reduce campers' risks. Recommendations include promoting behaviors to minimize spread, maintaining a healthy environment, maintaining healthy operations, being prepared for when someone gets sick and special considerations for overnight camps. When considering an in-person summer camp, review the CDC's more detailed recommendations on the Website at www.cdc.gov, then compile questions to ask the summer camp you're considering to make sure it adheres to these safety protocols.

How does the camp ensure your child's safety?

Find out what kind of safety training the camp provides its staffers. Are there staffers trained in CPR, on hand at all times? What are the camp's procedures in the event your child becomes ill, has an accident or an emergency?

Don't sweat it

Remember, although there are many great camps, none is likely to offer everything precisely the way you want it. Just choose the one that best fits your child and satisfies your most important criteria. Your child will have many summers to come and plenty more opportunities for more exciting camp experiences. 



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Tom Efird: then and now

Former head of Standard Distributors enjoying retirement

By Thomas Lark

Photographs Courtesy of *Gaston Lifestyles Magazine*



Tom Efird

Local businessman Tom Efird was on the very first cover of *Gaston Lifestyles* magazine, 10 years ago.

We recently caught up with Tom to see what he's doing nowadays. He has continued to enjoy life since he retired at 70, stepping down as the longtime head of Gastonia-based Standard Distributors, a wholesale supplier of Anheuser-Busch products. It serves grocers, convenience stores, restaurants and bars throughout Gaston and Lincoln counties. Some 45 staffers work for the company's sales and distribution arms, Tom informed.

His career also includes a stint as a lawyer, two generations ago. A stellar student in the prestigious law school of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he drank deeply from the Pierian spring of higher learning—his diligent studies much facilitated by the habit he cultivated as a child: being a voracious reader. And it was while at Chapel Hill, some 60 years ago, that he met his future wife, Anne, who was then a history major. Anne would soon become a teacher in the local schools and at Gaston College. But she retired early to become a fulltime mom, once the Efirds' kids were born.

They have two sons. Tim Efird, 53, runs Standard

Distributors these days. And Lewis Efird, 51, is the president and owner of United Oil of the Carolinas. The two companies are located “within a couple-hundred yards of each other,” as Tom pointed out, on Spencer Mountain Road.

Tom's family has long been known for its contributions. His father, Hoyle Efird, was once the sheriff of Gaston County. He also later served two terms in North Carolina's state legislature, as his proud son noted.

These days, Tom and Anne Efird reside at Covenant Village in Gastonia. They've been married 58 years in August. They're members of the First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia. Tom is now 82.

But as he told us, he still keeps a hand in Standard Distributors, the company he created in 1967, back in the dark days when he and such leaders across the state had to fight to bring Gaston and countless counties in North Carolina into the modern world, with the legal sale of alcoholic beverages. The result may be summed up in one word—a mighty important one, in which Tom is a devout believer: *progress*.

Talking of which, life has moved on and Standard Distributors with it. But that doesn't mean the countless local folks who love Tom have forgotten him.

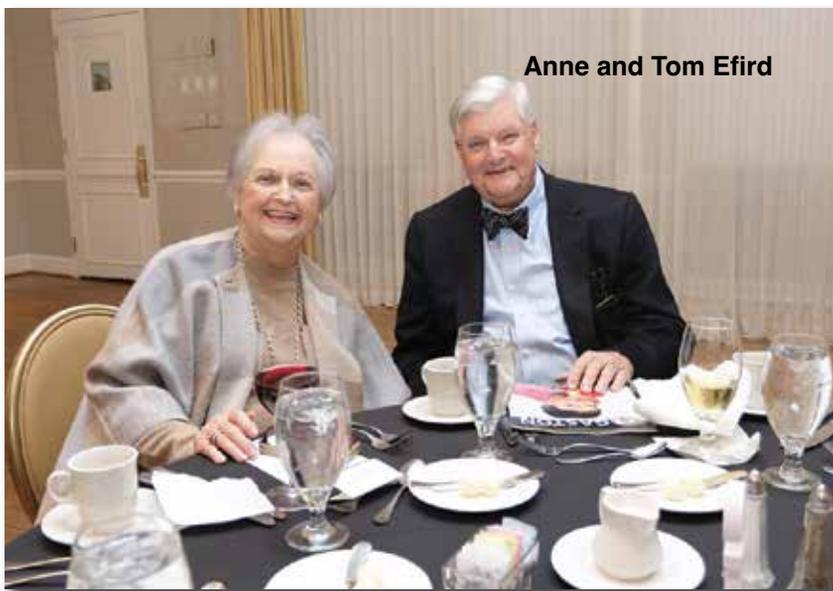
“A lot of the old-time employees still want to talk to me,” he said. “But they know perfectly well where I am. Tim is fully in charge, and he was really running the place, even before I ‘quote’ *retired*.”

Tom chuckled at this, adding he sometimes has to tell folks that it's a new day at Standard Distributors, with a new generation.

“I've got to make it plain that *they're* running the show,” he said, “and I no longer am. It's worked out very well. But I still keep my hand in what's going on.”

Most such businessmen opt to play a lot of golf when they retire. Not Tom Efird. He prefers tennis.

“Golf is about the only bad habit I *don't* have!” he joked, adding kiddingly of his friend, *Gaston Lifestyles* CEO Mo Ally, “Unfortunately, playing tennis, I meet a lot of guys, like Mo Ally, who become



Anne and Tom Efird

my friends. My tennis game is a little slower than it used to be. I've never been a great player, but I am enthusiastic."

A sports fans, Tom likes Charlotte's Panthers and Hornets. And he still follows the fortunes of his beloved Chapel Hill, and he gets tickets to Tarheel games, as he revealed. But these days, he gives them to his granddaughter. Tim's daughter, Elizabeth, is a senior at Chapel Hill.

Returning to the topic that served as a catalyst for the birth of Standard Distributors, Tom acknowledged that bringing legal sales of alcoholic beverages to North Carolina was indeed a fight.

"It was very heated. There were some real hot contests. There was a number of areas in North Carolina that didn't permit legal sales. North Carolina is still a local option state. Local communities have to vote to permit sales. There are very few areas left that are dry. You don't hear any dispute about it anymore. The county of Gaston went wet."

As one example, he noted that it's only 11 years now since folks in Stanley finally voted for the sale of beer and wine in grocery and convenience stores and on-premise liquor sales. It's axiomatic that such things equate to communities' growth and prosperity, as Northern and foreign-based businesses simply will not locate facilities in dry communities. Despite some strident brouhaha from the usual suspects in 2011, nearly two-thirds of those voting in Stanley opted for progress, not regress. The matter is now settled in Gaston County, in North Carolina and throughout the South, as Tom noted.

"It's become sort of a non-issue," he observed. "The only disputes you get are around the fringes of that, such as whether to have Sunday sales and when to begin and so forth (generally, it's after 2 p.m. on Sundays)."

Tom continues to be an avid reader. He reiterated that he still enjoys tennis, and he is a keen follower of sports.

"At 82, that's enough for me!" he added with a laugh.

And what would he tell folks, if asked to sum up for them just who Tom Efirm is?

"I'd say that I'm a native of Gaston County, and these are my people," he said. "I know them and love them. I've always tried to stand for progress and education and trying to do things to help the economic life of the community, meaning opportunities for everybody."

Among the many hats he's worn over the years, Tom has served on the boards of both Gaston College and Belmont Abbey College.

"I've been delighted to see both those institutions grow and thrive," he said. "I like seeing their students better themselves."

Tom also talked of Gaston County's past and the future.

"We were tied to textiles," he said, "and that was sort of the flavor of the county back then. When I grew up, you didn't need a watch, because they blew the mill whistle! It gave us the rhythm of a factory, all over the county. We've watched the textile industry take some hard blows because of world trade. The government had other fish to fry with foreign countries. But the mills that have survived remain strong. The business mix of Gaston County has really changed a lot. Now all of a sudden, we're on the cusp of growth all around us."

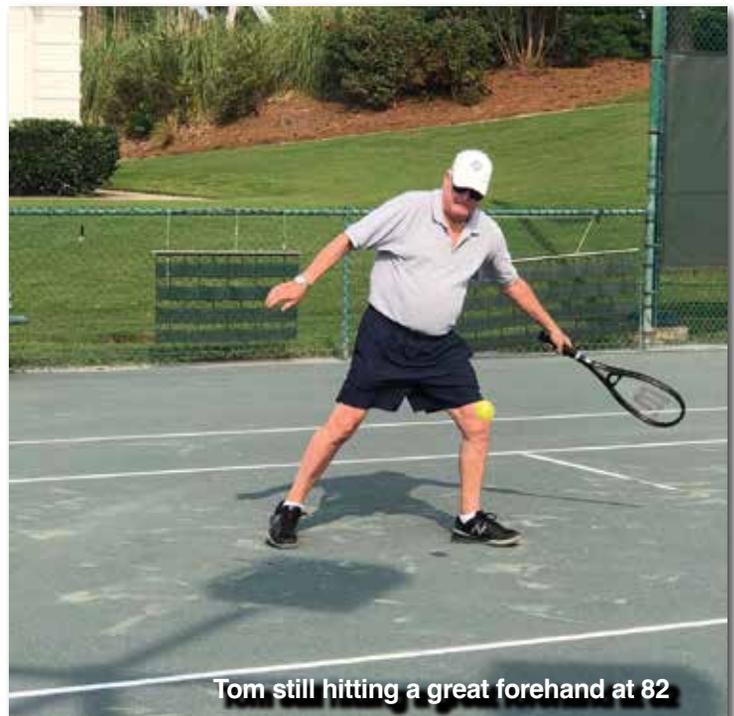
It's the Charlotte effect: Gaston County benefits economically from Mecklenburg's own economy, and the former plays host to the bedroom communities of the latter.

"I'm very interested in transportation issues," Tom said, citing the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport and the "tremendous difference it's made in the kind of industry located here."

Other than British-based businesses, no foreign country is more heavily invested in the region than Germany. Lufthansa flights into Douglas, allowing German businessmen to fly here within hours, have made a crucial difference, as Tom pointed out.

Still, progress never comes without problems, as he added.

"Those apartments in Charlotte are creeping right up NC-27," he remarked. "We're in an area of real change. But overall, that's a *good* thing. Change is really coming right now. I'm sure we'll have some things we won't like about it. But look at Belmont. That's a really *chic* place to live now. I'm really pleased to see the nice growth." 



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