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Local News for Everyone

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2025



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PHOTOS BY ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Students and staff at Central Carolina Technical College as well as USC Sumter students, City of Sumter employees and Clemson Extension representatives gather to test out the new litter education and awareness sculpture that will live permanently at Prisma Health Shot Pouch Greenway Park. Read more about the creation on A19.





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Information: (803) 774-1200
Advertising: (803) 774-1246
Classifieds: (803) 774-1200
Delivery: (803) 774-1258
News: email pressrelease@theitem.com
Sports: sports@theitem.com


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HAPPILY EVER AFTER STARTS *Here*

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Contest celebrates the best of everything in our community

Welcome to one of my favorite (and busiest) times of the year, Best Of season! With contests in Sumter and Clarendon underway, our staff at *The Item* is gearing up to celebrate more than 500 winners across the two counties.

For Sumter, this is the 25th anniversary of the contest, although its growth has multiplied in recent years. What started as a mail-in ballot of a few dozen local favorites has transformed into a celebration extravaganza, complete with hundreds of thousands of votes, a red-carpet event and year-round showcase.

The “best,” of course, is open to healthy debate, personal preference and interpretation. Most of us don’t try, for instance, every dentist in town. That sounds painful just typing the words. But the winner of that category and others is



Vince Johnson

inevitably a business that has favor within parts of the community and may help future customers on their own path.

Best Of contests epitomize the celebration of community that leads our coverage at *The Item*. Although we also

serve to protect the community and shed light on things happening around you, one of our primary focuses is building the best within our Sumter communities.

Our year-round coverage celebrates Sumter, its people and its businesses. *The Item* is unapologetically pro-Sumter. We want to help you live your best life.

If this coverage is important to you, I’d ask you to join our cause by subscribing to *The Item* at theitem.com/subscribe or by calling our office.

We look forward to the celebration.

Vince Johnson is publisher of The Sumter Item.



MICAH GREEN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Hundreds of Best of Sumter annual readers’ choice contest winners were celebrated last year at Sumter Original Brewery during an awards gala.

OSTEEN

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36 W. LIBERTY ST., SUMTER, S.C. 29150
(803) 774-1200

Vince Johnson
PUBLISHER
vince@theitem.com

Kayla Green
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
kayla@theitem.com
(803) 774-1235

Jill Burrus
CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER
CLASSIFIEDS, SUBSCRIPTIONS AND
DELIVERY
jill@theitem.com
(803) 774-1212

Melanie Smith
ASSISTANT EDITOR
melanie@theitem.com
(803) 774-1293

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Karen Cave
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Devin McDonald
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(803) 983-0786

Mark Pekuri
mark@theitem.com
(803) 464-8917

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Rep. Murrell Smith



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Government

4 recent headlines to know from Sumter government

BY DEIRDRE CURRIN

deirdre@theitem.com

WILL WHEELER RESIGNS, SPECIAL ELECTION TO COME IN JUNE

Three days into the legislative session, S.C. District 50 House Rep. William Wheeler, a Democrat from Lee County, resigned from the position he has held since 2016. His resignation was made official on Jan. 17, and he confirmed later that his plans were to run for a 12th Circuit Court Judge seat, which by law requires he be out of the General Assembly for at least one year.

With Wheeler's vacancy comes the need to fill his seat, and two candidates have already filed for the job. Republican Bill Oden and Democrat Carl Whetsel both announced their intention to file for the seat early, and both have since made good on that promise.

Oden is the chairman of the Sumter County Republican Party and served in both the U.S. Air Force and the South Carolina State Guard, the former of which he spearheaded the formation of the first Cyber Unit for. Oden worked for Kershaw County School District from 1997-2016, retiring as the district's senior systems administrator. He is a resident of Sumter County.

Whetsel is retired from the U.S. Army and the S.C. Army National Guard and served combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He also owned Whetsel Chiropractic Clinic for 33 years. He spent 10 years on Bishopville City Council and 10 years on the Lee County Board of Elections and Voter Registration. Most recently, Whetsel retired from the State Park Service, for which he worked as a ranger. Whetsel is a resident of Lee County.

The special election will take place on June 3, with an early voting period of April 9 to April 11. If a primary is needed, it will be on April 1, with an early voting period of March 17 to

March 28.

CITY OF SUMTER OKS 1ST READING OF DRAFT BUDGET FOR MORE THAN \$350K IN FEDERAL FUNDS

Since summer last year, the City of Sumter has been preparing to receive federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the form of Community Development Block Grants, or CDBGs for short. At Sumter City Council's meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 4, the first reading was approved to adopt a budget for the expected \$368,392 worth of CDBG money.

CDBG money goes toward community development, specifically to low- to moderate-income areas and residents. This includes a range of projects such as housing repair, youth services and demolitions.

Below is the proposed budget for CDBG money that passed first reading on Feb. 4. This budget is currently only a draft:

Administration — \$73,678. This money would go toward salaries, benefits, vehicle maintenance and gas, conferences and office supplies.

Demolition — \$30,000. Slum and blight in residential and commercial areas would be targeted with this money.

Sumter United Ministries — \$44,900. SUM would use this money for materials needed to do minor housing rehabilitation for low- to moderate-income homeowners within city limits.

Housing Repair — \$165,314. Six houses of low- to moderate-income homeowners would be rehabilitated with this money.

YMCA Youth Services — \$2,500. This money would provide vouchers for low- to moderate-income youth to participate in activities.

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DID YOU KNOW? February and March — More than simply months on the calendar

— Historian Carter Woodson was credited with launching **Black History Week** in 1926 to recognize the major contributions of African Americans during the second week of February to coincide with the birthdays of President Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12) and abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass (Feb. 14).

Congress expanded it to **National Black History Month** 50 years later during the

nation's bicentennial celebration in 1976 when then-President Gerald Ford urged the country to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history."

— **National Women's History Month** honors the successes and sacrifices of U.S. women. It actually dates back to March 8,

1857, when hundreds of women from New York City garment and textile factories rallied to protest harsh working conditions. Later, in 1909, New York City became the site of the nation's first Women's Day celebration, a year after 15,000 women there marched to demand shorter working hours, better pay, an end to child labor and the right to vote.

More than 70 years later in 1981, Congress

set aside the second week of March as **National Women's History Week**. Six years later in 1987, Congress expanded the week to one month. Through the decades, women have made advances that include increased earnings, educational attainment and job opportunities.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau



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GOVERNMENT

FROM PAGE A4

Youth Employment — \$49,000. During the summer 2025 program, 35 to 40 low- to moderate-income students would be hired with this money.

HYPE Program — \$3,000. This program supplies low- to moderate-income students with supplies, mentoring and field trips.

This budget would run from April 1, 2025, to March 31, 2026.

HOTEL WITH VIOLENT HISTORY APPROVED FOR DEMOLITION

Sumter City Council members, with the exception of Anthony Gibson, who was absent, unanimously approved first reading of Resolution No. 978 to demolish Rodeway Inn at 220 N. Washington St. during its regularly scheduled council meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 4.

On Thursday, Feb. 13, the City of Sumter's Design Review Board approved the demolition, making it official.



ZAC HOOKS / THE SUMTER ITEM

First reading of the demolition of Rodeway Inn, 226 N. Washington St., was approved by Sumter City Council on Tuesday, Feb. 4, due to its history of criminal activity. The demo was approved by Historic Preservation Design Review board on the afternoon of Thursday, Feb. 13.

The North Washington Street structure has a history of criminal activity, including fatal shootings. The most recent was on Jan. 27, when 28-year-old Raekwon Owens was killed and a 25-year-old Sumter

woman was injured; a second woman was present during the shooting but was not injured. Two men, Tevon Guess and Melvin Belle, were arrested and charged with murder and two counts of attempted

murder, according to Sumter Police Department. Belle was also charged with possession of a weapon by a convicted felon and possession of a weapon during a violent crime, the department added.

SUMTER COUNTY RECEIVES CLEAN AUDIT REPORT

The annual audit report from Sumter County's 2023-24 fiscal year was presented at a Sumter County Council meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 28, and according to Grant Davis of Mauldin and Jenkins CPAs and Advisors, Sumter County came up with a "clean report."

"We did not note any instances of noncompliance or internal control deficiencies to report to you all, and [...] the county has received a clean opinion on its spending of federal awards specific to the Coronavirus state and local fiscal recovery funds," Davis said. "So, all in all, a clean report with nothing negative at all to report to you all, honestly a positive experience from our perspective."

Item Reporter Alaysha Maple contributed to this article.

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Learning and the brain

The maggots of mechanism

“The opposite of life is not death, but mechanism.”

— Iain McGilchrist, neuroscientist and philosopher

The maggots embedded themselves into the soft piled fleece of the campers’ bright orange hoodies, which they wore, defiantly, against the hot days in late August — 2005 — when the afternoon rains and the relieving sunlight concocted a thick blanket of humidity in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

It was my first week as a wilderness therapy instructor, and minutes before I heard them screaming, I had been searching for leftover coals in the central campfire, hoping my breath would carefully push the ashes aside and reveal an orange nugget still burning from the night before. And since initiation rites exist in every human community, even the granola lovers of western North Carolina, I was also in charge of making the coffee for the other instructors. As a rule, it’s best to have your coffee before de-maggotting campers in your charge. But the screams came just a little too early.

Hours later — after we had pulled the maggoty hoodie over the two girls’ heads and picked a few maggots out of their long, unwashed hair and had them change into new clothes and then sent them back to basecamp for showers — we learned what happened.

Every week, we spent two nights at the same campsite; these were “lay-over” days, when a field therapist would hike out to the group and meet with the campers individually to assess their progress and then provide us instructors with goals for the following week. Convinced that bears and copperheads liberally roamed the woods at night, looking for victims, the two new campers decided that urinating in their sleeping bags

instead of the designated latrine was a safer bet, which was, by any measure, a reasonable assumption to make for two girls who’d never camped a day in their lives. But of course, the flies set in during the warm afternoons of “lay-over” and the eggs must have hatched in the night and began their expedition toward the warm, damp clothing, spreading over the girls’ bodies as they tossed and turned during those first nights of sleeping on the ground.

It is fear that keeps us rolling around in the maggoty pestilence of our own minds. “The human brain was designed [...] to mislead us, even enslave us,” argues journalist Robert Wright. And in this story, the campers’ fear perpetuated a story in their minds, a story about how dangerous the wilderness can be and how much safer they would be to stay put, wrapped in their warm sleeping bags. While it made them feel safe in the short term, it was clearly not a sustainable solution to living in the woods for the next few weeks. It worked, until it didn’t.

They needed a new story and a new set of skills, both of which required time, energy, movement — and disruption.

When our minds are plagued by fears, we often adapt to the world in

negative ways. We live with a deficiency (or scarcity) mindset, according to humanistic psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman; this deficiency mindset “colors all of our perceptions and distorts reality” (i.e., the bears and copperheads multiply). Whether it’s safety, food, love or respect, “the greater the deficiency of these needs, the more we distort reality to fit our expectations and treat others in accordance with their usefulness in helping us satisfy our most deficient needs.” The campers felt unsafe and acted as reasonably as they could in that situation. Can we blame them?

We are reminded in the book of James (2:15) that Christians are called to meet these immediate needs: “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” When these needs are not met consistently, people struggle to self-actualize (i.e., meet their potential), which leads to transcendence — “Transcendence, which rests on a secure foundation of both security and growth, is a perspective in which we can view our whole being from a higher vantage point with acceptance, wisdom and a sense of connectedness with the rest of humanity.” For educators, this means that until our students’ basic needs are met, we will struggle to fulfill the sacred duty of our roles — to help our students become explorers of the world, constantly growing and learning.

What unfortunately happens too often is that the deficiency mindset leads to a life of “mechanism,” and as Iain McGilchrist states above, mechanism is the opposite of life. We create routines, patterns (of thinking), ways of being, schedules, relationships, etc. that keep us safe and comfortable but remove the risk and reward of a life of exploration, a life of transcendence. G.K. Chesterton said “[o]nly dead things float with

the current; live ones swim against it.”

Human beings can walk the same pathways for decades and never look around them. As Henry David Thoreau confessed of this tendency in himself (a noted Transcendentalist!), “It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived [at Walden Pond] a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct.”

Had I been a more experienced wilderness therapy instructor, I would have immediately ensured the campers had a “buddy” system in place for nighttime restroom needs, I would have taught them what to do if they saw a bear, and I would have taught them where copperheads were likely to be. In short, I would have addressed their safety concerns immediately. So, in a metaphorical sense, the maggots were really on me because I failed my campers.

All growth begins with disruption, an event that wakes us up to our mechanical and dead lifestyles (i.e., we cannot stagnate and wait for the maggots), and points us to the infinite horizon, the horizon that recedes before us on the journey — crossing rivers and scaling mountains and sometimes pushing through swamps — never to be achieved, but to be pursued. That’s what great education does for students — it disrupts their self-deprecating narratives, it enlivens their passions, it asks them to go and live their questions. It also provides a portable tent and sleeping bag, a safe place where they can rest along the journey, but great education never asks students to stand still. The search for the lit coal beneath the ashes, discovery — about yourself and your relationship to others and the world — is the point.

Kaneft is the headmaster of Wilson Hall in Sumter.



Brent Kaneft

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Education

Top recent storylines include Sumter school board, Hillcrest Middle and Liberty STEAM

BY BRUCE MILLS

bruce@theitem.com

POLICY COMMITTEE TO BRING 50% GRADE FLOOR BACK UP WITH SCHOOL BOARD

Sumter's school board discussed the idea of reinstating a 50% quarterly grade floor policy at the first Policy Committee meeting that was held since the November 2024 election saw turnover to some elected seats.

After the previous board removed the minimum grade floor policy less than six months ago in a move approving members said aims to hold teachers, students and families more accountable for grades, new board Vice Chairman Brian Alston, who serves as the committee's chair, brought up putting the floor back in place on Feb. 5.

Going back to the 2015-16 school year, the grade floor rule required Sumter School District teachers to give a grade of 50% to students who earn lower than that mark in each quarter, except the final quarter, in a subject. In the final quarter, the administrative rule in the district's grading manual said a student would get an "earned average" grade based on actual performance.

The previous board was split on the matter last year with a slim majority emphasizing students should be ac-

countable for their grades because teachers already provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery through a variety of assessments and that there is a Multi-Tiered System of Supports in place to support children. Trustees on the other side favored offering additional chances to students and voiced they think a 50% quarterly grade floor instills hope and a chance for students eventually to still pass a course later on.

In an April survey conducted by district administrators, 82.5% of teachers who responded said they were against the floor, but some trustees questioned the accuracy of that survey.

As a possible update to the policy, Alston said he will consider the option of reimplementing a grade floor at just the high school and not lower levels.

HILLCREST MIDDLE TEACHER NAMED REGIONAL TEACHER TO WATCH

Hillcrest Middle School science teacher Robert Easley was recently named one of five regional teachers to watch in the Palmetto State by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education, according to a news release.

He won the honor for the Upper Coastal Region.

Award recipients were nominated by peers across the state for their dedication to middle level education, association President Jeff Jenkins said.

"Each of these recipients exemplifies the best of middle-level education through their support of adolescent learners," he said. "While there were many nominations, each winner truly embodies the spirit of our work to provide an excellent education to all students, supporting their social/emotional needs and ensuring that their classrooms and schools are places where kids thrive."

Recipients will be recognized as part of the 48th-annual South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Conference on Feb. 28 through March 2 in Myrtle Beach. The association is the only professional organization in the state with a focus on middle grades' schools, teachers and students, the release said.



EASLEY

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE WINS STATE'S CHAMPION AWARD FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

Speaker of the House Rep. Murrell Smith, R-Sumter, has been an outspoken supporter for public charter schools in South Carolina, and now he has won one of the highest honors from an associated state agency.

The Public Charter School Alliance of South Carolina recognized Smith for its 2024 Champion for Charter Schools Award at Liberty STEAM Charter School's Board of Directors' meeting on Jan. 27, and agency Exec-

utive Director Kevin Mason was on hand to present him with his new, shiny hardware.

The annual award goes to policymakers who significantly impact charter schools in the state, Mason said.

He added that Smith's leadership and commitment to school choice have expanded options and ensured access to high-quality education for all students and increased funding for charter schools in the Palmetto State.

Additionally, Liberty STEAM board Chairman Greg Thompson praised Smith for his encouragement six years ago when Sumter's first tuition-free, public charter school was just in the idea stage of development.

Thompson said that operating a successful charter school is "daunting, especially the financial aspect," and Liberty would not be open today without Smith's assurances back then.

"Murrell gave me the courage when he said, 'Greg, if you will do it, I will do my part.'"

"This is a small token of us saying, 'Thank you, Murrell, because of the things you have done to help make tonight possible, since it would not have happened without your courage and your leadership.' So, thank you very much."

Smith said it was an honor to receive the state Champion for Charter Schools Award from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

"I believe every child in South Carolina deserves access to a high-quality education, and this award represents the transformative power of school choice in providing those opportunities for students and their families."



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Religion

Let's all commit to trying harder to show love to others

In January, it felt like winter was here to stay. Having spent most of my life in the South, my blood is too thin to handle 20-degree weather! I have always thought when it is 70 degrees in February "this is why we live in the South!" I am fairly certain winter will rear its head again, but for now I am going to be grateful for the warmth beckoning us to go outside.

February greets us with Valentine's Day. Now I know Valentine's Day is a "Hallmark holiday," a day created to get us to the greeting card aisle in desperate pursuit of the perfect card. I have been in the group of procrastinators who waited until Feb. 14 to go to the store. I can testify to how absolutely pitiful the card selection is on Feb. 14 at 6 o'clock at night. But for a moment, I want to offer a defense of Valentine's Day.

I still remember being in elementary school and preparing Valentine cards for my classmates. I remember having a list of every kid in my class, and I remember my mom making sure that I didn't leave anyone out. Seems like a pretty good lesson for a third-grader to write individual names on an envelope, to make sure no one is left out and for the card to contain a warm, friendly greeting of encouragement and support. Right now I think our community, our country and our world can use a little bit more love. Can I get an Amen?

As a Christian pastor, I believe that I

am to love my neighbor. In the teachings I follow, when I am told to love my neighbor, I am not told to love one neighbor and not another; I am told to love all of my neighbors. Now I know that inevitably someone responds that they find another person "unlovable," implying they make no effort to be lovable. One of my favorite quotes

says "I love everybody, and I like some." This implies what we all know to be true, loving someone means respecting them and caring for them, it means putting their needs before my own and encouraging them to succeed. It does not imply that you agree with everything they do or everything they believe; but it does mean you accept that they are human and they deserve to be loved.

As we enjoy the warm break from our journey through winter, let's commit ourselves to trying harder to show love to others. Let's commit ourselves to working together to help those in need and to find solutions for the challenges that need to be confronted in our community. Let's commit ourselves to finding ways to be united across the divides that we have helped to build. And maybe we can remember the joy that came from giving a Valentine to everyone in our class and then opening that bag full of Valentine candy that we received in turn. Happy Valentine's Day! *Stewart Rawson is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in downtown Sumter.*



Pastor Stewart Rawson

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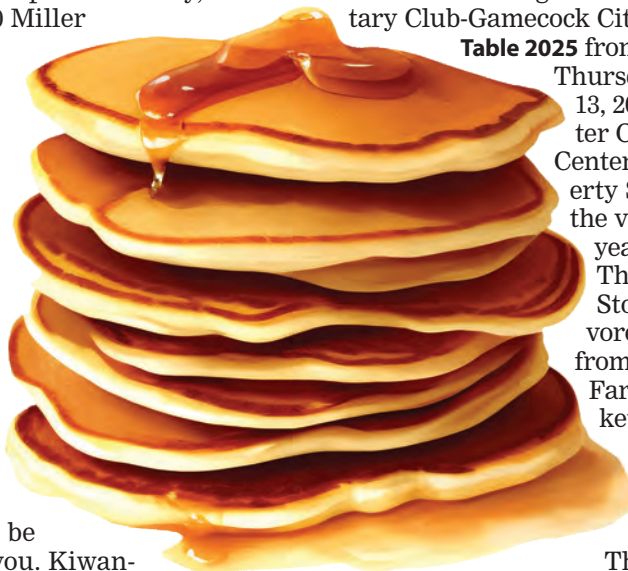
SUMTER COUNTY

The 2025 Rub O' the Green presented by Tandem Health is coming up on Friday, March 14, from noon to 5:30 p.m. at Beech Creek Golf Course, 1800 Sam Gillespie Blvd., Sumter. The St. Patrick's Day tournament will feature a costume contest and other festivities and prizes. Shotgun start is at 12:30 p.m. Lunch is included, and there will be an awards reception immediately following the tournament. Registration will open soon for teams.

Reignite your love with rock 'n' roll and experience the timeless classics of Creedence Clearwater Revival, performed by the Georgia Players Guild, at **Ramble Tamble: The Creedence Clearwater Revival Experience** at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 15, at the Sumter Opera House, 21 N. Main St. Tickets are between \$28 and \$32 and can be purchased at www.sumteroperahouse.com/ramble-tamble.

Get ready to chow down at the **62nd-Annual Pancake Day Fundraiser**

sponsored by the Kiwanis Club of Sumter. The all-you-can-eat pancakes and sausage event will be held from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, March 1, at 40 Miller Road. Tickets are \$8 for adults and \$4 for children (4-12 years old) and are available from any Kiwanis Club member. Tickets can be delivered to your office or somewhere else in town. Kiwanis Club members will be glad to meet you. Kiwanis International is a global community of clubs, members and partners dedicated to improving the lives of children.



Sample fresh local cuisine from area farmers and prepared by local chefs and restaurants along with a full bar, music and dancing at the Sumter Rotary Club-Gamecock City **Farm to**

Table 2025 from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday, March 13, 2025, at Sumter County Civic Center, 700 W. Liberty St. Some of the vendors this year include The Farm Store, Carnivore and others from the Sumter Farmers Market and The American Legion Farmers Market.

The fundraiser will support local charities including CART (Coins for Alzheimer's Research Trust), Sumter Rotary Gamecock City Scholarship

Fund, United Ministries and the 4-H club. To purchase tickets, visit <https://tinyurl.com/ymbhkyer>.

The second-annual **Sumter Springfest**, presented by Quixote Hospitality, Thompson and Thompson Turner, returns to Sumter for another day of food and tunes the whole family can enjoy at 11 a.m. Saturday, March 22. This year's lineup includes Chappell Court, Candi Band, 20 Ride and Party on the Moon. Tickets will be available soon at <https://sumterspringfest.com>.

Sumter's free celebration of creativity and culture, **Art in the Park** including Reading in the Park, will once again flow through Sumter Memorial Park, 417 W. Hampton Ave., 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, March 29. Arts and crafts, vendors, delicious food and Reading in the Park will ensure a day of fun activities and a chance to support local causes.

Enjoy two hours packed with more

SEE **EVENTS**, PAGE A13



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EVENTS FROM PAGE A12

than 20 classic hit songs, nostalgia, stories, trivia and more as Robert Neary performs an unforgettable tribute to Neil Diamond in **So Good: The Neil Diamond Experience** at 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 4, at the Sumter Opera House, 21 N. Main St. Limited VIP tickets include access to sound check and post-show meet & greet. Tickets are \$35 to \$40 and \$60 for VIP. To purchase tickets, visit www.sumteroperahouse.com/so-good-neil-diamond.



CAMDEN

Celebrate Irish and Celtic heritage at **Irish Fest Camden 2025** on Saturday, March 1, on the grounds of Kershaw County Airport, 2203 Airline Drive, Camden. Founded in 2017, this festival has grown into a beloved community event, attracting thousands of visitors each year. Visitors enjoy live Celtic music, Irish dancing, storytelling, a large selection of Irish beer, delicious food from more than 40 food trucks, whiskey tastings and more. The Lucky Leprechaun 5K takes place on Saturday morning, followed by the Highland Games, where athletes compete in traditional Celtic sports. The festival supports the Irish Cultural Foundation of SC, a South Carolina nonprofit. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit <https://irishfestcamden.com>.

COLUMBIA

Take the family and spend the day at the largest wildlife show in the Carolinas, the **Palmetto Sportsmen's Classic**, March 28-30 at the S.C. State Fairgrounds, 1200 Rosewood Drive, Columbia. The classic features presentations on archery, animal displays, antler scoring, DockDogs, the Hawg Trough (an aquarium of 400 gallons of water and multiple types of fish with a pro angler sharing fishing tips and lure presentation), the SCDNR fishing pond, hunting, conservation, fishing and more. If it has to do with the outdoors, you will find it here. Hours for the classic are Friday, noon to 8 p.m.;

Saturday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.; and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information and tickets, visit www.psclassic.com.

ELLOREE

Join the 60th running of the **Elloree Trials** for a full day of family fun, tailgating and horse racing on Saturday, March 22, at Elloree Training Center, 170 Wishbone Circle, Elloree. Also on site will be food trucks, souvenir tent, merchandise vendors, parachute exhibitions and hat and tailgate contest, the Miss Elloree Trials Pageant and a live broadcast with Haley from CAT 105.3 New Country. Gates open to the public at 8 a.m. for tailgating and festivities. The first race begins at 1 p.m. Tickets can be purchased at the gate by cash only: adults, \$25; children 12 and under are admitted for free. To check availability for reserved parking spaces, call (803) 395-9068. Free general admission parking is available. For additional information, visit ElloreeTrials.com or email elloreetrials@outlook.com.

FLORENCE

Francis Marion University Performing Arts, 201 S. Dargan St., Florence, welcomes one of the most accomplished bands in American roots music, **The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band**, from 7:30-9 p.m. Saturday, March 1. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band features founding members Jeff Hanna (lead vocals, guitar) and Jimmie Fadden (drums, harmonica, vocals); longtime bandmate Bob Carpenter (keys, vocals)-a member since 1980; along with Jim Photoglo (bass, vocals); Jaime Hanna (guitar, vocals); and Ross Holmes (fiddle, mandolin, vocals). According to the FMU website, the band's "career breakthrough came in 1970 with the release of the record Uncle Charlie & His Dog Teddy and the single "Mr. Bojangles," a folksy Top 10 pop hit. The Dirt Band's latest album, *Dirt Does Dylan* - released in 2022 - has received widespread critical acclaim." Purchase tickets at <https://tinyurl.com/2hn4v3f>.

Power Comicon returns on Saturday, March 15, to Florence Center, 3300 W. Radio Drive, Florence. The event will feature comics, toys, statues, art, costume apparel, pop culture memorabilia for all ages, comic artists, writers and other comic-related guests as well as a cosplay contest with more than \$1,000 in cash and prizes. For additional information, visit <https://tinyurl.com/5xvy94p5>.

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Business

Sumter Chamber of Commerce's first female CEO is also its youngest

BY DEIRDRE CURRIN

deirdre@theitem.com

Breanna Wise has served about every position available at Greater Sumter Chamber of Commerce, from membership communications to programs and events, but there was one role Wise had never taken on: CEO. That remained true until July 2024 when she was named interim president/CEO of the Chamber after its CEO at the time, Chris Hardy, resigned, leaving the role vacant.

Recently, though, the word “interim” in Wise’s position was taken off, and it’s now official; Wise is the Chamber’s newest CEO. Not only is Wise boasting a new title, but she is also making Sumter history by being the Chamber’s first female CEO and, at the age of 30, the youngest CEO in the Chamber’s history.

“I feel more confident in what I’m doing because I have done all of the other positions,” Wise said. “Or at least I have a really good understanding of what it takes for the staff to do their job. There’s a lot of time and effort that goes into those positions and what they do on a day-to-day basis, and I think it is super important for the person that’s leading the team to really understand what it takes.”

The announcement of Wise’s new title was made at the Chamber’s annual retreat, which took place from Friday, Feb. 7, to Sunday, Feb. 9.

“It has been a true delight working with Breanna this year,” Greater Sumter Chamber of Commerce Chair Cheryl Baker said at the retreat. “This lady has really stepped up to the plate. She has exceeded our expectations. I’ve heard so much feedback from y’all. I see more communication, I see more attentiveness, I see [us] being more approachable and what a great job Breanna and her team have done,

and it is with a true sense of appreciation, love and excitement for the future of the Chamber of Commerce of Sumter, South Carolina, that we are dropping that interim title and recognizing Breanna Wise as our CEO, president of the Sumter Chamber of Commerce.”

Though Wise might seem impenetrable, her life has been “a roller coaster of emotions” in the last year. With two 8-year-olds and a 17-year-old depending on her at home, alongside coming off getting married in December and, of course, taking on a new position at work, Wise has had a lot to balance. Especially because the Chamber is just now getting back to being properly staffed.

“Even checking out of my Chamber role and then checking back into my mom role, putting [her children] in bed and then checking back into my Chamber role until midnight,” Wise said. “It was just a lot of work, but I think that that was truly because we were just short-staffed, and I was essentially doing three positions: office manager, programs and events, and interim CEO.”

The change in workload was hard for Wise, but she made it clear the help of Chamber staff such as Chamber Director of Communications Peyton Richardson and Chamber Director of Partner Development Josh Morrell, as well as Chamber board members, was integral to keeping everything together, as they picked up any of the things she may have dropped while juggling the number of tasks she had.

Even though Wise can’t always relate to those she works with whose children are already grown up and out of the house, she can relate to other young professionals — an important factor for a chamber of commerce that sometimes sees younger business owners.

“Imposter syndrome was really difficult for me for a little while but also



JANEL PRZYBYLA / THE SUMTER ITEM

“Interim” was removed from Greater Sumter Chamber of Commerce CEO Breanna Wise’s title at the Chamber’s annual retreat on Saturday, Feb. 8, making her the youngest and only woman CEO for the Chamber in its entire history.

just comparing myself to others,” Wise said. “I have really worked on making sure that I don’t do that because I’m not like others, and [...] I do think that that makes me different, in a good way, for the position because I can relate to other young professionals that are up and coming.”

You may not always see Wise front and center, but rest assured that she is always behind the scenes with her hands on most everything the Chamber does.

“If someone doesn’t see me out front and center, that doesn’t mean that I’m not confident or comfortable talking in front of people because I will and I do if I have to or need to, but I think that it’s important for me to be the support role that I am,” said Wise, as she

would rather see the Chamber’s board in the spotlight rather than herself.

Born and raised in Sumter, Wise went to Lakewood High School. She is on track to graduate from the Institute of Organizational Management, which is a U.S. Chamber of Commerce program Wise has spent about four years completing.

Right now, Wise is continuing to focus on what the Chamber needs to do to help Sumter continue growing, alongside continuing to teach and uplift her staff.

“The most important thing in my role is to make sure we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing and continuing to be whatever Sumter needs us to be as far as the business community goes,” Wise said.



Harmony in every note

Hillcrest Middle's band shines under 2nd-year director

BY BRUCE MILLS
bruce@theitem.com

To have a successful school band requires a strong director, and Hillcrest Middle School is hitting all the high notes these days with second-year teacher Cornelius Blanding.

Three Wildcat band members who were named all-region and their inspirational director discussed keys to success for the ensemble and milestone achievements for the band recently at the middle school on "The Hill" in Dalzell.

Seventh-graders Kayleigh Ford (flute) and Jaden Robinson (baritone) and eighth-grader Caitlyn Jackson (clarinet) were Hillcrest's first Region 5 Band selections in about a decade, according to school administrators. The region consists of 13 counties in the eastern half of the state.

All three students are 13 years old, started playing in the sixth grade at the school, are passionate about music and want to continue with band in high school and then in college, they said.

Audition requirements for all-region include preparing a solo, know-



PHOTOS BY BRUCE MILLS / THE SUMTER ITEM

From front to rear, Hillcrest Middle School seventh-graders Jaden Robinson (baritone) and Kayleigh Ford (flute) and eighth-grader Caitlyn Jackson (clarinet) were recently named to the all-Region 5 Band in South Carolina.

ing seven major scales from memory, sight reading, knowing musical terminology and other concepts.

Ford, Robinson and Jackson are also among about 10 Hillcrest band members who already perform with Crestwood High School's marching band and jazz band.

The trio said to make all-region and perform with the high school ensembles takes a lot of practice after school and at home and credit



Cornelius Blanding is in his second year as band director at Hillcrest Middle in Dalzell and is the school's Teacher of the Year for this year. Previously, he spent five years in a similar position at Chestnut Oaks Middle School in Sumter School District and was also a campus Teacher of the Year at that school.

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If interested in donating an instrument(s) to the school's band, contact Band Director Cornelius Blanding at Hillcrest. The school's phone number is (803) 499-3341. Blanding's extension is 139.

SEE **BAND**, PAGE A16



BAND FROM PAGE A15

Blanding for being a caring and knowledgeable leader.

Ford and Jackson said Blanding helps them with musical concepts but also goes beyond music to help them at times with life issues.

"He helps us with everything, even stuff not related to music or school but things in life," Ford said.

Those include dealing with setbacks and having the right attitude, she added.

Blanding is a 2012 Crestwood graduate and Hillcrest's current Teacher of the Year and calls his 60 band members at the school "my kids."

"These are my children," he said. "Even outside of academics, for a lot of my students I am their confidant, and I try to be that safe space for them and teach them life skills."

Blanding was a leader in Crestwood's ensembles while in high school and played saxophone in South Carolina State University's band while in college. He was also the student director at S.C. State, a position directly under the band's staff and director.

Being a relatable person with others has helped Blanding as a leader throughout his career, he added.

"It's those things that do not get taught in textbooks that set me apart from everyone else," Blanding said. "Music theory, educational philosophies and playing techniques — all those things are good, and it is good to know those things — but I am more so talking about the 'heart work' and being able to relate to the students."

"Sometimes that is not just, 'Hey, how are you doing?' Sometimes, it's 'Hey, you need to get your stuff to-



BRUCE MILLS / THE SUMTER ITEM

From left, Hillcrest Middle School Band Director Cornelius Blanding and students Kayleigh Ford (flute), Jaden Robinson (baritone) and Caitlyn Jackson (clarinet) stand outside the band classroom recently at the school. The three students were named to the all-Region 5 Band.

gether because I want you to still be here in my band. I don't want you to be kicked out of school.'

"It's those things and being able to build relationships with the kids and have those tough conversations if need be."

His classes have "very high musical standards" to get the students to be accomplished performers, he said.

"A lot of students don't make it," Blanding said. "Some quit because they don't want to do it any more, and they realize it's not just banging on instruments all day. I mean, we have fun, but it's structured fun."

"I also try to have personality and don't like to be boring, and that

OTHER HILLCREST STUDENTS WHO AUDITIONED FOR ALL-REGION

Mya Taylor	Shyla Sylvester
Tori Washington	Ariyah Gray
Arianna Crumb	Louie Hubbard
Andre Robinson	Bailey Pocaique
Zariah Wright	Source: Hillcrest Middle School
Isabelle Logan	
Madeline Page	

keeps the kids locked in. I might run around, holler and scream and random things, but it's all to keep them engaged. For me, I think, band is all

about making memories anyway. The music is cool, the accolades are cool, but it's a family at the end of the day."

Hillcrest Instructional Coach Misty Roberson said it is a testament to Blanding that he was selected as the school's Teacher of the Year in just his second year at the school. Previously, he served five years in the district at Chestnut Oaks Middle School, where he was also a campus Teacher of the Year.

"He has a great relationship with the kids and has a witty, funny personality," she said. "He cares about the kids and trains leaders in his classes. He is a great leader himself and well respected by his peers."

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Entertainment

'Breaking Bad' is one of the best TV shows of all time

The definition of chemistry is studying the properties of matter and how they react while undergoing changes when interacting with other substances. Vince Gilligan, an innovative and creative genius, emerged onto the scene with the concept of taking a character like Mr. Chips and transforming him into Scarface.

His idea gradually went through the transformative process into becoming quite possibly the greatest television series of all time. Admittedly, as an enthusiastic film and television viewer, I always found myself wrestling with the deciding factor of what would constitute the greatest television series ever made. "Breaking Bad" always fits the definition with its powerful character development, intense, raw acting, shocking revelations involving betrayals and secrets threatening the foundation of the characters' existence, and moments of cathartic dark humor serving as more a necessary form of levity rather than slapstick comedy.

"Breaking Bad" is the story of a mild-mannered, brilliant chemistry teacher named Walter White. As a married man with a physically impaired son and another child on the way, he and his household struggle to make ends meet. He finds himself working two jobs to support his family.

Upon receiving the diagnosis of terminal, inoperable lung cancer, he desperately seeks ways to financially secure his family.

After joining his brother-in-law DEA agent Hank on a ride-along during a drug bust, revealing the exorbitant amount of money in the meth drug trade, he forms a partnership with a former student named Jesse Pinkman. Walter's expertise as a scientist in the field of chemistry and Jesse's experience in the field of cooking/selling



Isaiah Ridley

meth gives birth to their signature blue meth. The success of their creation reaches mythological status as the purest and most perfect product within the underground crime drug syndicate.

Walter's success as a secret drug kingpin begins the gradual process of unraveling the family unit with his wife, Skyler, son Walter Jr. and with the birth of his daughter Holly. His lies and changes in behavior bring estrangement and isolation. Bryan Cranston's acting as Walter White remains deserving of its praise of the literal metamorphosis of a mild-mannered man becoming a feared and respected drug kingpin. Slight changes in facial expressions, body language, posture and tone of voice demonstrate that despite reluctance to get into the world of crime, the taste of fear and respect corrupt the core of his existence. Viewers, depending on their perspective, determine whether they sympa-

thize, or in a different manner, live vicariously through his character with the progression of the story.

Even with "Breaking Bad" serving as tragic and emotional changes to Walter White's character, Gilligan's writing provides a blueprint of establishing character development with every single important piece pushing the story forward. The acting of Cranston, Anna Gunn, Aaron Paul, Dean Norris, Bob Odenkirk, Jonathan Banks and Giancarlo Esposito are what make "Breaking Bad" such a memorable experience. If I ever find myself watching an episode or binging a particular season, despite knowing what is about to unfold, every single time I am in a constant state of bewilderment. The quality of the show is exceedingly complex and revolutionary; you wish it were possible to experience it all over again as if it were your first time.

The beautiful element of "Breaking Bad" brings the important question of how far a person would go to guarantee their family is secure. Walter enters this treacherous journey with the purest of intentions. Cat-and-mouse situations increase the intense nature of determining whether Walter's secret unravels and the associated consequences. The purpose of my review is simply to remain vague with the details as much as possible. Any revealing of spoilers will rob viewers of the impact of experiencing the series for the first time.

"Breaking Bad" is a series where all five seasons are comfortably within the realm of perfection. He mastered the art of capitalizing on riding the

momentum of every episode without giving the impression of providing filler to bulk up a season. All episodes serve a purpose in treating their audience with respect, intelligence and leveling up the atmosphere in having all viewers on the edge of their seats. Tensions maintain the suspense with Walter and Jesse's partnership constantly teetering on the brink of destruction. Jesse, through all his naivety and misguided well-meaning intentions, finds himself unable to separate himself from the manipulative dynamics of his former high school teacher and mentor. Paul portrays Jesse, displaying a vast array of emotions, particularly for an actor with no previous acting experience prior to "Breaking Bad," which is equally impressive. He channels elements of anger, sadness, confusion, regret and drug-fueled euphoria with seamless ease.

Attempting to pick which season is a favorite of mine is definitively impossible from my perspective. Each of the five seasons brings new and exciting uncharted territory for first-time viewers. There are myriad iconic moments of dialogue, shocking revelations and gripping scenes perfected solely for the purpose of providing the viewer with adrenaline, leaving you captivated and addicted for more. Once again, the review is intentionally vague, for the fact that those not familiar with the series will absolutely embrace "Breaking Bad" with every fiber of their being. I can honestly state that it truly is, quite simply, the greatest television series of all time.

To watch Isaiah Ridley's movie reviews online, find him @Izzy's Cinematic Escape on YouTube.

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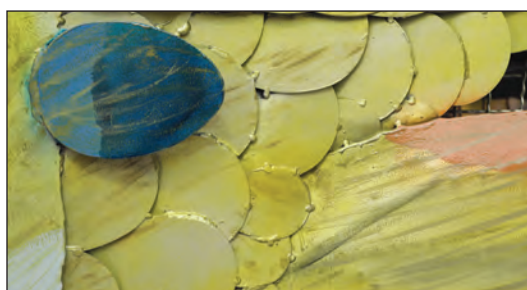
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'... I think this sort of sculpture can remind people when they're out in these natural environments exactly how we're supposed to respect nature and treat it, so it will be there for us to really enjoy for many years.'

LISA CALLIHAN, Central Carolina Technical College professor



PHOTOS BY ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Students and staff at Central Carolina Technical College as well as USC Sumter students, City of Sumter employees and Clemson Extension representatives gather to test out the new litter sculpture that will swim between CCTC and USC Sumter's campuses for now and will find its permanent home on the Prisma Health Shot Pouch Greenway Park.

Sumter's 1st litter sculpture encourages residents to keep their city beautiful

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE
alaysha@theitem.com

In "Finding Nemo," Marlin and Dory's journey across the ocean was filled with unexpected encounters — some friendly, some not so friendly.

But if they had ventured into Sumter, they might have come across a different kind of aquatic oddity: a giant fish with a nev-

er-ending appetite for trash.

Sumter's latest environmental effort is a larger-than-life litter sculpture, the first of its kind in our city, made of metal, sculpted in the shape of a dazzling aquamarine fish and created by the hands of local welding students and instructors at Central Carolina Technical College.

Litter is a social problem that affects everyone in Sumter, from being an eyesore while sightseeing on the highways to making an area more vulnerable to crime. Efforts to combat this issue in both the city and county are widespread.

But Cassie Castleberry, water resources agent with Sumter's Clemson Extension, thought why not add a little color to it?

"I just thought, well, why not see if we can build [a sculpture] for ourselves, for our community and see if we can do some education with it and some awareness," Castleberry said.

The idea of a fishy friend to fight off litter was funded by a Keep South Carolina Beautiful – Palmetto Pride grant, which assist eligible

SEE **SCULPTURE**, PAGE A20

SCULPTURE

FROM PAGE A19

counties in creating and maintaining successful litter reduction and beautification programs. Sumter received the grant in January 2024, totaling \$7,145, \$1,800 of which went to the sculpture, and began working on the creative installation in fall.

Axel Reis, head of the welding department at CCTC, and his students Josh Cannon and Kenyatta Silcott and welding instructor Jim James and assistant instructor Josh Padgett were hands on — literally — in bringing the fishy fellow to life. From countless sketches to rough skeletons to sculpting out a seemingly endless number of scales, this sculpture was built piece by piece before becoming the wonder CCTC and USC Sumter students, staff and community members marveled at the afternoon of Feb. 4. The welders were all smiles at seeing their hard work be admired; it made the sweltering days and tedious tasks all worth it.

“What we do here at CCTC in the welding program is very diverse. We’re not just focused on one thing. The student can come here and basically learn all structural welding processes, and at the same time, we can add some icing on the cake and have some art projects for people who have the nature of being an artist or want to be creative by working with metal, making sculptures, making creative metal-works,” Reis explained.

This diversity among their talents and teachings is what Castleberry said lent a hand to making the installation better than what she could have imagined. But you know what they say about good things, right? You can never have enough.

Lisa Callihan, a professor at CCTC, shared in on the love of artistic expression and community beautification by giving the community’s new fishy friend its delightful paint job. But the opportunity meant so much more when she learned what it was for.

“To hear about all the good it’s going to do for spreading the proper attitude and the awareness about the environment and what we can do to protect our waterways, I think this sort of sculpture can remind people when they’re out in these natural environments exactly how we’re supposed to respect nature and treat it, so it will be there for us to really enjoy for many years,” she expressed.



PHOTOS BY ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

From left, welding students Josh Cannon and Kenyatta Silcott; Josh Padgett, assistant welding instructor at CCTC; Axel Reis, head of welding at CCTC and designer of the litter sculpture; Clemson Extension Water Resource Agent Cassie Castleberry; Jimmy James, CCTC instructor and designer of fish scales, Lisa Callihan, artist and CCTC professor and William Sumter all contributed to the creation of the fish-inspired litter sculpture and pose in front of the finished piece at its unveiling on Feb. 6.



Kenyatta Silcott, one of the CCTC students who worked on the litter sculpture, admires the completed sculpture at its unveiling on Feb. 6.

The glossy clear coat on Callihan’s creative work is courtesy of William Sumter, who said it was an honor to partner on such a project that will have a meaningful impact on both Sumter’s people and environment.

For the time being, the sculpture will float around the CCTC campus, doubling as a useful tool and a nice sight to see on a leisurely stroll before swimming over to USC Sumter’s campus to share in on the fun. Its permanent home, however? That’s a work in progress.

“One of the things that we talked about when Cassie came up with the idea is where does it go? Where is the fish’s home as an installation that can be seen? We’ll get to do it,” said Kyle Kelly with City of Sumter’s Planning Department.

Kelly was instrumental in getting the sculpture approved and finding its permanent home along Prisma Health Shot Pouch Greenway. A space has been incorporated in the 3.1-mile multi-use path, near Broad Street, Kelly said. While there are no defini-

tive dates or concrete timelines on when the fish will be out on the greenway, the group knows it’ll only further Sumter’s collaborative effort to keep our community clean.

Speaking of collaborative effort, that’s precisely what it took to get this fish from an idea on paper to a real-life wonder to behold. Kelly and Castleberry agreed that “many hands make light work” and being able to not only showcase local talent, but also slip in a bit of education and awareness benefits every organization and agency who took part in its creation. As our fishy friend floats its way through Sumter, the group hopes it will serve its purpose in more ways than one, including being a reminder of how teamwork really makes the dream work.

“I think it mirrors the whole project purpose because it’s going to take a team to clean up the environment and keep everything in pristine condition, for future generations,” Callihan expressed. “When you work together as a team and you see how much you can accomplish, then that’s a good example for everybody that’s going to see this sculpture.”

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Catching up with former Wilson Hall star Sears as he prepares for A's first season in Sacramento

BY TIM LEIBLE

tim@theitem.com

JP Sears has seen it all during his baseball career. The former Wilson Hall and Citadel standout battled his way through the minors before making his debut with the New York Yankees. He experienced the craziness of the MLB trade deadline when the Bronx Bombers shipped him out west to join the Oakland A's.

Since that trade in 2022, the southpaw from Sumter has become a staple of the A's rotation, pitching to a 4.38 ERA last season over 180 2/3 innings. Last summer also gave Sears an experience he shares with only his teammates in Oakland. Sears was part of the last A's team in Oakland, as the team announced it would eventually make its way to Las Vegas. That move won't happen this season, as they're still finalizing stadium details in Sin City. Instead, Sears and the A's will spend this summer in Sacramento. They'll call Sutter Health Park, a minor league stadium, home until the move to Vegas is finalized.

Before he gets to Sacramento, Sears will take part in spring training in Arizona, bringing a sense of familiarity to what will be a very different season. *The Item* was able to connect with the former Baron pitcher as he finished his trip to Mesa to touch base on the A's busy off-season and look ahead to what he expects to be a very interesting summer.

/Item: How does this season feel different amid the move from Oakland and the fan reaction to the team's exit at the end of the season?

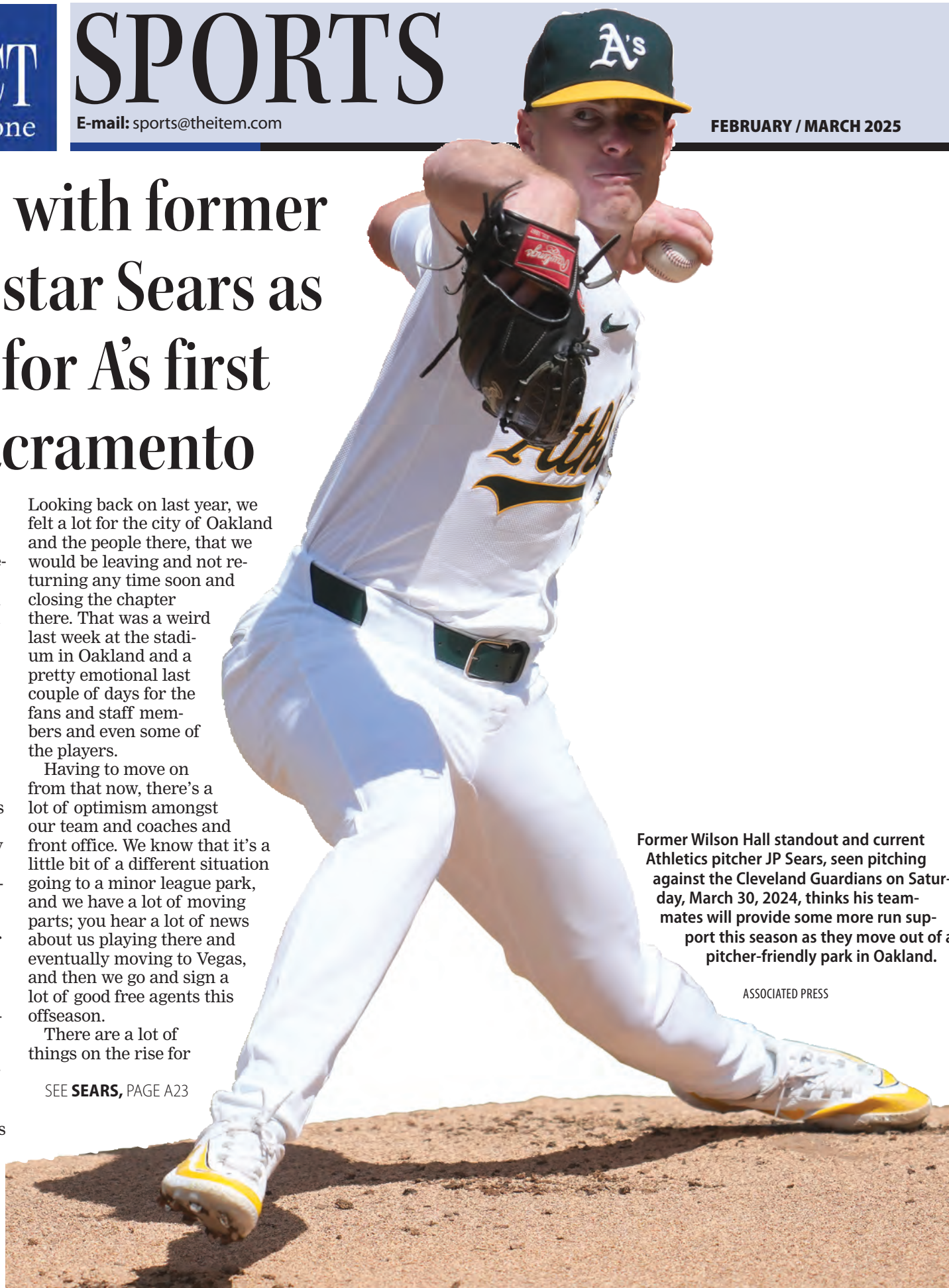
JP: It's obviously a unique year.

Looking back on last year, we felt a lot for the city of Oakland and the people there, that we would be leaving and not returning any time soon and closing the chapter there. That was a weird last week at the stadium in Oakland and a pretty emotional last couple of days for the fans and staff members and even some of the players.

Having to move on from that now, there's a lot of optimism amongst our team and coaches and front office. We know that it's a little bit of a different situation going to a minor league park, and we have a lot of moving parts; you hear a lot of news about us playing there and eventually moving to Vegas, and then we go and sign a lot of good free agents this offseason.

There are a lot of things on the rise for

SEE **SEARS**, PAGE A23



Former Wilson Hall standout and current Athletics pitcher JP Sears, seen pitching against the Cleveland Guardians on Saturday, March 30, 2024, thinks his teammates will provide some more run support this season as they move out of a pitcher-friendly park in Oakland.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEARS FROM PAGE A22

the A's over the next couple of weeks and months and eventually a couple years, so I think the main thing amongst our team is that we're really excited and optimistic. We're not really worried about the negatives that come with playing in a minor league park. We're going to have at least 12,000-14,000 there every night. I got to go to Sacramento a couple of weeks ago to get a feel for the city, and everyone there seems like they're super excited to have us there. They're super welcoming, and they're going to support us a lot at the games. I'm really excited. This is probably the most excited I've been about a season leading up to it.

Item: Is there almost like PTSD of going back to a minor league stadium as someone who had to grind his way through the minors?

JP: No, I wouldn't say PTSD; it's more so just an understanding of the situation at hand and being mature about it and taking the most out of it that you can. I'm aware of us being in a minor league park, but we're going to have at least double, if not triple, the amount of fans than we had the last two or three years in Oakland. I think the city of Sacramento is going to support us pretty heavily. Now being in the big leagues for a few years, I've had an understanding of what it takes to pitch at that level, so it's about taking advantage of that opportunity that I've been given the last couple of years and just try to continue to do that and continue to look forward and keep getting better.

Item: As a pitcher, I'm sure the worst part about moving out of Oakland is losing the friendly confines that the Oakland Coliseum provided. Do you actively think about the stadium conditions you're pitching in when on the mound?

JP: That's something I get asked about a lot, and most pitchers will say the same thing. You have so much going on in the game, so many things you have to think about and you're actively trying to execute. Thinking about the ballpark and the atmosphere and the setting you're in is pretty far down the list for me. You're aware of the hard numbers that the stats show you of the home runs or more outs to be had in foul territory or what have you in Oakland compared to Sacramento or any other stadium, but I have other things on my



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Former Wilson Hall standout and current Athletics pitcher JP Sears, left, jokes with catcher Shea Langeliers, right, as they leave the bullpen before the start of a game against the Texas Rangers on Friday, Aug. 30, 2024. Sears thinks the A's are primed to make a huge jump in 2025.

mind during the game, and I'm more focused on those other things. There may be times you bring it up as a coach or as a player to each other just to not ignore the fact that there's certain things that you have to remember, that the ball flies a little bit more and maybe there's certain players you might attack a little differently, but those are things I'm trying to figure out before the game more than during the game. Once the game starts, you're trying to compete and have fun.

Item: The other side is maybe you'll get a little more run support.

JP: Yeah, if you kept up with our team in the second half last year, we had a really productive offense in the second half of the season. Guys are going to get more mature and become better hitters every year and learn more, and also having a ballpark that's a little more in their favor is going to help us all out in a positive way. Our job is to prevent it from going out, and their job is to get it out there, so we're all going to be focused on our jobs at hand. I think we're all going to be excited to be in a good atmosphere, a good lively atmosphere and a new city with new grass and dirt and

new facilities and a little bit of a new beginning compared to the distractions we had a little bit last year. We're going to try to continue to do our job and show up every night with a lot of energy, excited to play the game of baseball and still get to play at the highest level whether or not it's in a minor league park. To us, it's big-league players on a big-league field, so it's a big-league park to me.

Item: You mention the ballpark statistics; are you a big numbers guy? Do you like to soak in the analytics available to you, or do you prefer to unplug from that a little bit and try to go out and play ball?

JP: I try to make sure I have a good understanding of what my approach is going to be going forward in a game and try to overprepare with my catcher and coaches so we know what our plan is. Having a pitch clock and having a lot of things going on at the same time. I like to use those numbers to be a benefit to me, but they can hurt you if you lean on them too much. I try to filter out what I think I can use and try to be as prepared as I can leading up to the game. Once I head out to

warm up, it's mainly, "What's the approach on this next guy? Let's just go execute it."

Item: The A's spent a little more money this offseason than people are used to, signing starting pitcher Luis Severino to a three-year, \$67 million deal, which became the largest contract in team history. They also traded for LHP Jeffery Springs and signed both INF Gio Urshela and RHP Jose Leclerc. Is that something that you and the rest of the team notice as a tactile way to see that the owner and front office are focused on seeing this team continue to improve?

JP: For sure. As a player, when the offseason hits, you're focused on yourself and focused on getting better and how I can help my team out next year. Two seasons ago, we had a really rough year, and last season, we didn't have a great season, but we kind of finished on a high note, so you're always looking for that next guy or next couple of guys to help your team get better. I was happy to see the news whenever we signed Severino and signed Springs and got Urshela and even some minor league guys that we're going to have around.

That definitely gives you a little extra motivation that you can never get too comfortable; there's always people that are behind you and looking to take your job. Even though there is a reason I am where I'm at, I still have to perform and prepare and be available. It definitely gives me that extra boost of confidence and also an extra boost of it being time to go and keep getting better or you're going to get left behind.

I'm looking forward to this being a big year for the A's and hopefully one for us to shock a bunch of people. They expect us to be the same as the last couple of years, but I think it'll be much different than that.

Item: How important was it to also see Brent Rooker sign his five-year, \$60 million extension? The A's have long been seen as a team that trades their stars before needing to pay them, like dealing Matt Chapman to the Blue Jays and Matt Olsen to the Braves before they signed new deals. As someone who is moving along the MLB pay scale in your last year pre-arbitration, is that something that caught your eye?

JP: He's a good friend of mine, so I was super happy for him and his family. Obviously, we play this game because we love playing baseball, but there's

SEARS FROM PAGE A23

nothing like financial stability for your family for the rest of your life, and that's what he gets with that contract. I was super happy for him and proud of him.

That does nothing for me but make me want to do the same. Having that financial stability would be awesome and is a goal of mine, but I can't be too long-sighted about that. I have to focus on what I have going on this year. This is my last year of pre-arbitration, so I'm trying to have a really good season before I enter arb next year. All I can really do is focus on the little things. The little things are how I can get better that day and how I can prepare for that next outing and just take things five days at a time and let those monetary things play out in the future and not really focus on that too much.

Item: Speaking of that drive to get better, what were your biggest priorities this offseason as you're looking to take that next step after a strong season?

JP: I think there were things that I was proud of last year; I think there were things where I was a little disap-

pointed in myself. As a player, as a competitor, you always look to get better. I've always been proud of my availability the last two or three years with the team, always making my starts and being consistent. What comes along with that is wanting to have quality starts as well, having consistent quality starts. I just looked this offseason to try to sharpen the little things that I felt would help me prolong those games that I felt I let get away from me. Just trying to sharpen my breaking balls a little bit, trying to really separate my slider and my sweeper and make those two different swing and miss pitches. I feel like, if I'm able to continue to raise the floor with my four-seam and just keep my velo(city) up with my four-seam fastball, then I'll be able to complement those breaking balls, as well. I think the main goal was to find those one or two things that will really prolong my starts or make the start easier on me. Whatever I'm doing, just making it a little more quality. My quantity has been there, but I need to be able to get deeper into games and keep a couple of those games I let get away from me just a little bit closer for my team. Just knowing the firepower I think our offense is going to come out with this

year in the first half, I know I just need to get our team into the sixth inning with a tie game or a little bit of a lead, and we'll be able to be pretty happy with the results at the end of the day.

Item: Were there specific things you did differently this offseason with those priorities in mind?

JP: I think one thing, as a player, you try to rule out is the pace of the game and try to get better at controlling your thoughts and your temperament. Just analytically and physically, trying to get my off-speeds better in general. Those were things I consciously worked on daily, as far as sharpening those pitches.

I also added back going to the windup some whenever there are no runners on base. I think that will give me more time to be able to decide what pitch I want to throw and how I want to attach each hitter whenever I'm facing those hitters with nobody on base. With the pitch clock nowadays, you have to be prepared for that outing that day and the hitter you're facing. I tried to just be conscious every day when I was playing catch in the offseason of trying to put myself in those situations. I think that'll

end up paying off whenever it comes time to face hitters.

Item: Spring training is also a great time to tinker with some of those things. Are there specific things you're looking to try in spring training to see what works and what doesn't with batters in the box?

JP: Going into spring training, two years ago, I really felt like I had to make the team coming out of camp. Last year, I felt a little more confident that I was going to be in the rotation, like I do this year, so I'm able to kind of work with that a little bit. But I still feel like I'm trying to make all of my decisions better decisions and just be super decisive during spring training, just really commit to everything I do and really be convicted with everything I do on the mound. I'm looking to get a little more swing and miss with my fastball and my breaking pitches. I feel like I missed on some of my swing and miss last year. I got a little bit away from having as many strikeouts as I wanted to [Sears finished the season with 137 punchouts in 2024 after striking out 161 batters in 2023]. Having the swing and miss really helps in times when your stuff isn't working as well; you're able to navigate your way through lineups.



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Sumter library system wants to help you get into nature

State park passes available for 3rd year for families to enjoy 47 parks free

BY MELANIE SMITH

melanie@theitem.com

If you're keen to get outside and enjoy nature this spring but your entertainment budget is tight, Sumter County Library can help.

For the third year now, the library system has offered state park passes to families to check out, just as they might check out the newest must-read novel. The program was recently renewed for 2025, according to library Director Robert Harden, and library patrons can use the passes to enjoy any of South Carolina's 47 state parks for free. That includes Poinsett State Park in Wedgefield in the western part of Sumter County.

The state park passes are given to the library system from S.C. State Library. Front desk staff at the library said

the "passports" are popular, especially this time of year as the weather warms and people want to get outside more.

"We have definitely noticed that in the spring and summer months, especially, the demand outweighs the supply — in other words, we get a lot of people coming in for park passes only to find that they are all checked out. Sometimes they are all checked out — we have 10 total," said Keanna Arids, circulation desk supervisor.

The passes are good for everyone in the vehicle for the whole day, although special park events might be excluded. There are a couple other guidelines for using the passes, according to Harden:

- They can be checked out for 14 days at a time but can be checked out multiple times;
- They must be returned to the

branch where they were checked out;

— Lost passes will result in a \$99 replacement cost charged to the patron's record;

— Removal of perforated park pass number on bottom of park pass will result in full-cost replacement; and

— Late returns will be charged \$1 per day up to a \$5 maximum.

Staff said new patrons have enjoyed using the passes and that they are one of the most popular non-book offerings.

"I would say that the park passes (along with our computer services and Seed Li-

brary) is one of the largest draws for new patrons that is not book-related. Families checking out park passes are typically pleasantly surprised to find that the passes not only cover their entire vehicle, but are good for the entire day. We believe that this program

(among many diverse offerings at the Sumter County Library) saves our patrons countless dollars towards often tightly stretched family budgets while providing no-cost fun for all involved," Arids said.

Visit your nearest branch to check out a park pass and enjoy a day out with your family or friends this spring.

Signing up for a library card to be able to check out a pass is quick, and the library offers myriad other programs and services throughout the year, including a coloring club, summer reading program, a bookmobile, computers, printing/faxing and more.

There are plenty of parks out there to explore, with the "Mountains of the Midlands" (that's Poinsett) just a few miles away.

"We all agree that these passes have definitely affected the community in a positive way. The excitement in our patrons' voices when they learn of the park passes is one of the most consistent reactions we receive when detailing all the services and programs the library has to offer," Arids said.

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Brotherhood in action: Lakewood High alumni found Brothers Inc. to make change among Sumter's youth



ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Brothers Inc. is a community organization founded by childhood friends, from left, Jason Johnson, Brandon Brooks, Richard Patrick and Cedric McKnight and seeks to create a vibrant, inclusive and empowered community through collaboration and engagement.

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE

alaysha@theitem.com

What does it mean to be a brother? Being a brother goes beyond blood relation. It's about loyalty, accountability and standing in the gap when no one else will.

To be a brother, you have to know when to lead and when to listen — not for credit or for recognition but because it's the right thing to do.

That's what Brothers Inc. is built on.

FROM CONVERSATION TO ACTION

Lakewood High School Class of 2001 alumni Jason Johnson, Richard Patrick, Brandon Brooks and Cedric McKnight make up the community grassroots organization Brothers Inc., which is dedicated to creating an inclusive and empowered community through collaboration and engagement.

Patrick, Brooks and McKnight grew up in Wedgefield, surrounded by a village of hardworking men and women who wanted nothing more than for the younger generation to succeed. For Johnson, it was no different, as he grew up on the southern edge of our county lines in Pinewood. Community leaders came in the form of coaches, teachers, store owners and family friends who exhibited quality characteristics that he wanted to model.

When the friends met in high school, their bond was cemented when they discovered their desire to leave their community better than how they found it.

Patrick explained that grassroots organizations are pivotal to a community's growth. While everyone may look to leaders to make significant change, and should, boots-on-the-ground work can generate great results, too.

"They can see everyday people trying to make everyday change. They don't have to reach out and try to see the stars and people that are rich or famous. To see everyday people and everyday problems that can relate to the things that they go through is very important to build up the community for

the grassroots level," he explained.

Before Brothers Inc., there was Four Brothers — a small mentorship initiative the friends launched in 2023. But it didn't land quite how they hoped. Response was low, and after about four meetings, the group ventured back to the drawing board to discuss what their beloved hometown truly needed. When they returned, restructured and rebranded, this time, the people listened.

In October 2023, the Brothers hosted a motivational speaking event featuring Duane Kyles, drawing a crowd of nearly 60 people, including city leaders, council members and even the mayoral candidates. In November, "State of the Youth" panel sat before a packed room of community and school leaders to talk about what they need to succeed in Sumter. The group hosted several successful events, including the "No Days Off" athletic and academic celebration in December and a "Dream Team" panel in January to honor community leaders of yesteryear and today.

Now they're planning their inaugural Black History Bowl for middle school students — a trivia-style competition designed to engage and educate young students on their history.

But for all the momentum they've built, there is still one thing they haven't cracked yet.

REACHING THE KIDS

The turnout at their events thus far has been commendable, and the feedback has been great. But something is missing.

"At the end of the day, we're not trying to reach the adults. We would like to see more kids come to these events because it's a lot of good information being given," Brooks explained.

The struggle with a lack of attendance from young people is not that youth don't care, the Brothers expressed. It's the access. Social media is their prime means of spreading information, and while convenient, they lack connections needed to implore

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BROTHERS

FROM PAGE A26

youth to attend, meaning the information often meets a dead end.

So, they're switching up their approach to meet the students where they are. They've already started working with Sumter School District to get their programs in classrooms and assemblies, giving students the chance to see who they are, what they do and why it matters. McKnight, a former principal in the school district, assured it would make all the difference.

"If kids don't see people or hear from people who are doing positive things in the community...when they go home, the community has a greater influence. [They'll think] I'd rather be like that drug dealer who can show me a pocket full of money versus being like Mr. McKnight, Mr. Richard, Mr. Brandon or Mr. Jason, who are hardworking and doing it the right way," he explained. "It's just about being active and showing there is a different way."

The desire to reach youth comes from their own childhood. The Brothers remember what it was like back

'If kids don't see people or hear from people who are doing positive things in the community ... when they go home, the community has a greater influence. [They'll think] I'd rather be like that drug dealer who can show me a pocket full of money versus being like Mr. McKnight, Mr. Richard, Mr. Brandon or Mr. Jason, who are hardworking and doing it the right way.'

CEDRIC MCKNIGHT

One of the four founders of Brothers Inc. and former principal in Sumter School District

when — when disagreements didn't go past fist fights, when the whole neighborhood looked out for you, when elders weren't too exhausted to care.

That's not what they see now. Or at least, not yet.

"EVERYBODY NEEDS A BIG BROTHER."

That's what Brooks said when asked why the name Brothers Inc.

"Brothers" shows connection — a shared experience, understanding or respect for one another. As for Inc.,

Johnson said it's the most important part of the name.

"It shows the ability to work together. It shows productivity. If you look at anything that we've done, we've been fortunate enough to show other people in the community [and] organizations who are leaders in their own right; the focus really hasn't been on us," he explained. "It's been about sharing ideas; it's about putting a spotlight on other people that are doing work similar to what we're doing."

It's not lost on the Brothers that just as it took a village to raise them, it'll take the same to make real change in Sumter. And they're willing to do the work with all those who share the same passion.

They're willing to show up in spaces that others don't. They're willing to be there for those who have no one. They're willing to make something happen when all else has failed.

In other words, they're willing to be the big brothers this community has always dreamed of. It'll take time, and it'll take effort, and they've got enough of both to give.

When they look around Sumter, from Wedgefield to Pinewood and everywhere in between, they don't see hopelessness. They see potential. And they refuse to let it go to waste.

Want to get involved?

Anyone looking to collaborate with Brothers Inc. is asked to reach out via the Brothers Incorporated page on Facebook.

Their next event, presented in part by Greg Martin, will be Senior Showcase & Rising Stars Basketball Game on March 9 at Scott's Branch High School, 9253 Alex Harvin Highway in Summerton. Doors open at 11:30 a.m.




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Washington School remembered

In 1837, a one-acre tract of land was deeded to the village of Sumterville. This land, for the consideration of \$1



Sammy Way
REFLECTIONS

and improvements, was for the purpose of establishing a suitable school for the Sumterville community. Granted by Sumter's first lawyer, John

Blount Miller, this tract of land became the site of Sumterville Academy; for a number of years, it remained the most important school in this area.

"It was not truly a public school, and there is no definite record as to when it discontinued operation, but it



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

This photo of Washington School students appeared in the 1936 yearbook.

is certain that the building burned at a later date. Several schools, either private or parochial, were in operation in the Sumter community during this period of time.

"There was an abundance of educational opportunities for those who could afford to pay the tuition. Many of the Sumter residents began to demand public educational facilities. In May 1888, the issue of public education was put before the taxpayers of

the town. The residents of the community petitioned South Carolina General Assembly to provide for the establishment of a separate school district and allow for the collection of taxes to support the building of a public facility. A charter for the development of public schools in Sumter was granted in 1888 on Dec. 24, and a school board was elected to initiate operations. The

SEE **REFLECTIONS**, PAGE A29



Washington School opened Sept. 12, 1892.



Bruz and Heyward Crowson, photographers for *The Sumter Item*, walked through Washington School in May 1978 before the building was torn down.



REFLECTIONS

FROM PAGE A28

Andrew Jackson Moses mansion on Washington Street (present Sumter County Museum) was leased for the education of white students, who would begin their studies on Sept. 1, 1889. During July 1889, the first teachers were hired, and John B. Duffie was selected as school superintendent.

"The A.J. Moses School opened on Sept. 2, 1889, and approximately 300 boys and girls enrolled. The school was forced to utilize the cellar to find room for this number of students. Nine grades were formed with only one girl qualifying for the 10th grade, and no students qualified for the 11th grade. The student's knowledge of math was used to determine grade qualification. A small tuition was charged for each student, and the calendar year was scheduled to run for nine months, concluding the session in June. It was decided by the residents of Sumter to construct a larger graded school building. A portion of land at the corner of Washington and Liberty streets was leased from the Ladies Monumental Society. This lease was to run for 99 years, and construction was begun on what would become Washington School in 1891.

"The new graded school (Washington School) was opened on Sept. 12, 1892, and became a fixture in the public school system of Sumter for several decades. The building was torn down in 1978. The Wachovia Bank [Wells Fargo] currently stands where this once-proud structure stood."



Washington School is seen in May 1978.



Students sit on the steps of Washington School.

SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS



Bruz and Heyward Crowson, photographers for *The Sumter Item*, took these photos as they toured Washington School in May 1978 before the building was torn down.



CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1. Egyptian snake
4. Upper limbs
8. Blemish
12. Also
13. Ooze
14. Mama's fellow
15. Possessive pronoun
16. Financial officer
18. Ready the oven
20. Ordinary language
21. Footed vase
22. Ballet skirt
23. Salon treatments
26. Vegetable holder
27. Embroider
30. Gather in
31. Sleepy's roommate
32. Slangy assent
33. On in years
34. By way of
35. Like seawater or tears
36. Chilled
38. BPOE member
39. Look hard
41. Neighboring hyph.
45. Possession
47. Seek to persuade
48. Kind
49. Fog
50. Misspeak
51. Phase
52. Notable periods of time
53. Lay eyes on

DOWN

1. At the peak of
2. Rotten
3. Skin opening
4. Purplish flowers
5. Telecast again
6. "_____ the Press"
7. Luxurious resort
8. Spew
9. Carnival ride
10. Makes like
11. Occasional
17. Whirled
19. Camel's feature
22. Muscle twitch
23. Amateur's opposite
24. Slippery as an _____

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15				16				17				
18			19					20				
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30					31				32			
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			36	37			38					
39	40						41			42	43	44
45					46					47		
48					49					50		
51					52					53		

25. Brightness
26. Large snake
28. Have a bite
29. Child's question
31. Achieved
32. Babbles
34. Swerve sharply
35. Inclines
37. Oaf
38. Doolittle of "My Fair Lady"
39. "_____ and Lov-ers"
40. Tease
41. Singe
42. Fleecy females
43. Pierce with a drill
44. Time past
46. Ship's pronoun

SOLUTION

A	S	P	A	R	M	S	S	C	A	R		
T	O	O			S	E	P					
P	R	E	H	E	A	T						
U	R	N										
S	E	R	M	S	B	I	N					
W	E	A	H		Y	E						
T	I	C	E	D	E	L	K					
S	T	A	R	E	C	L	O	S	E	B	Y	
O	W	N	E	R	S	H	I	P				
N	I	C	E		H	A	Z	E				
S	T	E	P		E	R	A	S				

SUDOKU

					6			
2	3	6				5		
	1		3	7				
		9	1				7	
	7		2			9		
					5			3
	8	5				2	9	1
		1		4				

HOW TO PLAY:

Fill the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 through 9 only once. Each 3x3 box is outlined with a darker line. You already have a few numbers to get you started. Remember: you must not repeat the numbers 1 through 9 in the same line, column or 3x3 box.

SOLUTION

8	5	7	2	4	9	1	6	3
1	6	2	7	3	6	5	8	4
3	9	4	5	1	8	7	2	9
6	4	3	9	8	7	2	5	1
5	1	6	4	9	2	3	7	8
2	7	8	3	5	1	9	4	6
9	2	6	8	7	3	4	1	5
7	8	5	1	9	4	6	3	2
4	3	1	6	2	5	8	9	7

Social Security Matters

Curious ex-spouse wonders if more than one SS benefit can be collected

BY RUSSELL GLOOR

National Social Security Advisor at the AMAC Foundation, the nonprofit arm of the Association of Mature American Citizens

Dear Rusty: If a financially well-off individual had multiple ex-spouses, could it happen that the multiple ex-spouses could each be collecting Social Security based on their own financial situation as compared to their rich ex-spouses? Thus, multiple payouts by SS? Just curious, because there are probably many people in this situation as a result of the ever-increasing number of people involved in multiple marriages that each lasted more than 10 years.



GLOOR

Curious Ex-Spouse

Dear Curious Ex-Spouse: A former spouse can only collect one SS benefit – either their own SS retirement amount,

or an amount as an ex-spouse if the marriage lasted 10 years or more. And it is possible for multiple ex-spouses of a marriage to the same person to qualify for benefits from those unions, if each marriage lasted at least 10 years. But each ex-spouse can only qualify for one benefit payment – either their own earned SS benefit, or their benefit as an ex-spouse. In other words, someone with two (or more) ex-spouses might have their exes collecting full benefits on their record, provided that each marriage lasted at least 10 years. But an ex-spouse can only get one benefit – their own SS retirement amount or an ex-spouse amount – whichever is higher).

It's possible, also, that an ex-spouse can collect benefits from a former spouse at the same time as a current spouse is also collecting spouse benefits on the same record. And there is no detriment to either's amount because multiple spouses or ex-spouses are collect-

ing on one person's SS record (Social Security is, after all, a means for spouses, or ex-spouses, to avoid poverty). However, an ex-spouse's own SS retirement benefit (from their personal lifetime work record) must be less than any ex-spouse benefit they are entitled to from a former spouse. Essentially, if the "10-years-married" rule is satisfied, ex-spouses are subject to the same benefit rules as a current spouse.

You are correct that we see some cases like this these days, but each eligible ex-spouse can only get one benefit, and their ex-spouse benefit is always offset by any personal SS retirement benefit the ex-spouse may also be entitled to on their own lifetime work record.

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ABOUT AMAC

The 2.4 million member Association of Mature American Citizens www.amac.us is a senior advocacy organization that takes its marching orders from its members. AMAC Action is a non-profit, non-partisan organization representing the membership in our nation's capital and in local Congressional Districts throughout the country. The AMAC Foundation (www.AmacFoundation.org) is the Association's non-profit organization, dedicated to supporting and educating America's seniors. Live long and make a difference by joining us today at www.amac.us/join-amac.



Bostic Insurance Agcy, Inc.
Charles Bostic, JR. Agent
704 Bultman Drive

Corner of Bultman and Wise Drive, Sumter

I am a second generation State Farm agent, continuing the legacy started by my father, Bo Bostic. He established his agency in Sumter back in 1965 and ran it until his retirement in 1985.

In 1984, I opened my own agency in Sumter, becoming the third one in the area at that time. It's amazing how quickly 40 years have passed!

My father, who served in the Korean war, eventually settled in Mullins, SC and worked at Martin hospital. It was there that he had his insurance with a State Farm agent named Doc Capps. Doc played a significant role in my father's life and introduced him to the State Farm organization.

The Bostic family has a long-standing reputation of serving Sumter. My daughter, Lauren Locklear, works for Gateway Mortgage in Sumter, and my son, Charles (Chas) III, owns and operates AmeriSpec inspection company, providing home inspections in Sumter and the surrounding counties.

I have truly enjoyed serving Sumter and the surrounding areas for the past 40 years, and I have no plans of slowing down. You can find my office located on the corner of Bultman and Wise Dr, where my team, with over 68 years of combined experience, is ready to assist you with all your insurance needs.

We eagerly look forward to seeing you and providing you with top-notch service.

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(Manning)**

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