



Ragin Prep reflects on state championship run

A19

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INSIDE

Business A15
 Education A10
 Events A8
 Government A5
 Puzzles A30
 Reflections A29
 Sports A18
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 A28

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ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

From left, De'Mure Kitchen's Jamal Green and Alonso Felder spoke about the story behind the viral trend-inspired name of their new restaurant and how feeding Sumter is just the start for their entrepreneur dreams. Read more on A15.




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Impact marks 1 year of community news, storytelling

Celebrations are in order. Not just because it's finally warming up, but because *The Sumter Item Impact* turns one as of this issue.

The Item went through a huge transition last year around this time. We decided to take the never-easy path of switching to printing two days a week. Myriad factors, many of which are out of our control and being faced by newspapers big and small throughout the country, led to the move. Paper and printing costs are up. Big box stores spend less money on advertising and coupon inserts. Social media and the internet, while ideologically a great way to connect in ways we couldn't before, gave rise to so much information at our fingertips that there is constant competition for your attention. While this can hold information disseminators accountable, it also leads to choice paralysis and information numbness.

When a newspaper closes, especially a local one — we are family owned and operated out of Sumter County since 1894 — a credible source for community-level information usually does not replace it. And this is happening at an

alarming rate. According to the State of Local News 2024 report, part of a decade-long project researching thousands of newspapers and digital sites, more than 3,200 print newspapers have shuttered since 2005. They continue to disappear at a rate of more than two per



Kayla Green

week, including 130 in the last year alone.

"In our 2022 report, the State of Local News Project predicted that by the end of 2025, the United States would have lost one-third of its print newspapers over the past two decades. In this year's report, we found that the country has already exceeded that mark. A little fewer than 5,600 newspapers remain, 80% of which are weeklies," project members write in the report.

As this contraction continues, in their place, news deserts spread like a disease that thrives off the mistrust in media, misinformation on social media and lack of pride in our communities that take root in the absence of access to

READ MORE

For a more in-depth look back through our inaugural year of *The Item Impact*, see page 4.

critical information needs. Needs like public safety and health information, civic engagement, ways to get to know where you live and even existential needs like weather forecasts.

A news desert, as defined by the Local News report, is a county without any news source. Its residents have no access to local information. Instead, they pay attention to social media, regional TV's breaking news headlines and national politics, becoming more polarized and less capable of discerning fact from opinion or even misinformation.

There are 206 counties considered news deserts in the U.S.

Sumter is one of the 1,561 with only one source.

And that's where I'll put a stop sign to the doom and gloom. Because change is inevitable, and no matter the situation, if you fight it, you'll probably be sunk by it. That's our mindset at *The Sumter*

Item. We will make changes as needed for a future that continues to include a local news source for Sumter's citizenry.

Maybe our biggest decision in the changes we made last year was to put this then-new *Item Impact* out for free. Despite cost challenges and all those scary numbers, we believe having access to local news, whether it's about serious government topics or entertaining food and business spotlights, makes for a better quality of life when the people around you are more informed.

We simply can't do this without our community partners. If you're a local business or want to get your message to the largest printed news audience in Sumter, look no further. We direct mail this monthly paper at no charge to over 28,000 households and businesses in Sumter (it's also available at our office). Please reach out if you're interested by emailing advertising@theitem.com. I can also help direct you or answer other general questions at kayla@theitem.com.

Thanks for being part of this journey. We're planning to stick around for many anniversaries to come.

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1 year in, what exactly did *The Item Impact* do?

BY KAYLA GREEN

kayla@theitem.com

Journalists are told to avoid writing clichés. But, when we came up with the name for this free monthly paper, we couldn't help ourselves.

Our mission in its inception was, quite literally, to make an impact in the community. To dive deeper.

The Item Impact was born from a want to strengthen bonds, inform readers and paint a fuller picture of what Sumter really is. To get into all its nooks and crannies. Yes, to be more informed. But also to maybe even learn something fascinating, to come away thinking, *I didn't realize that about this person or place*. To, say it with me, feel impacted by what you read.

Like flipping the plastic pages of a childhood photo album (how many of you even get that reference anymore?), let's review year one of *The Item Impact*.

249 STORIES STRAIGHT TO YOUR MAILBOX

We published **249 articles** in the first 12 months of *The Item Impact*.

The beginning of the paper usually includes topic-specific roundups so that if you don't go to elected boards' public meetings, and even if you don't subscribe to *The Sumter Item*'s main paper, you'll have the basics so you can either make decisions from there or know what you want to look into further.

Government roundups have ranged from summaries of future projects to discussions of preserving historic buildings. There were **28 articles on local election topics**.

Deirdre Currin, our government and general Sumter reporter, said her favorite stories in the first year were on Palmetto Tennis Center's free-to-play, ability-inclusive Thrive

program and on Hidden Wounds, a Sumter resource center for veterans by veterans.

Education reporter Bruce Mills, like Currin on her beat, is at every school board meeting to bring you updates and context without having to weed through agendas and streams. He cov-

ered everything from new board priorities post-election and new technology being used in schools to the year's valedictorians and expansions at Liberty STEAM Charter.

Mills said his favorite stories from the last year were two spotlights that ran in our series called Sumter Classics, where **we highlighted eight locally owned businesses** that are well-established in Sumter. His nods were A Ring Around the Roses florist shop for our Valentine's Day edition and Yucatan Mexican Restaurant celebrating 25 years.

Speaking of food, if you read every edition of *Impact* in its first year, you'll have read about **23 restaurants** in Sumter, everything from icons like Guignard Diner and Sylvia Jo's to new ventures like Tin Lizzy's and guides like how to make the most of your strawberries from Dorr Farms and where to eat downtown.

Impact also has informational articles, from a monthly list of events and things to do to explainers on how to attend public meetings, apply for a business license in the city or file a Freedom of Information Act request. We regularly tell you how to get involved, from spotlights on nonprofits to arts and entertainment groups, from support groups to summer programming both for children and older adults.

Speaking of arts and entertainment, Alaysha Maple covers that beat along with public safety. She wrote a **four-part Get to Know series** where she highlighted people in county or city law

enforcement, from a captain in civil services to a senior victims advocate. On the arts side, you may have read about ArtFields, a Double Dutch competition or the new South Sumter Art Park.

Her favorite stories were a feature on Sumter Opera House's theater services coordinator's journey "from the ranch to the opera house" and a feature on a grandmother's mission to spread awareness of maternal mortality.

And a picture of Sumter isn't complete without its sports. *Impact* is where Tim Leible can go beyond the scores and the season du jour. The **28 sports stories** he wrote in *Impact* year one ranged from community programs that are bringing youth together to spotlights on retired players inspiring the next generation and check-ups on alumni performing at the college and professional level.

His favorites were about Sumter High School's girls basketball coach Jeff Schaffer and his impact on the state champion team and looking back on the career, life and legacy of coach Mickey Moss.

There was plenty more, too, in these pages, including **12 visual stories**, most of them about Shaw Air Force Base. As we embark on our second year of *The Item Impact*, our mission remains the same. To bring you information and storytelling you need and want to know, stories you won't find anywhere else. To tell the stories of Sumter.

If there's something you'd like us to cover, you can always email an individual reporter or pressrelease@theitem.com.



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Government

4 headlines to know from local government this past month

BY DEIRDRE CURRIN

deirdre@theitem.com

NEW HOTEL AND PARKING GARAGE AND NEW TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL ANNOUNCED AT STATE OF SUMTER PANEL

Sumter Chamber of Commerce held its annual State of Sumter on Friday, March 7, where several developments were announced.

Board Chair of Sumter Economic Development Greg Thompson said a meeting was held recently with economic development's hotel partners, and planning is taking place to build a 130- to 160-room hotel with a convention center in downtown Sumter. The city and county are putting about \$8.5 million into a parking garage and convention center, he said, and private investments of \$40 million will go toward the hotel as well as the convention center.

Liberty STEAM Charter School will see a large expansion in the future in the form of a technical high school, Thompson said. Sumter Economic Development will partner with CCTC and University of South Carolina, Clemson University and Francis Marion University to have students of the technical high school have the first two years of their degree completed for free. About seven trades will be available for students at the high school not seeking to attend college.

SUMTER PLANNING COMMISSION APPROVES AFFORDABLE APARTMENT COMPLEX TO BE BUILT ON SITE OF



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From left, Sumter Economic Development Board Chair Greg Thompson, Greater Sumter Chamber of Commerce Board Chair Cheryl Baker, Farmers Telephone Cooperative Inc. Public Relations Director Chip Chase, Sumter County Council Chairman Jim McCain and Sumter Mayor David Merchant speak on a panel at the chamber's annual State of Sumter program.

VACANT MENTAL HEALTH FACILITY

At 215 N. Magnolia St., you may see a new development in the coming months — a 50-unit apartment building of affordable housing that will take the place of the old Santee-Wateree Mental Health building.

The mental health facility relocated to 801 N. Pike West in 2018, and the building has since been abandoned, but Sumter City-County Planning Commission approved the new building.

The new building will be called Magnolia Arbor Apartments and will include six one-bedroom units, 32 two-bed-

room units and 12 three-bedroom units.

Alongside the apartment complex, a currently unnamed commercial space on the property will also be included in the project — adding a retail use to the apartment space.

SUMTER ZONING BOARD VOTES DOWN LIQUOR STORE AFTER AREA RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT

An item on Sumter's Board of Zoning Appeals agenda brought the public together in disapproval of a potential liquor store that would have been on a prominent Sumter road.

The request was for special exception

approval for a Market Place Spirits #2 — a liquor store — to go where the currently unoccupied Family Video is at 7 N. Guignard Drive.

After hearing from the project's applicant and six community members against the request, the board on Wednesday, March 12, unanimously denied the special exception request without any further discussion on the matter. No residents spoke in favor of the request.

SUMTER CULTURAL CENTER APPROVED

A cultural/community center was approved by Sumter's Board of Zoning Appeals on Wednesday, March 12. It would be called Manning Avenue Free Studio and would be at 241 Manning Ave.

The existing structure on the land has cultural significance, formerly being the studio of David "Pablo" Sanders, who was an artist and sculptor. If the project comes to fruition by doing the proper landscaping and following correct setback standards, this would become a museum/art gallery, and a new structure would be constructed to house the center's job training programs, art projects and behavioral health support services.

Following in the footsteps of its previous use, the community center is proposed to be an "inclusive, safe haven for artists, at risk children, youth and adults to learn, value and create art as a means to heal, inspire, challenge and build equity in the South Sumter community and surrounding areas," according to documents accompanying the request.

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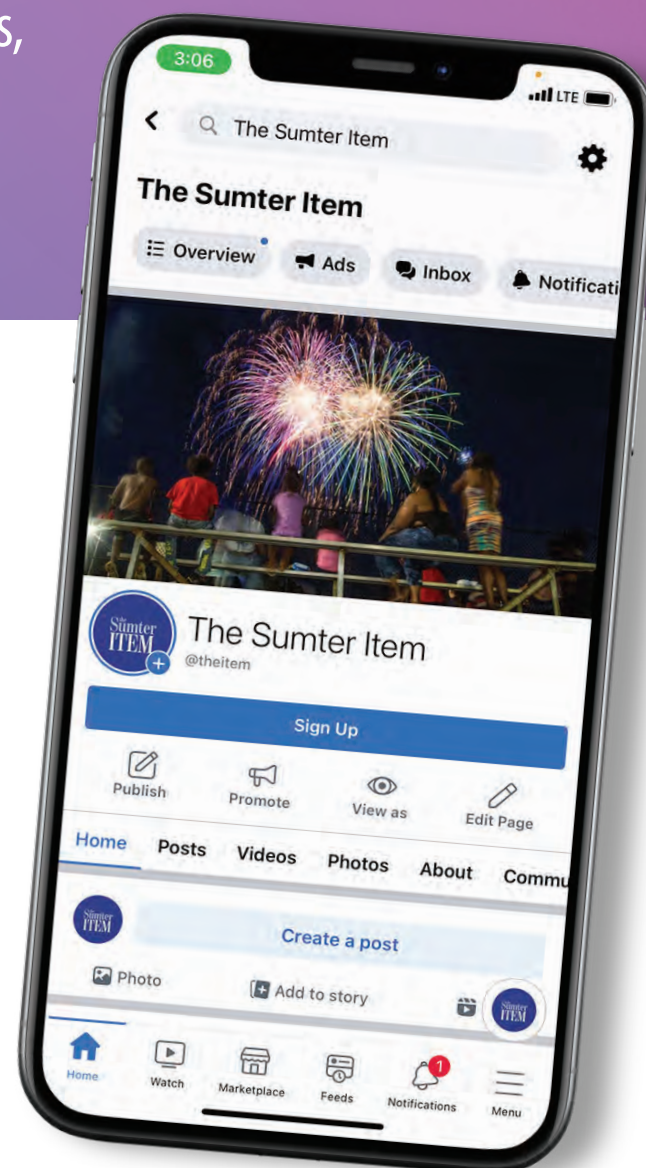


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the Sumter ITEM

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Honor Vietnam War veterans, celebrate warmer weather at events coming up

SUMTER

Comic book lovers can join Sumter Original Brewery for its **Comic Book Show** on Saturday, March 29, starting at 10 a.m. The brewery is at 2 S. Main St. in downtown Sumter.

The annual Sumter fair won't be here for a while, but a carnival is just around the corner. Sumter Fair by American Legion Post 15 invites everyone to its **Spring Carnival** starting on Friday, March 28, at 4 p.m. and lasting through Sunday, April 6, at 5 p.m. The carnival will be set up at 30 S. Artillery Drive, Sumter. Entry is \$3 with unlimited ride passes available for purchase, free parking and live entertainment. If you are interested in becoming a vendor or concessions vendor, visit Sumterfair.com.

National Vietnam War Veterans Day is March 29 annually in the U.S., and Bishopville will recognize Lee County Vietnam veterans that day at 11 a.m. at S.C. Cotton Museum and Lee County Veterans Museum, 121 W. Cedar Lane, Bishopville. Guest speaker will be retired Col. Samuel



T. Brick Jr., a staff judge advocate. Music will be performed by 282D Army Band. If you are a Vietnam veteran or know a Vietnam veteran from Lee County and wish to be included in the ceremony, contact Chris McCormick, commander of VFW Post 3096, at chrisamccormick1964@gmail.com. Sumter will hold its inaugural Vietnam Veterans' Appreciation Day on Friday, March 28, on the front lawn of the old Sumter County Courthouse beginning at 11:30 a.m. State American Legion Commander Bruce Donegan will serve as the keynote speaker, and re-

tired U.S. Air Force Col. Bush Han-son will serve as master of ceremonies. Local service agencies will also be on hand to sign up veterans for various services.

Vegas Nights will benefit the new Ramp Building Program through Habitat for Humanity. The evening will feature a variety of casino-style games, live music, a silent auction and delicious food. Participants can try their luck at blackjack, poker, craps and roulette, all while enjoying a festive atmosphere that evokes the excitement of the Las Vegas Strip. This

event is intended for entertainment purposes, so no cash or prizes will be given in exchange for game winnings. The event will be held on April 4 from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at Church of the Holy Comforter Parish Hall, 213 N. Main St. Tickets are \$77.77 and can be bought at habitatsumter.org/event. The money will go directly toward creating and installing ramps for qualified families.

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. to 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.

Festival on the Avenue, celebrating the South Sumter community through the traditions of African American culture including family, food and the arts, is back from Thursday, April 10, to Saturday, April 12. The annual festival was

SEE **EVENTS**, PAGE A9

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EVENTS FROM PAGE A8

originally based on the Bimbé Celebration, a West African Festival of Harvest during which villages gather to give thanks through dance, praise and feasting. The event along Manning Avenue will include Heritage Night – Remembering the Past, the 11th-annual golf tournament at Crystal Lakes Golf Course, A Taste of Soul at the Manning Avenue Farmers Market, entertainment by Terence Young and Finesse, plus the annual parade on Saturday morning followed by food, fun and music from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more details, visit Festival on the Avenue on Facebook.

The Fourth Edition: Women's Empowerment Brunch 2025: All Things Health, Mind, Body, Soul will be held from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Saturday, April 12, at the Morris College gymnasium. Doors open at 10 a.m. Tickets are \$50. The charge for vendors is \$100. Contact Dr. Linda Jackson at (843) 598-8210. Jackson will serve as host of the event with Dr. Lenore Jackson serving as co-host. The guest speaker will be the Rev. Cecelia "CeCe" Armstrong.

Call Jackson at (843) 598-9210 for more information.

Support veterans through the Wounded Warrior Project and Air Force Wounded Warrior Program and get some exercise at the same time at the **Wounded Warrior 5K** at Patriot Park. Race day is Saturday, April 26, beginning at 8 a.m. with checkin at the park at 380 General Drive. Race begins at 9 a.m. The first 300 total participants who register will receive a T-shirt, Wounded Warrior bracelets, bib and Fleet Feet of Augusta goody bag. All money from signups will go toward the two veterans' projects. Register for \$30 at <https://tinyurl.com/2psfve6s>.

It's time to start planning float entries for the **Sumter Iris Festival Parade**. This year's parade will be held Saturday, May 17, at 10 a.m. with the theme "Purple Wonder." If your school, civic club, church or business would like an application, please visit irisfestival.org, or contact Gail Hyatt at (803) 983-3916, or via email, gailhyatt@sc.rr.com. Deadline for entry is Friday, April 25. The parade kicks off the weekend days of the annual Iris

Festival, held each year in May. This year's festival falls earlier, before Memorial Day weekend, and includes four days of good food, plenty of shopping opportunities, games and rides for the kids and the young at heart, plants to beautify your garden and much more. It all begins with the annual Taste at the Gardens on Thursday, May 15. Look for more information on the annual event at <https://tinyurl.com/bdhtv48y> and closer to the festival in The Item and Lakeside magazine.

CAMDEN

Bring out those fancy duds and get ready for the 90th running of **The Carolina Cup**. Watch an exciting afternoon of steeplechase horse racing surrounded by friends. The annual spring event draws more than 30,000 fans to the Springdale Race Course, 200 Knights Hill Road, Camden, and this year's social event / tailgating party will be held Saturday, March 29. For additional information, visit <https://carolinacup.org>.

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.

Midlands Plant & Flower Festival offering a variety of plants, flowers, horticulture and agriculture products, equipment, lawn and garden decor, and more will be held Thursday-Sunday, April 10-13, at South Carolina State Farmers Market, 3483 Charleston Highway, West Columbia. Hours are Thursday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. and Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Free admission and parking. Vendors can contact Sonia Brazell at (803) 737-4614 or sbrazell@scda.sc.gov.

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Education

School board to rezone attendance lines; Liberty expands vision

BY BRUCE MILLS

bruce@theitem.com

BOARD VOTES 5-4 TO REZONE SCHOOLS' ATTENDANCE LINES; NO TIMETABLE GIVEN

A little more than two years after the contentious issue of district realignment of school zone lines was postponed indefinitely in Sumter, the school board passed the measure March 10 in a 5-4 vote, and no timeline was provided.

The rezoning issue essentially had no discussion in 26 months in between the decision to delay it and the March 10 Sumter School District Board of Trustees meeting, but board Chairman Shawn Ragin said in his opinion it was time to decide on it.

The five trustees who voted for the motion to authorize Superintendent William Wright Jr. to proceed with realignment were Ragin, board Vice Chairman Brian Alston, Gloria Lee, Matthew "Mac" McLeod and Brittany English.

The four board members against the measure were Bonnie Disney, the Rev. Ralph Canty, Tarah Johnson and Phil Leventis.

Four trustees — Ragin, Alston, McLeod and Lee — supported the realignment concept in 2021-22 when an eight-month study was conducted and concluded with a 5-4 vote nearly three years ago in April 2022.

That study included an independent consultant, a board ad-hoc committee that met regularly with the consultant and community meetings with the public.

Two main goals in the project were to increase bus transportation efficiencies, which were improved slightly in the option chosen, and also balance "facility utilization," or schools' enrollments, across the district.

To balance utilization, a project theme involved moving students from higher-enrollment schools in the City of Sumter to lower-enrollment schools in the outlying county areas. That mea-



On Feb. 21, Sumter High School was selected as a Special Olympics National Unified Champion School for the third time.

ZAC HOOKS / THE SUMTER ITEM

sure generated public outcry, but it kept all rural schools open.

This time around, the full board discussion on rezoning was 19 minutes in open session after the item was placed on the school board's agenda the Friday before the meeting and an action item on it was listed at the bottom of the agenda.

At the meeting, Wright, the district leader, briefly discussed realignment criteria from 3.5 years ago but did not include a complete summary of the study, presentation, maps or how many students would be affected by relocation to a different school.

The option that was approved in April 2022 would move about 17% of total enrollment to a new school, including 32% of high school students.

LEVENTIS NEW AREA 8 TRUSTEE

Phil Leventis, a former eight-term state senator for the greater Sumter region from 1980 to 2012, is the new Area 8 trustee on the district's board of trustees. He won a runoff election for the seat on Feb. 25, and his first meeting was on March 10.

Leventis will serve the remaining two years of Sen. Jeff Zell's term, who had to resign after he ran for and won the state Senate District 36 seat in November.

SUMTER HIGH EARNS SPECIAL OLYMPICS HONOR FOR 3RD TIME

Sumter High School received national banner recognition on Feb. 21 after being selected as a Special Olympics National Unified Champion School for the third time. The honor is awarded to schools that demonstrate a consistent commitment to inclusion, respect and collaboration by meeting 10 national standards of excellence set by Special

Olympics.

According to a news release, Sumter High has created an inclusive school climate through unified sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole-school engagement, ensuring that students with or without disabilities learn, train and lead together.

LIBERTY STEAM CHARTER'S NEW VISION IS 4,000 STUDENTS

On Feb. 18, Liberty STEAM Charter School founder and board Chairman Greg Thompson announced the school's new vision is to double total enrollment projections and serve 4,000 students in Sumter.

To accomplish that vision, Liberty will eventually start a second K-8 school on the western side of Sumter County near Shaw Air Force Base in tandem with the current K-8 model in the City of Sumter; and both will feed into a single senior academy for high school students.

"Ultimately, we will do another K-8 school in Sumter," Thompson said. "So, our dream and vision are to have two K-8 schools feeding our high school, and that will bring our total population probably somewhere around 4,000 students."

The high school will also have a technical high school component.

Liberty's prior vision was to serve 2,061 students, or "scholars" as it refers to them, at buildout as a K-12 school during the 2032-33 school year. Currently, the school adds one grade per year in its enrollment model. That equates to about 150 new students annually.

A goal of the school since its formation has been to create a successful choice alternative to traditional public education in Sumter.

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"It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

— J. Krishnamurti

A young Irish-Catholic priest embarked on a mission to the Kalenjin peoples of Kenya. Having been trained in "community development," he was eager to put his knowledge into practice. After a few days among the Kalenjin, he called a meeting with the men of the tribe. He spoke optimistically about improvements they could make, shared resources he could leverage from contacts back home and encouraged them with the idea that many of their problems could be solved.

After a period of silence, an elder tribesman spoke. "Why is it, for you Europeans," he asked, "that your only response to a problem is that you want to solve it?" The priest listened, perplexed. "A problem is an invitation to self-transcendence. And if all you do with the problem is solve it, life will just give you another problem." The elder sat back down.

Between our ears is an incredibly powerful problem-solving machine, divided into two hemispheres. Though the hemispheres function together, they do so in slightly different ways. In short, the left hemisphere sees the world through a technical lens — it looks to solve problems immediately. The right hemisphere, however, sees the world through a broader lens, one that amplifies the connection between all things and seeks understanding.

We need both, but in a healthy society, the left hemisphere serves the right. Currently, we are living in a world dominated by left-hemispheric thinking. We scramble to fix symptoms while failing to deepen our understanding of root causes.

Here is a parable to illustrate the point:

Two fishermen cast their lines from the banks of a wide river. Suddenly, one notices several young children being swept downstream, unable to swim and screaming for help. They both jump into the river to rescue the children (left hemisphere), but they soon realize that no matter how hard they try, they cannot reach them all — and more keep coming! Finally, one fisherman realizes he must go upstream to discover why these children are falling into the river in the first place (right hemisphere).

In education, we are understandably focused on the drowning children we can immediately save, though we are easily overwhelmed, and in our desperation we yell absurd things at the flailing children like "try harder" or "be more disciplined" or "try Jesus" (James 2:15) as they float past. Worse, imagine if the fishermen, instead of rescuing the children they could, began arguing about how the children should have learned to swim. Now, let's imagine that in this parable, there are guns, beer bottles and smartphones floating in the river, too, and the desperate children grab hold of them. Would we blame them? Do we blame a drowning victim for grabbing hold of anything nearby? Of course not. Instead, we might echo Jesus' words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Drowning children will desperately cling to anything they believe might save them.

When problems arise in education, most of us react with left-hemispheric solutions — better parenting, new technologies, tighter discipline, improved grading policies, God in or out of school, change in curriculum, higher pay for teachers, school choice. None of these are bad ideas — each contains some level of truth — but they are incomplete. Some solutions work in the short term, but they are not transformative because they address symptoms rather than the disease.

"Fixing" schools will not solve our children's ills because children do not grow up solely in schools but in an ecosystem influenced by economics, politics, religion, culture, media, narratives about history, misinformation, etc. As Pat Conroy said, the water is wide. For example, in Sumter, 27% of children under 18 live in poverty, and in S.C., 44% of all families either live in poverty or are considered ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed), which means they're one crisis away from catastrophe. Our left hemisphere may react with immediate solutions. But we should be asking, is the problem a failure of employers to pay living wages? of education? of politics? of growing inequality? of inflation? of consumerism? of rapacious greed? of individualism? of absentee fathers? of religion? of substance abuse? of poor choices? of a lack of a "work ethic"? Answer: all the above.

Jesus tells the parable of the barren fig



Brent Kaneft

tree in Luke 13:6-9: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the

ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.'"

We are a generation that is used to discarding things when they don't seem to be working: "Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" You can hear this sentiment in the voices of those who want to end public education because it is "failing," for example. Addressing symptoms can look like progress, but it is false progress. And so, we fracture again and again, and the junkyard piles high with our refuse — for example, consider how many underperforming private/charter schools exist in our state; these institutions were once the immediate solutions to "failing" public schools (disclaimer: As

an independent-school leader, I believe a healthy ecosystem of private, charter, public and home schools can exist).

To reference the quote above, we are now "well-adjusted" to this unhealthy cycle, which keeps us busy with immediate suffering (i.e., the drowning children) and pessimistic about the future (i.e., the drowning children continue to float downstream).

Schools should not be compartmentalized and given sole responsibility for failing students; schools are a reflection of the broader ecosystem in which we live. Until we shift our thinking beyond immediate problem-solving and toward deeper systemic understanding, we will continue pulling children from the river without ever addressing why they are falling in. The real challenge is not just to save them but to stop them from drowning in the first place. That requires the hard, dirty and necessary work of examining the roots, going upstream — and taking responsibility for what we find there. And if we do, that is when we will experience the "self-transcendence" the Kalenjin elder described.

Kaneft is the headmaster of Wilson Hall in Sumter.



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Military

HIDDEN WOUNDS is more than just a safe place for veterans

BY DEIRDRE CURRIN

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Some wounds go beyond the physical. In fact, some of the longest-lasting pains remain in the heads and hearts of those who have endured the unimaginable. When you pair that mental pain

with isolation, fear and the physical hardships of homelessness and poverty, you get the unfortunate reality of many veterans. Some of what is experienced in service to one's country can be so traumatizing, the feeling stays even when a service member gets back home.

United States Marine Corps veteran Lance Newman remembers how it felt leaving the service and not having anyone to talk to, burying how he felt inside, hidden away from even his family. The resources Newman needed were not readily available to him, but he wants better for his fellow veterans. That is why he created Hidden Wounds.

"All of us have these dark secrets that we tend to hide, and when you hide them [...] sooner or later, the pipes are gonna burst," Newman said. "That's not a good thing because when those pipes burst, it lands on everybody

you love."

Hidden Wounds is not just a want but a need for a community that has a high number of veterans like Sumter does. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Sumter County has an estimated population of more than 10,000 veterans, making up 13.2% of Sumter's adult population. So, when an area has a large number of veterans, it needs enough resources to take care of them, and Hidden Wounds is one of those resources.

Beyond a safe physical space full of people who understand what veterans go through, Hidden Wounds supplies basic needs for veterans, too.

From electricity bills to housing to a full gym and food, the sky is the limit for what Newman and his team are willing to do for Sumter's veterans.

One of the largest resources Hidden Wounds provides to veterans is the beginning of mental healing, and this is a critical need for veterans everywhere. The number of veteran deaths by suicide a day is about 19, though Newman attests the number is higher, with some veteran suicides slipping through the cracks.

"The moral injury that goes on with a



PHOTOS BY DEIRDRE CURRIN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Executive director for Hidden Wounds Lance Newman has spent 17 years helping veterans. Hidden Wounds provides free resources to veterans in need, including rides to appointments, payment toward overdue bills and housing.



The lobby of Hidden Wounds is a welcoming area for veterans in need. Hidden Wounds is an organization that provides free resources to veterans.

lot of veterans, you really never see it," Newman said. "That's why they are still able to put their clothes on, take a bath and get a haircut and look normal, but on the inside, they're just so dark, and they've been in that black box."

Hidden Wounds provides mental counseling from veterans and support groups while helping with the outside factors that can make continuing on even harder. The mental struggles of veterans are the namesake of Hidden

Wounds, representing that what veterans may struggle with the hardest is imperceptible to the eye.

"We've all had issues with suicide," Vietnam veteran and U.S. Marine Ben Marich said. "In my case, Vietnam. We lost an entire generation because no one took care of them through Agent Orange, through the inability of the system to adjust to us, so we didn't

SEE **WOUNDS**, PAGE A13



Vietnam War and United States Marines veteran Ben Marich takes a toy from service dog Flash. Flash helps veterans who are mentally struggling and is a free resource provided by Hidden Wounds.

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WOUNDS

 FROM PAGE A12

know what PTS [Post-Traumatic Stress] was until 1980."

Some veterans, including Marich, call what is more commonly known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by PTS instead. This comes from the belief that Post-Traumatic Stress is not a disorder but instead a response to traumatic events.

It took Marich himself almost 50 years before he was diagnosed and treated for PTS.

Now, the veterans who know how it feels to lose a friend to suicide and who have struggled with suicide themselves are working to pull the veterans around them out of the darkness they are so familiar with. There is another member of the Hidden Wounds team who helps with suicide prevention, and that's Flash.

Flash is a trained service dog who, according to Marich, has saved 22 veterans from suicide. He is able to point out who in a room needs help and sticks near that individual, offering companionship. Right now, Hidden Wounds is working on training three more puppies to assist veterans.

The food pantry of Hidden Wounds is always in need of more donations. Hidden Wounds is an organization that provides free assistance and resources to veterans, including food. Food donations can be brought to Hidden Wounds at 21 S. Washington St.



United States Air Force veteran Paul Quarrella helps United States Marine Corps veteran Tom Lash on a computer at Hidden Wounds. Hidden Wounds is an organization that gives veterans free resources such as computers, full gym usage and rides to appointments.

PHOTOS BY DEIRDRE CURRIN / THE SUMTER ITEM

As for training humans, Hidden Wounds also offers mental health first aid training in six different disciplines: youth, adult, military/veterans, law enforcement/corrections, higher education and senior citizen. The training gives a three-year certification to those attending it and educates the attendee on how to provide aid to those suffering mentally.

Hidden Wounds is made up of a small but mighty group of volunteers, of which Newman is the executive director, William Oden is the board chair, William Bailey is the administrative as-

sistant and Paul Quarrella is the volunteer coordinator.

When you enter Hidden Wounds, at 21 S. Washington St., the atmosphere isn't one of a business, nor does it act as a business. For veterans visiting Hidden Wounds, there is no expectation. They can sit and play checkers, read a book, talk or even just take a nap. In the lobby are couches, a coffee bar and free snacks. Walking farther into the building reveals tables to eat at, more comfortable seating and inspirational messages on the walls.

"One of the best compliments we get is that when veterans come here, they say, 'I feel comfortable,'" Newman said.

Transforming the Hidden Wounds building was a community effort done with the help of local businesses such as Dixie Products, which helped put new floors in for free; Gregory Electric, which provided electrical supplies; Farmers Telephone Cooperative, which provided internet and phones; and Hines Furniture, which donated furniture.

Even though Hidden Wounds has only had its brick-and-mortar location for a short time, Newman has been helping veterans for 17 years, amassing

a total of nearly 8,000 veterans whose lives he has touched.

"We have so many veterans that have fallen in the gap or need temporary help or need guidance. Having these resources and partners, believe me, it goes a long way," Newman said. "We're able to do everything from a food pantry to helping someone get lined up with mental health help."

Hidden Wounds does, in fact, keep a food pantry, but it also has a dry goods pantry with hygiene items, clothing and goods that some veterans cannot get for themselves. And, for veterans who need a ride, Hidden Wounds offers dropoffs and pickups for appointments.

Newman does not always wait for veterans to come to Hidden Wounds for help; he often goes to them, too. There is a population of veterans in Sumter who are homeless, and Newman will bring goods to them in an effort to gain their trust and eventually help them on a larger scale. There have also been times when Hidden Wounds has put a veteran in a hotel for a week while searching for their family or more permanent housing for them.

Hidden Wounds has most recently partnered with veteran housing organization VALanthropy to provide inexpensive housing to veterans across from the Hidden Wounds resource center. The ground has already been broken on the project, which would provide 12 units for veterans to live in.

Grants help pay for services provided to veterans, but those grants do not help keep Hidden Wounds' doors open. At the end of the day, they have their own bills to pay, and they rely on donations to keep going. Hidden Wounds takes physical donations, including food and money, at its physical location from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Go to hidden-wounds.org to donate online and learn more.



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F-16 Viper Demo Team takes on Heritage Flight Training Course

The F-16 Viper Demonstration Team recently attended the Heritage Flight Training Course at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona. The team attended the annual gathering of Air Combat Command demonstration teams to certify for aerial maneuvers in the air show season. The course also provides an opportunity to fly alongside legacy aircraft in celebration of Air Force heritage.

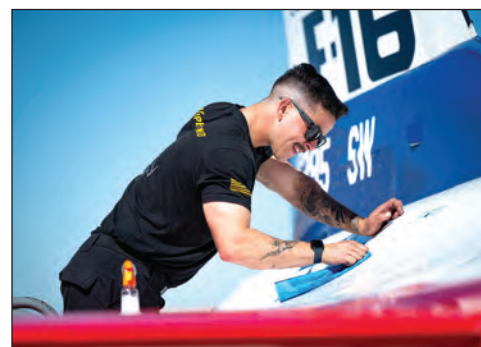


U.S. Air Force Maj. Taylor "FEMA" Hiestler, F-16 Viper Demonstration Team commander and pilot, prepares for takeoff at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, on Feb. 28.

U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTOS BY SENIOR AIRMAN STEVEN CARDO



A U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon flies in formation alongside a F-22 Raptor and two Northrop F-5 aircraft during the Heritage Flight Training Course.



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Eli Sanchez, F-16 Viper Demonstration Team assistant dedicated crew chief, wipes down an F-16 Fighting Falcon at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, on Feb. 27. The demonstration team trained and performed alongside partner Air Combat Command demonstration teams and heritage flight legacy aircraft, using the opportunity to prepare for the upcoming air show season and celebrate Air Force heritage.

Business

The De'Mure Way: Sumter chef, Clarendon entrepreneur bring new flavors, meaning to South Sumter with restaurant

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE

alaysha@theitem.com

Food is more than just nourishment. It's also an invitation — one that welcomes you into a person's world, giving you a glimpse into their history, their culture and their heart.

For Alonso Felder and Jamal Green, food is their language, their craft and their way of leaving a lasting impact — and De'Mure Kitchen is just the start.

For Felder, 37, a military veteran from Summerton, service has always been part of his identity. But while serving his country gave him discipline and purpose, he knew he wanted to build something of his own — something that would allow him to take control of his future. But to do so, to follow his dreams, he knew that he needed a solid foundation, and it first had to be built on financial stability.

"You've got to have a foundation, and when I say foundation, you got to have money. You got to have finances. You got to do something that's going to support your dreams," he explained, his wise words to other young entrepreneurs.

Whether it was saving money from his career, taking on side hustles or simply being smart with his investments, Felder understood that success wasn't just about talent, but also about preparation. Which is why when the time came to open a restaurant, he was ready, and he knew the best business partner to call.

Jamal Green, 38, born and raised in South Sumter, grew up with a path lined by spices, recipes and the oppor-



PHOTOS BY ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

ABOVE: De'Mure Kitchen is at 516 S. Lafayette Drive. Alonso Felder and Jamal Green created the new restaurant in South Sumter and said it is just the beginning of what they want to do along their restaurant journey.



LEFT: De'Mure Kitchen founder Alonso Felder, above, and chef Jamal Green pose in their new restaurant.

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with love, laughter and a deep understanding of flavor. He would come to get his big break into his familial kitchen scene as the grill master at family functions; he's since taken up a knack for frying.

The smells of seasonings, the rhythm of stirring pots, the joy of feeding others — it all shaped him. From his first job at 16 until now, the food industry has been his bread and butter. Which is why as he and Felder worked to create a space that represents their dedication to great service and even better food, there was only one way to do it: The De'Mure Way.

The Anglo-French word gained virality during the "Very demure, very



The De'Mure Way at De'Mure Kitchen comes with cheesesteak, four classic wings with cheddar-bacon-topped fries.

SEE DE'MURE, PAGE A16

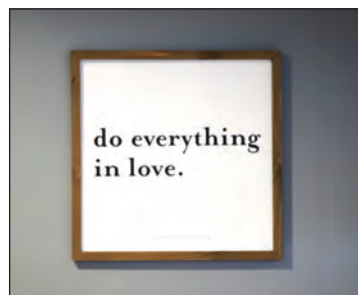
DE'MURE FROM PAGE A15

mindful" trend across social media platforms. But Felder and Green sought to give it new meaning when they opened De'Mure Kitchen, 516 S. Lafayette St., on Dec. 30, 2024.

"Clean" and "polite" were the two words the duo used when it pertains to De'Mure Kitchen, which is what customers should expect when dining. Ordering from a menu of their favorites — from wings of all flavors and heat levels and Philly cheesesteak eggrolls to piping hot fries and mozzarella sticks and everything in between. And if you want the full experience, get it "The De'Mure Way," complete with cheesesteak, four classic wings and cheddar-bacon-topped fries.

The combo provides a great sample of everything the business has to offer, in both taste — with flavors that complement — and presentation. Since opening in December, raving reviews have flooded their Facebook page.

"If you look on our Facebook page, you'll see a plethora of people just showing off their reviews, eating the chicken off the bones, leaving the plate empty," Felder said. "They really



PHOTOS BY ALAYSHA MAPLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

De'Mure Kitchen's Jamal Green and Alonso Felder talked about the story behind the name of their restaurant at 516 S. Lafayette Drive.

love it."

And for Green, it's worthwhile. To see familiar faces come through those doors time after time, ordering his creations and never leaving without tossing a quick word of thanks and encouragement through the small kitchen door, it's a feeling he couldn't describe in words but showed in the warm smile that spread across his face.

"That's what I want to see. It's all about the person, and that's how I interact with people — through food. It's a good feeling," he expressed. "I'm born and raised on the south side. So being over here and especially feeding people on south side, that's really what it's about."

The duo has big plans to take their demure business venture from state to

state, even setting their sights on going global. But for now, they'll stick to bringing the community the service they've become known for, with a few additions. While much remains under wraps, Felder detailed implementing a wait staff to now bring orders out to dine-in guests and a soda dispenser system, opting out of the canned sodas they currently have, as well as adding Southern sweet teas and other drinks to the menu. Green has heard the pleas of the public for more of his pasta dishes and hopes to roll out the addition in the near future.

As they continue on this journey, building their wholesome restaurant into a full-fledged enterprise, the duo reflects on their past trials and tribulations that led them to this success. How their own inhibitions have been their greatest downfall. How the going got too rough just one too many times. It's now, on the other side of those dark times, that their mottos mean more than just words.

"Just keep going," Felder reminds himself.

"You got to go through it to get to it," Green expressed.

For this, they said, is only the beginning.

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Religion

We all know how to be kind, thoughtful and encouraging

I have had the privilege of serving as the pastor at First Presbyterian here in Sumter for the last year. My wife and I moved to Sumter about six months ago, and so now it is our home, too.

Although it is hard for me to believe it has been a year (my older, more mature friends tell me that as you age, “the days get longer and the years get shorter!”), I am thankful to call Sumter home. I was told early in my time here “here in Sumter we always try to work together.” For the most part, I have found this to be true. There is certainly more we can do; it is easy to become too focused on your own neighborhood or your own church and to forget that our community is larger. I believe one of the greatest challenges we all face is to

look beyond our own needs. We are prone to be selfish and to think we have already done enough.

As a minister, I have the privilege of working with all ages. As everyone who is a teacher knows, you must make sure that your message is appropriate to the age of your students. If you have a difficult concept and you are teaching 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, you may spend as much time thinking about what you are going to say



Pastor Stewart Rawson

and how you are going to say it as you actually spend saying it. Several months ago, in this column I quoted the wisdom of a writer named Robert Fulghum. Fulghum wrote an essay called, “Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” I have continued to think about Fulghum’s



essay. Repeatedly I have thought to myself, “Why is it so difficult for us as human beings to live by the lessons that our parents taught us when we were younger?” One of the first lessons we were taught in preschool was to share. Why is it so difficult for us when we become adults to share? We were told, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything.” And

yet the tone and volume of our civil discourse gets louder and louder. We speak without thinking, and we jump to conclusions.

The curious youth asked her pastor, “Are you a good Christian?” The pastor responded, “You will have to ask my next-door neighbor.” What would people learn about you if they followed you around for a day? What would someone discover about you if they followed you around for a day and you didn’t know they were watching your every move? Do our children learn more from what we say and from what we teach them, or do they learn more from how we treat others?

Maybe we all need to go back to kindergarten and return to the basics. We all know how to be kind and to be thoughtful and to be encouraging of others; now let’s do it.

Stewart Rawson is the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Downtown Sumter.

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Crestwood AD Scriven helps spread drug awareness

BY TIM LEIBLE

tim@theitem.com

South Carolina Athletic Coaches Association Executive Director Scott Earley often tries to find time to travel to different states to find ways to improve the progress of coaches in the Palmetto State.

A few years ago, a trip to Texas led to a connection that is continuing to grow in South Carolina, as he was inspired to start his own branch of the Coaches vs. Opioids program with the SCACA.



PHOTO PROVIDED

South Carolina Athletic Coaches Association Executive Director Scott Earley jump-started the Coaches vs. Opioids program in the Palmetto State in 2023 after a former student died of a fentanyl overdose.

expand and make this program as big and as good as we could."

This year, they took a major step forward thanks to a grant from the state government.

"We're trying to spread awareness for what is the No. 1 killer for people under 50 in America. It's the silent killer, and one that people often don't want to talk about," Earley said. "I thought that would be a good way to get the coaches involved because they're influential in their communities, so we can deliver the message through the athletes to the parents.

"Statistics say that 90% of beating this epidemic is just awareness. Just don't take a pill that's prescribed for

Inspired by the loss of a former athlete, Andrew Gall, who died from a fentanyl overdose, Earley has worked to expand his efforts in South Carolina.

"I had one of my former players where, at 19 years old I had to do the eulogy at his funeral," Earley said. "It turned from a project to a passion, so my awareness heightened my energy to ex-



Crestwood Athletic Director Terrence Scriven, seen speaking at a Meet the Knights event at CHS, is one of the South Carolina Athletic Coaches Association members charged with spreading the word about the Coaches vs. Opioids initiative with schools across the state.

NICH PITTS / SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO

you because one pill can kill."

With the help of that grant, Earley was able to bring on four other leaders from across the state to help spread the message about the dangers of opioids. Crestwood Athletic Director Terrence Scriven is joined by Cindy Jacobs, who leads Financials and Vendors for the SCCA, Alison Youngblood and Sherry Smith, the middle school rep for the SCACA, to visit with schools and coaches in an effort to better educate student-athletes.

"With our young people dealing with vaping and drugs and the impact that it has in our community, I said absolutely," Scriven said of his response when Earley asked him to come on board with the program. "Any time you deal with young people, this should hit you, and it should hit home. Let's not be naïve to think that drugs are not affecting our community here. The more we can get information out, the more we can talk about it, the more we can eliminate young people being involved with drugs.

"I have two young girls, and you never know when this can hit home, so the more you talk about it and the more you can get people to understand it's not good, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a part of that."

Scriven is focused on the Pee Dee area, so he travels to various schools to sit down with coaches and provide them with tools to pass on their message. At the end of the day, the local coaches know their student-athletes

better than anyone, so they are the perfect voices for this message. Within Sumter, Scriven meets with individual teams more often because of his connection with each school in the district. Scriven also helps oversee membership with the SCACA, as well as serves as the 4A lower state head, so he's able to make sure the Coaches vs. Opioids message is passed along to all the new coaches as they join the organization.

"It's easier one on one," Scriven said of the conversations with students.

"When I spoke to the Sumter High boys basketball team, I was able to have a dialogue with them, and the No. 1 thing they talked about was peer pressure and the fact that they know it's around and they see it, so if you aren't strong enough to move away, you can get caught up in it. Hearing that from them and our kids, as well, just talking to them on a daily basis, when you open up and talk to them one on one, you can know how to react to them and how to help them.

"You have to find a way to combat that and keep talking about it, keep harping on it. As long as you keep hearing it over and over again, it'll be with you forever. That's the plan."

The playbook that SCACA provides schools includes some important statistics. Seven out of 10 pills with fentanyl contain a lethal dose, and 115 million pills laced with the drug were seized by law enforcement in 2023. They include examples of real and fake versions of prescription drugs like Adderall and

Xanax. SCACA also preaches the dangers of vaping, especially illegal and unregulated vapes. They also include videos and conversation starters to get the ball rolling with student-athletes. The full playbook is available on the SCCA website at www.sccoaches.org.

The expanded efforts by SCACA have received glowing reviews by coaches, parents and, most importantly, students across the state.

"The response has been unbelievable," Earley said. "What we really want is for this to be student-driven, and that's been taking place across the state. They're making their own videos and are trying to shed the light on the opioid crisis. It's all been positive. The only negative is (people saying), 'We had 1,000 playbooks show up at our school, what do we do?' That's where people like Terrence Scriven come in and hold your hand and show you what to do.

"Now it's student-driven, and there's no peer pressure more powerful than positive peer pressure. So far, so good, and hopefully the legislators will be impressed with what we've been able to do and continue to fund us so we can continue to save lives."

Earley hopes to continue growing the program for years to come. They met with the House of Representatives this month as they seek reoccurring status for the grant. After a year of setting up the foundation for expansion, future money can go toward strengthening their message within every school in the state.

"As it began to grow, I knew it would take some man- and womanpower to really take this where we want it to go," Earley said. "If we get renewed, we'll be able to do more of that because most of that grant was spent on the back end, making the pamphlets and doing the billboards and just going to visit games. We tried to stack it together where it can continue to grow, and now we're at the point where we hope we can add some more people and do a better job of covering all schools in the state of South Carolina, no matter where they're at."

Rams reflect on impact of state championship run for Ragin Prep

BY TIM LEIBLE

tim@theitem.com

On Feb. 22, Ragin Prep made history, celebrating a state championship for the first time when the Rams defeated Curtis Baptist for the SCISA 1A basketball state title.

A month later, the initial high has cooled down, but the excitement around the school is still strong.

“I kinda got over it about a week ago. We’re on to building the schedule now, so I’ve been on the phone trying to get the schedule right for next year,” head coach Anthony Jackson said. “Like I said in the gym (after the championship), we’re trying to put it back together for next year.”



RAGIN

“But the atmosphere here has been crazy. You get the kids, teachers, everybody treating us like superstars, celebrities, however you want to put it. We’re just trying to

stay humble and stay grounded because, at the end of the day, we have another goal to put it back together and win it again.”

Players from the championship squad echo the message of their head coach.

“I feel good that we won, but I also feel like we need to get back together to do it again,” said junior K’Den Shannon, who was a member of the first Ragin Prep squad four years ago. “When it was Day 1, the staff members believed in us, but I don’t think the students cared too much. Now, that’s a big part of this school, basket-



The Ragin Prep basketball team celebrates their SCISA 1A state championship win over Curtis Baptist on Feb. 22.

ball. I think that’s what they know us for now.”

Ragin Prep founder and Headmaster Shawn T. Ragin continues to feel the buzz around the school.

“It has boosted the morale. The whole campus atmosphere has really



Ragin Prep's K'Den Shannon cuts down the net after winning the SCISA 1A state title.

changed,” Ragin said. “With the staff, the parent relationships and the community. We’ve gotten several calls from different officials and other community members that have reached out to us. It’s really boosted morale overall.”

The championship run caught the eyes of Sumter as a whole, not just the families at Ragin Prep. They felt that support on the run to a state title.

“It came from last year when we got

PHOTOS BY TIM LEIBLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

SEE RAMS, PAGE A20

RAMS

 FROM PAGE A19

knocked out in the third round. Everyone else started seeing Ragin Prep,” Shannon said.

As more people started to see the name Ragin Prep in a positive light, Ragin has noticed an uptick in interest in the school as a whole.

“A lot of folks are paying attention. We’ve been around for 11 years, people know who we are; we’ve always been in the community. I see that the community overall have embraced the state champions,” Ragin said. “We’ve received a number of phone calls, we’ve gotten several inquiries on our website with potential applicants. Of course, they’re asking about the academics. That’s most important, and we make sure we highlight that as well. Overall, they know what we’re doing here now.

“I tell the students every day that we don’t have a magical answer or anything; we come here every day, and we work our behinds off. Our teachers and staff do well. Overall, this accomplishment highlights that. We’re writing history, and there’s more to come.”

Kavontay Rose was able to be a first-hand example of the opportunities at Ragin Prep. As a middle-schooler, Rose found himself getting into trouble at Ebenezer. After meeting Jackson through AAU, he decided to make the move to Ragin Prep and found the right home.

“He and Dr. Ragin gave me a second chance to come here and rebuild to where I am now,” Rose said. “I know they’ve got my back, so I appreciate them for that.”

The Rams had to overcome a lot of adversity to win the SCISA 1A state title. Ragin Prep doesn’t have a gym to call home. Over the years, they’ve worked with Morris College and Sumter County Recreation and Parks to use different gyms in town, but their success came on the back of hard work outside of the team setting. The Rams couldn’t rely on getting all of the practice they needed after school together; each member had to be committed to improving on their own.

“These guys don’t have the resources a lot of their peers have,” Jackson said. “Last year, we started to say, ‘We live in a neighborhood; let’s get up and run, go shoot some free throws. Enough of the excuses. We al-

ready know what we don’t have. Let’s go make something out of nothing.’ Last year, we created that mindset that we have to work outside of practice. This year, it was their everyday mindset.

“These guys kept their heads straight, stayed focused, and we got the job done. For me, this is one of the many firsts for Ragin Prep.”

Junior Kayshaun Rutherford said the Rams needed to be self-motivated in order to succeed.

“Working by yourself when no one is around,” he said. “Even running around your neighborhood helps you get in shape.”

The rest of the sports at Ragin Prep are now trying to follow in the footsteps of their basketball program. Outside of hoops, Ragin Prep has track, cross country, bowling, archery and cheer. Those programs have a blueprint for success, but the biggest key for Jackson, who also serves as the athletic director for the Rams, is helping these athletes find their passion for each sport. That passion will lead to continued growth.

“Us winning that championship inspired a lot of our other sports,” Jackson said. “Seeing what was done on the basketball court can be motivation for a lot of our athletes.

“We’re all pretty happy with the exposure that we’re getting, but all of us as coaches understand the situation we’re in. We’re just starting our programs, and I tell them all the time, even our headmaster, but we don’t have to win. We’re in Year 4, and we’re fortunate with where we are for basketball, but like with every other program, we’re just growing and trying to get these kids familiar with the sport; we want to make sure they like the sport.”

As the athletic programs continue to grow, so will Ragin Prep. Ragin is always in search of ways to improve the quality of life for his students, whether that comes on the basketball court or in the classroom and beyond.

“We’ve accomplished a whole lot, more than we thought we would based on the goals and plans we currently have,” Ragin said of the school as a whole. “In that, we’re going to look at the things that we’ve done and build upon those things. In the future, new facilities is something that we’re excited about talking about, growing our campus overall, developing more academic opportunities for



TIM LEIBLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Ragin Prep's Kayshaun Rutherford, left, handles the ball during the SCISA 1A state championship game.

our students, and hopefully we can get the support from the community and different partners that we’ve partnered with over the years.

“We’re really here working, doing what we can for children. There’s great hope to continue to build.”

The Rams don’t plan to settle for one championship. While they’ll lose three seniors to graduation, the returning players are hungrier than

ever to defend their title.

“When the other team lost, I saw the tears on their face. I don’t want to experience that feeling anymore,” Rutherford said. Shannon added, “I don’t want to let anybody down anymore. I don’t want anyone to feel upset with us or that we can’t do anything anymore because we lost players or we don’t have the material to do it. Those are just excuses.”

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Do you know: Octavia Harby Moses

Sumter woman remembered for blessings she gave others in many ways

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE

alaysa@theitem.com

Some of history's most influential figures never sought the spotlight, yet their impact continues to shape the world today.

Women and men across generations have driven progress through resilience, education and quiet but powerful leadership, leaving behind legacies that deserve to be remembered. Among them is Octavia Harby Moses.

Octavia, the daughter of Rachel Mordecai and Isaac Harby, was born in 1823 in Charleston. Her father was one of the founders of Reform Judaism in America, and she was an observant Jew and would host her family members on the Sabbath throughout her life.

Following the death of her mother in 1827 and her father in 1828, Octavia married a Jewish man, Andrew Jackson Moses, in 1839 before the couple moved from Charleston to Sumter in



PHOTO PROVIDED

Octavia Harby Moses was born in Charleston in 1823 and moved to Sumter with her husband in 1842.

great-grandchildren in her lifetime, according to Diana Roof, Temple Sinai Jewish History administrator.

The family's home played a pivotal part in the religious life of the community. Isaac Harby, son of Octavia and Andrew, wrote that because there was not a synagogue in the community, re-

ligious education and worship services were the responsibility of the home. "On each Sabbath morning and on the religious holidays, an assemblage of the family would be found at the home where they had come together for the reading of prayers, at the conclusion of which each in turn would receive her blessing with a kiss," he wrote.

Over the next 27 years, she gave birth to 17 children and would be a grandmother to 39 grandchildren and nine

great-grandchildren in her lifetime, according to Diana Roof, Temple Sinai Jewish History administrator.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the couple disagreed on which side to stand for. Andrew sided with the Union, and Octavia was for secession, Roof explained. When South Carolina seceded from the Union, Andrew changed his alliances, and he and his five oldest sons signed up to fight in the war. Here on the home front, Octavia joined the Women's Aid.

Described by Ruth Edens in "It Takes a Heap O' Livin'" as an energetic and creative person, Octavia was in-

strumental in the Civil War, turning her creativity into a tool of care. Sumter served as supply and railroad repair center for the Confederacy during the war and its churches and courthouse as hospitals for wounded soldiers.

Octavia knitted socks, prepared lint for dressing wounds and sent blankets and other resources to Confederate supply centers. When short on supplies, Octavia cut up her window curtains to make dresses, brewed imitation coffee from okra seeds and parched peanuts and crafted hats from corn shucks, according to The Forward, a nonprofit Jewish publication. While caring for Confederate soldiers during the war, their home was also a place of solace for family and relatives that fled from Charleston to seek refuge in Sumter.

"Octavia Harby Moses was a multi-faceted individual. No task was

SEE **MOSES**, PAGE A23



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MOSES FROM PAGE A22

too menial, and none too difficult," Edens wrote.

At 80, Octavia put a pen to her past, writing memoirs about meeting every train that brought soldiers through town. About walking from home to take food to Confederate soldiers as they passed through. About how her compassion extended to Union soldiers as well.

"I organized a sewing society, to cut and make garments for them. Many boxes of clothes and provisions were sent off, not only to my own sons but to any others who needed them. I made a point to try and meet every train that brought soldiers through our town and, with others, frequently walked from my home, sometimes at two o'clock in the morning, to take food to our men as they passed through," wrote Octavia in "Recollections." "I cut up my carpets and piano cover for them, sent my blankets, etc. We did not count such things as privations; I have always said that I knew no privations during the war."

Following the war, Octavia formed "The Ladies Monumental Association."



Moses formed "The Ladies Monumental Association" to erect a monument in honor of deceased Confederate soldiers of Sumter.

According to Roof, the association sought to erect a monument in honor of deceased Confederate soldiers of Sum-



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Octavia Harby Moses is seen with her Sunday School class.

ter. Octavia was president and remained so until her husband died in 1877. The monument is on Washington Street between Liberty Street and Hampton Avenue.

"She was the family matriarch and a

strong influence on her family. She was the one who ensured her family observed Shabbat. Her children fondly remember receiving her blessing with a kiss," Roof expressed. "May her memory be for a blessing."







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Sumter High School foreign language teacher Diego Teatin stands next to a picture of his native country of Colombia in his classroom recently at the school.

PHOTOS BY BRUCE MILLS / THE SUMTER ITEM

Connecting cultures through education

Sumter High international teacher Diego Teatin elected president of state language teachers group

BY BRUCE MILLS

bruce@theitem.com

As an international teacher at Sumter High School, Diego Teatin is not only helping to fill the gap with the U.S. teacher shortage, but he is also a perfect fit in today's growing multicultural society.

A native of Colombia in South America, Teatin is living his dream in the United States to grow as a teaching professional, loves the opportunities available here in America to thrive and was recently elected president of the state's fellowship of language teachers and advocates group.

A career educator, Teatin is in his 20th year as a teacher with about 10 years of service in the U.S., one in England and the rest in his homeland. He is fluent in three languages — Spanish, English and French — and has served in the language department at Sumter High for four years, teaching French and Spanish.

Teatin is the only French teacher in Sumter School District.

With bachelor's and master's degrees focused on teaching in English and French, he said he found teaching his native Spanish was actually a challenge.

"I didn't really study to be a Spanish teacher, even though I spoke the language," Teatin said. "There were some particulars that I didn't know. I didn't recognize what a subjunctive was and other things because I just said them and it was my language. I didn't get the time to sit down and study every single thing."

He eventually earned various credentials to teach his native language.

As part of an international teacher exchange program called Foreign Academic and Cultural Exchange Services, better known as FACES, he has one more year of service time remaining before he must return to Colombia.

Teatin said through exchange programs such as FACES, international teachers are helping to fill the U.S.

teacher shortage in various subjects to include foreign languages, English and math. Most teachers who come from abroad have master's degrees, and many come with 10 to 15 years of teaching experience, he added.

While here in the U.S., Teatin has earned his Doctorate degree in Education and Innovation.

"Where there is a need, most likely there will be a teacher who will be able to take over, and they are very well qualified," he said.

Teatin added that international teachers can make a big impact in U.S. schools because they can bring a new perspective and are generally well known for classroom consistency and discipline.

TODAY'S GROWING MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Regarding the language barrier that can exist between international teachers and local students, Teatin



SEE **TEATIN**, PAGE A25

TEATIN

 FROM PAGE A24

said international teachers can open students' eyes to different cultures in the growing multicultural world of today. Additionally, like he has personally done, teachers can adapt to the culture here.

It can be a "learning moment and win-win situation" for both students and teachers, but it does require patience and building relationships over time, he added.

Those concepts tie in with his new role as president of the South Carolina Fellowship of Language Teachers and Advocates.

The group has about 450 members, most of which are U.S. foreign language teachers in the state with some international teachers as well, and its mission is to foster cultural understanding and promote language learning among various communities, he said.

Members get involved with different organizations and attend festivals to learn about different cultures. The fellowship also holds an annual conference where foreign language teachers from across the Southeast come to share their experiences and best practices in the classroom.

Now more than ever, businesses, the economy and education revolve around all cultures, Teatin said.

The fellowship can help private schools and public charter schools in the state with teacher recruitment and in building a foreign language curriculum to meet state requirements. Also, the group can assist businesses with immigrants as labor — such as construction and farming — to break down language barriers.

There are some limited English as a Second Language (ESL) course opportunities in Sumter for workers that the fellowship can direct businesses to, or a company official could learn Spanish, he said.

"What's easier, to try to have 20 employees learning English, or you as the boss taking the lead and learning Spanish so you can communicate with your employees?" Teatin said.

The fellowship can help businesses find the proper resources to help with instruction in numerous languages,



PHOTOS BY BRUCE MILLS / THE SUMTER ITEM

Sumter High School foreign language teacher Diego Teatin instructs his French class recently at the school. Teatin is the only French teacher in Sumter School District.

not just Spanish, he added.

Given the growing multicultural society, the state Department of Education has started to offer the Seal of Biliteracy to students who become bilingual before high school graduation.

Last year, nearly 20 students at Sumter High earned the relatively new credential.

Teatin said to earn the award, many students need an international teacher to assist and "inspire them that learning a foreign language is an asset."

In today's world, graduates who are bilingual have an advantage, and it can provide better career opportunities, he added.

Teatin noted that in Europe it is common for people to speak two lan-

guages.

Sumter High Principal Anamaria Sandor said Teatin is a dynamic leader



Sumter High School foreign language teacher Diego Teatin sits next to a student's homework project depicting a festival in Colombia.

at the school and inspires those around him.

"His energy makes learning engaging as he effortlessly switches between languages," she said. "Beyond the

classroom, he leads cultural events, organizes the Seal of Biliteracy program and pushes students to excel. His passion and dedication make him a role model for success."

DID YOU KNOW?

- About 10% of teachers in Sumter School District this year are international teachers.

- The Lakewood High School Teacher of the Year for next school year is math teacher Sandrena Carter, who is from Barbados.

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Larry Braxton, Masonic Lodge No. 64 past master and past district deputy grand master of the district, shows a Masonic collar. The Sumter lodge's 170th anniversary is this year.

Sumter Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64 marks 170 years of service this year

BY DEIRDRE CURRIN
deirdre@theitem.com

Up in Sumter's Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64's meeting chambers, the walls are lined with photos of the lodge's past masters, and outside of those chambers are display cases with old Mason memorabilia in them, antique Mason aprons and important artifacts such as the medicine bag of the lodge's first master, who was a doctor.

The lodge's halls are a physical embodiment of its history. The Claremont Lodge was first officially established in 1855, and it shows on the walls, in the cases and in the history that comes from its members' mouths.

One of the reasons the lodge has so much memorabilia to show is because of its age. The lodge, first chartered on March 6, 1855, is turning 170, marking 170 years of service to and in Sumter — a milestone that is cause for celebration. But this celebration won't just be for one day or even one month; Sumter's Claremont Masonic Lodge

will use the whole year to celebrate and give back to its community.

Faith, hope and charity are the three basic pillars of Masonry, and the Claremont Lodge will be emphasizing the charity pillar this year as they prepare to celebrate their longevity. The plans, which are still in their preliminary phases, include partnering with the Veterans of Foreign Wars on Memorial Day, helping with the annual pumpkin patch at Aldersgate United Methodist Church by providing treats, having a car show on the lodge's grounds and a black-tie event at the end of the year as a big celebration for the lodge's 170th anniversary.

The lodge dedicates itself to charity and community service outside of landmark years, too. The Masons specifically do a lot to help veterans, with many of Sumter's Masons being veterans themselves. On Veterans Day, the lodge partners with Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3034 to provide a free

MASONS

FROM PAGE A26

spaghetti dinner for local veterans. The lodge has also collected food for Sumter United Ministries and Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and placed wreaths on local veterans' graves for Wreaths Across America.

The Claremont Lodge is one of 300 in the state, according to Wayne Jones, who is the lodge's current secretary but who has also been past master for the lodge twice. Past master is a term that refers to a Mason who was once a worshipful master, and a worshipful master is the highest-ranking officer in the lodge. The worshipful master is also the head of the lodge's business and meetings, and that title currently belongs to Brent Moore.

The Masons themselves are a fraternal group of like-minded men who uphold a moral code, such as the three basic pillars of Masonry, faith, hope and charity.

"Our biggest motto is we like to take good men and make them better — it's basically a moral guideline for leading a virtuous life," Jones said.

One of the lodge's Masons, Eric Shumpert, said he is an example of that principle. Having problems because of deployments, Shumpert said he and his speech therapist have noticed a significant difference in his condition after he began working toward becoming a Mason. This, he said, is because of the memorization and questions he had to answer during the process.

"I started being quicker, whereas before I would get in something called a loop," Shumpert said about the progression of his speech.

Masonic lodges may be known for their secrecy (or for the fact the United States' first president George Washington was among their ranks), but one of the reasons their secrets are so well kept is because all that is "esoteric", or understood by only a small group of people, is passed down orally. Because of this, becoming a Mason is a challenging ordeal that requires dedication and, of course, a great memory.

Typically, you must know a Mason to become one. While much of society depends on technology, the Masons continue to bypass it. For example, meetings cannot be held via platforms such as Skype or Zoom; instead they must be held in person.



Past masters line the walls of Sumter's Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64. Past master refers to a Mason who was once a worshipful master, and a worshipful master is the highest-ranking officer in the lodge.

PHOTOS BY DEIRDRE CURRIN / THE SUMTER ITEM



The chambers of Sumter's Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64, where the Masons meet once a month, are seen recently.



Sumter Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64 holds 170 years of history, including the above medicine chest of the lodge's first worshipful master in 1855.

Another staple of being a Mason is harmony. When someone wants to join the Masons, every member of the lodge must approve of the new member joining; if even one person votes against that person joining the Masons, they can't join. Potential members will also have references interviewed to gauge what type of person they are. It all goes back to the principle of making an already good man better.

"We frown upon religious or political [discourse] within the group,"

Jones said. "Our meeting rules is that harmony should always prevail, so anything that causes disharmony is frowned upon and shunned."

You do not have to be a Christian to join the Masons, but you do have to believe in a supreme being.

Masons also hold each other accountable. For example, certain felonies can get you investigated by the lodge and potentially kicked out, and the fraternity will intervene when they see a Mason beginning to tread

down the wrong path.

The number following the lodge, 64, denotes what number lodge the Claremont Lodge is — 64 out of the 300 in South Carolina.

The Claremont Lodge did not always have its own facility. In the 1950s, a group of lodge members got together and formed the Sumter Temple Corporation, which was tasked with acquiring a building. That building still stands today at 215 Alice Drive in the City of Sumter and was constructed specifically to be a lodge, which is important because Masonic lodges are often built with King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem in mind. The city's lodge is no exception.

Though Charleston, Greenville and Spartanburg have some of the biggest lodges in the state, the Claremont Lodge has a lot of heart in it. With 149 members, only 50 are active because of limitations due to old age. The average age of the Claremont Lodge members is 73, and that older average is not exclusive to the Claremont Lodge; the average age of all Masons in South Carolina is 65.

"Hopefully [we'll] find younger men out there who want something like this to become a better man, to learn," said Moore, the worshipful master.

Though there are many reasons Masons join together, one is to have a brotherhood behind you — a group of men from various walks of life who could guide you in different areas. These days, there is a surplus of information online, and one doesn't necessarily need to go out of their way to find answers or to even have a group of like-minded individuals to chat with.

"Everybody has to come willingly; we do not recruit openly, but when we were established, of course there was no electronic communication, telephones and that kind of [thing], so this was an opportunity for like-minded people to get together and have discussions," Jones said.

Now, as the years go by, the lodge looks toward the future with its further charity work in celebration of its 170th anniversary and the recruitment of members.

"We welcome everybody to come sit down, enjoy a meal with us, talk with us," Jones said.

Claremont Masonic Lodge No. 64 meets on the third Thursday of every month and eats dinner together at 7 p.m. Reach out to the lodge by email at webmaster@scgrandlodgeafm.org.

Entertainment

‘Captain America: Brave New World’ has flaws but still entertaining

The merger between Marvel and Disney studios during the Infinity Saga of the Marvel Cinematic Universe yielded immediate and dominating suc-



Isaiah Ridley

cess. From 2008 to 2019, there was no way to prevent the Marvel/Disney machine from breaking box-office records, attaining the No. 1 spot, and no

other competition came close in terms of building fan excitement with its projects.

The culmination of an 11-year build-up to "Avengers: Infinity War" and "Endgame" came to its intense and emotional conclusion. After the release of "Endgame," from a fan's perspective, Marvel's path became significantly disjointed compared to its organized approach in 2008. That is not to say its cinematic outings afterward were abysmal or did not have any redeeming qualities. Simply put, apart from, say, "Spider-Man: No Way Home," "Doctor Strange Multiverse of Madness" and "Deadpool and Wolverine," Marvel appeared to focus more on quantity rather than quality storytelling.

"Captain America: Brave New World" had widely documented issues behind the scenes with extensive rewrites and reshoots. Eventually the whole film went into the stage of being reshot with a confirmed shorter runtime, important plot points removed and prominent actors initially confirmed to have larger roles becoming dramatically reduced. Anthony Mackie reprises his role as Sam Wilson/Falcon, who is carrying on the mantle of Captain America after receiving the shield from Steve Rogers in "Endgame."

"Brave New World" explores the concept of sinister forces within the United States government infiltrating important sects. The government also is



Julius Onah, left, Anthony Mackie and Danny Ramirez attend the special screening of "Captain America: Brave New World" on Thursday, Feb. 13, in New York.

PHOTO BY EVAN AGOSTINI / INVISION / AP

working with other countries after obtaining a mysterious material from Celestial Island referencing the eventual arrival of mutants into the Marvel Cinematic Universe. A mysterious benefactor emerges from the shadows seeking personal retribution against newly elected President Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross, adding more to the chaos of the circumstances.

Included in the cast with Mackie are Harrison Ford, Carl Lumbly, Danny Ramirez, Giancarlo Esposito and Samuel Sterns. The extra plot points add more to the complicated narrative with a contrasting of tones. Captain America's universal tone does not necessarily mesh well when the exploration of celestials is included. Any theme with Captain America works best kept within the confines of a more grounded, realistic approach. Mackie, taking over the role of Captain America, performs the character exceptionally well, considering how well received Christopher Evans' performance was as Captain America. It was refreshing watching Mackie avoid attempting to replicate what made Evans memorable.

He brings more of a humanistic approach to the character since Sam Wil-

son is not an enhanced super soldier thrust into chaotic circumstances where his skills, strength and knowledge have obvious limitations. The biggest surprise for me personally came from Ford's performance. As of late, he was only taking roles for monetary purposes rather than sincere passion for the project. His acting as Ross was a highlight, as he engaged in intense, enthusiastic and cathartic humor with Mackie. He puts in the work transitioning from reserved, political and simmering to explosive rage with remarkable ease.

The problem "Captain America: Brave New World" runs into is its inconsistency in what kind of film it wants to be. The writing is formulaic and predictable, with outcomes not having the impact required for its initial consequential stakes and its approach into exploration of the celestial concept intertwined with espionage.

Where the film absolutely shines is when its themes remain within the mysterious world of sinister espionage. Keeping it grounded in the complicated web of top-secret missions, cold benefactors and small-scale inner government questions and turmoil creates a

far better and more cohesive story. It is one of the major reasons "Captain America: Winter Soldier" remains at the top of the list as my favorite Marvel Cinematic Universe film.

There are dynamics I would have removed from "Brave New World." I would not have included the snarky, arrogant sidekick, increased Esposito's performance contributions, not brought in any references to celestials and maintained more of an espionage-like Winter Soldier and Civil War. Is that to say "Brave New World" is a bad film? No. It is entertaining, fun and exciting, and while it does not break any new territorial ground, I found it very serviceable and have no regrets watching it in a theatrical setting.

The action is high octane and suspenseful. While Red Hulk only appears for about five to seven minutes, his action sequences make for exciting and memorable moments. If anything, "Brave New World" would have served better as a Hulk solo film/sequel rather than a Captain America story. I do appreciate the exploration of Wilson's struggle in living up to Steve Roger's legacy, referencing/including the story of the first African American Super Soldier, and the revelation of the mysterious benefactor kept the story from becoming abysmal.

Despite the flaws, it is nowhere near as horrendous as my expectations were fearing. There is and was room for massive improvements. I do not plan to rush to purchase it for my collection or desire to watch it again in theaters. However, I will state without regret it is worth a view in a theatrical setting. Unfortunately, it does not have the lightning-in-the-bottle magic that previous Marvel cinematic outings contained.

In the end, I still enjoyed "Brave New World" and found myself entertained. I give it a solid 6 to 7/10. As I stated, there are no regrets on my end watching the film, and I do not view it as a waste of my time. It is serviceable and accomplishes what it needs on an entertaining spectrum.

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

Galloway & Moseley celebrates 90 years

Reflections recalls the opening of one of Sumter's longest-existent retail stores, Galloway & Moseley Jewelers. The information



Sammy Way
REFLECTIONS

and photos used to prepare this piece were obtained from *The Sumter Item* archives.

The Galloway and Moseley jewelry firm initially located at 36 S. Main St. was defined as "a fine morale builder as well as an established and popular enterprise."

The business was established April 12, 1935, and today it remains one of the most popular jewelry concerns in Sumter as well as in Florence, South Carolina. The shop's original founders were G. Moseley and J.D. Galloway. In addition to carrying a fine line of diamonds, watches and gifts for everyone, it continues to serve the community by providing watch and jewelry repairs. In fact, the firm was the original watch inspector for both the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Railroads. Mr. G.B. Moseley, one of the city's civic and business leaders, played a prominent role in the Sumter Merchants Association, Rotary and many other worthwhile organizations. Mr. Moseley's partner, Mr. Galloway, a native of Bish-
opville, died in 1938.



This ad for the new store was published April 11, 1935.



BELOW: Galloway and Moseley owners and employees gather for a group portrait in 1969.



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS



ABOVE: The new location at South Main Street advertised that it specializes in sterling silver, fine china, crystal, diamonds, watches and jewelry. Its repair department specializes in engraving, diamond setting, special orders in designing and remodeling.

LEFT: Jewelers inspect a piece of jewelry in 1991.

SUDOKU

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SOLUTION

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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.

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

Social Security Matters

Reader worries wife took her benefit too soon

BY RUSSELL GLOOR

National Social Security Advisor at the AMAC Foundation, the non-profit arm of the Association of Mature American Citizens

DEAR RUSTY — I hope we haven't made a mistake! My wife just applied for her Social Security benefit. She was born in May 1962, and the estimated amount of her benefit is \$1,280/month. Her work income last year was \$5,616; however, mine was about \$65,000. I do not plan on taking my benefit until the age of 70 in July of 2027.

My worry now is about the penalty for earning too much. We figured that since her income was so

low, we wouldn't have to worry about that penalty, so we signed her up, and then it hit me: what if they look at MY income, especially since our tax return is filed as Married Filing Jointly. Do we have a problem, or are they just going to look at HER income to determine if there is a penalty? I hope I haven't messed this up. Also, I think I read that any penalty you are assessed for earning too much is returned to you once you reach FRA; is that true?

Uncomfortable Senior Citizen

DEAR UNCOMFORTABLE SENIOR — First, let me ease your anxiety — you haven't "messed this up." While it's true that your income will be included when the IRS determines how much of your wife's Social Security benefits are taxable, changing your IRS filing status is usually not wise. However, considering your combined income and your "married/jointly" IRS filing status, up to 85% of the SS benefits your wife receives during the tax year will be included as part of your overall taxable income as a married couple. Your wife's monthly SS benefit is about \$1,280, so about \$13,000

(annually) will be included in your Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) when you file your taxes. You can have income tax withheld from your wife's SS benefit by filing IRS Form W-4V at your local SS office (you can have 7%, 10%, 12% or 22% withheld). Note your wife's tax obligation for this year will be less because she will not get SS benefits for all of 2025.

The other thing you are concerned about is whether your income will be counted when determining if your wife will be subject to Social Security's "Annual Earnings Test (AET)," and the answer to that is "no." At her current earnings level (about \$5,600), your wife is well below the annual earnings limit (\$23,400 for 2025) for those collecting early Social Security benefits. So, the AET will not apply and will not reduce your wife's monthly Social Security benefit. FYI, if her earnings did exceed the annual earnings limit, it is true that some of the resulting penalty would be recovered after she reaches her full retirement age (FRA) of 67.

Note the distinction between "taxation of SS benefits" and the "annual earnings test" for those collecting early benefits. Taxation of benefits is always based on your joint income when filing

married/jointly, but the Annual Earnings Test (AET) looks only at your wife's personal work earnings until she reaches her FRA.

As I expect you already know, by claiming now (at age 62+), your wife's monthly SS retirement benefit will be permanently reduced (by about 26%). Until you later claim your SS benefit, your wife will receive her reduced personal SS retirement amount. But, when you claim, her benefit amount will be reassessed to see if she is also entitled to an incremental amount as your wife. If her SS entitlement at her FRA (even though she claimed at 62+) is less than 50% of your FRA entitlement, then her benefit will increase. However, she will not get the full 50% of your FRA entitlement because she claimed her own SS retirement benefit before her FRA (more likely, she will get about 34% of your FRA entitlement).

In the end, you really did not make a mistake by filing for your wife's Social Security to start now. By the time you personally apply at age 70, your wife will have collected about \$46,000 in Social Security benefits which, I'm sure, will be helpful. And only a relatively modest amount of income tax will be paid on her Social Security benefits.



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