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4 UP FRONT

10 POINT TAKEN

Forgotten and remembered the past, present and future of the COVID era.

14 NC TREND

First-generation farmers promote fresh food; a downtown department store hangs tough; breweries seek sustainability; getting cold heats up.

94 TOWN SQUARE

Kill Devil Hills' sandy beaches, charming locales and flighty history attract those looking for coastal digs.

+SPONSORED SECTIONS

78 HEALTH CARE

Health care for women and children has improved by leaps and bounds. Better access, facilities and procedures are leading to longer, fulfilling lives.

84 COMMUNITY **CLOSE UP**

Logistics, location and labor have been key factors in the Triad's economic success. Investments are ensuring continued growth throughout the Carolina Core.

JUNE 2021



COVER STORY

■GRAND PLAN

Prepped by a family patriarch, Aaron Thomas has big ambitions for a construction business with smalltown roots.

BY DONNIE DOUGLAS



■WORK PERKS

In our 2021 list of the state's Best Employers, companies are thinking outside the box to offer creative perks to recruit and retain talented workers.

BANKING



MONEY **MANAGERS**

N.C.-based investors overseeing more than \$1 billion in assets.



▲ FINANCIAL ▲ MIKE

A ranking of the largest Past posts prepared banks and credit unions based in N.C.



MAYER

First Bank's CEO for a rewarding assignment.

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FILLING YOUR BUCKET

ike many people over the past year and a half, I've been spending a lot more time at home. For what reason, you ask? Oh, just this little thing called a global pandemic. It's a strange, unprecedented feeling, being cooped up in your house for a really long time. We've been forced to limit our in-person interactions. Trips and vacations? Forget about it. I've likened the experience to that of a caged animal — it's left me feeling trapped, isolated and a little fearful of the outside world.

So as vaccines have been distributed, stores and businesses reopened, and COVID restrictions lifted, I'm trying to reintegrate myself into a "normal" society once again, which feels difficult even after getting fully vaccinated. It requires some retraining of how we've taught our brains to function over the past year. It means consciously not crossing the street when someone is coming toward you on the sidewalk, feeling comfortable inside restaurants and bars, and being around large groups of people without panicking. It may require some metaphorical "dipping toes in the water" before taking a cannonball leap into the pool of normalcy.

But it WILL get better, and it WILL get easier. Last month, my husband and I headed north to Abingdon, Va., to brave the Virginia Creeper. What began as a Native American footpath and once served as a railroad, the 34.3-mile trail is a popular biking and hiking spot near the Virginia-North Carolina line. The idea of biking the trail was daunting: The lack of gym access over the past year had left me, well, a little out of shape. Plus, the potential of being around a ton of people? But I wanted to take the leap into the pool of uncertainty. And I wasn't the only one. The trail was packed with adventurers looking for a beautiful ride through the Appalachians, especially after a year of being cooped up.

We happened to be there just after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Gov. Roy Cooper lifted mask restrictions. It was the weirdest, most magical, joy-inducing feeling. I didn't realize how much I missed seeing the lower half of people's faces, their expressions and their warm smiles. I also didn't realize how much I missed smiling back.

On our trip we stopped in Damascus, Va., which was holding a scaled-down version of its annual Appalachian Trail Days festival, welcoming both tourists and hikers that stop by while thru-hiking the 2,190-mile trail. The usual festival vendors were selling local wares and fair food. But there was also such an outpouring of love. Church groups and others offered showers, haircuts, Wi-Fi, food, blankets, clothing and other essentials for the weary travelers. Hikers who hadn't seen each other since they parted ways on the trail greeted each other with grins and bear hugs.

It reminded me of a children's book called *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* by Carol McCloud. The book teaches that you carry an invisible bucket wherever you go: When your bucket is full, you feel happy, and when your bucket is empty, you may feel sad. You can help fill other people's buckets with kindness, appreciation and nice gestures. Those actions also help fill your own bucket. I saw a lot of bucket-fillers that rainy afternoon. It's nice to know that after a really tough year, human kindness endures, and people are eager to show love.

There is still uncertainty surrounding the return to normalcy. But getting back to interacting with and helping our fellow humans, spending time with loved ones, meeting new people and exploring new places is worth it. And it certainly doesn't hurt to be a bucket-filler.



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Key Dates

Nominations & Applications Open:

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Nominations Close:

May 31, 2021

Applications Close:

June 14, 2021

Winners Selected:

July 22, 2021

Awards Gala:

Fall 2021

Eligible Companies Must

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- Be a commercial enterprise, not a nonprofit
- Be either privately owned or publicly traded
- ► Have net annual revenue in the range of \$10 million to \$500 million
- Demonstrate sustained revenue and employment growth over the past 3 years









WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

We love getting feedback from our readers. Here's a sampling of what you had to say about Business North Carolina on social media last month.

Eric Crane

Account Manager | Customer Success |
Client Success | Sales Leader | #ONO
This is huge for the Pinehurst area. Awesome
work Pinehurst and city council to form such a
wonderful partnership!! More importantly, the
ability to grow the game of golf!!



USGA drives excitement in Sandhills

Robert Russo, CEO

CEO at Independent Advisor Alliance I'm honored to be on the same list with so many amazing and successful people — many of which are my friends. While it's my name on the list, this honor is a result of the success the entire team at Independent Advisor Alliance has acheived. A special shoutout to our 146 partner firms that allow us the opportunity to support them! #WhylAA #Powerlist2021

Power List 2021

Jake Rose

Account Manager | Systel Business Equipment

My favorite player made the cut; I am proud to see my father Jim included in this distinguished list!



Power list 2021

Conrad Wood

Business Banking Market Manager at PNC Interesting listen. Exciting to see N.C. continue to be showcased this way.



The Weekly Roundup podcast: Byron Hicks

Y

No surprise NCRMA has several strong members on the @BusinessNC 2021 #PowerList including #Retail and #EconomicDevelopment. Proud to represent these businesses and grateful for their leadership. #NCRetail #ShopNC #ncga #ncpol

Power List 2021



Mebane Rash @Mebane Rash

Thank you @BusinessNC for lifting up women who lead, for seeing us as business leaders. Impact happens where the "supply curve intersects w/ competitive demand in the marketplace of ideas." N.C. believes in ed creating a market for news and policy we serve.

Power List 2021



Pat Kahle @ptkahle

CONGRATS to @MonroeUnionEDC's Chris Platé for making the @BusinessNC's Inaugural Power List! We're proud of the work Chris does and applaud BNC for recognizing him. We're proud to have Chris on the @UnionCountyCOC's Board of Directors.

Power List 2021



Mike Hawkins @MHCommissioner

So great to see @PatrickWoodie included in @BusinessNC Power List 2021! Patrick works tirelessly for a better North Carolina for all our citizens — as do the other leaders honored by @BusinessNC #RuralCounts

Power List 2021



morethanvmi

Spent an hour with Richard Childress with @rcrracing and @childresswines for [an upcoming] story with @businessnorthcarolina

He shared stories about Dale Earnhardt, Junior Johnson and his two grandsons, Austin and Ty Dillon.

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- 1) Go to businessnc.com/smallbusiness for online nomination forms, or
- 2) Fill out the form below and email or mail it to us, using the information below.

You may nominate as many companies as you wish, but they must be:

- Smaller than 100 employees
- · Based in North Carolina
- Independently owned with at least one owner active in the business
- · In business for at least five years

NOMINEE INFORMATION

Company name:	
Contact person:	Title:
Address:	
	Email (if available):
YOUR INFORMATION	
Name:	Company name:
Phone number:	Email

We mail entry forms to the nominees so they have the opportunity to provide more information about their companies. Visit businessnc.com/smallbusiness for more details. **Nominations must be received by June 18, 2021.**

Submit your nomination online at businessnc.com/smallbusiness or mail to:
Small Business of the Year, Business North Carolina, 1230 W. Morehead Street, Suite 308, Charlotte, NC 28208 If you have guestions, call Jennifer Ware at (704) 927-6272 or email jware@businessnc.com.







FUELING A GROWING PROFESSIONAL SERVICES LANDSCAPE

Once considered a lagging sector in N.C., professional services companies throughout the state are experiencing significant growth. PNC is working alongside them, providing solutions and services to help address business challenges.

This is the eleventh in a series of informative monthly articles for North Carolina businesses from PNC in collaboration with *BUSINESS NORTH CAROLINA* magazine.

For John Messick, PNC commercial banking lead for the Eastern Carolinas, indicators of a thriving professional services ecosystem abound. The view from his 21st floor office in downtown Raleigh is punctuated by construction cranes. The highway he travels upon for the occasional beach getaway is newly paved. And many of the professional services clients he and his team advise – including engineering, architecture, accounting, law and consulting firms that are integral to facilitating North Carolina's growth – are in growth mode themselves.

The continued growth of companies in the professional services space is not without headwinds – especially against the backdrop of business disruptions stemming from COVID-19, says Messick. From managing cashflow and payments to planning for the future, Messick and his team of commercial banking relationship managers and in-market colleagues are helping professional services organizations advance and evolve their businesses.



SOLVING THE CASHFLOW CONUNDRUM

Cashflow can be a perennial challenge for professional services providers. Demand fluctuates. Customers change. And services specific to some professions such as accounting are seasonally driven. While companies may plan for these variables, other external challenges – a global

pandemic, for instance – have the potential to severely hinder cashflow, the lifeblood of a business.

"In many recent cases, we've found that companies have contracts for work, and the demand for services is alive and well," says Messick. "However, disruptions in the supply chain are making it difficult for some firms to perform work immediately. During times when projects – and therefore, revenue – are on hold, organizations can rely on working capital lines of credit to keep their operations going."

A revolving line of credit for short-term or unpredictable needs, for example, can help companies react quickly when challenges or opportunities arise. Additionally, using a revolving line of credit for short-term purchases can help companies improve their standing with vendors and may improve their eligibility for early-payment discounts.

For professional services that require large capital expenditures, equipment financing is another credit strategy that can help preserve cashflow, says Messick. There are various creative ways to structure these loans to better leverage working capital, while helping control infrastructure costs and managing equipment obsolescence.

Also essential for optimizing cashflow, says Messick, are treasury management solutions, which can help organizations grow revenues and control costs.

OPTIMIZING CASHFLOW & BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Accelerating receivables processes is one step professional services companies can take to help improve cashflow, says Dan Behanna, PNC Treasury Management sales manager for the Carolinas. Lockbox solutions, for example, allow companies to channel all payments – both electronic and paper – through a financial institution's local processing center, where specialists process payments and route funds into one central account for quick posting. PNC maintains nine such centers throughout the country, including one in Charlotte.



In addition to accelerating receivables, lockbox services can help companies be more resilient, says Behanna. This was particularly evident in 2020 when many organizations transitioned employees to virtual work environments, putting a strain on accounting departments and the ability to manually collect and deposit checks.

PLANNING FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER

In an industry as knowledge-, skill- and relationship-based as professional services, it should come as no surprise that succession planning is an important element of a holistic business plan.

"It is never too early to begin planning for business succession," says Charlotte-based Jim Benedict, PNC senior wealth strategist and private business strategist. "With professional practices, there often is a split in value among practice revenue, ownership of real estate and equipment, and leading the practice. That's why a vital aspect of succession planning is understanding the relative value of

the company and how the various components of the business will be transferred at the time of exit."

Another crucial element of succession planning is identifying likely successors well before an owner plans to exit, says Benedict. That way, future leaders can be brought into the practice and develop relationships with existing clients. And, in the event of an unplanned exit, the company is equipped for a change in leadership.

Yet another consideration that is more deeply felt by owners of professional services companies is the value needed for a smooth exit, says Raleigh-based Michael Moyer, PNC senior wealth strategist and private business strategist. "The value of a professional service firm is greatly enhanced if successors to a retiring partner are well-integrated into the practice, and have been delivering valuable services to firm clients in the years before an exit," says Moyer. "From a retiring partner's perspective, it's important to get started early, and build value outside of the business so they are well positioned for retirement and the future."

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A GRAY BLUR, WITH CRAZINESS TO SPARE

Forgotten and remembered — the past, present and future of the COVID era.

started writing for this magazine in the summer of 2018.

It feels like a long time ago.

I tend nowadays to divide up

I tend nowadays to divide up time. There was before March 2020 and since. Everything before March 2020 feels distant.

I decided to go back three years and read back the run-up to the COVID era. I discovered that I'd forgotten a lot. Maybe I wasn't paying close attention. I had just retired. There was a lot of paperwork.

I forgot people were opening up cat cafes. One in Chapel Hill was going to be the fifth in North Carolina.

I forgot that in the summer of 2018, what steamed people were lines at the DMV to get the Real ID, which was a new driver's license that would

verify identity to board a plane, among other security protections. "Better hurry up and get that Real ID. Don't wait until the last minute." Then COVID hit, and the October 2020 deadline went away, and then they said, "Well we'll give you until October 2021." Not long ago, the deadline was changed to May 2023. It wouldn't surprise me if that slips, too.

If you have a really good memory, you may recall that in early August 2018, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was saying that the updated forecasts showed a less active hurricane season was likely. In September, Hurricane Florence drowned our crops and turned Wilmington into an island. Construction crews are now rebuilding Marine Corps installations along the state's coast at a cost of more than \$3 billion, spread over five years.

It was Epic

The hot local company in 2018 was Epic Games in Cary, a few exits down Interstate 40 from Research Triangle Park.

A lot of us older folks didn't know much about Epic, even



though it had been here since 1999. Then Fortnite became one of the world's most popular video games by mid-2018, and the company raised \$1.25 billion from investors. That made the company worth \$15 billion and Epic CEO Tim Sweeney a billionaire. It was the largest fundraise from venture capitalists in 2018 and a record for North Carolina.

Epic has since had another billion-dollar round of investment and is now worth an estimated \$29 billion. It is hiring thousands more employees and will build a new headquarters on the shuttered remains of Cary Towne Center shopping mall. It also decided to sue Apple, alleging

that the app store is a monopolistic racket. A lot has happened in three years.

Speaking of Cary Towne Center, it was a hugely popular mall anchored by department stores that got hammered by Amazon and the rest of the internet. Being in a fast-growing, affluent Raleigh suburb didn't save it. Its last hope was Ikea.

When Ikea announced in 2017 that it was coming to Cary, it was front-page news. A year later, it canceled the store, deciding that big boxes in the suburbs were not its future. In 2018, chain stores were already seeing a difficult environment. The pandemic just made the future happen sooner: Belk, J.C. Penney, Neiman Marcus, Stein Mart and Pier 1 Imports went into bankruptcy. Brooks Brothers closed its factory in Garland. Kmart closed its last North Carolina store in Kill Devil Hills. It's been a rough few years for retailers not named Amazon.

Even Wegmans supermarket chain had to adapt. Remember the Wegmans buzz? In the fall of 2019, the opening of its first North Carolina store in Raleigh was a huge event. About 3,000 folks were in line at 7 a.m. on a Sunday, and 30,000 people

walked through the store that day. People started showing up Saturday night to tailgate. The crowd set a Wegmans record to see the epitome of grocery shopping as an experience. Six months later, we were experiencing Instacart deliveries to our garage, hailing the drivers from a social distance.

Wegmans opened a Wake Forest store in mid-May, its fourth in the Triangle, but has canceled the second Cary location. A Holly Springs store seems to be in the cards, but everyone in the supermarket world is watching to see what the past 15 months has done to the business model.

Before COVID hit, every week there was a new project being announced in the Triangle. Raleigh has a presentable skyline, but nothing as grand as Charlotte. When someone puts up a tall building here, we crane our necks and go, "Wow-ee." Well, there are a bunch of big buildings here still in the works. But some of these are on hold.

You need confidence to be a developer, a Steve Jobs-like reality distortion field.

If 20% of all workdays are going to be spent at home, as a recent study argues, that could be a problem for some towers, not to mention the 60 million square feet of office space already being leased in the Triangle. The counterargument is that Raleigh, Durham and Cary are still going to grow — 3,000 employees are coming to RTP with Apple's planned campus, and Google is building an engineering hub in Durham with 1,000. We will see who is right soon enough in vacancy rates and Class A rents.

Pandemic: The movie

I have gotten so used to life in the virus that I had forgotten what it was like in January, February and early March of 2020. When I went back to review, it was like one of those apocalypse films: troubling, foreshadowing signs of volcanic, seismic or West Antarctic ice sheet activity worrying experts.

A few days after the New Year 2020, there was a story on Page 6C of the paper — where apocalypses first tend to reveal themselves. It said Hong Kong was going to a "serious response" level because travelers were coming back from the mainland with a mysterious infectious disease. Two weeks later, U.S. airports were reported to be screening travelers from China.

In late February, it was as if a switch had been thrown. A North Carolina case was confirmed when the state lab started testing in the first week of March. At that point, the lab had enough supplies from the CDC to test about 150 people.

Hand sanitizer, masks and paper products were vanishing from shelves. Big conferences were being canceled. Unfortunately, the late February Biogen conference in Boston sent COVID back to RTP.

Companies were discussing whether to send their folks home, and the governor was declaring a state of emergency. For me, what brought home the crisis was when Duke University President Vincent Price told the ACC on March 12 that the Blue Devils would not be playing N.C. State in a quarterfinal game, citing health concerns. That ended the 2020 ACC Tournament and, for that matter, March Madness.

We had craziness to spare, anyhow

Over the next two weeks, restaurants became takeout only; bars, hair salons and gyms closed. Amazon was hiring 175,000 workers nationally because its warehouses were slammed. That showed up in Garner, where a new distribution center that had been announced for 1,500 employees in 2018 took on 3,000.

We weren't ready for the pandemic in so many ways, but digital have-nots suffered in particular. When we sent kids home in rural areas, many were living in broadband deserts. Kids were in cars in school parking lots next to buses rigged for Wi-Fi. A Stokes County funeral home let students come in to use its network. Teachers were sending lessons home on flash drives.

By last fall, a few signs of normalcy appeared; you had to squint because the news was still all COVID and elections. In early October, movie theaters reopened. In November, the first international flight left Raleigh-Durham International Airport since March, to Cancun, Mexico. (The longer runway for nonstop Asia flights was grounded.) Schools were beginning to schedule proms, but they would be outdoors in Johnston County.

These developments were overshadowed by the holiday spike in cases, which set a state record on New Year's Day 2021, with 9,527 reported cases with a 15.5% positive rate. But people got distant again, and vaccines arrived. By early March, daily cases dipped below 1,000, the lowest since September. Companies were talking about making plans to bring people back to the office. It will be complicated.

A Monday in September

The past 15 months have been the same grim thing over and over, a Groundhog Day of waiting for shots and herd immunity. Some things stood out, but mostly it was just a gray blur.

One thing will stick with me from last September. A deputy fire chief in my town of Clayton passed away of complications from COVID. Jason Dean was 42. Folks honored Dean with a parade. On the Monday morning after his passing, locals came out to stand on Main Street and on U.S. 70 Business to watch a long, slow procession of firetrucks, American flags planted on the roadsides and hanging from ladders up high. Masked firefighters from all over in uniform saluted as the casket went by.

It was a reminder of something I took for granted back in the long-ago days of 2018 and 2019, something we hadn't been able to do publicly, in person during the pandemic — mourn the departed.

I will remember that sad, dignified small-town parade. ■



Veteran journalist Dan Barkin moved to North Carolina in 1996. He can be reached at dbarkin53@gmail.com.

THE JAB, OR YOUR JOB

MANDATORY VACCINATIONS IN THE PRIVATE WORKPLACE

By Grant Osborne

We are all tired of the slowly-abating but persistent pandemic. And more than ready to get back to "normal."

But employers' efforts to encourage or require employees to return to work present many challenges, such as those involving management of viruses and illnesses that employees may bring with them. Employers are understandably worried about the welfare of their workforce and those with whom they come in contact. Many employers have, therefore, asked whether they may require that employees subject themselves to an FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccination.

The following summarizes this complex subject under selected federal and North Carolina laws in the private workplace where there are at least 15 employees. It does not address governmental employment (which implicates Constitutional issues such as Fourteenth Amendment "liberty" and "property" interests).

"Employment at will" prevails in North Carolina. That generally means that an employer (in the absence of a contract to the contrary) may discharge an employee for any reason or whim, but not for a reason that's unlawful or violates "public policy." The doctrine gives employers the right to dictate lawful conditions of the job. The law has less to say about those conditions than many people think, and generally permits an employer to determine where the rights of some employees end and the interests of other employees begin.

Employers may decide that employees must get vaccinated against COVID-19 to protect other employees' interests in not getting sick – subject to legal limits.

Insistence on such a condition may come at a price; many employees may regard it as heavy-handed or intolerable. The following focuses more on whether a private employer may lawfully insist on it than on the prudence of doing so.

Employers, as a rule, may impose such a condition. But there are limits.

THE LIMITS

The Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA") of 1990 prohibits covered employers from discriminating against applicants and employees based on "disability," some of whom may claim that they have a disability that prevents them from being able to submit safely to a COVID-19 vaccination. Such a claim requires an employer to consider whether it has a duty to provide the employee or applicant with a "reasonable accommodation" of the alleged disability.

Such an accommodation – such as exemption from a vaccination requirement – can be required unless providing it would inflict "undue hardship" on the employer. Employers that insist on vaccinations should therefore expect some people to assert that they suffer from a "disability" that entitles them to an exemption.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ("Title VII") prohibits covered employers from discriminating against applicants and employees based (in part) on "religion." Religion in this context means sincerely held religious beliefs and practices, whether part of an "organized" religion (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity) or some other sincere system of spiritual belief. It includes atheism too, but not mere political or personal beliefs or preferences, such as objections to vaccinations unmoored to religious faith; or, for an odd but real example, a "personal religious creed that Kozy Kitten People/Cat Food" contributes to an employee's "state of well-being."

As with the ADA, Title VII requires a covered employer confronted with a claim of entitlement to a "religious" exemption from a vaccination requirement to consider



whether "reasonable accommodation" is required, because covered employers are required, within reason, to accommodate sincerely held religious beliefs unless that would cause an undue hardship (such as one that would impose more than a negligible cost on the employer's operations or compromise workplace safety).

The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 ("GINA") prohibits covered employers from discriminating against applicants or employees based on "genetic information," e.g., information about their own genetic tests, those of family members, or family medical history. Such discrimination can arise from vaccination programs that involve medical screening questions, such as questions about an employee's or family members' medical histories or immune systems.

GINA, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, is not implicated when an employer merely administers a COVID-19 vaccine, but risk-averse employers may prefer to seek proof of vaccinations instead of administering them themselves.

The N.C. Persons with Disabilities Protection Act prohibits covered employers from "fail[ing] to hire or consider for employment or promotion," discharging or otherwise discriminating against a qualified person with a disability because of a disabling condition. It generally applies to employers that employ "15 or more full-time employees within the State" and imposes "reasonable accommodation duties."

Because of the varying ways in which the required number of employees is counted, an employer could be covered by the Act but not covered by the ADA, or vice versa. Employers in North Carolina therefore need to know which law applies to them so that they can know when reasonable accommodation is required.

THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Imposition of a mandatory vaccination policy may be lawful, but may produce unintended consequences, such as alienated employees and potential legal disputes.

Thoughtful employers may therefore opt for a policy that merely encourages employees to get the jab. That may yield almost as many vaccinations as the mandatory approach – and may do more to enhance company cohesion and team-spirit in these troubled times.

A clear written policy, in either case, should be prepared and implemented, after the employer has decided which approach best suits its goals.





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Page 16

Page 18

Page 22

Page 26

FARM FRESH

FIRST-GENERATION FARMERS ARE GROWING INTEREST IN LOCAL PRODUCE AND EXPANDING ACCESS TO FRESH FOODS.

BY VANESSA INFANZON

hen Shelby native Tyler Jones had trouble sourcing his three small Charlotte area food stores with local dairy products, fresh produce and pastureraised meats, he decided to buy a farm. The local food movement had gained traction, and the idea of moving back to the country appealed to him.

In 2015, Jones, 39, bought a 40-acre farm in Lincoln County for \$4,000 an acre. He learned about the property through classified-ad site Craigslist.

First-generation farmers like Jones are popping up across North Carolina despite lots of barriers. They are developing ways to make farming sustainable through a variety of education, partnerships and activism. These modern-day farmers say their survival requires creative business models.

The 2017 U.S. Department of Agriculture census counted about 46,000 farms in North Carolina, of which about 75% are not owned by families with long-term access to land and equipment. A third of new farmers lease land because rising property values makes ownership difficult, according to a report last year by the National Young Farmers Coalition.

Jones sold his grocery markets and partnered with John "Johnny Ray" Bousselot of Mount Holly to form Honey Hog Restaurant Group in 2018. They have expanded to own 126 acres while leasing another 140 acres. They operate the Honey Hog and Nannie's Fish Camp & Chicken Champ restaurants in Fallston, which is 10 miles north of Shelby in Cleveland County. Their third restaurant, The Hoot Nannie, is slated to open in Forest City in mid-June.

Honey Hog Farm's hogs, Wagyu cows and chickens provide much of the meat on the restaurants' menus, a farm-to-table strategy that Jones says is a key to the company's success. "It's important to put the farmer back on the sales floor," he says. "The whole purpose of running our own farm and producing our hogs is to show that it can be done. We're trying to inspire other farmers to link up with other restaurants or start their own. Why can't a farmer be invested in his own restaurant?"



▲ Kamal Bell founded Orange County-based Sankofa Farms in 2016 to provide healthy food options in low-income neighborhoods.

The Farmunist, Jones' Instagram account, is filled with photos and videos to educate consumers and other farmers about how supporting local farmers elevates an entire community. In an April post, he shared how \$500,000 in revenue last year from the Honey Hog restaurant sparked economic development. Half of the money returns to local farmers, and the other half provides for 63 restaurant employees. "We typically don't talk about the finances of the restaurant, but in this case, it's very important to understand the impact that one restaurant can have on its local farming community based on sales," he says.

Creating access to healthy food

First-generation farmer Kamal Bell bought 12 acres in Orange County's Cedar Grove area to establish Sankofa Farms in 2016. His financing included \$70,000 borrowed over 30 years through a



▲ Sankofa Farms, above, offers honey-making classes. Honey Hog Farm, right, raises hogs, cows and chickens for its Cleveland County restaurants.

USDA program. The farm is one of 1,518 Black-owned farms in the state, according to a federal report. But nearly 40% of those farms produced annual revenue of less than \$2,500 between 2012 and 2017.

Collard greens, kale, lettuce, mustard greens, okra, squash and watermelon grow on 5 acres at Sankofa Farms, while Bell, 30, raises bees in 40 hives and hosts classes on bees and making honey. He advertises his bees in the Teaching Responsible Apiary Practices program on Airbnb, typically charging \$50 for a class.

Bell's entry into farming stemmed from his frustration with food deserts, the term for areas that lack access to healthy and affordable food. "I got into farming because I wanted to make a change," he says. "I wanted to get Black people healthy food."

North Carolina has 353 census tracts, which are similar to the size of a neighborhood, fitting the USDA's definition of low income and low access: at least 500 people, or a third of the population, live more than one mile from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store in an urban area or more than 10 miles in a rural area.

Bell takes a different approach to selling his produce than most small N.C. farmers. Sankofa Farms distributes through Fed Up!, a food drive organized by three N.C. social justice groups to distribute locally grown fruits and vegetables in low-income neighborhoods. Those groups include the Poor People's Campaign led by Goldsboro pastor and activist the Rev. William Barber.

Bell also partners with Root Causes, a Duke University Medical Center-sponsored program with a mission of "healing the food system" by making more fresh produce available to people of modest means.

"[Farmers markets] don't get the food to the people who actually really need it," Bell says. "It's more of a system for people who can afford it and perpetuate inequality."

Educating future farmers

Bell has degrees in animal industry and agriculture education from N.C. Agricultural and Technical State University in Greens-



boro and taught at two middle schools in Durham for four years. He is working on a doctoral degree in agriculture extension education at N.C. State University.

He founded Sankofa Farms Agricultural Academy after he realized how people affected by food deserts didn't know how to solve the problem. Seven students, ranging from elementary to high school age, are learning how to grow food and manage a farm with Bell on weekends and school breaks. They also study agriculture professions and issues.

Sankofites, as Bell calls his students, develop self-determination, cultural identity and the ability to solve problems within their communities and understand how larger systems work. "We could take this model to other places and it would be a benefit to farmers."

Another resource for small N.C. farmers is Family Agriculture Resource Management Services, a Charlotte-based nonprofit group offering legal and technical services. Its founder is Jillian Hishaw, a lawyer who has distributed more than \$100,000 from her group's emergency fund to help first-generation farmers mostly in the Southeast. The money has helped farmers avoid foreclosures and paid for equipment repair and medical bills. Corporate donors have included Allstate Insurance, Clif Bar, Food Lion, New Belgium Brewing and Nucor.

The USDA has various projects that aid farmers including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which also provides funding for conservation and improved water and air quality, Hishaw says. "So many young farmers don't realize there's a lot of USDA programming that [one] can take advantage of regarding fencing, digging a well, or acquiring a hoop house [greenhouse made with poles and plastic roof]."

SUSTAINABLE SUDS

THE NORTH CAROLINA CRAFT BEER SCENE TOASTS A MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS ETHIC.

BY JENNINGS COOL

rewing beer is part art, part science. Malt, water, hops, yeast and skill are the basic ingredients needed to create any batch. North Carolina is a big national industry force with more than 320 breweries and brewpubs across the state and a \$2.8 billion economic impact.

While beer is an important part of North Carolina's identity, tackling climate change issues also has become a crucial mission. The administration of Gov. Roy Cooper created a Clean Energy Plan that aims to reduce the electric power sector's greenhouse gas emissions by 70% below 2005 levels by 2030 and attain carbon neutrality by 2050. Industries such as agriculture and manufacturing are increasingly emphasizing environmentally friendly practices. Tar Heel brewers have followed suit, finding innovative ways to bolster their green thumbs and decrease their carbon footprint.

Dan Wade, head brewer and co-founder of Charlotte's Wooden Robot Brewery, breaks down beer's production resources into three main categories: ingredients (hops and malt), water and energy usage, including energy used during the heating and cooling process and transportation of ingredients, materials and packaged goods.

"There are lots of small, incremental things we try to do throughout the whole process to minimize the impact of the three main resources that go into beer production," Wade says.

Wooden Robot specializes in traditional Belgian farmhousestyle beers and focuses on local, fresh artisanal ingredients. As a Certified Craft Malt Brewery, Wooden Robot buys about 95% of its malts from Epiphany Craft Malt in Durham, one of three craft malt houses in the state. The North American Craft Maltsters Guild only requires breweries to purchase more than 10% of malt from a certified local malthouse to receive the designation. It's one of three certified breweries in Charlotte.

"If you think about it in terms of cooking, hops are like the spice, so it is not the majority of the ingredients. Malt and water are the primary things that make beer beer," Wade says. "Wooden Robot is a 15-barrel brewery, which equates



▲ Charlotte-based Wooden Robot Brewery is a Certified Craft Malt Brewery sourcing about 95% of its malts from Durham's Epiphany Craft Malt.

to about 500 gallons. For every batch of beer, 100 pounds of hops are required — depending on the beer — whereas about 1,000 pounds of malt are needed."

In 2020, Epiphany Craft Malt released a climate-resilience plan outlining goals to improve environmental sustainability and become carbon negative. During the same year, Epiphany Craft Malt distributed about 174,000 pounds of malt to Wooden Robot for beer production, all of which was carbonneutral. This removed about 150,000 pounds of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, which is equivalent to a car burning nearly 7,500 gallons of gas. By sourcing locally, Wooden Robot also cuts down on the miles traveled for transporting its heaviest material.

Wooden Robot has adapted other sustainable practices as it makes its beer, including recycling water and giving its spent grain to local farmers for cattle feed.

"It is especially important for breweries to practice sustainability because we produce an agricultural product. The more



the climate changes, the harder it is for us to get quality ingredients to produce quality products," says Wade, who started Wooden Robot in July 2015 in Charlotte's South End neighborhood. "It is a self-sustaining loop. If we do things to fight climate change, it will not only help society at large, but it will help us continue to get ingredients that are high quality and affordable."

Sierra Nevada, a Chico, Calif.-based brewer that opened a nearly \$110 million site in Mills River in Henderson County in 2015, has long emphasized green initiatives such as solar energy, CO2 recovery and rainwater collection. In 2016, the Mills River location became the first production brewery in the U.S. to achieve Platinum certification for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a certification system awarded to structures designed and built using sustainable strategies. Other N.C. breweries, such as Mother Earth Brewing in Kinston and Asheville's New Belgium Brewing, have received similar designations.

"Mills River was set out to be LEED-certified since day one," says Mandi McKay, director of social responsibility for Sierra Nevada. "Throughout the process of construction, we continued to up the ante."

Mills River uses a solar system providing about 6% of the electricity needed to operate the brewery. About 2,200 solar panels are installed on the roof of the packaging building, along with nine solar trees in the parking lot. In 2020, Mills River's solar panels generated more than 600,000 kilowatthours of energy, equivalent to the electricity used by about 57 average-sized U.S. homes for one year.

"Sustainability at Sierra Nevada has been pretty core to who we are and how we have operated pretty much our entire history since 1980," McKay says. "Sustainability goes hand-in-hand with operating a successful business. You are thinking about long-term processes, resilience and putting in place systems and

▲ Sierra Nevada's Mills River location, top, was the first production brewery in the U.S. to be certified LEED Platinum. Birdsong Brewing in Charlotte installed a 75-kilowatt-hour solar system on its roof in 2017.

technology that allow your company to sustain itself."

On a smaller scale, Birdsong Brewing in Charlotte installed a 75-kilowatt-hour solar system on its roof in 2017 that has saved approximately \$25,000 in electricity since the installation. It has benefitted from the solar power tax credit, a Duke Energy rebate program, making the payback period slightly less than five years.

Solar, along with other green initiatives, reflects the brewery's goal of facilitating environmentally friendly processes that help sustain the business, community and environment. "Craft beer is an integral part of the community, and any business that aspires to be a beneficial contributor should spend time focusing on ways to reduce its environmental footprint," says Birdsong President Chris Goulet.

Though implementing sustainable practices might add to the cost of running a brewery, many consumers appear willing to foot the bill with increased prices. A study by Indiana University found that the majority of U.S. beer drinkers — 59% — would be willing to pay more for brewskis produced with sustainable practices.

"The takeaway for the brewing industry is that it is financially feasible to introduce energy-saving practices into the brewing process," said Sanya Carley, an associate professor at Indiana who was part of the study, in a release. "Even if it ends up adding costs, more than half of all beer consumers are willing to absorb those extra costs."

STAYIN' ALIVE

LOVE OF COMMUNITY AND CHANGING WITH THE TIMES MAKE LEINWAND'S A RARE SMALL-TOWN RETAILING SUCCESS STORY.

BY DAN BARKIN



▲ Ricky and Eileen Silvers Leinwand are third-generation operators of a Bladen County department store. Their son, Michael, is their tech expert.

nce staples of small towns throughout North Carolina, department stores have mostly disappeared because of competition from discounters or because succeeding generations wanted to do something else.

A rare survivor is Elizabethtown's Leinwand's, which still rings the register after 86 years. It continues to anchor a vibrant downtown in Bladen County because Ricky Leinwand, after graduating from UNC Chapel Hill in the mid-1970s, came home to help his father, Wallace, run the 6,000-square-foot store. That was a lucky break for Elizabethtown, which is on the Cape Fear River, eight miles from White Lake, a popular resort area since the early 20th century. A steady stream of lake visitors make their way to Leinwand's in the summer.

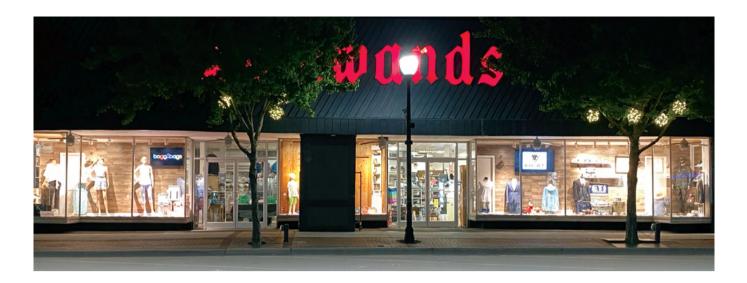
Like his father and grandfather before him, Leinwand has been active in civic affairs as a longtime member of the community college board, a town council member, a booster of local teams and a leader in organizing good works.

The Leinwands' story is a familiar one in rural eastern North

Carolina. Jewish immigrants from Germany to the Russian Empire settled in places like Elizabethtown, Whiteville and Clinton in the 19th and early 20th centuries and opened stores. North Carolina's population mostly lived in and around small towns, farming and working in mills.

Isaac Leinwand grew up in the Galicia region of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire and emigrated to the U.S. in 1907 when he was about 20. In the 1920s, he opened a store in Branchville, S.C., a little railroad town. Then the Depression hit, and "Granddaddy just lost everything" when the banks shut down, Ricky says.

Isaac had a brother in Whiteville who helped him start over again in Elizabethtown in 1935. Four years later, Isaac's store burned down in a fire that might have consumed much of downtown Elizabethtown if fire companies from Lumberton, Whiteville and Fayetteville hadn't arrived quickly.



"It's a miracle we're even in business," Ricky says. But Leinwand's reopened, and in 1947, Isaac's son, Wallace — Ricky's father — took over the business in a partnership with his wife, Shirley (just as Ricky and his wife, Eileen Silvers Leinwand, now run the store together).

Wallace, who passed away in 2012, became a prominent Bladen County leader. He was the town's mayor, president of the Rotary Club, president of the Jaycees, on a bank board and organized youth baseball.

He was typical of Jewish merchants in small eastern North Carolina towns — the Weinsteins in Lumberton, the Leders and Manns in Whiteville, the Baers in Dunn, the Sugars in St. Pauls, and the Kramers in Wallace. A 2007 study of eastern North Carolina Jewish families by Campbell University historian James Martin Sr. noted "wherever Jews went, their sense of civic obligation was very strong."

Ricky has carried on the tradition as a member of the town council and as a leader in local Rotary, Optimist and Jaycee groups. He's also been a radio broadcaster of local high school sports for more than 30 years. For decades, Leinwand's has hosted a Christmas shopping trip for residents of the Boys & Girls Homes of North Carolina in nearby Lake Waccamaw.

"Instead of just keeping to ourselves and just hanging around Jewish people, we became mayors of our towns or [state] senators," Ricky says. He cites mayors David Weinstein of Lumberton and Terry Mann of Whiteville. "We didn't hide. We gave back to the community. The story is not just me and my family. It's the story of Jewish people in the South."

To carry on his family's civic tradition, he had to stay in Elizabethtown. And he knew, when he graduated from UNC more than 45 years ago, that the family business needed to change.

The retail that he saw while attending UNC made an impression. "I saw all those nice stores in Chapel Hill — Julian's, Milton's, The Hub. And, I said, 'Daddy, I really want to come back, but we need to

upgrade our business.'

"I said, 'We need to buy this \$30 shirt, the Lacoste shirt, the alligator shirt.' We were used to selling \$14.95 shirts. He said, 'Nobody in Bladen County's gonna buy that. They can't afford it.' I said, 'Well, maybe we can attract from Lumberton and Clinton and Fayetteville.'"

And that's what they did. In the mid-'70s, nearly all of the store's business was



from Bladen County. Now, more than 80% of the volume comes from outside the county with the most business coming from neighboring Cumberland, Sampson, Columbus and Robeson counties.

"I still depend on my good old farmer," Ricky says. "The farmers are my best customers. But these are not overall, dirt farmers anymore. They're sophisticated master's-degree-type farmers in the swine industry. And even though I'm Jewish and I don't eat pork, we definitely support the swine industry." Smithfield Foods employs more than 5,000 people at its Bladen County pork processing plant.

Leinwand's has a digital enterprise, operated by his son, Michael, and uses social media to expand the reach of its business. "We just started this a year ago with the virus and everything going on," Ricky says, noting that customers in 15 states have made online orders. "My son's smart. I'm 68 years old. I don't know much about that stuff."

The store carries more than 300 brands, and shoppers found it online during the pandemic. In addition to apparel, Leinwand's sells watches, sunglasses, bags and Yeti cooler products.

"People love our brands, and we get permission from the manufacturers to sell it online, and that's what we do," Ricky says. "It's a very small part of our business right now, but we're impressed by the fact that people are finding out about us in Oregon and Washington and California."



▲ Generations of Bladen County boys have rented tuxes for the prom from Leinwand's. "Mr. Ricky kind of told us how to dress," one said.

He has been Mr. Ricky for years to young men who got their prom tuxes because Ricky came to their high school to take their order. That's how he met Brent Underwood, one of many Bladen residents who have worked at the store in their teens. Underwood, who now tours the state with his band 87&Pine, says Leinwand's was "extremely important to guys like me coming up. Mr. Ricky kind of told us how to dress."

The store, Underwood says, is "Elizabethtown to me."

When Elizabethtown native Larrell Murchison signed a \$3.6 million, four-year contract with the Tennessee Titans last year, the former N.C. State University football star wanted to donate winter coats to local kids. His agent was ready to buy \$5,000 to \$10,000 in merchandise in the Raleigh area, but Murchison said to get it from Leinwand's.

"And I said, 'I'll tell you what. I'll go in half with him," Ricky says. "And we clothed about 40 kids." He also put on a red N.C. State sweatshirt at Murchison's request and posed for a picture with the 300-pound defensive lineman, who had visited the store since elementary school.

"I love my Tar Heels, but I also love my local people that have been successful," Ricky says. ■

The Brody family's impact

The Leinwand's success in Elizabethtown was mirrored by the Brodys, another Jewish immigrant family that made a major mark on eastern North Carolina. According to a family history written by Harold Brody, the Brody Brothers Dry Goods Co. started as a small shoe store in Sumter, S.C., in 1917 and later became Brody's Department Store. Founder Hyman Brody immigrated to the U.S. from Russia in 1906, followed seven years later by his wife and six children. Hyman and Bessie Brody later added four boys and a girl to the family.

Hyman's brother Leo moved to Kinston in 1928 to start the second Brody's Department Store, followed by one in Greenville in 1938. Brody's later expanded with department stores in Rocky Mount, Goldsboro and New Bern before the business was sold to the Alcoa, Tenn.-based Proffitt's chain in 1998.

Hyman's son, Julius "Sammy" Brody, expanded the family's holdings into radio and television broadcasting and a Coca-Cola distributorship. He also became a philanthropist, joining his father, brother Morris and other family members in helping establish the medical school at East Carolina University in Greenville with donations topping \$22 million. In 1999, the school was named after the family.

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ICY HOT

AN AGE-OLD COLD TREATMENT HEATS UP AS CRYOTHERAPY CENTERS PROLIFERATE.

BY SHANNON CUTHRELL

he practice of harnessing cold for therapeutic purposes has been around for centuries, but a relatively new branch of alternative medicine called "cryotherapy" offers a modern twist. Submerging your body neck-down in subzero air is an increasingly popular way to reduce inflammation and body aches, prompting a surge of business interest in the trend.

Skeptics don't buy the claims that it can help one lose weight, cope with stress or treat serious medical issues such as multiple sclerosis. Evidence of its efficacy is mixed, and the practice is not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which cites the risk of frostbite, burns and adverse reactions.

Still, the popularity of cryotherapy is catapulting with the global market slated to grow by more than 9% annually between 2019 and 2024, reaching annual sales of \$319 million, according to market research firm MarketsandMarkets.

Father-son duo Joseph and Matthew Pepe are spearheading the Triangle's budding cryotherapy scene, signing on with Texasbased franchise operator iCRYO. They launched their first iC-RYO location in Raleigh earlier this year, laying the foundation for several more across the region.

Joseph, a franchise industry veteran who lives in Connecticut, heard about cryotherapy from a friend. Coming off a 40-year career operating health and fitness centers on the East Coast, including more than 30 Planet Fitness locations in North Carolina and Connecticut, Pepe decided to enter a new venture with his son.

Passionate about sports medicine, Matthew was ready for something new after running his own business consulting firm since 2015. After earning a master's degree in sports medicine from New Jersey's Seton Hall University in 2008, he led enterprise sales and business development at a health technology startup. He then ran a site for STEM education franchise Zaniac in Cary while consulting companies on product development and strategy.

After scouting franchise opportunities for about six months, the Pepes signed a multi-unit franchise contract with iCRYO in August 2019 for the Triangle and other parts of the state. iCRYO offers a mix of services, from whole body cryotherapy to intravenous infusion and vitamin shots, infrared sauna sessions, facials, compression therapy and body sculpting. Its whole body service involves customers standing inside a chamber for two to three minutes surrounded by liquid nitrogen air with temperatures



▲ Industry experts are divided on cryotherapy's effectiveness in treating medical conditions and managing weight.

dropping to minus-140 degrees Fahrenheit. Customers buy day packages, monthly packages or memberships. Whole-body cryotherapy and other offerings such as the infrared sauna and compression therapy are about \$29 per session.

Father-son co-founders Bill and Kyle Jones launched their first iCRYO retail location in League City, Texas, in 2015, seeding a franchise network that now includes more than 20 open or soon-to-open U.S. locations. That momentum landed iCRYO a ranking of No. 978 on last year's Inc. 5000 list of the fastestgrowing private companies. With a two-year growth rate of 377%, the company also scored the No. 30 spot on Inc.'s 2021 Texas Regional 5000 list. According to the most recent financial statements filed with the state of California, iCRYO generated \$2.6 million in revenue in 2019, about triple the previous year. Net income was about \$717,000.

iCRYO is one of several cryotherapy enterprises that share a similar franchise model and slate of services. Restore Hyper Wellness, which has more than 70 franchise locations nationwide including a few in Charlotte, generated a record \$32 million in revenue last year. Icebox Cryotherapy Studios has eight locations in Georgia, Florida and New Jersey and six more coming soon to other states. The Triangle is also home to a few non-franchised cryotherapy businesses that offer similar services, such as Durham-based bR3 Wellness Studio and Raleigh's CryoNC Boutique Wellness Center and Living Well Balanced.

In February, the Pepes debuted their first iCRYO venture in Raleigh's North Hills district. Matthew handles the day-to-day operations, and Joseph advises from Connecticut. While they declined to share the specifics of their equity partner investment, Matthew says iCRYO's current franchise fee is \$45,000 per location, and the cost of construction, upfit, fixtures, furniture and equipment can range between \$550,000 and \$750,000 per location.

The Raleigh operation is surpassing initial projections, despite launching without iCRYO's IV infusion service while Pepe works to secure a state license to administer the therapy. The space averages two consultations per day, with 90 membership passholders and about 400 customers through late April.

"Pain and inflammation are the two biggest things that everyone can relate to, whether you're a weekend warrior athlete who gets sore after a flag football game, an elite athlete or a 65-year-old retiree with arthritis," Matthew says. "But doing whole body cryotherapy on a regular basis will help manage that for you — it fleshes out inflammation from your joints and muscles and allows your body to release endorphins, which relieves you from pain for the next four to six hours."

Customers are given a free consultation to gauge their pain levels; those who measure high on the main scale may need daily sessions before tapering to two or three times a week or when flare-ups occur. Though many active adults come in to manage their sore joints, other passholders who frequent the location are living with chronic conditions such as arthritis, lupus or fibromyalgia.

The Raleigh location has eight full- and part-time staff members, and Matthew says he'll add a few registered part- and full-time nurses once the medical IV services are up and running.

The Pepes will launch their second location in Cary's Waverly Place retail center in July. They recently secured the rights to build four more offices in Chapel Hill, Durham, Greensboro and a yet-to-be-determined Triangle city, along with two locations in Wilmington. A separate franchisee has rights to the Charlotte market with plans for an initial site in the SouthPark neighborhood.

"We lucked out with an opportunity to open here in the Triangle, and we're open-



▲ iCRYO also offers other therapies such as Rapid Reboot, which uses compression technology that is said to boost circulation, eliminating soreness and enhancing muscle recovery.

ing before competitors come to the territory," Matthew says. "We want to grow as organically but as quickly as possible in North Carolina." Matthew says the location will soon offer proprietary formulas to pair with the IV infusion service as the company expands its "wellness" business segment.

"Cryotherapy will always be there because it's such a dominant and easy-to-use modality for pain management, but we're going to surround that with some really cool things that aren't quite in the space yet, so that's really what we're excited about."





Today's apprenticeships offer employers of all sizes and across multiple industries the opportunity to build a pipeline of trained, motivated, and dedicated workers. In 2021, many North Carolina employers are facing challenges finding skilled candidates to fill open positions in roles from healthcare to IT to public safety. Developing an apprenticeship program provides a viable solution.

WHAT IS APPRENTICESHIP?

Today's apprenticeships go far beyond those we saw 50 years ago. This practical, employer-driven training model combines paid on-the-job learning with related classroom or technical instruction. Employees earn while they learn. They may attend classes at the local community college and can earn industry certifications, associates' or bachelors' degrees as part of their training. On-the-job learning is a big part of all programs, with apprentices earning a nationally recognized credential when they complete the apprenticeship program.

Apprentices often find life-long opportunities with their employers. David Garren, Vice President of Human Resources for Watson Electrical, shares, "Apprenticeships help quantify what an employee knows. In fact, the chairman of our company and CEO went through our apprenticeship program years ago!"

There are several types of apprenticeships, including programs for incumbent workers and youth apprenticeships where employers hire and train apprentices that are still in high school. Formal apprenticeship programs may cover those who have completed pre-apprenticeships, other employees looking for additional training, adult apprentices new to an industry, or veterans leaving the service. Registered apprenticeships are structured to meet standards that are recognized by the US Department of Labor.

MORETHAN JUST ROI

The North Carolina Department of Commerce recently completed a survey on behalf of ApprenticeshipNC. One key finding: businesses responding to the survey reported an average return of 170% on their investment in their registered apprenticeship program(s); and 85% believe apprenticeships provide a net financial benefit to their business.

JUST A FEW INDUSTRIES THAT CAN BENEFIT FROM APPRENTICESHIPS INCLUDE:

- Information technology and cybersecurity
- Healthcare
- Advanced manufacturing
- Energy
- Logistics
- Public safety
- Hospitality
- Building trades/ construction

The benefits extend beyond the numbers. Employers often see reduced turnover, increased loyalty, a jump in productivity and employee engagement, and reduced hiring costs.

"We saw such a hunger for more training from our caregivers, beyond the initial basics," says Dona Goforth, co-owner of Home Instead Senior Care. "Our CNA [certified nursing assistant] students seem to have developed a sense of purpose, and they have begun setting goals for themselves. This has also improved their attendance."

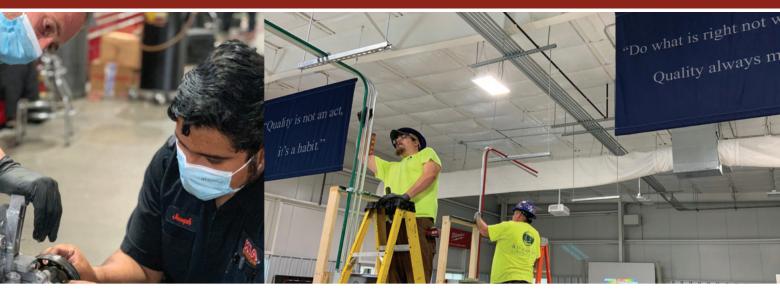
Sherri Jones, Workforce Development Specialist with Charlotte Water, says they are seeing benefits from the program, too. "The apprenticeship program has helped us gain more qualified employees. Our apprentices understand this is not just a job; it is a career path. Because of that, you have employees that are dedicated, employees that know exactly what they're doing, and employees that not only trust you, but you trust them."

170% S
The average registered apprenticeship program in North

apprenticeship program in North Carolina yields a 170% return on investment for the employer For every \$1 invested in apprentices, employers receive an average of \$1,70 in additional value. **63**[%]

off-the-street hires

of respondents said journeyworkers create more value than comparable 3.2 YEARS Average duration of



APPRENTICESHIP PARTNERS

You don't have to go it alone. ApprenticeshipNC, part of the North Carolina Community College System, helps employers set up and register their apprenticeship programs at no cost to the employer. Their trained apprenticeship consultants have access to resources and partners like community colleges to help structure training programs, obtain grant funding, or offer financial aid to students; K-12 public schools as a resource for untapped talent and youth apprentices; workforce development boards to help recruit and screen candidates; and industry consortia. These experienced resources can reduce your costs and help get your program successfully up and running quickly.

JOINT TRAINING COOPERATIVES

When companies combine resources, challenges within programs are more easily overcome. Organizations hiring and training for similar types of work often find power in numbers. Joint training programs offer a cost effective and sustainable option for employers. These programs can foster innovation and create a culture of excellence. The Alamance Career Accelerator Program, Carolinas Electrical Training Institute, Apprenticeship 2000, NCTAP, Guilford Apprenticeship Partners, and the Raleigh-Durham Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee are successful examples.

START A REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP

If you believe your business might benefit from starting a registered apprenticeship program, the first step is to visit www.ApprenticeshipNC.com. You can start the process online or locate your regional Apprenticeship Consultant and contact them by phone or email to learn more.

"The Atrium Health ApprenticeshipNC Consultant was a trusted guide every step along the way to register our Surg Tech Apprenticeship," says Cynthia Bailey, Sr. HR Consultant with Atrium Health. "I was a little apprehensive about the process because I kept hearing that a healthcare apprenticeship was unchartered territory. The more I learned from my consultant, Eric Tillmon, the more a registered apprenticeship seemed possible. Today, we have three registered apprentices on their way to becoming Surgical Technologists. This could not have been possible without our consultant, the local community college and my team."

Once you have decided a program is right for you, the Apprenticeship Consultant will work with you to define the program and ensure it meets the required standards. The program will then be registered with ApprenticeshipNC, who is recognized as a State Apprenticeship Agency for the Department of Labor. Once that is done, the employer can launch the program by assigning current employees or hiring new ones.

"Absolutely reach out to ApprenticeshipNC," says Garren. "They have all the right tools and resources to help put together a really robust program that will help you and your company – in manufacturing, construction, healthcare, or others – and for any size company."



To learn more, visit www.ApprenticeshipNC.com.

REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PAYS DIVIDENDS!

85% of survey respondents believe

of survey respondents believe apprenticeships provide a net financial benefit to their business 2x!!

The number of people served by ApprenticeshipNC has doubled in the past 4 years

70% of survey respondents

of survey respondents currently have five or fewer apprentices \$36,100

ANNUAL SALARY

\$10,500

AVERAGE
ANNUAL
TRAINING COSTS

DENTAL PLAN

BY KATHY BLAKE

he supply of dentists in North Carolina appears likely to increase over the next few years, with High Point University's plans to start a dental school. The School of Dental Medicine and Oral Health is slated to open in 2023 with an initial enrollment of 32 students. HPU's plan is to eventually have annual classes of about 45 students in a four-year program leading to a doctoral degree.

"HPU is investing \$150 million to build the dental school of the future. We are preparing health care professionals for the world as it is going to be," High Point President Nido Qubein says. "Our founding dean, Dr. Scott DeRossi, is strategically assembling his team, and as we've done with other health care programs, we will follow the guidance of our accrediting bodies and swiftly build up to reach our capacity enrollment of 180 students."

DeRossi is the former dean of UNC Chapel Hill's Adams School of Dentistry. He stepped down in January to return to a faculty role.

Qubein says more dentists are needed because fewer than 75% of U.S. adults receive oral health care as recommended. "We expect that our clinics and our graduates will help to close those gaps in our state and beyond."

The Chapel Hill program, which started in 1950, graduates about 80 students annually. The only other N.C. dental school opened at East Carolina University in Greenville in 2011. It has about 50 graduates annually.

"We are hopeful that many of these students will stay in North Carolina and practice in these shortage areas," says Alec Parker, executive director of the N.C. Dental Society.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported in 2019 that an estimated 2.4 million N.C. residents lacked adequate dental care. There are residents in virtually every N.C. county living in areas that have a shortage of dental health professionals, according to the government agency.

The number of dental providers in North Carolina increased from 2,207 in 1979 to 5,112 in 2017, according to the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at



▲ Scott DeRossi will serve as dean of the planned High Point University School of Dental Medicine and Oral Health.

UNC Chapel Hill. Three counties — Hyde, Gates and Tyrrell — had no dental practices, and the state's dentist-to-population ratio is below the national average.

The Dental Society's Parker says North Carolina offers "many opportunities to help people lead healthier lives in the places that need it most. We are hopeful a new dental school, working in tandem with our existing two dental schools, will help provide increased access to care to patients across the state."

High Point officials are working with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and the Commission on Dental Accreditation to "ensure that we are on target with the initial application process for predoctoral and specialty dental programs," Qubein adds.

The dental facilities will be built near Congdon Hall, home of HPU's health sciences and pharmacy schools.

High Point enrolls more than 4,000 students who come from all 50 states and 34 countries, Qubein says. Oral health isn't the only thing on his expansion calendar. "HPU will be announcing more programs this year," he says, "so you won't have to wait long. But you can assume we will be breaking new ground both literally and figuratively with additional programs."





HIGH POINT

▶ Fitesa, a global maker of nonwoven specialty fabrics headquartered in Brazil, is investing \$18 million to expand its manufacturing plant here, creating as many as 22 jobs. The company, which has North American headquarters in Simpsonville, S.C., will install two lines of machinery to make fabrics for the health care industry.

WINSTON-SALEM

▶ HanesBrands named Michael Dastugue as its new finance chief. Dastugue previously served as CFO of Walmart's U.S. division.



- An affiliate of JAB Holdings, which owns **Krispy Kreme Doughnuts**, announced plans to take the company public again nearly five years after being acquired and going private. It did not say how many shares it would offer or a price range for the offering.
- Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest N.C. raised more than \$9.4 million. The money will go toward constructing a nearly 140,000-square-foot facility in Whitaker Park. The building is slated to be finished in the fall of 2022.



▶ DC Blox, an Atlanta-based provider of multitenant data centers, will invest as much as \$305 million in a 14-acre tract in High Point. It plans a Tier III data center that will offer services such as uninterruptible power supply systems, climate control systems, security controls and internet privacy.

GREENSBORO

- ▶ Hickory-based communications equipment supplier **CommScope** is closing its location here. Layoffs will start in July and run through September, affecting about 50 workers.
- ▶ ITG Brands, the third-largest U.S. tobacco manufacturer, tapped Kim Reed as president and CEO. Reed has served as executive director of sales for the past two years, overseeing 1,000 employees responsible for \$3 billion in net revenue. She will succeed Oliver Kutz, who will serve as cluster general manager of Central Europe and Ukraine for Imperial Brands.



Kim Reed

- ▶ LT Apparel Group, a multinational manufacturer of adult and children's apparel, is receiving \$3.4 million in economic incentives from the city and Guilford County to build a warehouse and distribution center on North Summit Avenue. The company is planning a \$57.3 million investment, adding 116 jobs paying at least \$15 per hour and averaging \$46,021 a year.
- ▶ Chipmaker **Qorvo** acquired Californiabased IT startup NextInput. Financial details were not disclosed. NextInput makes products in the category of force-sensing solutions for human-machine interface.
- ▶ Economic development organization Piedmont Triad Partnership named N.C. Board of Transportation Chairman Mike Fox president. He succeeds Stan Kelley, who has led PTP since 2015 and will stay on as CEO during a yearlong transition period. Fox is a partner at law firm Tuggle Duggins.

MCLEANSVILLE

▶ Bethlehem, Pa.-based **Conduit Global**, a telecommunications service provider, is closing its data center here and laying off nearly 175 employees. Layoffs will begin June 25.

CHARLOTTE



KINGS MOUNTAIN

Swiss manufacturer **ABB** is closing its nearly 40-year-old plant that makes Baldor Reliance electric motors by August. The 265 workers will be laid off starting in July.

CONCORD

▶ JPMorgan Chase plans to open its second branch here, marking its fourth filing for a new N.C. branch this year. The New York-based bank has opened 11 branches in the Charlotte area as part of a plan to add 40 in North Carolina over several years. Nationally, it is adding 400 offices.

STATESVILLE

▶ Charlotte-based manufacturer Jeld-Wen is investing \$7.9 million to establish a plant for its VPI Quality Windows brand. The move is expected to create 235 jobs with an average annual salary of about \$51,650. Jeld-Wen could receive about \$2.2 million in state incentives if it meets job and investment targets.



Doosan Bobcat North America will invest \$70 million and add jobs at its Statesville plant over the next five years. The expansion will double the facility to 1 million square feet and add 42 jobs the first two years and as many as 250 new jobs in five years.

CHARLOTTE

- Architectural software startup **Prescient** raised \$190 million from investors including JE Dunn Construction. The company relocated to North Carolina in 2017 after receiving \$2 million in state incentive pledges. It operates a plant in Mebane.
- ▶ Carewell raised nearly \$25 million from four investors. The e-commerce platform, which sells medical supplies and products for incontinence, nutrition, personal care and health care, previously raised \$5 million in a seed round less than a year ago.
- ▶ Richmond, Va.-based utility giant Dominion Energy bought Birdseye Renewable Energy for an undisclosed price. Brian Bednar, who started the 18-employee business in 2009, will be president of the Dominion subsidiary.
- German brewer **Gilde** is opening the Embassy at Gilde brewpub in the South End neighborhood with plans for a 5,450-square-foot beer hall, an outdoor area and seating for 350. It's Gilde's first U.S. location and plans to open this fall.

Charlotte-based tech giant Honeywell gave \$1 million to the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library Foundation to build a data visualization lab at the new Main Library, which will open in 2024. The lab will include 270-degree screens for education, including youth engagement in STEM, civic and community planning sessions, gaming, and simulation exercises.



SERVING TAKE-OUT AND DINE-IN IN RALEIGH AND DURHAM



RALEIGH

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▶ Charlotte's Carowinds amusement park is delaying the opening of its water park because of a labor shortage. Carolina Harbor, the 26-acre water park, will open June 12 instead of May 29 as originally planned.

- ▶ Fort Mill, S.C.-based Aperture Education acquired education technology startup **Ascend**. Financial details were not disclosed. Aperture Education serves nearly 1 million students and 42,000 educators in about 500 school districts.
- ▶ Robert Niblock, a 1984 UNC Charlotte graduate who was CEO of Lowe's Cos. from 2005-18, made a \$2.5 million donation to the university's Belk College of Business. This donation creates Niblock Scholars Program scholarships for as many as five Belk College freshmen or transfer students. Niblock gave \$2.5 million for a student center at the business school in 2015.
- ▶ Hammered by COVID-19, Aloft Charlotte Airport and Courtyard Charlotte Steele Creek filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Raleigh-based MJM Group is part owner of the two hotels. Both bankruptcy petitions report assets of more than \$10 million to \$50 million and debts in the same amount.
- Novant Health has received approval to establish a fifth community hospital here. The 186,000-square-foot, 32-bed acute care facility will cost about \$179 million and is scheduled to open in October 2025. State regulators say it is needed to accommodate the county's projected population increase.

▶ Wells Fargo & Co. is donating more than \$3.2 million to local organizations that are addressing social equality concerns. Johnson C. Smith University and United Way of Central Carolinas will each receive a \$1 million grant. Other funds will be distributed to Charlotte is Creative, the Latin American Chamber of Commerce and Central Piedmont Community College.



- ▶ Morris Costumes, a costume distributor that ships about 20,000 packages a day, has sold much of its company to Oriental Trading, a subsidiary of Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway. Morris is a three-generation family business.
- ▶ Cox Communications is buying the commercial division of fiber provider Segra, which purchased High Point's NorthState Communications in 2019. Diego Anderson, senior vice president and general manager of Segra operations, will be the new company's CEO.



▶ Charlotte-based fast-food chain Bojangles and Chaac Foods Restaurants announced a partnership to open 40 Bojangles stores over the next seven years. Bojangles operates about 760 locations in the Southeast. Chaac has restaurants in nine states and is also acquiring 40 existing Bojangles in Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAROWINDS, BOJANGLES, JATHOMPSONOSI3



DURHAM

- ▶ Boston-based **Fidelity Investments** plans to add 500 jobs at its campus here as part of a new business function, including customer service for 401(k) accounts and other clients.
- MindPath Care Center, North Carolina's largest behavioral health provider, was acquired by Sacramento, Calif.-based Community Psychiatry Management. Financial details weren't disclosed.



▶ Tergus Pharma is opening a \$35 million headquarters with plans to double its 100-employee staff over the next three years. The company is a contract-development organization for pharmaceutical clients. CEO Vijendra Nalamothu is a former executive of Sanofi-Aventis and Dr. Reddy's Laboratories.



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▶ Cary-based artificial intelligence company PeriGen was acquired by Halma, which is based in the U.K. Financial details were not disclosed. PeriGen focuses on improving safety in childbirth using AI, while Halma is a global group of life-saving technology companies.

MORRISVILLE

▶ Applied LifeSciences & Systems raised \$7 million, which it will use to accelerate the commercialization of the automated and individualized poultry vaccination systems. The Series B fundraising round was co-led by Merck Animal Health and Mountain Group Partners.

CHATHAM COUNTY

▶ PolarOnyx, a California-based advanced laser 3D manufacturing company, moved its headquarters to a 142,000-square-foot building here. It plans to add an unspecified number of jobs as it expands its 3D printing business.

WAKE FOREST

▶ **Wegmans** opened its first location here last month. The 100,000-square-foot, 400-employee store is the Rochester, N.Y.-based grocery chain's fourth in North Carolina.

RALEIGH

▶ Technology company **Bonsai** raised \$5.2 million, including \$2.3 million in convertible securities. The startup, led by co-founder Jake Rosenfeld, is building a career and advice platform akin to LinkedIn.

▶ **Red Hat** is adding more than 500 research and development jobs mostly here and in Boston. The new positions will include technical engineering, product marketing and content strategy.



- Solar manufacturing startup **Solar Biotech** raised \$2 million from an investor. It is seeking to raise a total of \$4 million.
- New York-based real estate brokerage firm **Compass** is entering the Triangle market, opening an office with 55 agents in the Crabtree Terrace office building across from Crabtree Valley Mall. Compass has offices across the U.S. including Los Angeles, Seattle, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.
- ▶ Engineering and surveying company **McKim & Creed** named Steven W. Smith CEO. He succeeds John T. Lucey Jr., who will remain chairman of

the board. Smith previously worked at Montreal-based WSP, where he served in several executive positions.



Steven W. Smith

CARY

▶ Video game company **Epic Games** acquired ArtStation, a Montreal-based company that offers a platform for artists to sell their work, post openings and house portfolios. Financial details were not disclosed.

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK

▶ The Council for Entrepreneurial Development named Kelly Rowell president and CEO. She joined the group in 2017 and has been its interim leader for the past 13 months. CED has been part of the Raleigh and Durham tech scene for more than 35 years.

CARTHAGE

▶ Winston-Salem-based **New Atlantic Contracting** was the lowest bidder of seven companies seeking to expand the Moore County Courthouse. The work includes construction of a 120,000-square-foot, four-story addition and renovation of the county's existing 47,000-square-foot courthouse.



SMITHFIELD

▶ **Amazon** plans to establish a \$100 million processing center here, adding 500 jobs. The facility will be 620,000 square feet and located in West Smithfield Industrial Park near Johnston Regional Airport.



WILMINGTON

- ▶ Live Oak Bank plans to open a small business center in downtown, aimed at helping underserved small businesses. The center will be on Market Street in a space above the new Seabird restaurant.
- ▶ The city approved a \$1.3 million agreement with cloud banking firm **nCino** for a long-term sponsorship of the Port City sports complex, including naming rights for the park. The \$10 million, 65-acre park will have 11 fields and is expected to open in fall 2022.
- E-commerce giant **Amazon** has announced plans to create hundreds of

jobs by launching a delivery station here. Average pay will start at \$15 per hour.

WALLACE

▶ eGourmet Solutions is investing \$500,000 to extend and modernize its distribution center here, adding 40 jobs. The positions will pay an average of \$36,000 a year.



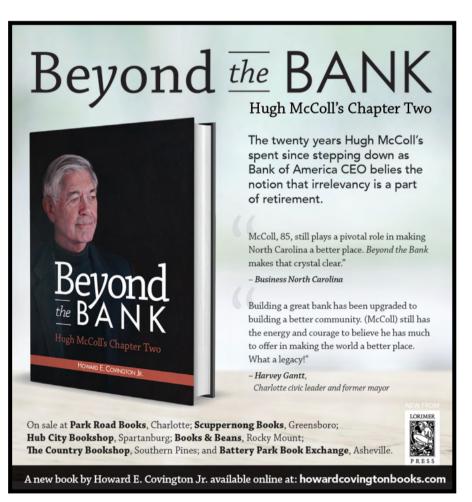
ASHEVILLE

Revenue generated from lodging sales taxes is surging to record levels in Buncombe County, despite COV-

ID-19 restrictions. Originally estimating \$14.8 million in tax revenue, the Buncombe County Tourism Authority says it is now expecting to generate \$25.4 million.

▶ Howdy Homemade Ice Cream, a business that seeks to employ people with special needs, signed a lease for a new location here. An opening date has not been announced.







The unprecedented lockdown of 2020 has now evolved into the uncharted journey back to the workplace. As organizations make plans to bring employees back to the office, employers are struggling to strike the right balance of safety, flexibility, and productivity. Despite the uncertainty, if planned out effectively, returning to the office could be an opportunity for teams to collaborate on the next iteration of their workspaces.

The most important step in building your new workplace is understanding its position in the world. The pandemic has demonstrated how life outside work can dramatically impact employees. You must be mindful of this as you approach mapping out the future of your business.

Choose a team to ensure your foundation is stable.

As you begin discussions around the transition back to the office, appoint a re-opening team that includes managers and staff from across the company who will be affected by or play a major role in the re-opening (finance, payroll, facilities, human resources, and heads of business divisions).

The first task for the reopening team is a review of the state of the business. Understanding the financial health of the organization and its performance over the last year will drive your strategy. Also review staffing needs and their access to the resources needed to do their job. With input from all other teams across the organization, determine staffing needs and schedules, operational requirements and the kind of workspace required to safely reopen.

Draw up and communicate the plan often to everyone.

Reaching the level of trust needed to safely reopen your workplace requires transparency and open communication between management and staff, according to Molly Galloway, Chief Strategy Officer, Catapult: "Build a strong foundation for your new workplace by explaining where you are, what you need, and, most importantly why, then ask employees what they need, and really listen."

Employee opinion surveys, organizational assessments, one-on-one meetings, online "office hours," and virtual all-staff meetings are easy ways to keep the communication channels open.

"Regular communication encourages honest feedback that helps you understand hidden obstacles to successful re-opening," says Kathryn Sears, HR Advisor at Catapult. "If you haven't been having these conversations all along, start the process now, even if it means pushing back the return by a few weeks. Rushed re-openings can negatively impact employee morale."

Sears recommends ongoing outreach in multiple formats that match the tone of the announcements. For example, letters or emails are not advisable for new information that may be perceived as negative. Instead, introduce sensitive information through video, phone calls, or a virtual town hall.

Announce the reopening date as soon as it's chosen, giving employees ample time to adjust to the



upcoming change, as well as plan for childcare, family commitments, and other responsibilities that shifted as they worked from home. Also, be prepared to explain why you are returning to the office and make available data that supports your decision.

What additions will the design dictate?

Whether all employees will return to the office full-time, remain remote, or participate in a hybrid work experience that melds the best of both scenarios, employers must create a sense of routine around new logistics, so all workers feel comfortable, safe, and motivated.

"The new workplace is less about the number of hours you spend in the office and more about the quality of the work you're doing," says Galloway. For employers, this means considering permanent remote work arrangements, flexible hours, staggered schedules, or shift work to accommodate a more amenable work/life balance for employees as well as allowing for ongoing social distancing.

"Most organizations will probably choose a mix of remote and onsite," says Becky Drozdz, HR Advisor, Compensation Lead at Catapult. "COVID has forced schedule flexibility, and companies should it because hiring and retaining talent is one of the biggest challenges right now. If the employee can't get flexibility here, they're going to go somewhere else." But a flexible, hybrid workplace only works if employees hold themselves accountable for their productivity. Employees should maintain the quality output expected of their role, even if that means working smarter and, yes, even harder during devoted work hours. Employers should provide clarity around hybrid workplace rules and clearly define the parameters that will determine if employees are meeting expectations for their role.

The ground floor is just the beginning!

The first day back in the office is just the start of the reopening journey, so put a plan in place for gauging success and identifying ongoing challenges. And be willing to rethink the plan if there are issues.

"There will be a lot of anxiety coming back into the office," says Cynthia Daniel, Catapult Senior HR Consultant/Team Lead, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. "I think employers should acknowledge this beforehand and hold some virtual roundtable discussions with employees, maybe even implement an employee resource group or check if their EAP offers resources to help people transition back into the workplace."

Finally, when you seek to understand how external forces affect employee performance, behavior, and expectations, you are better equipped to build a workplace culture that supports, respects, and values them.







WORK PERKS

As the corporate world begins to emerge from the COVID pandemic, employee benefits and workplace culture are more important than ever. In *Business North Carolina*'s 2021 list of Best Employers in the state, companies are getting creative in order to recruit and retain top talent, offering perks such as unlimited paid time off, on-site fitness programs, incentive trips, virtual events and contests, and fun, off-campus outings. In its annual survey, Best Companies Group polled employees and their employers on dozens of topics, from recruiting practices to recognition programs. Topping the list are Mackenzie Ryan, a Raleigh-based staffing company; Hickory-based accounting firm Martin Starnes & Associates; and Williams Mullen, a legal firm based in Richmond, Va. Employment numbers are as of Jan. 1, 2021.





Mackenzie Ryan

Raleigh, staffing

U.S. employees: 16 | N.C. employees: 16

















Other: Employees enjoy the tunes of an office DJ, who spins, creates mixes, takes requests and livens up the atmosphere. Fun office activities include company Olympics, Family Feud and games of Kahoot.

Independent Insurance Agents of North Carolina

Cary, insurance nonprofit

U.S. employees: 32 | N.C. employees: 32





Other: Work-life balance is key, with 35-hour workweeks for non-exempt staff and minimum overtime. The company also offers Flex Fridays off every other week throughout the year.

Blackman & Sloop

Chapel Hill, accounting

U.S. employees: 40 | N.C. employees: 40





Other: The accounting firm gives out a Rock Star Award that recognizes an employee with outstanding performance with a cash prize. A new wellness program promotes healthy challenges among the staff with reward points up for grabs.



100% HEALTH PREMIUMS PAID



PROFIT SHARING



STOCK OPTION



SUSTAINABLE **PRACTICES**



TUITION **ASSISTANCE**

INCLUDES CERTIFICATIONS, UNDER-GRADUATE OR ADVANCED DEGREES



PAID DAYS OFF DOES NOT INCLUDE SICK DAYS AND



TELECOMMUTING



FITNESS FACILITIES ON-SITE



401(K) OR PENSION PLAN

Cities indicate company headquarters.



Rocky Mount, financial services

U.S. employees: 30 | N.C. employees: 30

















Other: Workers are celebrated during Employee Appreciation Week with cards and gifts. During the pandemic lockdown, the company provided lunch for essential onsite workers every day for six weeks from local restaurants.

Tayloe Gray Agency

Wilmington, advertising, PR and marketing

U.S. employees: 20 | N.C. employees: 20



















Other: Fun is incorporated in the workplace with an in-office game room, complete with foosball, a pool table and a golf simulator. During the pandemic, employees have stayed in touch with monthly cocktail hour Zoom calls.

The Brooks Group

Greensboro, sales training

U.S. employees: 30 | N.C. employees: 30



















Other: The company encourages work-life balance with unlimited PTO and keeps employees relaxed with twice-a-week yoga classes in the office. As part of its monthly Second Friday program, workers are treated to a catered lunch and educational presentation.





All American Entertainment

Durham, entertainment agency

U.S. employees: 27 | N.C. employees: 27

















Other: The entertainment agency puts community first, with donation matching for employees and a paid day off to volunteer. Adding a fun spin to the workplace, employees can play Spin the Wheel and win cash prizes, and the company offers revenue-driven bonuses and early releases on Fridays when workers hit monthly or weekly sales goals.



VisionPoint Marketing

Raleigh, marketing

U.S. employees: 49 | N.C. employees: 49

















Other: Monthly MVP Awards are given to an employee-nominated worker who receives an extra half-day of vacation and a \$50 gift card. One Friday per quarter, employees participate in a fun activity during work hours as part of Fantastic Fridays.



Johnson Price Sprinkle

Asheville, accounting

U.S. employees: 43 | N.C. employees: 43





















Other: The accounting firm didn't allow the pandemic to curb its enthusiasm for employee bonding: Workers competed in a virtual 5K, reporting their times and celebrating participation on a Zoom call. For Halloween, employees submitted photos of their costumes and voted for their favorites online.

Delta Dental of North Carolina

Raleigh, not-for-profit health care insurance

U.S. employees: 23 | N.C. employees: 23



















Other: Fun annual employee events include a Halloween party, Thanksgiving lunch, Valentine's Day celebration, Secret Santa gift exchange and baby showers. The notfor-profit company promotes out-of-office outings such as bowling and team building activities at All Associates Advance Days.



Verigent

Huntersville, staffing

U.S. employees: 30 | N.C. employees: 26

















Other: The staffing company celebrates anniversaries, promotions and transitions to new teams, birthdays, and other life events such as marriage, children and moving. Each December, Verigent hosts a raffle when workers can win prizes such as an Echo, a set of knives or a \$500 gift card.

Falcone Crawl Space & Structural Repair

Charlotte, construction

U.S. employees: 39 | N.C. employees: 39



















Other: The company awarded brand new 2020 King Ranch trucks to its top three crew leaders. Workers kick back after a long day at the Charlotte campus, which is complete with pingpong tables, a batting cage, a foosball table, two basketball nets and an in-house beer keg.



Zöe Dental Asheville, health care

U.S. employees: 26 | N.C. employees: 26















Other: Zöe Dental keeps the workplace lively with quarterly celebrations such as Christmas decorating parties, game show parties, craft-making activities and potluck lunches. If the company meets or exceeds yearly goals, team members have been rewarded with shopping sprees, manicures and pedicures, massages and zip line adventures.



Capital Investment Companies

Raleigh, financial services

U.S. employees: 38 | N.C. employees: 38















Other: Capital Investment Cos. shows appreciation for employees by awarding gift cards for exception customer service and surprise cash bonuses. Breakfast and/or lunch is provided frequently to those working in person. Before the pandemic, the company hosted two annual corporate retreats, monthly yoga sessions and guarterly chair massages.

hep Petra

Huntersville, renewable energy and utilities

U.S. employees: 34 | N.C. employees: 34

















Other: Employees are involved in the community with volunteer opportunities at Second Harvest Food Bank and other nonprofit organizations. The company celebrates the holidays with Halloween costume days, ugly Christmas sweater competitions, potlucks and spirit weeks.



100% HEALTH PREMIUMS PAID



PROFIT SHARING



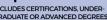
STOCK OPTION



SUSTAINABLE **PRACTICES**



TUITION **ASSISTANCE**





PAID DAYS OFF DOES NOT INCLUDE SICK DAYS AND HOLIDAYS U - UNLIMITED

FITNESS FACILITIES ON-SITE



401(K) OR PENSION PLAN

TELECOMMUTING

Cities indicate company headquarters.

Martin Starnes & Associates

Hickory, accounting

U.S. employees: 61 | N.C. employees: 61















Other: Employees are shown appreciation for educational achievements and licenses with treats, massages, competitions, and games such as Bingo, trivia, Sudoku and more. The company kept up the Christmas cheer with a virtual event, and workers were given monogrammed stockings, gifts and candy by partners who dressed up like elves.

Parrish & Partners

Columbia, S.C., engineering

U.S. employees: 50 | N.C. employees: 18



















Other: The company's Emerald Award Program allows employees to recognize a coworker who goes above and beyond normal job responsibilities. Employees bond over group lunches, group outings and activities, and Halloween costume and ugly sweater contests





WingSwept

Garner, technology

U.S. employees: 55 | N.C. employees: 55















Other: Though many of its team bonding activities have gone virtual during the past year, fun outings have included eating out at restaurants, bowling, escape rooms and go-kart racing. Other events such as Office Olympics, cooking competitions, picnics, chili cook-offs, outdoor movie nights and a Halloween trunk-or-treat keep workers engaged.



North State Bank

Raleigh, banking

U.S. employees: 196 | N.C. employees: 196



















Other: Employees look forward to various company-sponsored events throughout the year including a chili cook-off, cookie baking contest, Halloween costume and pumpkin-carving contest, annual frozen turkey for Thanksgiving, ice cream trucks in July for National Ice Cream Month and a Christmas party.



Jackrabbit Technologies

Huntersville, technology

U.S. employees: 77 | N.C. employees: 76

















Other: Service awards are given to employees who have served one, three, five, seven, 10, 15 and 20 years; winners get to select a gift from an online catalog as a prize. Workers who have been with the company for 10 years receive a four-week paid sabbatical leave.



Transportation Impact

Emerald Isle, transportation

U.S. employees: 89 | N.C. employees: 89



















Other: Workers look forward to exciting quarterly events such as laser tag, a fishing competition, a scavenger hunt and a pool party. When the company went fully remote last March because of the pandemic, it continued to boost morale with virtual events and contests for employees.

Blue Ridge Energy

Lenoir, energy

U.S. employees: 216 | N.C. employees: 216





















Other: Employees are eligible for an Annual Service Award, receiving a plaque and their choice of gift or money in five-year increments. The corporate office has a relaxation station with a massage chair for employees to decompress during the workday.



ES&E

Greensboro, distribution

U.S. employees: 95 | N.C. employees: 95

















Other: As part of the Essie Bucks program, employees have giveaway "bucks" to reward co-workers for excellent customer service, which can be redeemed for cash, time off or other prizes. At an end of the year party, employees who have been with the company for five-year increments receive a cash award that increases with the years of service.





WIMCO

Washington, construction

U.S. employees: 74 | N.C. employees: 74



















Other: WIMCO hosts fun employee events throughout the year including Family Fun Day, an annual meeting and awards ceremony, a Christmas party and off-site teambuilding activities. Workers get three hours a week on the clock to exercise, whether it be at the in-office gym, an off-site facility or at home.



Pine Gate Renewables

Asheville, enerav

U.S. employees: 231 | N.C. employees: 158

















Other: Biweekly happy hours, raffles, and group and volunteer activities such as company-sponsored hikes and a pet-friendly office are just a few of the ways Pine Gate Renewables keeps its employees happy. It has supported its workforce during the pandemic by contributing a \$75 stipend for working from home and initiating a child care assistance program in which employees can be reimbursed \$300 per week for eligible care expenses.



Bernard Robinson & Co.

Greensboro, accounting

U.S. employees: 183 | N.C. employees: 183

















Other: The accounting firm rewards hard work with its Employee of the Quarter recognition, which comes with a \$500 bonus. Employees who pass all four parts of the CPA exam receive a \$1,500 bonus, and during busy season, the company offers 15-minute chair massages to workers.



Epes Logistics Services

Greensboro, transportation

U.S. employees: 182 | N.C. employees: 145

















Other: Food and ice cream trucks frequent the office several times a year, and the company offers several employee contests including cornhole tournaments, a freethrow contest, pingpong tournaments, a creative snack contest, a Halloween costume contest, an ugly sweater contest and a gingerbread house contest.



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TELECOMMUTING



FITNESS FACILITIES ON-SITE



401(K) OR PENSION PLAN

Cities indicate company headquarters.

The McIntosh Law Firm

Davidson, legal

U.S. employees: 55 | N.C. employees: 55



















Other: Employees are treated to appreciation luncheons and breakfasts, birthday gifts, casual Fridays and firm-sponsored yoga. The company has a donation-matching policy to help support workers' favorite charities.

Carolina Donor Services

Greenville, health care nonprofit

U.S. employees: 136 | N.C. employees: 136



















Other: The company's Give a Wow is a peer-to-peer recognition program that gives employees an opportunity to acknowledge each other's great work. Work outings include Durham Bulls games, laser tag, painting and pottery classes, and arcade games.





Copiers Plus

Fayetteville, technology

U.S. employees: 50 | N.C. employees: 50



Other: The third-generation family-owned company looks out for employees during tough times with donations of money and resources for in-need families. Copiers Plus reimburses as much as 50% of employee training and education that is deemed beneficial to the company.

16 Nat

National Coatings

Raleigh, construction

U.S. employees: 133 | N.C. employees: 31

















Other: Employees enjoy weekly lunches, holiday parties and tickets to local sporting events. The company purchases an AAA membership for its female workers and gives employees flexible hours to accommodate life events such as school functions and doctors' appointments.



Go-Forth Pest Control

Greensboro, pest control

U.S. employees: 73 | N.C. employees: 68

















Other: Each year, the company takes employees and their families on a trip to the beach, covering the bill for gas, accommodations, several meals and entertainment. Go-Forth Pest Control offers workers and dependants a 100% employer-paid telemedicine plan immediately upon hire.

18

Champion Credit Union

Canton, banking

U.S. employees: 95 | N.C. employees: 95



















Other: Champion Credit Union's Service Award Program, which recognizes winners at its annual holiday social, comes with a monetary gift and an extra week of PTO. The company's wellness program offers rewards — including cash, gift cards and extra PTO — for participation and reaching certain levels.

19

Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation

Linville, environmental nonprofit

U.S. employees: 55 | N.C. employees: 55







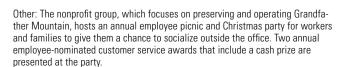














Consumer Education Services

Raleigh, nonprofit financial services

U.S. employees: 66 | N.C. employees: 66















Other: The nonprofit group hosts monthly raffles for gift cards and items such as TVs, AirPods, tablets, smartwatches and appliances. Employees enjoy fun contests throughout the year including an ugly sweater contest, gingerbread house wars, or remote workspace competition and pet contests for gift cards.



DMA Sales

Tabor City, distribution

U.S. employees: 110 | N.C. employees: 91

















Other: The distribution company throws employee luncheons, family picnics and an annual Halloween party. It also offers free or discounted tickets to local family entertainment or sporting events.



Wetherill Engineering

Raleigh, engineering

U.S. employees: 63 | N.C. employees: 63



















Other: The woman-owned engineering company treats employees like family with a flexible schedule, Christmas bonus and holiday parties throughout the year.



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TELECOMMUTING



FITNESS FACILITIES ON-SITE



401(K) OR PENSION PLAN

Cities indicate company headquarters.



Williams Mullen

Richmond, Va., legal

U.S. employees: 418 | N.C. employees: 62















Other: As part of its Staff Appreciation Week, employees are given lunch, a firm gift, special gifts for service milestones, hand-written notes from managers, a free hour of PTO and Jeans Day. Outstanding employees are nominated by co-workers for Spotlight Awards and receive a plaque and gift card and are profiled on the firm's intranet.



Scott Insurance

Lynchburg, Va., financial services

U.S. employees: 341 | N.C. employees: 104



















Other: Annual employee activities include College Colors Day parties, book clubs, birthday celebrations, food trucks at the office and an afternoon smoothie bar. The company also hosts on-site wellness workshops focused on stress management and offered a virtual fitness class twice a week in early 2020.





Davenport & Co.

Richmond, Va., financial services

U.S. employees: 447 | N.C. employees: 29















Other: The financial-services company keeps associates and their families healthy with an on-site health center, Weight Watchers and other nutrition programs, free flu shots, COVID vaccinations, biometric screenings, walking contests and health coaching. Fun annual events include a firm picnic, holiday party, Donut Day, March Madness, and an Elf on the Shelf contest highlighting firm associates.



Edward Jones

St. Louis, Mo., financial services

U.S. employees: 46,498 | N.C. employees: 1,480









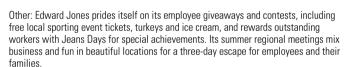














Samet Corp.

Greensboro, construction

U.S. employees: 343 | N.C. employees: 290





















Other: Samet keeps workers physically fit by offering yoga classes, basketball and a walking club. It also offers on-site personal development seminars and workshops.



CAPTRUST

Raleigh, financial services

U.S. employees: 753 | N.C. employees: 351



















Other: Each quarter, three employees are nominated by co-workers and recognized by Captrust's CEO with guarterly excellence awards. Its Captrust Way group sponsors annual events such as a trick-or-treating and Halloween celebration at headquarters and trivia and game nights.

South State Bank

Columbia, S.C., financial services

U.S. employees: 5,432 | N.C. employees: 297





















Other: South State Bank loves to celebrate throughout the year with a bracket contest for March Madness, a Super Bowl party, Easter egg hunts, a Halloween costume contest and festive Fridays in December. The company also has a relaxed dress code that allows employees to wear business casual and jeans throughout the day.



Burns & McDonnell

Kansas City, Mo., engineering, construction, architecture

U.S. employees: 7,347 | N.C. employees: 50















Other: The company's MacCulture Recognition Program allows managers to recognize exceptional employee-owners with points, which can be redeemed for gift cards or merchandise. Annual events include a company picnic, potlucks, a holiday party, team-building activities and more.



Paducah, Ky., financial services

U.S. employees: 1,242 | N.C. employees: 80

















Other: CSI shows appreciation for employees with events such as cookouts, lunches and ice cream socials, and virtual happy hours, games and events while working remote. Additionally, employees are encouraged to participate in quarterly group community outreach projects and take paid time off to give back.



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Cities indicate company headquarters.



Coastal Credit Union

Raleigh, banking

U.S. employees: 576 | N.C. employees: 576

















Other: Coastal Credit Union employees utilize You Earned It (Kazoo), an online recognition system in which managers reward employees and employees recognize each other for accomplishments. As part of its new remote work policy, the company gives workers \$50 per pay period for remote work costs and provides employees with toilet paper, sanitizer, masks and disinfectant wipes.



Gallagher

Rolling Meadows, III., insurance services

U.S. employees: 33,300 | N.C. employees: 139

















Other: Employees have an opportunity to share their social responsibility and volunteer activities with an internal website to log volunteer hours and charitable giving. The Gallagher Foundation matches eligible charitable donations, empowering employees to make twice the difference to the charities of their choosing.



Total Quality Logistics

Cincinnati, Ohio, transportation

U.S. employees: 5,000 | N.C. employees: 239



















Other: Top-performing logistics account executives and a guest receive an allexpenses paid getaway to a tropical destination. Employees have fun in the office with pingpong tables, pop-a-shot machines, cornhole boards, putting greens and basketball courts.



Terminix Service

Columbia, S.C., pest control

U.S. employees: 1,100 | N.C. employees: 350



















Other: Employees can earn a spot for a two-night stay in Myrtle Beach for Terminix's Annual Awards Weekend, when top performers are recognized with awards and all eligible employees are wined and dined and given the chance to win a variety of prizes.

Fayetteville Public Works Commission

Fayetteville, utilities

U.S. employees: 650 | N.C. employees: 650

















Other: The utilities organization hosts an annual picnic for employees and their families. Workers stay active with fitness offerings such as CrossFit and yoga classes.



IEM

Morrisville, consulting

U.S. employees: 435 | N.C. employees: 90



















Other: Workplace celebrations include monthly birthday parties, a Valentine's Day brunch that doubles as a fundraiser for the N.C. chapter of the Lymphoma & Leukemia Society, a chili cook-off, a Halloween potluck lunch and costume contest, a Thanksgiving feast, and a holiday cookie exchange and ugly sweater contest.

BEST EMPLOYERS LARGE EMPLOYER CATEGORY (250 or more U.S. EMPLOYEES)





Strata Clean Energy

Durham, renewable energy

U.S. employees: 431 | N.C. employees: 266















Other: Strata Clean Energy hosts company parties, group volunteer events and weekly Good News Emails to keep employee spirits up. Workers are recognized for their hard work with spot bonuses, employee incentives and safety awards.



Gaia Herbs

Mills River, herbal supplements

U.S. employees: 285 | N.C. employees: 263



















Other: Employees nominate co-workers for the Hawthorn Award on a quarterly basis for demonstrating company values, and winners receive a \$50 gift card. Gaia Herbs also has a recognition platform that lets employees earn points that can be cashed in for gift cards or company swag.



CPI Security

Charlotte, security and automation services

U.S. employees: 744 | N.C. employees: 619





















Other: CPI keeps things fun at the office with games, activities and televisions throughout the breakrooms, holiday-themed parties and luncheons, and contests such as cubicle decoration, dress-up days and raffles.



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401(K) OR PENSION PLAN

Cities indicate company headquarters.



Tencarva Machinery

Greensboro, manufacturing

U.S. employees: 362 | N.C. employees: 110

















Other: Employees are recognized for outstanding work with the Wannamaker Award, which includes a \$300 gift, a newsletter article and an award. The company boasts fun employee contests throughout the year, weight loss challenges, internal promotions, raffles and office celebrations.



Dauntless Discovery

Morrisville, legal

U.S. employees: 293 | N.C. employees: 70





















Other: Dauntless Discovery bids the old year adieu and kicks off the new year with annual Christmas and New Year parties and hosts company potluck events. To stay connected during the pandemic, the company has hosted virtual holiday get-togethers and has a Microsoft Teams "Coffee Shop" chat dedicated to employee socializing.





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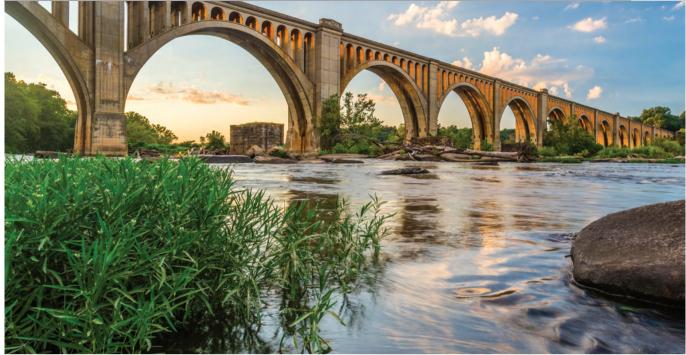
JPS strives To Be Greater.

Despite the past year's constant changes, the firm diligently worked to make positive community impacts. The JPS team donated food and household supplies, virtually volunteered on local nonprofit boards, participated in community virtual events as guest panelists, and wrote numerous newsletters on updated guidelines & legislation to keep clients and the community updated.

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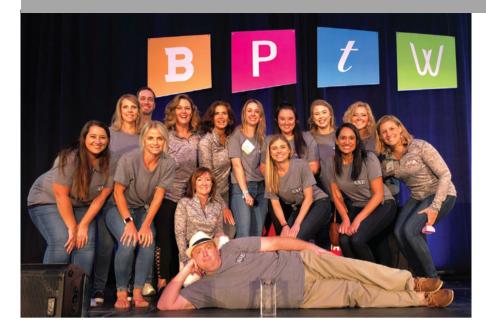




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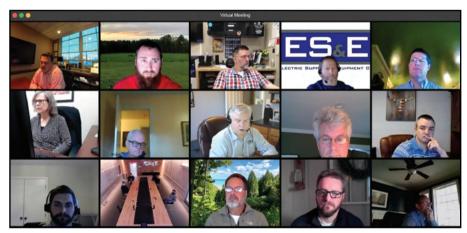




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Much has changed since ES&E opened its doors in 1935. We recently celebrated our 85th anniversary in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. During this most unusual year, Covid protocols impacted most events and traditions when company gatherings, employee recognition, and training switched to virtual events. One thing that did not change was our commitment to create and maintain the best workplace for our employees and to be the preferred electrical supplier for our customers. The ES&E Way – our corporate values statement – states in part that we are committed and empowered to continuously improve the value of our customer-centric culture through integrity, innovation and teamwork. This guiding principle and the willingness to evolve allows ES&E to thrive as a Best Workplace.

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For 50 years, Delta Dental of North Carolina has championed healthy smiles across the state. As North Carolina's leading dental insurer, we provide dental insurance to businesses as part of their employee benefits, and directly to individuals and families. As a member of the Delta Dental Plans Association, we are part of the largest dental insurance network in the nation, covering more than 80 million Americans. And we make it a priority to give back by heavily investing in the oral health of all North Carolinians, especially those with limited access to care.

From our start in Raleigh in 1970, we've grown to have the largest network of dentists in North Carolina. Now, with 70 percent of the state's dentists in our network, we save our customers money. In fact, we provide the deepest savings of any dental insurer in North Carolina. That's

just one of the reasons we've grown our customer base by 550 percent in the past 10 years alone.

As champions of our state's healthy smiles, we work closely with local, statewide and federal leaders to advocate for policies that support widespread access to oral health care, and to help everyone understand the critical role that oral health has on overall health. We educate leaders about the more than 120 signs and symptoms of non-dental diseases that can be detected through a routine oral health exam, we provide professional development services to the dentists in our network, and we provide resources and educational materials to our customers.

We are proud of the accomplishments of our team of professionals at Delta Dental of North Carolina. With our unwavering commitment to provide exceptional customer service, we maintain a 98 percent satisfaction rate among our customers.

We believe that everyone – and we mean everyone – deserves a healthy smile. That's why we we make it a priority to bring joy to our local communities by funding initiatives that support the oral health, quality education and physical well-being of all North Carolinians. In 2019, an estimated 2.4 million North Carolinians struggled to get adequate dental care. Through funding, education and in-kind donations, we are working to reverse this trend. Through our Smiles for Kids minigrant program, we have supported oral health education and dental services for more than 330,000 children and their families across the state, from the mountains to the coast. Now, that's something to smile about.

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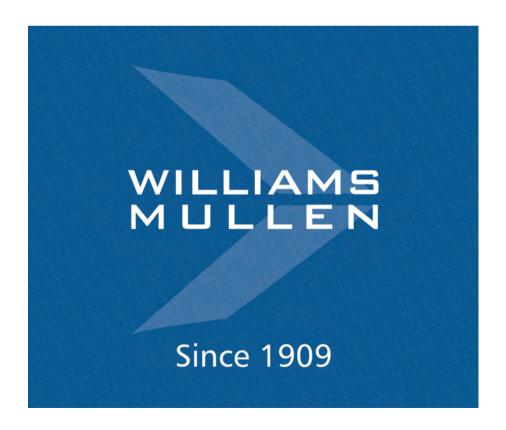




BEST BALANCE

At IIANC, we strive to offer a great work environment and culture so that our employees can provide the best service to our nearly 1,000 Trusted Choice® independent insurance agency member locations around the state. The focus on our staff's well-being was more important than ever in an unprecedented year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With staff working remotely between March 2020 - April 2021 and dealing with many of the work-life balance challenges brought on by the pandemic, IIANC leveraged technology. collaboration tools, a flexible work schedule, and fun activities to maximize productivity and ensure employees remained connected. As a result, our team successfully launched several new strategic initiatives that will enable IIANC to help independent agents grow their businesses around the state.

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Williams Mullen is a business law firm with nearly 450 employees working together in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Washington D.C. Our clients' success is at the forefront of what we do, and we recognize that helping grow our communities is part of that goal. We support hundreds of organizations through community service, pro bono legal work and donations from our foundation. We know that Williams Mullen only succeeds when we foster an inclusive environment where our team members can succeed professionally, contribute meaningfully and bring their authentic selves to work.

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BUILT ON INNOVATION & PASSION

Founded in 2008 by President and CEO. John Treece, and company CFO, Steve Bertling, DMA Sales has quickly grown to become a trusted supplier to the automotive and heavy-duty parts aftermarket industry. Serving OES, big box retail, wholesale, and e-tail sales channels, DMA is a leading product development, engineering, and diversified manufacturer whose portfolio of product brands have become some of the most recognized and respected in their industry. In addition, DMA is a leading private label manufacturer with over 60% of its global revenues coming from products produced by them but under the customer's brand.

Headquartered in Tabor City, NC, with over a 1,000,000 square feet of distribution space across its four facilities in North and South Carolina, DMA continues to deliver on its mission to provide innovation and value for its Customers. With growth in sales to soon approach over \$140 million and no signs of slowing down, DMA is poised for continued success. "Our company has a dynamic, performance driven culture

that embodies the entrepreneurial spirit from which we were founded. As an organization, our number one asset is our dedicated team of associates. It's their hard work and collaboration that enables us to exceed the service expectations of our customers. That's why we say, we are a company that is built on passion," said John Treece.

"Our employees are our number one asset and the reason we are able to service our customers beyond their expectations. We believe in taking care of our associates and as the CEO, I take that as my responsibility. Its important to me that our people have a good quality of life and can afford to take care of their families. We want to offer above average compensation and benefits so that we are the type of organization people want to be apart of," said John Treece.

For 2021, the company is instituting two new benefit programs. First, an educational scholarship program available to employee's children for attending a technical college or university degreed program. In addition, DMA is also implementing an educational support program for employees looking to

expand their education within their field of expertise or to better position them for advancement within the company.

Secondly, as there has been much discussion about increases to the minimum wage, DMA is introducing an aggressive plan to move its hourly minimum wage base to \$15 for every associate by the end of 2022. "We don't need to the government to tell us what the right thing to do for our hourly associates minimum wage. Moving to a base minimum wage of \$15 per hour will allow us to attract and keep quality workers. Most importantly, these employees will be making a wage that allows them to be able to sustain a better quality of life and that is important to us." Said John Treece. The company's current hourly wages range from \$12 to \$25 per hour, depending on the role and responsibility.

DMA's Senior Management Team (pictured above from left to right) Trent Barton, Director of Human Resources; Larry Clark, Director of Product Development; Brandon Henderson, Director of Product Management; Steve Bertling, CFO; John Treece, President & CEO; Maria Treece, EVP & CPIO; Olga McIntyre, CIO

















A LIFE-SAVING BRIDGE

As North Carolina's largest organ donation and tissue recovery organization, Carolina Donor Services is the bridge between people who need transplants and the donors who make those transplants possible.

For us, saving and healing lives is a calling. It's our mission. It's why we exist and why our 135 passionate and hard-working personnel in clinical and administrative positions get up each day to do what we do for donors, their families, and recipients. With warmth, understanding, and respect, we pledge and commit ourselves to help make the act of organ and tissue donation a meaningful one — helping people to experience the fulfillment of giving life to others. We fulfill our promise with every life we help save, with every family we touch, and with every spark of inspiration we ignite among our hospital and business partners and communities.

LOCATIONS IN DURHAM, GREENVILLE & WINSTON-SALEM | CAROLINADONORSERVICES.ORG



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Established in 1864, Scott Insurance provides expertise in the areas of commercial insurance, risk management, employee benefits, surety bonds, captives and personal insurance.

One of the largest independent agencies in the Southeast, Scott has 105 employee owners in N.C., up 31% since 2015. To accommodate their growth, Scott re-located each of its three N.C. offices in the last five years. Most recently, Scott's Greensboro office moved to a newly constructed building adjacent to First National Bank Field in downtown Greensboro (pictured).

Scott's continued growth – as a service provider and as an employer - is thanks in part to the company's unique structure as an employee-owned company. This structure has positioned Scott to maintain its independence, attract premium talent and foster a culture focused on service.

LOCATIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA, SOUTH CAROLINA, TENNESSEE & VIRGINIA | SCOTTINS.COM







Left: Ed Pearce, president of Tencarva, at a sales meeting in Charlotte, 2018; Right: Greensboro employees preparing fabricated equipment for local delivery.

MEETING DAILY NEEDS

If you drink water, take a shower, wash your car, paint your house, or have shingles on your roof, there is a good chance this Greensboro-based company may have been indirectly involved in helping make that happen. While it's is not a brand you will find on your grocery store shelves, Tencarva does play an important part in the processing equipment that many well-known brands use to make their products.

With customers ranging from your corner oil change to world-renowned aerospace technology companies, and myriads of others in between, it's hard to find a company that produces a tangible product that doesn't use some equipment offered by Tencarva. Many of the products offered are commonly used in chemical processing, pulp and paper manufacturing, food handling, mining, mineral extraction, drinking water, wastewater, and thousands of other applications.

Tencarva's primary role is to assist and supply industrial and municipal customers with liquid handling process equipment. As an equipment distributor offering a wide range of process equipment, we offer pumps, mixers, blowers, fans, filters, and many other types of associated equipment. Additionally,

we offer in-house services including application engineering, fabrication & machining, automation & controls, as well as operating a UL508A listed panel shop, and a full-service repair and support team for all manufactured and distributed products.

Tencarva has been in business since 1978. and over that time has acquired many additional companies, many which were grafted into the Tencarva brand and several which have remained as standalone companies offering their unique value to the market. Uniguard Machinery Guards, and ESSCO Service & Sales, are two brands headquartered in North Carolina which operate as their own brands. Uniguard manufacturers a highly customizable plastic equipment guard used to help prevent human injuries, and ESSCO is an electrical equipment distributor and electrical controls panel shop. Other Tencarva brands not located in North Carolina are Hudson Pump & Equipment in Jacksonville and Lakeland, Florida, Saladin Pump & Equipment located in Beaumont, Texas, and Southern Sales located in Nashville, Tennessee. All the Tencarva companies have one thing in common which is they offer equipment and related services to

industries and or municipalities.

Although Tencarva is spread out in geography, the 365 employees that comprise the company communicate regularly and support each other with shared resources. It's Tencarva Teamwork that has made us one of the Best Companies in NC to work for and will carry us through whatever challenges the future brings.

N.C. LOCATIONS:

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GREENSBORO

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1800 Sullivan Street, Greensboro, NC 27409 336.275.5321

GREENVILLE

100B Staton Court, Greenville, NC 27834 252.695.0400

WILMINGTON

1200 N. 23rd St., Ste. 111, Wilmington, NC 28405 910 799 8800

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Blue Ridge Energy is a member-owned cooperative with a propane and fuels subsidiary.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

Clean energy for future generations and helping the people they serve: two cornerstones of the vision that help make Blue Ridge Energy one of North Carolina's leading employers. The parent company is a memberowned electric cooperative serving its members with affordable, reliable electricity without garnering a profit. Blue Ridge Energy includes a propane and fuels subsidiary that serves an area beyond the footprint of the cooperative and includes product showrooms in five counties. Combined, the Blue Ridge Energy companies offer a complete one-stop energy resource.

Cooperative member-owners serve on the Board of Directors, steering the organization in a direction that maximizes value to local communities. The Blue Ridge Energy Members Foundation is also a reflection of the culture that focuses on helping local people.

Blue Ridge Energy's culture is powered by a heart for service combined with progressive low carbon energy resources that are provided at the lowest possible cost.

Company culture links success with strategies that attract the best employees to help operate the electric cooperative plus its propane and fuels and middle-mile fiber subsidiaries.

Employees are involved in community activities including economic development, education, heating assistance; health care, emergency response and other quality of life initiatives.

Employees enjoy competitive compensation levels that include incentives based on a balanced scorecard of performance goals set in reliability, member/customer service, safety and controlling expenses.

Employees utilize wellness programs with on-site nurse practitioners; strong employee development programs including mentoring and succession planning; tuition reimbursement; family-friendly benefits; and retirement benefits.

A culture where employees are key and delivering nothing but their very best has resulted in consistently ranking among the nation's best performing electric utilities for customer satisfaction and reliability. Employees frequently say that being at Blue Ridge Energy means being a member of a family – a family united in uplifting the lives of its members.

Blue Ridge Energy is proud to receive Business North Carolina's "Best Employers" recognition for the fifth time.



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WATAUGA COUNTY

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Prepped by a family patriarch, Aaron Thomas has big ambitions for a construction business with small-town roots.

By Donnie Douglas Photos by John Gessner

aron Thomas remembers getting quizzed as a 10-year-old by his grand-father, Curt Locklear, wanting to know his life's plan. Not having one wasn't acceptable, the youngster quickly learned.

"He was having none of that," Thomas says. "He was a hard driver. He expected a lot of you, and he expected you to work. ... He taught me everything I know about business, dealing with people, and I learned a lot about building."

Curt Locklear started Robeson County's Pembroke Hardware in the 1950s and built it into one of the larger True Value franchise stores in the U.S., a status it still maintains. Lindsey Locklear, one of Curt's nine children and Thomas' uncle, says the family quickly realized that the precocious youngster had a big future.

"During summers, Aaron would come and spend time in Pembroke, and he would stay at Daddy's house," Lindsey says. "He just fell into the classic mom-and-pop store in Pembroke, fell into the mix there, and started doing stuff. He had an unusual focus for a 10- and 11-year-old, and he wanted to know everything about everything."

By his late teens, Thomas was joining Lindsey on trips to national hardware shows. "Aaron has the gift of gab, and he loves to sell," says Locklear, 60. "He started following me pretty closely in his late teens, and I would take him to national hardware shows. He liked that, the bigger scene. He was a natural at that and loved that. Early on his confidence was high. All he needed was a good product, and he was ready to go."



It does give me a certain sense of pride coming from the poorest county in the state and showing we can compete with the best of the best.

- Aaron Thomas, CEO, Metcon

Thomas, 45, is now the sole owner and CEO of construction company Metcon, which employs nearly 100, including a significant number earning six-figure salaries. The company is projected to reach \$150 million in revenue this year. No other minority-owned North Carolina contractor has reached a similar level, and its headquarters is the source of great pride in Pembroke, a Robeson County town of 3,000 that is the home of the 55,000-member Lumbee Tribe.

Since Thomas formed the business in 1999 at age 23, Metcon has completed more than 800 projects in the Carolinas, including 20 current assignments. In 2011 and in 2013, the U.S. Department of Commerce named Metcon the U.S. Minority Construction Firm of the Year.

"I love it because we are creating something that will be there for my lifetime and well beyond," Thomas says.

Metcon's name comes from combining the words metal and construction. It makes sense because Thomas started by mainly building metal-frame homes through the Lumbee Regional Development Association, which aimed to provide affordable housing to tribal members. Typically priced from \$120,000 to \$170,000, the prefabricated homes were mostly assembled away from the home site, then shipped on a boom truck to the final location. "It was so much faster in getting the house to market and far superior to traditional methods," he says.

Thomas' major break came in 2000 when N.C. voters approved a \$3.1 billion bond package that was used to fuel construction for the UNC System. The money included \$57 million for the UNC Pembroke campus, just a few blocks from Thomas' childhood home. After moving to Greensboro and graduating from high school, he returned to Pembroke to earn an undergraduate degree in 1999. That continued his family's long connection to the university and its Lumbee heritage. He went on to earn a master's in construction management from East Carolina University in 2009.

About the same time of the big bond election, N.C. lawmakers approved legislation that set a "participation goal" for public agencies to provide at least 10% of state building contracts to minority-owned firms. (Agencies are still required to seek the lowest costs for projects.) The law applied to Black-, Hispanic-, Asian American-, American Indian- and female-owned firms that had at least 51% minority ownership and were deemed "historically underutilized businesses," or HUBs.

Another key ingredient was missing, however: the licensing needed to secure large government contracts through the bidding process. A \$100,000 loan from his grandfather in early 2000 checked that off the list. According to Thomas, the loan was repaid in less than a month.

As for bonding authority that gives clients confidence in a contractor's financial strength, Thomas says he initially relied in part on the assets of his former partner James "Bonk" Maynor, who is part of a Robeson County family that owned grocery stores, auto dealerships and real estate. The long-term key to bonding, however, is making a profit and then retaining much of that money in the business, he says.

Bolstered by a steady stream of UNC Pembroke projects, Metcon's annual revenue gradually increased during its first decade, reaching about \$30 million by 2010. "UNCP is a huge part of our story," Thomas says. It wasn't a steady path, however, with the bleak recession days requiring lots of flexibility to avoid layoffs.

Thomas says Maynor's business acumen helped keep Metcon afloat during the recession when he accurately foresaw a period when construction projects would dry up. Maynor, who is no longer affiliated with Metcon, suggest-



▲ Thomas has expanded his influence through service on the boards of key state building and economic development groups.

ed that the company should sell more than \$1.5 million of construction equipment that would likely be idle during the economic downturn as a way to raise capital and ride out the recession.

Indeed, Metcon experienced "three years in a row when we didn't make a cent" but didn't lay off any staff. "We were doing a decent amount of infrastructure work for mostly government entities ... and we were bidding work just to break even," Thomas says.

In 2010, Metcon won a bid to construct Cypress Hall, a UNC Pembroke dorm with 119 four-person suites. It proved to be critical for the company's ability to secure similar or larger projects going forward. Other UNCP developments followed, including a \$38 million business school that is scheduled to open later this year. The school is named after Pembroke native and California developer Jim Thomas, a distant cousin who pledged \$7 million to the school.

The local community embraces Metcon's success, says Robeson County Manager Kellie Blue, who is a member of the UNC System Board of Governors. "This is yet another great example of a huge economic development engine our universities are for the communities and regions they serve," she says.

From its Robeson County roots, Thomas has gradually expanded the business into larger, faster-growing markets, sparking what he calls "steady incremental growth" over the past decade. He added a Raleigh office in 2011 after landing a Duke Energy contract, then expanded into the Piedmont area when Metcon won bids for projects with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and UNC Charlotte. At the latter campus, Metcon built the 406-unit Laurel Residence Hall in a joint venture with giant British contractor Balfour Beatty.

Metcon's biggest contract to date involves a \$221 million project to build five energy-efficient schools in South Carolina's Horry County, which includes Myrtle Beach. That deal followed the company's \$16 million construction of Sandy Grove Elementary School in Hoke County, which was rated the nation's best education project in 2013 by *Engineering News-Record*, a leading national construction industry publication.

The Horry County projects were partly a collaboration with Firstfloor Energy Positive, a company led by Raleigh



archiect Robbie Ferris, who is a promoter of energy-efficient design of school buildings. While some industry officials say the promised energy savings are exaggerated, Thomas is a believer. Metcon has collaborated on several projects with Ferris' Sfl+a design firm.

"Sandy Grove was the first privatized energy-positive school in America that not only generated more energy than it consumed but also leveraged other unique financing structures and tax credits that greatly lowered the total cost of ownership for the school district," Thomas says.

Ten more energy-positive schools have followed, but none in Robeson County, a spur in Thomas' heel. Like many rural N.C. counties, Robeson has schools that are as much as 80 years old, many of them outdated. Given their limited tax bases, it's difficult for those counties to raise money for new schools, he says. "Hell, it's not difficult, it's virtually impossible without having the political will to consolidate." He champions public-private partnerships to speed the pace of new schools in rural areas, a stance that remains controversial among many N.C. education officials.

To be sure, Metcon has won a slew of business in its home county. It built projects for the Robeson Department of Social Services and Lumbee River Electric Membership Corp. and led the renovation of the former Southern National Bank headquarters in downtown Lumberton that is now the home of county government.

"I consider myself blessed to be surrounded by a dedicated and talented leadership team that have been with me a very long time," Thomas says. "They have built this company brick by brick, year by year."

Several of Thomas' top colleagues have been with the company for more than 15 years, including Chief Operating Officer Sam Isham, Senior Project Manager Samantha Locklear, Assistant Vice President Mark Floyd and Greg Hunt, vice president of infrastructure. "I think they were all happy to build something special, and all being from Robeson County and being part of growing a company that could pretty much compete with anybody across the state," Thomas says. "As the company has grown, they have all grown, as professionals and individuals — and monetarily. They get paid well."

Blue says Thomas has surrounded himself with talented staffers. "He is a listener and someone who is receptive to good advice even if it is hard and direct."

Thomas says that the only thing preventing Metcon from recording more business is difficulty finding qualified staff. He has lobbied for Robeson County to add more high school-level courses that would provide skills training for students not bound for college. Getting that done has proven to be difficult.

"We definitely compete with other large contractors for new talent, especially in the larger markets of Raleigh and Charlotte," he says. "We have been able to attract top talent and in some instances while going head to head with the big boys. People want to be a part of cutting-edge projects and cutting-edge techniques such as energy-posi-



▲ A \$38 million business school will be a major economic driver for Robeson County. The school makes up about a fourth of UNC Pembroke's enrollment.

tive building and other things we are doing."

About 90% of Metcon's work today is design, build or construction management of at-risk projects, although the company "dabbles in real estate" and provides some infrastructure work for local municipalities. It builds apartments but no single-family homes.

As Metcon has grown, so has Thomas' profile in North Carolina. Like many contractors, he makes substantial campaign donations to N.C. politicians and employs a Raleigh lobbyist. In 2018, he was appointed to the board of the Economic Development Partnership of N.C., the state's key industry hunting organization. He is also a former chairman of the N.C. State Building Commission. "I was able to bring some fresh ideas and perspectives from a contractor who had really grown up doing their work, from doing it on a small scale to a large scale. I think I could bring a unique perspective that they never had, from that of minority companies and small companies."

Thomas says Metcon goes an extra step to aid minority subcontractors, who make up more than 40% of his company's spending. "We are pretty widely known to expend a high amount of work with the minority subcontractors. We also have the highest level of minority workforce."

He credits his grandfather for emphasizing the importance of working to build a better community. He and his wife, Azalea, are raising four children in Pembroke: Ayanna, 21, Alena, 16, Ashtyn, 15, and Austin Curt, 6. Any conversation with Thomas about Metcon is pep-

pered with references to his Lumbee heritage as well as his native county. "One thing I am proud of is how we have been able to create a company in little ol' Robeson County, take what we have learned across the Carolinas, and create a lot of jobs," he says. "It does give me a certain sense of pride coming from the poorest county in the state and showing we can compete with the best of the best."

UNC Pembroke Chancellor Robin Cummings says Thomas' business success is noteworthy, but "the person he is aside from that is what makes him such an asset to our university, Pembroke and southeastern North Carolina. He built his company through hard work and determination, but more importantly, he's determined to do his part to see his community and university grow and prosper, to make a difference."

Metcon's highest-profile current project is probably the Catawba Two Kings Casino Resort in Kings Mountain, the \$273 million gaming site planned by the Catawba Nation tribe. The resort, which is a joint venture with Philadelphia, Miss.-based Yates Construction, continues a lengthy relationship between Thomas and the South Carolina tribe. "I have been working with the Catawba for a decade doing other projects, including their bingo hall." Unlike a lot of casino visitors, Thomas appears likely to come away a winner.

NC FINANCE

The largest investment advisers based in North Carolina

anaging other people's money is a terrific business even in a pandemic, particularly when the investment markets are robust. That's an obvious conclusion from Business North CAROLINA'S latest annual ranking of firms that manage more than \$1 billion of assets.

All but six of the 34 companies listed reported growth in assets under management last year. similar to the previous year when 31 of 36 firms showed gains. The data is based on the companies' most recent annual filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, which are detailed snapshots that include number of

employees, amount of assets managed, enforcement actions and key owners. Most of the companies invest in stocks and bonds, though the list includes a few private-equity groups and those focused on alternative investments. Large asset managers that are based outside North Carolina are not included, such as Fidelity Investments, Goldman Sachs and Vanguard Investments.

As in prior years, the rankings are dominated by two large companies: CapFinancial Partners of Raleigh and Barings of Charlotte, CapFinancial is the parent of Captrust Financial Advisors, which has grown through mergers with 48 companies since 2006. Lenoir native Fielding Miller co-founded the



business in 1996 by targeting then-newfangled retirement plans called 401(k) accounts. Last June, Captrust sold a 25% stake to Chicago-based private-equity group GTCR with Miller remaining the largest shareholder.

Barings is owned by MassMutual Financial Group, a Springfield, Mass.-based insurance company. Mike Freno, who had been president, succeeded longtime CEO Tim Finke in November.

The S&P 500 Index increased 16% in 2020 and advanced another 10% through May 20. That obviously gave a lift to stock-oriented investment companies that dominate this list. Nine companies

reported increases in assets under management of more than 20% from a year earlier, led by three Charlotte-based companies that each posted gains of about 30%: Biltmore Family Office, Adhesion Wealth Advisors and Bragg Financial Advisors.

Two private-equity firms on the list — venture capital investor TrueBridge Capital Partners of Chapel Hill and Five Points Capital of Winston-Salem – were acquired over the past year by Dallas-based P10 Holdings, a publicly traded asset manager.

ASSETS UNDER MANAGEMENT (BILLION): ↑ CHANGE FROM 2019



CAPFINANCIAL PARTNERS

RALEIGH

+\$86



It is the holding company of Captrust, which has acquired 48 advisory firms since 2006 and has more than 800 employees.

BARINGS

CHARLOTTE

\$277

+\$1.1



The asset manager owned by MassMutual. Mike Freno became CEO in

STERLING CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

CHARLOTTE

+\$11.9



Truist, formerly BB&T, has owned a majority stake since 2005.

ALIGHT FINANCIAL ADVISORS

CHARLOTTE

\$31.6

+\$2.9



Formerly known as Aon Hewitt Financial Advisors, it's a subsidiary of Blackstone, a large private-equity company.

GLOBAL ENDOWMENT MANAGEMENT

CHARLOTTE

\$11.5

10%

Its clients are mainly universities and foundations. Porter Durham is managing

WEDGE CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

+\$1.1

CHARLOTTE

\$10.8

-\$0.5



The investment adviser, formed in 1984, is owned by 16 general partners.

ALUMINA INVESTMENT MANAGEMENT

CHARLOTTE

-0.5

-5%

Former Carlyle Group managing director Greg Kares owns more than 75% of

INDEPENDENT ADVISOR ALLIANCE 8.

CHARLOTTE

\$7.7

+\$1.8

1 30%

Robert Russo founded the broker-dealer in 2013. It has about 216 advisers.

ADHESION WEALTH ADVISORS 9.

CHARLOTTE

\$6.1

+\$1.5

T 32%

The firm was founded in 1999 and acquired by Maryland-based Vestmark in 2018. Barrett Ayers is president.

10. WELLS FARGO INVESTMENT INSTITUTE

CHARLOTTE

\$5.9

-\$0.4

-6%

It was formed in 2014 and is owned by the big bank that has more than 27,000 Charlotte area employees. Darrell Cronk is president.

11. RIDGEMONT EQUITY PARTNERS

CHARLOTTE

\$5 +\$0.4

78% The private-equity group was founded in 1993. Its most recent fund has

\$1.65 billion in committed capital. 12. CARROLL FINANCIAL ASSOCIATES

CHARLOTTE

+\$0.6

Founder Larry Carroll's son, Kris, is CEO and majority owner.

ASSETS UNDER MANAGEMENT (BILLION): ↑ CHANGE FROM 2019

13. TRUEBRIDGE CAPITAL PARTNERS

CHAPFI HILL

\$3.6 +\$0.3

Founded by Edwin Poston and Mel Williams, TrueBridge was acquired last year by Dallas-based asset manager P10 Holdings

14. PARSEC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

ASHEVILLE

15% +\$0.4

The firm was formed by Bart Boyer in 1980. Rick Manske is CEO.

15. HORIZON INVESTMENTS

CHARLOTTE

\$3.4 +\$0.1

CEO Robbie Cannon has owned the firm since 1999.

16. FRANKLIN STREET ADVISORS

CHAPEL HILL

T 13% +\$0.3

Robert Newell is president of the company, which is owned by Fifth Third

17. NOVAQUEST CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

RALEIGH

+\$0.2

The private-equity firm focuses on investments in health care and life sciences. Former Quintiles CEO Dennis Gillings is a part-owner.

18. BRAGG FINANCIAL ADVISORS

CHARLOTTE

+\$0.5

28%

Assets under management have soared 60% in the past two years.

19. FORTIGENT

FORT MILL, S.C.

\$2.1

-11%

It's owned by industry giant LPL Financial, which has a big office in suburban

20. SMITH, SALLEY & ASSOCIATES

-\$0.3

GREENSBORO

+\$0.3

T 20%

Founder Gregory Smith Jr. leads the firm, which has grown its assets under management by more than 50% since 2018.

21. SALEM INVESTMENT COUNSELORS

WINSTON-SALEM

+\$0.4

T 22%

Founded in 1979, the company is led by President David Rea. CNBC ranked it the top U.S. financial adviser in 2019 and 2020.

22. COLONY FAMILY OFFICES

CHARLOTTE

+\$0.2

T 12%

Managing Director Eric Ridenour is the principal owner. It represents wealthy

23. VERGER CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

WINSTON-SALEM

+\$0.2

8%

The firm is owned by Wake Forest University. Jim Dunn is CEO.

24. MORGAN CREEK CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

CHAPFI HILL

\$1.9 +\$0.2 **1** 9%

Former UNC investment chief Mark Yusko's firm specializes in alternative investment products.

25. PAMLICO CAPITAL

CHARLOTTE

\$1.9 -\$1.4 -43%

The private-equity firm was founded in 1988. It invests in business and technology services, communications and health care.

26. COMPERIO RETIREMENT CONSULTING

CARY

\$1.8 +\$0.4 **1** 29%

James Sotell founded and leads the firm focusing on the 401(k) industry.

27. BILTMORE FAMILY OFFICE

CHARLOTTE

\$1.7 +\$0.4

1 33%

CEO Chris Cecil co-founded the firm in 2008. His partners include Mike Farrell, Nikki Gokey and Rael Gorelick.

28. DIXON HUGHES GOODMAN WEALTH ADVISORS

CHARLOTTE

\$1.7 +\$0.1

T 5%

It's an affiliate of one of the nation's 20 largest CPA firms, which has about 2.300 employees and had annual revenue of \$476 million in 2020.

29. CAROLINAS WEALTH CONSULTING

CHARLOTTE

\$1.5

+\$0.1

10%

President George Edmiston Jr. started the firm in 2001.

30. ETON ADVISORS GROUP

CHAPEL HILL

+\$0.1

The firm was formed in 2017 and is led by CEO Robert Mallernee

31. CORRUM CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

CHARLOTTE

-\$0.1

→ -8%

Jason Cipriani and Jonathan Mandle are co-managing partners of the hedge fund founded in 2013

32. NOVARE CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

CHARLOTTE

\$1.2

+0.1

1 5%

William Baynard Jr. and Don Olmstead founded the investment adviser in 1999.

33. CORNERSTONE ADVISORS

ASHEVILLE

-5%

The firm is led by Ralph Bradshaw, 70, an Asheville investor who is president of the publicly traded Cornerstone Strategic Value Fund.

34. FIVE POINTS CAPITAL

WINSTON-SALEM

NA

The private-equity firm, formerly called BB&T Capital, was acquired last year by Dallas-based P10 Holdings.

NC FINANCE

MAKING A COMEBACK

An expected slump didn't occur, sparking a rebound for the state's banks and credit unions.

hat a difference a year makes: Last summer, the banking industry was preparing for an avalanche of bad loans expected to result from the spreading coronavirus pandemic. Institutions set aside reserves, punishing earnings.

A year later, most banks have reversed those charges and experienced limited credit losses. Deposits shot up at record levels as federal stimulus boosted savings rates. As a result, shares of many North Carolina-based publicly traded banks have doubled over the past year.

Business North Carolina's annual list of the state's biggest financial institutions based in the state showed limited changes this year. The rankings are based on information supplied by New York-based S&P Global Market Intelligence.

With apologies to David Letterman, here's a list of 10 notable events over the past year.

In 1972, when Kelly King joined BB&T, it was the 262nd-largest U.S. bank. When he retires Sept. 12, successor **TRUIST FINANCIAL** is likely to be No. 6. King, who turns 73 on Sept. 12, became CEO in 2009. His successor is former SunTrust Bank CEO William Rogers Jr.

FIRST CITIZENS BANCSHARES made its big play. The Raleigh-based company owned and led by the Holding family is buying New York-based CIT Group for \$2 billion, creating a \$100 billion asset bank. Regulatory approval is taking longer than expected, but the deal is on track to close this summer.

LIVE OAK BANK rebounded after fears that a weak pandemic economy would crush its small business clientele. The Wilmington-based bank operates nationally by leveraging Small Business Administration-backed loans while using pace-setting technology. Its shares more than quadrupled over the past year after slumping in March 2020.

TRULIANT FEDERAL CREDIT UNION has kept its rapid growth pace since Todd Hall succeeded long-term CEO Marc Schaefer in January 2020. The Winston-Salem-based institution's revenue grew by 13% annually over the past two years. Truliant has more than 30 branches, mostly in the Triad and Charlotte.

FIRST CAROLINA BANK notched a 64% increase in revenue and 72% gain in profit from the previous year. The Rocky Mount-based bank was recapitalized by an investor group led by CEO Ron Day in 2012. It was the 42nd-biggest N.C.-based financial institution two years ago. Now it ranks 25th.

Focusing on Wake County (along with a Wilmington branch) has proven a winning strategy for **NORTH STATE BANK**, which reported the highest returns on equity and assets among N.C. banks. Assets climbed 25% to \$1.2 billion, while net income increased about 30%. CEO Larry Barbour founded the Raleighbased bank in 2000 after working for Wachovia.

BANK OF AMERICA'S year was reflected in CEO Brian Moynihan's annual pay of \$26.5 million last year, a \$2 million — or 7.5% — decline from the previous year. Profit tumbled 35% last year as the bank set aside reserves in anticipation of bad loans due to the pandemic. Fewer losses occurred than expected, while interest rates are expected to rise, brightening BofA's prospects.

The national push for racial equity aided Durham-based **MECHANICS & FARMERS BANK**, the second-oldest Black-owned bank in the U.S. Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase invested a combined \$18 million in parent M&F Bancorp by buying nonvoting preferred shares, which are redeemable after five years. The move reflected the big banks' confidence in CEO James Sills III.

Michael Lord is retiring as CEO of **STATE EMPLOYEES**' **CREDIT UNION** on Aug. 31, concluding a 46-year career at the Raleigh-based institution. He became CEO in 2016 after succeeding longtime leader Jim Blaine. Assets at the second-largest U.S. credit union increased by about 15% to \$47 billion last year.

A strong demand for home loans helped **UWHARRIE BANK** report a big increase in profit. Mortgage lending increased to \$338 million in 2020 versus \$122 million in the previous year, the Albemarle-based bank said. Assets gained 26% to \$823 million. Uwharrie has more than 3,000 individual shareholders.

FINANCIAL50 | LARGEST BANKS AND CREDIT UNIONS BASED IN NORTH CAROLINA

2021	2020	Company	Headquarters	2020 revenue (million)	% change from '19	Net income (million)	% change from '19	Return on assets	Return on equity	Total assets (million)
1	1	Bank of America	CHARLOTTE	\$86,563	(4.1)	\$17,894	(34.8)%	0.7%	6.7%	\$2,819,627
2	2	Truist Financial	CHARLOTTE	22,668	80.8	4,482	39	0.9	6.6	509,228
3	3	First Citizens BancShares	RALEIGH	1,984	7.2	491.7	7.5	1.1	12.4	49,958
4	4	State Employees'	RALEIGH	1,386	12.2	248.1	2.1	0.6	6.7	47,376
5	5	First Bancorp	SOUTHERN PINES	303.1	9.4	81.5	(11.4)	1.2	9.3	7,290
6	6	Live Oak Bancshares	WILMINGTON	279.3	34.3	59.5	230.5	0.9	10.5	7,872
7	7	Coastal Federal	RALEIGH	176.1	6.1	19.4	(44.1)	0.5	5.2	3,955
8	9	Truliant Federal	WINSTON-SALEM	153.5	13.3	28.9	27.3	0.9	12	3,320
9	10	Local Government Federal	RALEIGH	142.8	9.2	28.4	85.6	1.1	12.8	2,847
10	11	Southern BancShares	MOUNT OLIVE	139.6	16.0	44.6	40.3	1.3	12.6	3,836
11	8	HomeTrust Bancshares	ASHEVILLE	132.8	(2.6)	20	(31.7)	0.6	4.9	3,680
12	12	Fidelity Bank	FUQUAY-VARINA	106.8	13.9	32	9.6	1.3	13	2,831
13	13	Allegacy Federal	WINSTON-SALEM	98.5	6.4	11.1	(25.5)	0.6	6.1	1,790
14	14	Peoples Bancorp of N.C.	NEWTON	67	5.3	11.4	(19.1)	0.8	8.3	1,415
15	17	North State Bancorp	RALEIGH	64.6	28.9	17.7	27.3	1.5	20.6	1,172
16	15	Vizo Financial Corporate*	GREENSBORO	58.4	1.7	20.2	(0.5)	0.3	5.8	7,384
17	16	Select Bancorp	DUNN	58	10.7	9.4	(35.2)	0.6	4.7	1,723
18	18	Self-Help	DURHAM	44.1	(0.7)	4.4	(72.3)	0.4	3.8	1,280
19	23	Uwharrie Bank	ALBEMARLE	42.6	45.4	8.4	110	1.2	14.2	823
20	19	Marine Federal	JACKSONVILLE	40.6	(2.4)	3.4	(55.8)	0.4	5.1	823
21	24	Latino Community	DURHAM	38.1	63.5	19	160.3	3.5	36.6	595
22	22	Union Bank	GREENVILLE	34.6	12.3	5.7	(20.8)	0.6	6.1	987
23	21	Farmers & Merchants Bank	SALISBURY	34.1	(0.3)	9	(12.6)	1.3	11.6	754
24	20	Charlotte Metro Federal	CHARLOTTE	31.9	(8.9)	4	(44.4)	0.6	6.3	739
25	33	First Carolina Bank	ROCKY MOUNT	28.1	64.3	10.5	72.1	1.2	10	1,067
26	28	Aquesta Bank	CORNELIUS	22.7	16.4	5.4	22.7	0.9	9.6	683
27	43	Dogwood State Bank	RALEIGH	22	86.4	0.2	NA	0	0.2	612
28	27	Bank of Oak Ridge	OAK RIDGE	21.7	8	4.1	(14.6)	0.8	7.7	537
29	25	Piedmont Federal	WINSTON-SALEM	20.8	(2.8)	1.3	(31.6)	0.2	0.6	918
30	30	Providence Bank	ROCKY MOUNT	19	5.0	7.6	2.7	1.4	11.1	587
31	34	KS Bank	SMITHFIELD	18.7	11.3	4.8	14.3	1.1	11.5	486
32	29	Carolinas Telco Federal	CHARLOTTE	18.7	(3.1)	1.3	(67.5)	0.3	1.78	552
33	26	Piedmont Advantage	WINSTON-SALEM	18.5	(9.3)	(1.6)	NA	(0.4)	(4.6)	407
34	31	Fort Bragg Federal	FAYETTEVILLE	17.7	(1.7)	2.8	(3.4)	0.6	5.5	498
35	32	Summit	GREENSBORO	16.4	(5.2)	1.8	(28)	0.6	4.8	305
36	41	LifeStore Bank	WEST JEFFERSON	16.4	29.1	4.6	43.8	1.4	12.5	372
37	35	Surrey Bank & Trust	MOUNT AIRY	15.6	(3.1)	4.6	(8)	1.2	9.5	431
38	36	Members	WINSTON-SALEM	15.5	(1.3)	1.8	(28)	0.5	4.3	394
39	39	Champion	CANTON	15.1	7.1	1.9	5.60	0.6	5.4	345
40	37	Lumbee Guaranty Bank	PEMBROKE	14.1	(4.1)	2.5	(16.7)	0.7	5.8	417
41	44	Mechanics and Farmers Bank	DURHAM	12.5	14.7	1.2	9.1	0.4	5.3	309
42	40	Premier Federal	GREENSBORO	12.2	(10.3)	0.4	(80)	0.2	1.2	223
43	38	First Federal Savings Bank of Lincolnton	LINCOLNTON	12.1	(16)	2.4	(46.7)	0.6	3.6	427
44	42	Telco Community	ASHEVILLE	11.8	(2.5)	2.5	(21.9)	1.1	10.3	260
45	45	Mountain	WAYNESVILLE	11	1.9	0.9	0	0.4	3.9	265
46	47	blueharbor bank	MOORESVILLE	10.4	10.6	3.3	6.50	1.2	9.8	325
47	46	First Flight Federal	CARY	10.1	(3.8)	0.7	(22.2)	0.4	2.7	210
48	48	Roxboro Savings Bank	ROXBORO	9.4	16.0	3.3	32	1.4	6.5	263
49	NA	First Federal Bank	DUNN	8.1	NA	0.6	NA	0.3	3	206
50	NA	First Capital Bank	LAURINBURG	7.4	NA	0.9	NA	0.4	3.6	265

Red= Credit union. Data compiled April 28, 2021.

Includes banks, thrifts and credit unions that filed regulatory reports for the year ended Dec. 31, 2020.

Total revenue equals the sum of net interest income, noninterest income and gains on sales of securities.

Net income equals the sum of net interest income after provision, noninterest income, gain on securities, extraordinary items less noninterest expense and taxes

source: S&P Global Market Intelligence

LOCAL FIRST

Big-bank veteran Mike Mayer finds small can be beautiful.

By David Mildenberg



ike Mayer has tracked a circuitous route on his path to becoming the CEO of North Carolina's biggest community bank. It's been 39 years since he left Clemson University with a bachelor's degree. Since then, he has helped lay groundwork for what became the largest U.S. bank, raised \$30 million to start a Charlotte bank that was derailed by the recession of 2007-09 and held together a struggling institution long enough to sell it to a wealthy rival.

Now, Mayer, 61, holds a \$1 million-a-year job aimed at transitioning a small-town rural N.C. lender into a viable competitor in the state's five main urban markets. First Bancorp started in 1935 in Troy, a Montgomery County town that peaked in population at 3,400 about 30 years ago. It grew to \$2 billion in assets by 2006 after acquisitions of banks in Thomas-ville, Latta, S.C., and Southern Pines, where it now has its headquarters. It entered Wilmington by buying the assets of struggling Cooperative Bankshares in 2009.

When Mayer arrived at First Bank in March 2014, the company had about \$3 billion in assets and a market cap of about \$250 million. The bank was led by Richard Moore, a former state treasurer who had joined the company's board in 2010 and became CEO two years earlier.

First Bank now has \$7 billion in assets, a market cap of \$1.25 billion and growing niches in the Charlotte, Triad, Triangle, Wilmington and Asheville areas. It ranks seventh in deposit market share among banks that operate branch networks in the state. "It's a great company that genuinely cares about its people and genuinely cares about its communities," Mayer says.

Indeed, he says it reminds him of his first postcollege employer, a bank that also had about \$7 billion in assets and was led by a brash Marine veteran.

Scrappy little pup

Mayer grew up in Charlotte and played basketball for coach Hugh McColl Jr. at age 10. A dozen years later, he joined the coach's bank, NCNB, after getting an offer that was about \$1,000 more than another N.C. institution. "A thousand dollars would buy a lot of beer," he laughs. "When you are 22 years old and making \$17,000 a year, it is pretty big."

After six months in the Queen City, Mayer was assigned in January 1982 to Florida, where he did the "Interstate 4 tour" over the next decade as NCNB gobbled up small and midsize Sunshine State banks on its run toward becoming today's Bank of America.

"We were a bunch of cowboys," he says. "We were a small player back then, and you get scrappy when you are the little pup."

Mayer became city executive in Daytona Beach at 26, one of the youngest in the bank's history. During his 10 years in Florida, he lived in Tampa, Orlando, Daytona Beach, Jacksonville, eventually landing back in Orlando and then back in Tampa. "I never knew what spring cleaning meant because I was never around long enough."

Purchasing Gulfstream, Exchange, Pan American and Ellis banks within three years expanded NCNB's presence, prompting derision from Florida rivals. They relentlessly reminded customers that NCNB stood for "No Cash, No Brains."

That just gave the Charlotte-based company more inspiration, Mayer says. The parochialism was no match for the Florida expansion strategy developed by Mc-Coll's brain trust and led during much of the 1980s by Gene Taylor, who spent 38 years at the Charlotte bank. In 1997, NCNB broke through by buying Jacksonville,

Fla.-based Barnett Banks, the state's largest lender. BofA retains the top market share for Florida bank deposits.

"The culture we had at NCNB in those days was just amazing. It was one of the greatest places you could ever work," Mayer says. "I remain very devoted to Mr. McColl because he taught me some life lessons. He was such a great leader."

Lessening swagger

In the early 1990s, Mayer returned to Charlotte and took increasingly senior jobs in commercial lending as the bank mushroomed in size and became NationsBank. He was a senior business lending executive covering western North Carolina and upstate South Carolina and later had a job covering parts of the Southeast. Over time, the bank's larger scope made it a more bureaucratic place to work, he says. He knew it was time for a change when he didn't look forward to going to the office — and many of his colleagues were leaving the megabank.

"I've heard it said that when I got to NCNB, our swagger exceeded our capabilities," he says. "By the time I left, our capabilities exceeded our swagger." He departed BofA in June 2006.

He quickly learned that timing is essential in business
— and nothing comes easy. Amid increasing signs of a



When you get everyone rowing the oar in the same direction and there are now 1,140 of us the boat gets moving really fast.

- Mike Mayer, CEO, First Bank

housing-related recession, Mayer led an investor group that raised \$30 million to launch Colony Signature Bank in Charlotte. It was the last N.C. bank to receive a charter from the State Banking Commission for more than decade because of the wreckage caused by the economic downturn. But Colony Signature never got off the ground.

"We raised the money, and we were going to be like Paragon [Bank]. It was going to be wonderful," he says, referring to the successful Raleigh-based business lender



▲ Forbes magazine has rated First Bank top among N.C. banks over the past two years in a survey based on customer responses.

that is now owned by TowneBank. "But by August 2008, I knew we were going to get killed."

Mayer called a meeting of the investors. "We sent all of the money back to our investors, and those of us who had organized the bank pulled out our checkbooks and wrote checks to pay our bills. Mine was about \$150,000."

For the newly unemployed Mayer, "it was the low point, from a career standpoint." But with an assist from N.C. Commissioner of Banks Ray Grace, it didn't take him long to get back in action. He worked briefly for a small startup bank in Gastonia. Then in January 2010, he was hired as CEO of 1st Financial Services, a publicly traded owner of Mountain 1st Bank, which had 14 branches in western North Carolina. It had raised \$36 million when organized in 2004 and had received \$19 million in federal bank bailout funds, which Mayer thought gave it a cushion to ride out the recession and build a large company.

He was wrong. "I had no idea western North Carolina would be as bad as it was. You couldn't sell anything." Mountain 1st gave an \$800,000 foreclosed property to a charity when it was unable to find a buyer. A decade later, Mayer notes that real estate in the mountain region is at record valuations.

Mayer spent more than four years at the Hendersonville-based bank, nursing troubled loans, unsuccessfully seeking new investment and answering to regulators. "It took a chunk out of me," he says. "I'd never do it again." But he turned down Moore's offer in early 2013 to join First Bank because he and his board expected his departure could cause Mountain 1st to fail.

In January 2014, First Citizens Bank & Trust acquired Mountain 1st for \$10 million, including \$8 million to repay the U.S. Treasury for Troubled Assets Relief Program loans. "A manager of a significant bank investment fund called me and said, 'People don't realize what you were able to do at Mountain 1st," citing many other Carolinas banks that went bust in the period.

Two months later, Mayer joined First Bancorp as president. "Richard stuck with me and waited for me to get here," he says. He liked that First Bank's shares were widely held, unlike faster-growing N.C. banks whose ownership was dominated by institutions more likely to sell to larger rivals. Sure enough, BNC Bancorp, Yadkin Financial, Capital Bank Financial and others were acquired.

"It was an 80-year-old bank that had some deep roots, but it also had challenges that neither the board nor Richard were blind to," Mayer says. The main issue was reducing the bank's reliance on slower-growth areas and expanding in more populated regions to boost profit.

First Bank already had footholds in Wilmington and Asheville after buying failed banks there in 2009 and 2011, respectively. Expansions continued with the purchase of Greensboro-based Carolina Bank for about \$100 million in 2017 and Asheville Savings Bank for \$175 million a year later. First Bank has the sixth-largest deposit market share in the mountain city.

"We always wanted to be in the state's five big markets, and Asheville Savings Bank gave us a chance to do that," Mayer says. "Even with the addition of Charlotte and Raleigh, Wilmington continues to be our fastest-growing market. We just have a really good team there, and the market is on fire."

First Bank was outbid in some other acquisitions, which Mayer says is OK. "In hindsight, we think that the ones we got were the ones we needed and the ones we didn't get, we're probably better off without them."

Rally time

Beyond geographic expansion, Mayer says First Bank's success stems from a revitalized corporate culture that has instilled confidence and trust. "We were just a dinky bank in Southern Pines that no one knew anything about. We had a lot of good people, but we didn't have one central theme we could rally around. That's what we've built."

The bank hired customer-service consultants affiliated with Disney and Ritz-Carlton and designed a values-based strategy that Mayer says has paid off handsomely. "When



▲ With branches from Kill Devil Hills to Brevard, First Bank relies on a cohesive culture with a consistent message, Mayer says.

you get everyone rowing the oar in the same direction — and there are now 1,140 of us — the boat gets moving really fast."

The bank benefits from good chemistry between Mayer and Moore, who is CEO of the holding company, says Raleigh lawyer Dennis Wicker, a former N.C. lieutenant governor who joined the First Bank board in 2001. "Richard is probably more progressive politically, while Mike is a more conservative, traditional banker type. But they make a great team, they complement each other and they are very close."

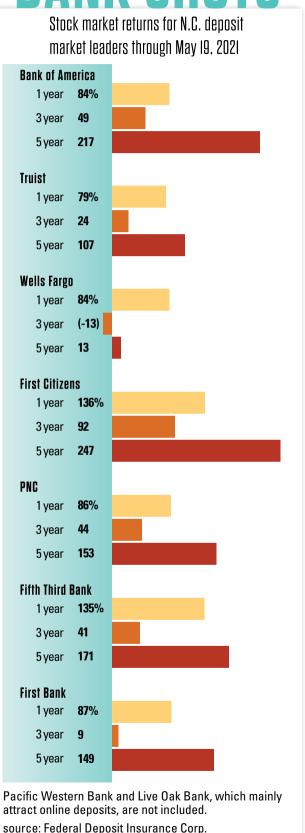
Mayer confirms that he and Moore, 60, look at many bank-related issues from different angles. "But 98% of the time, we come out at the same point," he says. "One of the things about smart people like Richard is that they know what they don't know. He didn't know how to run a bank, nor did he want to. But he knows economics and finance as well as anyone, and he has had a completely different perspective after serving as the state treasurer and working as an institutional investor for Relational [Investors, a now-closed San Diego-based money manager]."

First Bank's financial performance has helped its shares mirror or outperform industry averages over the past one-, three- and five-year periods. It raised its quarterly dividend in March and last November became part of the S&P Small Cap 600 index. Five of the seven analysts tracking the company's shares rate it as a "buy."

Whether First Bank will sell to a larger rival is a frequent conjecture among N.C. bankers because building stronger urban franchises in a fast-growing state makes it increasingly attractive. Staying independent remains a key motivation for its top executives, Wicker says.

"What Richard and Mike have in common that is unshakable is that they are both inspired to build something. I think they want to keep building on what they've built already."

BANK SHOTS





Health care for women and children has improved by leaps and bounds. Better access, facilities and procedures are leading to longer, fulfilling lives.

In the 1990s, when H. Stacy
Nicholson was a professor of pediatrics
at Children's National Medical Center
in Washington, D.C., only half of
children diagnosed with leukemia
survived. But times are changing.
"Today, the survival rate is close to
90%," says Nicholson, a pediatric
hematology oncologist who is now
president of children's services and
pediatrics chairman at Charlottebased Atrium Health.

Alisa Starbuck, vice president of women's and children's health service at Winston-Salem-based Wake Forest Baptist Health and president of its Brenner Children's Hospital, also has witnessed the trend, which has accelerated with each medical breakthrough during her 35 years of caring for sick children. "We don't know what the discoveries of tomorrow will be, but the potential is always there," she says.

Wake Forest's more than 150 pediatric specialists treat more than 4,500 children each year. "The children who may have a grim diagnosis today may not have such a grim outcome five years from now," Starbuck says.

Medical advances are reshaping health care for women, too, adding years and quality to their lives. Michael Sundborg, a gynecologic oncologist with Pinehurst-based FirstHealth of the Carolinas, points to advances in cancer testing and prevention as an example. "Cervical cancer is among the deadliest cancers in women, but learning more about the high-risk human papilloma virus combined with administering pap tests in younger women has probably saved more women's lives than any other test in the history of medicine," he says. Mammography has made similar strides. "Even now, research and better techniques to screen for breast cancer have improved survivability," he says.

Creating these improvements starts with work and dedication by patients and providers. But advances also include better access to care, improved hospitals and clinics, fine-tuned and technology-enhanced procedures, and better-trained doctors.

BETTER ACCESS

Most women's health care centers are in urban centers, where they serve large populations packed in small places. But in rural regions, where that dynamic is reversed, technology helps providers traverse miles, caring for patients without the need for bricks and mortar. "We are constantly evolving and reinventing ourselves when it comes to personalized care for women," says Pam Oliver, executive vice president of Winston-Salem-based Novant Health and president of Novant Health Physician Network.

Greenville-based Vidant Health has been instrumental in providing care for women in rural communities east of Interstate 95. "We cover 29 counties. Many have populations with social disparities and sparse access to specialized health care for pregnant women," says James deVente, an East Carolina University associate professor and Vidant Medical Center's director of obstetrics. "As we look at safety and quality of care at our hospital, we realize that our ability to care for pregnant patients is dependent upon how they were taking care of themselves before they got to us."

Angela Still, a Vidant Health administrator in women's care, assembled an outreach team to learn how to become an effective tertiary care hospital for women in rural regions. "One way we have extended our care is through telemedicine," she says. "The patient and her local primary care doctor can sit in front of a computer and consult with our fetal medicine experts." Women in rural regions can get a high-risk pregnancy consultation, for example, without leaving their hometown.

Vidant's Enhancing Community
Health Care Outcomes program uses

online conferencing platforms to provide comprehensive patient care. "This involves setting up a huge Zoom meeting with physicians, ultrasound nurses, social workers and other specialty care providers to put patients in front of our subject matter experts," Still says.

Outreach is happening west of I-95, too. Atrium, for example, offers women's care at satellite offices in many small communities, including Shelby, Boiling Springs, Rutherfordton, Kings Mountain and Denver. "We have teams of subspecialists who go into towns outside of Charlotte, giving patients access to them either virtually or within a relatively short distance," says Suzanna Fox, enterprise service line leader for women's health and deputy chief physician. "Atrium Health recently became an enterprise service line through a partnership with Wake Forest University. I'm excited about our partnership with Wake Forest, and we are looking forward to advancing what we already consider a robust research and education component to what we already offer. We will be able to extend our reach

for clinical trials, robotics and our ability to provide care virtually."

BETTER FACILITIES

Modern women's health centers are comprehensive clinics dedicated to all aspects of care. Children's specialty hospitals play a central role in meeting the unique health care needs of their community's youngest patients, ranging from prevention measures to critical care.

Novant Health's Maya Angelou Women's Health & Wellness Center offers a variety of health services for women of any age. "As we continue to build out our network, we make sure we have specialists to coordinate women's care across all types of diseases," Oliver says.

The state-of-the-art Women's and Children's Pavilion at CarolinaEast Medical Center in New Bern has been providing patient-focused care to mothers and their infants since 2018. Shawn Klabo, clinical nurse manager, says that includes allowing mother and baby to remain together from hours after delivery until it's time to go home. "After birth, everything we do for the baby is bedside,"



CarolinaEast Medical Center's cardiovascular care center was the first in North Carolina to achieve an excellence accreditation from the American Heart Association.

HEALTH CARE WOMEN & CHILDREN

she says. "From weighing newborns to performing routine tests, our program is designed to allow mothers to know everything that has happened with their baby from the minute they arrive to deliver their baby to the minute they go home."

The Women's and Children's Pavilion has 16 beds and labor and delivery rooms. Klabo says its operating room includes a designated cesarean-section suite that allows newborns to stay with their mothers immediately after birth. Its specialists include obstetricians and gynecologists, labor-and-delivery nurses and lactation consultants.

Atrium's Levine Children's Hospital opened an expanded and renovated pediatric emergency department in September. Three months later, it cut the ribbon on The HEARTest Yard Congenital Heart Center, a next-gener-

ation pediatric outpatient clinic that was built with a gift from former Carolina Panthers tight end Greg Olsen and his wife, Kara. The 25,000-square-foot center offers enhanced treatments and resources for patients from prebirth through adulthood. It has the region's only cardiac neurodevelopmental program.

Asheville-based Mission Health is adding to its offerings, too. In addition to access to world-class care through Sarah Cannon Cancer Institute and a \$3.7 million renovation of Mission's surgical oncology clinic, Mission Children's Hospital recently opened its own emergency department. "This is a huge opportunity for the western North Carolina region to have a more kid-friendly environment with board certified pediatric emergency medicine providers," says Ansley Miller, a pediatric hospitalist

at the hospital, which serves a 50-county region.

Mission Children's Hospital has 130 beds and averages 3,100 admissions to its inpatient units, 3,900 outpatient pediatric surgeries and nearly 12,000 pediatric emergency department visits annually. "We treat babies from a couple of days old up to teenagers transitioning into adulthood," Miller says. "They all have different needs due to their changing bodies, their varying developmental stages and the types of illnesses they have."

BETTER PROCEDURES

Women's specialty care involves teams of physicians and specialists who provide a total approach that Novant's Oliver believes is paramount to keeping women healthy. "Women have unique concerns and needs, not

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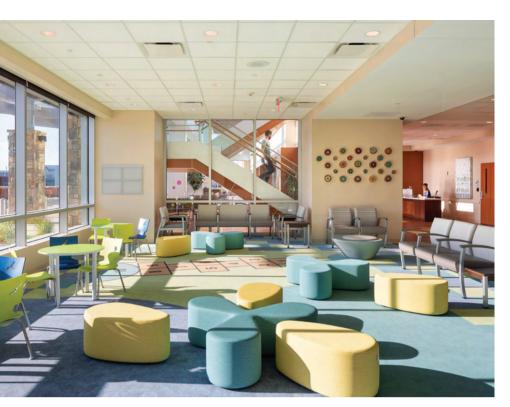
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Mission Health's \$400 million, 12-story North Tower opened in Asheville in October 2019.

just in their reproductive health but across many diseases," she says. "Women's risk factors for heart attacks are much different than men's, particularly during pregnancy. Women need to hold us accountable to make sure we continue to evolve care to serve their unique needs. We are constantly looking for ways to evolve and reinvent ourselves when it comes to personalized care."

At Atrium Health, doctors use the robotic da Vinci Surgical System for minimally invasive surgeries, Fox says. "This approach is less traumatic for women, and even hysterectomies that at one time kept women hospitalized for up to 10 days can now perform same-day surgery," she says.

For women who have undergone invasive surgeries, such as mastectomies, an appointment with Leif Nordberg, a plastic surgeon at Cape Fear Valley Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in Fayetteville, could be a stop on their road to recovery. "About 70% of what I do is breast reconstruction after mastectomy," he says. Surgeons have used skin

and tissue from elsewhere on a patient's body for rebuilding breasts, but that approach is changing. "Using bioengineered tissue from a patient's cells, we are getting to the point where we can essentially grow a new breast," he says.

BETTER DOCTORS

Mission's Miller says medical centers offer subspecialities in pediatric medicine, identifying each child's needs and tailoring therapies to fit specific patients. It's paying off. Children are surviving diseases that were once deadly and living into adulthood. That's creating new breeds of doctors.

Modern pediatric subspecialties run the gamut — pediatric nephrology, gastroenterology, pediatric pulmonary disease, infectious diseases, sleep disorders, eating disorders, mental health issues and many more. They have made a difference in the lives of young patients and their families. "Before all these specialties existed, [many of these] kids did not survive

HEALTH CARE WOMEN & CHILDREN

into adulthood," says Atrium's Nicholson. "Access to pediatric subspecialists is relatively new. My subspecialty as a pediatric hematology oncologist was established in the 1970s, and I was certified in that subspecialty in 1992."

Wake Forest's Starbuck points to an adult congenital heart disease subspecialty, which was developed in 2012.

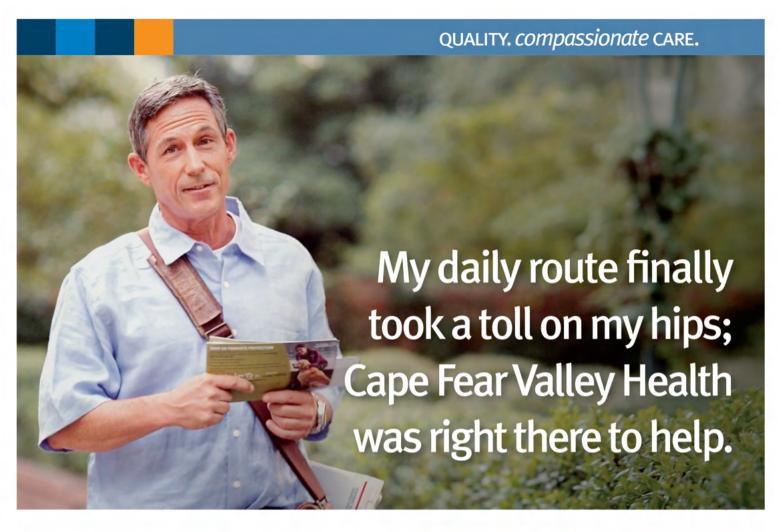
"Some doctors started out as pediatric heart specialists, but where they once were treating a child with a congenital heart defect, they found themselves treating a 30-year-old whose heart defect had been repaired," she says.

The new subspeciality certification provides doctors with the training necessary to address the health needs of adult patients who grew up with congenital heart disease. According to the American College of Cardiology, adult congenital heart disease patients have now surpassed the number of pediatric patients needing care, which was unheard of only a few decades ago.

Nicholson says gene-therapy advances allow re-engineering of defective cells, giving kids suffering from diseases, such as cystic fibrosis and sickle cell anemia, a chance at healthier and longer lives.

"This is a very hopeful time in medicine and pediatrics," he says. "The developments in pediatric subspecialties have improved the lives of children with serious illnesses and will continue to improve in years to come as we gain more scientific knowledge."

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from Raleigh.



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Dear Business NC readers:

Growth is imminent around the Piedmont Triad region where strong partnerships create a unified pipeline for development and opportunity. With three major interstates and two under construction; colleges, universities, and technical institutes that cater to more than 110,000 students; and industry growth within aviation and aerospace, logistics, entrepreneurship, biotechnology, and more – the Triad has plenty to offer.

As part of the Triad, Winston-Salem is a "city on the rise," according to a recent accolade by Southern Living. It is a fitting moniker as we stretch into the first full year following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and turn our attention to what comes next.

What is next in Winston-Salem is a robust recovery fueling economic growth and incoming talent. Our community is indeed on the rise – positioned to benefit from changing trends that have companies, talent, and visitors seeking out mid-sized cities in lieu of large metros.

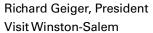
We are ready to welcome them. Winston-Salem offers more room to grow, a connected community, affordability, and plenty to explore. Our identity remains tied to our rich cultural history while embracing new and innovative plans.

These attributes are a part of a collaborative vision that Greater Winston-Salem, Inc. and Visit Winston-Salem share when we talk about our community, what we stand for, and where we're headed.

We recognize that a visit - whether at a convention, corporate meeting, or weekend getaway - is often the opening salvo to putting down roots through a business investment or relocation. And with Winston-Salem welcoming nearly 2 million visitors a year at pre-pandemic travel levels, there is a lot of opportunity to showcase our great city.

We invite you to visit and explore what's next in Winston-Salem and the Triad.







Mark E. Oming

W GREATER WINSTON SALEMEE

Mark Owens, President and CEO Greater Winston-Salem, Inc.



Logistics, location and labor have been key factors in the Triad's economic success. Investments are ensuring continued growth throughout the Carolina Core.

The Triad is named for the geometric arrangement of its most populous cities — Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point. But there's more to the 12-county region than its moniker. It's home to three interstates with two more under construction. More than 110,000 students are enrolled in Triad colleges, universities and technical schools. And its diverse economy includes aviation and aerospace, logistics, entrepreneurship and biotechnology sectors.

Tucked inside the Triad is the Carolina Core, a 120-mile swath that starts west of Winston-Salem and continues toward Fayetteville, following the route of U.S. 421, which is the future Interstate 685. It

boasts six industrial parks, including one at Piedmont Triad International Airport and two megasites. Thousands of shovel-ready acres are positioned so eventual tenants can take advantage of customizable workforce development, distribution routes and growing consumer markets.

Stan Kelly, president and CEO of Greensboro-based Piedmont Triad Partnership, says the Carolina Core brand launched three years ago. "We are working to further strengthen our region and market the physical assets of the Core as well as its sector strengths and talent advantages," he says. "We are a region that has invested in itself. To date, the public and private sectors have

invested hundreds of millions of dollars in infrastructure, building sites and higher education, which will support economic growth in the Carolina Core for years to come."

Penny Whiteheart, the partnership's executive vice president, calls Carolina Core's momentum "the new economy," with regional supply chains, reshored manufacturing and a local industrial focus. "Stan [Kelly] has said time and again that our region believes in the notion that a win for one is a win for all," she says. "A win for one community benefits not only that community but the surrounding region and the entire state. The Carolina Core's economic momentum is fueled by

COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP THE TRIAD

its unique combination of assets, from megasites to Class A office space, from bustling metros to rural communities. Leaders from the Carolina Core are closely aligned with my administration and [the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina]. We have worked together to recruit industry to the state, to support efforts to make [U.S.] 421 a future interstate and to support our higher education institutions, among other initiatives."

PARK IT

Bob Leak is a more than 30-year veteran of economic booster Winston-Salem Business Inc., which joined forces with the Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce to form Greater Winston-Salem Inc. in 2019. He was named Whitaker Park Development Authority president in March 2020. Though the past year has proved challenging with

the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-athome orders, he sailed forward, using marketing, videos and website updates to promote what he'd been coaxing from backstage for two years. "[It was] like trying to sell real estate from the upstairs bedroom," he says. "We had projects that were underway, and we were able to host the occasional visitor, put our masks on and knock on wood."

Winston-Salem-based Reynolds American donated 220 acres for the park. "It's an industrial area and has been since Reynolds developed it in the '60s," Leak says. "Our goal is to re-energize this facility and this property into industrial and distribution and residential and hotel space and bring some vibrancy to the surrounding area."

Whitaker Park is 2 miles north of downtown Winston-Salem and adjacent to Wake Forest University. It has rail access and is a half-hour drive from PTI. Using phrases such as "economic catalyst" and "banner year," Leak doesn't waiver on the park's promise, which is already showing. Bloomington, Ind.-based Cook Medical, for example, will use an 850,000-square-foot former cigarette factory — at one time the world's largest — to make medical devices. Its current 650 Winston-Salembased employees will work there, along with 50 more by 2030. The park's original tenant, Raleigh-based Virtue Labs, has doubled its space for manufacturing hair products, and a mixed-use development that includes 300 apartments, a hotel and retail space was announced in 2019.

Leak says the past year has reaffirmed his belief in the park's potential. "We have three projects under contract, and we closed on the residential in December last year," he says. "I think in five years, it will be the catalyst we anticipated it would be. When we got



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COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP THE TRIAD

this park, it was all empty. We're trying to recruit companies that will put a lot of people back to work, increase the tax base of the community, and support the Wake Forest [University] campus and the athletic campus: large-scale projects that will have an impact."

Carolina Core's growth is both organic and cultivated. "I think there's no question [that] this is a new dynamic, but it's not the only piece of the puzzle," Leak says. "For instance, two projects we're looking at right now are wanting to relocate because they're looking at a better cost of operations, a better quality of life, access to highways and ports. So, we continue to have interest from out of the area. But there's no question that future growth in the Triad will come from entrepreneurship and startups. You have to do some recruiting. To be successful, you have to take the holistic approach to make communities better."

TAKING OFF

Carolina Core's higher-education offerings include Jamestown-based Guilford Technical Community College. It's a gateway to jobs at PTI, where aviationrelated companies, such as aircraft refurbisher HAECO Americas and delivery company FedEx, have set up shop. Nick Yale, the college's director of aviation programs, has worked in the aviation industry for 30 years, including stints as a technician, instructor, private pilot, airframe and power-plant technician, and avionics technician. "We have one goal, which is to offer successful programs where upon completion, students can and will be hired by local, regional or national aviation employers," he says. "We have successful apprenticeships set up with multiple employers in the region, so students can be gaining real experience while they are in classes."

Guilford Tech's Aviation Campus at PTI includes three buildings. The T.H. Davis Aviation Center — also known as Aviation I — opened in 1989, was renovated in 2016, and houses a helicopter, eight aircraft and 20 training systems. Aviation II is a 60,000-squarefoot building with seven classrooms and 14 specialty labs that serves about 100 students daily in avionics, Aviation Manufacturing Quick Careers Program, and sheet metal and composites, the modern materials that today's aircrafts are made of. The Caesar Cone II Aviation Building — also called Aviation III opened in 2014 on 20 acres and is home to the aviation management and career pilot programs.

Guilford Tech recently added an aerospace manufacturing technology course and has three specialist tracks. Yale says the continuing education department is growing, too, adding



classes in nondestructive testing and composites. "We are working on additions for commercial drone licensing and utilization," he says. "And we are also working on the expansion of drone training to support the survey industry and marry up our offerings with our civil-engineering program with a transfer degree to [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University]."

Jobs are waiting for graduates of Guilford Tech's aviation program.

"HAECO has created a new website — HAECOisHiring.com — to help educate and guide those interested in a career with HAECO, as well as a longstanding training partnership with Guilford Technical Community College," HAECO Airframe Services President Bill Collins said in a release. "We are committed to creating a career path for people who want to grow into these jobs."

Yale says HAECO's growing demand for workers stems from contracts that kick off this summer. But it's not the only company that's interested in Guilford Tech's students, even before they've earned a degree. "GTCC has an apprenticeship with HAECO set up in aviation, and about 40 to 50 apprentices are involved at one time," he says. "HAECO is looking for more. We also are trying to expand our regional aviation business, specifically Signature TECHNICAir, Textron[-owned] Cessna, Honda, DaVinci Aerospace and Sky Aircraft Maintenance. We are applying for grants to support this expansion [and] hope to add another 20 to 30 apprentices in fall 2021. Delta Airlines and Endeavor Air in Raleigh also are recruiting at the school."

SITES TO SEE

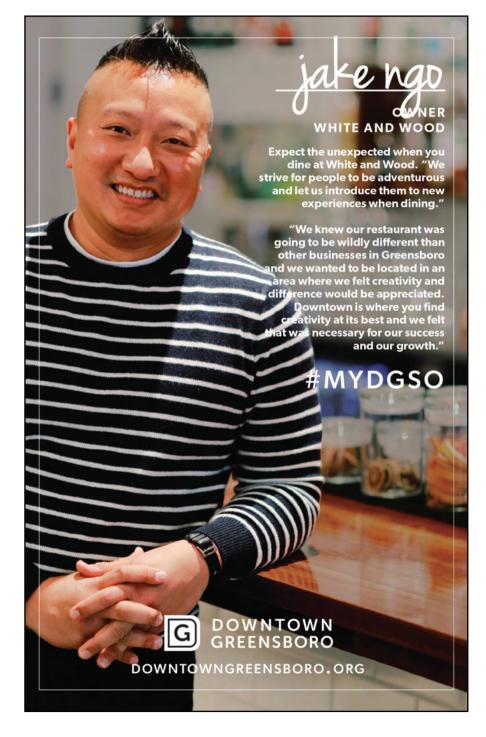
Kelly can list all the reasons that make the region attractive to businesses. But he'd rather have them do it. "Companies have cited the Carolina Core's robust workforce, strategic location, vast transportation and logistics networks, readily available sites and excellent quality of life as reasons to invest in the Core," he says. "From our companies to our people to our deep investments in our communities, the

Core is defining itself as a future-ready region brimming with opportunity set to transform North Carolina."

The Carolina Core's strongest sector is advanced manufacturing. "That is where our history is and where we see our future," Kelly says. Recent economic development proves his point, with Nestle Purina PetCare's \$450 million investment that will bring

300 jobs to Rockingham County and furniture-maker Prepac Manufacturing's \$27 million investment and 200 jobs in Guilford County.

Carolina Core is dotted with industrial sites, railway connections and colleges. "Related to manufacturing is our logistics and transportation infrastructure," Kelly says. It's a selling point. Atlantabased fast-food chain Chick-fil-A,



COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP THE TRIAD

for example, is building a \$52 million distribution center that will create 160 jobs in Mebane, and United Parcel Service, also based in Atlanta, is investing \$316 million and adding nearly 600 jobs to its delivery efforts in Mebane, Graham and Greensboro.

Industrial site opportunities are available for almost any need. The largest can be handled at Carolina Core's two megasites. The Greensboro-Randolph Megasite's 1,825 acres is near interstates 40 and 85. And Chatham-Siler City Advanced Manufacturing Site's 1,802 shovel-ready acres is about 50 miles from two international airports, Piedmont Triad and Raleigh-Durham International.

Smaller-scale expansions and startups will find 10- to 1,000-acre sites at Triangle Innovation Point, which is billed as a life-sciences and advanced-manufacturing industrial park. And PTI Aerospace Center has 1,000 acres ready for development and proximity to Guilford Tech's workforce training and graduates.

INNOVATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

Collaboration is charting Carolina Core's course, "Public and private leadership ... is highly engaged and aligned on a vision for the future," Whiteheart says. "The very formation of the Core is a result of regional partners coalescing around the area's competitive assets to tell a story. From Winston-Salem's Innovation Quarter, one of the nation's foremost urban research parks, to Greensboro's [Steven] Tanger Center for the Performing Arts, to High Point's downtown catalyst project ... community leaders have rallied around transformational projects for the good of the entire region."

Innovation Quarter is marketed as a "knowledge community" for its transformation of an industrial district into a mixed-use collection of 1,000 apartments and lofts, retail — coffee shops, salons, financial services and restaurants — 20 miles of greenway

and office space for 90 companies. It was recognized in December as "Best Practice for Creating Integrated Places" by research group Global Institute on Innovation Districts, which estimates that more than 100 are emerging worldwide, mixing workers, businesses, extracurricular activities, and research and development.

Innovation Quarter has 28 acres of shovel-ready land for development, but it's not the only place where Carolina Core's entrepreneurial spirit thrives. Congdon Yards in High Point has studio units suited for startups and small businesses, and private office and fullfloor suites. A common area, boardroom, coffee bar and courtyard foster collaborations. A former textile mill, The Gateway building in Greensboro offers build-to-suit offices for entrepreneurs. "The Core is undergoing multi-billion-dollar downtown transformations to revitalize and repurpose downtown cores into mixeduse and residential living space to breathe life into downtown centers," Kelly says.

Part of that transformation comes from a COVID side effect: Many people are looking to relocate, escaping crowded urban centers to work remotely. "We believe that midsized cities are extremely attractive to people growing their career," Kelly says. "In the Core, businesses and people can access North Carolina's fast-growing metros while still benefitting from the perks and quality of life of midsize cities and small towns."

Even as vaccinations put pandemic restrictions in the rearview mirror, Carolina Core will continue to drive ahead. "We look forward to continuing our work together to win new jobs and expansions in the Core," Whiteheart says. "Together, we can secure a strong future for generations to come and ensure North Carolina is among the most prosperous and competitive states in America."

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.



Steven Tanger Center for the Performing Arts in Greensboro is a state-of-the-art facility with seating for approximately 3,000, hosting concerts, Guilford College's Bryan Series, Greensboro Symphony Orchestra performances, comedy shows, and Broadway and other live theatrical productions.



Q&A with Stan Kelly

President & CEO Piedmont Triad Partnership



Q: What is the Carolina Core?

A: The Carolina Core is North Carolina's next economic engine. Bridging the urban crescent between Charlotte and the Research Triangle in central North Carolina, the Carolina Core is defined by diverse assets connected along future Interstate 685 – from megasites to Class A office space, from bustling metros to rural communities. In the Core, businesses and people can access North Carolina's fastest growing metros, while still benefitting from the perks and quality of life of mid-sized cities and small towns.

From our companies to our people to our deep investments in our communities, the Carolina Core is a future-ready region brimming with opportunity set to transform North Carolina.

Q: Why should companies make the Carolina Core their next big move?

A: This 120+ mile stretch of central North Carolina from west of Winston-Salem to Fayetteville is defined by assets that make the region a globally competitive market – a smart

and growing talent pool of more than 2 million people, access to 30+ colleges and universities, multiple airports, four megasites totaling 7,200 acres of certified land, industrial and urban research parks and more. Companies also benefit from North Carolina's corporate tax climate, which includes the lowest corporate tax rate in the United States, and competitive incentive programs.

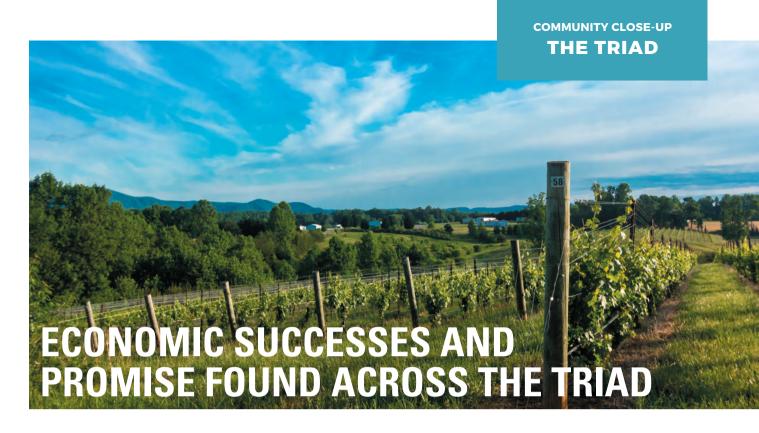
Purpose and vision are at the Core here, with public and private leadership highly engaged on a vision for the future. A spark has caught and strong, innovative companies are investing and growing in the Carolina Core.

Q: What is it like to live in the Carolina Core?

A: There's something for everyone living in the Carolina Core. Affordable housing and excellent public schools leave more money for the things you like – whether that's practicing yoga in an urban park, hiking and tubing, or attending the PGA Wyndham Championship. And without traffic congestion, you will have more time to enjoy these activities with your family.

Q: Where can I learn more about the Carolina Core? A: To learn more, visit NCCarolinaCore.com.





While the Triad's name is rooted in Guilford and Forsyth counties, businesses and opportunities abound and are thriving across its other 10 counties, from Surry in the northwest to Montgomery in the southeast. They are connected by 12,000 miles of roads, according to the Piedmont Triad Regional Council, which calls the region "a hub for commerce" that supports 900,000 jobs.

Claiming actor Andy Griffith's hometown, Surry County has two hospitals — North Regional and Hugh Chatham Memorial — four corporate and industrial parks, and more than 15 manufacturers, including Leonard Buildings & Truck Accessories, Nester Hosiery, and Weyerhaeuser. In April, the county was named second in the state for conservation, receiving nearly \$1.3 million in federal funding for a three-year study of farmland, streams, rivers and creeks.

Located at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Yadkin County is known for its vineyards and wineries that attract tourists. It also has a strong manufacturing base that includes top employers Unifi, Packaging Lines, B&G Food and Lydall Thermal/Acoustical.

Tourism is a big draw in Stokes County, too. The lake, hiking trails and campgrounds at Hanging Rock State Park attract about 700,000 visitors annually. Its main thoroughfare — U.S. 52 — is slated to become part of Interstate 74.

Rockingham County's top employers are manufacturers, including Gildan Activewear Eden; Dorada Foods; and gun manufacturer Sturm, Ruger & Co. The county has several industrial sites, ranging from 70 to 214 acres.

Combining state and local government incentives to recruit industry, Caswell County promotes its new 171-acre Pelham Industrial Park, Caswell County Industrial Park and workforce training programs. Piedmont Community College in Yanceyville provides industrial and technical training.

Alamance County is home to many manufacturers. Flexaust recently invested \$3 million to upgrade an existing 57,000-square-foot factory in Burlington, where it will produce hoses and employ as many as 50 people by 2024.

Davie County is prepping buildings and land in Mocksville for business relocations and expansions. The first phase of Davie Industrial Center, a more than 324,000-square-foot building — the first of three that will cover more than 920,000 square feet — was recently completed.

Most of Davidson County's workforce is employed in manufacturing, logistics, education and retail. Wake Forest Baptist

Health and Novant also have between 500 and 999 employees, according to the Davidson County Economic Development Commission. Davidson-Davie Community College's manufacturing apprenticeship programs are partially funded by a \$196,000 grant from Duke Energy and Piedmont Natural Gas.

The state's 11th-largest county, Randolph is home to the North Carolina Zoo. With more than 500 acres of exhibits, it's the country's largest habitat zoo. It also is home to Victory Junction, which was founded by NASCAR racing legend Richard Petty and his family in honor of his grandson, Adam, who was killed in a racing accident. The nonprofit camp caters to children with chronic illnesses and disabilities.

Uwharrie National Forest covers much of Montgomery County, where companies involved in timber products, footwear, braided rugs, food processing, furniture and packaging are the largest employers. Almost one-third of its workers are in manufacturing, and many are trained by Montgomery County Community College.

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.

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MADE FIRST SUCCESSFUL FLIGHT HERE IN 1903

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MEDIAN LIST PRICE FOR THE TOWN'S HOMES IN APRIL

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Dare County's sandy beaches, charming locales and flighty history attract those looking for coastal digs.



▲ Kill Devil Hills covers 5.5 miles of the Outer Banks north of Nags Head

BY BRYAN MIMS

he roar of a revved-up engine sweeps over the beach houses and hotels like a rogue wave. It drowns out voices, turns heads and stops traffic. After this burst of showboating, the hot rod keeps rolling north on Highway 12, past roadside onlookers eating ice cream from camping chairs and groups drinking cocktails on front decks.

On this Friday night in Kill Devil Hills, the souped-up, decked-out cars come up the road with the frequency of ocean swells: Camaros, Bel Airs, Mustangs and Malibus. In the parking lot of the Ramada Plaza sits more vintage beauties: convertibles, pickups and coupes. This is the OBX Rod & Custom Festival, an annual two-day affair that puts fancy rides on parade and fuels local charities such as the Children & Youth Partnership for Dare County with the proceeds.

Watching the waves of chrome and steel from their third-floor deck, Terry and Tracy Mc-Mann are among the roughly 7,000 year-round residents of Kill Devil Hills. They moved here from Richmond, Va., last summer after years of visiting the Outer Banks destination. Hanging from their deck railing is a black flag designed with a pirate ship and bearing the words "Kill Devil Rum."

It's the flagship spirit bottled at Outer Banks Distilling in nearby Manteo. "The pirates would get sick, and they'd drink the rum to kill the devil inside," Tracy says. The town's official story about the name's origin is steeped in rum. Back in Colonial days, ships carrying the liquor sometimes ran aground on the shoals off the Outer Banks. Locals scavenged the rum from the wreckage, stashed it away in the tall dunes and deemed it strong enough to kill the devil.

In modern times, pandemic-weary people have flocked to the coastal town. They've found





▲ A monument to the Wright Brothers' first successful flight is Kill Devil Hills' best-known landmark.

working remotely can be a day at the beach. Kill Devil Hills claims about 5 miles of beachfront, tucked between Kitty Hawk and Nags Head. Home sales across the Outer Banks are as fired up as a hot rod on a warm Friday night.

HIGH TIDE OF HOME SALES

The town's first-term mayor, Ben Sproul, 54, has lived here since the '80s and owned a surf shop for nearly 20 years. Now the marketing and communications manager for Surf or Sound Realty, he credits the pandemic for triggering at least some of the unprecedented boom in sales and property values. "There hasn't been this much disruption and change in this lifetime," he says. "It's dramatic."

The Outer Banks Association of Realtors reports that residential sales in March increased 87% compared with the same month in 2020, with the number of properties under contract up 100%.

This frenzy is reflective of the hot housing market across the country, but the Outer Banks has its own set of "many moving parts," as Sproul puts it. As the coronavirus closed office spaces and classrooms, people figured they could work as well from a beach house as from a home in the burbs. "We have a lot of loyalists that come every year, and a lot of them think, 'Oh, I wish I could own a home down there," Sproul says. "This really got a lot of people off the sidelines and pushed them over the edge to where they said, 'We should really do this."

Meanwhile, some local homeowners hit rough financial seas and decided to sell. It hasn't been enough, however, to keep inventory of homes for sale from reaching historic lows. The Realtors group says inventory in March dwindled by 72% compared to a year earlier.

A downside of the hot market is that housing for people who work in area restaurants, shops and recreation venues has evaporated. Many now commute from inland communities, unable to afford closer digs. Online rental marketplaces such as Airbnb and VRBO make it easier for homeowners to rent to vacationers rather than the local workforce, Sproul says. He's working with various groups to brainstorm ways of encouraging property owners to offer affordable housing for year-round residents.

At the pirate-themed Jolly Roger restaurant, founded in 1972, general manager Andrea Sullivan says the shrunken pool of

workers has forced Jolly Roger to close early on Sundays and open later on Mondays. She says much of the worker shortage stems from jobless benefits that have outlasted coronavirus restrictions, prompting some would-be employees to rely on unemployment checks rather than return to work. But housing can be a dealbreaker. "I have several people trying to come to work just for the summer, and they have to secure housing," she says. "And they haven't been able to do that."

Dare County's housing scarcity predates the pandemic but has become more pronounced. "I do feel that sometimes [property owners] are looking at the almighty dollar and that it's more important for the tourists to have a place to go rather than the locals to have a place to live," Sullivan says. "If you want it to be a successful tourist community, you have got to make sure you have the locals to work here."

NO VACANCY

When the pandemic began shutting down the economy in March 2020, Dare County officials blocked access to everyone except permanent residents, property owners and employees. Sheriff's deputies posted checkpoints on U.S. 64 and U.S. 158, the two main highways leading into the county, that lasted about two months. Hotels sat as empty as the deserted beaches. But on May 16, Dare County swung the gates wide open and let the river of cabin-fevered beachgoers flow.

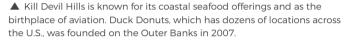
"Once that bridge opened, everyone just flocked down here," says William McCloud, who works the desk at the John Yancey Oceanfront Inn. "Everybody was just trying to get out of the



▲ The Outer Banks' labor shortage is compounded by the inability of foreign college students to travel to the U.S. because of pandemic restrictions.







house, and we've been slam-packed." On this Friday night, the hotel is all booked. It's been near capacity since March, he says.

The nearby Outer Banks Motor Lodge harkens back to midcentury roadside America where guests drive right up to their room doors. Even with multistory beach houses and high-rise hotels all around, this 38-unit motor lodge, opened in 1959, is adored by visitors who have checked in for decades.

"Some guests came last year to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary, and they had been here on their honeymoon," says general manager Linda Sabadic. "We ended up having a pretty full season, with a lot of our regulars coming back because they knew us and knew what they were getting, and I think we're going to have a really good year again."

Mayor Sproul says the occupancy tax, levied on guests staying in hotels and rentals, was practically nil in April 2020. That cut deep, he says, since the Outer Banks traditionally draws crowds for Easter and spring break. But Kill Devil Hills bounced back from that deficit. "By the end of the year, we made up for the loss and we're ahead."

A HIGH-FLYING HISTORY

The devilishly lyrical name of this town includes the word "hills" for good reason. In a land-and-seascape defined by its levelness, lofty sand dunes billow along the Albemarle Sound, lending a three-dimensional quality to the horizon. Attracted by the towering dunes and tireless winds, two brothers from Dayton, Ohio, came to the shores to make their crazy dream come true: On a cold, December morning in 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright launched the world's first powered, heavier-than-air flight. They gave North Carolina a reason to brag, with the slogan "First in Flight" gracing license plates since the early 1980s.





This world-changing achievement is commemorated at the Wright Brothers National Memorial, which draws about half a million visitors every year. Its centerpiece is a 60-foot-tall granite monument atop the 90-foot-tall Kill Devil Hill. Back when the Wright Brothers took flight, this stretch of coast was a remote and mostly roadless outpost. Homes and stores emerged in 1878 after the establishment of Kill Devil Hills Lifesaving Station, which responded to shipwrecks off the coast. The community incorporated in 1953. Bridges were built across the sounds, transforming far-flung beaches into vacation spots.

The main drag through Kill Devil Hills is the four-lane U.S. 158, flanked by beachwear shops, pancake houses, fast-food drive-thrus and parking lots. But the soul of Kill Devil Hills is along the beach road, N.C. 12. It's home to the classics: The Kill Devil Grill, Miller's Steakhouse and Seafood, Jolly Roger, and Awful Arthur's Oyster Bar.

On this Friday night, Awful Arthur's has a good-sized, jovial crowd. Behind the bar, John Mason slides trays of shrimp, crab legs, oysters and clams into the steamer as he also takes drink orders and chats with the patrons. It's the prime out-to-eat-at-the-beach kind of place where the world's problems get lost in the happy hubbub. "I'm glad I live on the Outer Banks," Mason says. "All I do is fish and live, and everybody seems to just worry about living."

Leave it to a bartender with an oyster shucking knife to serve up such a heavenly slice of life from Kill Devil Hills. ■



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