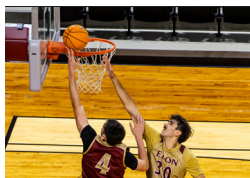


Top photo: Guard Nick Dorn throws a dunk in transition during Elon men's basketball 127-56 win over Warren Wilson College on Nov. 30, 2023. Bottom photo: Guard Regina Walton sets up a play during the second half of the women's basketball game against Wingate, where Elon fell 72-53 on Dec. 2, 2023.



A preview into the men's and women's seasons

**PAGE 3 BASKETBALL**



A new basketball duo emerges

**PAGE 4 BASKETBALL**



A high school athletic director steps into role

**PAGE 7 BASKETBALL**



THE PENDULUM

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# ELON BASKETBALL

## PLAYERS TO WATCH

### NICK DORN

SOPHOMORE GUARD



0

2023-24 CAA All-Rookie Team  
CAA Rookie of the Week (4x)  
Team-high 60 3-pointers in 2023

### MARAJA PASS

SOPHOMORE GUARD



4

2023-24 CAA All-Rookie Team  
Appeared in all 30 games  
Led all CAA freshmen with 110 assists

### JAYDA ANGEL

FRESHMAN GUARD

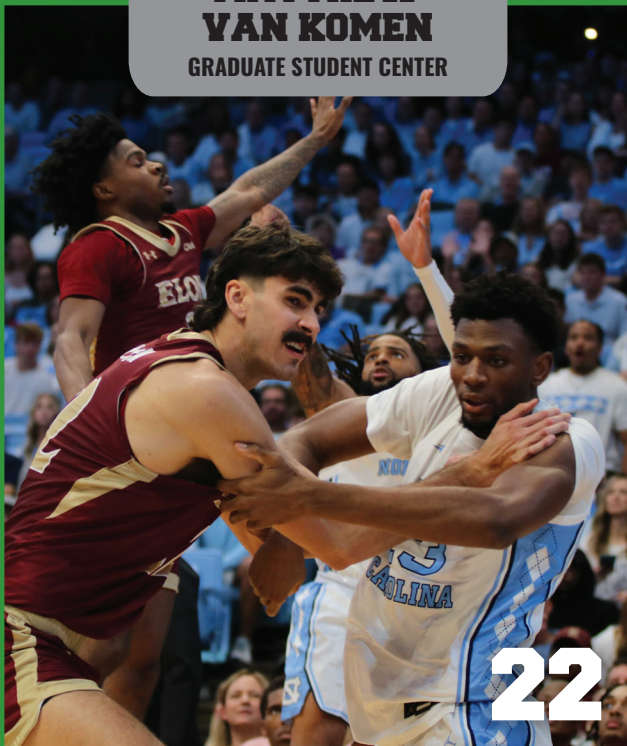


8

Had 17+ points in first two Elon games  
2,746 career high school points  
All-State Team (2x)

### MATTHEW VAN KOMEN

GRADUATE STUDENT CENTER



22

Transfer from Hawai'i Pacific  
47 blocks last season  
Tallest player in Elon's DI history at 7'4"

DESIGN BY ERIN MARTIN

## CORRECTIONS

In the last edition of The Pendulum, the story on the dean of the business school listed Dean Raghu Tadepalli as the former dean of the school, but he will serve as dean until the end of the school year. Elon News Network regrets this error.



# Men's basketball looks to win conference with mix of returning players, transfers

The team is returning more than 50% of last year's roster, added four transfers

**Miles Hayford**  
Elon News Network

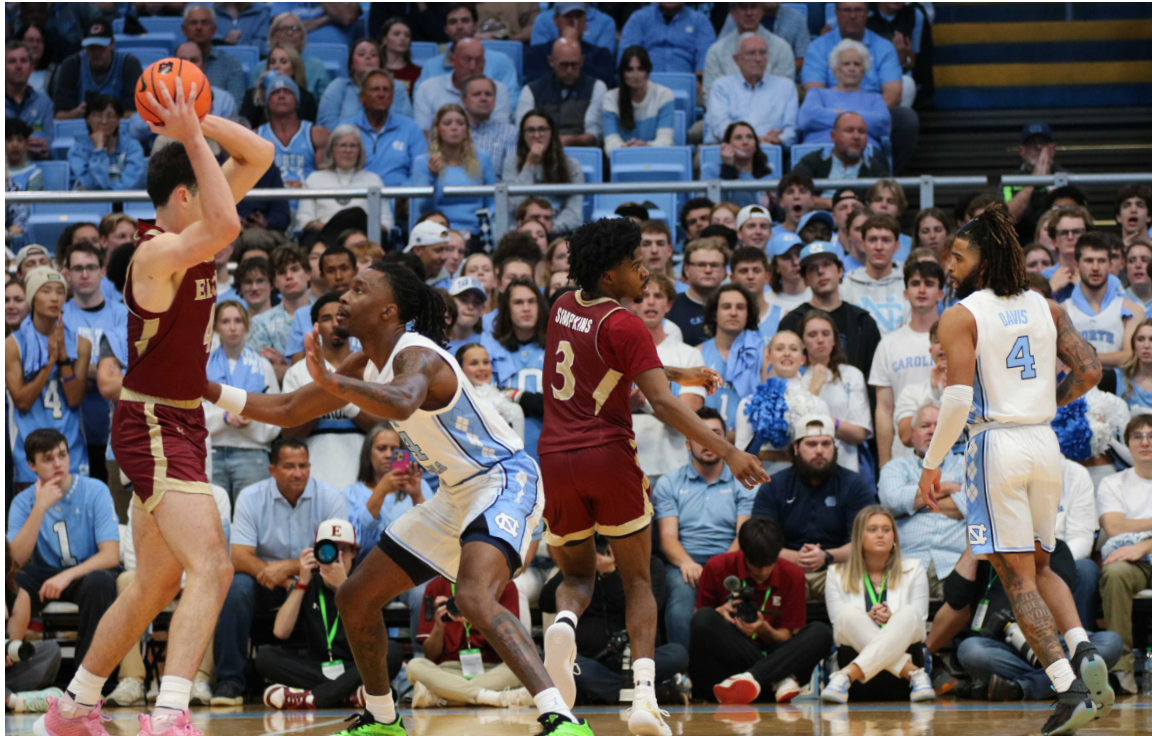
After three straight losing-record seasons and two years under the leadership of head coach Billy Taylor, the Elon University men's basketball team is ready for a Coastal Athletic Association Championship. According to senior Sam Sherry, the current squad is finally poised to make a run.

"We have the right pieces, the right people, the right program to do it," Sherry said. "I've been in this program a long time, and I've seen many different teams, many guys come in and out. I think we have the right team to make it all the way to the championship and win."

The first two years in the Billy Taylor era weren't successful record-wise but successfully developed key players like Sherry and junior TK Simpkins. Last year, the Phoenix just fell short in the first round of the CAA Tournament, losing to Hampton by one.

During the offseason, Elon lost some key players to the transfer portal, including star guard Max Mackinnon. Mackinnon was the second-leading scorer with 12.1 points per game. He also had a team-high 4.8 rebounds per game and played the most minutes on the team.

However, Elon has bounced back from that loss, returning more than 50% of last year's team and making several key additions in the transfer portal. Taylor added significant contributions to the guard position with junior Jameel Rideout and



MONIKA JUREVICIUS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior Sam Sherry looks to pass the ball during the team's season opener against the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill on Nov. 4.

redshirt sophomore Andrew King. King has made an immediate impact, making the starting lineup in the team's season opener. Another guard brought in through the transfer portal was TJ Simpkins, TK's twin brother. TJ is another efficient scorer to add to Elon's offense, having averaged 15 points per game at Northwest Florida State College. Graduate student Matthew Van Komen also transferred to Elon, bringing tremendous size to a small-ball Elon team that needed it. His 7-foot-4 frame will be a key addition to Sherry's presence in the paint.

Sherry said he believes the combination of new players and returning players will work well.

"We've been practicing really hard together. I think we mesh really well together," Sherry said. "Teams

will see that we have an addition of new guys, but we also have guys who have been through the system who understand coach's philosophy."

Despite the struggles the team has seen over the past three seasons, Sherry said he believes this year is different. The team is more of a team, according to Sherry.

"Guys are trusting each other a lot more, and I see better camaraderie between each other," Sherry said. "Everyone's clicking, everyone's connecting, and that's what the best teams do. They connect, and they have great chemistry out on the court. I think we're a very tough team."

Elon, who went 3-12 on the road last year, is also putting in more dedication this year and putting a big emphasis on preparation.

"We're working very hard," Sherry said. "We study scouting reports, we get in the weight room when we don't need to be in the weight room, we're doing the little things. It's about, especially on the road, sticking to it and trusting in each other."

Sherry is the sole senior on the team and will look to lead Elon to a championship this year. In addition to Sherry, TK is expected to aid the team's scoring effort, having led the team in scoring and was tied for second among the team with an average of 4.7 rebounds per game. Another potential reason for the team finding success this season is their ability to share the ball and work as a team, according to Sherry.

"We share the ball very well, and we got guys who could score, guys who can rebound, so it's just about

trusting in each other," Sherry said. "As long as we trust in each other and trust in coach's way, I think we should be good."

Elon is currently 1-2 but started off the season well, putting up an admirable fight against the 9th ranked team in the country, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in its season opener. The Phoenix lost 90-76 but made a double digit comeback late in the second half to take a lead with a few minutes remaining.

"We know Carolina's capable of taking it from 10 to 20 in a heartbeat, but our guys continued to stay with it," Taylor told Elon News Network in the postgame press conference. "They didn't get away from the game plan. I love the tenacity that we showed, and we kind of embodied what we can become this season."

Taylor also pointed out in the press conference the underrated nature of the team and what they proved in the North Carolina game.

"We were picked 12th in the preseason. Not many people gave us much of a chance at all in here tonight," Taylor said. "But our kids don't believe in any of that nonsense. They believe in themselves. So what you saw was a result of that."

As the team moves past the first few games, they look toward conference play, which begins Jan. 2. They also have several key non conference games, including a road game against the University of Notre Dame on Nov. 22.

"We showed that we can do a lot of good things, and we can hang with and can play against some of the best teams in the country," Taylor said. "Obviously, it's long gone, but a long season ahead of us, and we're ready to play."

For the full men's basketball schedule, go to page 9.

## Women's basketball enters with high expectations, healthy roster

Elon is coming off two losing record seasons but has healthiest roster in years

**Miles Hayford**  
Elon News Network

If the Elon women's basketball team's 9-21 and 11-21 records over the past two seasons taught them anything, it would be resiliency, according to head coach Charlotte Smith.

"Over the last couple of years, we've grown as a team, we've weathered adversity, and we're just really excited that all the pieces feel like they're falling into place this year," Smith said. "Sometimes it feels like life is falling apart, but it's actually falling in place and everything is falling in place beautifully."

It's been a tough couple of years as the Phoenix only won eight home games over the last two seasons. Last season was marred by the season-long injuries of two of the team's brightest stars: redshirt sophomore Raven Preston and redshirt junior Kamryn Doty. Smith said the absence of Doty and Preston taught the team some valuable things.

"It taught us the importance of just showing up when life is hard, and we've grown from those life lessons," Smith said.

Smith expects Preston, who led

the team in scoring two years ago, to pick up where she left off before her injury.

"We know that we'll get productivity from her in regards to offensive firepower," Smith said. "She was terrific on the boards, and that's one of the areas where we've had a huge deficit the last couple of years."

Smith said Doty's basketball IQ will be crucial to leading the team, particularly the offense.

Doty said paying attention to the little things will be vital and stressed the importance of practice.

"It just starts at practice. You practice how you play at the end of the day," Doty said. "So, if we are competitive, have high energy and practice consistently, then it will be easy to transfer that over to the game, rather than having to flip the switch when it comes game time."

Doty said a potential obstacle is the team being guard-heavy, with 11 of their 15 players being guards, but she believes they can overcome that disadvantage.

"All of our guards have a lot of heart and we're tough, so it's not going to be our downfall in any type of way," Doty said.

Smith has high expectations for Preston and senior Iyecz Adams, both of whom were named preseason All-CAA. She also cited the addition of the five new freshmen as a reason to get excited for the season.



MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Redshirt sophomore Raven Preston dribbles through two defenders in a game against Gardner Webb on Nov. 8. Elon won 69-61.

"We have a lot of first-years coming in that are natural scorers," Smith said. "I'm excited to hopefully get back to our goal of where we're averaging at least 70 points per game."

One of those natural scorers is freshman Jayda Angel, who has been fantastic for the Phoenix so far, scoring more than 17 points in each of her first two games at Elon. Smith said getting freshmen like Angel involved early is a key part of their development. Smith said she believes Angel will have a big year due to her ability to create her own shot and clutch factor.

"It's both progressive and trying

to get them to play early because you want to build their confidence in the non conference so that when the conference schedule hits, you've seasoned them to where they're almost sophomores now," Smith said. "What we're trying to do right now is shorten their learning curve so that they all can be contributors this year."

The Phoenix will be facing off against some major women's basketball powerhouses this year with road games against Virginia Tech and the current No. 3 team in the country, the University of Southern California. Elon will play USC, who is led by one of the

best players in the country, JuJu Watkins, on Dec. 15. However, Doty said she believes it is a win-win situation.

"We approach them like we literally have nothing to lose," Doty said. "Just take advantage of all the opportunities we have against them. I feel like games like this are learning opportunities to see what we can really be good at. I just go into those games with the idea just to have fun and just work on what we've consistently been working on in practice."

Smith said she believes they are talented enough to capture their first Coastal Athletic Association championship since 2018, they just have to stay healthy. The team is driven to win a championship by an unlikely source: a magnet. According to Smith, the team receives a participatory magnet every year at the CAA Tournament after they lose. Smith, and the rest of the team, don't want to come home with a magnet this time.

"When we're not competing to our highest potential, I'll stop in the middle of practice and say, 'Do you want to come home with more than a magnet this year with your name on it?' We want to come home with some hardware. That's our motivation: Come home with more than a magnet," Smith said.

For the full women's basketball schedule, go to page 8.



# From tall to taller: Towering duo prepares for season

Senior Sam Sherry is joined on men’s basketball team by transfer Matthew Van Komen

Miles Hayford  
Elon News Network

Reinforcements have arrived in the frontcourt for senior forward Sam Sherry. After being the primary big man for the Elon men’s basketball team the last couple of years, Sherry is ready to share the load this year with transfer graduate student Matthew Van Komen, who at 7-foot-four, is the third tallest player in the NCAA right now. Sherry, who stands at 6-foot-11, and Van Komen form a towering duo in the paint that will certainly have an intimidation factor.

“It’s a little bit of a fear factor,” Van Komen said. “If you look at the roster here, 7 foot, 6-11, and then so on and so forth. You don’t see that on any college rosters, especially not at this level. So people see that, they’re going to be a little scared going into it.”

During his time at Elon, Sherry has been a force for the Phoenix, averaging 9.5 points and 4.7 rebounds last year. He also had 35 blocked shots, the eighth best single-season performance in program history at the Division I level. He has been dominant on the glass, accumulating 321 rebounds over his time at Elon. Sherry has been forced to carry a large load, however. During his time as a Phoenix, he has been one of the sole contributors in the paint on a team that lacked size. During the 2023-24 season, 60% of the team was made up of guards and Sherry was the only player who was taller than 6-foot-8. Last year, he contributed to 13% of the team’s total rebounds.

However, this year, Van Komen joined Sherry to bolster the team’s interior defense and prowess on the glass, relieving Sherry of the sole responsibility of Elon’s control of the paint. Van Komen averaged 7.4 rebounds per game and had 47 blocks in his time at Hawai’i Pacific University last year. Sherry said it is great to have another guy play alongside him in the paint and believes they work well together.

“I think having Matt on the team is very

valuable to us,” Sherry said. “He brings another force in the paint and I was always the force in the paint, but having another guy with me and play alongside with is always great.”

Sherry also said he believes their styles of play complement each other.

“Having his size is pretty remarkable, and my size too, I think we’re good,” Sherry said. “We’re a good team. He brings in emphasis in the paint where he can be a screen, rolling, dunking guy and being a force on defense, too. And, I’ve been working on my game, catch and shoot, driving, throwing lobs. So I think it’s definitely a good thing that we’re playing out there together.”

“

WE CHALLENGE EACH OTHER EVERY DAY, AND WE PLAY TOGETHER EVERY DAY. IT’S BEEN REAL FUN. I THINK WE’RE GONNA WIN A LOT OF GAMES TOGETHER.

SAM SHERRY  
ELON BASKETBALL FORWARD

Elon’s interior defense will likely become an unwavering swarm of blocks and rebounds thanks to the duo’s size. Van Komen said if they play man-to-man defense, Sherry is able to be on the side of the court, forcing opponents to Van Komen.

“I’m the center, force everything to me. Sam’s on the side, so if I go and help him, they’ll shift into the center, but I’ll be hopping off my guy, but still protecting the paint,” Van Komen said.

Sherry said the addition of Van Komen also allows him to stay up top on the perimeter more often as Van Komen can handle the paint.

The two of them aren’t just improving the team but are also helping each other improve.



COURTESY OF ELON ATHLETICS  
Graduate student Matthew Van Komen attempts to block senior Sam Sherry during a practice in Schar Center.

“Going against him, it forces me to adjust my shots, get a little more touch on my shots,” Sherry said. “We challenge each other every day, and we play together every day. It’s been real fun. I think we’re gonna win a lot of games together.”

The duo of Sherry and Van Komen has already provided results a few games into the season. Van Komen has four blocks already, along with 15 rebounds. Van Komen shined in the team’s dominant win over Bluefield University where he scored 13 points and picked up 8 rebounds. Sherry is doing his part, too, also notching 18 rebounds and is averaging 13 points per game.

Sherry and Van Komen’s skill and height should prove plenty of theatrics and thrilling plays this year. The pair has high expectations for themselves, saying that they are aiming to be the leading rebounders and shot blockers in the Coastal Athletic Association. Fans should expect lots of alley-oops from Sherry to Van Komen this season, according to Sherry. Sherry said it will be “lob city” and is excited to see what they can do.

“If I get a high post, I’m looking for Matt on the lob, he’s looking for me on the lob,” Sherry said. “So, I’m excited to get going in the regular season and show some people who we really are.”

## Transfer portal additions provide spark to men’s team

Head coach Billy Taylor’s four transfers have been involved early, often

Miles Hayford  
Elon News Network

From 2021 to 2023, the amount of NCAA athletes entering the transfer portal increased from 6,749 to 8,767. Since the creation of the transfer portal in 2018, the college sports scene has rapidly changed with teams’ use of transfers dictating their success and failures.

Despite losing star guard Max Mackinnon to the transfer portal this past offseason, Elon men’s basketball has a bright season ahead thanks to an impressive cast of four transfer acquisitions.

The 2024 signing class includes redshirt sophomore Andrew King, junior Jameel Rideout, sophomore TJ Simpkins and graduate student Matthew Van Komen. Head coach Billy Taylor focused on bolstering the team’s perimeter game by picking up three guards.

TJ Simpkins joins his twin brother TK Simpkins on the team after taking a year off from each other by attending junior college at Northwest Florida State College. He excelled there, averaging 15 points per game, including a 44-point effort in his third collegiate game. TJ said it felt good to rejoin his brother.

“We’ve been doing this forever, since we were kids,” TJ said. “When we got back on the court together, it didn’t feel like we missed a beat.”

TJ is excited to play this season alongside his brother and believes their natural chemistry translates onto the court.

“He can just give me a look and I know what he wants me to do,” TJ said. “So, just the natural

twin chemistry, it just works everywhere.”

The transition to Elon was easy for TJ thanks to his frequent FaceTimes with TK while he was away at NWF State. TJ said he would always FaceTime his brother and had met many of TK’s teammates at Elon, making it an easy transition when he met them in-person for the first time.

TJ is off to a great start at Elon, scoring 18 points in the season opener, and 21 against Bluefield University — currently leading the team in scoring. He said it was a great experience to be able to start his time at Elon in front of a large crowd at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“That was the largest crowd I ever played in front of, so it was a good feeling,” TJ said. “But, I just had to kind of get used to the Division I game. I got settled down, and had a good second half — so proud of that.”

While TJ had a simple path to Elon’s team with TK being a start for the Phoenix, Van Komen came to Elon by chance. Van Komen — who played at Division II school Hawai’i Pacific University last year — transferred to Elon thanks to a lucky opportunity. In the offseason, he was working out with someone in Arizona who knew Elon assistant coach Greg Herenda. Herenda then talked to Taylor and Elon flew Van Komen out for a visit, and after seemed like a good fit, an offer was made.

Van Komen — who is 7-foot-4 and the third tallest player in college basketball right now — brings size and interior defense to a team that has relied on 6-foot-11 senior Sam Sherry exclusively for this. He has made an immediate impact for the Phoenix with 13 total points and 15 rebounds. Despite being a transfer, Van Komen has been immediately inserted into Elon’s gameplan, having been in the starting lineup in every game so far. He said he didn’t expect to be in the starting

lineup from the start.

“I did not know that coming in. I didn’t start in Division II, so, I’m not really used to that role,” Van Komen said.

King has also immediately found a starting role in Elon’s offense. King, who was hurt last year at the University of Illinois, Chicago, competed for a starting guard position and won it.

“Last year I was hurt, so I wasn’t even expecting to have a big role,” King said. “I was expecting to have to prove myself, but I was able to keep believing in myself, and coach believed in me. So, that was big.”

“

WHEN WE GOT BACK ON THE COURT TOGETHER, IT DIDN’T FEEL LIKE WE MISSED A BEAT.

TJ SIMPKINS  
ELON BASKETBALL GUARD

King said he was attracted to Elon by its atmosphere and environment.

“I could just see how family-oriented it was when I first got here, and how it’s a college atmosphere,” King said. “Because the schools I was at, it wasn’t really a college atmosphere, a college feel; kind of just I was there. Being here feels like I’m at actual school, and so that was pretty big for me.”

Coming off an injury, King said he is a bit rusty, and these first few games he is still adjusting to being back on the court but hopes

to have a good season. His primary goal is to be the Coastal Athletic Association Defensive Player of the Year.

“The first two games were a little rusty, just being honest,” King said. “But eventually I feel like it will get there. Everyone believes in me, the coaches trust me. So, if I just keep building the trust and believe in myself, it will shake off.”

Rideout, who transferred from the University of South Carolina, Aiken, is nursing an injury right now but expects to debut for the Phoenix later in the season. At USC Aiken, Rideout helped the team win two conference championships, averaged 8.7 points per game over two seasons and he made 38.8% of his 3-pointers last season.

Rideout said it was an easy transition to Elon thanks to the welcoming nature of the team.

“The team was really open. They welcomed you with open arms, and I kind of fit in right away,” Rideout said. “There were some learning curves, like getting adjusted to Billy and figuring out how he wants to play, like the style of the play. But once I figured that out, it’s going pretty well.”

Coming from a DII school, Rideout said he wants to prove that he can compete at the DI level, along with helping Elon win a CAA Championship.

“The main thing is just that I know I belong,” Rideout said. “I believe I’m one of the best if not the best guard in the conference, and I want to show that I can impact winning at this level.”

So far, Elon’s additions from the transfer portal have made a big splash on the court, accounting for almost 29% of the team’s scoring. Elon will likely rely on the efforts of TJ, Van Komen and the rest as they progress deeper into the season.





Sophomore point guard Maraja Pass brings the ball up during a Nov. 8 game against Gardner Webb. Elon won 69-61.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sophomore Maraja Pass prepares for sophomore year after being named to CAA All-Rookie team

**John Houlahan**  
Elon News Network

Within team environments, there has to be a leader to step up to the task. Sophomore Maraja Pass said she hopes to step up to the role this season.

Pass said she is going into the season optimistic and ready to prove herself as a scoring threat on the court — along with being a vocal leader for the Phoenix.

“Mainly, I just focus on being a leader, getting that aspect of my game improved to being able to lead my team, being able to be a leader on defense and offense,” Pass said.

Pass, coming off of an extremely strong freshman season, found herself on the Coastal Athletic Association All-Rookie team. She also earned three CAA Rookie of the Week honors. The 5-foot-4 guard averaged 8.6 points per game, along with 4.2 rebounds and 3.6 assists across 30 games played. She led all CAA freshmen in assists. She found her career high in points in a game against Marshall last December where she notched 21 points for

the Phoenix.

Pass said these stats and accolades don’t get in the way of her goals for herself and her team.

“I think that accolades really don’t boost my confidence or anything like that,” Pass said. “I just want to help my team win, honestly.”

Other than being a leader, Pass also prioritized scoring during the offseason working on her jump shot.

“I think that’s something that me and coach Smith really drilled this summer, that I wanted to be a threat from outside as well,” Pass said.

Pass exited her freshman season with a 40% field goal percentage and 27.6% from the three-point line, which was second highest on the team. She looks to continue to improve these numbers this season.

“Sophomore slump — not a thing for me,” Pass said. “So, just trying to build off of last season.”

However, she said she hopes her biggest improvement comes from her presence on the court and her ability to lead and motivate her teammates in every way possible. According to head coach Charlotte Smith, Pass’s personality and communication on the court helps her thrive in her position and gives the team the best chance of winning.

“Being a point guard, you have to be

vocal,” Smith said. “You’re the director back on defense as you are the first one back in the hole and directing traffic. So, hearing her be more vocal has definitely been a great addition to helping us be a better team, and she’s done a tremendous job of being a leader for our first-years, trying to get them organized, helping them to understand what we’re trying to accomplish in our offensive and defensive schemes.”

Pass’ leadership is not just directed toward her younger freshman teammates, but also with her veteran teammates in games and practice, according to Smith.

“It’s amazing to see how there’s no slippage in her leadership, whether she’s on a veteran team or young team,” Smith said.

The team has another reason to have high expectations with the return of guards Raven Preston and Kamryn Doty. Both guards left the season early due to injury, which ultimately increased Pass’s workload on the floor giving her the opportunity to thrive in her freshman campaign.

With their return, both players expect to have an immediate impact on the Phoenix. In the 2022-23 season, Doty averaged 28.6% from three-point range and 72.5% from the free throw line, and Preston averaged 30.4% from behind the three-point line. Their addition will ease the load Pass had to carry

last year.

“I believe that we need each and every individual on the floor, and I believe that they will contribute a great, great amount to our team’s success this year,” Pass said.

“

MAINLY, I JUST FOCUS ON BEING A LEADER, GETTING THAT ASPECT OF MY GAME IMPROVED TO BEING ABLE TO LEAD MY TEAM, BEING ABLE TO BE A LEADER ON DEFENSE AND OFFENSE.

**MARAJA PASS**  
ELON BASKETBALL PLAYER

Smith said she is also excited for their addition and believes they will relieve some of the responsibility Pass has to carry.

“Raven and Doty are definitely some great additions that will help carry some of the load offensively,” Smith said.

# Women’s basketball senior uses experience to help team

Women’s basketball senior forward lycez Adams steps up as leader for team on, off court

**Benjamin Berfield**  
Elon News Network

With the 2024-25 collegiate season underway for the Elon University women’s basketball team, senior forward lycez Adams represents the only senior on the team. Adams is in her second year with the Phoenix having transferred from East Carolina University at the end of her sophomore year.

Last year, Adams started in all 27 games played. She made an immediate impact leading the Phoenix in points per game with 10.3 and rebounds per game with 7.

Adams enters her senior year with five freshmen players on the roster, which is three more freshmen compared to last season.

Adams said she embraces the opportunity to provide veteran experience to the team.

“It’s cool being the only senior on the team,” Adams said. “You get to bring that experience and maturity to the team. I use my leadership role to keep us moving forward.”

She described herself as someone that’s vocal, especially when it comes to carrying over the standards set by head coach Charlotte Smith.

“I just do what the coaches say whether it’s

keeping the standard high, the character of the team, or the whole culture,” Adams said.

Smith said Adams plays a big role during games. She said Adams helps get other players in a position to excel.

“She’s done a great job stepping up and being vocal,” Smith said. “She’s trying to help get everyone organized on the court.”

Smith said it’s very beneficial to have someone of Adams’ caliber take on the role of helping the team’s younger players.

“They have someone who can show them the ropes,” Smith said. “She has done it for the last four years in collegiate basketball with student-athlete experience, as well as success while doing it.”

Adams said the younger players have embraced the influence that she brings and feels as though her experience and energy has spread throughout the roster.

“They’ve been very receptive,” Adams said. “The energy is very contagious and it’s showing on the team.”

Adams added that players are willing to help one another if something doesn’t go their way.

“When one gets their head down, it’s pretty much natural for all of us to say, ‘You’re good, next play,’” Adams said.

She also said that most of the team’s standards have already been enforced so far on offense and defense. Adams said the team aims to keep the mindset they have from practice intact during games.

“The culture is the same,” Adams said. “Coach especially emphasizes defense and rebounding, and I think it just spreads throughout the entire game.”

Adams’ influence on the team has continued off the court as well. She is involved with the team’s Big Sister program where she is assigned to mentor one of the freshmen and do team building events, Smith said.

“She’s done dinners at her house for some of the younger players while trying to teach them the Elon way,” Smith said.

Adams said she believes her leadership has also allowed her to flourish individually. She is averaging 6.8 points but had her first game in double figures with 10 points against Marshall University on Nov. 13.

“I can trust myself to know how the game goes with my experience and the things I learned from the coaches,” Adams said. “I’m just trying to implement that into how I help lead the team.”

Adams wants to continue being a vocal leader for the Phoenix. She said while everyone wants to play well, she hopes to maintain the team’s confidence during those stretches when they might struggle.

“We’re all extremely hard on ourselves,” Adams said. “We want to do our best so I just want to ensure that we still have confidence in everything that everyone brings to the team.”

Smith praised Adams for her ability to leave everything on the line for the Phoenix. She admired Adams’ desire to win and her



lycez Adams cheers on her teammates during a Nov. 16 game against Kent State. She is the team’s sole senior.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

mentality toward achieving those goals.

“Last year she played through injury,” Smith said. “When you’re injured, you could go check yourself out and she never checked out because she wants to win and she’s a warrior.”



# Women’s basketball duo returns to the court after season-ending injuries



Redshirt junior Kamryn Doty shoots the ball during a game against Gardner Webb on Nov. 8. Elon won 69-61.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Redshirt sophomore Raven Preston, redshirt junior Kamryn Doty have returned for the season

**Monika Jurevicius**  
Elon News Network

Elon women’s basketball guards Kamryn Doty and Raven Preston sat on the Elon bench for a full season, recovering from injury. They watched their teammates score 3-pointers, run across the court and they imagined the day they could come back to contribute to the team. After a season of healing, the time for a comeback is here.

They return to the basketball court after both suffering season-ending injuries last year and said they wish to keep the specifics of those injuries private. The experience has helped them grow as a power duo as they prepared to come back to play this women’s basketball season.

Doty, a redshirt junior, did not play her freshman year 2021-22 season due to a torn ACL, according to previous Elon News Network coverage. She did not play last season due to a another season-ending injury, where her focus was to practice patience over urgency to come back to the game.

“I had a lot of negative emotions to begin with, but I soon realized that the negative emotions weren’t going to get me anywhere,” Doty said. “My mindset was just to get into the rehab process, do what I can and contribute how I’m able to contribute to the team – whether it’s just giving energy or being a resource for them.”

Doty’s drive to play was hindered as this was her second time experiencing the “same injury,” she said. The process was more steady-paced for Doty this time around, as she said she focused on bettering

herself during the recovery process.

“The biggest thing for me was finding a balance between when I can get extra practice or physical activity, or when I should just sit down and let my body recover,” Doty said. “I’ve just gotten more mature, instead of wanting to go hard all the time. I’m really big on listening to my body now.”

When Preston got hurt, she turned to her spirituality to positively stay connected to basketball. Being off the court allowed her to look at the game from a new angle, something she said has improved her as a player for the Phoenix.

“I have my own plans for my life, but God has a completely different process and plan for me,” Preston said. “I haven’t really got experience in helping the team out other than being on the court. Being the biggest cheerleader and seeing the game from a completely different lens was big. It helped a lot by getting through the process and coming back.”

As student-athletes, both Doty and Preston said they believe players may forget to take time for themselves when the game is always on their minds. During their time away from basketball, they realized the importance of taking care of themselves.

“When you’re too consumed, you forget about other things or your other responsibilities,” Doty said. “You forget to take care of yourselves. You forget to check up on family. There’s so much else but so many things outside of basketball that I realized are just as important — if not more important — than basketball.”

During rehabilitation, both players were put on different schedules than those who were competing to focus on recovery and maintaining physical fitness in areas that they were cleared to work on. Doty said without Preston, coming back to the game alone would have been more difficult.

“Being in it together helped a lot,” Doty said. “We’d be in the training room together. We lived together. We had our own separate lifts outside of the team. When they would play, we would go in the morning — the day before the game — and lift.”

The women’s basketball team has already seen wins this season with Doty and Preston back. The team currently has a 3-1 winning record, scoring a total of 257 points so far this season. Preston said she believes all the new skills and perspectives help the team look at the game differently as a whole.

“We’re all just really hungry while being out,” Preston said. “You see things at such a different perspective. I probably wouldn’t

have known half the stuff that I know now if I didn’t sit out. I’m actually pretty grateful.”

As the season is underway, both Doty and Preston have contributed to the team in the games they have played. Preston is averaging 13.5 points per game with a team-high of 10.5 rebounds per game. Doty averages 4 points and 2.8 rebounds per game. However, they said a player’s health is the top priority for a successful season.

“It’s really not worth it having to sit out for a couple days rather than if it hurts – then you hurt it even more – having to sit out for an entire year,” Doty said. “At the end of the day, we’re very strong whenever we’re healthy.”



Redshirt sophomore Raven Preston drives in the paint during a Nov. 8 game against Gardner Webb.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



# New Eastern Alamance athletic director hopes to keep community connected

After long-time AD John Kirby retired, Brad Costa takes on role of athletic director this school year

**Kathan Gandhi**  
Elon News Network

Brad Costa, a former three-sport athlete from a small town near Buffalo, New York, always knew he wanted to pursue a career in sports.

He now gets the chance to do that as the new director of athletics at Eastern Alamance High School.

At first, he thought having a career in sports would be playing professional football. But after an underwhelming stint as his high school's quarterback, he realized professional sports may not be feasible. Still, he wanted to keep the competition.

"I'm the kind of person that hates losing more than I like winning," Costa said. "Having a purpose and common goal is so important to me as a human being. You don't get that anywhere more than you do in athletics."

Costa moved to Mebane starting as an assistant coach for Eastern's men's basketball team in 2015. The New York native learned under head coach Jay McPherson, the all-time wins leader at Eastern Alamance High School.

"We had a ton of success," Costa said. "And not because of me, but because we had a lot of really great players."

After McPherson stepped down as head coach in 2020, Costa took over the position. His time was defined by COVID-19 shutdowns, canceled workouts and less successful years compared to seasons prior. Despite the outcomes, Costa said he pushed through adversity and became an assistant athletics director in 2023. Soon, a career-changing opportunity presented itself.

Eastern's 15-year athletic director, John Kirby, decided to retire this spring. Costa was given the chance to fill his shoes.

"I never wanted him to retire," Costa said. "My thought process was: try to learn from him in an assistant athletics director role for as

long as I could."

Costa said he was excited to progress in his career but knew he had big shoes to fill in Kirby's absence.

"He is a Mebane legend," Costa said. "He's unbelievable and very, very missed. But I know that he's always here."

After officially starting in August, it quickly became clear to Costa that he had a lot of work on his hands.

“

HAVING A PURPOSE AND COMMON GOAL IS SO IMPORTANT TO ME AS A HUMAN BEING. YOU DON'T GET THAT ANYWHERE MORE THAN YOU DO IN ATHLETICS.

**BRAD COSTA**  
EASTERN ALAMANCE HIGH SCHOOL  
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

"My day-to-day is to put Eastern Alamance athletics in the best possible chance to grow athletes and win games," Costa said.

That includes ensuring athletes stay eligible to compete, meeting the North Carolina threshold for grades and filling out proper medical forms, Costa said. He said he takes time daily to supervise the school's athletic facilities while keeping tabs on transport coordination for all sports. Doing this for each of the roughly 200 student-athletes at Eastern makes it a full-time job, needing constant communication.

"I didn't realize what all goes into it," Costa said. "I'm always calling a radio crew that's trying to set up for a Friday night game or reporters that are trying to get with our football coach."

The new job means more to Costa than just a leg up — it feels like he has found a place



KATHAN GANDHI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Brad Costa was recently hired as Eastern Alamance High School's new athletic director. He looks to continue a legacy of support and tenacity at the school.

to stay.

"Eastern Alamance is like a home," Costa said. "I don't want to go anywhere else. We live just a couple of minutes from here. It would be a great way to entrench my family and my daughter into the school and into the community."

As Costa and his family continue to grow in Mebane, he said it means everything to give back to a community so eager to provide support.

"Mebane is a small town, and for so long, Eastern Alamance has been the beacon," Costa said. "This community cares about athletics so much."

On one of his first days at Eastern Alamance, Costa was on morning parking lot duty. He was surprised to see droves of cars driving down to the Eastern football field.

"It was people setting up chairs to watch the Friday night football game," Costa said. "They were there at 7:30 in the morning because that's the spot they've been in for the last 20 or 30

years. I think that does a perfect job of saying what sports means to the community."

The Mebane community raised roughly one million dollars to fund Eastern's new fieldhouse. Costa said he hopes to rally the community for similar projects.

"I'm so grateful to have this community," Costa said. "I'm grateful to be in a place that has cared for me."

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EASTERN ALAMANCE IS LIKE A HOME. I DON'T WANT TO GO ANYWHERE ELSE.

**BRAD COSTA**  
EASTERN ALAMANCE HIGH SCHOOL  
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

## Southeast Alamance athletics continue to evolve in second year

High school athletic director, basketball coach discuss growth of Southeast Alamance Athletics

**Benjamin Berfield**  
Elon News Network

When Southeast Alamance High School opened in 2023, BJ Condron had been considering joining the athletic administration. He had coached women's basketball at Orange High School for 10 years but was starting to become interested in the athletic department.

"I found myself enjoying the administrative parts of the job, and was thinking about going into athletic administration," Condron said. "The job here came open, and I decided I would throw my name in and was lucky enough to get the job."

Condron said he wanted to establish multiple principles after being named the athletic director. He listed one of his goals as forming a beneficial experience for all students playing sports.

"Our mission is to create a positive athletic experience for our student-athletes in the community," Condron said. "We want our student-athletes and their families to leave with good memories."

In doing so, Condron said it's necessary to prioritize setting a culture around the sports program. Condron stated the importance of having the right people around to set up the program's core values.

"It's important to start with a good

culture," Condron said. "To have a good culture you have to have good people, so it involves establishing a good coaching staff to work with our student athletes and trying to find the best people that fit some of the core values."

One of those people is men's basketball coach Brandon Williamson. He previously coached middle school basketball but said he was intrigued by the chance to build a new program.

"It's not too many times you get an opportunity to start something brand new," Williamson said. "The biggest thing is just being able to establish your own culture."

Williamson said the team's culture is built through love as he believes it allows the team to bond together.

"I use the word 'love' quite often to explain our culture from a basketball standpoint," Williamson said. "I think love can develop that chemistry organically, and we'll be able to find ways to sacrifice and do things for one another."

He emphasized the desire for his players to gain something from the season beyond just basketball.

"Most people aren't going to play college sports and that's OK," Williamson said. "But I want us to get something out of this four month experience we're having. We just try to create an environment where people want to be around each other and play for one another."

Last year, the Southeast Alamance Stallions rode a nine-game winning streak into the playoffs where they advanced to the third round.

Williamson said one thing he learned

about coaching a brand new team was that it takes time. Having won championships before, Williamson went into last season with similar expectations but understood that it would be a process.

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OUR MISSION IS TO CREATE A POSITIVE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCE FOR OUR STUDENT-ATHLETES IN THE COMMUNITY, WE WANT OUR STUDENT-ATHLETES AND THEIR FAMILIES TO LEAVE WITH GOOD MEMORIES.

**BJ CONDRON**  
SOUTHEAST ALAMANCE HIGH SCHOOL  
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

"You can't go into a situation expecting championships right off the bat," Williamson said. "It takes time, but the fact that we were there wasn't to be expected. It simply goes back to us getting hot and growing chemistry at the right time."

Condron also said that some obstacles also involve having to learn as everything else is going on. He added that many coaches in sports outside of basketball have helped him manage certain challenges.

"Everyone has strengths and weaknesses," Condron said. "I was able to find some people that are more than willing to help me with my weaknesses and make sure that we're prepared for every event and sport."

Condron said he's been encouraged by how new students have responded to the program's early stages. He said there's a student council which gives students an opportunity to contribute to the high school's principles.

"They responded well to it so far," Condron said. "They're buying into the culture, but at the same time, it's also up to the students to create the culture. We have a student council where students are able to help create part of the culture as well."

Williamson said he was also impressed by how students have responded to the new principles he's establishing within the high school's sports program. He has noticed a significant difference compared to his first year.

"We can already see a difference," Williamson said. "Year one was a whirlwind because my players were coming from other coaches' philosophies that weren't ours. It's not anyone's fault, but we're now miles ahead than where we were before."

Condron said there's still work going forward. However, he likes where the sports program currently stands as a whole. He said everyone just has to keep progressing for their athletics to flourish.

"I think we've got a long way to go," Condron said. "There's a lot of improvements we want to make and we have a vision moving forward. I think so far, we're on a pretty good track."



WOMEN’S BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

11/23 @ VIRGINIA TECH - 2 P.M.	1/26 @ DREXEL - 2 P.M.	
11/26 @ LONGWOOD - 6 P.M.	1/31 - WILLIAM & MARY - 7 P.M.	
12/4 - FURMAN - 11 A.M.	2/2 - MONMOUTH - 1 P.M.	
12/8 @ EAST CAROLINA - 1 P.M.	2/9 @ TOWSON - 2 P.M.	
12/15 @ SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA - 3 P.M.	2/14 @ UNC WILMINGTON - 7 P.M.	
12/19 @ LONG BEACH STATE - 4 P.M.	2/16 - CAMPBELL - 1 P.M.	
12/31 - LEES-MCRAE - 1 P.M.	2/21 - DELAWARE - 7 P.M.	
1/3 @ NORTH CAROLINA A&T - 7 P.M.	2/23 - DREXEL - 1 P.M.	
1/5 @ WILLIAM & MARY - 1 P.M.	2/28 @ CHARLESTON - 7 P.M.	
1/10 - HAMPTON - 7 P.M.	3/2 - NORTH CAROLINA A&T - 1 P.M.	
1/17 - STONY BROOK - 7 P.M.	3/6 @ NORTHEASTERN - 7 P.M.	
1/19 - HOFSTRA - 1 P.M.	3/8 @ MONMOUTH - 2 P.M.	
1/24 @ DELAWARE - 6:30 P.M.	3/12 * CAA CHAMPIONSHIPS	
HOME	AWAY	* NEUTRAL SITE AWAY

MEN’S BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

11/20 @ NORTHERN ILLINOIS - 7 P.M.	1/16 @ DREXEL - 7 P.M.		
11/22 @ NOTRE DAME - 7:30 P.M.	1/18 @ DELAWARE - 2 P.M.		
11/29 * MAINE - 2 P.M.	1/23 - MONMOUTH - 7 P.M.		
11/30 * NAVY - 2 P.M.	1/25 - CHARLESTON - 7 P.M.		
12/1 @ PENN - 2:30 P.M.	1/30 - HOFSTRA - 7 P.M.		
12/7 - WOFFORD - 7 P.M.	2/1 - NORTHEASTERN - 7 P.M.		
12/14 - LYNCHBURG - 7 P.M.	2/6 @ CAMPBELL - 7 P.M.		
12/18 @ ETSU - 7 P.M.	2/8 @ CHARLESTON - 6 P.M.		
12/21 - UNCG - 7 P.M.	2/13 - NORTH CAROLINA A&T - 7 P.M.		
12/28 - MARSHALL - 7 P.M.	2/15 @ UNC WILMINGTON - 7 P.M.		
1/2 @ NORTH CAROLINA A&T - 7 P.M.	2/20 - TOWSON - 7 P.M.		
1/4 - HAMPTON - 7 P.M.	2/22 - WILLIAM & MARY - 7 P.M.		
1/9 @ WILLIAM & MARY - 7 P.M.	2/27 @ MONMOUTH - 7 P.M.		
1/13 - CAMPBELL - 9 P.M.	3/1 @ STONY BROOK - 6 P.M.		
HOME	AWAY	* NEUTRAL SITE AWAY	3/7 * CAA CHAMPIONSHIPS



# Oct. 7 survivor comes to Elon, shares how he saved 750 people during attacks at festival in Israel

Elon Jewish Life, Hillel, Chabad invite Rami Davidian to campus Nov. 18 to share story

**Fiona McAllister**  
Elon News Network

Rami Davidian, once a farmer, saved 750 people from the Hamas attack Oct. 7, 2023, at the Nova Music Festival in Israel. Elon Chabad, in collaboration with Elon Hillel and Elon Jewish Life, invited Davidian to speak at Elon University on Nov. 18 in Whitley Auditorium.

Davidian stopped at Elon as part of his U.S. speaking tour. Joining Davidian was Millet Ben Haim, a survivor of the Oct. 7 attacks, who translated Davidian's story from Hebrew to English. On the Oct. 7 attack at the music festival, Davidian helped Ben Haim escape from Hamas militants.

On Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas militants unleashed a surprise attack in Israel, Gaza and other parts of the Middle East, killing over 1,000 people and kidnapping hundreds of other Israeli citizens.

Davidian spoke about his many encounters with Hamas militants. He told the crowd that prior to Oct. 7, 2023, the day had held extreme significance to him for a different reason — his father died on that date.

On that day, while on the way to the synagogue to commemorate the loss of his father 46 years ago, there was a surge of attacks on Israeli barracks. Davidian received a call from a friend asking for his help in saving a young man. Davidian's wife urged him not to go, saying that he might be killed in the process.

Davidian promised his wife that this rescue would only take a few minutes, when in reality it took several hours. Before finally getting to the music festival on his search for the young man, he passed multiple dead bodies, some stacked in trucks along the road.

Davidian explained that upon arriving

at the festival, hundreds of young people were screaming in panic and more bodies littered the ground as he navigated further into festival grounds. Davidian said he tried to gather the injured together, telling them everything would be alright.

"They started to operate how to get them all back," Ben Haim translated. "So later, one goes to his own home to be taken care of by his wife and kids and the rest go to a community center."

As people continued to evacuate, Davidian continued searching for the young man he had promised to find. Looking in a field, Davidian found him in a bush along with 14 other friends. Davidian helped to fit 15 people in his private car — which typically fits five — before ushering them to safety.

One of the young people asked Davidian to also rescue a friend who was left behind. Agreeing, Davidian told the young person to send their friend his contact information. Within a few minutes, he said he had received over 4,000 messages from many different people — asking him to help rescue their family and friends as well.

In order to carry out this mission, Davidian said he had to make lots of difficult decisions.

"First, he had to pretend to be a Palestinian," Ben Haim translated. "So he is smashing cars and pretending to steal things. ... That way, he was able to evacuate more people from within the terrorists."

Davidian presented a slideshow that included pictures and videos of the first-hand accounts from these attacks. All in Hebrew, Davidian shared the messages he received from those he saved and their thanks to him with the crowd. Included in this presentation was Ben Haim's experience as an attendee of the music festival.

With two videos, Ben Haim showed her and her friends dancing at the Nova Festival just minutes before a second video showed the panic and distress festival-goers faced from the attacks.

Ben Haim emotionally told the crowd that she convinced her friends to let her



FIONA MCALLISTER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Oct. 7 survivors Rami Davidian, left, and Millet Ben Haim share their stories on Nov. 18 in Whitley Auditorium. Davidian rescued 750 people Oct. 7 from the Nova Music Festival.

drive the car in order to escape. While they were on the main road, they saw a truck full of militants. After the car in front of them was shot, Ben Haim made a split-second decision to make a U-turn into the opposite direction.

After running into a field and hiding, Ben Haim explained that this feeling was like being chased in a bad dream — where she tried to run faster but couldn't.

"At that moment, I just started to talk to myself," Ben Haim said. "I told myself that I'm probably going to get killed, and it's bad, but I don't have control over that. And the only thing that I have control over is myself."

While hiding, Ben Haim contacted as many people as she could and desperately posted on social media looking for help. After taking to social media, Ben Haim was given Davidian's contact information from a complete stranger.

"He assured us that he will take care of us," Ben Haim said. "He's looking for us."

After a while, Ben Haim said she heard a

car arrive and she then knew that someone had come to help save her.

After hearing their story, those in the audience were left with a heavy silence.

Chabad Community Affiliate Rabbi Mendy Minkowitz translated for Davidian during an interview with Elon News Network. Davidian said continuing to share his story has turned into a positive experience, despite being painful.

"He says his therapist actually advises him that it's good for him to keep on sharing it, because every time he shares it, it's like a cleansing process that gets it out of his system," Minkowitz translated. "It's part of the healing process."

Having been touched by Davidian's story and acts of heroism, junior Luke Silpe said listening to his story was very hard.

"I came to hear him speak today to get a perspective of someone that actually was there, and someone who actually did something impactful on a day like Oct. 7," Silpe said.

## Alamance County Behavioral Health Center aims for 24/7 expansion

The crisis diversion center, which opened mid-June, serves community with mental health, substance abuse

**Madison Powers**  
Elon News Network

The Alamance County Behavioral Health Center served 723 individuals last month and currently offers its urgent care facility 16 hours per day, Donald Reuss, vice president of behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability network operations at Vaya Health, said at Monday, Nov. 18's Alamance County Board of Commissioners meeting. Reuss said he hopes for the facility to be open 24/7 in the future.

The center officially opened June 19 after a two-year-long collaboration between Vaya Health, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, RHA Health Services and other community partners, according to Reuss.

He said conversations revealed a need to support the crisis system in Alamance County to divert people with mental health and substance abuse issues from jail.

"Previously in the county, they had pieces of these services, but they were kind of fragmented," Reuss said. "It really made it a little more challenging for citizens to access, as well as for law enforcement to really develop good, strong relationships and coordinated efforts."

Vaya Health is designated as a local management entity/managed care organization, or LME/MCO, by the NCDHHS. According to NCDHHS' website

and Reuss, these companies manage North Carolina's tailored Medicaid plans, coordinate and facilitate the provision of services and work with licensed practitioners and provider agencies.

The crisis diversion center aims to treat behavioral health issues, such as substance abuse, mental health disorders and intellectual and developmental disabilities, according to Reuss.

"It's primarily for people that have a mental health or substance abuse issue that they're working on, but it's also fully operational for anybody that has an intellectual/developmental disability," Reuss said.

The 28,000 square-foot center was announced in September 2022 and is located at 963 Kirkpatrick Rd.

According to Reuss, the center features a 16-bed residential facility which will function as a crisis center for individuals who need inpatient care. This facility will open pending state acute care facility licensure by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Reuss said he does not yet have an idea of when this will be; he said some facilities have been licensed within a few months, while other providers have waited for up to a year.

In his presentation to the board of commissioners, he said an application to NCDHHS was submitted a month ago and he is waiting to hear back, though he said he requested an expedited process from his contacts there.

A representative from NCDHHS declined Elon News Network's request for an interview.

However, the center does already have operating facilities. Its behavioral health urgent care facility is open for 16 hours a

day, seven days a week, and eight beds are available for patients to stay up to 23 hours. Ideally, Reuss said, this part of the center will be open 24/7, but he said the facility will need around-the-clock officers on-site for this to happen.



I REALLY WANT TO SEE THIS BEING ABLE TO RUN 24 HOURS A DAY AND PROVIDE THE SERVICE, BECAUSE OBVIOUSLY, THE NUMBERS YOU JUST INDICATED, THERE'S A NEED.

**STEVE CARTER**  
VICE CHAIR OF THE ALAMANCE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

"It's really just finding the officers that are willing to work those shifts," Reuss said. "We hope it's soon."

In his presentation to the board of commissioners, Reuss said he reached out to county municipalities to ask for officers or financial support.

"I met with every municipality in the county and asked for their support," Reuss said. "And I'm sad to say, I did not get any takers in my request at that time."

At the meeting, vice chair Steve Carter said there is around \$450,000 in the board's budget that can be allocated to provide funding for

officers.

"I really want to see this being able to run 24 hours a day and provide the service, because obviously, the numbers you just indicated, there's a need," Carter said.

At the meeting, Alamance County Sheriff Terry Johnson said there is one officer paid for by RHA Health Services with money from the board, who is on shift from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. He said he met with county police departments earlier this year to ask for support.

"Burlington, in fact, they said no. Graham said no. Elon Campus, Mebane and Haw River and Gibsonville has interest in coming on board to help," Johnson said.

Licensure code doesn't require security, according to Reuss, but it's best practice to have — so acquiring 24-hour security is the last step in keeping the urgent care open at all times.

Drew Elliot, vice president of public affairs at Vaya Health, said the walk-in facility is open to the community and provides a centralized emergency treatment facility for individuals in need of behavioral health care.

"The way we like to describe it is just as you would go to an urgent care if you sprained your ankle — you didn't know if it was broken, sprained or just twisted — you're going to go to the urgent care," Elliot said. "They're going to triage you and make sure that you get the right sort of support for you. Just like that, but for behavioral health."

Additionally, the center offers a peer bridger program, designed to reintegrate patients who have been in the hospital for a period of time.



**CHEAT SHEET** CHEAT SHEET IS AN INTERVIEW WITH A RELEVANT EXPERT TO EXPLAIN COMPLEX TOPICS

# Split ticket voting increases across the country



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY IMAGES/TNS, ENN FILE PHOTO, DESIGN BY ERIN MARTIN  
Republican presidential nominee, former U.S. President Donald Trump gives brief statements as he arrives at Valdosta Regional Airport to visit areas affected by Hurricane Helene on Sept. 30, 2024, in Valdosta, Georgia. North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein, the Democratic nominee for governor, speaks inside Burlington's Persnickety Books on March 14 as part of a "Real Time with Stein" campaign event.

Political science professor says split ticket voting is on the rise in North Carolina, U.S.

**Erin Martin**  
Elon News Network

In the 2024 election, North Carolina upheld its tradition of split ticket voting — which occurs when an individual chooses candidates from different political parties for different races on the same ballot. This mirrors the results of 2016 and 2020, where North Carolina voted for a Republican president and a Democratic governor. A similar pattern occurred in the 2024 election in Nevada, Arizona, Wisconsin and Michigan — where Donald Trump was awarded the electoral college votes for the state, but a Democratic senator won the state.

According to data from Gallup, political independents now constitute the largest political bloc in the country, with an average of 43% of U.S. adults identifying as independent in 2023, tying the record high from 2014.

Steven Greene, a professor of political science at North Carolina State University, sat down with Elon News Network to discuss the revival of split-ticket voting in the 2024 elections. From North Carolina's history of divided voting for president and governor to the potential influence of independent voters, Greene provides insight into how this electoral behavior shaped outcomes at both state and national levels.

*This interview was edited for clarity.*



**Steven Greene**

## What is split ticket voting and what is its impact in North Carolina?

It's when you vote for a candidate of one party at what we'll call the top of the ticket, such as for president, and then vote for a different candidate, or candidates, for other positions, such as voting for Donald Trump for president and Josh Stein for governor. Or in other years, voting for, say, a Democratic governor and a Republican senator — examples like that would be split ticket voting.

**Is this a trend we normally see across the United States every four years?**

Split ticket voting used to be huge. It used to be a really big deal. It was not at all uncommon to see a presidential candidate win a state with 55 or 60% of the vote, and then a senator win that state from the other party with 60% of the vote. And this happened all the time, through much of the 20th century, through the 1990s and what we've seen over the past couple of decades is presidential voting and Senate voting in particular, become increasingly linked, and a dramatic decline in splitting and voting. It's for one I think, on one level, it went from maybe 25% or higher of voters splitting their tickets between president and Senate, in some elections, down to 5%, so that had been a really notable change.

We might call it the renaissance of split ticket voting in 2024 and the number of states where Donald Trump won the popular vote and Democratic senators held on — Nevada, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan — I think maybe just those four. But that's four that really matters for the Senate. And it's split tickets.

Voting has always been more popular between presidents and governors, because governor is a very different office than senator and people I think approach voting toward it differently. We've seen plenty of

that here in North Carolina. This is the third election in a row where North Carolina has voted for a Republican for president and a Democrat for governor. Kentucky has a long pattern of doing something similar. So, that said, that's where we've really seen that in North Carolina is between president and governor and the long pattern we've got here.

**“**

WE MIGHT CALL IT THE RENAISSANCE OF SPLIT TICKET VOTING IN 2024 AND THE NUMBER OF STATES WHERE DONALD TRUMP WON THE POPULAR VOTE AND DEMOCRATIC SENATORS HELD — ON NEVADA, ARIZONA, WISCONSIN, MICHIGAN. BUT THAT'S FOUR THAT REALLY MATTERS FOR THE SENATE.

**STEVEN GREENE**  
NC STATE POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR

**Do you think North Carolina continues to split ticket with president and governor because they are different positions or because North Carolina has been happy with its Democratic governors?**

People do think about it differently. But that's one of the reasons why split ticket voting has declined so much between president and Senate is what we call the

nationalization of politics. People really just see a senatorial office as an extension of the political conflicts we have at the national level. Whereas the job of a governor running a state, there's going to be a lot more about thing. A focus on education policy, on just handling things at the state level that don't necessarily engage the key national political debates in the same way.

And honestly, I think the biggest reason we have had this pattern of late in North Carolina is because Republicans have nominated some really poor candidates for governor, and that if they had been smarter in their nominations, we would be on eight years of a Republican governor instead of Democrats. Because I think so much is just partisanship, but candidates still matter, and Democrats have had really good ones.

**We have seen an increase in Americans identifying as politically independent. Do you think that they're part of the reason we've also seen an increase in split tickets?**

I don't. The truth is, the vast majority of independents prefer one party over the other, and whether they call themselves independent or not, they actually have a pretty clear partisan preference and think that way and act that way. It's really like 10% of the electorate or less who truly doesn't have meaningful party attachments, and it's been that way for some time.

**Do you think we will see this trend continue into the midterms?**

I think when we talk about the midterms, of course, there is no real split ticket voting, because there is no national top of the ticket. But will we maybe see Democrats do well in states Donald Trump won? Yes, there's a long standard pattern of presidents often doing poorly in midterm elections.



# Health center offers bridge back to community

CENTER | from pg. 10

“If somebody goes on to their inpatient psychiatric unit, those peers will actually go to the hospital and help bridge people coming out of the hospital back to the community,” Reuss said. “A lot of individuals coming out of psychiatric inpatient care are asked the highest risk for committing suicide across our communities in North Carolina, so it’s one of our most vulnerable populations.”

Reuss said the center also houses a peer living room, where anyone can come in to receive support, use computers and be with a community. He also said the facility has recently been licensed for a substance abuse intensive outpatient program and offers medication management services, individual and group therapy and an intensive in-home care, where licensed clinicians administer mental health treatment for children and their families.

He said the center hopes to create a community calendar, inviting outside organizations — such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness — to offer services within the center.

“We really want to start working on bringing those individuals, those organizations, to the table, and really building out what we call a community calendar, so people know that every Monday and Wednesday, National Alliance will be in that facility, and every Tuesday and Thursday vocational rehab may be there,” Reuss said. “So people know that if they need to get access from those supports, they can get them in at one place.

Reuss said when Vaya Health began to work with Alamance County in late 2020, it was told planning and opening the center was a number one priority.

“We sat down with community leaders,”

Reuss said. “We looked at available land across the county. We looked for different resources, different partners, to go in this venture, and we worked with the county to identify a location and funding and support in order to move forward.”

According to Reuss, the center is funded through a \$4.6 million NCDHHS grant secured by Vaya Health, \$1.5 million from Cardinal Innovations — the LME/MCO with which Alamance County previously worked — and \$500,000 from the North Carolina General Assembly.

Elliot said this center has been the result of a community effort.



THE JOURNEY IS NOT OVER. THERE'S STILL A LOT OF WORK TO DO THERE, BUT WE GOT THE PHYSICAL PLANT INFRASTRUCTURE IN PLACE THAT WE'RE BUILDING THAT FOUNDATION AROUND.

## DONALD REUSS

VICE PRESIDENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND INTELLECTUAL/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY NETWORK OPERATIONS AT VAYA HEALTH

“Vaya and the county commissioners have been the driving force behind this, but it’s required a whole lot of other coordination from different parts of state government,” Elliot said. “It’s been a lot of different groups coming together to make this happen. And it



MADISON POWERS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Alamance Behavioral Health Center at 963 Kirkpatrick Rd.

will also require ongoing support from a lot of those same groups.”

He said the center has been designed to be a sustainable project for the Alamance County community.

“You’ve got expenses,” Elliot said. “Who owns the building and how is it financed, and leases to the providers and then, and how is the revenue coming in? Is it through Medicaid? Is it through other support and ongoing county support?”

Reuss said Vaya Health can only pay for certain patients — not all.

“We only can pay for the members that the state has assigned to our health plan that walk into that facility, but anybody can walk into that facility,” Reuss said.

He said Vaya has been working to ensure

that the center will be accessible.

“We can adjust our rates to make it sustainable, but if other health plans are not configured in a right way to where other health plans help also cover that cost in the plan, then we don’t have a long-term sustainable program,” he said. “We’ve really been working hard to make sure that the rates that the health plans are paying really contributes to what we provide.”

He said there is more to come as the center obtains licenses — once it does, Vaya Health will begin a marketing campaign to raise awareness in the community.

“The journey is not over,” Reuss said. “There’s still a lot of work to do there, but we got the physical plant infrastructure in place that we’re building that foundation around.”

## Elon uses peer institution as a benchmark, has one mutual peer

Elon has 15 peer institutions and 47 schools view Elon as its peer yet have only one mutual peer

### Avery Sloan

Elon News Network

Elon has 15 peer institutions and 47 colleges and universities chose Elon as one of its peers, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Yet, none of Elon’s peers deemed Elon as one of its peers, as of data from IPEDS for 2022-23. Many colleges and universities have not updated their peer institutions since then, with the exception of Furman University, where Elon is now one of its peers, according to its website.

Elon selected its peers in 2022, Jason Husser, chair of Elon’s Long Range Planning Committee, said. This committee was the primary group involved with finding Elon’s peers, with data from the office of institutional effectiveness. Husser said the main factor Elon prioritized was student learning.



I REMEMBER BEING STRUCK BY JUST HOW MANY PLACES PICKED ELON AS A PEER.

## JASON HUSSER

CHAIR OF ELON'S LONG RANGE PLANNING COMMITTEE

Picking peers that also were peers with Elon was not a factor, because Husser described Peer Institutions as moving targets each school picks but did see the fact that 47 other schools chose Elon as a peer as a positive. According to research from Craig

Willis, professor of computer science at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, only 23% of peer institutions are mutual peers, or both schools have put each other on its own lists of peer institutions.

“I remember being struck by just how many places picked Elon as a peer,” Husser said. “I think that’s because Elon has been so successful, and its offerings for students, for student learning.”

Peer Institutions are used as a point of comparison for many things at Elon’s campus and other schools. Husser said when picking schools, they used a dashboard to compare almost every university in the U.S. used in the U.S. News & World Report national rankings, including how engaged their alumni base is.

Other factors included retention rates, other places that prospective students applied and size of the institution — in terms of number of students, graduation rates, tuition and fees, Husser said.

Elon’s tuition and fees has consistently ranked lower than the majority of Elon’s peer institutions.

“We weren’t trying to find a twin university out there, but places that we could see elements of Elon elements and Elon values of focusing on students and mission driven around students, we also collected extensive feedback from the university community as a whole,” Husser said.

Willis said an important factor to keep in mind is that many schools, including Elon, have multiple lists of peers to use for different purposes. Different schools and departments look at different schools for different occasions.

Husser said for many of the peers Elon selected, in some ways Elon is aspiring to be more like aspects of those schools, but in other ways Elon is ahead of them.

“A happy challenge with the process is that Elon is a pretty unique place in terms of its size as well as its level of offerings that it offers, its mix of graduate and undergraduate programs, and its suburban setting,” Husser said. “What we found were a number of places that had elements that felt like Elon to us.”

## INSTITUTIONS ELON IS A PEER OF

Abilene Christian University  
Babson College  
Belmont University  
Bradley University  
Bryant University  
Carson-Newman University  
Chestnut Hill College  
College of Charleston  
College of New Jersey  
Concordia College, Moorhead  
Drake University  
Drury University  
Endicott College  
Hamline University  
Harding University  
High Point University  
Ithaca College  
Lipscomb University  
Longwood University  
Loyola University of Maryland  
Marymont University  
Mercer University  
Methodist University  
Monmouth University  
North Central College  
Pfeiffer University  
Piedmont University  
Queens University of Charlotte  
Quinnipiac University  
Saint Xavier University  
Samford University  
Shenandoah University  
Simmons University  
St. Catherine University  
St. Mary's University Texas  
Stetson University  
The Citadel  
University of Evansville  
University of Lynchburg  
University of Mary Hardin-Baylor  
University of Mount Olive  
University of New Haven  
University of Richmond  
University of Tampa  
University of the Pacific  
Valparaiso University  
York College of Pennsylvania  
**Furman University\***

## ELON PEER INSTITUTIONS

American University  
Bucknell University  
Chapman University  
Fordham University  
**Furman University**  
Gonzaga University  
James Madison University  
Lehigh University  
Marquette University  
Miami University – Oxford  
Santa Clara University  
Southern Methodist University  
Syracuse University  
University of Denver  
William & Mary

This data is from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System from 2022–23.  
\*Furman did not list Elon as a peer but since has updated its list of peer institutions to include Elon.



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Luminaries line a sidewalk Nov. 28 during the 2023 Festival of Lights and Luminaries in Elon's Historic Neighborhood.

ENN FILE PHOTO

Elon's fourth annual event is set to occur Dec. 3, focuses on community, student traditions

Neil Parmar  
Elon News Network

Ahead of the Festival of Lights and Luminaries, the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life is working with multiple groups on campus to ensure those on campus can see a reflection of who they are amongst the lights of the night.

Hosted by Elon's Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, the Festival of Lights and Luminaries is in the works and is set to occur Dec. 3. Though the tradition of the luminaries has been around for a long time, Lights and Luminaries will see its fourth rendition of this

version of the event, highlighting a multitude of the cultures and religions that create Elon University's community. This event has been an Elon tradition for longer, but this will be its fourth year called Lights and Luminaries.

Working with those around them, the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual life has been meeting with organizations around campus, sophomore Aeiris Faloni said. As one of eight multifaith interns and one of three "point people" for Lights and Luminaries, Faloni has had a large role along with her peers in organizing this event.

"We've been reaching out to all of the spiritual and religious clubs and organizations, as well as cultural clubs and organizations on campus to come together, all around the theme of light, to explore and talk about their different identities," Faloni said.

Faloni said those in attendance this year can expect to see tables from German Club

with wreath decorating and Surtal — Elon's Bollywood dance group, among many others. Also this year, the Asian-Pacific Student Association will host a table to discuss Lunar New Year. There will also be other activities and groups in attendance, such as writing letters to Santa, Faloni said.

Sophomore and multifaith intern Lizeth Torres-Tomas also said the festival is a great sense of community.

"Even though Elon's campus is an academic oriented space, the Truitt Center hosts the Lights and Luminaries specifically to have it as an embodiment of a model for people to come together to share joy and community. It's just a time for community," Torres-Tomas said.

According to Hillary Zaken, director of Multifaith Programming and Engagement, the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life is excited to see an act of unity spread across

Elon's campus and provide an opportunity for those to embrace their culture and learn about the others that occupy campus.

Elon University's motto, seen on the institution's seal, is "Numen Lumen," meaning "spiritual light" and "intellectual light," both of which correlate directly to the core values of the Lights and Luminaries event, according to the Truitt Center's website. Faloni said she believes the event is crucial to expanding diversity across Elon and learning from each other.

"Elon is a multifaith community, it's super important that we all come out and show the connection between our different religious and cultural traditions and also to gain a religious and cultural understanding," Faloni said. "We like to call it a religious screen, for the experiences of others. It makes us better people ourselves and also more accepting of our fellow peers than our experiences."

## North Carolina Student Legislature empowers students to shape state politics

NCSL invites students to engage with state politics through discussions and debates

Gaby Maldonado  
Elon News Network

The North Carolina Student Legislature is a nonprofit organization that gives students a firsthand experience of the legislative process at universities throughout North Carolina, including Elon. Through drafting legislation and debates, students enhance their public speaking skills and work on real-world policy ideas.

Junior Eva Farmer, who serves as the vice president of Elon's chapter of NCSL, explained that members bring resolutions to meetings — written proposals for new laws or changes to existing ones — sparking debates among the group.

"It's a lot of fun," Farmer said. "It's hampered by the fact that we have a time limit for how long we talk."

Every Monday, NCSL holds meetings where members propose resolutions on various topics, ranging from education to abortion and other pressing issues. During these meetings, students debate and refine these proposals with the help of other members for practice. The goal is to improve members' understanding of how laws are created and discussed and to equip them with the skills necessary to advocate and effectively present their ideas.

John Bloh, a senior political science major and president of Elon's NCSL, said he views the organization as a way for students to engage with state politics.

"Students write their own pieces of legislation like the real North Carolina legislature would do and get a feel for what state politics is like in the state of North Carolina," Bloh said. "It gives a pathway for students to participate in the state as well as learn about issues that people are currently facing."

In addition to campus meetings, NCSL students participate in interim conferences, or ICs, held once a month across North Carolina at schools like the University of North Carolina Charlotte, Campbell University and Belmont Abbey College.

Bloh said these conferences are valuable networking opportunities where Elon students can connect with other students interested in politics.

"All of them have different beliefs and commitments, but everybody is commonly interested in North Carolina state politics," Bloh said. "One of the best things that we provide for Elon students is the ability to interface with other political people from other schools, our age, and see what options are out there."

Thomas Kerr, a professor in political science and public policy at Elon, is the adviser for NCSL. Kerr said NCSL promotes student engagement with differing ideas.

"You can take on a perspective outside of your own, and that makes you analyze your own beliefs even further," Kerr said.

Beyond these conferences, NCSL hosts an annual session in Raleigh. Here, students can present their fully developed resolutions to other universities and propose them to the North Carolina legislature for consideration as actual state laws.

"You see someone propose a resolution

at the beginning of fall semester, and they kind of workshop it, and then at the end of the year, they have this beautiful, really well thought of resolution, and you're presenting it to the whole state," Kerr said.

This semester, NCSL has increased its membership and created a welcoming environment, Farmer said.

"We're trying to make the club a lot more inclusive to people," Farmer said.

While developing resolutions and debating them is exciting, Kerr emphasized the challenges that come with legislative work.

"Yes, it's easy to recognize a problem and come up with a solution to address that

problem, but the nitty-gritty details in the legislative process, where's funding come from, are you going to raise taxes? Is the real challenge for students," Kerr said.

As students explore how the government works, Kerr emphasizes the importance of maintaining their values.

"I also want students to hold on to their morals and stick to their guns when it comes to policy issues," Kerr said. "Politics is a living, breathing thing, and everyone can get involved with it; your opinion matters."

Students interested in joining NCSL can attend meetings at 6 p.m. every Monday in Gray Pavilion 103.



GABY MALDONADO | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshmen Madison Bryce, left, and Ghufuran Abd take notes during the North Carolina Student Legislature meeting Nov. 11.



# The man with a silver thumb



Bob Rice sits by his workshop desk located in his daughter's garage. Rice is 91 years old and started his hobby of silverware repurposing five years ago.

LILLY MOLINA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## Elon alum, local artisan creates jewelry and other knickknacks from vintage silverware

**Lilly Molina**  
Elon News Network

With shaky hands, Bob Rice opened one of the various plastic storage cabinets in his garage. Inside are a mix of wooden, plastic and shoe boxes. Some are labeled vintage spoons, forks and coins, but that's not what he is looking for. He scans his inventory with his thick lenses that he calls his glasses, but he eventually finds a box labeled knives.

He takes it out and, with his walker, shifts his weight over to the counter next to him. Rice looks through the box of vintage knives and picks a few of them out with unique vintage designs ranging from flowers to line patterns. He likes knives the best: they are perfect for making rings. Making a high pitch-cutting sound, the band saw Rice uses cuts around half the handle, holding the scraps for a later use and isolating the half that is decorated with a design. Now as sharp as the blade he sawed off earlier, Rice smooths it out on a belt sander before he bends it into a size-adjustable ring in fewer than 30 seconds. He then tosses it into a tumbler to make it shiny.

Instead of relaxing in his retirement, Rice sells at The Main Line, an artisan goods shop located in downtown Graham but also takes commissions. Over these past five years, Rice estimates that he's made around \$50,000 in profit from this side hustle. This uncommon hobby all started when Rice was casually surfing through videos on YouTube and fell upon someone making a miniature reindeer from a fork.

"So I said, 'I got a few pieces,'" Rice said. "So I made a Rudolph, and it grew from that."

"Grew" is an understatement. It exploded.

Elon alum '61 Bob towers at 6'5", his walker barely half his size. He has hearing aids in both ears and wispy white hair barely covering the top of his head. He

wears a life alert bracelet on his right wrist. He is turning 92 in February.

### The people pleaser

Rice and his wife, Racine, had worked at AT&T for 18 years before being offered early retirement in 1989 when Bob was 58. With an unexpected retirement, Bob took up woodworking to kill time. He said those skills helped him pick up silverware art fast. Despite not having formal training, he learned quickly the hobby of silverware repurposing by watching YouTube videos and then from there developed his own style.

Bob gets most of his supplies from eBay. He said his creations can be dated to over 100 years old and he has enough inventory — around 400 to 500 pieces to be exact — to continue making rings. He has cabinets full of silverware awaiting transformation in addition to drawers filled to the rim of jewelry ready to be put on shelves.

"I like to do it," Bob said. "I like to please people."

One of Bob's most popular items, especially during Christmas, are guardian angels made from silverware. Whenever he is making an angel, ring, bracelet or others — nothing goes to waste. He will repurpose the excess metal scrapings and turn them into earrings or pendants. He even uses coins to make jewelry. The man has made letter openers, ornaments and bolo ties all from silverware.

Including the necklace that rests on Racine's chest.

"This was made from a bracelet that my father gave me when I was in high school," Racine said. "It was broken, of course and not usable, but I had saved it. And Bob took that off of it, put it on here."

### The high school sweethearts

Native to Burlington, Bob and Racine had their first date in Whitley Auditorium. They had two tickets to see Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." Bob was the basketball star at Williams High School, but despite his local fame, he only had eyes for Racine.

He was a senior and she was a junior. He noticed her during study hall only in passing and in that short amount of time,

Bob gathered the courage to ask Racine out. They got married on Thanksgiving Day in 1954; it was a small ceremony with only immediate family.

This upcoming Thanksgiving will mark their 70th marriage anniversary.

Bob and Racine's daughter, Carrie Gumbrecht, said her father had always been "gruff" or the "fix it" type of man, but when it came to Racine, he had always been tender.

"It's a model that you don't see that much anymore," Gumbrecht said. "I'm very fortunate to have had my parents for all of my life."

Bob said Racine and Gumbrecht are his best salespeople.

Gumbrecht loves to wear his jewelry and said she gets compliments when she wears it out. This back-door sales model has gotten Bob numerous commissions, but to Gumbrecht it's more than just that. It's her father's legacy, and she said every time she looks at what he has made for her, it will remind her of him, even when he is gone.

### The old man

Bob built a hydraulic press a year ago to mold designs such as a starfish into his silverware creations. He said stainless steel is no good because it is almost impossible

to drill holes into. He mainly uses silver-plated metal, but he also has a small inventory of sterling silver, even though he doesn't come across it often.

He said he likes doing this pastime because it keeps his mind active.

But he can't keep this hobby up forever.

"He is slowing down," Gumbrecht said. "The last year I have seen a big difference, but his mind is still sharp. He's always thinking about and looking up silverware sites."

Thinking now about his age, Bob pauses for a moment. "I don't know how long, much longer I can keep it up, to tell you the truth."

In the beginning of September, the tumbler — which he made himself — had finished rolling and Bob was ready to see his shiny treasure. After a misstep trying to reach his walker, he had fallen, shards of rocks and jewelry scattered all over the garage floor. With Gumbrecht inside, he hollered for help, but no one responded. He ended up laying there for a few hours before a neighbor ran to the rescue.

With an inventory that could last up to 10 years, technically Bob could stop, but he doesn't want to.

Instead, Bob sits back down at his work desk, grabs a set of pliers, and moves on to manufacturing the next creation.



LILLY MOLINA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bob Rice works on attaching clasps on bracelets made from spoon handles. Rice takes commission orders but also sells at The Main Line, located at 134 N Main St. in Graham.





Redshirt junior punter Jeff Yurk punts the ball against Maine on Nov. 16. Elon won the last home game 31-25.

PAUL BARRETTO | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jeff Yurk is leading the Football Championship Subdivision in yards per punt

Miles Hayford  
Elon News Network

Many football teams look to their quarterback, running back, wide receiver or maybe a player on defense to be their star. It's an uncommon occurrence when a football team's best player is on special teams. Right now, Elon football has one of those rare athletes.

Redshirt junior punter Jeff Yurk has been a bright spot for Elon in a position that can go unnoticed.

Yurk has had a great year so far with 25 50+yard punts, including a career-long of 72 yards. With one game left on the schedule, Yurk leads the Football Championship Subdivision in yards per punt with 48.1, which is on pace to be the third best single-season average in FCS history. Yurk's career average is also currently in the top 20 in FCS history.

Elon football special teams assistant coach who specializes in kickers and punters, Mike Nall, attributes Yurk's success to his purpose and process-driven approach.

"Jeff takes a real analytical approach to everything he does," Nall said. "He's almost like a mad scientist when it comes to diagnosing what he does and getting better at what he does. He looks at every little nuance of the process of punting a football. He's very purpose-driven, I would say, and process-driven. He doesn't come out here and warm up like most punters do, where they just rattle off balls. Every time he punts the ball, he punts it with a purpose."

Yurk's life as a punter began back in his freshman year of high school where he abandoned his previous time as a junior varsity quarterback to join the varsity team. Being a kicker and punter was his way in, and it took off from there.

In 2021, he arrived at Elon and started as the team's punter. During his first two years at Elon, Yurk began to rack up awards and recognition. In 2023, he transferred to the University of Pittsburgh. However, he didn't stay long and returned to Elon this year, where he has had the best season of his career.

"Elon was really the perfect place for me, and I didn't really realize it my freshman and sophomore year," Yurk said. "There's a saying, 'You have to leave to understand what you're missing out on,' right? And that's what I did. I left and I understood what I was missing, and I missed this place so much."

Yurk cited Elon's proximity to his hometown of Southern Pines, North Carolina, the coaching situation and the friendships he has here as reasons that brought him back to campus.

Being a punter, Yurk is forced to adopt a mindset far different than any other player on the football field. Punters, like any other athletes, want to excel and be out on the field to contribute, but their additions aren't desired as much as other football positions. The offense of a football team ideally wants to score every possession and avoid having to use their punter to give the opponent the ball back. Yurk is in a position that only is utilized when the offense stalls out and is forced to punt.

"I don't necessarily want to be out there as much, but at the same time, it brings me joy taking advantage of it when I do put it down inside the 10," Yurk said. "I just love helping the team, that's the main thing."

Yurk said he is supportive of the offense when they are clicking and don't need to use him as much; he appreciates the rest. Nall emphasized the help punters give to the defense.

"He makes the job easier for the defense because he flips field position for the team," Nall said. "We go from being backed up in our own end zone to the defense backing the other team up in their end zone. He understands how critical what he does is to the success of the team, and he puts that above everything."



HE'S ALMOST LIKE A MAD SCIENTIST WHEN IT COMES TO DIAGNOSING WHAT HE DOES AND GETTING BETTER AT WHAT HE DOES. HE LOOKS AT EVERY LITTLE NUANCE OF THE PROCESS OF PUNTING A FOOTBALL.

MIKE NALL  
ELON FOOTBALL SPECIAL TEAMS COACH

Nall praised Yurk's focus on the team getting better as a whole while perserving through the lack of recognition punters get.

"He wants to be good as a punter, but he also wants to be good to make the team better," Nall said. "It can be a thankless job at times because you don't hear people talk much about punters. You don't hear a lot about them, and he understands that, and that's not a big deal to him."

Punters, being a part of the special teams group, can be separated and disconnected from the team during practice. However, Yurk said there is no division outside of practice.

"Out of practice, we're always just either playing ping-pong in the room or playing

video games with the fellas," Yurk said. "It's good vibes all around, we're not singled out."

Over the last few years at Elon, Yurk has gotten better, improving average punt distance each year. His freshman year, he averaged about 37 yards per punt, then averaged about 44 yards the next year, and has gotten close to 49 yards at certain points this year. Yurk said that he focused on always trying to improve.

"There's a lot of technique with punting, and I'm always trying to get better," Yurk said. "If it's trying to get more distance, trying to get more hang time, trying to put it in the right spot more often, something like that. Everything kind of comes down to form and how I'm trying to swing at the ball."

Yurk has focused on matching distance with hang time, and making sure the ball lands in a location where Elon can gather around the ball and the returner to force a fair catch.

One of the reasons Yurk has developed into one of the best punters in the nation, according to Nall, is his conditioning and discipline. Nall said Yurk has been taking more pride in working out and watching what he eats. He also praised Yurk's improvement under pressure.

"He's just continually worked on both the physical and the mental aspect of punting, and the mental aspect really is the last thing to come," Nall said. "It always is. It is with players of any position. They mature and they learn how to deal with the pressure of playing a football game, and he's learned how to deal with that pressure, and it's gotten progressively better every year."

As the end of the 2024 season nears, Yurk has one more year left at Elon as he prepares to pursue football after college. Yurk has NFL talent, but he needs to take a few more steps to get to that level, according to Nall.

"I really want to get into the NFL," Yurk said. "That's definitely the goal for that young kid that played in the park all those years ago."