

## ‘We definitely don’t want anybody to feel hungry’ ABSS navigates free meals, rising lunch debt

USDA gives funding to district; CEP schools receive free, reduced meals

Anjolina Fantaroni  
Elon News Network

At 10:32 a.m. at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School, trays clatter as cafeteria workers rush to prepare the first wave of students for lunch. In this Community Eligibility Provision school, most students eat for free — no forms, no payment and no questions. For many, this may be the most reliable meal they get all day.

The Alamance-Burlington School System has 28 CEP schools according to Spencer Brown, the executive director of ABSS Nutrition. CEP is a program that allows high-poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students without requiring applications for free and reduced-price meals. Eight ABSS schools are not part of CEP but still provide breakfast to students for \$2 and lunch for \$3.10. In those schools, students can rack up lunch debt.

Lori Snow, ABSS nutrition reduced meal specialist, said her job is to process all the lunch applications that come in so that children can eat — and it’s a rewarding experience.

“Doing everything I can to get most children to qualify for free meals,” Snow said.

However, no child goes hungry during the school day.

Brown said providing meals for students is exactly what he signed up for.

“We definitely don’t want anybody to feel hungry, so we’ll do everything we can to make sure that students get a meal,” Brown said.

### The USDA

ABSS receives funding for the nutrition program in several ways, such as reimbursements, a la carte sales and an annual United States Department of Agriculture grant that covers ingredient costs. The USDA’s child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, provide millions of children with meals that support their health and development.

Students may be eligible for free and reduced-price meals based on multiple factors such as participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, their home status, household income or family size. According to the USDA, children in families below 130% of the federal poverty level are eligible for free meals, and families with income between 130% and 185% of the level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

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ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School students stand in the lunch line for lunch wraps and nachos Nov. 14.

## The Blend Burlington celebrates Hispanic roots, culture

Downtown Burlington shop combines community, culture, coffee

Gaby Maldonado  
Elon News Network

When Lucero Marti first walked into The Blend seven years ago, she quickly fell in love with the space.

“I asked God, ‘I’d really love for this place to be mine one day,’” Marti said.

And through her involvement with the local Rotary Club, a global nonprofit humanitarian organization, Marti’s connection to The Blend deepened. The Rotarians began holding their meetings at the shop, giving her the chance to build a friendship with the former owner.

When the former owner found himself unable to continue running the business after getting married, he approached Marti about taking it over. That turning point led to a new beginning, and she became the new owner Jan. 2.

As she settled into her new role, Marti focused on redefining the shop’s purpose. She said she wanted it to feel like more than just a coffee shop.

“We have created a safe space for everyone to come here,” Marti said. “We want everyone that comes in here to feel loved, to feel accepted, to feel that they fit in somewhere.”

Today, The Blend serves as a community hub where people gather over coffee, food, and conversation. What began as a small café has expanded to include event space, catering services and a mobile coffee cart. The shop sources beans from across Latin America — including Mexico, Honduras, and Colombia — uses local ingredients and aims to provide a welcoming environment for all.

Beyond creating a space where everyone

feels at home, Marti wanted The Blend to celebrate Hispanic culture through its menu. One way she does this is with a traditional Mexican sweet bread.

“We incorporated conchas, and I really wanted that to be noticeable that we are a Hispanic-based establishment,” she said.

Marti also draws on family traditions with her drinks.

“I have also come up with chocolate drinks, which is chocolate Abuelita, because when I grew up, my grandmother used to make that for me, and it took me back to my childhood,” she said.

The Blend’s sense of community also shows in the relationships formed between staff and visitors.

Miranda Hill, a shift lead and barista, said the café creates an environment where people can relax, work or connect with others.

“The atmosphere is very chill and laid back. We have a lot of people that come and study, do school and work. So it’s definitely more of an atmosphere for people to stay and chill,” Hill said.

She added that the cultural influences at The Blend make the space feel distinctive for people.

“I definitely think it’s cool, because they always incorporate fun words, like Spanish words, especially for the fall and winter menu. It makes it fun and different,” she said.

Hill said that personal connections with customers are a key part of what makes The Blend unique.

“We go the extra mile. We have a lot of regulars that come in every day, so being able to talk to them and getting to know them on a more personal level, I would definitely say, is one thing that sets us apart.”

And regulars can see the impact the café creates.



GABY MALDONADO | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Miranda Hill makes coffee at The Blend Burlington on Nov. 21.

Carlos Hernandez, a regular who has been visiting The Blend for several years, said the café feels like more than just a place to grab coffee — it’s a space where people are seen and valued.

“It’s a place in which you can walk in not knowing a single person, and then by the time that you leave, you’ve at least met one person who shares something similar, whether it’s what you believe in, what you do, what you work in and just feeling welcome,” Hernandez said.

Hernandez, who is Mexican, said the café’s Hispanic roots play a meaningful role in why it resonates so deeply with him. For him, seeing a local business embrace the culture is necessary.

“I think it’s something that the community needs, especially in the times that we’re currently living in,” he said. “It makes you feel a part of it, and want to participate even more.”

Hernandez said the café offers a sense of

connection for Hispanic customers.

“I think the impact that it leaves in the Hispanic community is one of inclusion, and that you can be far away from home, but you can still have a little piece of that regardless of where you go,” he said. “You can see that in the drinks, you can see that in the music. You can see that in the people that come in. You’re going to be able to find somebody that’s like you in places that you might not think they’re going to be at.”

For Marti, that sense of belonging is what she hopes people feel when they walk through The Blend’s doors.

“I want the community to know that they can come in here,” Marti said. “Not only are they going to find quality espresso or their favorite drink, but I want them to know that they will be seen, they will be valued and that they can feel that they are home away from home.”



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THE PENDULUM

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ENN seeks to inspire, entertain and inform the Elon community by providing a voice for students and faculty, as well as serve as a forum for the meaningful exchange of ideas.

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ENN is committed to accurate coverage. When factual errors are made, we correct them promptly and in full, both online and in print. Online corrections state the error and the change at the top of the article. Corrections from the previous week's print edition appear on this page.

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CORRECTIONS

In the Nov. 19 edition of The Pendulum, the brand student athlete Caden Strickland partners with was spelled incorrectly. The correct name is ChicknLegs Running.

The article "Kopper Top Life Learning Center seeks to boost community mental health" in the Nov. 19 edition of The Pendulum includes a quote that was incorrectly transcribed. The correct quote from Sheila Daily is "It's not just about making them do."

The answer key for the crossword in the Nov. 19 edition of The Pendulum was missing 10 down. The answer is "Santa."

Elon News Network regrets these errors.

# Elon establishes Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Program to start Fall 2026

Miles Hayford

Elon News Network

Elon University is launching a new Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program starting in the fall of 2026.

Students will have the option to choose between taking the program either at Elon's main campus or at the university's Charlotte campus. The program will have a hybrid model where students complete their first year of coursework in person and then complete online coursework while they have in-person clinical placements in the second year. The second year will include a 600 hour internship requirement. It will be a 60-credit program.

Judy Folmar, the program chair and interim program director, said the program is answering a need for more mental health professionals. She said that's part of the reason Elon decided to launch the program.

According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 97 out of 100 counties in North Carolina are considered mental health professional shortage areas. The state also ranks 38th in the nation for access to mental health care, according to nonprofit Mental Health America.

Folmar said this industry will grow at a high rate in the future. But she emphasized quality over quantity.

"It's not just about churning out more counselors. It's about developing and graduating ethical, competent, compassionate mental health professionals who will be trained with the absolute best preparation they can have," Folmar said.

Folmar said the two locations will allow students to choose to study at either a rural



ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR

Psychology and Human Services Building on South O'Kelly Avenue.

or urban campus. The decision to have online coursework was made to help students get used to the technology and increased usage of telehealth in today's world.

"It's really the best of both worlds that students are getting," Folmar said. "In-person instruction, scaffolded to prepare them for the online learning, and then they move into the clinical placements while they have online support and supervision. And once they're in their clinical placements, they'll have site supervisors who are trained clinicians."

The focus on online courses also meets students where they are, according to Folmar. She said that the average counseling student is working and is in their 30s or 40s, so online courses are needed for them to attend.

The program will also offer preparation for the National Counselor Exam, which certifies any student nationwide looking to become counselors. This preparation will come in the form of all students being required to pass the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination. According to a university press

release, this will help students get ready for the NCE and build confidence and familiarity with the online exam process. Folmar said they will also emphasize teaching trauma-informed counseling. According to the University of Buffalo, trauma-informed care focuses on realizing the prevalence of trauma and being aware of trauma that is present in everybody.

The launch of the program comes amid a statewide call for more investment in mental health services after several high-profile killings this year, including the stabbing of Ukrainian Iryna Zarutka in August. The death of Zarutka inspired a sweeping crime bill that ushered in several new criminal law changes, but Gov. Josh Stein has urged state lawmakers to fund more mental health services.

Applications for the Fall 2026 cohort are now open until April 15, 2026. Folmar said she expects to have 24 students for each campus' cohort next year. She encouraged prospective students to reach out with any questions.

## Students prepare for internship, job searches

Students looking for internships, job opportunities encouraged to start applying early

Elissa Leka

Elon News Network

From freshmen starting to navigate the professional world to seniors preparing for post-graduate opportunities, understanding how to navigate the application process can make all the difference in landing an internship.

For some students, such as freshman Alexander Saltsgaver, an important question is how to begin the search.

"I was in something called the Academy of Engineering in high school," Saltsgaver said. "We had to get an internship for the program, and so we did mock interviews."

He said his familiarity with the internship process helped grow his confidence with actual interviews. He said he doesn't feel as fearful about being judged by recruiters, but finding those opportunities has become difficult for him in college.

Amber Moser, director of internships in the School of Communications, said that all students in the School of Communications are required to complete an internship before they graduate. The Love School of Business also requires students to complete an internship and all students can receive an Experiential Learning Requirement credit for completing an internship.

Part of Moser's job is to be the instructor for the required internship course. However, she said there is more to her role.

"I also work with students to support them in looking for internships and securing opportunities," Moser said.

Whether support means being the person who sends out email lists with relevant opportunities, setting up one-on-one meetings, or even being a friendly face in the career advising office, Moser is here



ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR

The Student Professional Development Center in Moseley Center on Dec. 1

to help students. She said she believes it is important for students to start thinking about career planning and internships in their first year at Elon.

"That doesn't mean they need to start seeking out an internship right away," Moser said. "Planning for it and researching and putting the pieces in place to be successful in your first year is really beneficial, particularly if students are double majoring, depending on the kind of double major they have."

Moser noted that Elon has a plethora of sources available for student success, such as the Student Professional Development Center, on-campus career advisers, the Elon Job Network, lists sent to students with networking event opportunities, Elon Q&A, Big Interview and the Writing Center.

Moser said it can be easier for applicants to reuse cover letters for different jobs, but this won't help students stand out as candidates.

"It's obvious if it's a letter that has been replicated over and over again and isn't tailored to the company and role," Moser said. "Mentioning the company specifically, mentioning the role specifically, talking about not just what the role can do for you,

but what you can do for that organization and what skills you can contribute, and also keywords are a big deal."

Moser said that while not every job will require a cover letter, tailoring anything from a resume to supplementary questions helps candidates stand out from the crowd.

Mikayla Williams, a senior psychology major and a sociology and leadership studies double minor, said it is important to prepare early for internships.

"A lot of people want to have multiple internships, but they don't necessarily realize that you have to start early, getting the experiences that will make you a competitive applicant," Williams said. "A lot of the time, you have to delay the application so that you can get those experiences."

She said that the many jobs and internship experiences she had during her time at Elon have shaped her ability to navigate the professional world.

"Being able to have positions on campus and community building aspects has really shown me that's what I want to do after I graduate," Williams said.

Williams said her advice to underclassmen is to remain persistent, be prepared and do a lot of research.





COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COALITION FOR ALTERNATIVES TO THE DEATH PENALTY

Advocates and members of the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty gather for a weekly vigil at Central Prison in Raleigh.

# Advocates against the death penalty react to 'Iryna's Law,' potential implications

New law could bring back executions to state after 20-year pause

**Miles Hayford**  
Elon News Network

Kristin Stapleford still remembers the early morning of Dec. 6, 2002 when her uncle Ernest Basden was executed at 2 a.m.

An ice storm had swept across North Carolina, making it a chilly night as she and other family members anxiously awaited Basden's scheduled execution at Central Prison in Raleigh.

"I've never been claustrophobic in my life. That day, I became claustrophobic," Stapleford said.

Stapleford's uncle is one of over 800 people that North Carolina has executed, but the state has seen an almost 20 year pause on the death penalty due to legal challenges. However, HB 307, or 'Iryna's Law,' could spark a return of the death penalty to the state. The sweeping crime bill, which took effect Dec. 1, addresses a number of crime related issues but includes an amendment that directs the state to find another form of execution if lethal injection, the state's current method of execution, is found to be unconstitutional or not available. The state would have to choose a method adopted by another state such as the use of a firing squad.

Stapleford said that this new legislation brings back difficult memories.

"It's horrid. It just brings up all these emotions and feelings of December 6, 2002," Stapleford said. "There is no justice in the death penalty. It's injustice. People try to use the Bible. In the Bible, there's a verse that says, 'An eye for an eye'. Well, in my opinion, an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Basden was sentenced to death in 1993 for the murder of Billy White. Basden was convicted alongside his nephew Lynwood Taylor and White's wife, Sylvia White. Sylvia planned the murder-for-hire scheme. According to Stapleford, Sylvia hired Taylor initially who proceeded to

approach Basden. Basden, whose mother died when he was 14, was a recluse, Stapleford said.

"He was kind of depressive, and he didn't like to be around a lot of people, and he had his own mechanic shop, and he worked on cars, and he liked to be to himself," Stapleford said.

Taylor approached Basden about the job and Basden refused and called him crazy at first, but later accepted due to a need for cash. He later killed Billy with a shotgun high on drugs supplied by Taylor, according to Stapleford. Stapleford said that she condemns what he did, but that she doesn't think he knew what he was doing because of the drugging.

Taylor and Sylvia both avoided the death penalty and received life sentences, which Stapleford said she believes is unfair.

According to the Wilmington Star-News, six jurors signed statements that they would have chosen for life without parole if that sentence had been available at the time.

Stapleford was 21, coming home from college on a weekend, when she found out about the murder. Her mother, Basden's sister, was upset and told her daughter about it. From that point on, Stapleford, who hadn't seen her uncle since she was a child, decided she wouldn't let her mother go through that alone. She and her mother visited Basden in the county jail that he was being held at.

She attended all of the trial proceedings of the case, which was her first time in a courtroom. She said that she was "scared to death." Once he was sentenced to death row, Stapleford and her mother visited Basden once a month for nearly 10 years. While on death row Basden became a Christian and led prison services.

On the night of the execution, Basden's family members, including Stapleford, were able to visit with him.

"My uncle hugged my mom with so much emotion that he lifted her up off the floor when he hugged her because she hadn't hugged him in 10 years," Stapleford said.

Basden died at the age of 50 and his



COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COALITION FOR ALTERNATIVES TO THE DEATH PENALTY

Kristin Stapleford and other loved ones of those executed in North Carolina march in solidarity against the death penalty.

final words asked for forgiveness. "I killed Billy White. I'm sorry for it. And I pray that his family will come to forgive me and let time heal their wounds. And that's all we can do," Basden said.

Stapleford said that before this experience, she didn't have an opinion on the death penalty, but it radically changed her perspective. She said she promised her uncle on the day of his execution she would not give up the fight and she would always advocate against the death penalty.

She is now a member of the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, a statewide coalition of organizations committed to ending the death penalty. Through the NCCADP, she takes part in marches and vigils, along with talking to other loved ones of people on death row who were executed.

According to NCCADP executive director Noel Nickle, the coalition was founded to educate the public and lawmakers and does advocacy campaigns, such as their two-year commutation campaign that led to Gov. Roy Cooper commuting 15 death sentences in 2024.

Nickle said that HB 307 has added a sense of urgency to the coalition's efforts.

"It's a mess, and it's harmful, and we will stand against it as best we can with all of our partners and try to defeat the negative ramifications that have already started to take place because of it," Nickle said.

Some of the alternatives to the death penalty that the NCCADP emphasizes are increasing resources and services for survivors of violent crime, family members of homicide victims and people who are reentering society after incarceration. Nickle also said that life without parole needs to be chosen over the death penalty.

Nickle said she is confident that they will abolish the death penalty in North Carolina, but it is a matter of resolve and time. Amid the possibility of executions restarting in North Carolina, both Nickle and Stapleford said that continuing the fight against capital punishment is a must.

"If I could tell anyone, any family that has to go through this, you know, that has a loved one on death row, do everything you can for your loved one that's on death row," Stapleford said. "Advocate for them. Don't let it stop after they've been executed. Keep fighting."





Cafeteria Worker Patricia Hill prepares lunch at Elon Elementary School on Nov. 3.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

# CEP schools offer students free meals; non-CEP schools battle debt

## ABSS | from cover

Snow said it is challenging when a family does not qualify for meals, or when they used to qualify and no longer do, and they question the outcome.

“People will say, ‘But my mortgage is this much, or my car payment is this much.’ That’s not part of the equation,” Snow said. “And people don’t understand that.”

Every school in ABSS receives the same food, and the menus are roughly the same. According to Charlene Pruitt, ABSS meal planner and special diet coordinator, the high school menus may differ slightly because of USDA regulations, such as older students receiving more sodium and fruit on their trays.

Pruitt said ABSS is required to follow strict guidelines for special diet and allergy requests under the USDA Food-Safe Schools Action Guide. Allergy planning starts with a doctor’s note and continues with flagging the student’s account each time the cashier scans a lunch card.

“They should be looking at that, making sure most of the cashiers know already if a child has an allergy,” Pruitt said. “They already know that student.”

According to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, the top things to know about school meals include evolving and implemented standards, increasing USDA support and overall efforts to help feed healthier. Pruitt said she wishes the public understood the intense planning that goes into the nutrition program.

“There are a lot of regulations,” Pruitt said. “We can’t just put anything we want on the menu.”

The NSLP is designed for students to have five main components in their lunches, such as a protein and a grain, and a vegetable or fruit. ABSS students are not required to grab milk in the line, though it is provided.

Liza Hawkins, cafeteria manager at Harvey Newlin Elementary School, said those regulations matter — even dating back to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act that was a centerpiece of First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move initiative.

“Usually, the meat and grain are together in the entrée itself,” Hawkins said. “They have to have an entrée, and then either a vegetable or a fruit has to be on their tray.”

**CEP vs. non-CEP schools**

As a CEP school, most of Harvey Newlin Elementary School’s students — 510 out of

513 — qualify for free lunch. No students qualify for a reduced rate.

However, at Western Alamance Middle School, which has a total population of 894 students, only about half qualify for free or reduced-price meals — 465 students.

According to Hawkins, Harvey Newlin Elementary sits in a low-income area and the government subsidizes the cost of meals for every student, both breakfast and lunch.

However, she said the hardest part of being a CEP school where so many students qualify for free lunch is avoiding prejudice and protecting anonymity.

“If the need is there, you can still get it, but if the families are able to pay for the school lunch, then they do,” Hawkins said. “But it is difficult because you don’t want to make it known to the children that one pays and one doesn’t.”

Amanda Gantt, school nutrition manager for Western Alamance Middle School, said that since her school isn’t CEP, students have lunch debt that increases rapidly. She said seeing students with a meal debt is frustrating.

“Sometimes they don’t get to participate in extracurricular activities like school dances or things like that if they have a school debt over like 30 bucks,” Gantt said.

Gantt said debt isn’t fair and shouldn’t fall

on the students to pay for their own meals.

“It’s on the parents for not providing for them, and then they get to miss out on fun activities,” Gantt said.

Brown said community members who want to help can contact the district to pay student balances, either by reaching out to schools directly, contacting the School Nutrition Department or contacting the Finance Department to apply money toward lunch debt.

**Why it matters**

According to No Kid Hungry, a campaign to end hunger in the United States, childhood hunger harms students’ ability to focus and contributes to behavioral challenges and poor health. The organization states that consistent, nutritious meals are critical, warning that children who start school hungry often fall behind their peers and struggle to catch up.

Gantt agrees. She said she makes sure students receive full, nutritious meals so they have the energy to learn throughout the day.

“Can’t concentrate when you’re starving or trying to figure out what your next meal is,” Gantt said. “So even if they are in negative balance, we still provide meals for them, and they are still allowed to eat. So that’s great.”



Cafeteria Workers Patricia Carroll and Elizabeth Workman prepare nachos, wraps, vegetables, beans and fruit cups at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School on Nov. 14.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Executive Director of ABSS Nutrition Spencer Brown and Harvey R. Newlin Elementary Cafeteria Manager Liza Hawkins discuss kitchen preparation at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary on Nov. 14.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



# Students celebrate end of semester with ‘Wild West’ Cram Jam



A group of Cram Jam attendees perform “Stacy’s Mom” by Fountains of Wayne during live-band karaoke at Irazú Coffee. Cram Jam was hosted by the Student Union Board and took place throughout the Moseley Student Center and Lakeside on Dec. 7.

ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR



Airbrush Events Equipment Manager Martin Ingram creates custom art requested by students on cowboy hats and baseball caps during Cram Jam on Dec. 7. The airbrush area was one of the busiest attractions at Cram Jam, with more than 50 hats created throughout the event, which ran from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.

ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR



From left, freshmen Izzy Carl and Gianna Stedjan dispense paint onto paper plates to use in painting wooden horseshoes or horse heads during this semester’s “Wild West”-themed Cram Jam on Dec. 7.

ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR



A group of friends pose at the Cram Jam photo booth with their DIY stuffed horses on Dec. 7 in Moseley Center. The horse plushies were the fastest attraction to be cleared out during Cram Jam, with nearly all supplies being taken in under two hours.

ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR



Senior Ben “Farmer” Farmer attempts to stay on the mechanical bull during Cram Jam on Dec. 7 in the Lakeside meeting rooms. After two attempts, Farmer managed to stay on the bull for 15 seconds.

ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR



# United Way of Alamance County provides resources for all communities



The sign inside the United Way of Alamance County on Dec. 1.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The nonprofit directs individuals to partner agencies, provides food and shelter assistance

**Anjolina Fantaroni**  
Elon News Network

Shereá Burnett has been working with United Way of Alamance County for 10 years, writing grant applications and volunteering. But for just over a month, she has served as the organization's president and already has an idea of what the future holds.

"We've had the opportunity to partner in a lot of different ways in the last month, and we're planning some wonderful things for 2026 that I think will be the first time some of those things are done here," Burnett said.

According to Burnett, United Way of Alamance County is part of a global network focused on ensuring that individuals in all communities thrive. Staff at the nonprofit apply for grants in Alamance County and also distribute grants to partner agencies such as food pantries and shelters.

"We've got food deserts, we've got a child care crisis happening statewide, we've got an affordable housing issue that we're affected by," Burnett said.

Burnett said the nonprofit recognizes that not only do those factors affect rural areas, but racial demographics can also play a role.

"We know that what the white community goes through might differ from what the Black community goes through, which might differ from what the Occaneechi go through, which might differ from what our Hispanic community goes through," Burnett said.

Individuals needing help or direction from United Way can call the statewide database at 211. The call provides resources based on their needs, such as providing the locations of food pantries, caregiver resources and disaster recovery. However, Burnett said if people reach out to the United Way of Alamance County, the organization will refer them to partner agencies because it trusts the services those agencies provide.

"We, in no way, shape or form, want to step in and challenge that or trump that in any type of way," Burnett said. "What

we do is send people to the folks that specialize in those services."

Burnett said United Way of Alamance County is aware of the statewide child care crisis and is partnering with local organizations, including Graham Recreation and Parks, to work on an after-school program.

According to the Data Book, the majority of 3 and 4-year-olds in North Carolina were not enrolled in any early childhood education programming in 2021. The Data Book also said 16% of children in North Carolina lived in families where someone had to quit, change jobs or turn down employment because of child care issues.

The United Way's Community Council is a monthly gathering that brings together county professionals, volunteers, individuals and keynote speakers. Tara Nager '12, community partnership manager for United Way of Alamance County, said she oversees working with the community and securing locations.

"What we're trying for 2026 is to rotate different towns and cities within the county, because we are United Way of Alamance County, and so we want to

make sure that we are in all pockets of Alamance County," Nager said.

Nager also creates the Community Council blog announcement, which is a blog newsletter sent out a couple of times a week. Community members can submit announcements such as upcoming events, fundraising opportunities or community meetings.

"We want to make sure that our community is informed with what's happening, and so connecting those folks with those resources and making sure that they're aware of the upcoming events," Nager said.

Nager grew up in New Hampshire and graduated from Elon University with a degree in human service studies. She said she fell in love with the Alamance County community while volunteering at a local after-school program.

“

WE'VE GOT FOOD DESERTS,  
WE'VE GOT A CHILD CARE  
CRISIS HAPPENING STATEWIDE,  
WE'VE GOT AN AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING ISSUE THAT WE'RE  
AFFECTED BY.

**SHEREÁ BURNETT**  
UNITED WAY OF ALAMANCE COUNTY  
PRESIDENT

"That's the great thing about United Way, is we're a convener, so we bring folks together to have conversations, to have meetings, to just have the opportunity to share those resources," Nager said.

Nager said she enjoys giving the community information on events, resources, and the organization's efforts toward reducing food insecurity and improving housing.

"The most rewarding part is knowing that you're not going to see, you may not see the impact on a day-to-day basis, but you know you'll have people come back appreciative of the sharing of the resources, or the time that you spent talking on the phone and just listening being that ear for them," Nager said.



ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tara Nager, Community Partnership Manager, and Shereá Burnett, President of United Way of Alamance County, meet at the organization's office in Burlington on Dec. 1.



# Research project sews university, community together



Brooke Gustafson shows student volunteer Allie Bensimhon how to sew a garment at the Fitting Futures event held in the Elon Costume Shop on Dec. 1.

MEGAN WALSH | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior’s research aims to serve as guide for universities to become support for local communities

**Megan Walsh**  
Elon News Network

From her first trip off campus with the Elon College Fellows Program, senior Brooke Gustafson knew she wanted to use her fellows research project to engage the university with the local community.

“I realized then and there that there was a large bubble around Elon University that wasn’t connecting with the community,” Gustafson said.

That led Gustafson to create her research project, Fitting Futures, which aims to provide free clothing alterations to the local community and establish a model for other universities to replicate the program.

Gustafson is a theatrical design and technology, and arts administration double major. She said she began doing theater in middle and high school, where she also discovered a love for working behind the scenes.

Coming into Elon, she said she fell in love with the campus during a visit, and the Elon College Fellows Program provided her with what she needed to attend the school. A large aspect of the program is completing a research project, and for Gustafson, it became Fitting Futures.

Gustafson said she wanted to take her skill set and apply it to her hope of community engagement. After researching local organizations, Gustafson realized alteration services were missing from the community.

“Other organizations already have methods in which they can provide free attire to people in need, whether that be interview attire or prom dress attire, but there were no organizations that existed for providing free alterations,” Gustafson said. “That made me incredibly curious about, ‘Okay, well, why would that be important to provide alterations for people?’”

Gustafson’s research aims to create a guidebook model for university costume shops to provide free alteration events for

the local community, as well as look at the importance of alterations. In the fall of 2024, she received an Elon Leadership Prize, giving her \$7,500 to put toward her research.

Throughout her research, Gustafson hosted two events at the Elon Costume Shop in the Center for the Arts, and a pop-up shop at the Alamance County Public Library’s Community Closet, where she collected data and tested the event model.

Professor of the performing arts Kayla Higbee and professor of arts administration David McGraw serve as Gustafson’s mentors for the project.

Higbee specializes in costume design and said she helps Gustafson focus on best practices for consent during alterations and making people comfortable in the fitting room. Higbee said getting to help people feel good about their bodies and the alteration experience made her want to join the project.

“When you’re walking in somewhere that’s an intimate space, and you don’t know what to expect, you want to make sure people feel safe,” Higbee said.

Higbee said she appreciates that this project enables students to utilize their skills for the greater good.

“I think we have a specific, certain set of skills that not a lot of people do. So I’m really excited about her guidebook that she’s producing and going to send out to people, and I really hope that inspires other costume shops,” Higbee said.

McGraw has helped Gustafson figure out the logistics and timeline for collecting data for the project. Additionally, he helped her meet with community leaders to learn what the local community really needed.

McGraw said the project provides a way to change the perspective of universities and their impact on the communities around them.

“There’s always the risk of community members seeing universities as being separate, as being elitist, as not serving a function in the community, but just drawing upon community resources,” McGraw said. “This is a way for the faculty, the staff, the students of these universities to really give back and show their connection with the community.”

Gustafson said her research has found that clothing alterations are important because they provide people with a sense of dignity and confidence. She got the chance to see this in action during her alteration events at Elon on April 19 and Dec. 1, as well as during the pop-up at the Community Closet event Nov. 8.

“It’s one thing to have professional attire, but it’s a whole other thing for it to fit you and for it to be specifically made for you. It brings a different level of confidence, and that’s what we’re hoping to achieve,” Gustafson said at the Community Closet event.

## Research turns to reality

Gustafson said holding her community alteration events allowed her to collect data on the event model that she will use to create a guidebook for other colleges to repeat the events.

For her events on campus, she said patrons had to register for a twenty-minute time slot ahead of time. Patrons come in and fill out a pre-event survey before meeting with Gustafson and her student volunteers to figure out what is needed to alter the garment. Then, patrons come back at a later date to pick up the finished alterations and fill out a post survey about their experience.

In addition to figuring out how the process would work for Elon’s Costume Shop, Gustafson said she researched costume shops at other universities to make her guidebook as accessible as possible.

Gustafson said the events are all staffed by student volunteers serving as greeters, photographers and seamsters to complete the alterations. She said students can receive volunteer hours or extra credit for their work, but many don’t need the incentive.

“There’s always at least I’d say 30% of students who aren’t doing it for any sort of hours or incentives or extra credit in a class, which are the things that I provide for them, but they’re just like, ‘Oh no, I just want to serve, I just want to join you,’” Gustafson said. “That’s been really sweet to see that students do want to get involved.”

Maverick Powell is a junior theatrical design and technology student with a focus on costuming. Powell said they have participated

in both of the on-campus events Gustafson has done and they love the community engagement aspect of the project.

“I just like seeing people excited about the clothes that they wear, because I get excited about the clothes that I wear,” Powell said at the Fitting Futures event Dec. 1.

Gustafson also took her research off campus Nov. 8, hosting a booth at May Memorial Library’s Community Closet event, which focused on providing community members with free professional attire.

Gustafson said meeting the community members who attended the Community Closet was one of her favorite memories in her research thus far.

“There was a lady who we completed an alteration for, who was filling out the second half of our survey and got to one of the questions about how it impacted your confidence level, and she started crying out of joy,” Gustafson said. “She turned and looked to us and said, ‘This is the first time that anything has ever fit me in my life, and I really appreciate what you guys are doing to give people back their dignity.’ And that made me start crying.”

## The future of Fitting Futures

Going into the final semester of her research, Gustafson said the goal is to put together her guidebook and promote the project so other universities can begin doing similar alteration events.

Gustafson said she has loved getting to use her opportunities to make an impact, no matter how small.

“Even though this project right now is just at Elon local level, getting to make an impact, even on one life, through giving free alterations means everything to me,” Gustafson said.

After college, Gustafson said she hopes to continue offering alteration services in a similar capacity.

“Who am I to continue the rest of my life making money off of my skills when I could also be giving some of that to others who need it more than me?” Gustafson said. “It’s meant a lot to me. It’s given me a passion for what I do, a passion for service and loving others unconditionally.”



# ‘We’ve forgotten about HIV/AIDS still hits the South as awareness fades

Community reflects on shift in discussion, change in narrative

Nia Bedard  
Elon News Network

When Thomas Clodefelter walked into the American Red Cross in Lexington, North Carolina, he thought he would be making a difference.

“It was one of those things where I had the opportunity to go into the Red Cross and donate blood, and I didn’t think anything about it,” Clodefelter said. “I said, ‘Okay, I’m going to do something good.’ Went in and donated blood, didn’t think anything about it.”

But when he walked into the American Red Cross, little did he know what was flowing through his bloodstream.

“I had just completed a seven-year sentence from prison, maxed it out,” Clodefelter said. “I knew I hadn’t been involved with anybody sexually, pretty much thought I knew my status. But came to find out, six months later, a certified letter came in the mail. I had been exposed to HIV.”

Clodefelter had tested positive for human immunodeficiency virus in October 1990. HIV destroys infection-fighting CD4 cells in the immune system, according to the National Institutes of Health. The lack of CD4 cells can make it difficult for the body to fight off infections, illness and certain diseases. If HIV is left untreated, the infection can progress to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome — AIDS.

HIV is contracted through an exchange of bodily fluids, which can occur through having unprotected sex with someone positive, sharing needles, syringes or other drug injection equipment with someone positive, or through prenatal transmission.

“I KNEW I HADN’T BEEN INVOLVED WITH ANYBODY SEXUALLY, PRETTY MUCH THOUGHT I KNEW MY STATUS. BUT CAME TO FIND OUT, SIX MONTHS LATER, A CERTIFIED LETTER CAME IN THE MAIL. I HAD BEEN EXPOSED TO HIV.”

THOMAS CLODEFELTER  
TRIAD HEALTH PROJECT VOLUNTEER

A year prior to Clodefelter testing positive, the total number of AIDS cases in the United States of America reached 100,000.

But 45 years after the first reported cases of HIV/AIDS in the U.S., the fight against this disease is far from over, especially in the South.

According to the most recent data from the Center for Disease and Control and Prevention, the South accounted for 52% of all HIV diagnoses in the U.S. in 2023.

Professor of communication studies at Vanderbilt University Jeff Bennett said this high diagnosis rate stems from current systems in the South.

“We know that many more Black people live in the south,” Bennett said. “And we know that HIV/AIDS has had a disproportionate effect on people of color or queer people of color in this country, because you have all sorts of issues going on there. You have many people living in rural areas. You might have



Staff members from the Triad Health Project pose for a photo during Greensboro’s Holiday Parade on Dec. 6.

distrust of medical providers, you have the social stigma, you have the access question. There are so many different things to think about.”

The CDC reported 38,000 people received an HIV diagnosis in 2022. Men made up nearly 80% of new diagnoses in 2022. More men have also been diagnosed with HIV than women since 2008, according to the CDC. Men who reported male-to-male sexual contact are the population most affected by HIV, according to the CDC.

Bennett said that while non-straight men do make up a large portion of HIV diagnoses, HIV and AIDS affect all people.

“History sometimes tends to accentuate white gay people or cisgender white people,” Bennett said. “And it affected a lot of different people, and it hit, I think, communities of color particularly hard.”

Black people also made up 38% of new diagnoses in 2023.

Clodefelter is a Black man who contracted HIV through his girlfriend at the time.

“So that was a new part of my life, the new as I call it, my new life after finding out, sat down for four years, went back to the street,” Clodefelter said. “I was really bad, not on medicine, I was going to treatment, but I refused the medicine.”

There is currently no cure for HIV. The primary method of treatment is antiretroviral therapy, which involves mixing two or more medicines from several classes of anti-HIV medicines.

“The political system, the medical system, these institutions really failed on a lot of levels, especially in the 1980s,” Bennett said. “Who really kind of had to push for the government to appropriate more money for these things, for medicine to conduct more drug trials, to push pharmaceutical companies to make those medications available.”

Marie Maher moved to North Carolina from New York in 1990 and has been living in Durham with her wife for 18 years. Maher said that during the ‘90s, people in the South knew about HIV and AIDS.

“People were aware of it, and depending on the person’s exposure and knowledge and stuff like that, there were different comments,” Maher said. “You know, like,

‘maybe they’ll kill themselves all off with this disease,’ and some were ‘what a terrible way to go.’”

While Maher said people in the South in the ‘90s were aware of the epidemic, in the present, she feels that may not be the case.

“AIDS is kind of forgotten about down here,” Maher said. “I mean myself included, unfortunately, just haven’t kept up with it, and you just don’t hear too much about it. And I don’t know how far we’ve come with drugs for treating it.”

Since the first case of HIV was reported in the U.S., more than 700,000 people have died from HIV and AIDS-related causes as of 2018, according to the NIH.

“HIV/AIDS just completely and radically transformed everything,” Bennett said. “A lot of those consequences were negative. When you have that many people who die of a virus, it’s just really hard to understand the sweep of what that kind of event does.”

Clodefelter said he has also noticed a current lack of public awareness of HIV/AIDS.

“How is it that we’re still educating people when there’s no education on TV?” Clodefelter said. “There’s none of the basics that we used to see when HIV first surfaced, when AIDS first surfaced. It’s like because we have the medicines now, treatment. Y’all have forgotten about the conversation piece.”

Dec. 1 is commemorated as World AIDS Day, which was created by the World Health Organization in 1988 to remember the millions of people who have died from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses.

In 2025, the United States did not commemorate World AIDS Day for the first time since 1988.

In addition to some feeling as though awareness of HIV/AIDS has decreased, Bennett said the stigmas surrounding the disease remain prevalent.

“I don’t know if the stigma has ever completely dissipated. The literature on hookup apps is pretty clear about this too, right? The number of people who say drug and disease free, or people who want to know if you are ‘clean,’” Bennett said. “It’s an interesting term, because, of course, the opposite of clean is dirty, right? And that’s



Adriana Adams speaks to staff members during Greensboro’s Holiday Parade on Dec. 6.

basically what is imparted.”

Since testing positive, Clodefelter has been receiving treatment at the Triad Health Project, a nonprofit in Greensboro, North Carolina, aimed at slowing the spread of HIV and providing care to those with HIV.

“I hitchhiked to Greensboro,” Clodefelter said. “My mindset was not only to go in and receive case management and assistance, but also to be a part of this fight.”

Executive Director of the Triad Health Project Adriana Adams said her goal at THP is to give people with HIV/AIDS agency in their lives and autonomy by giving them access to medication and education.

Adams said the South having the largest amount of diagnoses in the U.S. is due to the lack of infrastructure.

“The South is poor, the South is more rural, the South has less infrastructure,” Adams said. “The South has people who are more stigmatized, and so they’re hiding

NIA BEDARD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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# out the conversation'



Thomas Clodefelter and Holly Racer hold a banner for the Triad Health Project's ahead of the group's float during Greensboro's Holiday Parade on Dec. 6.

NIA BEDARD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



A memorial quilt for those who lost their lives to HIV/AIDS hangs in Higher Ground, the community home for the Triad Health Project, on Nov. 17.

it longer. They're not going to the doctor to seek that care."

Since President Donald Trump has started his second term in office, Medicaid, a joint federal and state program that provides health coverage to low-income individuals and families, is set to lose \$880 billion over 10 years due to cuts as a result of the House of Representatives signing The One Big Beautiful Bill.

"We're taking on clients from Winston-Salem, from Rockingham, from Alamance, because they don't have those services anymore," Adams said. "With the current cuts, they're already shutting down. So who knows what's going to happen in a year or two?"

The Commonwealth Fund, an organization focused on promoting a high-performing, equitable health care system, publishes scorecards comparing health care

systems across the U.S. In the Commonwealth Fund's 2025 Scorecard on state health system performance, 14 of the 17 states that the CDC considers part of the South are ranked negatively on the scorecard.

These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia.

The Community Wellness Liaison for THP, Cesar Velasquez Felipe, said nonprofits like THP are meant to serve those who can't access health care for any reason such as finances or documentation.

"That's the moment where community acts," Felipe said. "There's people who have and is living with HIV, they don't have documentation, and they need treatment. So we people can't wait for that. We need to be working to try to get them and try to support

them, because that's the goal."

Felipe said stigmas surrounding HIV don't just occur in the U.S.

"I grew up in a rural area in Mexico where I didn't have any kind of resources," Felipe said. "When I had my first experience for testing, it wasn't the best. I felt a lot of shame, and I don't want people to be there, so I'm trying to make the change by myself."

Adams also said the stigmas around HIV/AIDS are still present today.

“AIDS IS KIND OF FORGOTTEN ABOUT DOWN HERE. I MEAN MYSELF INCLUDED, UNFORTUNATELY, JUST HAVEN'T KEPT UP WITH IT, AND YOU JUST DON'T HEAR TOO MUCH ABOUT IT. AND I DON'T KNOW HOW FAR WE'VE COME WITH DRUGS FOR TREATING IT.”

**MARIE MAHER**  
DURHAM CITIZEN

"There still is a lot of stigma that surrounds HIV," Adams said. "There's a lot of people out there who believe that there still is a death sentence that surrounds it, and then there's people who just have that stigma that they kind of self-actualize."

According to Adams, the stigmas around HIV/AIDS stem from how the virus can be transmitted.

"HIV is connected to sex in people's minds, even though we know there's other

ways that people contract HIV, however, largely we know that transmission is through sex at a high rate," Adams said. "That means that people think of HIV and sexuality and they link them together, and particularly here in the South, sex still carries a lot of connotations that are in the Bible Belt very much heavy for people, and are hard for them to get past, especially in a professional setting."

Holly Racer, the lead case manager, said for THP the most highly diagnosed group is not just men who engage in sexual relations with other men.

"Our data tells us a certain story, especially with the most diagnosed, or the most highly diagnosed group being black women, Latina population, still the men sleeping with men. It's been qualified in people's minds as a gay related disease, and that's not the case," Racer said. "This is not just this one type of person that gets HIV."

As Racer handles the case load for THP and no cure for HIV/AIDS exists, she said the best she can do for her clients is support them the best she can.

"It's that sense of consistency and care and showing up that kind of makes me think, 'Okay, today's been successful,'" Racer said. "It's those little, tiny steps for change or growth with a client, it becomes a lot more about that, or else we would be burnt out on both ends to try to figure out 'Oh, can we accomplish everything?' We can't do everything, but we can do what we're doing."

As HIV/AIDS continues to not have a cure, what THP and other organizations like it can continue to do is educate others and continue to provide medication for those who are positive.

"I've made a promise," Clodefelter said. "I made a promise to God that I wouldn't ever stop talking. I wouldn't ever stop educating. I wouldn't ever stop being in the street passing out condoms, in the barber shops, in the salons, in the schools, wherever he wants, wherever he wants."



# Local healthcare clinic provides lifeline to uninsured Alamance County residents

Open Door Clinic offers free healthcare, located in Burlington

**Miles Hayford**  
Elon News Network

Alamance County resident Valerie Epperson said she doesn't think she would be alive right now if it were not for the Open Door Clinic of Alamance County, a clinic that provides free healthcare to people who do not have insurance.

"When I first started, my diabetes were out of control, and I was just eating anything I wanted. It's like, I just didn't care," Epperson said. "When you have someone there to help you, it keeps your mind open all the time about, 'Hey, you need to do this. You need to stop doing this.'"

Before attending the clinic, Epperson was struggling with diabetes, panic attacks and depression. She had Medicaid for a time, but when her two children turned 18, they, along with her, lost access to Medicaid. Epperson, who is now 61 years old, went a few years without insurance and was unable to see a doctor. She had to go off her medication for panic attacks because she was off Medicaid.

"I'd done pretty good for the first year, and then it just started creeping back up on me, my having the panic attacks and depression, and it got to where I couldn't even hardly get in my car and drive because I felt like I was going to just panic, and so I knew then that I needed to get out and go try to do something," Epperson said.

Epperson looked around and found the Open Door Clinic and has been going there for about seven years. Epperson regularly goes to Open Door, seeing the primary care doctor two to three times a month, the endocrinologist every three months and the ophthalmologist once a year.

The clinic was established in 1990 after a group of physicians recognized that healthcare was needed for the uninsured. According to one of the clinic's phlebotomists, Laura Hale, this need was discovered because of an influx of uninsured patients in the emergency room at Alamance Memorial Hospital in the 1980s.

She said the hospital only had four exam rooms and patients without health insurance often showed up whenever they needed help with anything. So, physicians decided to create a place solely for those people.

Hale, who started working at the clinic in its second year, said it began entirely with volunteers. She said students from Elon University often helped out with the intake of patients. The clinic is now funded mostly by grants and donations.

The clinic is located at 424 Rudd Street



Executive director of the Open Door Clinic, Janay Powell, works with a medical assistant Nov. 20.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

in Burlington and is open for in-person care on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and on Wednesdays for virtual appointments. The clinic's services include primary care, endocrinology for diabetics, eye care, dental care and a social worker for mental health care. The clinic also partners with Cone Health to offer virtual primary care and gets free lab work from Labcorp.

Eligible patients are residents of Alamance County without insurance. Open Door Clinic Board of Directors Chair George Kernodle said that the clinic doesn't see children or the elderly, but mostly focuses on the "working poor." This includes people whose jobs don't have insurance or those with mental health problems that prevent them from working.

According to Janay Powell, the clinic's executive director, the clinic serves about 80-100 patients per month and has about 400 total patients. Powell said it's important to have clinics like this open for those who need it.

"There's a high need," Powell said. "Not everyone can afford health care, and that's not fair. 'Everybody deserves to be healthy and happy and be safe in the environment. I feel like this space is a safe space for our patients in the community.'"

The healthcare crisis extends beyond just the borders of Alamance County.

According to a 2024 Commonwealth Fund study, 9% of working-age adults are uninsured and almost a quarter of adults have insurance that leaves them underinsured. Almost half of U.S. adults say that it is difficult to afford health care costs, according to a KFF health poll. KFF polling also shows that one in five adults has not filled a prescription because of the cost.

The cost of prescriptions is something Epperson struggled with as she wasn't able to get certain medication before coming to the clinic. Now the clinic can write prescriptions for her, and her life has vastly improved, she said.

"Now, my diabetes is under control. I've changed my whole way of eating now because of this place, and I'm going to the gym now every day and walking, and I've probably lost 60 pounds," Epperson said. "It has really, really been a blessing for me."

Hale said that without the Open Door Clinic, people would fall through the cracks of the healthcare system.

"If we can't help them, they're at a loss if they get sick, and the more they get sick, the costlier it is for all of us because then they show up at the hospital, and then the hospital has to write the cost off of whatever they do to treat them," Hale said.

Epperson said free clinics like Open Door are important because they provide more than the emergency room can offer. She said it's important to be able to get a prescription for medication and get one-on-one care from a doctor or a nurse.

The clinic's role in the community has become increasingly important in a turbulent time for healthcare in North Carolina and nationwide. The extension of Obamacare subsidies that help people pay for coverage were the center of the recent government shutdown, which was the largest shutdown ever. Additionally, North Carolina has seen Medicaid cuts as a result of the state budget impasse. Because of the lack of a new state budget, Medicaid services were underfunded, leading to cuts.

Kernodle said the clinic lost a lot of its patients when North Carolina expanded Medicaid in 2023, but a lot of these patients could now return to the clinic as a result of the cuts. Powell said the clinic is ready for these new patients if the need arises.

"With the funding cuts that are going on right now, unfortunately, a lot of people in our community are going to lose Medicaid coverage, but fortunately, we are here for them so they can just come to see us," Powell said.

Powell said federal and state legislators need to understand the impact of rising insurance costs.

“

WHAT IF THAT WAS YOUR BROTHER AND THEY COULDN'T AFFORD THEIR DIABETES MEDICATIONS, AND THEN YOU'RE LOOKING AT THEM IN A COFFIN. WE HAVE TO REALLY CONSIDER THAT AND PUT PATIENTS FIRST.

**JANAY POWELL**  
OPEN DOOR CLINIC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"It's not helpful to our community," Powell said. "I think that you need to consider that and consider what if that was your mom? What if that was your sister? What if that was your brother and they couldn't afford their diabetes medications, and then you're looking at them in a coffin. We have to really consider that and put patients first."

As more Americans struggle to afford healthcare costs, Kernodle said that it's important for Alamance County residents to be aware of the Open Door Clinic. He said they can be unaware of the clinic because of a lack of advertising but he wants residents to know that the clinic is there for them.

"I would like for the community to know that there is an option for people, because a lot of families will have someone in their network who is going to be uninsured at some time, and they don't always know where to go," Kernodle said. "You don't have to be desperate. We're here for them."



Phlebotomist Laura Hale works in one of the Open Door Clinic's labs Nov. 20.

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



# Grief, loss support group provides comfort for Elon faculty, staff



KATE GRAY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rev. Kirsten Boswell checks the meeting schedule for the grief and loss support group for faculty and staff, offered monthly by the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life in collaboration with Counseling Services.

## Monthly meetings involve open discussion, reflection activities

**Kate Gray**  
Elon News Network

Elon University associate chaplain Rev. Julie Tonnesen said loss and grief are universal emotions, but found that they can be difficult for faculty and staff to process while continuing their usual routines.

“Even when we show up to work, that doesn’t mean that we get to put the rest of our lives on the back burner,” Tonnesen said. “Our grief comes with us. It’s not something we can just keep on a shelf at home.”

In collaboration with Counseling Services, the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, began offering a monthly group for faculty and staff to support those affected by loss. Tonnesen started the group in the fall of 2022 and currently runs it with Elon chaplain and Dean of Multifaith Engagement Rev. Kirstin Boswell, and Associate Chaplain for Muslim Life Shane Atkinson.

Boswell said the groups help people feel less alone in processing an event many relate to. According to the American Psychological Association, group therapy is as effective as individual therapy, and may be more effective in some cases by providing stigma reduction and solidarity.

“My team and colleagues that I connect with across campus are constantly sharing stories about people that are impacted by loss within our community, and it’s a part of the human condition, but we don’t always know how to navigate it,” Boswell said. “Part of the care that we want to provide to our community is to help people

that are dealing with this thing that is very common, but yet so very difficult.”

Pathologization is the characterization of a trait as medically or psychologically abnormal. Boswell said that grief is sometimes approached in this way — as a mental or psychological problem requiring treatment rather than a normal reaction to loss.

While Elon’s loss support group is run directly by chaplains from the Truitt Center, Counseling Services assists by consulting about planned activities and providing referrals for patients who need more help. Boswell said that running the groups through the Truitt Center allows for a more holistic approach to processing grief.



WE NEVER WANT TO  
PATHOLOGIZE GRIEF. GRIEVING  
IS A NATURAL THING — IT’S  
PART OF THE NATURAL HUMAN  
PROCESS.

**REV. KIRSTIN BOSWELL**  
ELON UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN

“We never want to pathologize grief,” Boswell said. “Grieving is a natural thing — it’s part of the natural human process. That could be a reason why we tend to put more of a focus on these things coming through the Truitt Center, as opposed to Counseling Services.”

Boswell also mentioned that Counseling Services only serves students, while the Truitt Center is a resource for students, faculty, staff and alumni.

According to Tonnesen, meetings generally involve open discussion time for attendees to share what brought them to the group, followed by an activity. This may include reflecting on a particular prompt or reading, drawing or another visual reflection activity, writing letters, or journaling. Lunch is also often provided.

“So many traditions and cultures around the world gather around a meal, or gather around some kind of food at some point in the bereavement process,” Tonnesen said. “There are so many particulars from different religious and cultural traditions about how long grieving periods should last, what different types of services and remembrances look like, but food seems to be one thing that’s pretty universal.”

The Truitt Center is also in the process of reinstating a similar group for students. Boswell worked with Counseling Services to run a student loss support group shortly after she arrived at Elon in 2021, but she felt they weren’t reaching all the students who needed help.

“We see a lot of students that are impacted by loss because they’ll reach out to someone, a professor will be in touch with them — however it is that they get on our radar — but they don’t necessarily make it to the group,” Boswell said. “After a while, we decided to stop to regroup and figure out what makes the most sense in terms of format.”

According to Boswell, the student loss support group is still in its early planning stage, but more information could be available as soon as next semester.

Tonnesen said the loss support group

is open to all staff and faculty regardless of religious or spiritual affiliation because loss is universal.

“Even for people who don’t ascribe to particular religious or spiritual traditions, grief and loss can bring up questions that are more universal,” Tonnesen said. “What happens after we die? What’s happened to my loved ones who have passed on? Why do bad things happen to good people? Those are questions that humans wrestle with regardless of our religious or spiritual traditions. Sometimes those religious and spiritual traditions can give us tools or wisdom to help us wrestle with those questions, but those questions are not exclusive to a particular tradition.”

Tonnesen emphasized that chaplains and counselors are available to support staff, faculty and students if they need individual support for loss.

“Grief is like a club that you never wanted to be in, but now that you’re in it, you kind of have to figure out what to do with it, because you’re stuck,” Tonnesen said. “You don’t really just get to get out. For some people, that sense of community, the sense of a monthly gathering, gives them a prescriptive way to enter into that grief.”

*For resources, students, faculty and staff can contact the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life at 336-278-7729, staff with Student Care and Outreach in the Office of the Dean of Students at 336-278-7200, or counselors from Counseling Services at 336-278-7280. Faculty and staff may also utilize Elon Work-Life Resources for support. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 988.*

## IF YOU GO

The next group meeting will be held Jan. 14 at Numen Lumen Pavilion 201



# Buried in Elon

## Story of early international student resurfaces

Spanish student lost to 1918 flu  
buried far from home

Lilly Molina  
Elon News Network

Elon University recently renamed Global Commons to Sato Commons after Toshio Sato — the first international student to graduate from Elon in 1920. However, Sato wasn't the only international student attending Elon at the time.

There was also 35-year-old Modesto Lopez from Spain.

Elon Archivist and Assistant Librarian Randall Bowman said he is not sure when Modesto Lopez arrived to Elon's campus, but he was here at the same time as Sato. Though Lopez was a Spaniard, he moved to Elon from Cuba.

"Mr. Lopez had not learned to speak English, so we could not know him well, but his ambition and efforts were worthy and commendable," Bowman read an excerpt from the Christian Sun, a newspaper of the church Elon had been affiliated with before the university

became a multifaith campus.

Bowman said he imagines that Elon supplied Lopez with a translator to help him with his classes and school work. Bowman said he is not sure if Lopez was the first international student to attend Elon.

"I don't know if he's absolutely the first, but he's the first to pass away," Bowman said.

Lopez died Oct. 11, 1918, after contracting the flu that soon turned into a devastating case of pneumonia. During this time, the Spanish Influenza was well underway, with its initial breakout starting in Kansas in March 1918. Fifty million people died worldwide, compared to the 7.1 million people who died during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Christian Sun, then-University President Harper and his wife opened their home to tend to those in critical condition from the flu. Lopez died there, and Bowman said he received the best medical attention the school had, according to information the archives have.

According to Bowman, there were only eight students who did not get sick during

the Spanish Influenza pandemic. Four students, including Lopez, died during the pandemic.

Lopez' untimely death began to raise some questions.

"Apparently, the college reached out to the Spanish consulate, which would have to have been in Washington, and on advice of the consulate, he was buried here in the town of Elon," Bowman said.

According to Durwood Stokes' book, "Elon College: Its History and Traditions," the Spanish consulate was unable to arrange the "disposal of the body." A Christian Sun article published in 1918 said Lopez is buried in Lot No. 113 in what is known today as Magnolia Cemetery.

"This is most likely the case due to the fact that there was a World War going on, plus a pandemic on top of it, and plus travel and moving human remains back then, as it was a vastly different world than today," Bowman said.

According to the Christian Sun article, students and friends had covered his grave with flowers.

Bowman said he sees the importance of keeping a file about Lopez.

"It's important as a historical record,

because of just the significance of the fact that he was an international student among the earliest, definitely, and that he passed away here in extraordinary circumstances," he said.

Bowman said he finds stories like Lopez's interesting.

Senior Alan Kornbluth is an international student from Venezuela. After hearing Lopez' story, he realized that the history of international students on Elon's campus never came up during his time at Elon, except at international student catered events.

"It's tragic. I mean, he didn't graduate," Kornbluth said. "But it also kind of reminds me of the current political climate and how a lot of international students are essentially banking on making it because of college."

For Bowman, it's stories like Lopez' that put joy into his job. Due to the fire in 1923, Bowman said there are not many primary sources he can go off of.

"We have a few, but not that many," Bowman said. "So just having this information is significant."

*Trista Panagakos contributed to the reporting of this story.*



Modesto Lopez is buried in Magnolia Cemetery. He was one of the first international students to attend Elon and was one of four Elon students to die during the Spanish Influenza.

LILLY MOLINA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



# First-generation students push beyond labels



Posters displayed in Moseley Center celebrated the intersectional identities of students, faculty and staff Dec. 2.

TRISTA PANAGAKOS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## Faculty, staff encourage students to build connections

**Trista Panagakos**  
Elon News Network

Elon senior Carlos Gomez Lopez was first introduced to Elon University in ninth grade, when his teachers encouraged him to apply for Elon Academy, a college access program offered to Alamance County high schoolers. Students stay on Elon's campus for three weeks during the summer, living in residence halls, eating in dining halls and meeting members of Elon's staff.

Gomez Lopez said the program helped him become familiar with the school and was one of the reasons he chose to be a student at Elon.

Since his freshman year, Gomez Lopez has been involved in multiple organizations on campus, such as being a student coordinator for El Centro, a hub for students to engage with Latin American cultures. He is also vice president of the Latinx-Hispanic Union and a mentor for high school students in the Elon Academy program.

Sophomore Andres Roldan Alvarado was not as familiar with Elon when he

submitted his application during his senior year of high school. After attending Phoenix Fusion, an event for admitted high school seniors to stay on campus, Roldan Alvarado said he felt Elon was the school for him. He is also a student coordinator for El Centro, an Elon Academy mentor and one of the co-founders of the Alpha Association of Latino Professionals for America.

Both students came to Elon through different paths, and have been involved in different organizations at Elon. This involvement also extends to the first-generation community on campus. Elon considers students first-generation if neither of their parents earned a four-year bachelor's degree.

Last year, Gomez Lopez was part of the First Phoenix Living-Learning Community. An LLC allows students with similar interests or backgrounds to live with one another and participate in specialized floor activities. First Phoenix is made up of first-generation students.

"I was part of the first cohort to ever live on that as part of the LLC, and I feel like there's a lot of support there," Gomez Lopez said. "Because I was an older student, I was part of the mentorship program that was implemented on the floor. So I was assigned

a first-year student, and we would just check in every month."

Roldan Alvarado said he became familiar with the first-generation community on campus when he met Kenneth Brown Jr., the assistant director of first-generation student support services, during the Phoenix Fusion weekend.

Roldan Alvarado said Brown is a constant figure in the Odyssey lounge and in the Center for Access and Success in Mooney.

"It's great," Roldan Alvarado said. "Knowing that you go to a little space, maybe you're not feeling the best, but then Kenny comes in, 'Hey, how you doing?' He just makes it all better."

Gomez Lopez has shared similar experiences with Brown, who encouraged him to apply to live in the First Phoenix LLC.

"I remember I was really put on through Kenny, just because I would just frequently come in just to talk about life, and that was one of the moments where I just came in stressing about housing, and he just recommended the program to me, and ended up working out and I'm glad I went through with it," Gomez Lopez said.

Brown said he sees himself as a connector for students on campus.

"Whenever I'm talking to people about my job and the types of things I do, I tell people that I'm building a stronger first-generation community," Brown said. "Which expands from things like our mentorship program and organizing that, connecting students to students, students to faculty and staff, our major first-gen celebrations."

While Brown's role deals with planning events, facilitating the first-generation mentorship program and advising the First Phoenix LLC, he said he spends most of his time forming connections with students to better support them.

"Lots of my time is just forming relationships with students and hearing about what is going well for them, also what's not going well, and how might we work together to solve any issues that they have, whether it's academic, social, professional," Brown said. "Then also, who are the people in the places on campus that might be available to them to help be a bridge for them with whatever situation that they might be facing."

### IF YOU GO

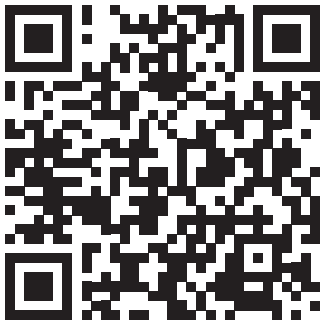
The First Generation Organization Office is located in Moseley 105 F

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# Shuffle N Roll game nights welcome newcomers, regulars



CASSIE WEYMOUTH | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Groups gather regularly to play “Magic: The Gathering” at Shuffle N Roll’s weekly game nights. Game nights are every Thursday at 6 p.m. and Saturday at 7 p.m. All games and all levels are welcome to join in.

Game night becomes a tradition for locals looking for community

**Cassie Weymouth**  
Elon News Network

Shuffle N Roll, a tabletop game store in Mebane, hosts game nights every Thursday at 6 p.m. and every Saturday at 7 p.m. for all game players, but particularly for “Magic: The Gathering” lovers. “Magic: The Gathering” is a collectible trading card game where players “duel” using their customized card decks. The store, opened by owner Austin Smith, has been a longtime dream of his.

This game night has filled a space in Mebane where people can gather and connect to those with shared interests.

“I started Mebane game nights just for something to do in Mebane,” Smith said. “I didn’t like having to drive 15 to 20 minutes out to go somewhere. And then, just because of how it grew, I figured I was able to do it with my personal timeline.”

“HAVING THE IN-PERSON, FACE-TO-FACE CREATES A LITTLE MORE COMMUNITY.”

**JESSE RIBEIRO**  
“MAGIC: THE GATHERING” PLAYER

The game nights have become popular since they started, according to Smith, with some Saturdays reaching up to 80 people in attendance. Smith said he wanted to provide a community space where people can enjoy both meeting up

with their regular groups and meeting new people.

A January 2025 Pew Research center study found that only 38% of men are likely turn to a friend for emotional support.

Jesse Ribeiro, a longtime regular, said he has made new friends he wouldn’t have met otherwise.

“Having the in-person-face-to-face creates a little more community,” Ribeiro said.

Rick Carmichael, another regular, first started playing “Magic: The Gathering” during his army deployments in 2013 and 2014 to Afghanistan.

Since then, the game has become routine in his life, meeting with his group nearly every week to play.

“It’s literally on my way home,” said Carmichael, “I’m able to stop here ‘til about 2 o’clock. The store stays open, that’s one of the best parts. And it’s just, I’m able to see my friends and have a good time.”

Carmichael said the space has provided a place that people can hang out in, something he said Mebane lacked previously. In this space, he said he is able to relax and spend time with friends.

“It’s guy time,” Carmichael said. “I’m able to stay here and stay out of trouble.”

Shuffle N Roll has been open for one year, and Smith has big plans for the space that he said he hopes he will one day achieve.

“I do hope to expand it, add on a bar and a full kitchen and everything else. But that’s years and years down the road,” Smith said.

**IF YOU GO**  
Game nights happen weekly on Thursdays at 6 p.m. and Saturdays at 7 p.m.

Shuffle N Roll is located at 200A N Fifth St. Mebane, NC 27302.



CASSIE WEYMOUTH | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

People play “Magic: The Gathering” and other games at Shuffle N Roll.



CASSIE WEYMOUTH | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Shuffle N Roll’s weekly game nights allow players to meet new people and spend time with friends.





# Elon soccer captain reflects on journey, leadership

AIANA JONES | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior looks back on time at Elon while preparing for graduation

**Aiana Jones**  
Elon News Network

From moving to Europe as a refugee to leaving his family to play soccer in America, Elon senior Majaliwa “Mac” Msabaha has faced a lot of change.

Msabaha, an Elon men’s soccer defender and midfielder, was named to the All-Coastal Athletic Association third team and the CAA All-Rookie Team in

his first year. He started 18 games that year and ranked third among Elon’s field players in minutes played.

With his time at Elon coming to an end in December, Msabaha, his teammates and head coach Marc Reeves are reflecting on his journey.

Msabaha was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo but fled to Denmark early in his childhood because of the Second Congo War. Back in Congo, Msabaha’s brother loved soccer, but couldn’t play after becoming paralyzed. Msabaha would play soccer occasionally, but said he wasn’t very interested at first. When he realized how much the game meant to his brother, he began putting more effort into perfecting his craft.

He said he chose to come to Elon because one of his former teammates from

Denmark was a captain on the team and spoke highly of the program. In the 2021 season, before Msabaha joined the team, Elon men’s soccer won only nine games out of 19. Msabaha wanted to help change that.

Reeves took note of Msabaha’s quick integration into the team.

“Mac played immediately as a freshman. I think he played every minute of every game, pretty much,” Reeves said.

Since then, the team has improved defensively. This season, Msabaha helped anchor a defense that allowed less than one goal per game.

As the team looked for leadership progression among the players, coaches identified Msabaha as a potential captain, a title he earned during his sophomore year. That development reflected the three words Reeves used to describe him: humble, committed and caring.

“He’s an incredible human, and he is

unbelievably dedicated to what he does,” Reeves said. “Maybe he’s not a natural leader in terms of being vocal, loud and imposing, so we wanted to try and develop that during his time here.”

“

HE’S AN INCREDIBLE HUMAN, AND HE IS UNBELIEVABLY DEDICATED TO WHAT HE DOES.

**MARC REEVES**  
ELON MEN’S SOCCER HEAD COACH

There was a private voting process that Msabaha didn’t know about. When he learned the team had voted for him, he said his first thought was to decline the role as he didn’t see himself focusing on others.

After taking some time to think, he said he realized his dream wasn’t to play professional soccer. Instead, he wanted to help freshmen and other players who did want to play professionally. If he and the rest of the team played well, it would make his teammates look better and open up more opportunities for them.

“I used to be very individualistic and only focused on me,” Msabaha said. “If we lost a game, as long as I played well, I couldn’t care less about the result.”

During his sophomore year, Msabaha struggled with trying to be perfect and putting too much pressure on himself as captain. Once he allowed himself to connect with the team on and off the field, it alleviated a lot of that stress and opened the door to better communication.

“I’m constantly thinking, ‘What can I do to improve more? What can I do differently?’” Msabaha said. “But most importantly, forget about soccer and what we do as students — it means nothing if the guy on the team doesn’t feel like a

human being or feels underappreciated. You can’t succeed without feeling a sense of belonging within the group.”

Carlos Levy, a redshirt junior defender, is currently one of the team’s co-captains alongside graduate midfielder Ryan Manna. Levy has also been Msabaha’s roommate for all four years of college.

“He leads by example. He doesn’t ask people to do anything he wouldn’t do or hasn’t done,” Levy said. “Whenever we have to run as a team, Mac’s first in line. If you see anyone at the facility at 6 a.m. getting in an extra workout, it’s him.”

Levy said Msabaha balances being both a friend and a team captain.

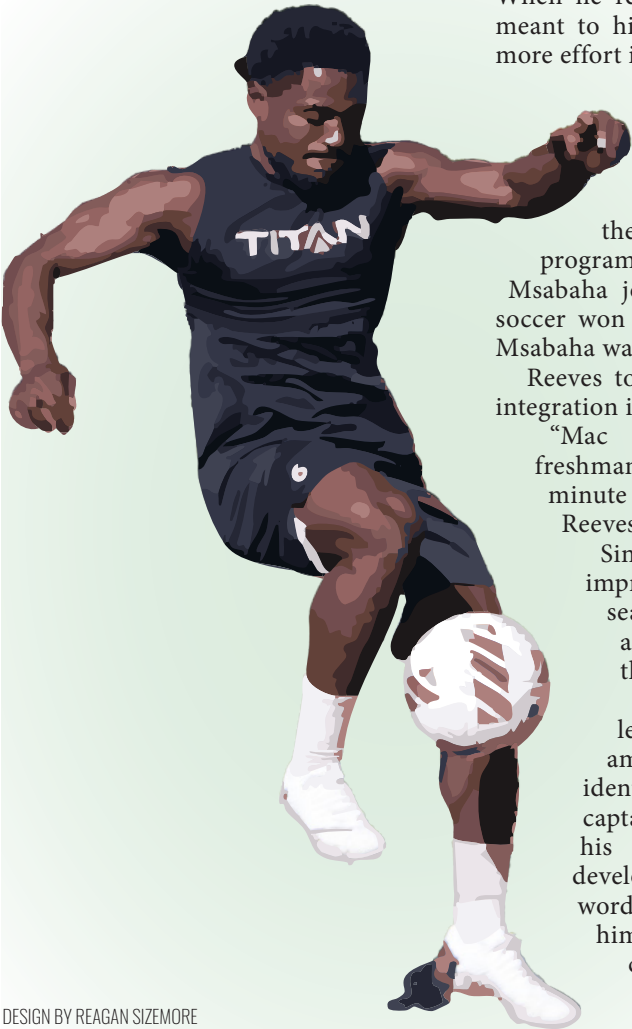
“There are moments he knows he has to do the unpopular thing. It doesn’t change our perception of him as a friend,” Levy said. “It just makes us respect him even more.”

With graduation approaching in December, Msabaha is preparing for life after college. He said he plans to stay in the United States and is beginning to search for jobs with hopes of either staying close by in Greensboro or moving to Los Angeles. Wherever he ends up, those who have worked with him said he will bring the same humility, steadiness and commitment that defined his time at Elon.

“

FORGET ABOUT SOCCER AND WHAT WE DO AS STUDENTS — IT MEANS NOTHING IF THE GUY ON THE TEAM DOESN’T FEEL LIKE A HUMAN BEING OR FEELS UNDERAPPRECIATED.

**MAJALIWA “MAC” MSABAHA**  
ELON MEN’S SOCCER SENIOR



DESIGN BY REAGAN SIZEMORE





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