

## 23 arrested for crimes against children



Davidson County Sheriff Richie Simmons talks about his role in "Operation Ghost Wire" at a press conference at Alamance County Sheriff's Office on Nov. 13.

REAGAN SIZEMORE | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

'Operation Ghost Wire' targeted individuals who solicited minors online, possessed child sexual abuse material

Reagan Sizemore  
Elon News Network

The Alamance County Sheriff's Office's Invictus Task Force announced the arrest of 23 individuals after a two week long operation they titled "Operation Ghost Wire." The Invictus Task Force is a multiagency task force that works to reduce internet crimes against children, sexual abuse, trafficking and the exploitation of children.

The Invictus Task Force is comprised of Alamance, Randolph, Davidson and Forsyth County Sheriff's Offices, Homeland Security Investigations, and the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations. According to the press release the individuals that were arrested

"either traveled with the intent to engage in sexual contact with a minor, solicited sexual contact from whom they believed to be a minor child and/or were uploading or downloading child sex abuse material."

During a press conference Nov. 13 at the Alamance County Sheriff's Office, Sheriff Terry Johnson announced that 23 individuals were arrested in the two week period Oct. 13 to Oct. 24. Eighteen of the arrests were made in Alamance County. Fourteen of the 18 individuals arrested in Alamance County were residents of Alamance County.

The two-week operation combined cyber tip investigations and undercover chats, where officers posed as minors according to the press release.

During the press conference Kevin Roughton, a special agent in charge at NCSBI, said the cyber tips they receive come from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children CyberTipline, which is a national reporting system for the online exploitation of children.

Roughton said many of these tips come from popular social media sites that predators use as a way to interact with minors, such as Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram.

"What we've seen in the last few years is this dramatic explosion," Roughton said during the press conference. "From where in 2019, we had less than 5,000 tips, this year we'll receive about 45,000 tips."

Among the 23 people arrested was former Elon University student Masungulo Musikavanhu.

According to an arrest report from the Alamance County Sheriff's Office, Musikavanhu was arrested Oct. 16 and charged with indecent liberties with a child and solicitation of a child by computer and appear. According to ACSO Musikavanhu solicited a minor with the intention to meet and commit an unlawful sex act, and then appeared at the meeting location.

See GHOST WIRE | pg. 4

NC sheriffs must work more closely with ICE under new law

The Criminal Illegal Alien Act sparks capacity concerns, constitutional questions locally

Lilly Molina  
Elon News Network

House Bill 318 now requires North Carolina sheriffs to work more closely with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. Originally vetoed by Gov. Josh Stein, the NC House of Representatives and Senate overrode the veto and the bill took into effect Oct. 1.

The Criminal Illegal Alien Act requires sheriffs to contact ICE if a person without legal immigration status is to be charged with a felony, such as certain sexual offenses or DWI. It also requires local sheriffs to notify ICE two hours after the time they would normally be released. If ICE responds, then those detained can be held up to an additional 48 hours until ICE arrives. If they don't respond, the sheriff releases the person according to bail conditions.

"It forces some sheriffs that didn't want to work with ICE to have to work with ICE," Alamance County Sheriff Terry Johnson said.

Gov. Josh Stein vetoed the bill, saying that the bill is unconstitutional since it violates a person's right to due process by holding someone past their designated detention time.

Over the weekend, masked Border Patrol agents arrived in Charlotte, arresting more than 200 people as of Nov. 18, according to CNN. On Saturday Nov. 15, federal agents detained people in public places as protestors marched down the streets of uptown Charlotte. During the Nov. 18 Raleigh City Council's session, Raleigh Mayor Janet Cowell said there have been confirmed sightings of border patrol agents in the area.

Stein criticized the federal agents in a video posted on social media Nov. 16.

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## North Carolina budget stalemate enters 4th month

State budget yet to pass, fiscal year began July 1

Miles Hayford  
Elon News Network

North Carolina still doesn't have a state budget — the only state that has both chambers controlled by the same party to not have a budget — more than four months after the new fiscal year began in North Carolina.

The budget impasse that North Carolina lawmakers have fought tooth and nail over for the last few months could become the new norm, according to Western Carolina University political science professor Christopher Cooper.

"The lesson here is you don't have to have a budget, and the electoral consequences of not having a budget are minimal," Cooper

said. "The legislators are not stupid, they're figuring that out."

The current fiscal year began July 1, but state legislators have been unable to come to an agreement on a new state budget. In the absence of it, the state operates on the previous fiscal year's funding levels, but not all funding rolls over. The North Carolina legislature is controlled by Republicans in both chambers, but despite this, the two chambers are unable to get over their differences. The disagreements between the chambers over the budget largely focus around scheduled tax cuts, Medicaid funding, raises to state employees and a plan for a multi-billion dollar state children's hospital.

According to Sally Hodges-Copple, a public policy analyst for the North Carolina Budget & Tax Center, Senate leadership is refusing to modify the scheduled tax cuts that

mainly benefit profitable corporations and the wealthiest North Carolinians. Hodges-Copple said these tax cuts are costing the state \$18 billion in revenue each year.

"Polling consistently shows that North Carolinians reject these tax cuts. They want the legislature to invest more in education, infrastructure, health care, the things that support their well-being, even if that means corporations and the wealthy have to pay more in taxes," Hodges-Copple said. "We don't have a budget today because some leaders in the General Assembly continue to prioritize those tax cuts at the expense of North Carolina's well-being."

On Nov. 12, Democratic members of the NC House held a town hall with community members to discuss the budget crisis at the Elon Community Church. Among them was Democratic Rep. Sarah Crawford who said that the lack of a budget means many

doctor's offices are now not seeing as many Medicaid patients because they can't afford to provide those services.

"There are people across the state that are losing services, losing access to health care, losing their therapeutic services, losing pharmacy benefits, because these Medicaid cuts have gone into effect, and that's all because the Republican controlled General Assembly cannot come to a deal," Crawford said in an interview with Elon News Network.

Medicaid cuts range from 3% to 10% depending on the service provider.

Cooper said the intra-party fighting shows how structurally different the Senate and House are. He said it shows that the two chambers approach politics very differently.

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Annual winter tradition grows from tree lighting  
PAGE 8 LIFESTYLE



Elon athlete builds online platform through NIL  
PAGE 9 SPORTS



Women's soccer team become CAA champions  
PAGE 10 SPORTS



THE PENDULUM

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# Officials warn students about ‘phishing’ cyber-scams



ILLUSTRATION BY REAGAN SIZEMORE

University officials, cybersecurity experts urge students to think before they click

Lily Mosbacher

Elon News Network

A new survey from the Pew Research Center found that 73% of U.S. adults have experienced some kind of online scam or attack. On college campuses like Elon University, the threat of these scams, often called phishing, is increasingly prevalent, especially when it comes to targeting student emails.

Gary Sheehan, director of Elon Information Security, said scammers have grown more convincing by using artificial intelligence to craft realistic-looking messages.

“Phishing scams are fake messages designed to trick you into giving away personal information, like your password, bank details, or student ID,” Sheehan wrote. “These attacks have become more common at Elon, and AI has made these attacks more dangerous.”

Sheehan wrote that his team has noticed an increase in fake job offers and emails impersonating faculty members or university leaders, including Elon President Connie Book. He also said that there have been messages impersonating department chairs, some even including QR codes leading to fake login pages.

“Pause and think before clicking,” Sheehan wrote, “Elon won’t email you for login credentials, account verification, or job offers.”

Freshman Josh Hertz said he became a victim of a phishing scam in October after receiving a deceptive message that appeared legitimate.

“I didn’t really know what phishing

scams were, and I learned from that to ignore it after that,” Hertz said.

Following the incident, Hertz said he faced brief technological challenges, such as being locked out of his account by the university.

“I got locked out and had to call to reset my password. It took me two minutes. I’d rather than have my information stolen,” Hertz said.

Hertz said what made the scam believable was how realistic it looked. He said he looked up the sender and found that they had a relation to Elon, making him believe the link was credible.

“

THESE ATTACKS HAVE BECOME MORE COMMON AT ELON, AND AI HAS MADE THESE ATTACKS MORE DANGEROUS.

GARY SHEEHAN

DIRECTOR OF ELON INFORMATION SECURITY

John Wimmer, assistant teaching professor of Management Information Systems, said students should take ample time to inspect emails before clicking any links.

“Never open an attachment that you aren’t 1,000% positive that you would trust the source. If you’re not positive that it’s coming from where they say it comes, it’s always a good idea to reach out via phone,” Wimmer said.

Wimmer said that in the past decade, there have been many changes in the

world of cybersecurity with the advent of technology and AI.

“Probably 10 to 12 years ago, really the only targets for what I like calling ‘bad guys,’ the ones who are trying to steal your data, was really more geared towards those high-end companies,” Wimmer said. “But I think that as the use of online tools that proliferated use of credit cards, the use of all this data has become more common, even in the noncommercial, non-corporate world.”

Vice President for Student Life Jon Dooley said phishing emails can circulate quickly across campus if students don’t take a moment to verify suspicious messages.

“I guarantee you nothing will get something fixed slower than complaining about it on Fizz because they’re not quick enough for the Wi-Fi here,” Dooley said.

Instead, he encouraged students to call the IT Help Desk at (336) 278-5200, which allows staff to identify and fix issues in real time.

Dooley advised that anytime students receive an email that looks questionable, they should forward it to [infosec@elon.edu](mailto:infosec@elon.edu) or confirm directly with the sender before clicking on links or providing information.

## ELON INFORMATION SECURITY GUIDE



## CORRECTIONS

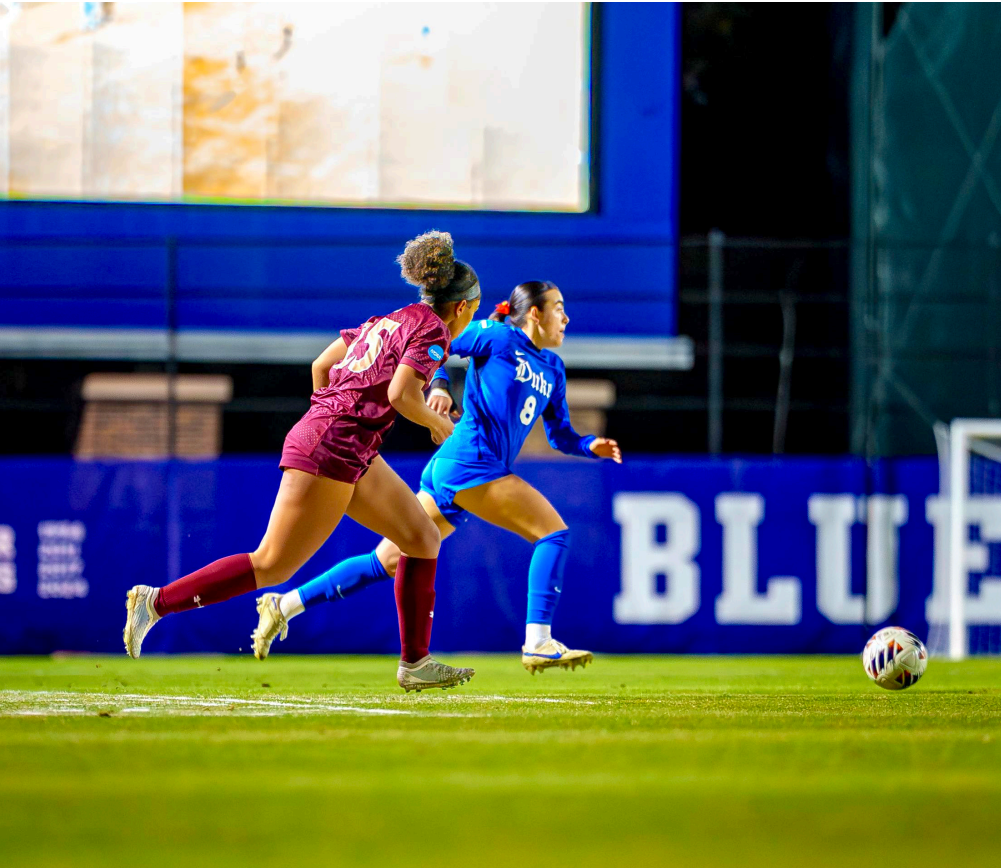
There are no corrections from the last edition of The Pendulum.





Redshirt junior guard Tyana Walker dribbles against her defender to an opening for the Elon's offense against Howard University on Nov. 15 at the Schar Center. The Phoenix lost to the Bison 56-46.

ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR

Elon freshman midfielder Miranda Dumornay attempts to catch up to a Duke defender, redshirt junior Elle Piper, to intercept the ball Nov. 14 during the first round of the NCAA tournament at Duke University's Koskinen Stadium. Elon was eliminated from the tournament after losing 3-0. Learn more about the team's journey to the NCAA tournament on page 10.



ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

WifisFuneral headlines a Limitless showcase for Elon University students at the College Street Taphouse on Nov. 14.



NIA BEDARD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Town of Elon Public Works and the Downtown Development Department set up wreaths at the downtown Elon plaza Nov. 17. The Town of Elon will light the Christmas tree at the plaza during the Hometown Christmas event Dec. 6.



# Invictus Task Force concludes ‘Operation Ghost Wire’



Forsyth County Sheriff Bobby Kimbrough Jr. speaks about his role on the Invictus Task Force at a press conference on Nov. 13 at the Alamance County Sheriff's Office.

REAGAN SIZEMORE | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## GHOST WIRE | from cover

Musikavanhu's arrest and nine others were made through the use of undercover chats. Johnson said investigators posed as children ages 12 to 14 years old who would agree to meet up with potential predators.

The Office of the Registrar confirmed that Musikavanhu enrolled in Elon in February of 2024 and withdrew Oct. 16, 2025.

Elon University was one of nine agencies that assisted the Alamance County Sheriff's Office in the operation.

In an emailed statement to Elon News Network, Chief of Campus Safety and Police Joe LeMire wrote the only involvement Elon University Campus Safety and Police had was when they received notification from the task force when they were operating in the area.

“THEY LOOK LIKE PEOPLE THAT YOU'D SEE ANYWHERE: THE MALL, THE GROCERY STORE, CHURCH, ET CETERA.”

**TERRY JOHNSON**  
ALAMANCE COUNTY SHERIFF

Johnson gave his definition of sexual predators during the press conference. “A person seen as obtaining or trying to obtain contact with another person in a metaphorically or predatory or abusive way, and we have had a bunch of that going on in Alamance County and our surrounding

counties,” Johnson said. The task force also works in collaboration with the Invictus Project, which is a nonprofit organization that aims to educate parents and guardians about how to prevent child exploitation and what signs to look for. Invictus Project founder and CEO Ray Dawson spoke at the press conference about how the project supports the task force. “We are not going to enforce our way out of this,” Dawson said. “It's going to take us to collaborate together with parents and people that are in a position of trust over our children, because we're going have to educate our way out of this.” When asked if the people they arrested had any similarities, Johnson said that they arrested a very wide variety of people. “They look like people that you'd see anywhere: the mall, the grocery store, church, et cetera.” Johnson said. According to Johnson, The task force will continue their work in the Piedmont Triad area. The Sheriff's Office announced two upcoming events, including a Parent Session on Jan. 20, 2026, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. that will be held at Trailhead Church, and a student and teen session on Jan. 25, 2026, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

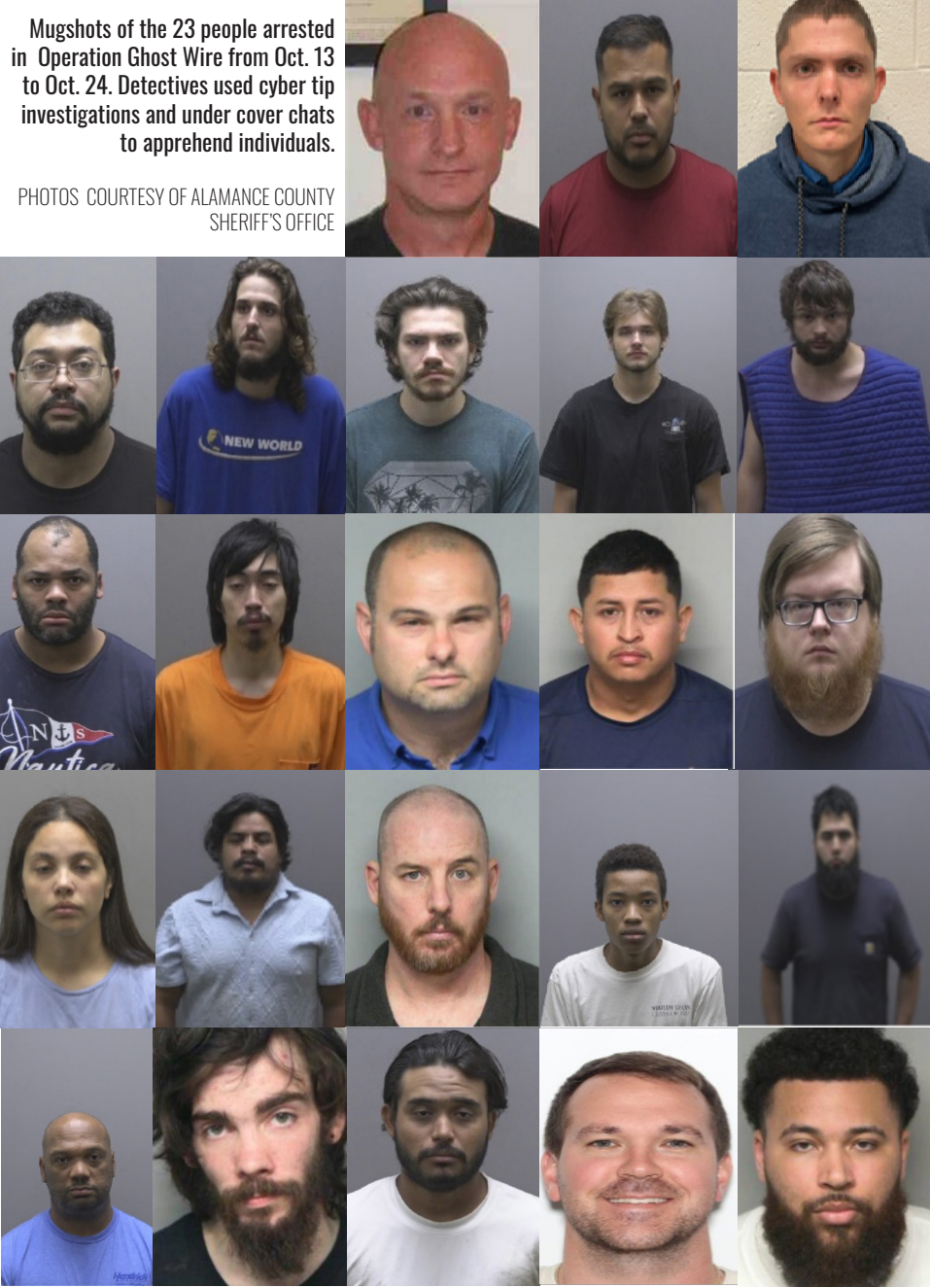
### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit [www.theinvictusproject.org](http://www.theinvictusproject.org) to learn more about the Invictus Project and the Invictus Task Force.

If you believe you or someone you know may be a victim of child exploitation or trafficking call the national hot line for 24/7 assistance. Call 1-888-373-7888 or text “HELP” to 233733

Mugshots of the 23 people arrested in Operation Ghost Wire from Oct. 13 to Oct. 24. Detectives used cyber tip investigations and under cover chats to apprehend individuals.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALAMANCE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE





# New NC law raises Alamance jail overcrowding concerns

## ICE | from cover

“We’ve seen masked, heavily armed agents in paramilitary garb driving unmarked cars, targeting American citizens based on their skin color, racially profiling and picking up random people in parking lots and off of our sidewalks,” Stein said in the video.

Dillan Bono-Lunn, a professor of political science and public policy, said that this law is applying a standard to people who have been accused, but not convicted of a crime.

“We’re thinking about innocent until proven guilty,” said Bono-Lunn. “By compelling sheriffs to hold people longer than they otherwise would be under the law, would essentially be not affording due process to everyone.”

Bono-Lunn said this new policy reminded her of the Laken Riley Act passed on the federal level Jan. 29 of this year. This bill allows for the detainment of persons without legal immigration status who are arrested for particular crimes such as burglary and larceny.

That law was challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union in court and a federal judge declared the Laken Riley Act unconstitutional because it violates due process. The judge ordered mandatory bond hearings for those detained.

Bono-Lunn said that she expects that this same process will happen again — that HB 318 will be challenged and then reviewed for whether or not it is constitutional. However, she said that since the bill has only been in effect for just over a month, it is too soon to tell. If the bill is found to be unconstitutional, Bono-Lunn said this could be a fraught situation for local sheriffs.

“I can imagine a situation where local law enforcement in following this state law end up potentially seeing cases thrown out if this piece of legislation is found to be unconstitutional,” she said.

Regardless, as of now, Bono-Lunn said that she sees local law enforcement as “a

rock in a hard place.”

“They are duty bound to enforce the laws and to protect communities and follow this particular piece of legislation, regardless of how they feel about that,” she said. “It could, ultimately, end up with some of their efforts in actually prosecuting crimes being overturned.”

Johnson said if the North Carolina courts find this law to be unconstitutional, then he is not going to hold detainees an additional 48 hours.

“But if the law requires me to, and it abides with the Constitution, I will hold,” he said.

Johnson said ICE will reimburse his departments for the additional costs for housing these individuals, but what he is worried about is his jail overcrowding. Right now the sheriff’s department has 400 beds in their detention center, with about 390 of them currently full, according to Johnson.

Johnson said if overcrowding continues, he might have to have people sleep on the floor. He worries this might lead to a lawsuit.

Johnson also said that it’s too soon to see how the Criminal Illegal Alien Act will affect his station, but he’s already seen the repercussions of overcrowding due to Iryna’s Law, which was passed in October 2025. This law removes cashless bail for some offenses, which means if someone can’t make bail they have to stay in jail until their trial has concluded.

Johnson said he has sent a message to Washington, D.C., to notify them about the overcrowding, but as of now they are not accepting any more people other than who his officers arrest. Despite this, with the additional time requirement added to the Criminal Illegal Alien Act, Johnson is worried they won’t have beds to accommodate this provision.

With the recent crackdown on noncitizen policies, Johnson is aware that the immigrant community in Alamance County could be scared.

“I hope our legislature, before passing laws such as this, looks at a total overall picture of the immigrant population coming



Sheriff Terry Johnson sits at his desk Nov. 14 as he explains the imminent drug trafficking trade problem happening within Alamance County.

into North Carolina or even Alamance County,” Johnson said. “I think it is going to concern some of the immigrants that have come here. They’re going to be afraid, and I hate that.”

Johnson said he knows there are people within Alamance County that didn’t enter this country with the proper paperwork, but as long as they are abiding by the law then they should not worry. His concern is the cartel members smuggling drugs here, something that has been on the Drug Enforcement Administration’s radar.

“DEA calls it the drug hub of the southeastern United States, and that’s a slap in my face,” Johnson said.

According to Johnson, this is a result of major interstates such as I-40 and I-85

running through Alamance County.

“They can come up to get the drugs here, but once they drop the drugs here, they’ve got Highway 54, Highway 87, Highway 62, Highway 70 and Highway 49,” said Johnson. “They can take those drugs on secondary roads anywhere in the southeastern United States.”

Johnson said that ever since he took office in 2002, he said it’s been an uphill battle in trying to get the drug cartel business here in Alamance County eradicated. He said he sees HB318 as a way to help create a safer community from illegal cartel members.

“These are the type people that I want out of my county, not necessarily the people that are trying to make a better life for themselves,” Johnson said.

# Budget impasse to impact local governments, teachers

## BUDGET | from cover

“There’s an old adage in politics that the other party is the opposition and the other chamber is the enemy and I think you’re seeing that,” Cooper said. “Just because you’re a member of the same party doesn’t mean that you necessarily see eye to eye on some major issues. The House and the Senate are structurally very different. They are culturally very different.”

Some of the lasting impacts also include the absence of pay raises for teachers. Additionally, more North Carolina child care programs closed than opened in August due to a lack of funding.

“Teachers in North Carolina, who are already some of the lowest paid teachers in the nation, they are not getting a pay raise,” Hodges-Copple said. “They’ve seen their household costs go up each year because of inflation, and so, without a raise, that equates to a pay cut for them. That’s not good for recruitment and retention, and it is not good for the experience of students in the classroom.”

According to Cooper, the budget crisis could also affect local governments. Because governments are forced to rely on previous funding levels, local governments that are trying to expand who they serve are having trouble with long-term planning. Elon Town Council Member Quinn Ray, who helped moderate the town hall on Nov. 12, said it’s affecting towns like Elon when trying to get state grants.

“We’re looking at what we’re trying to do here at Elon, getting a police station, and working for some funds for that. We were earmarked, but with no budget passed, it doesn’t come to us,” Ray said



From left, Rep. Ray Jeffers, Rep. Sarah Crawford and Rep. Vernetta Alston. The three representatives discussed the state budget and Medicaid funding during a town hall Nov. 12 at the Elon Community Church.

during the town hall.

Cooper also believes that situation could lead to less trust in government and people feeling that their voice does not make a difference.

A temporary solution that the General Assembly has been using in recent months is a pair of “mini-budget bills.” These are small spending bills that do not act as a fully funded budget, but instead fund a limited number of time-sensitive needs. For example, one of the mini-budget bills targeted funding disaster relief in the wake of Tropical Storm Chantal.

“They keep the wheels turning, and so they avoid disaster in a lot of ways, and they do allow them to move forward certain very particularized policies that they may want to pass. But it’s not a whole scale budget in the way the system is created for,” Cooper said.

These mini-budget bills are not new to North Carolina, as the state has gone up to two years without a budget in the past.

North Carolina passes a budget every two years and lawmakers didn’t pass a budget until November in 2021 and again didn’t pass one until October in 2023. Cooper said that it’s normal to not have a new budget before the start of the fiscal year, but not for it to last this long.

Cooper said that this stalemate shows that the Republican legislators don’t feel pressure.

“If they thought there were electoral consequences to pay, then they would have passed a budget,” Cooper said. “But they believe, and I believe they are correct, that their jobs are not in danger, and they are likely to be able to run for reelection and gain reelection, if they so choose. So I think it’s about the lack of electoral accountability in that way.”

State lawmakers will run for reelection in November 2026.

Republicans Sen. Amy Galey and Rep. Stephen Ross, whose districts include Alamance County, did not respond to Elon

News Network’s requests for comment.

Democratic Rep. Vernetta Alston, who attended the town hall in Elon, said that the past session of the General Assembly has been one of the most unproductive sessions in her five-and-a-half years in the legislature.

“One of our core jobs is simply to pass a budget,” Alston said during the town hall. “So we’ve left ourselves without doing our jobs, and without a comprehensive fiscal plan for the state. It’s really, really tragic and neglectful.”

State lawmakers have indicated that they have no plans for any major votes until sometime in 2026. Crawford said that she expects her and other lawmakers to return to Raleigh in April and take up additional funding conversations then.

“What needs to happen is that the Republican leaders in both the House and the Senate need to understand how much not passing a state budget is hurting the everyday North Carolinian, and put the priorities of the people first,” Crawford said in an interview with Elon News Network.

Gov. Josh Stein recently called legislators to come back to Raleigh next week in a rare special session to address Medicaid funding, but the session would just cover funding of Medicaid, not a state budget.

Cooper said that lawmakers are learning that a new budget isn’t necessary.

“It’s very possible we just won’t have a budget, and they’ll just pass mini-budgets, as they’ve done, and move on. I mean, in some ways, they’ve proven that they can get away without a whole scale budget,” Cooper said. “Obviously, at some point we’ll have a new budget again. But I’m not convinced it’s going to be this term.”



# Kopper Top Life Learning Center seeks to boost community mental health



Kopper Top staff support students when they finish riding and teach them the “behind the scenes” and responsibility of taking care of the horses.



Marcus Daily prepares to ride at the 2025 Piedmont Saddle show, where he scored in multiple events and won a ribbon. “I love being with the horses,” Daily said. “It’s fun to feed them, fun to ride them and fun to play with them.”

Facility uses horses, cats, dogs to support therapy efforts

**Grace Stetler**  
Elon News Network

When most people picture traditional medical treatment, they may imagine white coats and sterile exam rooms. But some therapists heal while standing on four legs, wagging their tails and offering comfort that is not prescribed.

This is where animal-assisted therapy enters the conversation. Animal-assisted therapy — also known as pet therapy — is a way of using animals to enhance the well-being of patients.

The who, what, where, when and why behind the foundations of animal-assisted therapy date back to 1796 at The York Retreat in England, where animals were first used to treat those with mental illnesses.

Today, discussions around pet therapy have grown and now impact individuals across the nation. Beyond institutions supporting patients, students have also taken an interest, as universities from coast to coast including Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Florida have begun implementing animal-assisted therapy programs.





GRACE STETLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



GRACE STETLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Deborah Meridith, in pink, talks with a Kopper Top student after a day out training on the trails.

**The Kopper Top Story**

Deborah Meridith is one of the leading figures in the animal-assisted therapy industry, and her home at 6657 Kimesville Road in Liberty, North Carolina, also serves as the base for her organization: Kopper Top Life Learning Center. Meridith, founder and executive director of Kopper Top, is driven by her passion for animals, but said she wanted to make a stronger impact on the community.

After going to school for a degree in biology, Meridith said she realized that she wanted her career to go in another direction. She ended up finding her path within the industry of recreational therapy. While a student in college, she worked diligently at a local farm — doing similar work to what she currently does with Kopper Top.

In 1990, Meridith’s calling to make a difference began. She started to work closely with the Special Olympics, yet conversations with her family made her realize she wanted to do more. In 1998, Meridith quit her job and, with \$300 in her pocket, she found herself where she is today: the founder of Kopper Top.

According to Kopper Top’s website, the organization strives to provide inclusive therapy services to anyone whether they

have special needs or disabilities, or not. The organization hopes to empower, enable and enhance a person’s quality of life through recreational therapy with their horses, cats and dogs.

To Meridith, the definition of animal-assisted therapy is simply “anything to do with an animal.”

“Because believe it or not, that is relieving stress and anxiety from you, and you don’t even know it,” Meridith said.

For her, the heart of this type of therapy is easy to understand.

“Animals were put on Earth for us to enjoy and love,” Meredith said. “They help our communities and remind us what it means to care for one another. I really couldn’t live without them.”

**Relationships, Resilience and Riding**

Kopper Top’s story is one of transformation — especially for Marcus Daily and his mother, Sheila, who said they have felt its impact beyond anything they imagined.

Sheila said that Marcus’s journey with Kopper Top began before the COVID-19 pandemic when he attended the organization’s day camp every week during the summer.

“He loved it and it gave him a real good

outlet,” Sheila said. “It’s really gave him a lot of confidence that he has lacked.”

Marcus said he feels that his love for KopperTop is about more than just the Special Olympics competitions he participates in via the organization and connection to the animals themselves. Rather, it is about the community he has built and the friendships that have stuck with him, with a bit of a love for winning some medals here and there. In the 2025 Piedmont Saddle Show, Marcus scored in multiple events and won a ribbon in one event for his performance.

“It’s not just about making the do,” Sheila said. “It’s about being connected in a special way for that animal to let that animal know it’s okay, ‘I’m okay, you’re okay, we can do this.’”

Sheila said she has seen children who visit Kopper Top find a sense of accomplishment.

“This year, one of the girls who won a blue ribbon was just in tears as got her award just from joy,” Shelia said. “So to see that kind of success for our kiddos who have different needs and different abilities, it’s just a wonderful thing.”

**A North Carolina Connection**

Outside of the work Meridith and Kopper Top are doing, other North Carolina organizations are making their mark in the

animal-assisted therapy industry as well. Travel 33.3 miles west of Kopper Top, and there’s the office of Jodie Skoff and the University of North Carolina Health “Tar Heal Paws” program.

According to the program’s website, Tar Heal Paws is an animal therapy program that offers patients support and companionship.

Skoff, the volunteer coordinator at Tar Heal Paws, shared her enthusiasm for the program and the growth that has developed in the 10 years she has worked with the program. She said the growth of the program was huge, and on a national level, the growth has continued, especially within conferences that she and her team attend.

“At every conference, there is always something about dog therapy — it’s just so popular nationally,” Skoff said.

Within UNC Health, the Tar Heel Paws animal-assisted therapy program has become the one of the most popular. From programs that register individuals’ pets to become therapy dogs to others that treat different patients in the hospital, the program is even impacting staff members.

“The stress level for staff that working in the medical field can bring is huge,” Skoff said. “This program even makes a difference for them, which proves that relationships are huge and that this does matter.”





Elon students walk around the Fonville Fountain in front of Elon University's Alamance Building on Nov. 28, 2023, during the Festival of Lights and Luminaries.

ENN FILE PHOTO

This year's event set to take place  
Dec. 2 in Historic Neighborhood,  
Academic Pavilion

**Megan Walsh**  
Elon News Network

An event with roots as a traditional tree lighting in front of the Alamance Building, the current Festival of Lights and Luminaries celebration continues to light up campus. The way Elon celebrates the holiday season has grown and shifted to fit the multifait, diverse culture of the university.

This year's festival will be held Dec. 2 across the Historic Neighborhood and the Academic Pavilion.

Director of Multifait Programming and Engagement Hillary Zaken is the coordinator of the Festival of Lights and Luminaries and said the festival really began to take its current shape in 2020.

Zaken said before the pandemic, the event featured a stage set up in front of the Alamance Building with a ceremony that lit up the campus all at once, a Christmas tree lighting and an appearance from Santa Claus.

The event had to change during the pandemic, Zaken said, to eliminate large crowds in one area.

"A certain number of people couldn't gather in the same place, so having everyone gathered in front of Alamance for that lighting simply was impossible," Zaken said. "As it turns out, this is a much better way to celebrate the campus that we are and are becoming."

Archivist and Assistant Librarian Randall Bowman said he has been attending the event since he got hired at Elon in 2000. His first time attending the event was only a few months before Elon transitioned from Elon College to Elon University.

Bowman said in his first years of attending the event, everyone would gather around a stage outside of the Alamance Building, where a brass band and carolers would perform. Then, guests were invited to join the singing for a tree lighting ceremony, something Bowman said he looked forward to every year.

"We would all sing 'Deck the Halls,' and that's when the lights would come on," Bowman said. "They'd flip on the lights around the fountain and right here in front of Alamance."

In addition, Bowman said the festivities included the luminaries still seen today, as well as a Hanukkah blessing, a chance for visitors to interact with Santa and Mrs. Claus, and hot cocoa and treats.

While the luminaries have always been a part of the event, Bowman said he has watched them shift from paper bags to the current plastic luminaries used each year. Additionally, he said he has seen the university add the option to donate to the school to have your name on a lantern.

"They put a label on the side, and that would be your luminary," Bowman said. "That came later, because by that time I got married, and my wife and I would always look for mine."

When Zaken took over coordinating the festival three years ago, she said one of her plans was to increase the campus partners and traditions present at the

event.

"When we think about shared imagery of light, it's not just about religious, spiritual or ethical identities. It's about the ways each of our cultures and traditions celebrates," Zaken said.

“

WE ARE BETTER WHEN WE  
SHARE ABOUT OURSELVES  
IN AN ENVIRONMENT THAT'S  
CREATED FOR CELEBRATION  
AND JOY AND EDUCATION

**HILLARY ZAKEN**  
DIRECTOR OF MULTIFAITH PROGRAMMING  
AND ENGAGEMENT

Zaken said that having campus partners helps to incorporate more than just the religious and spiritual aspects of the holiday season.

"Looking at all the different ways that we celebrate the season represents our campus in a different kind of way," Zaken said.

Zaken said this year's map for the event features 32 stations, including the luminaries divided amongst undergraduate students, seniors, staff and alumni luminaries. Beyond the lanterns, the event includes activities from organizations across campus, such as language and cultural organizations, such

as the French Club, Chinese Club, Hillel, African Diaspora at Elon and many more.

President of African Diaspora at Elon Salome Onikolase said the organization has held a booth at the festival for the last several years. This year's booth is called "From Africa With Light" and offers attendees a chance to reflect.

"A lot of people love attending the Festival of Lights and Luminaries," Onikolase said. "For people to be able to come to our table and reflect, and for them to be able to know that we have a table that they can come to is such a great opportunity."

This year, Zaken said three organizations are joining the event to feature tables and activities, including Spectrum Club Elon's queer-straight alliance, the newly formed Jewish social justice organization Tikkun Olam and representation from the Truitt Center's Pagan Life community. Zaken said this year will also see the return of the saxophone quartet that has not been a part of the event in the last few years.

Zaken said this event provides the perfect opportunity for students to share the pieces of their culture they want to share without the pressure of someone asking them.

"We are better when we share about ourselves in an environment that's created for celebration and joy and education," Zaken said. "I think that's one of the best things about this event, is it really brings people together by highlighting our diversity and also what unites us at the same time."

*Managing Editor of The Pendulum Sarah T. Moore serves on the Festival of Lights and Luminaries planning committee.*

1995



COURTESY OF ELON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Students and staff gather for the Elon "Festival of Lights" outside Alamance Building in 1995.

1999



COURTESY OF ELON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

A worker sets up paper bag luminaries for the 1999 luminary event outside the Moseley Center.

2004



COURTESY OF ELON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Students and staff gather around the Alamance Building during the Festival of Lights and Luminaries event in 2004.

2024



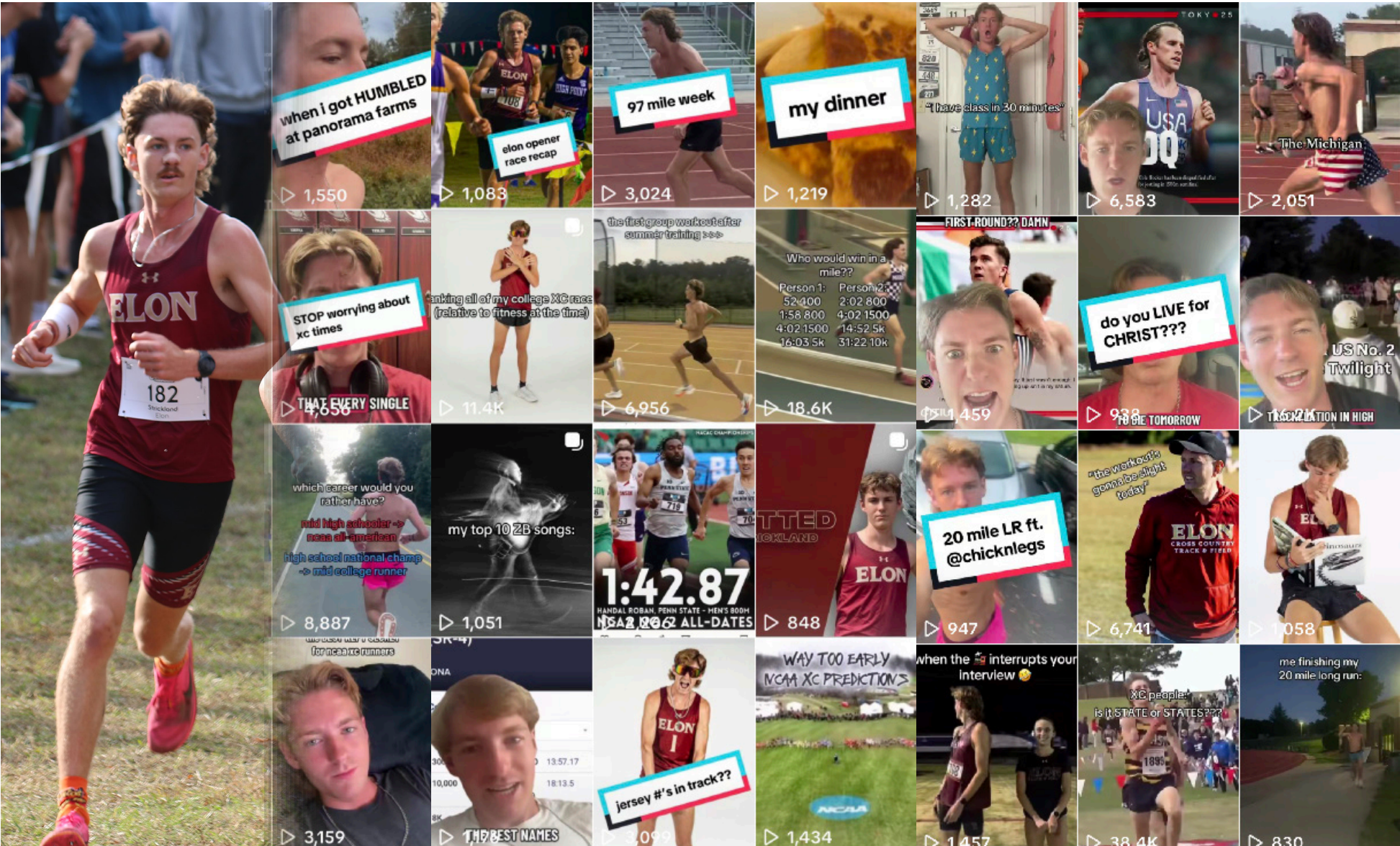
ENN FILE PHOTO

Students write wishes on lanterns and float them in Fonville Fountain outside of Alamance Building at the Festival of Lights and Luminaries hosted by the Truitt Center on Dec. 3, 2024.



# Running toward opportunity

## NIL helps Elon athlete build personal brand



KATHAN GANDHI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Senior Caden Strickland competes at the CAA Championship on Nov. 1 at the Elon Cross Country Course. Strickland posts videos about his student athlete experience on Instagram, @cadenstr1ck, and on TikTok, @str1ckland.

### Distance runner cashes in on NCAA policy through social media presence

**Max Wallace**  
Elon News Network

Imagine a college student having 5 million dollars in the palm of their hand. For some student athletes like AJ Dybantsa — the point guard for the BYU Cougars — it is not something they have to imagine. That is the reality of the NCAA’s Name, Image, and Likeness policy for college athletes like Dybantsa, who will make 4.4 million dollars through NIL over the next 12 months.

While some athletes make jaw-dropping amounts of money, others generate just enough to stay afloat while participating in their college sport.

Caden Strickland, a senior on Elon University’s men’s cross country team, said it wouldn’t be possible to put the amount of hours into running that he does each day if he wasn’t able to make money from just being himself.

“This takes up, essentially, our entire schedule,” Strickland said. “To have the opportunity to put my name out there and make money off of what I love doing helps me a lot financially.”

Strickland said athletes like himself are often unable to manage a job on or off campus because they have limited time outside of school and sports.

“The majority of the season I was running 90 miles a week, obviously with a full class load,” Strickland said. “That is not enough time for me to work an on-campus job or do anything else to make a reliable source of income.”

According to the NCAA’s website, NIL “empowers college athletes to earn income from business ventures and personal brand while still in school.”

In 2021, the NCAA adopted a NIL policy that allowed students to profit from their brands while competing in college athletics.

NIL is a tool that allows student-athletes to make money on the side of their sport. With the addition of the policy change, athletes can now partake in growing their own personal NIL without violating college athletic guidelines.

Strickland said the dream of establishing his name on social media started during the spring semester last year. Strickland would film weekly vlogs of his practice schedule and mileage for the week and upload them on both Instagram and TikTok. Although it was a struggle at first, Strickland saw his social media success take off over the summer when he was living on campus. He said the loneliness of the empty campus pushed him to upload more content.

“I was bored,” Strickland said. “I just took my phone out and started recording all of this stupid, silly content, and pushing it out there.”

Khirey Walker, a sport management professor at Elon and a former college athlete, said NIL was long overdue for student athletes.

“Being able to make money, regardless of the experience, is necessary,” Walker said. “Student athletes have to commit so much of themselves to the universities, so being able to profit off of that and connecting that

through the experiences that they have is really necessary.”

While it is a benefit for athletes, NIL can sometimes create distractions for the students. Walker said the ability to transfer helps athletes chase their dreams of getting to the next level, but it can also take away from the experience they are currently in.

“When you are at a university and playing for a sports team, that is where your heart should be,” Walker said. “If you are playing your season for a team and already looking elsewhere, you are short-changing that team.”

It’s not just on the court that athletes can leave experience behind; Walker also emphasized the importance of the academic experience for college athletes.

“There is no college sport without college,” Walker said. “Someday, your career is going to end. Those shoes are going to come off, and that degree is going to be as valuable as you made it in your time in college.”

Since the NCAA adopted the policy for NIL in 2021, the ability for student-athletes to make money while in college has taken off. In the last six months, the NCAA introduced the “NCAA NIL Assist.” The assist platform is used to help student-athletes “understand and make informed decisions about NIL,” according to the NCAA’s website.

NIL generates millions of dollars in revenue solely because of a player’s status for some college athletes, such as Dybantsa. But for Strickland, it took time to get to where he is today.

After a few months of hard work and seeing his posts on Instagram and TikTok climb to upward of 100,000 views and even 1 million views, Strickland was able to land a deal with ChickenLegs Running — an apparel company geared toward distance runners. Over the summer, Sydney Seymour, a former All-American Runner with NC State University, reached out to Strickland with an opportunity for a partnership at ChickenLegs. Strickland said the ability to combine his passion for running with his

newfound social media success is the best of both worlds.

“An idea pops into my head, I grab the camera and I post it,” Strickland said. “The extra stipend coming in helps me a whole lot.”

Strickland has found success in the running community, but Walker said athletes should also take advantage of the college community, as well as where they grew up, to capitalize on their audiences and supporters.

“That is where your brand is really strong, your home area, where you went to high school,” Walker said. “I think a lot of student athletes tend to forget about that.”

Walker said even though his days playing football are behind him, he has his eyes set on where he would have taken advantage of the NIL opportunities around Elon.

“I would have gone to any local restaurant that supports Elon athletics,” Walker said. “I joke with my students all the time, but I’m dead serious, Biscuitville would’ve been my first one.”

Strickland has also turned his Photoshop skills into his own graphic design business on Instagram, where he builds commitment graphics for athletes. He said the ability to do something like that would not have been possible without the passing of the NIL policy in 2021.

“It’s not something that I would have been able to do four years ago,” Strickland said.

Strickland said the addition of NIL has been a step in the right direction for the NCAA, and he hopes more opportunities for athletes will present themselves in the future.

“At the end of the day, we are not different than these other students,” Strickland said. “So why should they be able to do something that we’re not?”

As for Walker, he said there is still a long road to perfecting the NIL policy in college sports.

“I am really anxious to see how things are going to continue to go,” Walker said. “Especially with the amount of money and how things are rapidly changing.”



# Women’s soccer team reaches its goals with CAA championship win



ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR

After winning the Coastal Athletic Association championship Nov. 9, Elon women’s soccer team appeared in the first round of the NCAA Division I Tournament Nov. 14 where they played against Duke University. The Phoenix lost 3-0 and did not progress in the tournament.



ETHAN WU | PHOTO EDITOR

Junior midfielder Gabby Hoschek kicks the ball toward Duke’s side Nov. 14 during the first round of the NCAA Division I Tournament at Duke University’s Koskinen Stadium.

## Coach, players reflect on team growth following conference championship

**Benjamin Berfield**  
Elon News Network

In just two years, Elon University’s women’s soccer team has transformed from a three-win team in 2023 to Coastal Athletic Association champions, winning Nov. 9 against Stony Brook in a 1-1 match that came down to penalty kicks, where Elon prevailed 6-5.

Their turnaround not only earned an NCAA Division I Tournament berth against Duke University, but it also came as a rewarding accomplishment for everyone who spent the last two years changing the team’s fortunes.

One of those people is head coach Neil Payne, who oversaw Elon’s 3-9-5 season two years ago. He said the championship was extremely gratifying, and he could not be more pleased with how much everyone has progressed leading up to this point, especially for the upperclassmen who were on the 2023 team.

“I’m so proud of how far this group of players have come because there were a lot of players on that team,” Payne said. “I’m really happy with the way this team has developed over the last two years.”

Payne has seen improvement from the team both physically and fundamentally. He said everyone pays a ton of attention to detail in practices and games. In addition, Payne said the team is well-conditioned and able to respond to any challenge.

Throughout the season, Elon’s focus wasn’t on anything besides the opponent they were playing next. Payne described the team’s improvement as a game-by-game process, and the result was an 11-win season.

“We’re moving the ball around really well, and our technical application has been at a really high level,” Payne said.

“On the physical side, we’re a lot stronger, which allows us to be more resilient.”

Elon’s renaissance initially occurred in 2024, where the Phoenix engineered a 10-win improvement, finishing 13-4-1.

Sophomore defender Jessica Hill and sophomore goalie Katie Bisgrove each played integral roles in that turnaround, emerging as immediate contributors during their freshman year.

Although neither player was there for the 2023 season, Bisgrove said they were just as determined to help improve the team’s performance as the returning players.

“It just gave us all a drive and motivation to turn things around for this team now,” Bisgrove said. “Last season, Neil talked a lot about building a foundation so we were able to build our values as a team.”

Despite losing in the semifinals, the defeat didn’t leave the team dejected but rather motivated for more success. Hill said that because everyone now knew what it took to win, they were fully invested in Payne’s philosophy.

“One of the biggest differences between this year and last year is just everyone was bought into the concept of winning,” Hill said.

However, that didn’t come without adversity. The Phoenix got off to a poor start in conference play, going 0-2-2 in their first four CAA games.

Bisgrove said she acknowledged that this stretch could’ve derailed the team’s confidence, but everyone knew what they were still capable of and managed to rebound. She said the team managed to become closer, which helped their performance down the stretch.

“Other people might’ve doubted us with the performance we had in the opening weekend of conference play, but we knew we could trust each other,” Bisgrove said. “The positive attitude everyone had was really important because nobody turned against each other. We all just kept pushing through it, and it gave us

a lot of opportunities to strengthen our friendships.”

By the time the playoffs arrived, Elon was firing on all cylinders. They finished the season 4-0-2 and had snuck in as the final seed in the CAA South Division.

Although the Phoenix would have to play all its playoff games on the road, Bisgrove said the team was already battle-tested and ready to go.

“We got to the point where we stopped worrying about a game being away from home,” Bisgrove said. “We have a real appetite to go be as successful as we can in conference, so we would take each game as it comes.”

Those games proved to be tight contests, with the last two coming down to penalty kicks. They won the first game 1-0 thanks to an early goal by senior Ashlee Brehio. A missed penalty kick by the University of North Carolina Wilmington secured a trip to the championship. Freshman defender Abby Brinker delivered the team their title with the winning penalty kick.

Bisgrove described the championship as a defining accomplishment not just now, but in the long run. She said that the last two seasons can set this notion that the Elon women’s soccer team is expected to win CAA titles.

“We’ve come a long way in these past two years,” Bisgrove said. “It’s promising for the future of this program as a whole, and hopefully we can continue to have some more championships under our belt.”

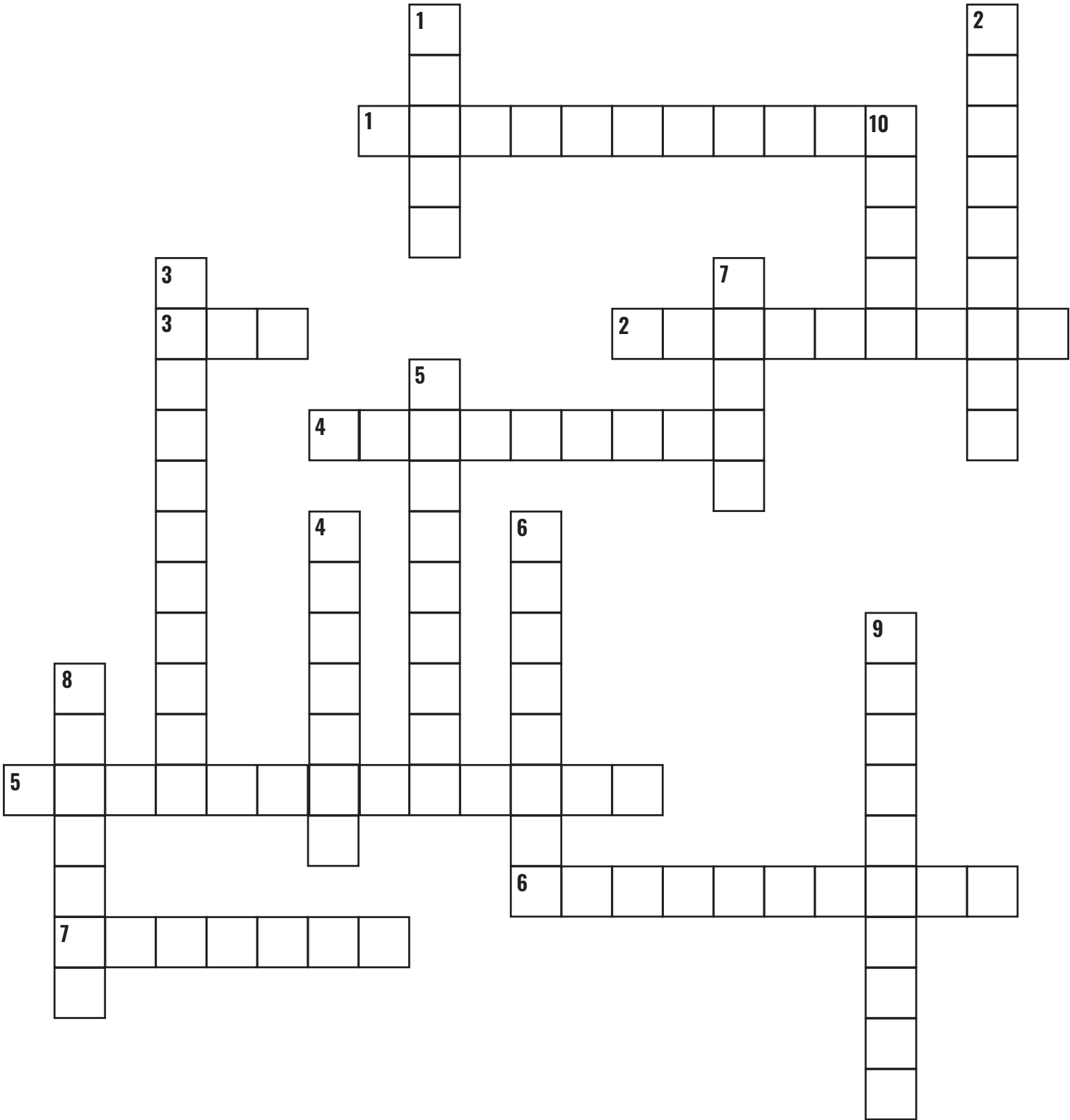
Elon’s season came to an end in the first round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Tournament with a loss to the Duke University Blue Devils Nov. 14. Even with the loss, Payne said losing the game should not take away the team’s success.

“It wasn’t about tonight, it was about the entire season,” Payne said. “I couldn’t be more happy with the response that we had, especially over the last month and postseason play. I can’t speak highly enough of my team.”



Crossword puzzle

Abbie Haapapuro  
Elon News Network



DOWN

1. Last name of the North Carolina governor  
(Pages 1, 5)
2. Facility in North Carolina offering animal-assisted therapy  
(Pages 6, 7)
3. Term used for small funding measures passed instead of a full budget  
(Pages 1, 5)
4. A way to gauge political opinions  
(Pages 1, 5)
5. Common phishing lure involving fake employment opportunities  
(Page 2)
6. How long it took the women’s soccer team to complete a “turn around”  
(Page 10)
7. Agency providing cyber tips  
(Pages 1, 4)
8. Last name of the Alamance County sheriff  
(Pages 1, 4, 5)
9. Object used during annual Elon event, this year scheduled for Dec. 2  
(Page 8)
10. Christmas figure who used to appear at Elon’s Festival of Lights and Luminaries events  
(Page 8)

ACROSS

1. Members of the political party controlling both North Carolina chambers  
(Pages 1, 5)
2. Organization attending national conferences about therapy animals  
(Pages 6, 7)
3. Federal immigration agency North Carolina sheriffs must contact under House Bill 318  
(Pages 1, 5)
4. Name of multi-agency operation that targeted individuals who solicited minors online  
(Pages 1, 4)
5. A type of scam using fake messages designed to trick people into giving away personal information  
(Page 2)
6. Last name of a senior on Elon University’s cross country team who posts videos to social media about his life as a student athlete  
(Page 9)
7. Month “Operation Ghost Wire” took place  
(Pages 1, 4)

ANSWER KEY

DOWN	1. Stein	2. Kopper Top	3. Mini-budgets	4. Polling
ACROSS	1. Republicans	2. UNC Health	3. ICE	4. Ghost Wire
	5. Phishing Scams	6. Strickland	7. October	
	5. Job Offers	6. Two Years	7. NCMEC	8. Johnson
				9. Luminaries





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