

TELL YOUR FRIENDS

# The Point

MAY 2026

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

*monthly*

## THE RIGHT DUFF

Broadway's Walker McDuffie has UNC's baseball team dreaming of the school's first national title



DATA CENTER UPDATE | NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL? | INDIE FEST LINEUP



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# The Rant Monthly

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I'm on the line, one open mind. This is my four leaf clover.

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COLD OPEN

## A nice story for parents who 'put in the work'

What stuck out to me most in Jonathan Owens' fine cover story on former Lee County High School and current UNC Chapel Hill pitcher Walker McDuffie was what he had to say about his parents.

McDuffie sang the praises of Stephen and Donna McDuffie, talking about their sacrifices — his mom took a lower-paying job so she could get him to travel ball games and his dad worked 12-hour late shifts but still made time to play catch and practice with him.

He also appreciated their approach in his development as an athlete.

"They never pushed me to play baseball," he says in the story. "There was never a thing where my performance in baseball dictated how they were going to treat me. If I had a bad game, we're still going to get ice cream. They've never treated me differently after I pitch badly. They don't love watching me play baseball because I do well. They love it because I love it."

As a soccer coach and a parent who has three children in various sports, this makes me happy. I've seen the parents who scream and yell at their kids who don't perform up to their standards. I've seen the mental impact this can have on a kid. But I've also seen many more parents who share the McDuffies' attitude toward



their child's sports — if the kid loves doing it and is learning something from the game, that's really all that matters.

A different approach can drive a very talented child away from something he or she used to love. I've seen it. It's tragic.

McDuffie seems to have a pretty good head on his shoulders (another nod to his parents), and no matter where baseball takes him, it feels like he's going to excel.

We love writing and sharing stories about the young people in our community who strive for big things. We love it even more when we can talk about parents who are positive role models and support that success, rather than demand it. — *Billy Liggett*

### FOUR North Carolina Revolutionaries

Did you hear America turns 250 this year? Here's a few Tar Heels that helped make that happen.



**Robert Howe**

As a Major General, he was North Carolina's highest-ranking Continental officer during the Revolutionary War.



**Richard Caswell**

He commanded the militia at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge and became a key political leader. Needed a better barber.



**John Harvey**

Speaker of the Colonial Assembly who oversaw the first two Provincial Congresses. He was key in organizing resistance.



**Cornelius Harnett**

You may recognize the name of a man who was a leader and voice of the revolution in the Cape Fear region. No portraits exist.

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Parks & Recreation

**MAY HAPPENINGS**

**PROGRAMS**  
Registration Open until full ↓

**Ladies Night Crafting: \$25**  
Summer Porch Decor

- Ladies ages 18+
- Bob Hales Center
- Friday, June 5, 2026; 6:30pm - 7:30pm

**New Program: Teddy Bear Picnic**

- Saturday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 10am - 2pm
- \$10/individual

**New Program: Fishing Derby**

- Saturday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 10am - 2pm
- \$10/individual

**GYMNASTICS**  
Late Registrations Accepted

**Session 3: May 11 - July 2**  
Cost varies with class length & skill \$45+

- All ages
- All skill levels

**Full Day Gymnastics Summer Camp: \$120**  
7:30am - 5:30pm

- May 26 - 29 : Tumbleweed Tumbling
- June 29 - July 2 : Red, White, Flip-tastic
- Aug. 3 - 7 : School Spirits & Cartwheels

**Half Day Gymnastics Summer Camp: \$75**  
8:00am - 12:00pm

- June 8 - 12 : June Bugs & Bounces
- July 13 - 17 : Tropical Twists

**ATHLETICS**  
Registration Ends, May 15, 2026

**Summer Sports Camp: \$75**

- May 26 - 29
- 8:30am - 12:00pm

**Sports Development Program: \$30/sport**

- Boys & Girls
- Ages 5-8 at 6pm; Ages 9-13 at 7pm
- Mondays in June: Flag Football
- Wednesdays in June Basketball
- Mondays in July: Baseball/Softball
- Wednesdays in July: Volleyball
- \*No Programming: June 29 - July 3\*

**Youth Kickball: \$30**

- Boys & Girls ages 4-14 as of May 1, 2026
- Tuesdays & Thursdays
- 6U @ O.T. Sloan Park
- 10U @ Dalrymple Park
- 14U @ Dalrymple Park

**New Sport: Youth Soccer: \$60**

- Boys & Girls ages 3-6 as of May 1, 2026
- Tuesdays & Thursdays
- Lee County Athletic Park

**SPECIAL EVENTS**

**Family Movie Night**

- Kiwanis Family Park
- Friday, May 8
- 5:00PM
- Lilo & Stitch (PG)

**FREE ENTRY**

**AQUATICS**

**OT Sloan Pool & Horton Pool**

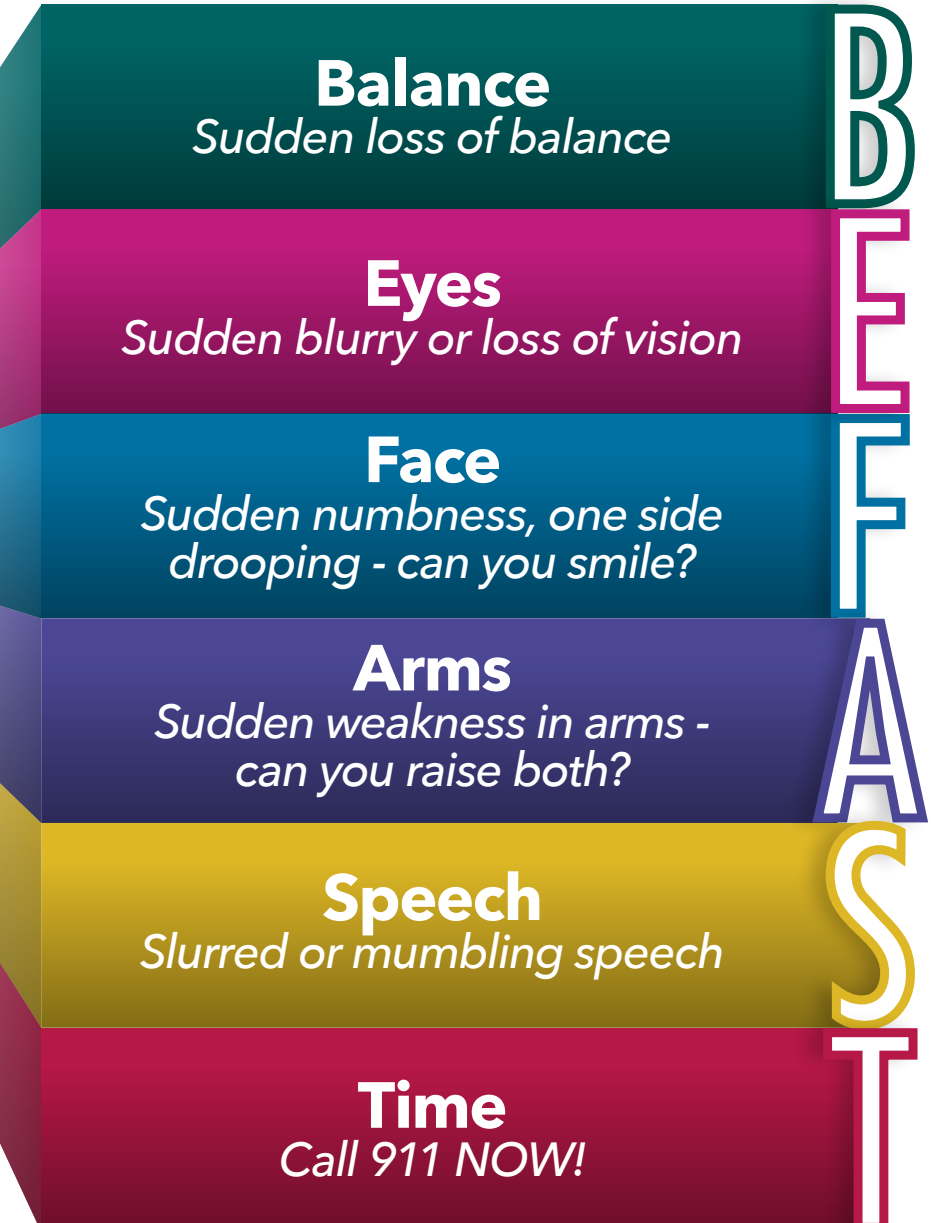
- Opens Saturday, May 23, 2026
- \$3/person
- 12:30pm - 5:30pm
- Tuesday - Sunday
- Open for Memorial Day (5/25)



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## OLIVE GARDEN, WHATABURGER, BJ'S EYEING SANFORD

Restaurant giants Whataburger and Olive Garden and retail chains BJ's Wholesale Club and Ulta Beauty are eyeing the Adams Village project along N.C. 87 (just south of Walmart), according to a report published in April by the *Triangle Business Journal*.

The article, written by *TBJ's* regional growth reporter Ben Tobin, sources people "with knowledge of the project" and did not receive confirmation from the national chains named. It credits Sanford's growth and Target's announcement last year that it was building a new store at Riv-erbirch Corner in west Sanford.

Adams Village has been associated with news surrounding Sanford's residential and business growth since it was first announced in March 2022. Not to be confused with Ashby Village (near Lowes Home Improvement), Adams Village will feature 250 single family lots and 231 townhome lots in its residential area. The commercial portion (highway facing) will sit on 30-plus acres of land.

There are approximately 956 Olive Gardens in the United States, and the restaurant has announced plans for 60 new locations in 2026 and even more in 2027. Texas-based Whataburger has more than 1,100 locations across 17 states, and North Carolina is part of the chain's recent expansion along the East Coast.

BJ's Wholesale Club experienced a strong fourth quarter in 2025 and has announced plans to open 25 to 30 new stores over the next two years. Ulta Beauty has more than 1,500 locations and saw a nearly 12-percent increase in sales in the fourth quarter in 2025.

— by Billy Liggett

# County adopts data center rules

Vote aims to protect land, manage water use and give county more oversight; balance growth with residential concerns

By Richard Sullins  
richard@rantnc.com

The Lee County Board of Commissioners adopted a sweeping set of new development rules governing any future data centers in April, creating a framework meant to protect rural and urban areas, manage water use and give the county clearer oversight as interest in large scale facilities grows. The final vote was 6-1.

Republican Commissioner Taylor Vorbeck cast the lone dissenting vote, objecting to a late change that reduced penalties for violating noise limits from \$10,000 per occurrence to \$100.

"That amount isn't punitive to large companies who could afford to ignore the fine," she said, citing concerns that the lower penalty would weaken enforcement.

County officials say the new standards are designed to balance economic development with the concerns of residents who worry about noise, industrial traffic, and the strain that high demand facilities can place on local resources.

The new regulations create some of the strictest operational and site requirements for data centers in North Carolina. One of the most consequential provisions appears early in the ordinance, and it addresses a concern that dominated much of the public debate.

For many residents, the most significant change is a new rule that flatly prohibits any data center from drilling for natural gas or using fracking. State law prevents counties from banning fracking outright, but Lee County used its development ordinance to make the practice impossible for data center operators.

The provision answers months of public pressure from residents worried about groundwater, noise, and industrial drilling near rural homes.

County planners said the drilling ban is just one part of a wider framework meant to manage the scale and impact of future data center projects. Other sections of the ordinance set limits on noise, water use, building height, and where large facilities can be located.

Data centers must be located at least 500 feet from any existing home and are prohibited from using groundwater, well water, or surface water such as lakes, rivers, or ponds. Instead, they must connect to the City of Sanford's water lines and obtain a letter confirming adequate capacity. Similar letters are required for wastewater, which must be routed to the city's public treatment system; discharges into the Deep River or its tributaries are explicitly banned.

Electricity must come from a regional utility such as Duke Energy or Central EMC, and backup generators may operate only during outages or emergencies. Noise levels generated by a center's operations would be capped at 65 decibels at pre-selected monitoring points, with regular testing by acoustic engineers and additional monitoring required if limits are exceeded.

The rules also require developers to provide detailed information about their cooling systems, energy sources, and impacts of construction — disclosures that county staff say will help them evaluate whether a proposed site is appropriate.

Supporters of the ordinance say the new standards give Lee County a clearer path forward as data centers continue expanding across North Carolina.

Developers who spoke during the public hearing said they appreciated the county's effort to create clear expectations. Several noted that data centers have become more common across the state and that local governments are increasingly being asked to evaluate projects with little precedent.

Some residents, however, urged commissioners to go further. They asked for stricter limits on water use, wider buffers between facilities and nearby homes, and more detailed environmental reviews before a project can be approved. They had hoped the county would study the issue longer so that better decisions could be made.

County staff said the ordinance reflects what they can legally require under state law. They emphasized that the rules are organic and can be updated as technology changes or as the county gains more experience reviewing data center proposals.

Commissioners also pointed out that the ordinance does not guarantee a data center will be approved. It simply establishes the standards that any applicant must meet before the county can consider a request. The vote to adopt the rules followed months of public meetings, workshops, and revisions. Several commissioners said the process helped them understand both the opportunities and the risks associated with large scale data facilities.

Supporters of the ordinance said the new rules give Lee County a stronger position as companies look for sites across central North Carolina. They argued that having clear standards in place will help the county evaluate proposals more consistently and avoid rushed decisions.

Opponents countered that the rules may discourage investment or push developers to neighboring counties with fewer restrictions. They urged commissioners to revisit the ordinance if it proves too limiting.

Sanford Area Growth Alliance CEO Jimmy Randolph praised the ordinance, saying it provides "solid protections and guidelines that all of us who live in this county value."

He reiterated that SAGA does not support any data center that would use fracking as a power source and noted that the new rules make such proposals impossible.

Randolph had told the commissioners at a previous meeting that he did not believe that a plan that was floated in 2025 by the Deep River Data company in Alamance County — a plan for which no permits have ever been applied since it was first reported on in late 2025 — would be a good fit for the county. But he went on to say "that doesn't mean that we will never have a data center here in Lee County."

"I believe that as the demands for increased data speeds and the capacities to expand the growth of artificial

intelligence that is already happening, a data center that more closely resembles what you are about to enact tonight will come and help to support that forward momentum this community has been known for."

Deep River Data has not been the first data center venture to express interest in potentially locating a large-scale site here. More than ten other data center companies have contacted Lee County in recent months requesting more information, though none of them pursued a project here beyond those initial inquiries.

With the adoption of this comprehensive set of regulations, Randolph said the county is now better positioned to attract a project that aligns with community expectations.

"We are moving forward as a community to agree on what new development should look like," he said.

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# OPINION

## An inconvenient scam

By Billy Liggett

I just arrived at Lee County High School, excited to watch my sixth-grade son compete in a chess tournament against middle and high school students. Chess has grown to become a connection for us — I taught him the game when he was much younger, and he’s grown to become much better than I ever was at that age.



He was set for three rounds on this day, and I was thrilled to watch (from afar) as he won his first round with a solid opening strategy and disciplined endgame. This was going to be fun.

Then my wife’s cell phone rang.

The number read “No Caller ID,” which my wife pointed out can mean a call from law enforcement. Having two other children in different schools throughout the city, I answered out of caution. The very professional-sounding man on the other line asked if I was Billy Liggett, which I was and still am. He then informed me that I did not show up for jury duty in a federal case, despite my signature claiming I would be there last week. My failure to appear, he said, constituted a warrant for my arrest that could be easily fixed if I drove to the courthouse and handled it over the phone.

This all came at me so fast. I didn’t recall getting a jury summons. I didn’t recall signing anything. But, also, I’m terrible at planning and organization. I don’t have the best memory of such things. There was a very real possibility I did sign something and just simply forgot.

So I stepped out of the room to escape the chess crowd so I could speak a little louder. And I asked a lot of questions.

If you read the headline for this column before reading my words, then you got a spoiler alert. This was a scam. As I later learned online, the “jury duty scam” involves callers who pose as law enforcement

officials and eventually demand payment or personal information to avoid arrest. As I learned in the call, they demand you stay on the line and text you images of “federal law” statutes that require somebody who faces a federal warrant to not disclose that information to friends or family and remain in contact (on the line) with the federal agent until you either arrive at the courthouse or send some kind of pre-bail payment (that part was oddly worded by the scammer).

It all felt very “scummy” from the beginning. First, they called my wife’s phone and pivoted when I answered. Second, he got angry with me as I got angry with him and suggested none of this sounded right.

I did not give out any personal information, but I did stay on the phone longer than I should have. Because Lee County High School was mere minutes from the courthouse, I called the guy’s bluff and said I was heading there to get it all straightened out. And when he suggested I take care of it over the phone financially, I knew for sure what was happening.

I then said a sentence I’ve never uttered before and hopefully will never utter again: “Then go ahead and ----in’ arrest me.” I’ll admit, that part felt good. Then I hung up.

As you might have guessed, I did not get arrested. And I don’t feel like I came close to “taking the bait,” but I did let it go on too long. Today’s AI software could have recorded my words, and the guy might be soon using them to call my bank and make a withdrawal. Did I mention I’m beginning to really dislike AI?

That I let it go on as long as I did is embarrassing. I turn 50 this summer, and I suppose “ability to sniff out scams” is — along with eyesight, original hair color and having a good, sturdy back — just something a man loses as he gets older.

So this is my public service announcement. Don’t fall for it. Any of it. If it smells fishy, it likely is. Everyone’s out to get you. Nothing is safe. Nothing is sacred. The end.

### EDITORIAL

## CONTINUE TO QUESTION OUR OFFICIALS ON DATA CENTERS

Opposition to data centers is everywhere you look anymore.

It’s not just Sanford and Lee County. It’s hard to be on social media these days, or even to look at the news, and not see something about how data centers — usually large-scale warehouses containing vast numbers of computer servers that run the operations of things like social media websites, banking and even health applications, and more — have created very real issues in communities across the country. Increasingly, these sites are being used to power artificial intelligence operations, which is part of the reason we hear about data centers more and more frequently, even though they’re really not something new.

The consequences of the explosion in data center construction have been environmental (they often use large amounts of water or power), economic (in many cases they come with large investments that are taxable by local governments) and even political (in some recent cases, officials supporting their construction have been turned out of office as a result). It’s safe to say that even though data centers have been a fact of life for some time, communities are now dealing with many of their consequences.

Sanford and Lee County entered a new chapter last month in their own data center story. A proposal to access natural gas beneath a dormant test well and use it to power a data center locally — a proposal that’s been rumored for half a year now, but hasn’t materialized in any tangible way — led to an outcry from area residents that resulted in the April adoption of rules by both governments that will guide the development of any future data centers that may want to locate here.

These rules have been described as “some of the most stringent” in the state. They explicitly disallow

the use of fracking to power any data operation here, taking the “proposal” that sparked the entire debate off the table entirely.

We’re no data center experts, but we can only see that as positive, even if we don’t know it to be perfect. We hope area leaders will continue to monitor developments both locally and across the country to ensure the regulations governing data centers are as strong as they can be in order to protect Lee County’s citizens and natural resources.

Unfortunately, data centers aren’t something local officials can unilaterally deny — at least in North Carolina. State law doesn’t allow cities and counties to make their construction illegal, so a strong set of rules is the best protection people in Sanford and Lee County can ask for (we’re also confident that whether they got everything right or not, the city and county planners who drafted the rules that were ultimately adopted did their research rigorously and with the goal of protecting people top of mind). Further, if you have online banking access or access your health information on the internet, or even get on Facebook to register your opposition to data centers, you’re not really opposing them — you’re just opposing them here. If you’re using social media to share AI-generated videos about the dangers of data centers, you’re doing something else entirely.

We don’t know whether a data center is coming to Lee County, but we know there are companies who have given us a look.

We hope our leaders will continue to insist that anyone wanting to locate one here will do so as responsibly as possible, and we hope those who have sounded the alarm about their dangers will continue making a fact-informed case for exactly what is and isn’t acceptable for our community.

### READERS RESPOND

Comments from Rant readers on various stories from the past few months (visit our Facebook page @rantnc to see more):

**On the MedEx ambulance deal falling through:** Thank the Lord it didn’t go through. The county was trying to put profits before people. Can you imagine having a really bad trauma case or someone who’s having a stroke, and they don’t receive the level of care they need? All they would basically do is transport. We need to keep FirstHealth. And if not, we need another ambulance service that can deal with traumas and all of the things the people of Lee County need. Lee County is growing tremendously so we need to be better prepared. God forbid we have a mass casualty and all they’ll do is transport to CCH or UNC. The people of Lee County deserve better.

Sabrina Nelson

**On the MedEx ambulance deal falling through:** I don’t think the commissioners truly understand what this says about them, the county and the impact it has. I was just looking at moving to Sanford and will no longer be searching in Lee County at all due to this. I’d rather move somewhere that cares about its citizens more than money.

Andrew Lynch

**On the MedEx ambulance deal falling through:** There is a big difference in providing emergency medical response and non-emergency medical response, which was the major responsibility of MedEx. Sadly, you often get what you pay for and a \$12 million difference in cost makes you question whether MedEx would be able to deliver on their end.

Suzanne Hart

**On the county working on a new elementary school:** I can tell you from experience where I used to live what will happen if the county doesn’t get serious about the fast growth they’re permitting to happen. The last place I lived for over 15 years allowed growth to go pretty unchecked.

They built a brand new high school to alleviate overcrowding at a couple of others. Because of all the insanely fast growth, by the time that high school opened it had 21 portable classrooms on the property.

The school was not making developers set aside property for schools, fire and rescue or other needed services. The last elementary school that was built was three stories high, long and narrow to fit on a miserable piece of property. The county had more than 91,000 students when I moved two years ago. In the five years between my children and kindergarten, 20,000 students were added.

We moved to Lee County to one of the more rural

neighborhoods to get away from the overcrowding and to get land. We did not want a new build house with everything looking the same and an HOA. My only regret is that we could not afford more acreage now. All I can do is hope the local farmers don’t sell everything off to developers.

Karen Peak

**On the county working on a new elementary school:** They need more schools, not just elementary. They also need another middle and high school with all the subdivisions they’re building.

But heck, they dang sure can’t even get employees (teachers) now or even bus drivers with them receiving the bare minimal funding. How do they expect all of this to happen?

Kaylyn Thomann

**On the county voting for new data center standards:** Having just seen a data center for the first time in Phoenix, they are massive. We have nothing on this scale in Lee County. The land, water and electricity needed for this would be immense. I see no advantage to this and worry that once again, Lee County is being considered to support positive growth in surrounding communities, but will experience the negative impacts of growth at home.

Sarah Womack

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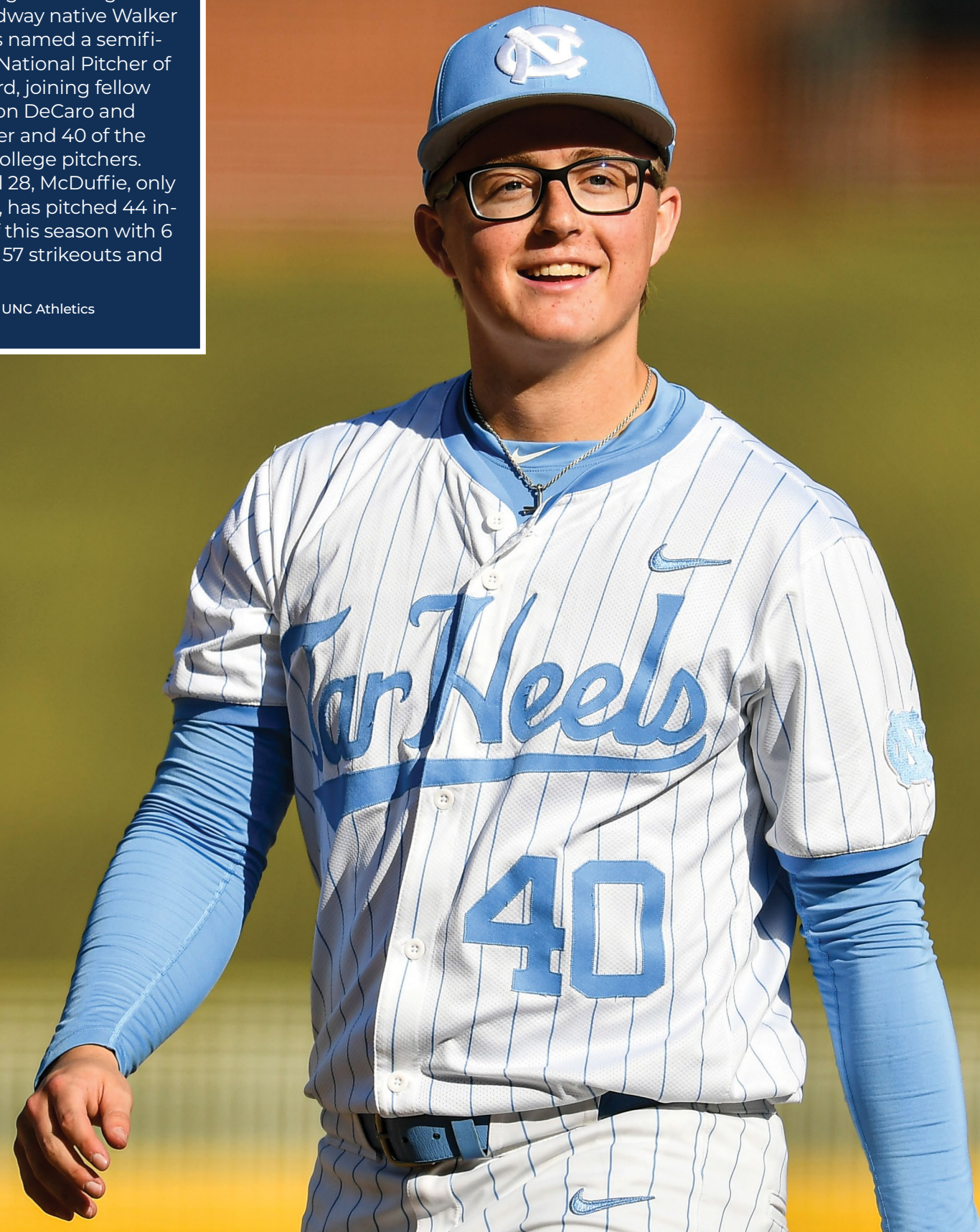
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**POY SEMIFINALIST**

Lee County High School graduate and Broadway native Walker McDuffie was named a semifinalist for the National Pitcher of the Year Award, joining fellow Tar Heels Jason DeCaro and Caden Glauber and 40 of the nation's top college pitchers. Through April 28, McDuffie, only a sophomore, has pitched 44 innings in relief this season with 6 wins, 4 saves, 57 strikeouts and a 2.23 ERA.

Photos courtesy of UNC Athletics

**COVER STORY**

# BROADWAY STAR

FROM THE DIAMONDS AT NORTHVIEW AND BROADWAY OPTIMIST PARK TO ONE OF THE BEST COLLEGE PITCHING STAFFS IN THE NATION, LEE COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL GRAD AND UNC STANDOUT WALKER MCDUFFIE IS HAVING A DREAM SEASON

BY JONATHAN OWENS

**A** 5-2 lead in the ninth inning is usually safe. But against the No. 2-ranked team in the country — a team with some of the most explosive 1-2-3 hitters in college baseball due up — a three-run cushion is far from comfortable.

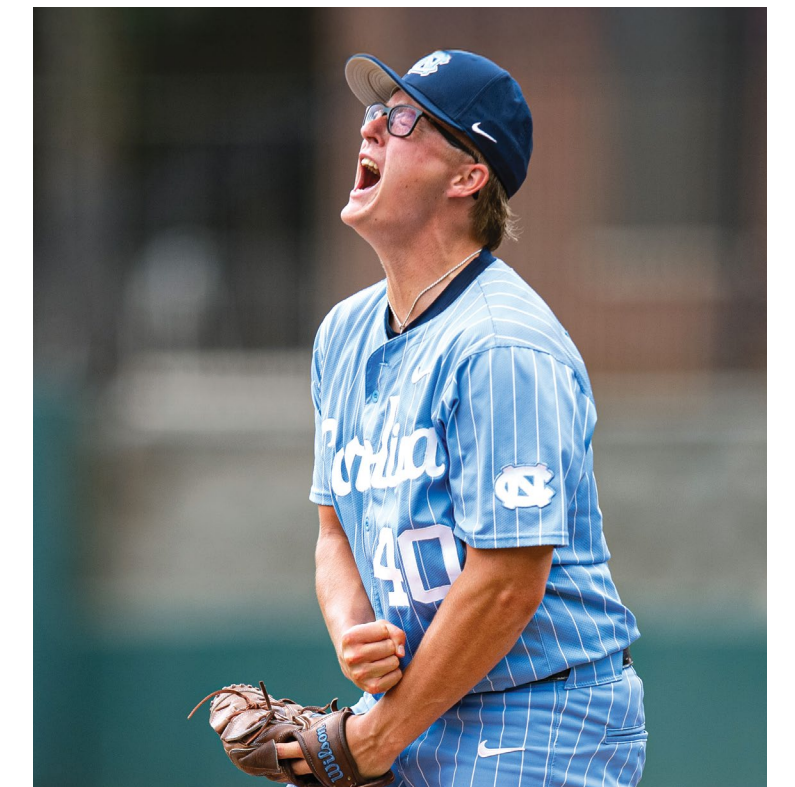
UNC Head Baseball Coach (and Sanford native) Scott Forbes didn't hesitate on who would take the mound in the ninth on April 17 against Georgia Tech.

He called on a fellow Lee County boy.

Walker McDuffie jogged in from the left field bullpen — trademark black thick-rimmed glasses on — and struck out one while coaxing two popouts from a lineup that had spent all season punishing pitchers for mistakes, recording perhaps the biggest save of his young career.

"Against an offense like that, to be able to close it down and set the tone early on a Friday night," McDuffie said afterward.

"That was big."



UNC relief pitcher Walker McDuffie celebrates one of his 55 (so far) strikeouts as a sophomore for the Tar Heels, ranked second in the nation as of April 28.



**Already a veteran**

“Last year [as a freshman], I didn’t know anything that was going on. I just went out there and pitched. But this year, it’s almost like you set an expectation on yourself after having a season like that. Now people know what you bring, and you have to bring that every day — or else it’s a failure.”

— Walker McDuffie



@therant905

He came back the next day and threw three more innings in a 14-4 rout that clinched the series and further cemented UNC’s standing among the nation’s elite with the postseason approaching.

There’s a reason you may see a few more “Walker Glasses” in the Boshamer crowd these days, and it’s not fashion. With a big-league slider, a developing changeup and a fastball in the mid-90s, McDuffie has become one of the most trusted arms in a UNC pitching staff that has ranked among the nation’s best for two straight seasons. He’s creeping up MLB prospect lists, too.

But to understand why Forbes handed him the ball against the Yellow Jackets, in front of 4,357 fans — the largest regular season crowd in Boshamer Stadium history — you have to go back.

**BROADWAY DAYS**

McDuffie’s love of baseball began early. His grandfather, Donnie Weaver, introduced him to the game and coached the family’s youngest kids — McDuffie always among them, always the smallest, always holding his own against older competition.

The pitch that would eventually carve up ACC lineups started at the lake on a summer afternoon that nobody involved probably remembers very clearly — except McDuffie.

“My uncle [Darryl Weaver] — he’s the one who taught me the slider grip,” he said. “I don’t even think he meant to. I just remember it when I was young, and it just kind of sat. It’s just all I could have remembered, the only thing I remembered from that. So I just rocked with it. And I mean, it’s honestly got me where I’m at.”

That uncle was almost certainly not thinking about MLB draft boards when he showed his nephew that grip. McDuffie was 6 years old.

He has not changed it since.

His parents, Stephen and Donna McDuffie, hauled him wherever he needed to go. From Broadway Optimist and Northview youth leagues to travel ball tournaments with Rob Wooten’s C35 organization, McDuffie was a gamer.

rantnc.com

He could play with anybody at any level, and he did.

Lee County has a rich baseball tradition, and McDuffie’s generation is no different. Everybody knows everybody, and rivalries are heated. McDuffie said that turned out to matter more than people realize.

“The competition in Lee County is really good,” he said. “Who I grew up playing against — all those guys — they push you, even if you don’t realize it. Everybody makes everybody better. And I think that’s why you see a lot of guys still playing ball from there, in our age group.”

**MOM & DAD**

Somebody had to make those camps, showcases and travel ball tournaments possible. McDuffie doesn’t talk about his parents the way athletes sometimes can — in vague or obligatory ovations. He’s specific about their sacrifices.

“I could go on and on about my mom,” McDuffie said, then paused. “She quit her job at the bank for 17-plus years and took a pay cut to be an assistant kindergarten teacher, just so she could be off to take me to travel ball tournaments in the summer.”

His father, Stephen, worked night shifts. Twelve hours. And if his son asked him to get to the field afterward — to throw, to take some BP, anything — he was there.

But what McDuffie kept going back to wasn’t the logistics. It’s something harder to quantify.

“They never pushed me to play baseball,” he said. “There was never a thing where my performance in baseball dictated how they were going to treat me. If I had a bad game, we’re still going to get ice cream. They’ve never treated me differently after I pitch badly.”

His parents don’t love watching McDuffie play baseball because he was good at it, he said.

“They love it, because I love it. And that gives me all the motivation in the world, because it’s my choice and my decision. I’m not doing it for them — but they get to reap the benefits of it, which is the best part.”

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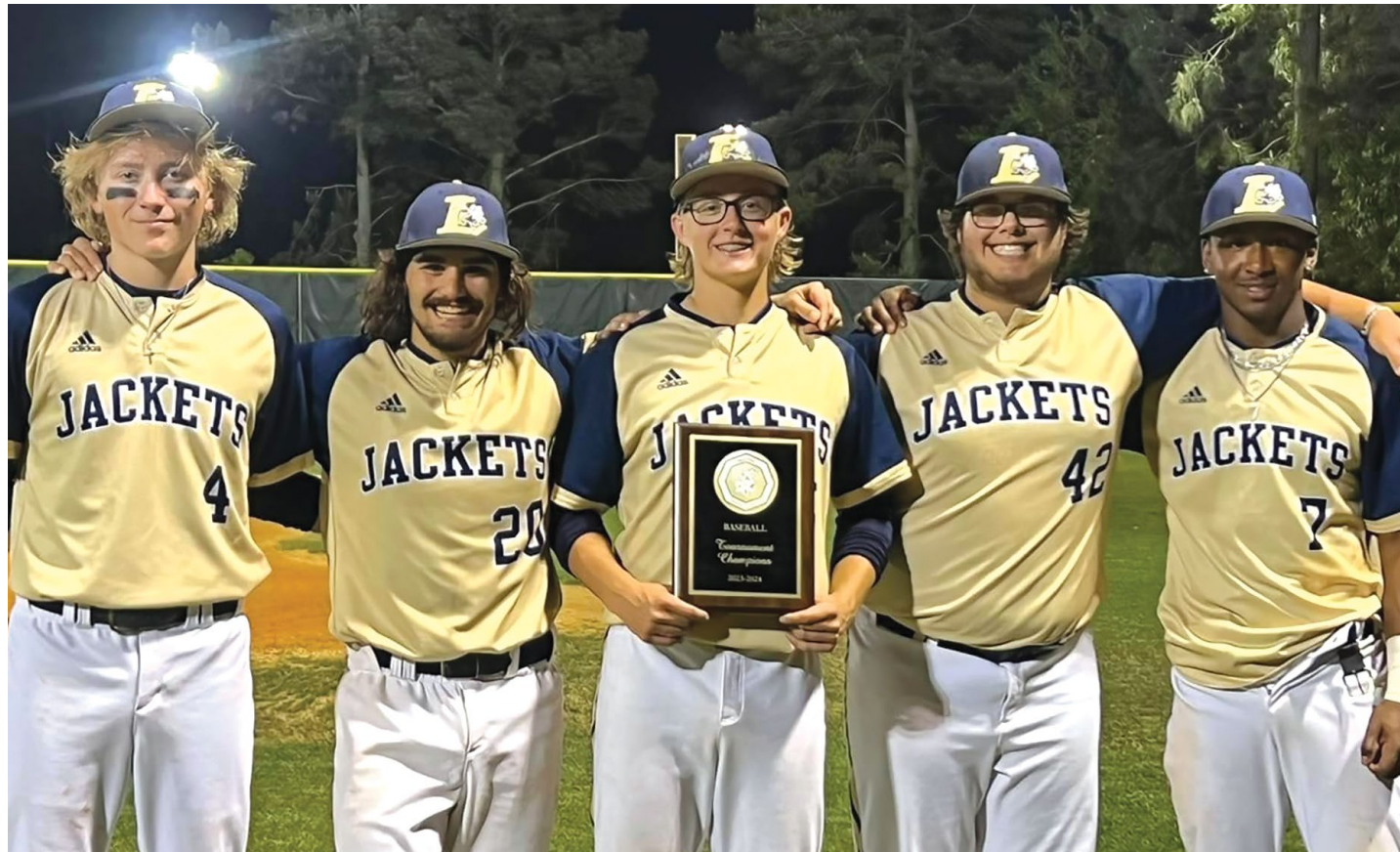
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Walker McDuffie (center) led the Lee County Yellow Jackets to a conference tournament championship and a 21-win season as a senior in 2024. He was named the NCBCA Class 3A Pitcher of the Year. Photo: Facebook

**HIGH SCHOOL RISE**

As the ace for Lee County High School, McDuffie's star brightened on the mound, in the field and at the plate. He'd always seen himself as a position player first — a shortstop, ideally — before an ACL tear and an honest look at college recruiting changed the equation. Pitching wasn't a consolation prize. It was a calling he hadn't fully focused on yet.

The results made the case. McDuffie was named the NCBCA's 3A Pitcher of the Year in 2024, earned All-State honors twice and was named Conference Pitcher of the Year his senior season.

Through all of it — youth leagues, travel ball, high school — McDuffie's path never crossed with Forbes in any meaningful way. Forbes still often comes home to Sanford. Lee County is a small world, yet they missed each other until McDuffie attended a UNC camp as a junior at Wooten's urging.

"I had never talked to him before," McDuffie said. "But, I went to their camp, and then they offered me the next day. So that was the first time I'd ever talked to him."

Forbes loved that slider and offered him immediately. McDuffie didn't need long to think about it. A lifelong Tar Heel fan with good grades, he may have ended up in Chapel Hill with or without baseball.

"Carolina is the only school I ever wanted to go to," he said. "My recruiting story is kind of boring."

**THROWN INTO THE FIRE**

College has been a different animal. McDuffie arrived on campus in the summer of 2024, not knowing what to expect, confident he could pitch but realistic about the learning curve.

Forbes had other plans for him.

McDuffie appeared in 28 games as a freshman — more than any other pitcher on the roster. He went 3-3 with seven saves, struck out 72 batters in 55.1 innings and posted a 3.74 ERA. He ranked fourth in the ACC in appearances and fifth in saves. He was the first Carolina true freshman to earn more than one save since Trent Thornton in 2013, and was named a second-team Freshman All-American by every major publication that covers college baseball.

None of it was the plan, exactly.

"I'm just a freshman coming in," he said. "You don't really know what to expect. But as we continued to practice and scrimmage and play each other and then play other teams, I started to kind of understand where I fit in best and what I needed to do to help us win."

What clicked came in his second career appearance — a save at East Carolina in late February 2025. He threw a hitless 2.1 innings with three strikeouts. After that, something settled.

"That one really kind of helped me solidify myself," he said. "Pitching against college hitters — it's a lot different than high school."

Forbes watched all of it from the dug-out. His assessment, repeated after nearly every outing: "He's definitely got it."

After a dominating performance from McDuffie against Oklahoma in the NCAA Regional, Forbes had another great line: "Not bad for an ol' Sanford boy."

# Getting caught in The Web

*Facility for local players to hone their baseball skills celebrates its second anniversary this summer*

Lee County has had plenty of representation at high levels of baseball to make it proud over the years.

There's Thomas Harrington, the Southern Lee standout who pitched at Campbell University and went on to make his MLB debut with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 2025 (Harrington is currently with AAA Indianapolis). There's Harrington's high school teammate Luke Craig, who went on to pitch at UNC Wilmington and was drafted in 2024 by the Arizona Diamondbacks. There's Rob Wooten, who pitched for the Milwaukee Brewers from 2013 to 2015 and now leads Grace Christian's baseball program.

And there's Walker McDuffie, whose achievements with the University of North Carolina's Tar Heel team you read about in this edition of *The Rant Monthly*.

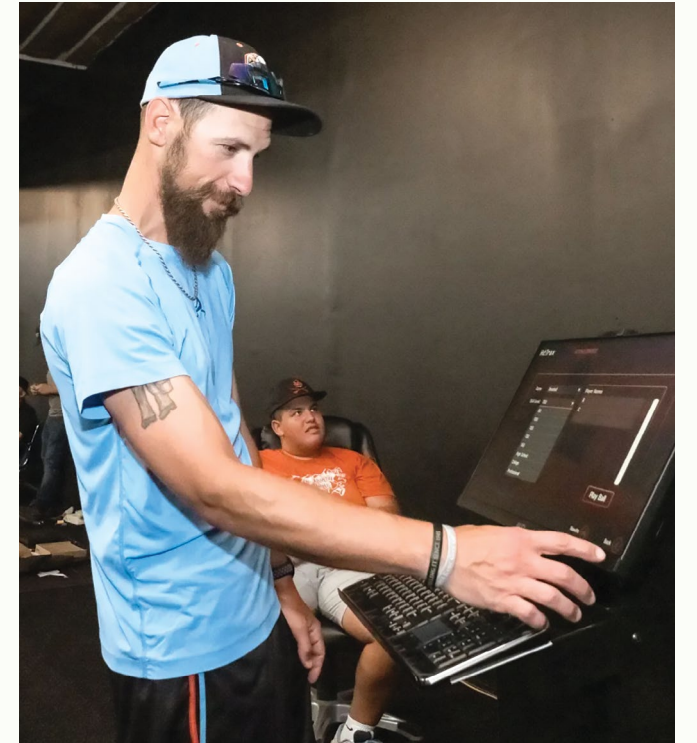
Sanford has always been something of a baseball town, and for the last couple of years, a baseball training facility in the Jonesboro area has been working to ensure that pipeline of local talent stays active.

Jeremy Palme was a founder of The Web in 2024 at 2626 Fayetteville Street. Palme is the head coach of the Sanford Spinners and has also coached baseball at Lee County High School and Grace Christian, and he opened the facility as a place for local players to hone their batting, pitching and other baseball skills. The facility will celebrate two years in business this August.

"It's been really good to have this in the community," Palme said. "Just getting to see and work with the next generation of ball players — I get to see a lot of people I grew up playing with coming in with their own kids."

Although The Web has served that purpose well since its opening, Palme and the team there saw an opportunity for it to also serve as a hub for local travel ball — not a replacement for other baseball programs that exist locally, but a supplement that offers kids more opportunities to develop their skills and compete at higher levels.

To that end, they've partnered with national baseball development program PRD and Ghost National to



Jeremy Palme, one of the owners of "The Web," demonstrates the business' "HitTrax" machine.

create the Ghost-Web, a Sanford-based youth travel baseball program with teams from 8-and-under to 13-and-under. There are currently between 60 and 70 area youth involved in the Ghost-Web program. Palme says there's always room for more baseball opportunities, even in a town that's already got plenty of activity.

"Our program is based around a development first approach. It is our goal to not only teach these kids the skills to play this wonderful game, but also to help them to understand the importance of being a great teammate and in turn a respectful young adult," he said. "We encourage kids to play multiple sports and stay involved in their local parks & rec sports, while also giving them the stage to play higher profile tournaments. This is a travel organization that puts the players first and only wants to add to the amazing tradition of exceptional baseball to come out of this area."

For more information about the Web and its travel baseball programs, visit [www.thewebathletics.com](http://www.thewebathletics.com).

— Gordon Anderson



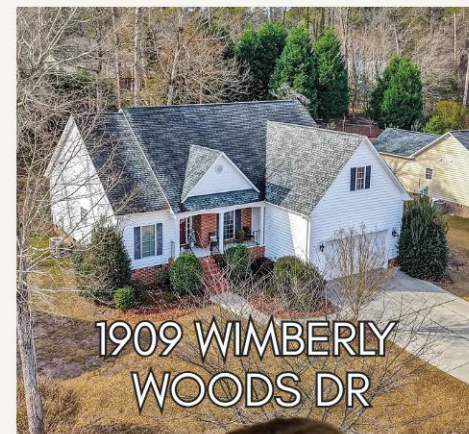
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# Lots of 'new' in Spinners' Year 6

*Sanford team moves to Lee County High School, welcomes highly touted college players*

The Sanford Spinners' 2026 season — the sixth since the team was formed as part of the collegiate level Old North State League — kicks off this month and promises to be an exciting one.

There are new elements for the season — most prominently, a new location. After five years playing at Tramway Park adjacent to Southern Lee High School, the Spinners will make Lee County High School's varsity baseball field their home in 2026.

The move came with an investment in the facility by the team, who funded new backstop netting, batting cage netting and pitching tunnel netting — upgrades that will be available to the Lee County High School Yellow Jackets.

The 2026 season also comes with the addition of new General Manager Tom Andor, a retired Army veteran and native of St. Francis, Minnesota who played baseball in college.

But there's plenty of excitement expected on the field as well, according to Head Coach Jeremy Palme. Palme said there were still some roster spots to be filled as of late April, but "a decent amount of returning players" as well.

At least two of those returning players — Sanford's Pierce Bouwman, who just committed to Campbell University and UCLA pitcher Logan Reddeman — have begun to draw attention ahead of the 2026 Major League Baseball draft. Bouwman is currently putting up big numbers at Catawba Valley Community College, and California native Reddeman is already appearing on 2026 draft boards.

Play in the ONSL, whose teams are made up of college players on their summer break, begins on May 23 for the Spinners with an away game against the Danville Dairy Daddies, followed by away games on May 28 (against the Clayton Clovers), May 29 (against Danville) and May 31 (against the Chatham County Yardbirds). The team's home opener is set for 7 p.m. on Friday, June 5, against Clayton, and will be followed on June 6 and 7 by games against Danville.

"That weekend will be a three-game homestand to kick off the season," team owner Al Anderson said, explaining that the June 5 game will be sponsored by Cornerstone K9 of Sanford, and will feature the debut



of Mickey the Bat Dog (Mickey's predecessor Murphy "got called up to the big leagues," Anderson joked). The June 6 game will be Central Carolina Hospital Night, and June 7 will be Community Heroes night and feature appearances by local first responders.

Anderson said the team is bringing in a new food vendor for 2026, in line with his stated goal of "creating a fan experience" Other upgrades for the season will include a hospitality tent, the installation of cameras capable of streaming games, a new PA announcer, and even the introduction of a team chaplain.

The Spinners' 2026 home schedule is below (all games begin at 7 p.m.). For more information, visit [www.sanfordspinners.com](http://www.sanfordspinners.com).

### 2026 Spinners Home Schedule

June 5 – vs. Clayton Clovers	July 1 – vs. Wake Forest Fungo
June 6 – vs. Danville Dairy Daddies	July 6 – vs. Raleigh Red Oaks
June 7 – vs. Danville Dairy Daddies	July 8 – vs. Carolina White Sox (non league game)
June 10 – vs. Sandhills Bogeys	July 12 – vs. Chatham Yardbirds
June 12 – vs. Raleigh Red Oaks	July 14 – vs. Chatham Yardbirds
June 15 – vs. Clayton Clovers	July 16 – vs. Chatham Yardbirds
June 16 – vs. Raleigh Red Oaks	July 18 – vs. Wake Forest Fungo
June 17 – vs. Danville Dairy Daddies	July 19 – vs. Wake Forest Fungo
June 18 – vs. Carolina White Sox	

— by Gordon Anderson

McDuffie said he later corrected his coach. "I keep telling him I'm from Broadway. There's a big difference."

The Tar Heels advanced to the Super Regional last year before falling just short of the College World Series. McDuffie pitched in two of those postseason games. He's been thinking about Omaha ever since.

### THIS SEASON

Sophomore seasons are harder than freshman seasons. The opposition has film. The element of surprise — the kid with the glasses jogging in from the bullpen that nobody has seen before — is mostly gone.

"Last year, I didn't know anything that was going on," McDuffie said. "I just went out there and pitched. But this year, it's almost like you set an expectation on yourself after having a season like that. Now people know what you bring, and you have to bring that every day — or else it's a failure."

He pressed early. The numbers dipped. He found his way back to the same mindset he carried as a freshman: just go out and have fun.

The results have been among the best of any reliever in the ACC. He's made 18 appearances, going 6-1 with a 2.45 ERA. He was once again among the team's leaders with 57 strikeouts as of April 27, following a commanding performance against rival Duke. At one stretch, he went 16 consecutive innings without allowing an earned run.

The coaching staff has played a major role in the development, he said. Before arriving at UNC, McDuffie had largely figured pitching out on his own; high school hitters don't require the full arsenal. Now, he has a full staff of coaches who can take as much time as needed to help him.

"I can ask a question, and they will sit there for 30 minutes and explain it to me in a way that I'll understand," he said. "They have the answer to absolutely everything. And even if it's not about me, I ask questions about other people, just because I want to learn as much as I can — because eventually, something someone else does might affect me later down

the road, and then I'll know exactly how to approach it."

He's built trust with Forbes and its staff, allowing him to walk into big games with their confidence, thanks to one simple thing: honesty.

"If he asks me if I'm good and I say yeah, I prove that I'm good," McDuffie said. "And once he sees that, and once it happens a few times, now we've got a system going. He knows I'm honest with him. Even on the flip side, if I don't feel good, I'll tell him that. It's not a 'I'm soft' thing. If I pitch today and I don't give us the best chance to win compared to one of the other 20 guys waiting, that matters."

### BEYOND CHAPEL HILL

Baseball America recently ranked McDuffie among the top 100 prospects for the 2027 MLB Draft, citing his ability to get ahead of hitters, induce ground balls, and avoid extra-base hits — and, of course, that slider.

McDuffie isn't eligible for this year's

draft. That means another season of development, including a possible starting role next year.

For now, his focus is singular. "That's why you come to UNC," he said. "At this point, you look at the recent history — that's the standard. The standard isn't to get to Omaha, tour around, and just check the box of 'hey, we made it.' For us, making it to the conference tournament is just another box to check before we get to our ultimate goal, which is to win the national championship. And I think that's very, very doable."

On a Friday night in April, in front of a record crowd, with the second-best team in college baseball due up in the ninth, the Sanford native Forbes handed the ball to a fellow Lee County baseball star.

McDuffie got three outs. The Heels won, which will mean the world for their postseason seeding and dreams of the school's first national championship.

Not bad for an ol' boy from Broadway.



Walker McDuffie sits next to his parents, Stephen and Donna McDuffie of Broadway, during his Signing Day ceremony at Lee County High School in 2024. In just his sophomore season at UNC, McDuffie is considered one of the best relief pitchers in the nation.

Photo: Lee County High School

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Pierce Bouwman

### So. Lee alum gets national nod, commits to Campbell

Former Southern Lee player Pierce Bouwman is having a historic season for Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory.

In early April, with plenty of games left on the schedule, he broke the Redhawks' season home run record with his 21st dinger. For his efforts that week, he was named the national NJCAA player of the week for going 15-for-21 at the plate with 12 runs scored, five doubles, six home runs, and 15 RBIs.

"Looking back on the week, I felt great," Bouwman said. "I was seeing the ball well, hitting balls on the barrel, and spinning it the way I wanted. I think a big part of that comes from the effort level and energy throughout our team, and knowing everyone is doing everything they can to win gives me confidence when I'm on the field."

Bouwman announced his commitment to play at Campbell University next season on April 21.

#### Thomas Harrington, *(Triple-A Indianapolis)*

Southern Lee alum Thomas Harrington made his first big-league start with the

Pittsburgh Pirates in 2025, but a groin injury ended his season in late August, cutting short any chance at a late-season rebound. He posted a 1.50 ERA in spring training this year and was subsequently optioned to Triple-A Indianapolis, where he's listed among the top pitching prospects in the system and figures into the Indianapolis rotation alongside Antwone Kelly and Wilber Dotel.

#### Cooper Harrington

*Liberty University*

The other Harrington from Sanford is making a real impression in Lynchburg, Va. Cooper Harrington, Thomas's brother, spent his freshman year at Liberty in a relief role, picking up wins and contributing out of the bullpen, including a 2-0 record and a scoreless performance against Virginia.

He's stepped into an even bigger role in 2026. In his first start of the year, Harrington held High Point scoreless through six innings and struck out a career-high eight batters in an 8-0 Liberty victory. He's also been used as a late-game arm out of the bullpen, earning saves, including a multi-inning appearance against Kennesaw State, where he struck out seven without issuing a walk.

#### Luke Craig

*High-A Hillsboro Hops*

Luke Craig, a Sanford native who pitched at Southern Lee and UNC Wilmington, was a seventh-round selection by Arizona in the 2024 MLB Draft. He worked through the system and was assigned to High-A Hillsboro, where he remains.

#### Bradley "B.J." Brown Jr.

*Queens University of Charlotte*

B.J. Brown, a Lee County High School product who initially enrolled at UNC Wilmington before transferring to Queens, delivered a walk-off home run to clinch the series against Jacksonville earlier this season.

It was his second walk-off hit of the season. Fellow Lee County High alum Luke Sheets also plays for the Royals.



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**MONTGOMERY MAKES UNAFFILIATED STATE HOUSE RUN OFFICIAL**

April Montgomery has qualified to run as an unaffiliated candidate in North Carolina's 51's state House District, which covers all of Lee and part of Moore County. The State Board of Elections certified 2,826 signatures, almost 600 more than she needed to make the ballot.

"We're very pleased with the result," Montgomery said. "The process got us in front of voters and we got to hear their concerns. People desperately want a choice beyond the two parties and we're going to give them one."

Montgomery will face Republican Charles Taylor, a member of the Sanford City Council since 2007, in November. Democrat Tashera Nichols McDuffie filed for the race in December, but later withdrew.

"We're going to make this a competitive race," Montgomery said, "Voters don't want politics as usual. When I go to the legislature, I will only be beholden to the people, a representative who's independent in name and in action."

Montgomery is chief development officer at EIP Storage, a Chapel Hill-based energy storage company, and she co-owns a small redevelopment firm that specializes in restoring historic commercial buildings with her husband David.

# Lee County's next elementary school project taking shape

By Richard Sullins  
richard@rantnc.com

Work on what will become Lee County's ninth elementary school is moving forward — quietly, slowly, and mostly out of public view. It is still far too early to know what the new school will look like or where it will be built, but Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach and his team have been steadily assembling the pieces behind the scenes.

It's been six months since the Lee County Board of Education began working in earnest with county commissioners on the project. Neither board has said much publicly, but enough information is available to sketch a picture of where things stand.

Large capital projects like this one tend to move at a crawl in the early stages. Before any groundbreaking ceremony can be imagined, the district must identify and secure a site, hire an architect, develop and approve plans, obtain full funding, secure permits, select a contractor, and negotiate a performance contract. Between each major milestone are dozens of smaller steps that must be completed in sequence.

**THE SEARCH FOR A SITE**

Last September, the school board authorized Dossenbach to begin searching for suitable land and to hire a real estate agent to assist. A broker has since been engaged, and several potential sites have been identified. The school board's Operations Committee, chaired by Republican board member Alan Rummel, has already met with the realtor in closed session to review the list of possibilities.

One option under consideration is a two-acre tract the school board already owns — the former Jonesboro Elementary School site at 400 Cox Maddox Road. The building, vacant since 1991 and used only for storage, was destroyed by fire in April 2023 and later demolished. The land has sat empty ever since.

In the spring of 2024, county commis-



The last new school built in Lee County was W.B. Wicker Elementary School, which celebrated its ribbon-cutting ceremony (above) in 2019.

sioners proposed building a joint maintenance facility on the site, but the offer came during a period of deep mistrust and poor communication between the two boards. The school board viewed the proposal skeptically, and the idea went nowhere.

By the summer of 2025, however, relations had thawed. The school board resumed discussions with commissioners about critical capital needs just as word arrived from Raleigh of a potential funding opportunity: up to \$44 million from the state's Education Lottery proceeds, covering as much as 85 percent of land acquisition and construction costs. Suddenly, both boards had reason to work together.

**A FUNDING PLAN ... AND A SETBACK**

North Carolina law divides responsibility for school property. Counties must purchase or condemn land for new school sites at the request of school boards, but once acquired, the property belongs to the school board. Counties also bear the financial responsibility for school construction, while school boards retain operational control.

With an estimated \$56 million price

tag for a new elementary school, the two boards met just after Labor Day 2025 to assemble a funding package. Commissioners pledged up to \$14 million, contingent on state approval, with the remainder expected from the NeedsBased Public School Capital Fund of the North Carolina Education Lottery.

The application was submitted, and optimism was high.

Until it wasn't.

Just before the 2025 Christmas break, Lee County Schools learned that its application for \$44 million in lottery funds had been declined. What had seemed like a nearcertain win became a reminder of how competitive and unforgiving the grant process can be.

The setback came amid growing concern that Lee County's school infrastructure might soon struggle to keep pace with rapid residential and commercial development. Representatives from N.C. State's Institute for Transportation Research and Education warned the school board last October that delaying the project further could mean missing out on millions in state funding.

The loss of lottery funding was a blow, but not the end of the road. The state will

open another application window this fall, and districts like Lee County will have only a few weeks to submit revised proposals. Reviewing last year's application — and understanding what the state liked and didn't — will be critical.

**WHY A NEW SCHOOL**

A separate study presented to the school board last October made clear that expanding existing elementary schools is not a viable solution. A new school serving about 800 students is projected to cost \$56 million, or roughly \$66,000 per student. Expanding existing campuses would cost about \$25 million per site but add only 300 seats — a far higher cost of \$83,000 per student.

If the district fails to secure lottery funding a second time, another option would be a bond referendum. But state law allows such referenda only in presidential election years, meaning 2028 at the earliest. That would delay construction by at least two years and significantly increase costs.

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

The last new school built in Lee County was W.B. Wicker Elementary, which opened in 2019 as Sanford's economic development efforts began to accelerate. Since then, the region has seen steady growth in industry and housing. More than 75 new housing developments are awaiting approval, representing nearly 16,000 new dwellings — most of which are expected to be sold as quickly as they are built.

Demographic data now being collected will play a major role in determining where the new school should be located. That analysis is under way, and district officials say they are actively engaged in the process, even if they can't yet share details publicly.

An announcement of the chosen site could come soon — or it could take months. Heavy equipment may not appear on any selected property for some time. But the work is happening, and the pieces are slowly falling into place for Lee County's next elementary school.

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# INDIE FEST RETURNS

AFTER THE FALL'S RAINOUT, CAROLINA INDIE FEST FEATURES ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED BANDS AND SEVERAL NEW NAMES

By Gordon Anderson  
gordon@rantnc.com

Carolina Indie Fest returns to downtown Sanford on May 15 and 16 at Hugger Mugger Brewing, bringing 10 unique musical acts over two days, a long list of food trucks, and a host of craft vendors.

Half of the acts scheduled to perform at the festival are holdovers who had been slated to play the fall 2025 iteration of the festival in September, which was called off due to the threat of rain.

❑ **Jack the Radio:** Raleigh, North Carolina roots-rockers blending rock and blues sensibility with Americana, folk, and country to create a tapestry of swampy southern-tinged sounds.

❑ **The Dapper Conspiracy:** High energy southern rock from Raleigh, infused with bluegrass, funk and blues. Inspired by the eerie gothic vibes of Fleetwood Mac, the virtuosity of Andrew Bird, and the creative energy of Spoon.

❑ **Pageant:** High Point-based four piece rock band “built to revive and redefine rock ‘n’ roll for a new generation.” Inspired by guitar-driven sounds of the 1980s, while adding new and modern elements.

❑ **The Boom Unit Brass Band:** The North Carolina Triangle’s “local version of a New Orleans Second Line jazz band.”

❑ **OP’ Joey Scrums:** A Triangle-based blend of folk, rock, and bluegrass influence that adds up to a genre-defying sonic experience, conveying personal stories of authentic emotion and the essence of Americana.

Filling out the lineup are:

❑ **Eduardo De Rosamaria:** Raleigh-based flamenco ensemble designed



Carolina Indie Fest runs from 5 to 10 p.m. on May 15 and 2 to 9 p.m. on May 16 in the beer garden at Hugger Mugger Brewing, 229 Wickler St. in downtown Sanford. Admission is free. For more information, visit [carolinaindiefest.net](http://carolinaindiefest.net).

to transport audiences to Spain’s Andalusia region.

❑ **Whoop:** Raleigh based quartet traversing indie-pop, rock, reggae, and jazzy hip hop “with instinctive musicality, rare chemistry, and palpable joy.” Whoop performed at Carolina Indie Fest in 2022.

❑ **The Southern Brothas:** A Carolina-based collective playing something they call the New Funk: “a deliberate, soulful reinvention of the southern sound – romantic R&B with real soul depth sitting naturally alongside Americana that reclaims Black heritage the

way it was always meant to sound.”

❑ **Jo Gore:** Singer and songwriter from southeastern North Carolina blending R&B and gospel with a voice “often described as both sanctified and sultry – a voice that can stir the soul and still the room.”

❑ **Effing & Blinding:** A high-energy four-piece rock band built on raw sound, tight chemistry, and an undeniable live presence. Blending straight-up rock and roll with deep grooves and flashes of funk, the band delivers a sound that is both familiar and unmistakably their own.



## COUNTY TO CELEBRATE OPENING OF NEW LIBRARY ON MAY 2

Lee County Libraries are excited to invite the community to a grand opening event for the main branch’s new location (1740 Bragg Street) on May 2, 2026 with a full day of celebrations.

From 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., the Library staff welcomes families, readers, gamers, and makers to stop by and explore their new space. The event will begin with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at 10 a.m. and continue with festivities throughout the day including live entertainment, guided tours of the new facility, crafts and games, story times with guest readers and food trucks.

The Library is postponing the previously announced soft opening that was set to occur beginning April 20th pending the completion of final equipment installation and inspections.

“The new Library building is coming along wonderfully,” said Beth List, director of Library Services. “We are looking forward to welcoming our community members into the space and promise the wait will be worthwhile.”

The new location offers something for everyone with sections for children, teens and adults, a makerspace, quiet study rooms, meeting rooms and more.

# MedEx ambulance deal with county falls apart

By Gordon Anderson  
gordon@rantnc.com

A deal for the provision of emergency medical transport service between Lee County Government and Ahsoskie-based ambulance company MedEx fell apart less than three months before it was set to begin.

The Lee County Board of Commissioners selected MedEx in late 2025 to receive the county’s franchise for emergency medical transport beginning in July 2026, and began negotiations with the company shortly thereafter. MedEx would have taken the job over from FirstHealth of the Carolinas, which has held the franchise since 2021.

But as the months dragged on without a signed contract, speculation became common — particularly within the EMS

community — that the two sides had been unable to finalize a deal.

That speculation was borne out when MedEx issued a statement in April to Curious Scout Media saying “the parties remain(ed) apart on provisions that MedEx believes are essential to ensuring operational stability, financial certainty, and the consistent delivery of high-emergency services” and that county staff had “indicated that no further changes would be considered.” The county then issued a statement saying the two sides were “unable to reach an agreement on the negotiated terms,” that “MedEx ultimately indicated that they could not agree to the terms the County felt were essential” and that “it became apparent that we were not going to find common ground on these outstanding issues, and negotiations could not proceed further.”

The failure to reach terms is the latest twist in a story that’s been unfolding for months. The Board of Commissioners first picked MedEx for negotiations in late 2025 after the company proposed to serve the county’s emergency transport needs for \$8.2 million — more than \$12 million less than the \$20.9 million bid given by FirstHealth. An advisory committee appointed by the county had recommended earlier in the year that the county stick with FirstHealth.

In November, *The Rant* reported that MedEx’s experience with regards to emergency transport may not have been quite as represented. MedEx had claimed during the bidding process and in public hearings that it was a “primary” or “co primary” provider of emergency medical service in Forsyth County, but documents

at the time showed the company is actually a nonemergency provider only authorized to perform emergency medical transport when specifically designated by that county. The commissioners stuck with MedEx after another meeting in December.

Both the county and MedEx described their own negotiations as “in good faith” in their statements. Lee County’s statement didn’t identify any of the “outstanding issues” that led to the breakdown, but MedEx CEO Dillon Lowe told the Curious Scout that the county wanted provisions “that could let the county suspend payments without clear standards” and “expand staffing and reporting requirements.” Lowe’s statement also said MedEx had invested more than \$1 million ahead of the contract’s start to acquire ambulances and hire staff.

## Central Electric providing grants to local educators to fund innovative projects

Teachers, are you looking for new opportunities to fund projects for your classroom?

Central Electric is awarding up to \$15,000 in Bright Ideas education grants to local educators in K-12 classrooms for the 2026-27 school year. Educators in K-12 classrooms with creative ideas for learning projects are encouraged to apply for a grant up to \$2,000.

Grant applications will be accepted through Sept. 15. However, it pays to apply early. All teachers who submit their applications by the early bird deadline of Aug. 15 will be entered into a drawing for one of five \$100 Visa gift cards. Scan the QR code or visit [NCBrightIdeas.com](http://NCBrightIdeas.com) for more information or to apply!



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LEE COUNTY SCHOOLS

# FINAL BOW

RON COLEY WRAPS UP HIS FINAL PRODUCTION AT LEE COUNTY HIGH AFTER 31 YEARS IN THEATER EDUCATION, 19 IN SANFORD

*Courtesy of Lee County Schools*

## DEL TACO, FIRESTONE, BASKIN-ROBBINS LOOK TO SANFORD

The Sanford-Lee County Planning Department issued permits in March that allow for forward motion on several commercial projects in the South Horner Boulevard/N.C. 87 area, including Del Taco and Baskin-Robbins restaurants, and a Firestone Complete Auto Care location.

The Del Taco location, at 3116 S. Horner Blvd., has been in the works for some time. The Rant first reported it had been proposed before the planning department's Technical Review Committee in February 2026.

The permit is valid through August 30 and allows for "site development and construction of a new 2,021-square-foot building" as well as an integrated drive thru.

Del Taco is a California-based fast food chain which has existed since the 1960s, with most of its locations in California. Its website shows North Carolina stores in Durham and Kernersville.

The planning department also issued a permit on March 18 that will allow improvements for a Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlor at 3104 S. Horner Blvd. – a commercial strip which currently houses Jimmy John's and Dunkin' Donuts — in "an existing unoccupied office space."

Baskin-Robbins has more than 7,800 stores worldwide and has been in business since the 1940s. The permit is valid through Sept. 14 of this year.

Finally, a permit was issued on March 20 to allow the construction of a Firestone Complete Auto Care store at 3355 N.C. 87, just south of the Wilkinson Auto dealership. The 6,600 square foot structure was first proposed in October of last year.

After more than three decades in education and nearly two decades shaping the stage at his alma mater, Lee County High School, Ron Coley is preparing for his final curtain call.

Coley has been a theatre arts teacher for a total of 31 years, 19 of those at Lee County High School. Despite time in elementary schools and at Athens Drive High, in many ways, his story has always been rooted right here.

"I graduated from here," he said. "Although, ironically, I never actually did a play here in high school."

That passion for theatre did not wait long to take hold. As a senior, Coley found his way to the stage through the Footlight Players, performing in *Sorry, Wrong Number* and *Anything Goes* in 1981, a pair of experiences that changed everything.

"The moment theatre hooked me was probably that first play," he said. "Once I did it, I just knew that was my 'new life.'"

From there, the path became clear: a career built around theatre, and around students.

"Once I started doing theatre myself, I wanted my career to be around it," Coley said. "But I also wanted to eat," he chuckled. "I decided I liked working with students, so I decided to be a teacher, and why not teach something you love?"

When Coley arrived at Lee County High School, the program looked very different than it does today. Resources were limited. Performances were fewer. Even the auditorium itself posed a challenge.

"The first show I did here was actually a classroom show," he said. "I was told



Ron Coley was a Lee County High School graduate who, ironically, never did a play or musical while a student. He would go on to teach theater at LCHS for 19 years.

the auditorium was in disrepair and we wouldn't be able to use it. But after that first show, we figured out how to make it work."

And make it work they did.

Over the years, Coley estimates the program has produced close to 100 shows, often staging four or five productions annually. Along the way, he watched the program evolve from modest beginnings into a thriving, county-wide source of pride.

"I'm proud of watching the program grow," he said. "Those early students really laid the foundation for what we have now."

Part of that growth came from an idea that started almost by accident — bringing younger students into the experience.

"With *The Wizard of Oz*, we decided to audition kids to be munchkins, and we had a lot show up," he said. "We used 25 of them. That led to student matinees, inviting younger kids from across the county to come see live theatre."

What began as a single casting decision grew into something much larger, a pipeline of future performers and a shared community experience.

"We started realizing we weren't just teaching high school students. We were building an all-county program," Coley said. "Now, we have students who come here and say the first play they ever saw was one of our student matinees."

As the years passed, Coley's impact extended far beyond the stage. For him, theatre has always been about more

than performance.

"I hope my students take away confidence," he said. "Even if they never do another play, they need to be able to stand in front of people and present themselves. That's something they'll use no matter what they choose to do."

Now as his career comes to a close, it feels only fitting that his final production brings everything full circle.

His final show at Lee County High School was M.A.S.H., a tribute to his beginnings at the school.

"M.A.S.H. was the first show we

did in the auditorium when I began teaching here," Coley remembered. "I thought how great it would be to close with what I opened with."

The production was also a celebration of the many students who have been part of the journey.

"This is a little bit of a hat tip to my former students," he said. "I'm inviting all my former students to come this weekend. I'm going to recognize them at the beginning of each show and ask them to come up on stage afterward."

As he looks ahead to retirement, he

admits the emotions are mixed.

"It will feel amazing to relax and start thinking about what my next venture will be," he said. "I plan to do some writing, maybe audition for some things myself — do some more things for me."

But there is one thing he knows he will miss.

"I'm really going to miss those opening nights," he said. "If you can go to work every day and laugh and be silly, and still make an impact — that's a win."

For countless students, families, and

community members, the Lee County High School theatre program has become something special. Something that often surprises those who walk through the doors.

"People sometimes expect a high school play to feel amateurish," Coley said. "But when they come, they usually walk out saying, 'That was much more professional than I expected.'"

That legacy of excellence, opportunity and belief in students will continue long after the final curtain falls.



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**EVENT CALENDAR**

**MAY 2**

**LEE COUNTY LIBRARY GRAND OPENING**

The grand opening of the new Lee County Library will include a ribbon cutting ceremony at 1 p.m. followed by a full day of activities, tours and live performances from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



**MAY 1:** The Stevens Center will host its First Friday Spring Fling from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Free food, live DJ, dancing, free dresses and suits, boys haircuts and girls hair styling and makeup.

**MAY 1:** First Friday Karaoke Championship begins at 8 p.m. at Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford. Free event. Must be 21 or older to compete.

**MAY 1-10:** Catch the final two week-ends of Temple Theatre's mainstage production of Bright Star, a musical comedy about a literary editor and a World War II soldier who discover a secret that changes their lives. Ticket information at templeshow.org.

**MAY 2:** The community is invited to the Chatham Street Parking Lot for this year's Bee City field day — aka, the Sanford Jambor-Bee — featuring activities and education all about bees and other pollinators beginning at 9:15 a.m.. The event will offer kids activities, a demonstration bee hive and a live bee cage. Award-winning master beekeeper Jody Moore and Dennis Brown, president of the Lee County NC Beekeepers Association, will answer questions about beekeeping.

**MAY 2:** Buchanan Farms will host its annual Strawberry Festival from 5 to 10 p.m. Enjoy a day of fun, food trucks, strawberry picking, live music, inflatables, a wagon trail and kids activities.

**MAY 2-3:** The Pint Sized Pasture will host its Family Farm days from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. both days. Enjoy a relaxed

outdoor experience with animals, activities and space to explore. Fun for all ages. Admission is \$10.

**MAY 3:** Join Sanford Yoga & Community Center for yoga in the quiet of the beer hall the first Sunday of every month and finish it off with a beer among friends. Yoga & Beer runs from 11 a.m. to noon.

**MAY 8:** Family Movie Night at Kiwanis Park will feature the live action version of Lilo & Stitch from 5:30 to 7:45 p.m. Food trucks will be on site. Admission is free.

**MAY 9:** "Market in Bloom" is the theme of a special Sanford Farmers Market at the new Pilgrims Sanford Agricultural Marketplace from 8:30 a.m. to noon.

**MAY 11:** Turn that black thumb of death into a green, thriving thumb with Hugger Mugger Brewing's Bier Garten Garden Club led by Lee County's N.C. Cooperative Extension office. These meetings are free and open to the public from 6:30 to 8 p.m. The May topic will be "Propagation from Cuttings."

**MAY 12:** Family Promise of Lee County will host Spring for the Promise, a food tasting and fundraising event, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Elks Club. Tickets are \$35.

**MAY 15:** The Hillsborough Street Jazz Trio will showcase a mix of traditional jazz standards, original compositions, and inventive jazz adaptations of pop songs by artists such as the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Queen and The Eagles at 7:30 p.m. Ticket information at templeshow.org.

**MAY 15-16:** Carolina Indie Fest returns with an all original, multi-day music festival hosted in downtown Sanford around Hugger Mugger Brewing. Thousands of music fans flock to this unique festival yearly.

**MAY 16-17:** The Old Gilliam Mill Crank Up runs from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Guests can see an old sawmill in operation, a "hit & miss" motor driven log splitter. There will also be a liquor still in operation and weaving demonstrations. In addition, you can take a tour of the park behind a 1950's tractor, watch a blacksmith at work and eat some ice cream.

**MAY 22:** The Splash Pad at Kiwanis Park will be the site of Beach Bash, Sanford's ultimate summer kickoff. Cool off at the Splash Pad, enjoy delicious eats from local food trucks, and take a shot at the dunk tank. Free event runs from 2 to 7 p.m.

**MAY 31:** Pain Your Pet event with artist Laura Henderson runs from 1 to 3 p.m. at Wild Dogs Brewing in downtown Sanford. Learn more at visitsanfordnc.com. Proceeds from this dual fundraiser will benefit Zoomies Funny Farm and Kind 2 Kritters.

**JUNE 4:** The City of Sanford Summer Concert Series kicks off at 6:30 p.m. at Depot Park in downtown. Tuesday Night Music Club will perform. Admission is free.

**JUNE 5:** The Sanford Spinners home opener at Lee County High School's baseball stadium will begin at 7 p.m. against the Clayton Clovers. Tickets are \$10, and \$5 for children ages 6-12. Free for children 5 and under.

**JUNE 6:** The San-Lee Chapter of the Antique Automobile Club of America presents the Classics to Customs Car Show in downtown Sanford from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**JUNE 11:** New Directions Bluegrass will perform at the City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at Depot Park in downtown Sanford. Admission is free.

**JUNE 12-13:** Temple Theatre's mainstage conservatory event, Fiddler on the Roof Jr., kicks off the

summer conservatory season. Ticket info at templeshow.org.

**JUNE 18:** Workin' on Commission will perform at the City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at Depot Park in downtown Sanford. Admission is free.

**JUNE 25:** Empire Strikes Brass will perform at the City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at Depot Park in downtown Sanford. Admission is free.

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**CROSSWORD: TV MOMS**

**ACROSS**

- 1. Ionic and Corinthian predecessor
- 6. Good times
- 9. AI fodder
- 13. Offer two cents
- 14. Doctor Dolittle, e.g.
- 15. Interior designer's concern
- 16. Not fiction, pl.
- 17. Big head
- 18. Fear-inspiring
- 19. "Good Times" mom
- 21. "The Sopranos" mom
- 23. Possessive pronoun
- 24. Gumbo pod
- 25. Protrude
- 28. Catcher's catcher
- 30. "Marvelous Midge Maisel's first name
- 35. "Metamorphoses" poet
- 37. Chows down
- 39. Millionaire maker
- 40. Time for eggnog
- 41. Sure sign of fire
- 43. "Frasier" actress Gilpin
- 44. TSA PreCheck alternative
- 46. Mosque V.I.P.
- 47. Arabian bigwig
- 48. Received salary
- 50. At the apex
- 52. Masseuse's office
- 53. "Where the Red \_\_\_\_ Grows"
- 55. Likewise
- 57. "Arrested Development" mom
- 61. "Fresh off the Boat" mom

- 65. Circumvent
- 66. French vineyard
- 68. Open disrespect
- 69. Dewey Decimal System, e.g.
- 70. 252-gallon cask
- 71. Cause anxiety (2 words)
- 72. Back talk
- 73. Extra point
- 74. Vanish without this

**DOWN**

- 1. Take of a hat, e.g.
- 2. Traditional October birthstone
- 3. Puerto follower
- 4. Opening, colloquially
- 5. #55 on periodic table
- 6. Part of an eye
- 7. "Married with Children" mom
- 8. Investor's asset
- 9. Hold as a conviction
- 10. Unit of land often featuring a home
- 11. Load sixteen tons, e.g.
- 12. Geometry calculation
- 15. Divert from course
- 20. Between washes and styles
- 22. Casino's pull
- 24. Foot rest
- 25. "Stranger Things" mom
- 26. Throat dangler
- 27. Mosaic artist
- 29. "Friday Night Lights" mom
- 31. Tug-of-War gear
- 32. List entries
- 33. Like anchor aweigh
- 34. "Schitt's Creek" mom
- 36. Martin of Rat Pack

**CROSSWORD**

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