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'We're not victims': - UNC Asheville basketball teams relocate to Charlotte after Helene

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Shane Connuck; Staff Writer | Section: News | 872 Words

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Josh Banks' mother led a convoy down Interstate 26 toward Charlotte.

Three UNC Asheville men's basketball players were in the back seat as Banks' mother drove alongside his stepfather on a recent Saturday night. Fellow Charlotte natives Jordan Marsh and Kameron Taylor were driving cars behind Banks, among eight players who were heading to the Queen City.

Head coach Mike Morrell left the following day, taking four more Bulldogs players with him. He'd happened to be watching his mother's dog - named Kobe - who came to Charlotte with the players as well. Basketball was the least of his worries.

The Bulldogs' men's and women's basketball teams have been in Charlotte for roughly three weeks amid devastating flooding in Asheville from Hurricane Helene. They've been living in hotels in University City and practicing all over, from the Charlotte Hornets' facilities in uptown to Johnson C. Smith to West Charlotte High School.

"All that we've been going through, we're just very thankful and appreciative," Banks, a fifth-year guard who rose to prominence during a standout career at Olympic High School, said Tuesday at Big South preseason media day in Charlotte. "We're not victims. It's just the situation that we've been in the past couple weeks, we're just blessed and thankful that we still have a season coming up, and now we're just locked in and focused.

"The past two weeks have been tough. It has been tough to see the place that we live and the place where we are most of the time in the condition that it's in now."

'We still get up every day smiling'

This season, UNC Asheville women's basketball is pushing to understand the applications of basketball into life.

New head coach Tynesha Lewis, who won North Carolina's "Ms. Basketball" honors in 1996-97 at Southwest Edgecombe, enters her first season. She previously led Elizabeth City State University, the Division II school in eastern North Carolina, to three straight Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship games after playing at N.C. State and in the WNBA.

Just like her first season as a head coach - she started at Elizabeth City State in 2020 - she's had to navigate uncharted waters. She's made an effort to hold regular check-ins with her players, and mental health specialist Dr. Laura Jones has been meeting with them, as well.

The Bulldogs have been practicing at Johnson C. Smith in the morning, and then they use the Hornets' facility in the evening to work on shooting. Queens University and the Charlotte 49ers have also hosted them when they can't get inside J.C. Smith or Spectrum Center.

"The hurricane has shown us: If we show up every day, no matter how I'm feeling - I'm aching, I'm sore - and I look to the right and my left, everybody else is still pushing," said Nycerra Minnis, a fifth-year forward from the Washington, D.C., area who started at University of Virginia. "We are really strong. It's not even just the hurricane, the emotional aspect has came with it. Everything we've had to overcome thus far, and our season is less than 30 days away.

"And we still get up every day smiling. I feel like, 'Wow.' We are strong, and we can do anything we put our mind to. Because we're doing it right now."

UNC Asheville teams understand the bigger picture

Morrell, who enters his seventh season as men's basketball head coach at UNC Asheville, has a diary.

There are "a lot more words in that thing" over the past few weeks, he said. He said if he ever ends up writing a book, these experiences will take up an entire chapter.

Janet Cone, the athletic director at UNC Asheville, has been integral, making a passionate effort to understand how the student-athletes are doing and ensure that the Bulldogs have places to play.

It might be "delayed gratification," as Morrell put it, in terms of how the totality of this experience will really end up helping them in the long run. But he knows it'll mean even more once they get a chance to return to practice inside Kimmel Arena.

"We ain't victims here," Morrell said. "I think too many times in these situations, it's like what we're going through. We're inconvenienced. And we'll be home, hopefully soon. When that time comes, hopefully, we'll learn a lot from it.

"But you go back to Asheville. Walk around, go down the front - I live a half-mile from the River Arts District - you find out really quickly when you get to walk into your own door, that you ain't no victim. There are people there going through a lot, lot more than we are."

Shane Connuck: @shane_connuck

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Shane Connuck, Staff Writer, "We're not victims": UNC Asheville basketball teams relocate to Charlotte after Helene', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 20 Oct 2024 13B https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
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Editorial/Opinion

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Section: Editorial/Opinion| 643 Words

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The writer was Republican mayor of Charlotte from 1991-95:

With regard to Ned Barnett's anti-voucher column in the Observer "NC's vouchers for all may hurt the GOP's original school choice - charters," he seems to believe that school choice advocates support a particular school or type of school, such as charters. That's wrong.

Unlike "school system" advocates - whose loyalty is to their "system" - charter school advocates support all choices, not charter schools per se. They rightly believe that more competition for the privilege of educating our children is better than having fewer options. If that means that some poor-performing charter schools must shut down because they can't compete, so be it. That's what free markets are all about, Ned.

Richard Vinroot, Charlotte

Bishop ad

A Dan Bishop campaign ad implies that school resource officers make students safer. Can he show us the evidence? No, because it doesn't exist.

Two things SROs definitely do is increase the cost of running schools and habituate impressionable youth to the constant presence of police. This is great PR for police agencies looking to expand their presence in the community because people grow up expecting to always see an officer.

Unfortunately there is little if any correlation between a high ratio of police to civilians and reduction of crime rates or resolution of crimes, but that doesn't fit the "more police is better" narrative conservatives like to promote.

Thomas J. Strini, Spencer

Lead in school water

The writer works with non-profit Environment North Carolina

The EPA's new deadline for replacing lead pipes is a significant step for public health, although they do little to protect kids at school. Lead is toxic to children even at low levels, with links to learning disabilities such as ADHD, antisocial behaviors, and depression.

Lead contaminated drinking water is widespread in North Carolina schools. Lead was detected in about 52% of nearly 21,865 water samples taken at NC schools, according to a state sponsored program. Replacing pipes won't fix the issue, since most lead in schools comes from fixtures within the building.

We know how to solve this problem. We need to replace lead-bearing fountains with lead-filtering water stations and put filters on all other taps. Kudos to EPA on heeding our call to replace lead pipes. Now, we need school districts to get the lead out of water for our kids.

Emily Mason, Cary

Trail magic

The writer founded environmental non-profit George Masa Foundation

The floodwaters from Hurricane Helene have finally receded, revealing destruction across western North Carolina. Yet amid the devastation, there's hope and unity. Instead of focusing on personal loss, people are asking, "How can I help?"

We're witnessing a kind of "trail magic," familiar to Appalachian Trail hikers - unexpected kindness from strangers. I've seen firsthand volunteers from as far away as Missouri and Kentucky arriving to provide meals. Volunteers are clearing debris, while people from across the region are sending much-needed resources. My fellow North Carolinians have continued to show up to help, lending a hand and sending relief. Neighbors are sharing food, water, and shelter, with strangers becoming friends during this crisis.

These acts of kindness remind us that in times of crisis, our shared humanity shines through. Nature doesn't discriminate, and neither do we. As we face the same storms, it's our compassion and community that will help us rebuild.

In the aftermath of Helene, this spirit of generosity - this trail magic - will be our greatest strength.

David Huff, Asheville

Typical white man

I'm the typical white, Christian, straight, married GOP voter from central NC. I believe in free speech and the Second Amendment. I believe in being fiscally conservative, and I'm in favor of slow, cautious progress, but progress nonetheless. I've never voted for a single Democrat in my 42 years of life.

I'm embarrassed to be a Republican. I can no longer support the leadership of the GOP as the behaviors, word and actions are no longer consistent with my values.

Joseph Peascoe, Greensboro

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Rainbow Kitten Surprise went from playing dorms to arenas

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Théoden Janes; Staff Writer | Section: Living | 2630 Words

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It's been 10 years since Rachael McKinney looked the members of Rainbow Kitten Surprise in the eyes and - as the Boone-based indie folk-rock band's brand-new booking agent at the time - gave them the bad news:

"We have to change this name," McKinney, then an Appalachian State University senior, told the group consisting of five musical artists who'd joined forces after meeting as freshmen living on campus in Bowie Hall. "It's not happening. We cannot do this. No one's gonna take us seriously.

"We have to change it."

Then they gave her some bad news right back: "It's too late," one of them replied, matter-of-factly. "People already know us too well for us to change the name."

A decade later, it is happening. They can do this. Save for the people who just haven't been paying attention, the vast majority of the music industry - and the thoughtful music fans who appreciate their emotionally raw lyrics - are taking RKS plenty seriously.

And on Oct. 25 and 26, the Mountaineers-turned-Nashvillians-turned darlings of major festivals like Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza will perform energetic back-to-back concerts at Spectrum Center in Charlotte and Lenovo Center in Raleigh, the largest indoor venues they've ever headlined in their former home state.

McKinney, who has been with the band ever since and is now its tour manager, can't help but laugh at memories of that debate, given how everything panned out for lead singer Ela Melo, guitarists Darrick "Bozzy" Keller and Ethan Goodpaster, and drummer Jess Haney.

"I appreciated that confidence in it, but I also just thought it was silly," she says of their original discussion about the name. "And looking back, I was wrong.

"But then you have bands like, what, Diarrhea Planet, and it's like, At least we didn't have that name. I love them, don't get me wrong. But at least we didn't pick that name."

Over the summer, we spoke to McKinney, Melo, Keller, Goodpaster; people who booked them in Boone; and multiple members of their inner circle back at App State, including - in his first mainstream-media interview ever - the man who came up with the name while high on morphine.

Those conversations (lightly edited for clarity and brevity) make up our exclusive oral history of Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

Note: All interviews for this story were completed prior to Hurricane Helene's arrival in Western North Carolina in late September. After the storm, Rainbow Kitten Surprise posted the following message on its Facebook page: "We're heartbroken to see the devastation left behind by Hurricane Helene. Our beloved home of North Carolina needs our help right now." The band listed a variety of ways its fans could help victims. And this month, RKS pledged to donate \$50,000 raised through its fall concert-ticket sales to recovery efforts related to Helene.

'Hanging out, smoking cigarettes, playing songs'

As App State freshmen, Melo, Keller, Goodpaster, Haney, and Charlie Holt (the band's original bassist, who parted ways with RKS last winter) all were assigned to the old Bowie Hall dorm. The only ones who knew each other prior to college were Goodpaster and Haney, fellow Robbinsville, N.C. natives who throughout high school were in multiple bands together that mostly just played in Haney's basement.

Ela Melo: I had a lot of things on the list of what I wanted to do with my life, but I wasn't quite sure about any of it. One thing that I did know is I did want to make music that people could get down to, people enjoyed. I had been doing that for years already, in my hometown of Albemarle, just chilling, had a band with some friends there. That didn't pan out. So I came onto the campus with a mantra, almost.

Darrick "Bozzy" Keller: I was definitely a shy kid growing up. But I remember going in for the first week of college and being like, Man, this feels like summer camp. This is never gonna end. I really stepped out of my comfort zone and would try to take my guitar and go jam with people and make friends. ...

Ethan Goodpaster: When I wasn't going to class, I was playing guitar, finding someone to play something with. There was a lot of jamming happening in our dorm.

Melo: College was a magical time, at least for me. It was like Bonnaroo or something - it's just, like, serendipity everywhere. You end up running into people and stuff, and forming relationships really quickly.

Keller: I knew Ela was a musician, but she was so humble about everything. ... She had seen me at an open-mic night play a couple original songs. Later that night, I bumped into her, and she was like, "Can I show you a song I wrote?" She showed me "All That and More (Sailboat)." And I was just like, "Dude, you have to get this out into the world. This is the best song I've ever heard in my life."

Melo: I played it one time, and he went and got his guitar. He was like, "Show me what you're playing. I want to play it with you." But Bozz was writing, too. So after, he was like, "Well, check my stuff out."

Matthew Clonch, who lived in the dorm and became part of their inner circle: Then they started playing together just for fun.

Ethan Goodpaster: Ela and Bozz were always sitting out there in front of Bowie or in the lobby playing, singing Modest Mouse songs, or Bon Iver songs, things like that.

Clonch: And the first show they ever did was an open-mic night at the college. They were just like, "Hey, this could be fun. We should do it."

Keller: That was the birth of RKS.

'What do you think it should be called?'

It was October of the fall semester of their freshman year when Melo and Keller decided to sign up as an acoustic-guitar duo for the open-mic night hosted at Crossroads Coffee House at the Student Union on campus. But they needed to register with the name of their act - and they didn't have one.

Keller: Maybe a week or so before, our friend Noah Toomey got meningitis right after coming back from fall break. And he was really, really sick.

Noah Toomey: It progressed to a point that Matt - my roommate freshman year - literally had to carry me down the stairs of our dorm to get into a friend's car to get me to the hospital. I'm completely out of it. Then 72 hours later I remember people coming in and out, but nothing too specific until the meds started actually working for me. That's when they came to me with the question about their open-mic night. It was Bozzy, Matt and Ela.

Keller: To see him like that, it was tough. And Ela was just like, "You can name the band. What do you think it should

be called?"

Toomey: I remember doing hand gestures, maybe? And, well, I mean, I love the internet. And there's that cat that has, like, the Pop-Tart body. It's called Nyan Cat. That's kinda what was going through my head. I'm sure I did repeat it quite a bit.

Clonch: I said, "'Rainbow Kitten Surprise?' That's ridiculous." And it was - then they did it anyway.

Keller: My initial reaction was: pretty cool. But we kept telling ourselves, "Ohhh, maybe we should change it."

Toomey, who says the only other time that he's talked about naming the band was when a friend interviewed him for a journalism class: If I could go back, it's always like, Would I have wished the name on them? Because it's a blessing and a curse. I was so morphined up at the time that it sounded like a great idea.

The open-mic night at Crossroads was a success, but after that performance, Melo and Keller focused exclusively on writing and recording music. They wanted, they say, to figure out what they were doing before getting back onto a real stage in front of real crowds. So they returned to using the dorm as their workshop.

Melo: I remember working on stuff over Thanksgiving and working on stuff for Christmas break. And then we were playing some of these songs for people in the lobby. I would write one and come down to play it for everybody, then figure out what the other parts were between me and Bozz. I was working on the mixes of stuff for months - until it was ready to release. The second I was done mixing, we just uploaded it onto Bandcamp. We put out (the three-song EP) "Mary" on May 5th of 2013. And we got a thousand streams the first night.

We knew then; it was like, "Dude, we released this at 10 o'clock at night, and we have a thousand streams overnight." We thought that was success at that point.

Toomey: But there's no way that even someone not in that state could have known the heights that they were gonna go to.

'Oh my God, this is actually incredible'

Melo and Keller continued writing and recording at Bowie Hall through the spring and into the summer of 2013.

Melo: Ethan would hang out sometimes, and we would play sometimes. He would bring his amp down. I played acoustic, and Bozz played acoustic, but Ethan would play electric - more, like, metal stuff. Something a little different. But Ethan can rock whatever the style is.

So we came back over summer break, going into sophomore year, and we're like, "OK, we gotta play some shows or something. But we need more people, 'cause we don't have enough hands for all these parts." We tracked Ethan down, and had him do kind of an audition. He learned all the songs the night before, but he knew 'em. It was just like, "All right, you're in the band, dude."

Keller: And we were working on the album "Seven" - which, musically, was just a bigger sound.

Goodpaster: So eventually they asked to borrow my roommate's cajón to record some drums on it. My roommate was actually Jess (who would become the band's drummer). Then, when we were looking for a drummer, we actually auditioned one guy before Jess. But he wasn't the fit. So I was like, "Hey, my roommate plays drums a little bit, played drums in band in high school. We should see if he wants to."

Keller: We added them during the process of Ela recording and writing that album. So by the time that album released, we were a full-band kind of thing.

Goodpaster: But Jess had only agreed to play one show with us.

That one show was at the old Galileo's bar and cafe in Boone, on Oct. 26, 2013.

Keller: When we first started, I booked all the shows. I was our agent, and Ethan did a lot of the social media and business management. It was very DIY and self-sufficient. We did everything ourselves.

Mark Dixon, former owner of now-closed Galileo's in Boone: I think, at first, everybody was like, "Rainbow Kitten Surprise? What is this? Are they serious?" But they took their music more seriously than their name, I guess. ...

When you're booking local groups like that, you want bands that are willing to put themselves out there and promote, and call everybody they know, and get everybody to come in. And it was clear very early on that they were good at promoting themselves. And then it became apparent real quick - 'cause we were a very small room - that they were gonna have to move on to a bigger room.

Goodpaster: And Jess - even though he said, "I'll just do one show" - kept playing with us.

Rachael McKinney, who would become their booking agent and eventually their tour manager: So they did that, then they played Espresso News, another coffee shop, in December 2013. Then they did a Beech Mountain show, a Montreat College thing, Appalachian Mountain Brewery. In June 2014, they did VH1's (reality-competition show) "Make A Band Famous," then Galileo's again .

The first time I ever even heard of them was when I was on the APPS (Appalachian Popular Programming Society) Council. We were looking for openers for a show with Hunter Hunted back in 2014. And I was such a judgmental little hipster college kid. I was like, Rainbow Kitten Surprise, what a terrible name. This is gonna be some dumb punk band. Then I heard the music - and I was like, Oh my God, this is actually incredible.

'They had the audience in their hip pocket'

From there - with bassist Charlie Holt having been added to the mix by Melo, Keller, Goodpaster and Haney - Rainbow Kitten Surprise continued turning heads on campus. After the fivesome opened for Hunter Hunted in November 2014 at App State's storied Legends nightclub, that winter the band signed with the university's student-run record label, Split Rail Records. In March 2015 it played for 300-plus concertgoers on "the small stage" at Legends; then in August, RKS booked "the big stage" - and drew a sellout crowd of 950.

Goodpaster: We started getting added to these big official playlists on Spotify, and our streaming started getting more popular and more popular. But I'd say - for me, at least - when I was like, Okay, this is cool, this could be a thing was when we sold out Legends.

Keller: That was definitely a milestone for us, 'cause in the beginning, Ela and I would walk to the little gas station beside Legends to get cigarettes. And we would just look up at the sign and be like, "Dude, wouldn't it be sick if we played there?"

Randy Kelly, the now-retired longtime manager of Legends: I was so surprised - and happily so - that at their shows, everybody in the audience knew the lyrics to their songs.

Matthew Clonch, their former dorm-mate, who would become their stage manager and to this day is one of Melo's best friends: I remember that at that time, they played an encore. Then they were called for another encore - and they didn't have any more songs to play. So they just played one they'd already played, 'cause they didn't know what else to do. It was a cover of "Float On" by Modest Mouse.

McKinney: It's that whole "when luck meets skill meets opportunity." And truly - I do believe this in my heart - I think Boone is a very, very special place. It's a different feeling when it comes to music than any other place that I've been. And the fans - literally, you have one person that's listening to RKS. They're telling everyone about it. They're not keeping that to themselves. It was word-of-mouth.

And after selling out Legends and showing those videos on social media, the band kind of just, like, exploded.

Rainbow Kitten Surprise's 'Love Hate Music Box Tour'

When: 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 25, at Spectrum Center, 333 E. Trade St. in Charlotte; and 8 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, at Lenovo Center, 1400 Edwards Mill Road in Raleigh.

Tickets: \$45 and up in Charlotte and \$40 and up in Raleigh, at ticketmaster.com. (\$1 per ticket goes towards supporting organizations delivering mental health treatment and access to care.)

Also: Rainbow Kitten Surprise and opening act The Brook & The Bluff are broadcasting their shows in Charlotte and Raleigh on Nugs.net as a pay-per-view event, with net proceeds going to the PLUS1 Rapid Relief Fund. Details at bit.ly/3Nmyj2F.

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NC will have a new state superintendent next year. See which candidates want your vote.

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: T. Keung Hui; Staff Writer | Section: News | 317 Words Page: 21A OpenURL Link

North Carolina voters will pick a new state superintendent to lead the public school system.

Current State Superintendent Catherine Truitt lost her re-election bid in the Republican primary. Now GOP candidate Michele Morrow will take on Democrat Maurice "Mo" Green.

The superintendent of public instruction is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the state Department of Public Instruction. This includes the \$11 billion in state funding for public schools that DPI distributes to local school districts and charter schools.

The superintendent advocates and informs the state on issues in education, makes recommendations for policy changes to the legislature and governor and works with the State Board of Education.

Truitt was elected in 2020. During her tenure, she pushed for higher pay for teachers, changes in how reading and math are taught, overhauling how schools are graded by the state and harsher penalties for teachers who have sex with students.

Now a new superintendent will have to deal with issues such as helping western North Carolina schools recover from Hurricane Helene and helping schools make up for pandemic learning losses.

Green and Morrow came out ahead in their respective March primaries to face off this fall.

Green is the former superintendent of Guilford County Schools, which is the state third-largest school district. He is the former executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, a group that funds progressive causes.

Morrow is a registered nurse, conservative activist, homeschool parent and former Christian missionary.

The race has gotten national attention due to CNN reporting about Morrow's past social media posts. Those include talking about killing Democrats such as former President Barack Obama and encouraging President Donald Trump to use the military to stay in power in 2021.

Candidate questionnaires

The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer asked Mo Green and Michele Morrow to fill out a candidate questionnaire. Only Green responded. Find responses from the candidates below or by visiting newsobserver.com/voter-guide.

T. Keung Hui: 919-829-4534, @nckhui

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Mark Robinson says alleged comments in CNN report won't hurt his 2024 election chances

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Nora O'Neill; Staff Writer | Section: News | 516 Words Page: 20A

OpenURL Link

Republican Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson on Thursday said he doesn't think sexually explicit and racist comments attributed to him in a CNN report last month will hurt his chances at being elected governor.

Robinson, who denies he made the posts and recently announced a lawsuit was filed against CNN over the report, told The Charlotte Observer at a meet and greet in south Charlotte that the comments posted on the website Nude Africa are "ridiculous." And while Robinson has repeatedly said the comments were not made by him, he specifically condemned the content of the comments on Thursday.

The comments included Robinson saying he was a Black Nazi and that he wished slavery would return, CNN reported.

"Yes, I condemn the comments," Robinson said when asked. "I mean, as a matter of fact, the comments were ridiculous. Some of the stuff that I read that I supposedly said on this site are just nonsense. And so of course we condemn those comments."

He called CNN a "dishonest news organization" and that "many people, including a great number of independents," have no faith in news outlets. CNN reported it found multiple online accounts under the same email address used on Nude Africa and noted connections between the comments and Robinson's other online activity.

Robinson has a history of making controversial remarks, including on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, Jewish people and Black Lives Matter. In 2019, a Facebook video showed Robinson saying that abortion is not about protecting women but rather killing children because "you weren't responsible enough to keep your skirt down."

Recent polls show Attorney General Josh Stein polling between 10-20 points ahead of Robinson, while the race for president is much tighter in the battleground state.

Robinson spoke to the Observer at a meet and greet event at Victory Christian Center Campus III where he addressed a room of around 10 people after arriving 30 minutes late. Robinson said he wasn't concerned about the low turnout.

"I kind of like smaller groups. We did this kind of quickly. It wasn't something that we organized for months," he said. "We're certainly not discouraged by the size at all. We love how people can go out and be emissaries for us and give people a more in depth view of actually who we are."

Matt Hurley, a new addition to Robinson's campaign team after most of his former staff quit, said he has a big philosophy change for the campaign: instead of keeping Robinson "locked up," he wants to let Robinson speak to more people including news media. The event at Victory Christian Center Campus, Hurley said, was an attempt at outreach to the Black community.

Robinson spoke to the group about education, Hurricane Helene relief, state agencies and more, before taking questions from attendees.

"The size may look small, but there's people behind you," one attendee told Robinson at the end of his speech.
"Don't be moved by what you see We're behind you. We're praying for you."

Nora O'Neill: noroneill

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Nora O'Neill, Staff Writer, 'Mark Robinson says alleged comments in CNN report won't hurt his 2024 election chances', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 20 Oct 2024 20A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C5782E0F670228>



JazzArts Charlotte marks 15th anniversary with big plans

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Liz Rothaus Bertrand; Arts Correspondent Section: Living 1549 Words

Page: 1C OpenURL Link

As JazzArts Charlotte celebrates its 15th anniversary this fall, the organization is focused as much on its future as on its past.

The nonprofit has grown significantly since its earliest days, when it started with a series of free performances at Festival in the Park and an educational program with a handful of students. It's also been a major force behind building a jazz community in Charlotte.

Today, it serves thousands of children and adults with performances and educational initiatives.

For years, the group was considered one of the area's best-kept secrets, said JazzArts Charlotte's president, CEO and co-founder Lonnie Davis. It has evolved from an organization with a small budget and big ideas to an anchor arts organization in the region.

According to its 2023-24 Impact Report, the organization's annual revenue and expenses now top \$1 million.

One of the accomplishments Davis is most proud of is the way JazzArts has worked to connect people of all ages and backgrounds in Charlotte. Jazz, she said, has served as a "tool to bring people together who otherwise would never cross paths."

Diversity and growth among jazz audiences

In 2018 and 2022, JazzArts Charlotte commissioned audience analyses from ArtsMarket, a consulting firm. According to its findings, JazzArts Charlotte's audience is "the most diverse among local arts organizations."

"That's something we're proud of, but we're very intentional about being diverse," Davis said. "And that is measuring diversity in every way. That's not only ethnic diversity but it's age, it's socioeconomics, it's education and... life stages."

Davis credits JazzArts' varied programming and affordable pricing as essential factors that allow it to serve so many different types of audiences. That's possible, she said, thanks to a variety of funding from individuals, community partners, foundations and corporate donors.

"Through our program, we've been able to bring people together in a very organic, unique way... and build valuable social capital... amongst the community," she said.

Those efforts have not only brought in a more diverse audience but also brought in many more people to its programs. Between 2019 and 2022, Davis said JazzArts doubled its audience base.

The organization's signature jazz series, The Jazz Room, which began with one monthly show now offers four performances a month. It features local, regional and nationally-known artists throughout the year.

Shows include popular tributes to artists of the past, like the upcoming Sasha Masakowski concerts featuring the Bossa Nova sounds of Brazilian legend Antonio Carlos Jobim. They also highlight innovators who stretch the genre in new directions, like five-time Grammy nominated trumpeter and multi-instrumentalist Chief Adjuah (formerly known as Christian Scott).

JazzArts growth also comes from a commitment to building a jazz audience in Charlotte through music education, workshops and ensemble opportunities for young musicians.

According to JazzArt Charlotte's website, the organization has reached more than 50,000 local K-12 students since 2011 through its JazzArts Academy, with 38% of those students coming from low-income communities.

The organization's educational programs have expanded and been greatly enriched, Davis said, by hiring JazzArts Charlotte's first Education Director, Patrick Brown, two years ago.

"We're really thrilled to have him and, you know, all of our other amazing team members that do this work day in and day out to... move our mission forward."

Programs include youth ensembles, jazz in school workshops and summer camp opportunities.

One of the newest groups is the Nuestro Tiempo Latin Jazz Youth Ensemble, now in its second year. The program introduces students in 7th to 12th grade to the fundamentals and history of the Latin jazz genre as they rehearse and play together.

"There are not many programs like this around the country," Davis said. "But the goal... is to expose our young musicians to the contributions and the culture and the rich heritage of Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban music and American music."

The program, which is directed by Cuban jazz pianist and vocalist iliana Rose along with Afro-Caribbean and Latin percussionist Johnny Vergara, meets weekly. About 20 students, selected via audition, currently participate. Many come from families with South American or Latin American roots, Davis said.

It's also a free program, thanks to grants from the Arts & Science Council, NC Arts Council and the Albemarle Foundation.

How JazzArts is marking its 15th anniversary

The organization is adding several educational and financial initiatives as it ushers in its 15th year. A new adult webinar series will debut in spring 2025.

Davis said one thing that sets JazzArts Charlotte apart from some other jazz organizations around the country is how it aims to provide educational opportunities for adults as well as youths.

"As part of our model, it's important that we educate everyone."

JazzArts Charlotte is also introducing a band director academy next spring, in partnership with Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, to enrich music education through work with local band and orchestra directors. That program is possible with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The organization recently introduced merit-based scholarships that offer full tuition for JazzArts programs to reward the hard work by some of the community's most dedicated young musicians. That's in addition to existing financial aid opportunities for youth programs.

Davis said JazzArts is also rolling out a new Legacy Society, providing opportunities for donors to contribute to the organization's endowment "to help secure long-term stability for this music and the work that we do in the rich tradition of jazz in our community."

According to its latest Impact Report, the organization had a shortfall of more than \$117,000 during its last fiscal year. Davis said the Legacy Society is one of a number of strategies the organization has implemented to address

this concern.

On the performance side, Davis said JazzArts will highlight fan favorites during its upcoming season of The Jazz Room. This will include "spotlighting some of the most beloved musicians that we have featured over the years," she said.

"Our audience can expect new collaborations with familiar artists that really helped to shape... what The Jazz Room has become."

In November, a special alumni concert will feature former students who are now professional musicians performing around the globe.

Other events this season include the popular family-friendly holiday show "Piano Night, A Charlie Brown Christmas, featuring the music of Vince Guaraldi."

For Valentine's Day weekend, Charlotte's own rising star, saxophonist Adrian Crutchfield returns to play a special concert dedicated to the music of Grover Washington Jr. Crutchfield's resume includes collaborations with artists including Branford Marsalis, Bette Midler and Prince.

And in March, acclaimed saxophonist and vocalist Camille Thurman, who previously performed at the Charlotte Jazz Festival, will make her Jazz Room debut.

That festival last took place in 2019 and was previously organized by Blumenthal Arts. Davis said she'd like to bring it back to the city, and is aiming for it to make a comeback in the next three to five years.

Looking towards the future

Davis said the organization not only wants to continue contributing to the local arts economy with its monthly shows but also wants to attract visitors to Charlotte as a tourist destination.

JazzArts has become a model for other organizations around the country, something Davis said is an honor. Outside of Charlotte, Davis also recently finished a two-year term as board president of the Jazz Education Network, a global community advocating for expanded jazz education and performance.

Among her goals for JazzArts is working toward a day when it has its own center for jazz in Charlotte to present educational programs and host the community.

But the recent devastation in Western North Carolina from Hurricane Helene has also been a surreal reminder for Davis. The New Orleans native relocated with her family to Charlotte in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"It's really heartbreaking and... I feel the pain of that community and our state very deeply," Davis told The Observer during her interview a week after the hurricane made landfall.

"My heart personally goes out to everyone experiencing loss and you know trying to recover... or looking for their loved ones... and don't know where they are right now. I know that, I know that too well."

The organization is discussing how it can support the people of North Carolina who are dealing with the hurricane's aftermath. Davis hopes it can be something meaningful "that will help them to... move forward from this tragedy."

That's something she managed to do herself many years ago with her vision for JazzArts Charlotte. And 15 years later, Davis is still looking for ways to use music to bring the community together.

More arts coverage

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Actor Channing Tatum stuns Helene relief volunteers with surprise visit to Asheville

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Joe Marusak, The Charlotte Observer | Section: north_carolina | 438 Words OpenURL Link

Actor Channing Tatum shocked Tropical Storm Helene relief volunteers with an unannounced visit to an Asheville food bank

Tatum not only pulled into MANNA Food Bank with a truckload of supplies Oct. 16, he helped unload them and sort the items alongside food bank team members and volunteers, officials with the nonprofit hunger-relief organization said on Facebook.

"Despite everything our communities have gone through since Hurricane Helene, it's been truly amazing to see such incredible people showing up to support us — and that includes Channing and his team," MANNA Food Bank CEO Claire Neal said on Facebook.

"He jumped right in to work with our crew, handing out food and resources," Neal said. "It was wonderful to see all the smiles he brought to the families at the WNC Farmers Market distribution."

Tatum _fitted.jpegActor Channing Tatum shocked Tropical Storm Helene relief volunteers with an unannounced visit to an Asheville food bank on Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024.

Helene, a former Category 5 hurricane, killed at least 95 people in the state and caused record flooding and damage in Western North Carolina after arriving in the state on Sept. 28. Entire mountain communities vanished in swollen, raging rivers. At least 90 people remain missing, emergency officials said.

Tatum was already in North Carolina for filming the movie "Roofman," in the Charlotte area, The Charlotte Observer previously reported.

The film is based on the true story of serial robber Jeffrey Manchester, known as "Roofman" or the "Rooftop Robber." He broke into dozens of McDonald's restaurants across the U.S., including in the Charlotte area, and was arrested in Gaston County in 2000.

Tatum is best known for starring in the "Magic Mike" movies.

tatum _fitted (1).jpegActor Channing Tatum shocked Tropical Storm Helene relief volunteers with an unannounced visit to an Asheville food bank on Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024..

Making a difference

On Instagram Oct. 7, days after the deadly hurricane had struck, Tatum urged his 17.5 million followers to donate to the 2Baby2 nonprofit. 2Baby2 has provided at least 200 million diapers to U.S. families in need and at least 60 million critical items to children devastated by natural disasters and other emergencies.

"Together, we can make a difference in the lives of these families during this challenging time," Tatum said on Instagram.

People on social media praised Tatum after his Asheville appearance.

"Sooo very sweet!!!" a woman posted on Facebook. "You can see his heart!"

"Thank you beautiful soul to help during this difficult time," another woman posted on Facebook. "May God Bless You Always."

tatum_fitted (2).jpegActor Channing Tatum, far left in top row, shocked Tropical Storm Helene relief volunteers with an unannounced visit to an Asheville food bank on Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024.

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Joe Marusak, The Charlotte Observer, 'Actor Channing Tatum stuns Helene relief volunteers with surprise visit to Asheville', *Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 20 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view/? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C5448D6BAAB218>



School choice advocacy is about performance, not loyalty to charters - Opinion

October 20, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC)
Author: From our readers, The Charlotte Observer | Section: letters_to_the_editor | 643 Words
OpenURL Link

The writer was Republican mayor of Charlotte from 1991-95:

With regard to Ned Barnett's anti-voucher column in the Observer "NC's vouchers for all may hurt the GOP's original school choice – charters," he seems to believe that school choice advocates support a particular school or type of school, such as charters. That's wrong.

Unlike "school system" advocates — whose loyalty is to their "system" — charter school advocates support all choices, not charter schools per se. They rightly believe that more competition for the privilege of educating our children is better than having fewer options. If that means that some poor-performing charter schools must shut down because they can't compete, so be it. That's what free markets are all about, Ned.

Richard Vinroot, Charlotte

Bishop ad

A Dan Bishop campaign ad implies that school resource officers make students safer. Can he show us the evidence? No. because it doesn't exist.

Two things SROs definitely do is increase the cost of running schools and habituate impressionable youth to the constant presence of police. This is great PR for police agencies looking to expand their presence in the community because people grow up expecting to always see an officer.

Unfortunately there is little if any correlation between a high ratio of police to civilians and reduction of crime rates or resolution of crimes, but that doesn't fit the "more police is better" narrative conservatives like to promote.

Thomas J. Strini, Spencer

Lead in school water

The writer works with non-profit Environment North Carolina

The EPA's new deadline for replacing lead pipes is a significant step for public health, although they do little to protect kids at school. Lead is toxic to children even at low levels, with links to learning disabilities such as ADHD, antisocial behaviors, and depression.

Lead contaminated drinking water is widespread in North Carolina schools. Lead was detected in about 52% of nearly 21,865 water samples taken at NC schools, according to a state sponsored program. Replacing pipes won't fix the issue, since most lead in schools comes from fixtures within the building.

We know how to solve this problem. We need to replace lead-bearing fountains with lead-filtering water stations and put filters on all other taps. Kudos to EPA on heeding our call to replace lead pipes. Now, we need school districts to get the lead out of water for our kids.

Trail magic

The writer founded environmental non-profit George Masa Foundation

The floodwaters from Hurricane Helene have finally receded, revealing destruction across western North Carolina. Yet amid the devastation, there's hope and unity. Instead of focusing on personal loss, people are asking, "How can I help?"

We're witnessing a kind of "trail magic," familiar to Appalachian Trail hikers — unexpected kindness from strangers. I've seen firsthand volunteers from as far away as Missouri and Kentucky arriving to provide meals. Volunteers are clearing debris, while people from across the region are sending much-needed resources. My fellow North Carolinians have continued to show up to help, lending a hand and sending relief. Neighbors are sharing food, water, and shelter, with strangers becoming friends during this crisis.

These acts of kindness remind us that in times of crisis, our shared humanity shines through. Nature doesn't discriminate, and neither do we. As we face the same storms, it's our compassion and community that will help us rebuild.

In the aftermath of Helene, this spirit of generosity — this trail magic — will be our greatest strength.

David Huff, Asheville

Typical white man

I'm the typical white, Christian, straight, married GOP voter from central NC. I believe in free speech and the Second Amendment. I believe in being fiscally conservative, and I'm in favor of slow, cautious progress, but progress nonetheless. I've never voted for a single Democrat in my 42 years of life.

I'm embarrassed to be a Republican. I can no longer support the leadership of the GOP as the behaviors, word and actions are no longer consistent with my values.

Joseph Peascoe, Greensboro

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Early voting in North Carolina reaches record turnout of 1 million

October 20, 2024 | Chronicle, The (Duke University) (Durham, NC) Author: Winston Qian | Section: News | 399 Words OpenURL Link

Just four days into early voting, 1,008,123 North Carolinians have cast their ballots, marking an all-time record turnout for the state.

The over 1 million votes account for roughly 13% of the state's 7.8 million registered voters. Of the votes, 916,433 were cast in person. Of the remaining 91,690 absentee votes, 77,831 were cast by civilians, 11,168 by overseas voters and 2,691 by the military.

On Oct. 17 alone — the first day of early voting — 353,166 voters cast their ballots, marking a 1.3% increase from the 348.559 voter turnout in 2020.

Duke's on-campus polling location, the Karsh Alumni and Visitors Center, was one of the most active in Durham County, with 1,175 voters casting their ballots on the first day alone. By Sunday evening, 3,571 people had voted at Duke.

In western parts of the state hit by Hurricane Helene in late September, 76 of the 80 early voting sites were open beginning Oct. 17.

As of Oct. 20, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump holds a narrow 0.5 percentage point lead in North Carolina's polls. It is unclear whether the record turnout benefits the former president or Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris.

According to the University's latest student voter engagement report conducted in October 2021, early voter turnout increased 33 percentage points from 2016 to 2020. The overall student voting rate between those years also marked an increase of 14.5 percentage points from 55.7% to 70.2%.

Students planning to vote early can cast their ballot at the Karsh Alumni and Visitors Center from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Sundays up until Nov. 2 at 3 p.m. They must present a valid photo ID such as a DukeCard, driver's license or U.S. passport.

Same-day registration is also available for students who have not yet registered. Those who would like to do so must show proof of residence, which they can do by presenting a document from the University including their name and housing address.

Students can check their registration status and access a sample ballot with the list of candidates and ballot referenda on the North Carolina State Board of Elections website.

Editor's note: This article was updated Monday afternoon with information on how many people voted at the Karsh Alumni and Visitors Center.

Winston Qian | Health/Science Editor

Winston Qian is a Pratt sophomore and health/science editor for the news department.

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Helene: Hard-hit 13 mountain counties turning out early to vote

October 20, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Alan Wooten | The Center Square | Section: State | 631 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – Only one of 13 counties in the North Carolina mountains identified as worst hit by the State Board of Elections has not accepted at least 10% of registered voters' ballots after three days of early in-person voting.

Rightly feared as a region where voter turnout could be impacted by Hurricane Helene's devastation, the counties represent 601,999 registrants as of Saturday. More than 69,000, or 11.5%, have already cast a ballot, and 62,890 of them – 10.4% – did it in person on Thursday, Friday or Saturday.

Sunday afternoon, DriveNC.org was reporting 493 road closures tied to the storm which came ashore in the Big Bend of Florida on Sept. 26 as a Category 4 hurricane. Its remnants settled over the Blue Ridge Mountains in the state, and 416 secondary roads remain closed by a storm that has killed 95.

Lawmakers in Raleigh added a dozen more counties to the list to make 25 in all granted ability to make needed changes as recovery from Helene continues. Absentee by mail ballots went out in September, and this week's inperson option lasts through the Saturday before Election Day.

Same-day registration can be done.

At a campaign stop in the eastern part of the state on Friday, Republican attorney general candidate Dan Bishop – departing the U.S. House, as is his Democratic opponent Jeff Jackson – said there's indications voters will find a way to get to the polls. Early numbers from the State Board of Elections back him up.

The nation's eyes are watching, given the state's bullseye for campaigning by presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. In Greenville alone, Harris came Oct. 13, former President Bill Clinton on Saturday, and Trump arrives Monday.

Bishop said feedback has been consistent. He said truckloads of supplies and private helicopter airlift operations are "the most amazing thing I've seen." He also expressed disappointment with government, naming the Federal Emergency Management Agency and North Carolina Emergency Management.

"I think they're gaining on it. There are some bright spots," Bishop said. "The North Carolina Department of Transportation is on the way to doing great stuff up there. All of those things – you're right, life and limb take precedence over elections.

"But I will say this – the situation I just described has inspired a lot of people. I saw one report, one county I won't specify, had record turnout on the first day of early voting. So, people are also very interested in expressing their views, their voice through their vote, in order to have more common sense prevail like those private relief operations and to see our government response be quick and get the job done. I think folks up there have that very much on their mind."

Few prognosticators believe the White House can be won without either Pennsylvania or North Carolina, and the winner just might need both. The former has 19 electoral college votes, the latter 16.

The election board unanimously approved a list of emergency measures for Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga and Yancey counties.

Enabling the relief to match the federal disaster declaration, the Legislature unanimously added Alexander, Alleghany, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon and Wilkes counties.

Of the 13 identified by the state board, only Rutherford County at 8.4% is below double figures turnout early. The top end is 17.1% in Polk, 16.1% in Transylvania and 14.2% in Haywood – the latter's 6,752 being the largest volume of the three.

Hard-hit Buncombe County, with more than twice as many registered voters as any of the other dozen counties, has had 22,145 vote early (10.2%), including 19,687 in person (9.1%).

Across the 13 counties, total early voting turnout is 11.5%, including 10.4% for doing so in person.

Turnout statewide for the 2020 presidential election cycle was better than 75%.

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Western North Carolina reopens, though still with many struggles

October 20, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Alan Wooten | The Center Square | Section: State | 372 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – Just over 4,000 customers in two North Carolina counties remained without power Sunday afternoon in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

The storm, a Category 4 hurricane when it hit Florida's Big Bend, is tied to more deaths in the state than any other. An exact total of fatalities in the southeast has varied, though only three hurricanes have been responsible for more since 1950.

The Department of Health and Human Services, in its update Sunday, said 95 have died in North Carolina.

Entering a fourth week of recovery, U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards, R-N.C., on Sunday said "all of western North Carolina is open for business. This includes Buncombe, Madison, Swain and Yancey counties, as well as all of Henderson, Polk and Rutherford counties."

Edwards, congressman for one of the hardest hit areas by the storm in the Southeast, said in his message the "do not travel" advisory has ended and there is "a milestone of more than 200 wastewater treatment centers operating normal" across his 11th Congressional District.

According to PowerOutage.us, Yancey County has 3,160 outages and Mitchell County 992. Both are on the Tennessee border just north of Buncombe County, where 42 lost their lives. Eleven died in Yancey County.

Assistance has poured into the state through the federal and state governments, and public entities such as faith and civic organizations. Twelve different states are represented among more than 3,600 soldiers, airmen and National Guardsmen. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has paid more than \$114 million in individual assistance funds already to more than 193,000 people, and 5,300 have been helped in transitional sheltering, a release from the governor says.

In emergency management, more than 1,600 responders from 39 state and local agencies have been on 146 missions. This would include search dogs, veterinarians and public health nurses in addition to emergency management teams.

Road closures due to Helene is down to 493, according to DriveNC.org. Notably, it is only two interstates and 416 secondary roads. There are 33 federal highway closures and 42 state roads.

Edwards on Sunday said the U.S. House of Representatives would be passing a disaster relief package upon return to session in November. He said only 21 post offices, about 10%, remain closed in the western part of the state.

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U.S. House committee launches investigation into alleged misuse of FEMA money

October 20, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Bethany Blankley | The Center Square contributor | Section: National | 775 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – Republican members of the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security have launched an investigation into the alleged misuse of Federal Emergency Management Agency funds by Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

DHS, which has oversight of FEMA, has directed that billions of dollars of FEMA funds be used to pay for food, housing, transportation and other services for illegal border crossers.

FEMA in recent years also has prioritized diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, The Center Square reported.

The committee is demanding answers from Mayorkas after on Oct. 2 he said FEMA "does not have the funds, to make it through the [hurricane] season."

Mayorkas made the remarks after the Category 4 Hurricane Helene made landfall on Sept. 26 and proceeded to cause destruction for 500 miles, causing an estimated \$47.5 billion in damages in 16 states, excluding loss of life. Helene particularly devastated portions of the states of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Hurricane Milton, a category 3 hurricane, next hit Florida on Oct. 8, causing up to \$2.5 billion in agricultural damages alone, according to state estimates.

At an Oct. 11 press conference, Mayorkas said more than \$350 million in FEMA assistance was distributed to help Helene survivors, "with millions more going out every day."

By Oct. 16, the White House announced the Biden-Harris administration had approved more than \$1.8 billion in assistance for hurricane recovery efforts, with more than \$911 million in already approved assistance for Helene survivors. Nearly 8,000 federal personnel "remain on the ground working side-by-side with state and local officials to help survivors with recovery and rebuilding," the White House said.

House committee Republicans said in a letter to Mayorkas that any FEMA "funding shortfall is extremely disconcerting" because Americans impacted by the deadly hurricanes "face dire circumstances while the Biden-Harris administration may have unwisely and irresponsibly focused funding requests for other FEMA activities." They also said Congress had met or exceeded appropriation requests for FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund, with \$61.2 billion allocated in fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

Scrutiny comes after in fiscal years 2023 and 2024, FEMA disbursed more than \$1.4 billion of taxpayer money through grants to states, local governments and nongovernmental organizations to pay for services for illegal border crossers through its Emergency Food and Shelter Program-Humanitarian Program (EFSP) and Shelter and Services Program (SSP).

Congress created the EFSP in 1983, later authorized it under a 1987 homeless assistance act, and has funded it since fiscal 1995, according to the Congressional Research Service. Funds are supposed to be prioritized to help the homeless, unemployed and more recently have been prioritized for "communities most affected by the influx of migrants," CRS says.

Under the Trump administration, Congress set aside \$25 million, 83.3%, of the EFSP funding through supplemental appropriation for southern border state local recipient organizations (LROs).

A March 2023 DHS Inspector General report found that under the Biden-Harris administration, the LROs were not always using the most recent batch of \$110 million in funds they received as intended by statute. The LROs "did not always provide the required receipts or documentation for claimed reimbursements" and "were unable to provide supporting documentation" for how the money was spent, the Office of the Inspector General found.

By statute, six private nonprofit organizations govern the allocation of EFSP funds: the American Red Cross, Catholic Charities U.S.A., the Council of Jewish Federations, Inc., the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the Salvation Army, and the United Way of America, CRS notes.

Congress continues to fund DHS and FEMA programs, including in the latest Sept. 26 continuing resolution, allocating \$20 billion to FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund. A recent FEMA advisory states that doing so enabled it to "begin processing obligations of approximately \$9 billion for over 3,000 paused projects" to help "communities, schools, and hospitals across the nation recover from and mitigate against disasters."

"Due to the uncertainty of receiving additional funding, and if current spending rates hold, the agency projects it will reimplement INF before the end of the calendar year," FEMA said. It's referring to Immediate Needs Funding restrictions it put in place "to preserve critical resources necessary for lifesaving and life sustaining activities against a rapidly depleting Disaster Relief Fund balance."

In the most recent omnibus passed by Congress, "roughly \$650 million was directed away from U.S. Customs and Border Protection to FEMA to fund the SSP," the committee says.

"In last year's supplemental spending request alone, which House Republicans roundly rejected, the Biden-Harris administration asked for \$1.4 billion in new funds for the SSP," the committee said.

The committee gave Mayorkas a deadline of Oct. 25 to provide information it requested related to FEMA disaster recovery efforts, including the EFSP and SSP.

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Eary voting continues at record pace locally, statwide

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Pitt County residents continued casting ballots at a record pace through three days of early in-person voting, following statewide trends.

The Pitt County Board of Elections reported 15,482 people voted Thursday-Saturday at seven sites that the elections office will operate through Nov. 2.

The three-day total surpassed the 2020 three-day record of 15,159, with voting on Thursday and Friday leading the way. A total of 6,488 people voted Thursday and 5,780 voted Friday, besting 6,072 and 5,453 in 2020.

Voting fell off on Saturday compared to the first Saturday in 2020, with 3,214 votes this year compared to 3,634 in 2020, according to county Board of Elections figures.

A total of 87,879 people voted in 2020 out of 123,513 who were registered, about 71 percent.

Voting resumes at 8:30 a.m. on Monday and continues through Nov. 2 at seven locations in the county:

Pitt County Agricultural Center, 403 Government CircleAyden Community Building, 548 Second St.H. Boyd Lee Park, 5184 Corey RoadEppes Recreation Center, 400 Nash St.Farmville Community Center, 3886 S. Main St.ECU Student Center, 501 E. 10th St.Winterville Community Room, 2593 Railroad St.

Early voting hours are 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday (Oct. 19, 26 and Nov. 2) and 1-5 p.m. on Oct. 27. Residents may register and vote on the same day during the early voting period. Photo IDs are required to register and to vote.

Two of the seven sites are new from sites used in 2020 — one at the Ayden Community Center and a site at H. Boyd Lee Park. Earlier reports in the Reflector that indicated the board did not operate sites previously at Eppes Recreation Center and Farmville Community Center were incorrect.

A site at Alice Keene Park, which typically draws the most early voters, is closed this year as construction of a new gymnasium continues there. So far this year, the site at Boyd Lee Park has drawn the most voters, with 2832, followed by sites at Winterville with 2,735 and the Pitt County Ag Center with 2,536.

The Associated Press reported that more North Carolina residents turned out to cast ballots on the first day of early voting this year than in 2020, even as residents from the mountainous western portion of the state continued to recover from the devastating effects of Hurricane Helene.

Preliminary data shows a record 353,166 people cast ballots at more than 400 early voting sites statewide on Thursday, compared to 348,599 on the first day in October 2020, the State Board of Elections said Friday.

As North Carolina's population and voter registration continues to grow, Thursday's total as a percentage of the current number of registered voters in the state was slightly lower compared to the percentage of the electorate four years ago, according to data provided by the board. Thursday's number was 4.54% of the state's 7.78 million voters, while the 2020 first-day figure was 4.78% of the 7.29 million registrants at the time.

The number of ballots that were cast and voters who were registered as of Thursday is expected to increase as county election boards continue to upload data, board spokesperson Pat Gannon said.

Lines and full parking lots were common on Thursday at voting sites in highly populated Piedmont counties and in the mountainous region where historic flooding three weeks ago destroyed homes, roads and bridges and knocked out power and water systems. The board said Friday it had received no reports of significant issues or voting problems.

Thursday's turnout "is a clear sign that voters are energized about this election, that they trust the elections process, and that a hurricane will not stop North Carolinians from exercising their right to vote," state board Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell said in a news release. Clear, sunny weather on Thursday likely aided the turnout, according to election officials.

Helene was the deadliest hurricane to hit the U.S. mainland since Katrina in 2005, decimating remote towns throughout Appalachia and killing at least 246 people, with a little over half of the storm-related deaths in North Carolina.

While electricity has nearly been fully restored in western North Carolina, tens of thousands lack access to clean running water. Still, all but four of the 80 early voting sites initially planned for the 25 western counties hardest hit by the storm were open on Thursday.

"Obviously, any time you have something this cataclysmic, it's going to disrupt people's lives," early voter Bill Whalen, 75, of Asheville, said Thursday, but "at least in my neighborhood, there's a widespread understanding of the importance of this election and how important it is to vote."

The early-vote period, which continues through Nov. 2 in all 100 counties, is extremely popular in North Carolina. More than 3.6 million ballots — 65% of all ballots — were cast during early voting in the 2020 general election. Voters can simultaneously register to vote and cast a ballot during the 17-day period.

Traditional absentee balloting began several days before Helene reached the state. More than 75,000 ballots were received from in-state, military and overseas voters through Thursday, the board said.

In addition to president, the North Carolina ballot also includes races for governor, attorney general and several other statewide positions. All U.S. House and General Assembly seats also are up for reelection.

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