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Family tries to pick up the pieces after landslide tragedy

BY THÉODEN JANES
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The moment Jamie and Melissa Guinn laid eyes on the house — nestled on the edge of the tiny Avery County town of Minneapolis, N.C. — they adored it.

Two stories, about 1,900 square feet, built in the late '80s but with cedar siding in a style that made it look even older and more rustic. Almost like a cabin, they thought.

On top of that, the house’s surroundings were heavenly: the North Toe River babbled up at the front deck from the other side of Highway 19E; on multiple sides there were dense thickets of lush, tall, green trees; and out back was a very

steep, very tall hill, which made it seem as if the home was built right into the side of a mountain.

They weren’t at first sure they would get approved to buy it. Jamie, a packing supervisor at Baxter Healthcare’s manufacturing plant, and Melissa — then a sub-assembly operator, at Baxter — had four other mouths to feed and were at the time living in an apartment in Marion in neighboring McDowell County.

But upon falling in love with the house, the couple couldn’t stop fantasizing about how they would make it their own if everything went smoothly with the offer.

And when everything did, when they were handed the keys, Jamie and Melissa



Courtesy of Bernice Hensley

During last month’s storm, Melissa Guinn — a Minneapolis, N.C., mother of four (including son River, pictured) — was swept away by a landslide in front of the loves of her life.

SEE LANDSLIDE, 14A



KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH Knikouyeh@charlotteobserver.com

Volunteers fill containers of water for the community at a water distribution site at Pack Square in Asheville, N.C., Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024.

Thousands in Western NC still without water after Helene

BY MARY RAMSEY
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Extensive work remains to restore clean water access for North Carolina communities hit hard by Helene two weeks ago.

Repairs are underway across Western North Carolina, including the main city of Asheville’s facilities, which serve more than 156,000 people in Buncombe and Henderson counties, according to the system’s 2023 water quality report. Crews are trying to finish work that would normally take months or years on

a much shorter timeline, Asheville Assistant City Manager Ben Woody said Wednesday.

At other public water systems throughout Western North Carolina, a variety of issues are stopping water

SEE WATER ISSUES, 8A

State Democrats say ‘soul of public education’ is on ballot

BY REBECCA NOEL
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N.C. Democrats say “the very soul of public education” is on the ballot in November as they work to break Republicans’ legislative supermajority.

With just less than a month until the election, Democrats aren’t expected to gain a majority in either chamber of the legislature. Republicans have held control of the state House and Senate since 2011 and are favored to win in most legislative districts, according to Dave’s Redistricting, a website that uses past

elections to determine how each district might vote this year.

But by breaking up the supermajority created in part by Mecklenburg Rep. Tricia Cotham’s flip to the Republican Party, Democrats hope to bring back the governor’s veto power. And they could prevent more veto overrides on topics such as school vouchers, sports and hot-button social issues in schools.

The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee has focused on 14 “spotlight races,” including three Charlotte-area House seats: Districts 98, 73 and 105. Each of the candidates running on the Democratic ticket in those races has said education as a top priority for

SEE DEMOCRATS, 6A

Western NC residents worry about health risks from mud

BY CATHERINE MUCCIGROSSO
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As historic floodwaters recede in western North Carolina, the destruction left behind from former Hurricane Helene also involves dealing with massive amounts of mud that some residents and business owners fear is toxic.

Helene leveled the Biltmore Village where Origami Ink has been “completely destroyed,” the gift shop said on its Facebook page last week. The flood waters reached the second floor, “literally smashing everything to bits and leaving everything coated in toxic mud,” Origami Ink said.

But as of Wednesday, federal and state officials would not confirm that the mud from Helene is toxic.

As part of the state and federal storm response, North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality and other state agencies are working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address potential contamination in the affected region, the agencies said in a joint statement to The Charlotte Observer.

“Given the widespread impacts of the storm and flooding, generally speaking, the public is advised to treat areas that have flooded and any substances of unknown origin with caution,” the agencies said.

Western North Carolina residents are urged to use caution during cleanup, especially if there is a noticeable chemical odor or spilled container of a hazardous material and to ask the local health department or fire department for help.

More guidance is available online at deq.nc.gov and the NCDHHS websites.

Federal and state agencies did not make an official available for interview.

TESTING FOR POTENTIAL CONTAMINATION

DEQ has received reports of concerns about potentially toxic mud downstream in Madison County near Marshall from damaged IPEX’s Silver-Line Plastics plant in Asheville. Marshall, with less than 800 residents, is on the French Broad River about 20 miles north of Asheville.

In response, inspectors have visited the site and found no injuries were confirmed related to potential exposure in this area, according to the federal and state agencies.

Silver-Line is not listed as a hazardous waste generator in DEQ permitting records.

“They have an air permit with the local air program in Buncombe County and did not have significant quantities of hazardous chemicals,” DEQ and EPA

SEE HEALTH RISKS, 14A



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