

NINERTIMES  
Student-driven news since 1947    Oct. 29, 2025

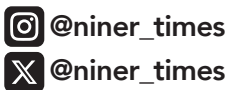
# THE WIZARD

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The musician  
making a  
career out of  
hard questions







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The Niner Times is UNC Charlotte's student-run news publication founded in 1947 and has received both state and national recognition.

We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students.

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UNC Charlotte event calendar

Día De Los Muertos Celebration  
Oct. 29, 1-3 P.M.  
Popp-Martin Student Union,  
Room 261

Haunted Union  
Oct. 30, 7-10 P.M.  
Popp-Martin Student Union

Women's Volleyball vs Rice  
Nov. 2, 1-3 P.M.  
Halton Arena

Faculty & Friends Concert  
Nov. 4, 7:30 P.M.  
Rowe Recital Hall

First-Gen Resource Fair  
Nov. 5, 11:30 A.M.- 1 P.M.  
Cauble Plaza

Football at East Carolina  
Nov. 8, TBD  
Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium

From the UNC Charlotte police logs (10/10 - 10/25)

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Oct. 10 - 25, 2025.

Oct. 12 Investigate

A resident student reported receiving a no-contact order against her ex-boyfriend. She received her order; he will receive his upon release from rehab. A report and SIM Maxient were completed.

Oct. 13 Communicating threats

Faculty reported receiving a threatening email from an ex-student. The individual was issued a trespass order via certified mail. A SIM and report were completed.

Oct. 17 Suspicious person

Dispatch reported a disruptive 'pillow fight' at a carnival near CHHS. Officers found the group in front of the Student Union, instructed them to stop, and they complied.

Niner's Comics: Construction on campus

Aisha Karim | Staff Illustrator







Courtesy of Brian Buser

# ‘The Wizard’:

## The musician making a career out of hard questions

Madeline Andrews | Asst. Arts & Culture Editor

The 49th Acre was overrun with people. Not a single face was recognizable; there was no room for walking paths or order, as cans and ribbons started to fill the grass beneath the hundreds of feet. And it was hot. Really hot.

On Saturday, Oct. 18, the Homecoming tailgate drew hundreds of then-hopeful UNC Charlotte students and alumni, all unaware of how the game would end. The celebration, easily mistaken for a St. Patrick’s Day block party, was filled with school spirit; nearly every surface and attendee bore green and gold.

As the afternoon unfolded, several

girls began to gather near the trash cans, forming a team huddle that soon attracted a small crowd. At first, I wondered if Norm was making his first appearance—until I noticed the hat.

Brian Buser, who goes by Planet Ruti professionally, is a wizard. If you approach him, he’ll kindly ask someone to hold his drink as he turns toward the camera. He will then offer you a gift: from a small drawstring bag pulled out of the shadow of his robe, he will produce a single golden coin that reads “you are loved” on its head, and a QR code sticker stuck on its tail.

The code takes you to his Linktree, where an assortment of platforms are listed. On his TikTok alone, he has amassed 18.5 million likes and over 300 million views.

The most popular video on his channel is a street interview filmed in downtown Asheville, N.C., Buser’s hometown, outside of the Asheville Museum of Science. In the interview, he approaches an older woman and asks, “What’s the hardest substance you’ve ever taken?” She pauses for a few moments before responding, “The hardest substance I’ve taken was swallowing the amount of money wasted on the military industrial complex.”

Due to the nature of virality online, it’s hard to tabulate just how many views that video has amassed, but there are over 50 million across Buser’s accounts alone.

“That’s actually my mom’s friend named Claire. I think the reason that popped off is because it exposed how a lot of people truly feel about the wasted resources of the United States, spending stupid amounts of money,” Buser said.

The wizard persona is new to the Planet Ruti universe. It became part of his artist persona after randomly buying a wizard hat on Amazon. Ever since, he has developed multiple wizard outfits that he interchanges for different events; his purple regalia with the impossibly-long hat is his formal wear.

The majority of the videos on the @Planetruti account are street interviews that start with Buser asking that same question: “What is the hardest substance you’ve ever done?” Considering the uniformity, it is shocking that the variety of answers comes from those eight words.

In many videos, people recall terrifying psychedelic experiences, one woman describing the time she took LSD and thought she was a pretzel that needed to be cooked, her husband

finding her as she was trying to climb into the oven. Many started their stories by giving the disclaimer that they were “going through a hard time” that led them to use substances in the first place.

At first, it’s hard not to view this street interview content as an easy paycheck, with the format seeming to only increase in popularity. However, the more time spent watching these videos, the more there is a sort of shared humanity that Buser fosters in these judgment-free conversations.

Asking pointed questions is how Buser captures what he describes as the “widest part of the funnel.” He is interested in getting as many people to engage as possible, and by asking a personal, somewhat adult question, he is allowing people to tell their most personal stories, which is what most audiences are interested in.

Buser went to UNC Charlotte until his second year, when he decided that a business degree would not help him towards his ultimate goal. He then returned to Asheville and started a music studio. After Hurricane Helene tragically destroyed most of the town, he decided it was time to move back to Charlotte, and is currently living in Uptown.

“Asheville’s limited [because] there’s only so many people there, so many stories, so much gold to refine. Leaving wasn’t restarting; it was more building off of,” Buser said.

Since leaving Asheville, he has accrued over 200 million views on his TikTok account, with brand deal offers from mobile games and even the card game Uno.

In his most recent videos, he asks, “When was the last time you’ve cried?” Often leading to tearful disclosures, hugs, and seemingly making a real emotional impact. Buser’s main aspiration is to use his platform to connect people to his music, which is overwhelmingly positive in nature, with song titles like “Accept You” and “Love What You Are.” He claims that money is his last motivation, noting that he is lucky not to have to be financially independent yet.

“That’s really why I do it, is when somebody reaches out and is like, ‘Hey, I decided to do something with my life based on a song you made.’ It’s about making things, expressing yourself, not being afraid,” Buser explained. “I think the best way to feel love for yourself is by showing others love.”



# Messages of hope: 32-year-old immigrant student gathers handwritten cards for hospitalized children

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

Fourth-year Ben Oz Elhadad can usually be found beside the library, sitting at a table clad with colorful cardstock, markers and stickers. A banner hanging from the table reveals his cause, which he'll gladly tell you about: making cards for hospitalized children and their families.

The mission is sponsored by Cards for Hospitalized Kids (CFHK), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. According to the CFHK website, their goal is to provide children with joy and hope through personalized cards. Oz Elhadad wants to do the same.

"Healing starts with hope," Oz Elhadad said. "And hope starts with the students in our school that decide to stop and write those cards. Those words help those kids to heal."

Oz Elhadad is, in his own words, not a typical student. An immigrant from Israel, the 32-year-old prefers to give back to his community rather than party in his free time. After the martial arts studio he worked at closed, he knew he needed to fill the hours he wasn't in school with something else. He believes that living in a place means you have to give back

to it, which led him to Cards for Hospitalized Kids.

He first found the organization after a quick Google search, drawn to both its mission and its potential for students on campus. To him, the writers of the cards are just as important as the children receiving them.

"When I started to do that research [on CFHK], I really believed that if I will be able to make the students in our school stop for a few minutes, write a few good words out of their heart, that something is really going to help some other kid," Oz Elhadad said.

Currently working toward American citizenship, Oz Elhadad values connection with his community, and his work gives him hope for the future.

"Those students who stop at the table and talk about all those words that they put on the cards, they want to help somebody," Oz Elhadad said. "They don't even know who, but they want to help, and that shows me how much of good and pure we have in our community."

The encouragement the cards pro-

vide children and their families also motivates Oz Elhadad. Being in the hospital can be isolating, lonely and miserable.

According to the Agency of Healthcare Research and Quality, 5,199,500 children ages 0-17 were hospitalized in 2019. The average length of stay was 4.1 days.

While this may not seem like very long, this means nearly a week of being out of school and away from friends. Children with cancer and other serious illnesses stay far longer, often enduring multiple long-term stays a year.

Even when recovering, the body can still be ravaged by all it has been through. Hearing that even one person, no matter who they are, believes in them, cares about them and has them in their thoughts can turn everything around.

"Those words have meaning," Oz Elhadad said. "Once the kids read them, maybe, I don't know if it will happen on every single one, but maybe a few of them will make the kids to survive, to go through whatever they're going through, to put a smile on their face, more confidence, willpower on their journey. That's why I'm here."

Oz Elhadad cannot provide a guaranteed time he will be tabling, but the best time to find him is between 11:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on Thursdays, right outside the J. Murrey Atkins Library. He said he might also be around on Mondays and Fridays, but Thursday is the best day. His goal is to reach 1000 cards by December. Currently, he has collected around 200.

Volunteering is not just something that looks good on a resume. It is about contrib-

“Those students who stop at the table and talk about all those words that they put on the cards, they want to help somebody. They don’t even know who, but they want to help, and that shows me how much of good and pure we have in our community.”  
Ben Oz Elhadad, fourth-year

uting something to life. With so many problems around the world, it can feel impossible to solve everything. But a simple, quick solution is to brighten someone's day with a card. It could brighten the writers', too.



Lauren Simendinger/Niner Times



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# Charlotte's new Free Expression Tunnel: Students embrace creativity and reflect on two months of public canvas

Annie Waskey | Staff Writer  
Wes Packham/Niner Times

From designing simple drawings to full murals, displaying symbols of political activism or expression of culture, graffiti and its creators have faced ongoing battles with authority for decades. It is due to Freedom Tunnels that many graffiti artists can express their art without fear of arrest or vandalism charges, and now UNC Charlotte has one of its own.

## Freedom Tunnels' history and Charlotte's future

The first of these tunnels was established in New York City and got its name from the graffiti artist Chris 'Freedom' Pape. After freight train operations were halted, the tunnel became a place for the homeless to take refuge, but their shantytowns were bulldozed in 1991. Its isolated state created a haven for graffiti artists, and, despite Amtrak's opposing efforts, this Freedom Tunnel is still coated in layers of graffiti, encapsulating the space's rich history across decades.

Now, these tunnels can be found across the nation, and as of this year, one can be found at UNC Charlotte. Located on the Toby Creek Greenway, the Free Expression Tunnel opened in August and already features vibrant artwork.

"It is a great addition to our school, and I hope that more things like this happen. I think it brings a community of artists together in a brand new and enlightened way," third-year art major Leilani Jones said.

## Student initiative and collaboration

The Freedom Expression Tunnel was advocated for and created by Charlotte's Student Government Association (SGA). Drawing inspiration from North Carolina State University's tunnel, third-year and SGA liaison Matthew Kingsley brought the idea to Student Body President Isaiah Grayson, who then pitched it to Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber. There were other options and ideas for what this space could look like, including a Freedom Expression Rock, but the tunnel was the most cost-effective and accessible choice.

The tunnel is owned by the city of Charlotte, so after working with the city to approve the project, the SGA successfully brought the project to life on campus.

"It's a great idea, a great concept and I think it's something that students wanted," Grayson said.

## Removing barriers to creativity

The Free Expression Tunnel creates an outlet for students to showcase their art, and whether it is of personal significance or a statement of political activism, the art is permanent and cannot be covered by authority.

"It's not like campus is going to come and paint over the stuff in the tunnel," Grayson said.

Artists value a space that allows them to create whatever they want to say or however they may be feeling without the fear of getting charged for vandalism.

"I think for me, when I do art, it allows my emotions to be expressed and it really helps me," first-year student Aspen Unwin said.

In a country where free expression is encouraged, Charlotte prioritizes facets for students to exercise that right.

"It's another area to loosen restrictions on expression, especially around a school where the First Amendment should always be in play," Kingsley said.

This tunnel allows students to tangibly express their passions and talents free from the stigma that comes with graffiti.

"There's a barrier, there's anonymity if you want it," Grayson said.

## Centering sustainability

Unfortunately, beavers along Toby Creek have found a way to express themselves by making the tunnel susceptible to flooding.

"We're trying to figure out what we can do with the wildlife, sustainably, so that we can make sure the tunnel doesn't flood," Grayson explained.

While the tunnel will always flood during particularly rainy seasons, flooding due to beavers is an issue that can be fixed, and the SGA is working to make the tunnel a safer and more accessible environment without harming wildlife.

"It's a problem we have to address, but we have to be sustainable and specific in the way that we address it," Grayson said.

Another issue the tunnel faces is a lack of lighting. Right now, the only light provided during the night is from the moon, which limits the area that can be used by artists to the sides of the tunnel.

"My chief of staff is currently working with our sustainability liaison to use the Charlotte Green Fund from the Charlotte Green Initiative to fund sustainable lighting for the tunnel," Grayson said.

## Lasting expression

"I think it serves to show what people are generally feeling. When you think about Freedom Expression Tunnels across the country, if there's a big event that happens, people paint murals in tunnels like that, [they paint] things and causes they believe in in tunnels like that," Grayson explained.

Students' attitudes were welcoming to the tunnel, and it's already getting the attention of the campus. The tunnel is designed to be a free place of expression for everyone to use, not just art majors or traditional artists.

"I think it's an opportunity for freedom of expression," second-year art major Miriam Clayton said. "Especially for non-artists who don't get the opportunity to have that and be a part of the school and make an impact that'll last."



# Making use of the Makerspace: Student punk guitarist repairs Schechter Demon-7

Mari Love | Staff Writer

Courtesy of Farhan Raza

Hunched over a table on the second floor of the J. Murrey Atkins Library sat third-year Farhan Raza: computer science and engineering student and lead singer and guitarist of the pop-punk band Pink Skull Garden. Raza was in the Area 49 Makerspace for one thing: reviving a broken Schechter Demon-7 electric guitar with a full rebuild of the electronics.

One of the goals was to make the guitar have a more Deftones-esque sound, a band Raza jokingly called “posers.”

Raza explained the sound and structure of his own guitar, a Squier Starcaster, and explained how one doesn’t need the most expensive piece of equipment to make good music.

“You don’t have to buy a thousand-dollar guitar for it to sound good,” Raza said, which is a sentiment that many artists can relate to.

Participating in the arts should not be a financial strain on people who wish to express themselves creatively. While expensive equipment and materials can prove themselves to be ‘better,’ there should not be a complete disregard for things that are within your budget.

## Leading your modifications

He presented his guitar, a mahogany hollow-body nestled in a gator case lined on the inside with pink fur. He explained how he completely customized the instrument, mostly using tools available in the Makerspace.

Raza feels a great sense of accomplishment after making alterations to his own guitar. In a world full of ultra-convenient services, Raza prefers a more hands-on experience with his instrument.

“I like to be part of the process because if something goes wrong or if I want to work on my sound, I know exactly where to look,” Raza said.

The process Raza is referring to is known as ‘modding,’ or making modifications to something that can enhance the experience or quality. Being in charge of your own modifications gives people the confidence and validation that is often not achievable when a person does not take a chance on themselves to do it themselves.

Raza went over his own modifications. With gleaming mahogany polishing, hotrodded humbuckers and complete rewiring, his Squier Starcaster is customized to fit his own sound, and he plans to do his own modifications from here on out.

“This [Makerspace] keeps me motivated to stay in a band and to work on my craft,” Raza said.

## Building for the band

The band Pink Skull Garden is a pop-punk group that released its debut album on March 15. Members include Raza (vocalist and guitarist), Aemon Esmond (bassist) and Hunter Dubar (drummer). Raza said they’re heavily inspired by bands like Green Day and Blink-182, but tend to explore genres such as shoegaze. They’ve performed at over 100 shows in and outside North Carolina, including some in Canada, but their upcoming show will be at the Star Quad on Oct. 31 at noon. Raza says he wants to give back to UNC Charlotte and to all the fans that support their music.

“What [Charlotte] helped me make, I’m also going to give back,” Raza said.

## What the Makerspace provides for students

The Makerspace has an array of resources such as 3D printers, sewing machines, heat guns, electrical wire, tools and wood, ensuring that any project a student has in mind can be done here. A lot of students use the space, as some equipment might be inaccessible due to financial constraints or is completely inaccessible for non-professionals. Most tools can be used for free, with some costing no more than \$1 for use.

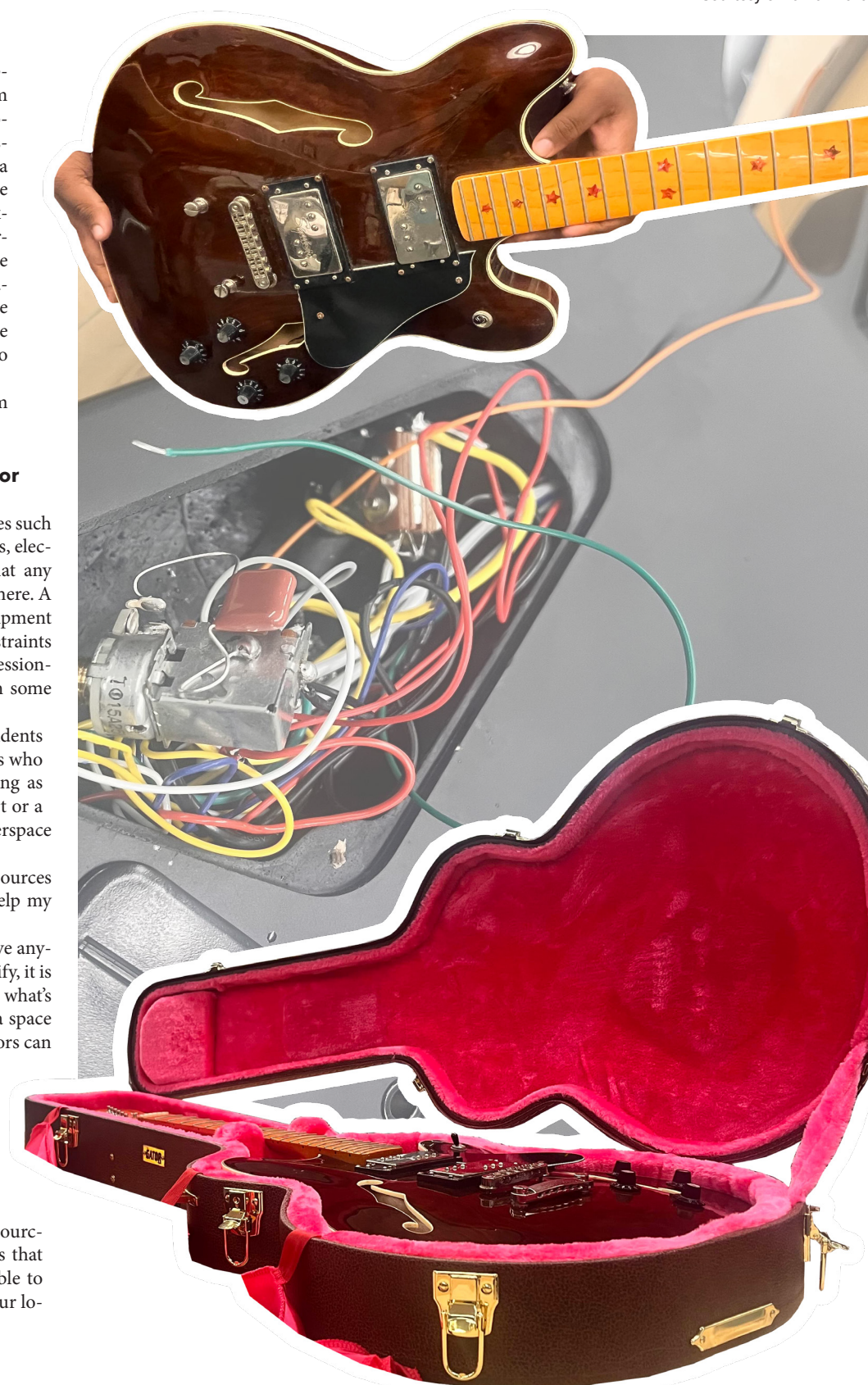
The Makerspace gets hundreds of students coming in and out throughout the months who use the space, no matter if it is something as simple as sewing up a small hole in a shirt or a modification on an instrument, the Makerspace has everything that one might need.

“The Makerspace gave me all the resources to do what I wanted to do and to also help my friend,” Raza said.

Even if you’re a student who doesn’t have anything to design, rewire or completely modify, it is still interesting to be an onlooker and see what’s going on. The Makerspace also provides a space where students of different or similar majors can connect with each other. Raza himself is studying computer science and environmental engineering, and he mentioned how many people came to see him working on his guitar with admiration.

“You see all kinds of things in the Makerspace,” Raza said.

The Makerspace proves itself to have resources for both academic and artistic projects that students may need. In this case, it was able to provide tools that helped and motivated our local pop-punk band.







Nicholas Hunt/Niner Times

## NOVA LITERARY-ARTS MAGAZINE RELEASES FIRST ZINE IN 3 YEARS

Wes Packham | Arts & Culture Editor

Coming three years after Nova released its first zine, this “multi-generational” issue showcases work from former contributors to Nova’s past magazines.

The zine was meant to be a “test run” before Nova’s full issue in the spring. The central theme of the zine was to reach out to people who have been a part of Nova and the larger Student Niner Media department, and ask them to contribute work for the issue.

“It was really heartening to see people who had been out of media for 20 [or] 30 years, who were still working on their own stuff in their own time, and were still making cool things, even if they didn’t end up working in the creative field,” Nova Editor-in-Chief Zach Jenkins said.

Despite difficulties reaching out to Charlotte alumni of decades past, Nova’s team was able to put together 24 pages of art and literary work, distributing hundreds of copies at the Queen City Zine Fest on Oct. 18.

A digital copy of the zine is available on [novacharlotte.com](http://novacharlotte.com).

# Queen City Zine Fest celebrates independent and do-it-yourself artists in Charlotte

Nicholas Hunt | Staff Writer

On Oct. 18, the Queen City Zine Fest held its fall 2025 festival at the McColl Center in uptown Charlotte. The festival aims to promote self-published physical media and encouraging collaboration amongst independent artists and creatives in Charlotte.

### But what exactly is a zine?

“A zine is just a kind of do-it-yourself booklet, but it has to be on printed paper,” Kenneth Raudales, co-founder of Zine Fest, said.

Zines are extremely diverse and vary in design and construction. Some are made out of thin copy paper, while others are made out of thick cardstock or even cardboard. They may be printed, hand-drawn, in color or monochrome. The lack of restrictions gives immense freedom to creators, making each zine unique and one of a kind.

Raudales co-founded the Queen City Zine Fest with his mother, Jenn, and associate Micah Cash in 2018. Since then, they have held seven festivals in the fall, with occasional events being hosted in the spring.

Queen City Zine Fest provides a space for photographers, illustrators, cartoonists, writers

and various other independently published creatives to showcase and sell their work.

Cash stated that Zine Fest’s goal is “building and cultivating community” and increasing collaboration and community within the local independent arts scene.

“I think it’s important to understand that we are really celebrating independent publishing, and people who are absolutely doing it themselves. They don’t need cultural gatekeepers. They can sell, they can create and they can build a community themselves,” Cash added.

### Connection and culture

With over 70 artists, the Zine Fest has become an event where Charlotte creatives can collaborate, purchase, promote and celebrate their physical creations.

One of these creatives was Sophia Firdausi, who attended the festival to promote her media company and magazine, Riot Productions.

“It’s a community-based media company, and we want to use art to create change by bringing the community together,” Firdausi said.

Riot Productions’ content revolves around the lives and culture of the younger generation. Fi-

dausi shared that Riot Productions’ mission is “to capture modernity through the lens of youth culture.”

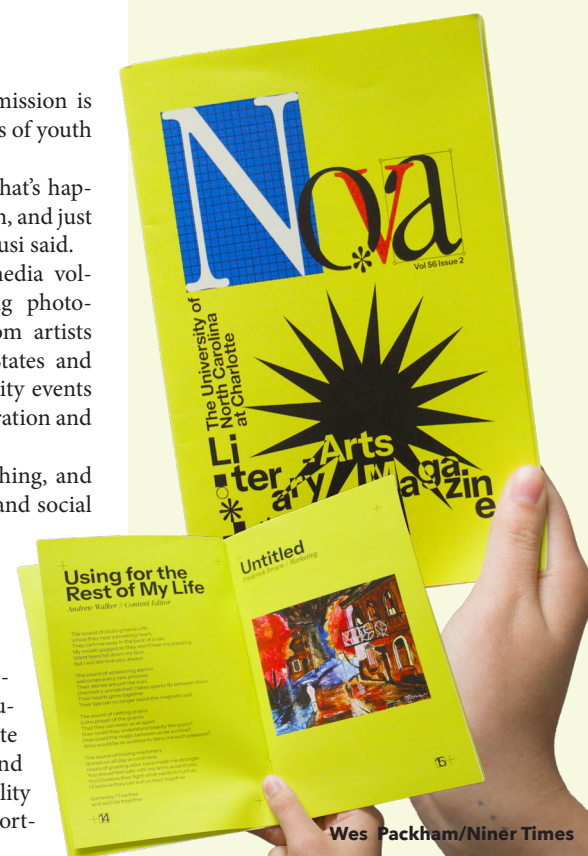
“We want to create an archive of what’s happening in the crazy world that we live in, and just capture everyone’s perspectives,” Firdausi said.

Riot Productions creates a multimedia volume-based print magazine, featuring photographs, illustrations and writings from artists across North Carolina, the United States and even Europe. They also host community events and activities, aiming to foster collaboration and partnerships with other artists.

“I feel like art is such a powerful thing, and it can communicate ideas that words and social media cannot,” Firdausi said.

The dozens of other creatives share this sentiment at the festival, who come together in person to support other independent creatives each year.

The Queen City Zine Fest is a celebration of human creativity and ingenuity. In a world where you can generate an entire image with just a prompt and a click, the festival shows that physicality and human involvement are still important aspects of everyday life.



Wes Packham/Niner Times



## PAST GOLDEN NINERS



### 2021 - RYEN BOLEWARE

WHILE AT CHARLOTTE, RALEIGH, N.C., NATIVE RYEN BOLEWARE MAJORED IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PSYCHOLOGY, SERVED AS SGA CHIEF JUSTICE, CO-CAPTAINED THE CHEERLEADING TEAM, SERVED ON THE LEAD PROGRAM AND WAS VICE PRESIDENT OF DELTA SIGMA THETA SORORITY, INC.

AFTER GRADUATING IN 2022, BOLEWARE NOW WORKS AS A VIP SERVICE LEAD AT XOXO LOUNGE.



### 2022 - RA'QUAN LEARY

AS A 49ER, AHOSKIE, N.C., NATIVE RA'QUAN LEARY MAJORED IN MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION. HE JOINED THE UNIVERSITY TRANSITION OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM (UTOP), STUDENT ADVISING FOR FRESHMAN EXCELLENCE (SAFE), AND EMERGING LEADERS, LATER BECOMING ACTIVE IN THE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES BOARD (CAB) AND THE NATIONAL SOCIETY OF LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESS (NSLS).

A 2022 CHARLOTTE GRADUATE, LEARY WENT ON TO EARN A MASTER'S IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION AND IN THE ARTS AT WESTERN GOVERNORS UNIVERSITY. LEARY NOW TEACHES MATH AT JAY M. ROBINSON MIDDLE SCHOOL.



### 2023 - KENAN MOORE

AT CHARLOTTE, MOORE EARNED A BACHELOR'S IN MARKETING WITH A MINOR IN AFRICANA STUDIES. HE JOINED SAFE, UTOP, NABA, NSCS AND NSLS. MOORE WAS ACTIVE IN THE BLACK STUDENT UNION AND SGA AS A SENATOR. A MEMBER OF KAPPA ALPHA PSI FRATERNITY, INC., MOORE SERVED AS CHAPTER PRESIDENT AND FOUNDED THE BLACK ORGANIZATION ALLIANCE BOARD (BOAB).

MOORE NOW WORKS AS AN OPERATIONS PROGRAM ANALYST AT WELLS FARGO, HAVING GRADUATED IN 2024.



### 2024 - S.L. IVEY

AFTER RETURNING TO COLLEGE IN HIS MID-40S TO REBUILD HIS LIFE, IVEY EARNED HIS BACHELOR'S IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND IS NOW PURSUING DUAL MASTER'S DEGREES IN HISTORY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. IVEY SERVES AS A GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT, LEADS THE GRADUATE HISTORY ASSOCIATION AND IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENT GOVERNMENT.

STILL STUDYING AT UNC CHARLOTTE, IVEY WAS RECENTLY NAMED A RECIPIENT OF THE THOMAS L. REYNOLDS GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH AWARD.

# Finding faith and home: Abby Grace Bare named UNC Charlotte's 2025 Golden Niner

Emily Schenkel | Staff Writer

Abby Grace Bare never envisioned herself going to college, yet she found her home here at UNC Charlotte and has now been named the 2025 Golden Niner.

Bare originally saw herself on a mission trip to another country for a few years, but under her mother's encouragement, she decided to attend UNC Charlotte.

After her first semester on campus, she realized Charlotte was the place for her.

Bare is a third-year student in the elementary education honors program, involved in the Mebane Early Literacy Scholar program, a teaching fellow and a teaching assistant (TA) for a biology class.

Bare found a special liking for being a TA, as she gets to be a point of contact and support for students in class when they might feel that they don't have one.

Bare shared that during her first year at Charlotte, she didn't have a professor or a TA with whom she connected on a deeper level.

Now, she aims to prioritize her students, help them with biology and connect with

them on a further level.

"It is so cool to watch the students that I'm able to build connections with flourish and grow," Bare said. "From freshmen who just moved here, who don't know how to study and are overwhelmed about biology, getting to connect with them and showing them that I'm there for them has been such an enlightening experience."

### Becoming the Golden Niner

As the 2025 Golden Niner, Bare expressed her excitement to represent not only UNC Charlotte but also her personal communities.

"Representing the campus as a whole, and being able to represent excellence and what being a Niner means, is just incredible," Bare said.

"I hope that being Golden Niner can bring attention to the College of Education, to the honors program and to the TA system. And I pray and pray and pray that God is glorified. If one person comes to Christ while I'm Golden Niner, then it's all worth it."

Bare defines Niner Pride as "being proud of where you are," and the excellence embodied by the campus community. She said that she is

proud that the community is diverse yet united under Charlotte's campus.

"So many different things go unnoticed and don't get the recognition that they need. We are really talented, and just being proud, even if we're not great at sports, just being proud," Bare said. "Going to games to represent UNC Charlotte regardless of the score or my title, having pride in the fact that we are constantly growing and getting better and being proud to be here, no matter what brought you here, shows our campus pride."

### Driven by faith

Bare shared that her life at Charlotte has progressed academically, socially and professionally, through her belief in God.

"Just being here, from the first day in Scott Hall 612 to now as someone about to graduate in May, it's just this huge journey of God's faithfulness in my life, and the lessons I've learned along the way of how he will provide for me. He will be the one. That's my true friend," Bare said.

Throughout the process of applying to be part of the Niner 9, Bare relied on prayer and on God.

"I remember sitting in the Union with a big as-



Wyatt Bullock/Niner Times



“

**“Soak up your community, soak up your college apartments, soak up moments with your best friends, soak up the Niner Times, soak up relationships with professors and TAs and learn the fight song.”**

**- Abby Grace Bare, 2025 Golden Niner**

signment due. One more time, I was like, ‘God, I haven’t heard back, and I’m not gonna stress out because you’ve got this. If I can use this opportunity to glorify you, your faithfulness and your goodness in my life and on this campus, then I want it.’ Thirty minutes went by, and I got an interview,” Bare said.

Bare continued to find comfort through her faith on the day of the Homecoming football game.

“I’m putting my makeup on, thinking this is for you, I’m putting my shoes on and zipping my dress up thinking that, ‘God, this is for you,” Bare said. “On the field, I was just thinking, ‘There’s no way that this wasn’t you, God. And there’s no way that this wasn’t absolutely a testament of your goodness and faithfulness in my life.”

#### **History of the Golden Niner**

Bare is the fifth ever Golden Niner, and first on an all-women court, with the Niner 9 and Golden Niner tradition beginning during the 2021 Niner Nation Week.

The inaugural Golden Niner was Ryen Boleware, a fourth-year student double-majoring in criminal justice and psychology. Boleware was involved in the Student Government Association, the Leadership Education and Development team, the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. and many other organizations at Charlotte.

In 2022, Ra’Quan Leary was named Golden Niner during his third year. Leary was a middle-grade education major and was involved in Emerging Leaders, the University Transition Opportunities Program, Student Advising for Freshman Excellence, the Campus Activities Board and many more on-campus initiatives.

Kenan Moore was named Golden Niner in 2023 during his fourth year at UNC Charlotte. Moore majored in marketing and minored in Africana studies, and was involved in multiple campus organizations, including the National Association of Black Accountants, the Black Student Union, the Flag Football Club, the Student Government Association and more.

Last year, S.L. Ivey was announced as the fourth Golden Niner, as a non-traditional 46-year-old graduate student. In his graduate program, he pursued a Master of Arts in history and a Master of Public Administration with a

specialization in nonprofit management.

Bare encourages all students to take it all in and absorb every little piece of what it means to be a Niner and part of the Charlotte community.

“Soak up your community, soak up your college apartments, soak up moments with your best friends, soak up the Niner Times, soak up relationships with professors and TAs and learn the fight song,” Bare said. “For us to be a part of the stadium expansion, R1 status and the biggest enrollment class, it’s a big deal. It’s important to soak it up and just enjoy it all.”



Ian Castelo/Niner Times



# Charlotte voters to decide mayor, city council and key ballot measures on Nov. 4; here's what to know

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

Charlotte voters will decide the city's leadership and the future of several major initiatives when they head to the polls on Nov. 4 for the municipal election.

Polling locations in the University area include the Cone University Center on campus, the former University City Library at 5528 Waters Edge Village Drive and Newell Presbyterian Church at 1500 Rocky River Road W.

Early voting is currently active and ends on Nov. 1.

## Charlotte mayoral candidates

Vi Lyles has served the city of Charlotte for the last four terms. As Charlotte's Democratic candidate for mayor, if she were to win, it would give her the title of second-longest serving mayor in Charlotte's history.

### Vi Lyles (Democrat)

Prior to being elected as mayor, Lyles served as mayor pro tem from 2015 to 2018 and as an at-large member of the Charlotte city council from 2013 to 2015.

Before getting involved in city politics, Lyles worked for the city as a budget analyst and director.

During her tenure, Lyles has prioritized affordable housing, investing approximately \$150 million in projects that have benefited over 5,000 families. She has pushed for enhanced transportation infrastructure and has emphasized sustainability through her leadership of initiatives aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and achieving zero-carbon city operations by 2030.

Lyles emphasizes equity and economic inclusion, launching the \$250-million Racial Equity Initiative to address under-investment in Charlotte neighborhoods.

Lyles is in favor of approving the transit tax. If the proposed tax is passed, Charlotte will expand the Blue Line, introduce a Red Line and allocate 40% of the money to roads. The money will come from a proposed sales tax increase from 7.25% to 8.25%.

### Terrie Donovan (Republican)

Donovan is the Republican candidate vying to become Charlotte's mayor, stepping into the race against Lyles with a platform grounded in public safety, transparency and accountability.

With over two decades of experience in the Charlotte real estate market, Donovan positions herself as an alternative to the current administration, arguing that the city's current leadership must do more to address rising crime and improve trust in government.

On Donovan's campaign site, she states that she wants to produce more funding for the police, strictly enforce current laws, support victims' rights and promote more community-based programs.

If Donovan wins, she will be the first GOP mayor since Pat McCrory.

### Rob Yates (Libertarian)

Yates, the Libertarian candidate for the 2025 Charlotte mayoral race, previously ran for mayor in 2023.

Yates has served as the Charlotte chair and North Carolina co-chair of the Foundation Against Racism and Intolerance for almost five years and has been heavily involved in the Libertarian Party of North Carolina, serving as the party's communication director for the last several years.

He advocates systems such as ranked-choice voting or approval voting to make municipal elections more representative.

Housing and transportation are also key topics on his agenda. He argues the city's current approach to zoning and development has driven up housing costs while overwhelming infrastructure.

## Charlotte City Council at-large candidates

Voters will also select four city council members to represent the city at large.

### Dimple Ajmera (Democrat)

Running for her fifth term as a Charlotte City Council member at-large, Ajmera previously served as a city council member in District 5. She has also held the position of chair of the Budget Committee, where she oversaw delivering balanced budgets that invested in safety, housing and more. She was chair of the Equity, Environment & Engagement Committee and served on the Charlotte Housing Authority Board.

She proposes building on past gains rather than overhauling the system.

Ajmera hopes to accomplish four key goals if elected councilmember at-large again: build a safe Charlotte regardless of zip code, champion sustainable infrastructure and a resilient future, expand access to affordable housing and create economic opportunities in all parts of the city.

### James Mitchell (Democrat)

Mitchell is running for re-election to an at-large seat on the Charlotte City Council.

Mitchell represented District 2 from 1999 to 2013 and was first elected as a councilmember at-large in 2015. Mitchell won a second term in the general election on Nov. 7, 2017; he ran for re-election for an at-large seat and won in 2019.

According to his platform, he seeks to break down barriers to employment, promote small-business growth and ensure upward mobility for residents who face systemic obstacles. Mitchell was the first councilmember to lead the charge to double Charlotte's housing trust fund, from \$50 million to \$100 million.

Mitchell is an advocate for transparency in city

council decision-making. Mitchell plans to ensure that local policies support continued activity of minority- and women-owned businesses.

### LaWana Slack-Mayfield (Democrat)

Slack-Mayfield is running for re-election to an at-large seat on the Charlotte City Council, bringing more than a decade of experience and public-service to her campaign. From 2011 to 2019, she represented District 3.

Mayfield was the first openly LGBTQ+ person elected to the Charlotte City Council in 2011.

She's led programs like the "Faith in Housing" initiative, which partners churches and community organizations to provide affordable housing and rehabilitation services for those in need.

According to Mayfield's campaign site, her priorities include stable, diverse-price-point housing, smart access to upward mobility, strong economic development and an end to racial and gender bias in city systems.

### Victoria Watlington (Democrat)

Having served District 3 since 2019, Watlington has been a city councilmember at-large since 2023 and is looking for re-election this term.

Watlington believes that Charlotte's most pressing issues are affordable housing and economic mobility.

If re-elected, Watlington wants to take a deeper look at public safety, culture, responsible growth, infrastructure and affordability.

As the Housing, Safety and Community Committee chair, Watlington was behind the \$100 million Housing Bond and Affordable Housing Funding Policy.

### Misun Kim (Republican)

Kim has never held any positions in Charlotte, but has previously run for mayor in 2023. Kim believes that property and sales taxes will increase homelessness in Charlotte and is actively opposed to the transit tax referendum pending approval.

Kim is an immigrant from South Korea and came to the U.S. in 1991 as a single mother. On her campaign site, she highlights her understanding of working families through per-

sonal experience.

Kim has expressed strong anti-immigrant views and said that undocumented immigrants misuse public resources, suggesting immigrant children should return to their parents' home countries.

In an interview with WSOC-TV, Kim said that the current city council will waste taxpayer dollars in building another transit system.

Kim's biggest concerns are taxpayer dollars and crime in Charlotte.

If elected, she will support youth data boot camps and expand access to trade schools for young students.

### Edwin Peacock (Republican)

Peacock has served as a District 6 representative and an at-large councilmember from 2007 to 2011. In both 2011 and 2015, he was the Republican nominee for mayor of Charlotte.

He has served as a board member of the Carolina Freedom Foundation and is co-chair of the Foundation for the Carolina & United Way COVID-19 Response Fund.

On his campaign site, Peacock emphasizes overseeing budgets carefully, fostering economic development and tackling transit issues.

Peacock calls for transparency between the City Council and the people of Charlotte.





# Letter to the Editor: Why Senate Bill 50 puts our communities' safety at risk

Submitted by: Daelyn Edge, Students Demand Action

North Carolina is the only home I have ever known. I grew up in rural Sampson County, where I remember tractors in the fields and sunrises over my grandfather's barn. To me, this state has always felt peaceful—but the rise in gun violence has changed that.

Since 2020, there have been more than 117 mass shootings in North Carolina, and many of us are fearful for the future. Senate Bill 50, which would let people carry concealed guns without a permit and lower the carrying age from 21 to 18, would only make things worse.

I have spent years working to prevent gun violence: as a representative for Sandy Hook Promise, a volunteer for Students Demand Action and a researcher on the Second Amendment at Duke University. From these experiences, I know the dangers that come when states weaken their gun laws.

Across the country, states that dropped permit requirements between 1999 and 2021 saw, on average, a 27% increase in gun homicides within three years. This is not a coincidence. Last year, lawmakers in North Carolina passed Senate Bill 41, which allowed people to buy a handgun without a permit. In the 12 months since, our state has suffered 27 mass shootings—the highest number in three years.

Supporters of Senate Bill 50 point

to the Second Amendment. But even Supreme Court rulings like *District of Columbia v. Heller* or *McDonald v. Chicago* emphasized that the right to bear arms is not unlimited. More recent cases, like *Bruen*, took a historical approach to the Second Amendment, requiring new laws to match old traditions. But history is not as simple as some lawmakers want it to be.

The Founders never imagined today's gun violence crisis. In fact, many early Americans saw carrying a hidden weapon as dishonorable. Some cities banned guns inside town limits, while others restricted concealed weapons but allowed open carry of larger firearms. History shows us that gun laws were never one-size-fits-all. Cherry-picking examples from the past to justify weaker

laws today is misleading and dangerous.

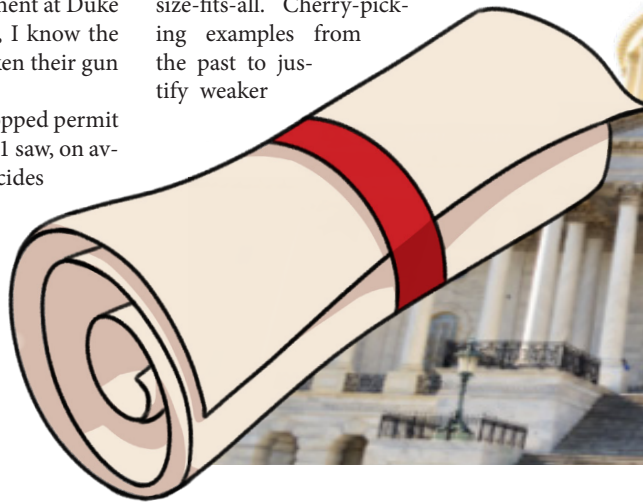
The danger is real. Research shows that people between the ages of 18 and 20 are three times more likely to commit mass shootings than older adults. Senate Bill 50 would give this high-risk group easier access to concealed weap-

ons, putting communities across our state at risk.

I am not against responsible gun ownership. People who go through the proper process and training should be able to carry a gun safely. But Senate Bill 50 removes safeguards that most Americans—88%, in fact—agree should exist.

Allowing concealed carry without a permit would make the public less safe and strip North Carolinians of the freedom to feel secure in daily life.

This is not about politics or partisanship. It is about saving lives: the lives of children who are now more likely to die from a gun than from a car accident; the lives of people caught by stray bullets fired from an untrained teenager's weapon; and the lives of kids in rural North Carolina who deserve the same sense of safety I once felt growing up here.



Megan Khor/Niner Times

## Opinion: UNC Charlotte does not have enough academic advisors

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

UNC Charlotte broke its own enrollment record once again this year. While this is great for the University, it creates more problems for students, including struggling to meet with academic advisors.

Academic advisors provide students with career advice, suggestions on degrees to pursue and guidance on how to achieve them. This information is necessary to ensure students have a happy and successful college experience. Yet with so many students to serve and not enough advisors to serve them, getting this information is next to impossible.

The whole point of college is going to class to study and get a degree. How can students do that when they cannot even meet with their advisors to ensure this? There are additional resources for students, such as lists of course offerings for each

semester, the class requirements available on the websites for each major and the DegreeWorks website, but they can be hard to understand without guidance.

There is also the matter of incoming first-years and first-generation college students. How are they expected to figure out what they need? Many first-year students are still figuring out what to major in. They cannot register for any courses until they have met with an advisor, and some majors require students to continue meeting with an advisor after the first year as well.

First-generation students are even more lost. They are also still trying to figure out how college works, and their families cannot provide them with the guidance advisors are meant to. After all, advisors do not just provide answers about classes, but about general college life.

Even if a student is aware of what classes they need to take, trying to get into the classes they need can feel like trying to win the lottery. If they lose, not only can it harm their current education, but their graduation could be pushed back, costing them time, energy and a lot of money.

Students can try to email their advisor for assistance, but the advisor may be busy trying to meet everyone else's demands. It could be weeks before they hear back, which may be too late.

This discrepancy is not fair to the advisors themselves, either. Their job is to advise students, offer guidance and offer suggestions for their desired path; there are not enough advisors to grant everyone the ability to do this. They can be just as overwhelmed and overworked as the students they are trying to help.

Charlotte is a large campus, but as enrollment

has grown, infrastructure has not. Classes fill up even quicker, campus services struggle to keep up with increasing demand and advisors are forced to take on more students than they can handle. With the increase in tuition money coming in, there is no reason why student resources, including advisors, cannot be increased as well. What is the point of admitting more students if they cannot be properly provided for?

This problem does nothing but harm Charlotte, both in reputation and its student body. A university should be able to provide its students and staff with everything they need to succeed, not leave them scrambling. Everyone at Charlotte deserves to learn what they need and when they need to learn it.



# Column: From enticing entrées to the secret sauce

Crawford Anderson | Staff Writer

On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11, the first crewed lunar landing in history, touched down on the Moon to the applause and elation of the hundreds of thousands who worked to get it there. NASA used the Apollo Guidance Computer on both the Command Module and the Lunar Landing Module. It contained groundbreaking technology for its time, with two kilobytes of RAM and 36 kilobytes of permanent storage.

Today, my Apple Watch has over two million times the computing power used to land on the Moon. Decades of steady compounding turned room-sized computers into something that fits on my wrist. The same principle can also make time work for you.

Last week in “From Dynamic Dinnerware to

Enticing Entrées,” we piled your ceramic plate high with a diverse menu, ranging from new-age stir-fry to old-school lasagna, and discussed the differences between America’s three major stock indexes. This week, we are talking about the seasoning and secret sauce that bring the entire dish together: compounding.

## What is it?

Often called the eighth wonder of the world, compounding is the process of reinvesting earnings, such as interest or company profits, so that they generate their own earnings. It creates a snowball effect where money grows on top of itself and accelerates over time.

Your dollars may not seem like much today, but given years or decades, they grow exponentially. Eventually, the growth from compounding can even outpace what you are contributing to savings, similar to how today’s computers are now advanced enough to begin writing their own code through cutting-edge artificial intelligence systems.

## Real-world applications

Michael Phelps and Kobe Bryant did not become world-class athletes overnight. Through daily training and relentless focus, they grew their skills from local standouts to national champions and ultimately global icons representing their sports.

The same goes for learning. My brother has just started high school, and when he told me about his English class, I held back laughter, not at him, but at the remarkable growth that occurs between ninth grade and college.

A first-year high-schooler may struggle to write a one-page essay, while college third-years wrestle with a 10-page paper (ask me how I know). What feels overwhelming now will one day seem simple, like the shorter assignments that once felt impossible to breeze through.

## The rule of 72

There is a quick way to estimate how long it takes to double your money: the rule of 72. Divide 72 by your annual rate of return.

At the S&P 500’s historical 10% average, your money doubles roughly every seven

years. At the Nasdaq’s higher historical growth rate of about 13%, it doubles in just over five years.

Investing \$100 in the S&P 500 might feel slow at first. For the first two decades, it crawls. But by the later years, each year’s growth equals nearly 10 times your original investment—even if you never add another cent.

## The power of time

As a college student or young professional, money is scarce, but time is abundant. If you wait until 40 to start investing, you might have more income, but with only 20 years to grow, each dollar compounds into just under \$7 by age 60. Start at age 30, and you will reach about \$17 per \$1 invested. Start at age 20, and you will have roughly \$45 for every dollar socked away.

Combine the consistency of the 25-500 Plan, the tax efficiency of a Roth IRA and the long-term averages of the S&P 500, and the secret sauce of investing becomes clear. Starting early makes you a millionaire of time. It turns a handful of dollars into the millions you will need—and want—as your most valuable asset, time, inevitably slips away.

## Feeling sluggish?

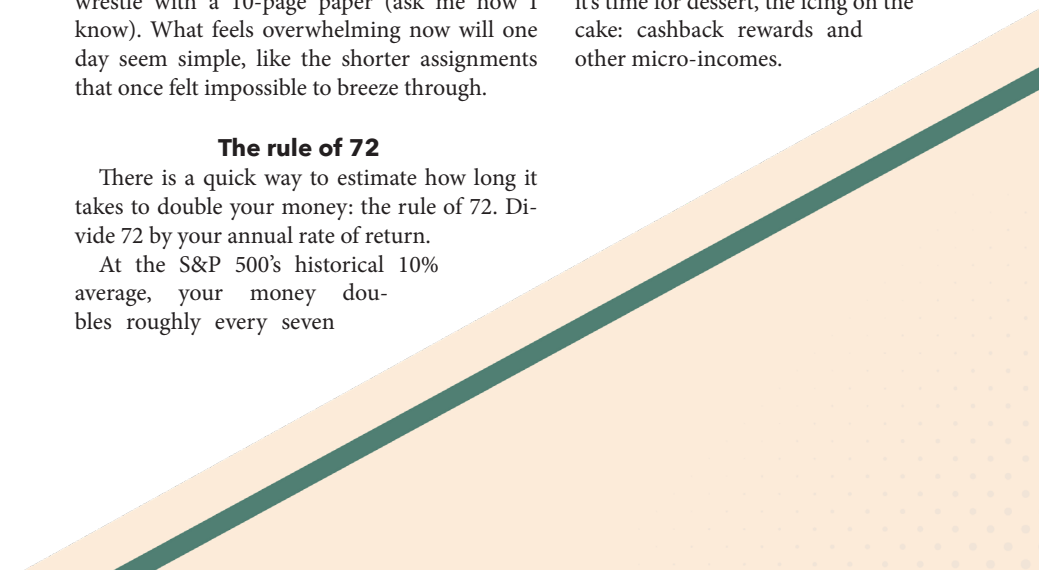
The first five to 10 years will feel painfully slow. Your \$100 might become \$110, then \$221, and you will wonder if it’s even working. But those years are the foundation. Compounding means that the most significant gains typically occur in the final stretch.

It’s a slow-cooked sauce. It may look the same for hours, but eventually it thickens into the flavor that brings the entire meal together.

You have let the sauce simmer. Now it’s time for dessert, the icing on the cake: cashback rewards and other micro-incomes.



Megan Khor/Niner Times & courtesy of Crawford Anderson





# Opinion: Enrolling more students is not a flex; it's a cash grab

Ava Harris | Asst. Opinion Editor



In the past few years, UNC Charlotte has annually posted on its social media, put up banners, boasted at family weekend and sent out countless promotional emails about its exponential student population growth. With a historic record of 31,091 students enrolled in 2024 and a new record of 32,207 enrolled in 2025, Niner Nation just keeps expanding. The posts, banners, presentations and emails all paint a stunning picture, but to returning Niners, it may rightfully seem like an utter nightmare.

This 1,116 student increase was inevitably accompanied by a \$28,221,408 to \$46,338,552 increase in tuition revenue for the University, give or take a few million dollars. Now the bragging makes a whole lot more sense; I would be pretty stoked if I started getting another \$30 million every year, too. But, of course, for a university the size of Charlotte, that extra cash only accounts for a partial increase in revenue.

The University's annual financial report stated student tuition and fees demonstrated a net increase of \$16.3 million in fiscal year 2024, when the University experienced a 603-student rise from 2021. This, and a score of other sources, contributed to the \$101 million Charlotte saw in income after operating expenses that year.

With these numbers in mind, the estimated \$30 million increase in tuition revenue will likely contribute around \$131 million in revenue for fiscal year 2025, which ends in June 2026. But as millions of college students around the country asked their administrations in the spring of 2024: where does all the money go?

Charlotte reportedly spent about 61%, or \$486,151,238, of its \$900 million total revenue in FY24 on employee salaries and benefits. This includes everyone from the Niner Times staff to the big cheese on the Board of Trustees.

Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber, the highest-paid employee of UNC Charlotte, makes a cool \$556,959 a year as of 2023. She, alone, could pay for 14 in-state students' tuition and fees every year or eight out-of-state students' and still have an annual income of over \$200,000, before the 20% bonus a UNC-System chancellor is eligible for every year. Part of the chancellor's benefits is the coveted chancellors' residence, Bissell House, complete with 7,500 square feet of 12 rooms and six bathrooms.

Former football coach and second-highest paid Charlotte employee, Biff Poggi, similarly made about half a million dollars in 2023 to

lead our ever-so-virtuous football team to their many, many losses that continue now even without Biff's sage wisdom.

Runner-up for FY24's highest expense was "supplies and services," at 25.6%. While the exact definition of this category is never specified, examples include "meal plans and bookstore materials, and(...)repairs and maintenance across campus."

Assuming "repairs and maintenance" includes, say, renovations, this category may cover the recently announced expansion of Jerry Richardson Stadium in FY25. The \$70 million revamp will comprise luxury suites, loge boxes, ledge seating and an indoor private club complete with a terrace, allowing 20% more people to watch our team lose. A training room for the players and a new press box to report those losses will also join the fray.

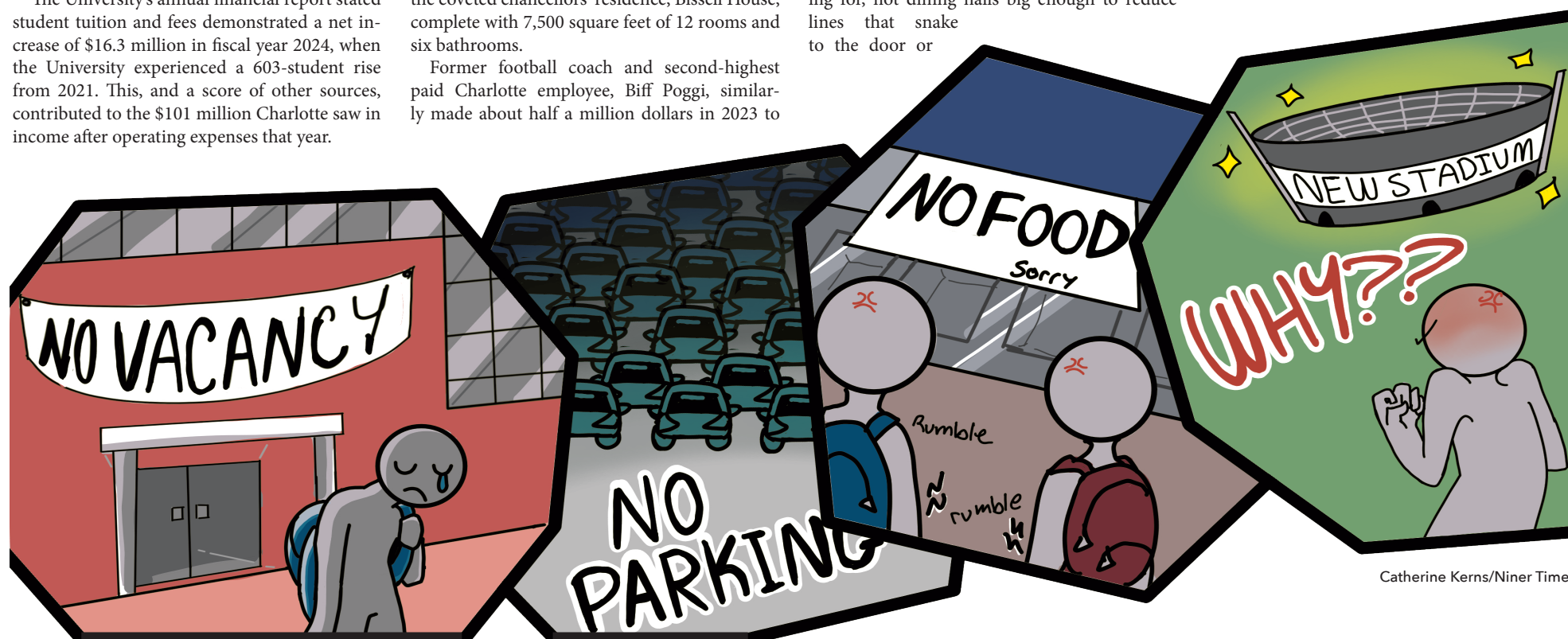
Because that is exactly what Niners are yearning for, not dining halls big enough to reduce lines that snake to the door or

another women's bathroom in Burson Hall, but more space to watch our team lose by 40 yet again.

The second-lowest expense, on the other hand, was "scholarships and fellowships" at 5.6%.

With classes that fill up if you blink, endless parking complaints, students involuntarily pushed off campus without space to house them on, food poisoning in the dining halls, advising appointments that take weeks to get and countless students without any semblance of financial aid or scholarships, booming enrollment is not an impressive feat; it is an irresponsible one.

Do not brag about bringing more people to an institution that cannot support them properly. Care for the people you already have and invest in them before planning one more admissions event to recruit another \$30 million.



Catherine Kerns/Niner Times



# Javen Nicholas carries over ‘Wide Receiver U’ standard to Charlotte

Evan Campos | Asst. Sports Editor

Redshirt junior receiver Javen Nicholas didn't arrive at Charlotte looking to find his footing—he brought it with him.

After three years at Louisiana State University (LSU), where he had daily exposure to some of the Southeastern Conference's (SEC) most elite receivers, including Malik Nabers, Brian Thomas Jr., Kyren Lacy and CJ Daniels, Nicholas comes from a program widely regarded as “Wide Receiver U” for its recent run of NFL-bound talent.

He's used the habits, reps and acumen from those years to shape a career season for himself at Charlotte while emerging as one of the pivotal voices in one of the youngest receiver rooms in the American Conference.

## Finding his route

A New Orleans native, Nicholas made his name at St. Augustine High School before committing to LSU. His football path didn't start with finding soft spots in zones.

“I moved to receiver sophomore year of high school,” Nicholas said. “I played running back, but I couldn't really gain weight. So when I moved to receiver, I would run routes full speed, and everything would just come fast.”

Older teammates helped him learn the position.

“They showed me how to run routes at the right pace, how to track the ball and slow the game down,” he said.

At LSU, Nicholas continued that education in one of college football's deepest receiver rooms, surrounded by future professionals who helped him refine every detail of his game.

Nicholas redshirted in 2022 after appearing in four games for the Tigers before taking on a larger role in 2023. He played in 10 games that season as a backup wide receiver and contributor on special teams.

In 2024, he appeared in 12 games, recording three receptions for 26 yards, including a career-best two catches for 16 yards in a win over the University of South Alabama.

Nicholas spent his LSU years observing, learning and visualizing what it took to succeed.

## Following familiar faces

After earning his degree in economics, Nicholas entered the transfer portal and quickly heard from Charlotte.

With Wide Receivers and Passing Game Coordinator Paul Turner and Offensive Coordinator Todd Fitch moving to coach at Charlotte, Nicholas said his decision to join them was a “no-brainer.”

“Coach Turner knew my game, he knew what I could do and he knew what I needed to work on,” Nicholas said.

For Nicholas, joining two coaches already familiar with his skill set made the transition seamless.

“Being under someone I was already comfortable with allowed me to play at full speed,” he said. “If I needed to work on something or have a hard conversation, I knew he'd be the one comfortable having it.”

Nicholas said Turner's philosophy keeps receivers never guessing what they're getting.

“He's the same person 365 days a year,” Nicholas said. “He's a realist and very hard on you. Even if you do something good, he'll kind of be like, ‘All right, not bad,’ but he gives credit when credit is due. We just try to match his energy every day, at practice and during games.”

## Guiding the group

Now Charlotte's leading receiver heading into Week 10 of the FBS season, Nicholas has emerged as one of the most vocal leaders in the 49ers' receiver room. He uses what he learned from his high school and college stops to help younger teammates still finding their way at this level.

“I just try to tell them things I went through and things I've seen that work,” Nicholas said. “I was around great receivers at LSU, and now I try to give that game to our younger guys. Sometimes I even ask them questions, like, ‘What were you thinking on that route?’ It's just communicating. That's what the game is about.”

It's not just Nicholas doing the heavy lifting. Graduate wide receivers Sean Brown and E. Jai Mason, along with sophomore Miles Burris, also help lead the group. Together, they've built a standard rooted in both accountability and versatility.

“As a receiver group, I feel like we're really close,” Nicholas said. “We all complement each other because we're different types of receivers. I'm more of a speedy guy, Sean's the deep threat who can really get any jump ball, E. Jai is the veteran guy, and Miles is the younger guy with a lot of talent.”

That variety keeps defenses guessing.

“They can't just focus on one guy, because at any point, any of us can make a play,” he said.

Nicholas has delivered some of his best work in Charlotte's biggest games.

Against the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he caught 11 passes for 122 yards, giving redshirt junior quarterback Conner Harrell a reliable target throughout the night.

In Charlotte's ESPN-televised matchup with Rice University, Nicholas hauled in five receptions for 93 yards and a touchdown.

His performance against the University of North Texas was his most dynamic yet, finish-

ing with seven receptions for 187 yards and two touchdowns while being nearly unguardable in the first half, forcing the Mean Green to start bracketing him in coverage.

## Navigating a new state

This season marks Nicholas' first time living outside Louisiana. Having grown up just an hour from Baton Rouge, La., Charlotte has felt like a new world in some ways.

“It has its pros and cons,” Nicholas said. “I miss home. This is the most I've been away from my family. At LSU, they came to every single game, and if they had a bye week, I could go home. The flights out of Charlotte are pretty pricey, but they still come to every game they can.”

The relationships Nicholas has built with Fitch, Turner and the receiver room have made being homesick easier to manage. Their support and familiarity have helped him settle in while staying focused on football.

That comfort extends to his relationship with Albin, whose steady, player-first approach reminds Nicholas of LSU Head Coach Brian Kelly.

“They're similar because their process doesn't change—win, lose or draw,” Nicholas said. “They both take care of our bodies and get us ready for game day. I just have a closer relationship with Albin. It's more personal.”

## True to himself

Nicholas has always aimed to carve his own path. He's a free thinker, unafraid to stand out and confident in who he is.

“I grew up an Odell [Beckham Jr.] fan,” Nicholas said. “I liked how he played the game with swagger and fun. I just take little bits and pieces from different guys and try them in practice. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but I'm always learning.”

Nowadays, Nicholas studies some of his favorite receivers in the NFL, including Cincinnati Bengals star Ja'Marr Chase and Minnesota Vikings star Justin Jefferson. Both LSU products are known for blending world-class route running with personality.

That carries beyond football. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nicholas and his brother launched Exotic Apparels, a clothing brand built around originality and expression.

“I don't like following trends. I just wanted to wear my own stuff,” Nicholas said.

For Nicholas, authenticity comes naturally. Whether it's football or fashion, he's unbothered by whether people get it or not. And it seems to be working for him.



Courtesy of Death Valley Voice



# New NCAA cap won't shrink Charlotte's track roster just yet

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Despite new NCAA track and field roster limits that cap teams at 45 athletes per gender, UNC Charlotte will continue to field upwards of 100 track athletes—for now.

The new roster limits stem from the landmark House v. NCAA settlement, which ruled that universities must pay any Division I athletes who have played since 2016. The settlement introduced revenue sharing among athletes and universities and added roster limits.

The settlement included a clause allowing athletes to be designated as Designated Student Athletes (DSAs). This status exempts athletes who were on rosters in the 2024-2025 season and recruits who were promised a spot on rosters in the 2025-2026 season from counting against a school's new roster limit for their sport and from potentially losing their roster spot.

Without the DSA status, Charlotte would have needed to cut roughly 15 athletes from both the men's and women's track teams, as they'll field 119 in the upcoming season.

As DSA athletes graduate, Charlotte's roster will gradually shrink to 90. Still, for the upcoming season, it's a fortunate break for a track and field program accustomed to success with larger rosters.

## Winning with depth

Charlotte's 2025 outdoor track and field season marked the eighth straight season in which one of either the men's or women's

teams won a conference championship. Since 2015, the program has taken home 16 conference championships across both men's and women's teams and indoor and outdoor programs. In that span, the program has fielded an average of 120 athletes per year.

The women's team has not ended an academic year without an indoor or outdoor conference championship since 2021. This season, they will field 60 athletes; last season, they fielded 55.

Depth on both teams has allowed Charlotte to build competitive groups in each event that score at conference championships. At the 2025 outdoor conference championships, Charlotte's women's team scored in 11 events, including the heptathlon, shot put and 5,000-meter race.

## Change in roster construction

For Bob Olesen, Charlotte's head track and field coach, slimming down the roster would mean a change in roster-building philosophy away from his current balanced approach.

"In our conference, if South Florida is focusing on sprints and hurdles, and Tulsa and Tulane are focusing on distance, we might be really well balanced, but not good enough to score enough points to win a championship," Olesen said.

As for what that exact philosophy change may be, Olesen says the coaching staff will, "cross that bridge when we come to it." If Olesen's track record as head coach is any indication of how the philosophy might shape the team, Charlotte should be just fine.

Since his hiring in 1998,

Olesen has guided his 49ers to over 40 conference championships and has adapted to change already after switching conferences in 2013 and then again in 2023.

In the American Conference, where all of Charlotte's 19 Division I teams compete, the median track and field roster size among programs that field both men's and women's teams is 88. In the 2025-2026 season, Charlotte has the fourth-largest team.

The conference's larger rosters are an outlier in the college landscape. Last year's women's track and field national champions, the University of Georgia, had just 36 athletes on their roster.

## Recruiting adjustments

In catching up with the Georgias of the world and getting ahead of the roster limits, Olesen said his staff has already changed how they recruit and adjusted last offseason before the lawsuit had settled.

"We definitely had to kind of hedge our bets with recruiting a little bit," Olesen said. "We wanted to identify and focus on the high-value prospects, that even if we were in a restricted situation, we would still want in our program."

"It definitely cooled some of our conversations with some athletes that might be considered a little bit more developmental."

Losing the ability to add athletes who are more developmental may come at a cost to Charlotte's program. Having mixed recruiting classes in the past has allowed Charlotte to grab athletes like senior sprinter Joyasia Smith,

who competed in a smaller high school division and did not have top times, but has competed in Olympic trials as a 49er.

Although the limits cause for a change he'd rather not make, Olesen is at peace with his soon-to-be shrinking roster.

"It's above my pay grade. I mean, it is what it is," Olesen said. "I understand the dynamic of it, and it's just one more hurdle to clear."

## The season ahead

With his focus on what's immediate, Olesen says Charlotte's women's team will again be one to watch. They'll compete for what he calls the "triple crown": a chance to win cross-country, indoor and outdoor track and field championships. Charlotte's men's team earned a triple crown of its own in 2022 when its roster was 67 deep.

As the weather gets colder, indoor track season is just a month away, with Charlotte's first meet taking place on Dec. 5 at the Liberty Kickoff.



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics



# Kennedy Ruff shines in the Sunday spotlight

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

**M**onday through Friday, she's probably seen with a pencil or a pen in hand—jotting notes, doing schoolwork and finishing her degree at UNC Charlotte.

On Saturdays, she might recharge or focus on her sorority, Alpha Delta Pi (ADPi).

But when Sunday arrives, se-

At R.S. Central High School, Ruff was part of both the cheerleading squad and the Distinguished Young Women Program, which helped build her confidence and stage presence.

When her studio closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ruff transitioned to Dance Productions - The Remix, in Harrisburg, N.C.

"I trained there and I learned a lot," Ruff said. "I improved a lot. I honestly feel like I wouldn't have gone the route that I did if I didn't go there because I got to learn from a lot of different cool choreographers and just learn to pick up choreography."

By the time graduation rolled around in 2022, Ruff faced a decision: pursue collegiate dance or take a leap into the professional world. Staying in Charlotte felt right, so she committed to UNC Charlotte—but first, she decided to chase a lifelong dream.

## Buzz City beginnings

After talking with members of the Charlotte Hornets' dance team, the HoneyBees, Ruff attended their prep clinic at 18 years old.

"I knew some girls who were on the team that I talked to and I got advice from them and they loved their time there, so I was like, 'Let me just go to this clinic and see if I like it,'" Ruff recalled. "I went to it and it was everything that I could want and more."

Although she was one of the youngest at tryouts, Ruff made the team. Soon after she began at UNC Charlotte, balancing classes by day and performing at the Spectrum Center by night.

Everything moved quickly and felt like it was falling into place. Buzz City seemed more like home.

## A mother's strength

Around the same time her dance career began, her mother, Carla, was battling breast cancer—a fight she'd faced twice before.

"It was kind of hard because I didn't really know—I was trying to figure out if this [dance] was gonna work out for me," Ruff admitted. "But she was very supportive the whole time and was like, 'Just go for it. Keep going.'"

One month after Ruff made the HoneyBees, Carla passed away. Her mother's strength and encouragement became the heartbeat behind every routine Ruff performed.

Starting her first year of college, Ruff found her footing again. Rushing ADPi, cheering at Hornets' games and learning to balance everything life threw at her, all while carrying her mother's spirit.

## League to league

Ruff spent nearly three years with the HoneyBees, but when her coach decided to take another direction, she felt compelled to do the same.

"I felt very fulfilled, but it was hard leaving what I was used to," Ruff said.

In April 2025, she earned a coveted spot with the TopCats, the official cheerleaders of the Carolina Panthers. The transition from NBA to NFL was easier due to her prior tryout experience, yet it brought a new level of excitement and community engagement.

"It's been super awesome," she said. "I feel like it's very different than [the] NBA obviously, but it's everything I could want and more. All the girls are very supportive and it's been a really good experience."

Tryouts for the TopCats were different from the Hornets, and instead of trying out with a freestyle dance of her own, Ruff followed a jazz and a hip-hop routine.

After that, she performed it with groups of around four or five other girls, and two weeks later, the professional interviews and floor routine were conducted.

Ruff was one of the 25 dancers selected to the roster ahead of the 2025 season.

Her most meaningful moment with the TopCats came on Oct. 12, during the Panthers' 2025 Crucial Catch game. The event supports the NFL's partnership with the American Cancer Society to raise awareness for early cancer detection and prevention.

"It was super awesome," Ruff said. "I got to do a halftime performance, which was really cool with Loren Allred, [and] she was 'The Greatest Showman' singer [who sang 'Never Enough' and] she sang 'This is Me.' That was super, super fun. That was really special, and we got to walk out with some people that were survivors during the performance, too. That was really full circle."

## A new routine in the making

In the spring of 2026 Ruff is set to graduate from Charlotte with a Bachelor of Science in Public Health and double minors in Communication Studies and Dance.

For her, walking across the stage will bring a sense of relief and accomplishment—a moment to breathe after years of balancing academics, sorority life and professional dancing.

With her degree in hand, Ruff hopes to explore opportunities in medical device sales or teaching dance, two passions that reflect her skills and spirit.

"The connections I've made in ADPi have helped me a lot with jobs and what I wanna do," Ruff said. "I've reached out to them about internships, so it also has been really good with being able to reach out to people like a resource."

For now, Ruff is staying true to herself and soaking in her Sundays. As she takes each day one step at a time, she's embracing new beginnings—and cherishing the big dreams she's already brought to life at such a young age.



Courtesy of Kennedy Ruff