

NINERTIMES

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"PLEASE PROTECT US:"

131 STUDENTS
SHARE THEIR
THOUGHTS ON THE
SAFETY OF
CHARLOTTE'S
LIGHT RAIL



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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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Campbell Marchant/Niner Times

Events to watch for on and off campus

Jazz Ensemble and Jazz Combo

Oct. 2, 7:30 P.M.

Anne R. Belk Theater

Group Bike Ride

Oct 4, 11 A.M.-1 P.M.

Hauser Alumni Pavilion

Women's Soccer vs Rice

Oct. 9, 7-9 P.M.

Charlotte Soccer Field

Fall Recess - No Classes

Oct. 9-10

Hola Charlotte Festival

Uptown Charlotte Tryon St

Brooklyn Village Ave - 4th St

Oct 4, 12-6 P.M.

Women's Volleyball vs Florida

Atlantic

Oct. 10, 6 P.M.

Halton Arena

From the Charlotte police logs (9/19 - 9/25)

Mareska Chettiar | Asst. Copy

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Sept. 19 to 25, 2025.

Sept. 19 Welfare Check

Housing Security called police after noticing a resident with a swollen eye. The student first refused but later requested a medic, who evaluated him. He declined transport.

Sept. 22 Investigate

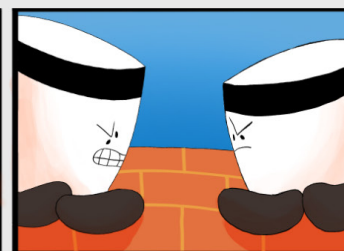
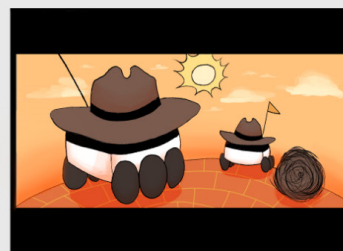
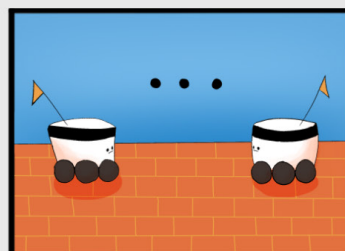
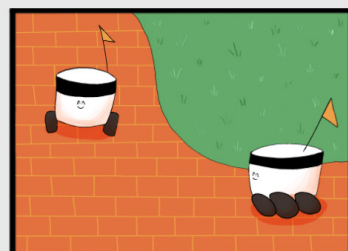
Dispatch got a call about a male screaming near Hunt Hall's entrance, possibly an altercation. Officers canvassed the area but found no one in distress or needing assistance.

Sept. 22 Investigate

Officers received a Flock alert about a vehicle tied to prior break-ins. Stopped near Colvard North, the driver had an active trespass order, was arrested, and the vehicle had fictitious plate and was towed.

Niner's Comics: Starship standoff

Charlie Pearsall | Staff Illustrator





Opinion: You are not alone in being lonely

Lindsay Hawkins | Contributor

Can you feel the excitement in the air? It is the first few weeks of college, and you are ready to make lifelong friends, find your soulmate and live happily ever after. But as you look around, you realize that many other people have already established groups. Groups that you are not a part of. While this may feel isolating, it is important to know that student loneliness is all too common.

The anticipation of getting to be independent and meet new people often makes us forget that we are on our own. The first few weeks are especially challenging. When scrolling through UNC Charlotte's Reddit page or even YikYak, it is not difficult to find threads about struggling to find friends and feeling as though you have missed your chance to make a connection.

A 2024 study showed that 64% of college students felt lonely. Not only this, but they reported feeling nervous, restless, hopeless and more. If most students feel lonely, why does it seem like it is only happening to you? Just know, this is not an isolated experience.

One thing that the University has done to attempt to create a more social place is the requirement that first-year students must live on campus, which started this semester. The goals outlined include connecting with the communi-

ty, easy access to the campus and better chances for academic success, among other things. But what do the first-year students who live on campus and the first-years who commute gather from these aspirations?

Vindhya Tirumalasetti, a first-year student at Charlotte, stated that living on campus is beneficial to her academics and social life. Tirumalasetti chose to live on campus despite not being required to and finds that she can focus better on her studies. Not only this, but she also finds the accessibility to other people as neighbors makes socializing easier.

"Small conversations lead to everyday conversations, and eventually you have become the best of friends," Tirumalasetti said.

She has been able to participate in clubs and campus activities, taking advantage of her proximity to events.

"They are at a walkable distance. I can go back to my dorm and take a quick nap, so it prevents me from making an excuse to not go," Tirumalasetti stated.

The one complaint she had was about the lack of transport off campus. Tirumalasetti recognized that the University does offer public transportation; however, she worries about safety and navigation.

"I am not used to public transportation, and I am afraid that I will get lost if I do use it. Also, I would not like to go by myself, due to safety concerns," Tirumalasetti noted.

However, among commuters, the experience varies. It depends on the amount of time spent on campus. Some commuters stay on campus for an entire day, while others only attend their classes and then return home. Mokshitha Bandi, a first-year and commuter at Charlotte, discussed struggling to schedule time with friends.

"By the time they're done with their classes, I usually go home," Bandi said.

She also finds difficulty in attending club meetings because they are mostly held in the evening.

"It is more challenging to be more social and involved on campus when you have to commute over half an hour," Bandi said.

Similarly, Jiya Jain, a first-year commuter, stated, "I cannot be as involved as people who live on campus, but I can still do the important stuff." This reflects a dilemma that students face: whether or not to live on campus.

One Charlotte Redditor worried that they would feel disconnected and miss out on social events if they chose to commute.

"I know staying home would be a lot more cheaper, but I feel like I would miss out on so

much happening on campus and would be disconnected from events taking place," read the post. "Should I save my money and stay home or stay on campus?"

This was met with responses that seemed split in opinion. Some commenters advised saving money and commuting, while others discussed the joys of living on campus.

"Living on campus was amazing for me (2020 grad.) The random late-night walks around campus with my friends were so fun, (...) My roommates were my best friends and we got so close because we lived together, (...) For me it was entirely worth it," another user commented.

The first-year on-campus living requirement is a great stepping stone to increasing the connections on campus between students, and it does seem to have accomplished most of the originally intended goals. A big factor in tackling loneliness and improving socialization appears to center on scheduling, ranging from clubs to simply hanging out. The success of the first-year on-campus living requirement is yet to be determined; however, it appears that it's on track to help students build connections and minimize student loneliness.

Opinion: Debate is overrated

Hobart Jones | Contributor

From Socrates roaming the streets of Athens to John Stuart Mill's "Marketplace of Ideas," debate has long been held as the battleground where truth will prevail. Get people who believe in differing ideas, sit them down, have them go at it and the correct one will survive. In the United States today, however, the proliferation of more debate has not borne the promised fruit of a better-informed political society.

Debate has evolved over the years from something between educated professionals into more of a spectacle. There was a time when the intellectual leader of the right and a Civil Rights Movement icon could sit down and make their case to America. The Baldwin-Buckley debate in Cambridge is the gold standard of debate, in which highly educated scholars had it out and people actually engaged with their arguments. James Baldwin was widely seen as the victor of the debate, and in the months following the debate, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was eventually passed.

Now, the internet has allowed people to argue more than ever. As it follows, debate on the internet has also exploded throughout the world. The origins of the modern debate scene on the internet have their roots in right-wing YouTube compilations.

In the mid-2010s, there was a popular genre of YouTube video where a fast-talking guy would spew statistics and facts. Their opponents were usually college students who were not as well-trained and would get 'owned.' These videos were normally one of the last stops on the alt-right pipeline. Through the first Trump administration, this genre produced right-wing figures like Ben Shapiro, Charlie Kirk and others.

If there were one social media platform that could be labeled Gen-Z, it would be TikTok. During the 2020 election and in the subsequent year, a niche community dubbed 'Political TikTok' emerged. Accounts like Conservative Hype House, which at the time had 1.5 million followers, would battle with creators on the left via TikTok's Stitch and Duet features.

These videos resembled the 2010s YouTube style of debate rather than a Buckley-Baldwin debate. This was to be expected, as a majority of participants on Political TikTok were teens or young adults. However, those 2020 battles would set the culture for years to come.

In today's age, debate is strewn throughout every platform possible. The only problem is that now a majority of it is purely for entertainment purposes. No one goes to watch a debate video anymore to actually see two qualified people discuss their beliefs. For example, there is an almost five-hour debate hosted by the podcaster Lex Fridman featuring two historians, an analyst and a Twitch streamer. It goes as well as expected,

historian Norman Finkelstein mocking the streamer Destiny for its duration.

The question to ask is: what is the point of all this? If you were aligned with Finkelstein beforehand, you came away thinking Destiny was an unqualified streamer. If you were more aligned with Destiny, you came away thinking Finkelstein was a bully. The video has around 3.8 million views, but clips of the debate went viral on various platforms.

One of the newest innovations of this style of debate comes from the YouTube channel Jubilee. Jubilee debuted a new format called "Surrounded," where one person sat surrounded by 20-25 people with opposing viewpoints. Their first participant was a familiar face, Turning Point USA founder Kirk, surrounded by 25 liberal college students. The video was a smash hit with 31 million views, while TikTok clips of the video reached as high as 60 million views. The video would launch the careers of some of its students, most notably Dean Withers.

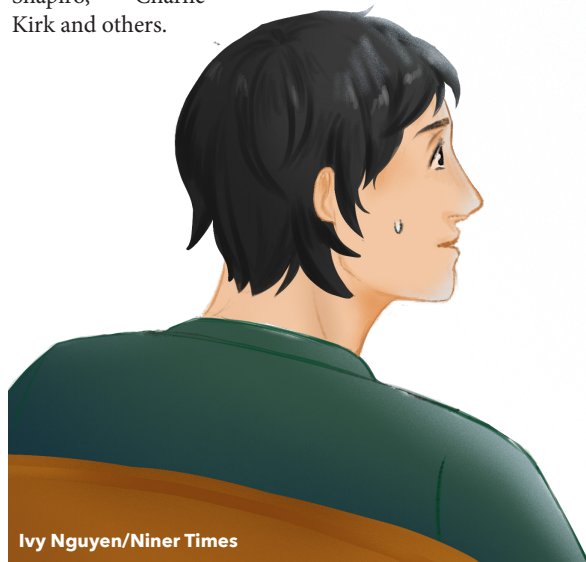
Withers, who is left-leaning, would go on to have his own Jubilee "Surrounded," which did fairly well. The question arises again: what is the point? No one is persuaded by watching a skilled debater face a bunch of novices on their side.

Worse than having zero impact, this new debate industry platforms dangerous ideologies. In a Jubilee video, Mehdi Hasan was placed against 20 seemingly normal conservatives. It became quickly apparent that this is not the case, as one of his opponents, under very little pressure, proclaims himself as a fascist and quotes the fascist philosopher Carl Schmitt.

Eventually, Hasan disengages and states, "I do not debate with fascists." Even after this limited exchange, that user would go on to grow his platform on the internet, attracting like-minded fascists to his banner.

Debate is not an unequivocal good force in society. More of it does not necessarily improve our political climate. The current debate sphere only encourages 'ragebaiting' to grow one's platform. The entire ecosystem is in need of a serious re-evaluation.

Debate needs to be untangled from entertainment—fewer duels between YouTubers and streamers and more actual debate from qualified participants. The ideals of debate may not be present currently, but it is worth striving for.



Ivy Nguyen/Niner Times



Courtesy of Craig Morrow

‘Home didn’t look like home used to’: UNC Charlotte students from Western North Carolina still rebuilding

Hayden Herr | Contributor

As the one-year mark of Hurricane Helene approaches on Sept. 27, students from Western North Carolina (WNC) say they are still grappling with losses.

Hurricane Helene had a local impact on many communities just 100 miles away from Charlotte. Students from WNC faced devastating effects at home while attending school.

Fifth-year student Craig Morrow is from Waynesville, N.C., a town devastated by the storm. Although Morrow was living in Charlotte during the Category 4 storm, his family and hometown were directly affected. He felt the impact alongside his community.

As an engineering student specializing in stormwater management, Morrow took this opportunity to contribute to the recovery of his hometown.

“So many things are happening [and] it’s so easy to get lost in the multitude of stories. Just because the hurricane happened in [September] doesn’t mean that people aren’t still affected by it the following year,” said Morrow. “The fight’s not over. There’s still people up there that still don’t have homes, still living in tents that need places rebuilt and they can’t afford it themselves, they need trustworthy foundations and organizations that they can trust in to provide the funds they need to rebuild.”

UNC Charlotte students from the region continue to face the structural, agricultural and emotional impacts of Hurricane Helene one year later. While the media coverage has decreased, the path to recovery is still ongoing.

Fourth-year student and Wilkes County resident Nathan Hall participated in a UNC Charlotte engineering course aiming to rebuild decimated bridges. This course was launched within a month of the hurricane and is ongoing in the fall of 2025.

The semester-long engineering course, run by Dr. Shen-En Chen independently of official University relief initiatives, works with 15 to 16 students to design and rebuild bridges lost to the hurricane. Using their engineering knowledge and proximity to the devastation, these students work with Lansing’s Bridge to Recovery—a non-profit founded by UNC Charlotte engineering alumna Emily Davis—to support private bridges in the Ashe County area that have been decimated. The organization has built a total of 90 bridges since the hurricane struck.

“[We need] the volunteer of individuals to come and just help rebuild, because I feel like food and shelter is taken care of temporarily but I think more of just volunteers to come and help build back a house or a bridge because for the most part we’re still forgetting about people in the backwoods and everything that ain’t really getting focused on,” Hall said.

Volunteer opportunities suggested by Hall include Samaritan’s Purse, a non-denominational Christian organization that provides disaster relief and emergency aid to victims of floods, tornadoes and hurricanes, as well as Lansing’s Bridge to Recovery.

Relief efforts at UNC Charlotte

On Oct. 1, 2024, Charlotte launched the Niners Care: Hurricane Relief Fund to crowdfund support for fellow UNC System schools immediately affected by Hurricane Helene, but it offered few resources to students.

“The efforts the school made to help students that were impacted by [Helene], I didn’t really hear of,” Morrow recalled. “They’ve been super adamant about the CAPS program, if [students] need therapy or need to talk to someone about it. You can go talk to them, but I don’t ever remember hearing a lot about it in Charlotte.”

Hall expressed that he wished the University had contributed more financial aid and recovery support efforts. UNC Charlotte provided the Niners Care: Hurricane Relief Fund, which former football Head Coach Biff Poggi pledged to match donations up to \$50,000.

While UNC Charlotte’s relief efforts were limited, other campuses took more active measures.

Schools such as UNC Wilmington offered immediate campus resource alerts to students, including information on counseling and basic needs.

Wilmington also opened its university recreation facilities to displaced students from Appalachian State, UNC Asheville and Western Carolina University, and launched 16 resources for affected students, as well as 17 volunteer and donation opportunities for unaffected students.

“I [wish I] would have [seen more contributions from the University] because, like I said, it’s really close to home [for some] and college kind of teaches you to better the world. Well, what’s more important than helping people in your home state?” Hall said.

Many students from outside WNC have volunteered and contributed to Hurricane Helene relief. Hall commended his peers and the bridge engineering team, Will Floyd, Michael Miles and Canyon Naisang, for their continued support and efforts within the stressful environment of fast-paced bridge building, which aids people who cannot access roads.

Lingering struggles and fading awareness

UNC Charlotte students from Western North Carolina shared that while the community in hurricane-struck towns is strong, Charlotte residents seem to have forgotten the disaster.

“Professors would check in on you, friends

and classmates, you know? Not anymore. It’s only brought up in the cases where we’re talking about the work we’re doing,” Morrow said.

Students also remark that while the media coverage for larger cities affected by Hurricane Helene has declined, smaller towns such as Avery County, Fairview, Madison County and Swannanoa didn’t have much to begin with. Many believe the devastation to be unknown to people who haven’t visited the areas.

The lack of media coverage has created a knowledge gap between WNC residents and the rest of North Carolina, hindering potential relief efforts, community connections and fostering a sense of isolation among many Western North Carolina residents.

Morrow encourages students to be aware of what their peers may have experienced during Hurricane Helene.

“Be mindful of the students,” Morrow said. “When it first happened, I had a lot of students in my classes that were making jokes about it and stuff, and it’s like, you don’t know what these students have been through, you don’t know about all they lost. I was lucky enough not to lose a lot, but I know people who lost everything. I know people who lost family members.”

Despite a year of recovery, efforts to restore WNC continue. Meanwhile, students who were affected urge others to spread awareness and support for this ongoing issue.

“Don’t be discouraged,” Hall said. “I know home don’t look like home [used to], but it will look like home, eventually.”

Booths at Charlotte International Festival share culture, deprioritize profit

Sofia DiStefano & Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | News Editor & Staff Writer

The annual International Festival transformed UNC Charlotte's campus into a global celebration once again on Saturday, Sept. 27, drawing nearly 20,000 people and showcasing dozens of performances, cuisines and traditions.

Recognized as the University's largest cultural event, the festival featured pathways filled with music, the scent of international cuisines wafting through the air and the vibrant colors of traditional attire and goods.

Performances from young and old performers were cheered on inside Halton Arena, while outside, dozens of booths showcased their culture and educated those who took a moment to listen to their stories.

And while some weren't necessarily selling any-

thing, the representatives were more than happy to be a part of the festival and represent their homeland.

Via Gomez, a mother of a UNC Charlotte student, stood proudly at the Venezuela booth, representing her home country, Venezuela, with food, music and tradition. Gomez explained how her table was designed to capture the heart of Venezuela, from the mountains to the rainforest, and the music and literature that shape her country's identity.

"Venezuela tiene la gente más bella, las tradiciones más ricas y el espíritu más cálido," Gomez said. "Es un honor compartir mi país aquí."

["Venezuela has the most beautiful people, the richest traditions and the warmest spirit," Gomez said. "It's an honor to share my country here."]

Many local businesses were in attendance, and each echoed the message that their primary goal was to promote cultural awareness and strengthen their community ties within Charlotte's diverse city, rather than pursue economic gain.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Serving food, strengthening community

During the peak of the festival, attendees patiently waited in the growing line at the Bosnia representative booth.



The booth was run by Berina Rucic, a graduate student who represented the Bosnian Student Organization at Charlotte. The group, which has participated in the international student festival for nearly 20 years, partners with a local Bosnian restaurant, Euro Grill and Café, on Central Avenue.

This year, Euro Grill and Café was serving two traditional dishes for the thousands of attendees to enjoy. The first dish was ćevapi, which Rucic described as grilled beef sausages served inside fresh bread with onions and a special Bosnian sour cream, and baklava, a walnut-filled dessert.

While a lot of time and effort goes into preparing, serving and getting these dishes ready for those interested in indulging in the Bosnian culture, Euro Grill and Café does not keep a cent of the profits.

The restaurant donates all its proceeds from sales at the festival to the Bosnian American Cultural Center, a nonprofit organization in Charlotte that helps younger generations of Bosnians stay connected to their cultural roots.

"Every plate goes back into supporting our community," Rucic said. "It lets us keep our student organization strong and make sure Bosnian students feel represented here."

Hmong: Raising awareness beyond the menu

As time passed, lines grew longer for the Hmong Culture stand. Selling Thai tea, Kenny Lee, a second-year student and president of the Hmong Student Association (HSA), spoke about the significance of being at the festival for awareness.

"We aren't really here for the profits, we're really here to spread awareness about Hmong people and Hmong culture," Lee said.

Lee explained that the HSA, along with family members of the students, has gathered to represent the Hmong culture at the festival.

Regardless of how much they make in profits, they hope to raise funds for future HSA events that would take place on campus.

"But if we do make a profit, then yes, that would help us, because we do have bigger plans for the future, which we would need funding for the next generations of our club, and the people who host Hmong culture at I-Fest [International Festival]," Lee said.

Nigeria: Sharing food and geography lessons

Further down the line, the Nigerian booth was eye-catching with all the accessories and clothing on display. One table sold Nigerian cuisine and beverages,

while the other sold traditional Nigerian clothing and accessories. Non-student vendors and the Nigerian Student Association (NSA) hosted the booth.

Enny Ogunyemi, president of the Nigerian Student Association, explained that participation in the festival meant spreading Nigerian culture.

"I think it helps because we're here to spread the culture, even if it's just people passing by, getting the stamps, and us just handing out the flyers that we have. They get to see different things about Nigeria; I heard a woman and her daughter pass by, and she was like, 'Oh, you were right about where Nigeria was, in West Africa.' That goes a long way," Ogunyemi said.

Ogunyemi expanded on the profits gained at the festival, saying it's distributed among the vendors and the NSA.

"The different profits are actually going to the vendors for the most part, but we get a certain percentage of some of the sales, and that would help our Nigerian Student Association to put on more events on campus, to have more food during our events," Ogunyemi said.

Additionally, she noted that the vendors see economic benefits through the festival, as they continue to return.

"A lot of them have done this for multiple years, and they keep coming back. So I think to some degree it promotes their businesses, it puts their names out there," Ogunyemi said.

Kuwait: First-time students, lasting impressions

At the Kuwait booth, three students welcomed a small crowd, accompanied by rose water and other significant cultural items.

Yousef Aleidani, a first-year student, said it was his first time attending the festival while his co-hosts are on their third. While they were selling small magnets, Aleidani explained they were more concerned about being able to educate others about Kuwait, adding that he was surprised many knew about the country.

"I'd say it's more of a mental journey, it makes us more open, it gives us more time to adapt to the friendliness and the different cultures here, and just to overall have fun," Aleidani said.

Aleidani said they weren't looking for profit, but rather having a good time at the festival. He was excited to share many facts about Kuwait, emphasizing the joy and honor he felt in representing the country at the festival.

Read more at
ninertimes.com



Megan Bentley/Niner Times

Courtesy of Caroline West, Latonda Mitchell & Allison Stadick (left to right)



‘Being a student and a parent means balance’: How three Charlotte students handle motherhood while getting their degrees

Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | Staff Writer

As Charlotte’s student population expands, so does the proportion of nontraditional students, which includes those who are parents balancing academics with the demands of raising children.

Having to juggle a double life, three student parents from the Charlotte Parent Organization (CPO) shared their stories on balancing academics and parenting.

The Charlotte Parent Organization aims to create a community on campus that unites parents, students, faculty, alumni and more. According to the organization’s purpose statement, it serves as a space to make friends, find like-minded peers, promote advocacy and provide resources.

As shared by these students, their stories have come with obstacles as well as memorable experiences, with the goal of shedding light on their realities to reach and inspire other parents, as well as students who may not understand.

“Definitely a difference in priorities, and you can’t really procrastinate anymore,” Caroline West, a Ph.D. student, said. “Now that I have kids, you have to start immediately, because you never know if your kid is gonna get sick or if you’re gonna be up all night with them, and so it’s just more planning ahead.”

West added that time management is also necessary. On the other hand, Latonda Mitchell, another Ph.D. student, had a differing response, which centered around the balance of both lives.

“Being a student and a parent means just balance, making sure that I am on top of everything that I need to do, being mindful of the things that my kids want to do, the things that I want to do,” Mitchell said.

The overlap of academic and family life

Each highlighted the challenges they face that are not often considered by those without children. Allison Stadick, also a Ph.D. student, spoke about the impact of being a parent on her ability to participate in additional student experiences.

“I’ve always had challenges trying to maintain any academic activities, and this goes into not just studying, but attending office hours or any extracurricular activities, to continue to stay an active student.”

“[This is also] while also making sure 100% of myself goes into taking care of my children and then also maintaining a job to continue to put a roof over our heads and food on the table,” Stadick added.

On the other side of being a student parent, West explained that the constant movement and time commitment of being a parent are often overlooked. When her kids are at school, she has a limited amount of time to work before their school day is over.

Afterwards, her time is spent playing with them, cooking dinner, cleaning and more, all while she still has to work on her academics after they go to bed.

However, West also pointed out the difficulty and limitation of only having three allowed absences from class as a parent.

“And then also all the absences sometimes. My kids are little, and so they lick everything, and then they get sick all the time. So it’s hard when you only have three absences in a class and you use them all up in the first two months because you have to take off when your kids are sick,” West said.

Mitchell had a similar response to those who aren’t mindful of her responsibilities as a mother.

As a parent, she must be careful about the classes and times she chooses, as they should align with her parenting schedule. Additionally, it may also include finding babysitters. She also mentioned the difficulty of upholding perfect attendance. All in all, Mitchell described it as a process with several factors.

While the students discussed these challenges that can be overlooked, they also spoke about the impacts that both lives have on each other, such as the impact of being a parent on academics and vice versa.

“There are a lot of distractions, and then there is a lot of uncertainty, where you really don’t feel like you’re up to par with the coursework. You constantly compare yourself to others, and that’ll include non-student parents and seeing how successful they are, and it’s really discouraging,” Stadick said.

Mitchell expressed concerns about being able to take advantage of the benefits from the learning experience of being a Ph.D. student.

“You don’t want to just finish something to finish. You really want to invest in the classes that you’re taking. I’ve missed a lot of opportunities, educationally, because I’ve had two small kids, or enhancement, I don’t want to say educational wise, but really enhancing the educational experience in a Ph.D. program,” Mitchell said.

Strengthened motivation

West said that parenthood has given her a stronger motivation and drive for her education, as she wants to be a role model for her kids. West

expressed the impact it had on her decision when joining a department.

“The funding was important to me to get to a program that had a stipend option, because I can’t go five years at a Ph.D. [program] that doesn’t provide a stipend because I have kids to think about. So it affected the lab I chose to join and the department I chose to join just so I could provide for my family,” West said.

Apart from feeling a sense of belonging within the CPO community, the students have felt seen in other ways.

Stadick touched on the Graduate Student Parental Leave policy in place at Charlotte, which made her feel a sense of relief after having her second child.

“It made me really happy seeing that [Graduate Student Parental Leave policy] and knowing that they’re acknowledging that at the very least, grad students have a personal life and we have that to fall back on and continue to be a student while also being a parent, because that helped me tremendously,” Stadick said.

West has seen relief in other opportunities, such as the CPO’s involvement with the rest of campus.

“We’ve gained a lot of traction really fast. I was very surprised. I didn’t think people would listen, but they did. So we’ve worked with Chris Smith [associate vice chancellor for student affairs] and the Student Health Center, and he’s been amazing, helping us get resources,” West said.

// PLEASE PROTECT US //

131 students share their thoughts on the safety of Charlotte's light rail via Niner Times survey

Sunnya Hadavi | Lead Writer
Light rail sketch courtesy of Niner Times archives

In the weeks following the murder of 23-year-old Iryna Zarutskaya, news about the case was on everyone's minds. For UNC Charlotte students, the murder had a much deeper impact, prompting the question: "Are other young people safe on the light rail?"

Concerns about personal and campus safety related to the light rail are not new for students. With a station directly on campus and two others near University buildings, students have voiced concerns for years about suspicious individuals while riding and entering campus.

One hundred thirty-one UNC Charlotte students shared their thoughts about the light rail and its safety following Zarutskaya's murder. While they represent a small percentage of the student population, they give insight into various aspects of safety on the light rail.

90.8% of these students have ridden the light rail. 67.2% do not feel comfortable or safe when riding.

"Please protect us. We are here at school to make memories with friends, pursue our education, while still being able to get to the heart of Charlotte and explore all the beauty it offers," third-year CJ Racelis said.

Ridership among students

For 59.6% of students, the light rail is a part of their commute and a means of accessing the city. Reasons for using the light rail include ease, lower costs and lack of personal transportation.

"I didn't have a car during my first two years of college," Osiris

Gomez-Miranda said. "I would take it to buy my groceries at Walmart, visit the city from time to time and go to the Spectrum Center so I don't have to order an Uber after a concert."

UNC Charlotte students receive unlimited free rides on the LYNX light rail and all other Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) services while enrolled. This pass is included in tuition.

The majority of students use it to explore parts of the city and go to events and concerts in Uptown.

"I am a massive fan of public transportation, and the light rail is the best version of that Charlotte has," graduate student Jason Berthiaume said. "Taking the light rail allows me to not have to worry about traffic or finding a place to park my car, which makes traveling Uptown far more practical for me."

Student safety on the light rail

The presence of possibly dangerous individuals is a primary reason why students avoid the light rail. For them, the convenience provided is not worth it with the current lack of security.

81.7% of students believe the light rail and its stations do not have sufficient security.

"There is almost zero fare enforcement, and any dangerous person or malicious actor can board the train without question," said Cameron Copenhaver, a spring 2025 graduate. "Once they're on board in a tight, closed space with you, there is absolutely no escape from them. So, I will opt to drive whenever possible, unless there is a specific reason not to. Because I do not trust the public."

LYNX stations are open and do not have turnstiles. With no

officials stationed at stops, CATS relies on its private security officers, who are supposed to check train cars for tickets routinely.

67.2% of students have never witnessed security officers on train cars or been asked to show their ticket.

Students use various methods to feel safe on the light rail. They pick seats where everyone can be seen, avoid headphones and travel in groups—multiple choose to carry pepper spray, handheld tasers and pocket knives despite it being illegal.

Harassment or assault is still possible. Of the students surveyed, 32.1% reported being harassed by others while on the light rail. 14.5% are unsure if their experience counts as harassment or assault, but have felt uncomfortable.

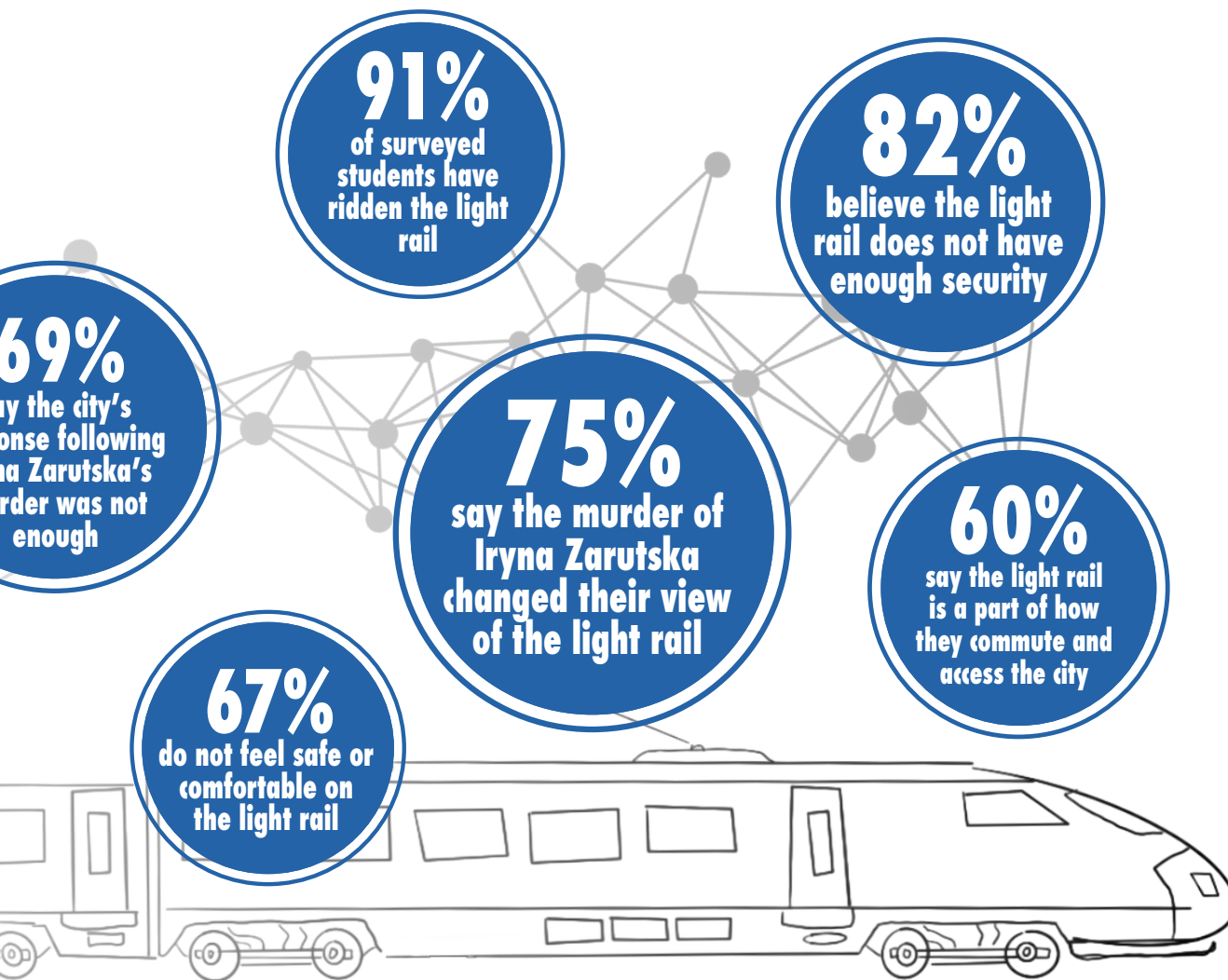
"I don't use the light rail anymore because it's just not safe," an anonymous third-year said. "It's unsettling knowing anyone can just get on board the same train that goes directly into the university that I spend thousands of dollars to have access to, and that anyone can threaten students the way Iryna was."

That student is one of the many students who stopped using the light rail due to safety concerns. 48.1% of students shared that they are changing how often they ride following Zarutskaya's murder.

23.7% of the students reported that they cannot or will not change how often they use it, for various reasons.

"As a lower-income individual, I feel hopeless," fifth-year Yousef Eddin said. "My opinion on the light rail has gotten worse, and made me realize how unsafe it really is, but security has not increased, and I am unable to change my behavior based on my opinion due to my income."

STORIES FROM THE LIGHT RAIL



Making the light rail safe for all

Following Zarutskaya's murder, CATS and local law enforcement have mentioned increased security on the light rail. The majority is centered around the location of the incident in South End, not in areas heading towards the University.

"I've noticed that the police have increased their presence in the South End and Uptown," an anonymous graduate student said. "They've been using their blue lights continuously to signal their presence and deter crime. While this initiative is beneficial within the city, it doesn't address the issues in the outer areas."

Other students have not seen any changes to security while riding the light rail.

"I have taken the light rail a few times for work after the incident, and I have noticed no change in terms of security," fourth-year Emma said. "Upping security is definitely a factor, as well as implementing a system to ensure all riders have paid for fare."

Many students believe that the infrastructure surrounding the light rail must improve and be similar to that of other major cities. Suggestions include adding turnstiles, conducting frequent ticket checks and maintaining a consistent security presence.

"Having a small box station at every stop where a cop is present for security could be beneficial," an anonymous graduate student said. "Have a mini building where they are equipped with AC and all the necessary functions to help them stay in the surrounding area. We need a more comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying issues that contribute to homelessness and crime."

In addition to increased security measures, multiple students say more needs to be done to support the homeless population and those struggling with mental health.

"I've been riding the train for the past four years and have noticed the rise of homelessness within our community," an anonymous fourth-year said. "People are frustrated with their surroundings, unable to seek professional help."

"We need to properly fund rehabilitative facilities/services so that people like the man who murdered Iryna can get the help they need, instead of sending them through a failing and inadequate prison system," an anonymous fifth-year said. "Had we had a preventative justice system that focuses on rehabilitation, Iryna might still be here. She should still be here."

Students also shared that the University can do more to comfort and protect its students. Some students shared ideas for student or under-25 compartments, increased monitoring of individuals entering campus and a greater presence of campus police at stations.

In the weeks since Zarutskaya's murder, UNC Charlotte has made no announcements to the student body or announced any changes to light rail security.

"I'm surprised and confused why UNC Charlotte hasn't done more to comfort students and improve security to make us feel safe," an anonymous second-year student said. "There is an entire section about the light rail in the new student module, and this murder took place on a train system that has a station on campus."

"I was harassed by Decarlos Brown. He had beer in his hand and all over the floor, and was banging on the floor. He started yelling at me, saying how he wanted to hurt me and attack me. He came up to me and stood above me as I was sitting down. I looked up at him and tried not to show fear. The light rail doors opened and he got off. When I heard he was the one who stabbed the woman, it was very hard to process. **It could have been me, and if I had notified someone, Iryna may still be alive."**

ANONYMOUS FOURTH-YEAR

"There were other people in the car and they did not do anything, even when this man was acting like he was going to follow me back to my dorm. **I FaceTimed my mom and showed him I had pepper spray** on me, and he still had the audacity to sit right next to me and refuse to move."

MORGAN ADAMS, FOURTH-YEAR

"I was returning from an event at the Dubois Center, a man was so furious, unprovoked. We were seriously scared of his actions. After his unusual behavior and shouting at us, **we changed seats, and he followed us.** It was so horrible. He got off at McCullough Station. We were so scared."

ANONYMOUS INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT

"My friend and I almost got robbed. An individual sat very close to us, and kept reaching in his bag while trying to get closer to us. It got to a point where my friend and I had to run out of the train and go into a new compartment. We were so scared that he would follow us back that **we made sure our walk back included campus security.** I haven't used the light rail again."

ANONYMOUS SECOND-YEAR

Among Republican voters, a Democrat led the line at JD Vance's Concord rally

Davis Cuffe | Editor-In-Chief

Orlando Jacobs woke up early on Wednesday.

A self-described Democrat, Jacobs spent the early hours of his morning driving himself to the Concord-Padgett Regional Airport to be first in line to hear remarks from Vice President JD Vance.

Arriving at 9 a.m., Jacobs waited roughly five and a half hours standing in line under a cloudless sky that caused 90-degree temperatures before sitting amongst the 100 or so Republican lawmakers, voters and activists that came to see Vance speak.

Held inside Roush Hangar, the event acted as a sort of 'who's who' for North Carolina Republicans. Before Vance, Republican state leaders gave speeches of their own and fraternized with each

other and the crowd. Yet, Jacobs didn't seem to be put off by the crowd of those from across the aisle as he made conversation with those around him.

"I think it's about time we all start to listen to each other," Jacobs said. "At first I was uncomfortable, but then when I looked around, these are God-fearing people who have ideologies just like me."

Further differing from the majority, white, middle-aged crowd, Jacobs is a Black man and identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Jacobs is also a social media creator and mental health advocate. Earlier this month, Jacobs traveled to Capitol Hill to speak with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi about mental health. Sept. 24's rally was his first time attending what he called a "Republican" event.

He said he hoped to see Vance address mental health at the rally.

"If he even just touches on mental health just a little bit, I would be excited," Jacobs said.

The last time Vance stopped in North Carolina was on the campaign trail in 2024. Now vice president, Vance represents more than the MAGA voting base, but the rally still bore all the hallmarks of election rallies from 12 months ago.

Red hats with the familiar white lettering still sat atop the heads of many of the attendees. Many wore T-shirts from the campaign trail or clothing sporting red, white and blue or the American flag. Donning neither red nor blue, Jacobs wore a plain white button-up shirt and black pants.

Inside, Jacobs and about 100 others sat in rows of chairs facing the stage, a spinning metal fan above them working to ease the heat from outside.

Unlike his past North Carolina stops, the hangar carried a low hum of anticipation rather than the excitement of a campaign

rally, as attendees awaited an address from their vice president instead of a hopeful contender.

During his speech, Vance was critical of Democratic lawmakers' approach to crime and addressed the fatal stabbing of Iryna Zarutska on Charlotte's light rail system in August.

Organizers clearly sought to support Vance's messaging; a sign in front of the stage read "Honor. Valor. Justice." Flanking the stage were two groups of local law enforcement, who sat stone-faced in rows throughout the speeches.

Behind them were two armored police vehicles, positioned in front of American flags that adorned the walls of the hangar.

The visual support was reciprocated as Vance further positioned himself as a firm supporter of law enforcement during his remarks.

"You don't have to agree with my immigration policies," Vance said. "You don't have to agree with Donald Trump's immigration policies, but if your political rhetoric encourages violence against our law enforcement, you can go straight to hell, and you have no place in the political conversation of the United States of America."

Vance was measured when it came to linking Democrats to crime, focusing instead on what he described as "soft on crime" policies.

But when the conversation shifted to political violence, Vance was more direct, placing the blame squarely on Democratic leaders.

"If you look at the political violence in our country over the last couple of months, the last couple of years, it is not a both-sides problem. It is primarily on one side," Vance said. "If we are going to truly go after the political violence in this country, we need the Democratic leadership of Washington, D.C. to look in the mirror."

The sentiment seems to reflect the Trump administration's narrowing of who will face retribution for the murder of Charlie Kirk.

Last week, Vance guest-hosted the Charlie Kirk Show and asked individuals to call out those who celebrated Kirk's death. Joining Vance on the show were other prominent figures in the Trump administration, including White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, who called for the destabilization of left-wing political organizations.

The point towards Democratic leaders, rather than organizations and individuals, is a new message, but not the one Jacobs was looking for.

"I do agree with a lot of things that I'm hearing, as far as we need to have common sense approaches to how we are dealing with crime in our communities," Jacobs said. "But I want to make sure that we are also adding in the mental health aspects."

Jacobs later added that his family's experiences with mental health, in part, fueled his devotion to the issue.

During Vance's speech, Jacobs nodded along and stood with the crowd for the standing ovation that followed. At one point during Vance's remarks, Jacobs stood up and said, "I'm Democrat and I love you."

Despite the show of affection, Jacobs said he wasn't swayed to the right or left after attending the event, again harping on a lack of mental health support for his hesitancy to go all the way on one side or another.

Jacobs left the arena, gaining nothing, no enlightening speech from Vance or a new friend that he could level with and lean on, but instead lost past preconceptions he said he had with the Republican Party.

Jacobs said his prior knowledge of Vance led him to think Vance was anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Black, which led him to worry about his own attendance at the event.

"I had to move past my prejudice and gather the courage to even come in this room and feel safe," Jacobs said. "And I felt very safe."



Davis Cuffe/Niner Times



Sofia DiStefano/Niner Times

She doesn't like losing; in 2025, Tomekia Reed says it's Charlotte's turn to win

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

2024 turned the page to a new chapter for Charlotte women's basketball. In 2025, Head Coach Tomekia Reed is ready to re-write the story.

Coming in from Jackson State University (JSU) last season, Reed brought her reputation for winning—envisioning a strong record, a shot at the American Conference Championship and maybe even a ticket to the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament.

But, as many first-year coaches face, stepping into a new program came with its growing pains. Reed's debut season in Charlotte ended with an 11-21 overall record and just four wins in 16 conference games.

Now, with significant roster turnover, only a handful of returners and a heavy recruiting class, Reed has distilled her message into two words: 'Our Turn.'

Growing a culture

For Reed, the changes to Charlotte's roster were not just about talent, but about fit. While evaluating potential players, she insisted on traveling and finding these athletes herself—recruiting the players who mirrored her own mentality—tough, resilient and full of personality. She wanted competitors who could score on the floor while also bringing energy to the campus and fan base.

"This team, they are so me," Reed smiled. "They are getting better every day and they want to get better. But for the most part, I think we have a really exciting team that fits who I am and what I want to do."

That emphasis reflects her own journey. Reed describes herself as once a scrappy player during her high school and college days, once nicknamed "Dennis Rodman" for her relentless rebounding.

Though she was not the tallest or fastest on the court, she made up for it with work ethic. That mentality, she says, is what she still carries as a coach—striving to outwork conference rivals and prove herself against more established programs.

Building a legacy

Before her time with the 49ers, Reed—a Jackson, Miss. native—got her start in 2006 at JSU as a recruiting coordinator. After a three-year stint, she spent additional time in assistant roles across the South, then becoming head coach at JSU in 2018. The Tigers quickly turned from a struggling program into a perennial winner.

Reed delivered for the Tigers, and winning became the standard: five straight regular-season conference titles from 2020 to 2024, three con-

ference tournament championships, and three NCAA Tournament berths (2021, 2022, 2023).

Reed was named conference Coach of the Year four times.

The biggest piece of her coaching success comes from spending time with her players. She's produced professional-level talent, helping players like Ameshya Williams-Holliday (drafted by Indiana Fever in 2022) and Angel Jackson (drafted by Las Vegas Aces in 2024). It's an accomplishment she calls one of her proudest achievements.

For Reed, success was never about her personal performance, but how she could elevate her players, her program and the visibility of women's basketball.

Reed has always been outspoken about wanting her players to walk away with more than a stat sheet, but a quality experience. That includes relationships lasting past the graduation stage—it's ones where former athletes invite her to weddings or ask her to be the godmother to their children.

"As a coach, we're supposed to help players transition to great things," Reed recognized. "For me, I always said when I became a head coach, I want to give my players a quality experience. I want them to walk away feeling great about their decision to play for me as their head coach—feel great about their institution. That comes from passion, it comes from love, it comes from taking care of them. Because I wanna be involved in your life after basketball."

With a strong resume and a darling personality, she was ready for the jump to a Division I program, ultimately landing in Charlotte in April 2024.

"Tomekia Reed is one of the most talented young coaches in college basketball today," Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber told Charlotte Athletics. "Throughout her career, she has demonstrated a strong commitment to excellence, both on and off the court."

New city, new challenge

While the opportunity was thrilling, Reed's move to Charlotte wasn't without challenges. She bounced from Airbnbs to luncheons, meetings to practices, all while helping her son, Carlon, settle into a new school and new city.

Those off-court adjustments from the summer bled into a difficult debut season. Through growing pains, the roster, a patchwork of veterans, never fully clicked.

Charlotte's turnaround meant making hard calls. Reed admitted there was "zero tolerance" when it came to players leaving or returning in 2025. Some didn't fit the long-term vision, while others earned her trust through grit and commitment.

Players like junior guard Caroline Thiel, also known as 'CT,' and graduate guard Imani Smith fought to stay, proving their value and hard work through versatility. A successful NCAA waiver also allowed graduate center Daphane White to return.

The newcomers bring fresh firepower. Statistically, the revamped roster dramatically upgrades the offensive potential of the 49ers; 115 points and 75 rebounds per game from incoming transfers, alongside improved three-point percentages.

For Reed, those numbers signal a hopeful chance to finally put her system in motion.

She's equally excited about freshman guard McKenzie Graves, who has deep family ties to Charlotte. Her parents and brother attended the university, and her mom and brother (Nikki and Nik) played basketball for the 49ers.

"One thing that I felt like we were missing last year was somebody who really had a lot of respect for this institution. Someone who really appreciates and values the women's basketball program here at Charlotte," Reed said. "She gives everything that she has, she has so much room to grow and she's got a great personality and she gets it and she understands what the vision is. She understands where we're trying to go with this program."

A new test ahead

The schedule reflects Reed's vision. Charlotte will open its 2025 season with a marquee matchup inside Halton Arena against Auburn University on Nov. 3—a game that fell into place after a personal connection with Auburn Head Coach Larry Vick-ers.

Reed believes that a powerhouse program on Charlotte's campus will be good for not only the team, but for the city and University as a whole.

Eyes on the ball

Above all, Reed is determined to make Charlotte women's basketball fun, competitive and connected. She emphasizes that this year's team is not only more

skilled but also more engaging for the students and the community. She is now calling on fans to rally behind the program.

The foundation is set. The culture is taking shape. And with Reed's fingerprints all over the roster, she's ready for her vision to come to life.

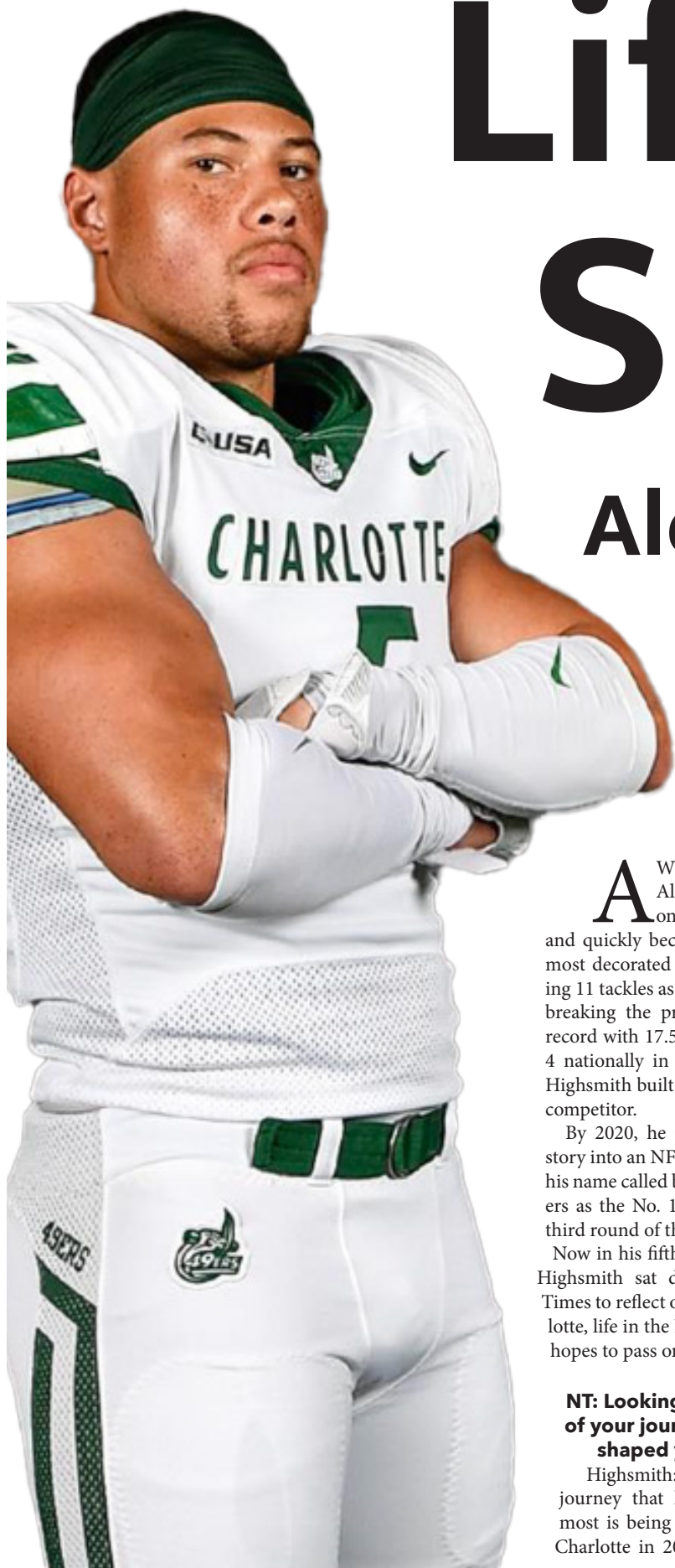
The wins won't come easy, and she knows that—it doesn't scare her. An underdog at heart, the fight is part of the process.

2024 was about survival—now, 2025 is about arrival.

"We watched too many teams pass us by," Reed said. "We watched opportunities pass us by. And I told them we deserve this. So it's our turn."



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times



Life in the Steel City

Alex Highsmith reflects on his journey from walk-on to NFL starter

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

A Wilmington, N.C. native, Alex Highsmith walked on at Charlotte in 2015 and quickly became one of the 49ers' most decorated players. From recording 11 tackles as a redshirt freshman to breaking the program's single-season record with 17.5 TFL and ranking No. 4 nationally in sacks his senior year, Highsmith built a legacy as a relentless competitor.

By 2020, he turned that underdog story into an NFL opportunity, hearing his name called by the Pittsburgh Steelers as the No. 102 overall pick in the third round of the NFL Draft.

Now in his fifth season in Pittsburgh, Highsmith sat down with the Niner Times to reflect on his journey in Charlotte, life in the NFL and the advice he hopes to pass on to upcoming players.

NT: Looking back, what part of your journey do you think shaped you the most?

Highsmith: I think the part of the journey that helped shape me the most is being a walk-on, coming to Charlotte in 2015. I didn't have any

big offers coming outta high school, and walking on at Charlotte really developed a mentality in me to outwork everyone and be my best self. I still carry that mentality with me today.

NT: As a walk-on, what's something that you tell other guys to keep them motivated and inspired to keep pushing for their dreams as well?

I would say to make the most of every opportunity you get, like no matter where you're [from], if you're a starter, if you're a backup, [or if] you're coming as a freshman. Whatever opportunities you get, you gotta make the most of it because you never know how many opportunities you're gonna get.

NT: How did playing at a newer football program like Charlotte help you develop resilience compared to guys from bigger-name schools?

My first couple [of] years weren't the best years in regards of wins. I think my redshirt freshman year, we won three or four games. Our sophomore year, we won one game, and then we won five and then seven the last two years. I know being 1-11 that sophomore year definitely was a tough year, having to come in and continue to play out to losing the way we

were. But I think it just shows that you have to persevere even when times are rough, and you just gotta show that you love football even when you're not winning. I think going through those times helped us to get to that first bowl game my senior year [2019] when we won those seven games.

NT: How have you seen Charlotte evolve from the time you were there to now? What do you think is to come for the community?

The school is continuing to expand, adding a lot of new things on campus and I'm excited for Coach [Tim] Albin and what he's gonna do with the team. Things haven't gone the way that they've wanted these first couple weeks. But I know he's a great coach. He's a great guy. I've met him multiple times, so I know he's got great things in store for this program. I think everyone in Charlotte wants to see us win. I want to see them win. I'm just excited to see how they continue to get better throughout the season. Charlotte's an amazing place and I still remember, we've been a university for a while, but a lot of people think that Charlotte is a newer school, just because you have a new football program. And I literally remember we

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“It just goes back to making the most of every opportunity and knowing that the opportunity you have to be a college football player. You shouldn’t take that for granted.”

- Alex Highsmith

[Steelers] played the Panthers in 2022 and we stayed at the Marriott on campus that year. A bunch of the guys were like, “This campus is beautiful. It’s awesome.” Like yeah, Charlotte’s a great place to be. I think there’s a good future ahead for the football program and the University in totality for sure.

NT: What would you say is your favorite part of Charlotte?

I just think there’s so much to do. I love the city. Whether it’s going to [see] professional sports teams. You got four now [because of Charlotte FC] and that’s something I’ve been really excited for because soccer’s my favorite sport behind football. I think I’ve been to one or two games. The atmosphere is awesome there. So that’s really exciting. And then, you got the lakes like [Lake] Norman [and] Lake Wiley. The food down there is incredible, unbelievable. There’s so much to do down there, and I know Charlotte’s only gonna get bigger and I just hope it doesn’t get too crowded—hope it doesn’t get Atlanta-type traffic.

NT: You visit a lot with Charlotte football and are an active figure with the program—what’s one piece of advice that you always give to players and why?

Every time I go back, I try to tell them something a little different. But I think it really just goes back to making the most of every opportunity and knowing that the opportunity you have to be a college football player. You shouldn’t take that for granted. There’s so many kids [and] guys that wanna be where you are. I kind of kept that much with me while I was in college. Like, anytime I would complain about a hard day at camp or a hard day of practice, getting up early or weights, getting up early to run, I try to remind myself that “You pray for this opportunity, you work for this opportunity.” So like, it’s kind of disrespectful to complain about it because there’s so many other people that would want to be where I’m at and living the dream like I am. I’ll just say that’s another thing I really try to speak to the guys as well.

NT: If you could bring one Steelers teammate with you to a 49ers game at Charlotte, who would you pick and why?

I would say Nick Herbig. Me and him, we’re always talking back and forth about Charlotte, [and] Wisconsin, and I just wanna bring him to experience Charlotte and the environment that we have.

NT: Who’s the toughest player you have had to cover?

I’d probably say Lamar [Jackson] is definitely one of the toughest guys we have to go against because of how versatile he is. [He’s] one of the best quarterbacks in the league and he can hurt you in the passing game and the running game. I remember we played [against] him in college. It was my first-ever game in Charlotte. He dropped 56 [points] on us in the first half. So now, having to play him twice a year, he’s one of those guys that we have to really game plan well for. Because if we don’t, you know, he’ll light you up.

NT: What’s the best piece of advice you’ve gotten from a veteran teammate?

I think in the league now, just really doing the right things off the field, taking care of your body, watching film well, getting extra treatment, extra recovery. Because ultimately we play 17 games now in a season, not including playoffs, so if you wanna maintain and sustain for the whole year, it’s a marathon. You gotta treat your body right, you gotta do extra recovery and stuff like that and do things outside the building to help you as well. I would say doing that and watching film is some good advice that I’ve had.

NT: Do you have any superstitions or routines that you stick to? Did you have any in college?

I have my process going into the game that I always do. I’ll get in a hot tub, I’ll see the chiropractor that we have. I’ll do mobility stretching and do my own warmup. Ever since college I’ve always read a passage in the Bible before every game. I used to read the story of David and Goliath. I read some Psalms, but in the story of David and Goliath, [it’s] just reminding myself that the battle is [of] the Lord’s and that’s something I’ve always done since college.

NT: How do you balance confidence and humility in a competitive environment?

To be a great football player and to be a great professional athlete, you have to have confidence. You have to have a swagger about yourself that you believe that you’re the best person stepping out there in that field. But also, I’ve heard the term humility. I’ve heard it categorized as, humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. [So], just doing whatever I can to be the best that I can be to help my team win when it comes on the field, but also, being a leader in the locker room [and] serving [the] guys.

NT: How do you keep yourself motivated in your work when you face burnout or challenges?

Keeping myself motivated [by] staying positive. [I’m] thinking [it] comes back to me, staying rooted in my faith in Christ and in the Word and continuing to push, like I said. Because during college, I had a lot of rough years of not winning. Now we haven’t had a losing season here with the Steelers, but, you know, haven’t won anything in the playoffs. So I think, just staying positive throughout the whole year, even when times are hard, I think is important.

NT: Who were some of the players or people you were inspired by when you were younger and pursuing professional football?

I was a Panthers fan growing up, so I mean I loved Julius Peppers and Steve Smith Sr. Those were probably two of my guys that I love watching growing up. Then also, [I was] huge Carolina [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] basketball fan. [I] loved all those players.

NT: If you weren’t playing football, what career or passion would you be chasing right now?

I was an exercise science/kinesiology major in college, so I would definitely be doing something with physical fitness. That’s one of the pillars of our foundation, the Alex Highsmith Family Foundation is impacting the youth through different ways. One of those ways is through physical fitness and nutrition. Me and my wife have a passion for those things. So I would either be some type of strength coach, trainer, something in that aspect of physical fitness.

NT: What’s an unknown fact that most people don’t know about you?

I mean, my favorite sport behind football is soccer—people don’t know that. Oh, and not everyone knows this, but I was an actor as a baby in “Dawson’s Creek.”



Courtesy of Pittsburgh Steelers

Miyu Tsurumaki keeps fighting

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Two years ago, Charlotte women's volleyball lost 3-1 to the University of Tulsa. The November match was the last game of the 49ers' 2023 season, and may mark an abrupt end to the volleyball career of Miyu Tsurumaki.

That day, after completing the end-of-game formalities, shaking hands with Tulsa opponents and chatting with teammates,

Tsurumaki walked to the locker room, where her coach would put a bow on her junior season, giving a speech about the season's conclusion and what was to come.

Looking to her senior season, Tsurumaki had a lot to be hopeful about. After transferring to Charlotte in the offseason prior, Tsurumaki had established herself as a key player in Charlotte's rotation and tied for first on the team in sets played. With another off-season of training ahead, Tsurumaki looked to be in for a strong senior season with the 49ers.

Her plans, however, paused for a doctor's visit she could no longer put off.

Tsurumaki had played the season with a roughly four-centimeter stone-solid lump on her right breast. It had grown to about the size of a walnut by the end of the season and started to cause her some pain.

After speaking with her boyfriend's mother, who worked in a hospital, she was advised to see a doctor, just in case her gradually growing lump was something serious. It was.

During a trip back home to Japan in February, she finally saw a doctor, and at 22 years old, Miyu Tsurumaki was diagnosed with breast cancer.

News she never expected

"I just cried like a baby," she said. "I called my coaches, and I couldn't even tell them my exact feeling, because I just cried and cried and cried. It was the worst."

For women aged 22 to 24, the breast cancer incidence rate is 1.5 cases per 100,000. The odds of being struck by lightning are one in 15,000.

Tsurumaki stayed in Japan for her treatment, where she'd be away from volleyball, campus and her teammates while battling cancer.

Hearing of her diagnosis, Tsurumaki's teammates quickly organized to establish consistent overseas communication. They simulated campus chats across a 13-hour time gap between Japan and Charlotte with texts and occasional FaceTime calls.

"Miyu is just a wonderful person, always willing to help, and her smile was something that characterized her every time. No matter what, she was enjoying every practice and game," said former teammate Florencia Wolkowyski.

"When we found out the diagnosis, we just couldn't believe it. We were all very sad."

Teammates like Wolkowyski and coaches sent cards and even pooled money to buy Tsurumaki a Nintendo, only to learn her boyfriend had already surprised her with one.

Finding strength off the court

During the 17-month recovery process, the Nintendo came in handy.

Four cycles of chemotherapy that made her lose all the hair that once danced behind her in a ponytail on the court and surgery to remove the tumor severely weakened Tsurumaki, taking her away from volleyball and everyday life.

In her extra free time, Tsurumaki documented her recovery on TikTok, where she talks about her experience with different treatments and educates her audience on how to detect breast cancer early.

"Nobody expected this at such a young age... For yourself, your family, your parents, grand-



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics



parents, even friends. I know how suddenly it can happen,” Tsurumaki said. “I want, especially women, to learn breast cancer symptoms so they can find it earlier. I don’t want anybody to go through a tough time like I had.”

Some of Tsurumaki’s videos have reached over 500,000 views.

In almost every video, support from her friends, family and boyfriend is mentioned.

“Even when my nose is running, they still love me,” Tsurumaki says in a video describing how chemotherapy had made her nose hairs fall out.

Despite the distractions and love from those around her, Tsurumaki missed volleyball.

After picking up the sport at just 10 years old, it had been a constant part of her life for more than half her time on earth. Between practices, games, time with teammates and film study, volleyball was a pillar of Tsurumaki’s lifestyle.

Lacking the muscle to even hit a volleyball without pain and 7,000 miles away from her home court of Halton Arena, Tsurumaki removed herself from the sport.

“I actually stopped watching volleyball games. I definitely missed it, but I cannot play, so I tried to stay away from it,” Tsurumaki said. “It was too sad.”

“Very American”

This attitude is shades away from her typical feelings towards the sport, and one she later dropped.

Tsurumaki was officially cancer-free in July, and after recovering from surgery, she got right back to building muscle so that she could return to the court.

Tsurumaki had lost nearly all her muscle during cancer treatments, and she said her initial return to the court was shaky. The athletic fluidity that once made her Charlotte’s top libero was gone, and it hurt to even touch the ball, but Tsurumaki said the return to the court still brought her joy.

Months after those first steps and with a little more muscle on her body, Tsurumaki says she’s almost at full strength and has been playing in local leagues to practice.

In those local league games, Tsurumaki has stood out for bringing an energy she says is “very American.”

In Japan, players are more composed while playing, so when Tsurumaki cheers on her teammates or curses herself for a mistake, she gets some weird looks.

“They just stare at me like I’m a crazy person,” Tsurumaki said. “It makes it kind of fun.”

The expressive nature of American volleyball is something that surprised her, too, at first. In some of her initial practices and games with the College of Southern Idaho, where she’d been before transferring to Charlotte, Tsurumaki remembers being stunned by the amount of energy her teammates had.

“People were so competitive, like even a small mistake, my old teammates would be screaming about it,” Tsurumaki said. “I was shocked, but I loved it.”

Cultural differences, like the ones she observed on the court during the first practice, were what initially drew Tsurumaki to study in the U.S.

Her interest began with a two-week middle school exchange trip to California. There she was struck by the kindness of the people around her and the large meal portions. For Tsurumaki, America was a place where she felt she could feel at ease being herself.

“To be honest, I just felt a lot of freedom,” Tsurumaki said. “I really fell in love with it.”

It took some convincing to get her parents on board with the idea of their daughter studying thousands of miles from home, but after some persuasion and connecting with an agent to help arrange with schools in the U.S., Tsurumaki was set.

Finding family away from home

At Charlotte, Tsurumaki formed a quick connection with her teammates, who took her shopping and started a movie night tradition. Her teammate Wolkowyski, an international student from Spain, said she easily connected with Tsurumaki as they exchanged cultures and bonded over being far from home.

Even with all the new things around her in Charlotte, Tsurumaki held onto her Japanese culture.

Wolkowyski recalls fond memories of Tsurumaki eating sushi during 3 a.m. bus rides, drawing some playful laughs from teammates.

“I’m a really shy person, but I could always talk to them,” Tsurumaki said.

In May of 2023, when Tsurumaki was undergoing treatments for her cancer, her Charlotte coaches, Karen Weatherington and Verna Julaton, visited her in Japan. The two brought everything Tsurumaki had left in her dorm and, maybe more importantly, some familiar faces.

“That definitely made me the happiest person in the whole world, to know that people still support me. Like, cared about me,” Tsurumaki said regarding the visit.

During the visit, Weatherington told Tsuru-

maki that Charlotte volleyball would dedicate the next season to her, with team T-shirts bearing her name and number in solidarity with her fight.

Ahead of Charlotte’s Oct. 3, 2024, annual ‘Dig Pink’ match, in which all proceeds from the match go to breast cancer research, Charlotte Athletics unveiled their “We play for Miyu” video on social media. In the video, an athlete from each of Charlotte’s 19 teams declares, “I play for Miyu.”

Eight hundred sixty-two attended the ‘Dig Pink’ match in which Charlotte fell 0-3 to the University of North Texas. The loss was one of 24 that season.

Before the season’s end, Weatherington was out as head coach.

With Weatherington’s dismissal came change. New staff were brought in, new players were recruited and new expectations were set.

During that transitional period, Tsurumaki received an email from new Head Coach Benavia Jenkins.

The email informed Tsurumaki that she would not be part of the team in the coming season.

An assistant coach with the program that Tsurumaki said she was familiar with followed up and spoke with her about the change, Tsurumaki said the conversation was “short.”

“I could understand that they have to win. They want a player who can play this season... We didn’t have a great conversation,” Tsurumaki said.

Tsurumaki’s dismissal isn’t how she pictured her end at Charlotte, and leaves her volleyball career in limbo.

Fighting for one more chance

Athletes have quit their sport for less. In 2018, NFL cornerback Vontae Davis retired at halftime after a mid-drive realization. Michael Jordan famously retired from basketball to play baseball.

Tsurumaki beat cancer, earning the right to go out quietly. Despite this, she’s fighting again, this time for a chance to play.

“Volleyball is a part of my life. I’ve never done one thing for so long. Volleyball is the only thing I could always do,” Tsurumaki said.

Redshirting through the 2025 season, Tsurumaki has joined an estimated 30,000 other college athletes in the transfer portal, waiting for their chance to play.

The portal has been a valuable source of athlete mobility, aiding their search for greater opportunities. Some enter the portal to find new homes, while others never emerge and are left stranded: still athletes, but forever in between teams.

To promote herself, Tsurumaki has taken to social media and recruiting sites, posting her highlights for coaches to see. Some coaches have shown interest, but Tsurumaki says once they hear about her medical history, they tend to back away.

“I think they don’t want to take a risk. A scholarship is a huge amount of money, so it’s understandable,” Tsurumaki said. “It makes me sad, because it’s nobody’s fault. It’s not my fault, but it’s not their fault either.”

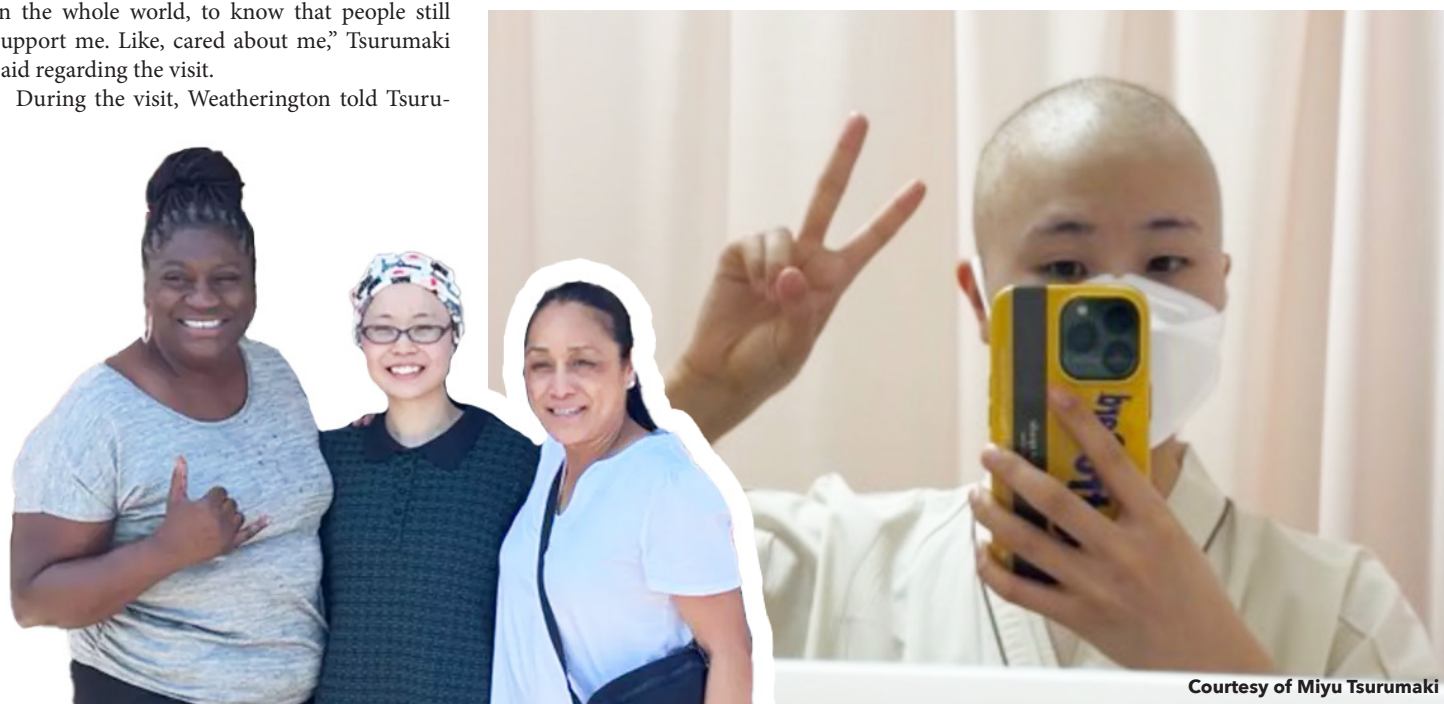
“I would like to be on the court. I’ll be happy. I’ll be so happy. That’s my goal, but sometimes I feel like it’s kind of impossible.”

For interested coaches and Tsurumaki alike, that November match two years ago against Tulsa remains her last game played. For so long, that match’s symbolism has been in question for Tsurumaki.

Could it have been her last match as a college volleyball player? Or could that inconsequential Wednesday night loss be what it should have always been?

A pause; a stopping point between one season and the next.

At 22, Tsurumaki fought for her life and won. Two years later, she’s still fighting.



Courtesy of Miyu Tsurumaki



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