

NINERTIMES

Student-driven news since 1947

Jan. 28, 2026

# SNOW DAY



CHARLOTTE STUDENTS SLED AND SHIVER  
THROUGH HISTORIC WINTER STORM



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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 events calendar

**Collage Concert**  
Robinson Hall, Anne R. Belk Theater  
Feb. 6, 7:30 p.m.

**Women's Basketball v. East Carolina**  
Halton Arena  
Feb. 1, 3 p.m.

**CAB on Ice**  
Hauser Alumni Pavilion  
Jan. 29, 7 - 9 p.m.

**Men's Basketball v. Rice**  
Halton Arena  
Jan. 31, 6 p.m.

**STEM Fair**  
Student Activity Center  
Feb. 5, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

**49er Gold Rush 5K**  
Belk Gym  
Feb. 7, 8 a.m. - 12 p.m.

## NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

# Goodbye and thank you, Mullen Publications

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief



There is a story in this edition about the closing of a small, family-owned printing company that operates just outside Charlotte. It's not a story we'd normally run or even know about, but for the Niner Times — for me — it's somewhat personal.

The Niner Times has been printed by Mullen Publications Inc. for almost 20 years. Their product has been the vessel for our coverage of the launch of our football team, the 2019 campus shooting, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and everything in between.

Their paper has made our news accessible and helped make memories forever. My parents still have copies of my first print cover. Digital publishing is easier, faster — but print is special. You can't hold a website, you can't hang it up on your wall.

Last spring, while I was reviewing the submission for our upcoming print, I noticed a typo on the cover. For me, the poorly arranged string of letters signaled the end of the world. While fighting off tears over the phone with my advisor, I was directed to call

Mullen Publications. It was a Sunday, but they picked up the phone almost instantly and reassured me that they could fix it. The maybe two-minute phone call saved my month. With Mullen Publications, we were in good hands.

While Mullen Publications will close, the Niner Times will find a new printer and continue to print. We'll be extremely lucky if our next printer meets the standard set by our last.

## From the UNC Charlotte police logs

Wes Packham | Writing Managing

The following are descriptions of a few incidents from the UNC Charlotte police logs from Jan. 15 to Jan. 25, 2026.

### Jan. 15 Injured/Ill Subjects - Cameron Boulevard/ Phillips Road - 4:57 p.m.

Officers responded to two pedestrians struck by an auto at Cameron Blvd. and Phillips Rd. Upon arrival, officers observed two individuals on the ground and a vehicle parked in the crosswalk. Upon investigation, it was determined the vehicle struck the individuals as it was making a right turn from Cameron Blvd on to Craver Road. Both individuals were conscious and alert with serious but stable injuries and were transported to Atrium Main. A report was taken.

### Jan. 17 Larceny - PPS - 3:26 p.m.

Officers were dispatched to PPS in reference to a larceny. Officers spoke with a resident student, who advised that cash was stolen from a locker they were using while at UREC. A report was complete.



# Record of movement: How ‘Mitsudo 密度’ captures the unseen through photography and film

Cris Velazquez-Euceda | Staff Writer

The Popp-Martin Student Union Art Gallery was filled only moments after the doors opened on Jan. 15. Students, family and friends were presented with Omar Awadallah, a graduate student in his final year at UNC Charlotte, capturing life in another world through his project, “Mitsudo 密度.”

“Mitsudo 密度” is Awadallah’s latest project and home to a collection of shots from around the world. Created during his ventures across China and Japan, “Mitsudo 密度” is made up of his carefully selected shots and a short film.

Awadallah made the most out of the opportunities he was given to travel. Throughout his time abroad, he made sure to bring his camera everywhere he went in an attempt to capture moments whenever possible.

“I took a lot of photos; to be precise, I took 73,000 photos and more than 10,000 short clips in the curation of the gallery,” Awadallah said. “There’s so many moments that we could miss, but I’d just keep clicking with the intention of framing and composing right.”

The theme of the gallery was movement: every shot of the short film involved moving crowds through the city of Tokyo, while the photos are snapshots of life during his time in cities around China.

Awadallah emphasizes looking at the invisible in our everyday life, something that he had begun to realize during his shoots.

“I wanted to get a different perspective of the human scale in these spaces, and that was my initial inspiration,” Awadallah said. “When I got there, I would notice these unseen moments that pass by without us noticing. [The project] became about the people more than anything else.”

## A record of movement

Movement in both the film and the photos was important to the message of enjoying the small moments in life, but the photos had to take a chance in experimenting. Though limited by the idea of movement through stills, Awadallah found movement by capturing the essence of it through naturalism.

The collection is framed as moments in time where movement is visible and uninterrupted. The photos are a glimpse into what Awadallah took in — the small moments — at their purest.

Awadallah intends to capture life in between the lens, often focusing on what many might consider the mundane in everyday life. Where many may consider mundane, he sees an opportunity for reflection and contentment.

“[I capture] the moments we pass by without noticing, and I feel like there’s a lot of richness in those moments, but we tend to overlook them,”

Awadallah said. “When we take a step back, and we enjoy how these views look, we can be happy with it.”

## Support around campus

Many of the night’s attendees showed support for Awadallah’s gallery, including friends of the artist like Ian Kreger, who attended the event in support.

“I am a big fan of his work, so I wanted to come out and support him,” Kreger said. “I hope to see his work more often. This is his first one, and it better not be his last.”

John Moir, a second-year student, stopped by just for a moment away from the cold, yet he found himself enjoying the unique photography.

“I like how they capture average people; it’s nothing crazy like high fashion, just people living their lives,” Moir said.

Mia Manjarres, a second-year student, had a similar experience and found herself enjoying the gallery as a break from her work.

“STEM majors here are always bogged down with so much; galleries like this could also serve as a brain break,” Manjarres said. “I’d like to see more highlights of everyday life, as this photographer has done.”

Awadallah’s short film was showcased in connection with his photography displayed around the gallery. The support Awadallah received encouraged him to consider submitting “Mitsudo 密度” to a film festival.

“It meant the world to me because a lot of them have seen the process, and there was a lot of support and really nice comments, especially about the film,” Awadallah said.

Awadallah hopes to continue improving his craft with filmmaking as he continues capturing parts of the world.

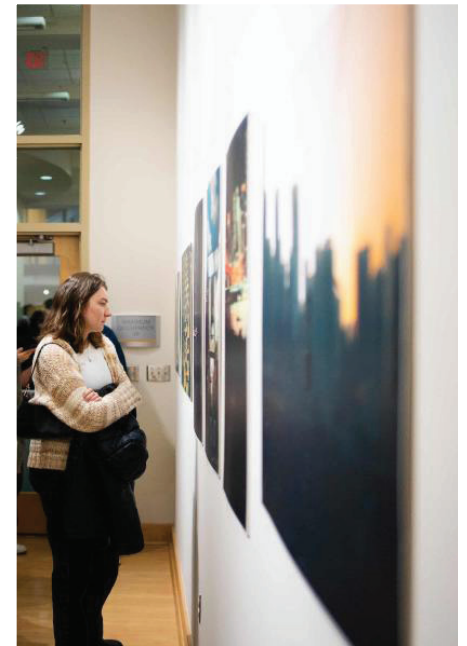
“I’ve been doing photography for years, but this was my debut in film, and so I’d like to make more and hopefully travel more,” Awadallah said.

“Mitsudo 密度” can be watched on YouTube, and more of Awadallah’s work is posted on his Instagram.

“

[I capture] the moments we pass by without noticing, and I feel like there’s a lot of richness in those moments, but we tend to overlook them.”

- Omar Awadallah



Courtesy of Omar Awadallah





# Encouragement and empowerment: How WISE takes part in helping women on campus

Cris Velazquez-Euceda | Staff Writer

With thousands of new students at UNC Charlotte every year, voices are heard through the group effort to support one another. One such group is the Women's Initiative for Selfhood and Empowerment (WISE), a club focused on elevating students and recognizing women's health.

WISE is one of many groups at UNC Charlotte showcasing ambitious leaders in support of women's empowerment. An initiative prominent around the world, WISE plans on bringing the movement closer to campus to help students remember their worth.

## Club history

WISE is the collaborative effort of three third-year students at UNC Charlotte: Lena May, Zephany Corpening and Za'niya Alston. Together, they have created a space open to all students with the mission of bringing women's health and empowerment to the forefront of campus.

The idea for the club came years before their beginnings at UNC Charlotte, when the three students noticed a lack of advocacy for women's empowerment in their own high schools.

"There wasn't much awareness about women's health, so we wanted to bring that here," May said. "A lot of young women will get their information through TikTok or find it randomly, but why didn't we learn this in school?"

WISE took the opportunity to recognize this gap in information to

students on campus, and started the club in August of 2025.

## WISE's purpose

If there's one message that the group hopes members and visitors understand, it's to give another try at being yourself first. May believes this to be as important as ever with the rise of social media throughout the years and its prominence in daily life.

"With social media, you can see everybody all the time, so I feel like now it's more important than ever to realize that it's you in the beginning, and then you can focus on everybody else," May said.

Corpening sees the importance to be even greater for newer college students who are learning to be independent for the first time.

"When it's your first time on your own, you should know how to be healthy mentally, emotionally and physically, so we're basically teaching young women how to do that," Corpening said.

## Growing interests

While WISE advocates for women in education, the club is open to all students willing to learn more and support their movement.

One such member is second-year student Dallaz Daniels, who has watched the group expand since the beginning.

"It's been a great experience, and I enjoy seeing how these young women teach and guide other women to love their bodies and encourage each other every day; it's strengthening," Daniels said.

Although the club was officially established only months ago, members have noticed a growth in their numbers through their events and interest meetings. Jay Allen, a third-year student and one of the first members of the club, has enjoyed the growth firsthand.

"I love the experience of being a part of the club, and I've met new people every time there's an event," Allen said. "People actually want to come out and see what we're about."

Both the executive board and members of the group find the campus support helpful in providing avenues for clubs similar to WISE.

"[The support] is pretty consistent, and people do come, so I think it'll get better with time," Alston said. "But even if one person comes to an event, that's one more person receiving the message."

One reason for their consistency could be their variety in events. WISE looks to host intriguing events to get members and newcomers excited to attend.

"We try to cater to different genres, like vision boards and journaling events, but we'd like to try more events that focus more on the other [aspects] of the daily lives of women," Alston said. "We want

to try yoga for your body and mind, and maybe educational events where we have someone come in and teach you about your body."

## The lasting message

The group continues to think ahead with its message by seeking a permanent spot for its mission on campus.

"We're juniors, but we still want to find that community that's going to stay because we don't want it to end with us," Alston said. "Women don't stop when we leave campus."

Beyond campus, WISE hopes to continue supporting women's health wherever they go. Corpening plans to continue her advocacy from what she's learned from her role in the club.

"I'd like to share what I've learned here through social media so it can reach a broader community," Corpening said.

May hopes to show continued support of the movement by using her previous experience working with nonprofit organizations.

"I could see myself building a center around this, like a women's center, or at least helping a non-profit similar to this," May said.

Alston stresses the importance of their cause through her final say on the matter: "We have to live by what we're teaching."



Ahmed Ahmed/Niner Times



# UNC Charlotte faculty skeptical about new public syllabi policy

Mareska Chettiar | Asst. Copy Editor

In accordance with a UNC System policy approved on Dec. 19, 2025, all UNC System universities must make course syllabi publicly accessible starting in the fall of 2026.

Under Policy 400.1.6, the syllabi are not required to include the names of professors or meeting times of classes, solely the course content and materials.

The policy stemmed from a movement spearheaded by the conservative-leaning Oversight Project, backed by the Heritage Foundation — the organization that created Project 2025 — that requested syllabi of 74 courses containing the keyword “DEI” from UNC-Chapel Hill during the summer of 2025.

The Oversight Project is a 501(c)(4) organization that uses the Freedom of Information Act to request information from institutions. Their latest requests flooded the Federal Trade Commission in the month of December for “machinations of the departed Biden administration,” according to an article by LawStreet Media.

The new policy was met with opposition from the North Carolina American Association of University Professors (AAUP) while it was being drafted and passed during December of 2025.

The NC AAUP cited the policy as an “attack on free inquiry” and highlighted threats to faculty’s personal safety.

UNC Charlotte has stated that it is working to ensure compliance with the new policy.

“Academic Affairs is working on how the University will comply with the system policy by fall 2026, including technology, guidance for faculty and processes. They will seek input from [the] Faculty Council and other relevant constituents to build a system that is compliant with the new regulation and takes into account campus-level needs,” the University said.

Professors from various UNC System institutions, including Charlotte, have already begun to shift how people access course syllabi in order to maintain academic and personal privacy, as well as take safeguards to protect intellectual property.

## Faculty perspectives

Karen Flint, a member of the UNC Charlotte chapter of the AAUP and a professor in the Department of History, shared her thoughts about the policy’s stance being ‘for the students’ — referring to the statements that highlight student benefits, including improving “student progression and timely degree completion.”

“If you are an outside organization, and you’re trying to get a lot of information about what faculty are teaching, that means you would have to go through each department, each class and click on it. So this is why AAUP has been saying, what is being created is actually not for students,” Flint said.

The UNC Charlotte Undergraduate and Graduate Catalogs contain detailed descriptions of classes and prerequisites online, available before the policy was drafted.

Flint emphasized the accessibility of course descriptions, material and schedules online and on a public campus. She explained that if accessibility for students was the problem, it could be fixed by adding syllabi to the schedule of classes.

She also expressed concerns about professors teaching sensitive topics.

“Some of us, we may be the only one in our department who teaches [the subject],” Flint said. “I’m the only African historian in my department. So it could be easy to identify me anyway; it may be easy to figure out what my courses are.”

Flint reiterated the threat to personal safety by “bad actors,” emphasizing that “doxxing” people — which involves releasing personal information like addresses and phone numbers — can be done online.

Associate Professor John Cox in the Department of Global Studies echoes Flint’s sentiments about safety for professors who teach courses with potentially controversial content.

“It would be very easy for a right-wing activist to search through some database provided by the UNC System to just look for words like race, racism, gender, LGBTQ, trans, etc., and then to

go on a witch hunt after those professors,” Cox said. “And, many, many of our classes in the UNC System were taught by people who are very vulnerable.”

Cox highlighted adjunct professors, who are often hired by a semester-to-semester contract, and non-tenured faculty.

“I’d like [students] to know that this also harms them, that anything that puts their professors and instructors in jeopardy is bad for them, it constricts their instructors into what they can teach and how they teach it,” Cox said. “And again, as part of creating a climate of fear. That’s very bad for students as well as for the faculty.”

With some Charlotte professors experiencing classroom interruptions in the fall of 2025 — with certain trends on social media prompting people to enter classrooms and film — professors teaching sensitive topics are anxious to return to campus next fall.

“We have an open campus. That’s one of the wonderful things about having a public university. Anybody can come in, anybody can use our libraries, but it also means that people could come in and disrupt our classes,” Flint said. “We know that that happened last semester.”

## A ‘compliance syllabus’

Flint also stated that she and some of her colleagues will be creating a “compliance syllabus” to post to the database.

“I have created a compliance syllabus. I will only give the information which they ask for. I’m not going to give them any more,” Flint said. “I have created a separate course expectations policy and schedule for my students, which includes all of those things.”

Flint stated that she encourages people to also create a compliance syllabus, explaining that she does not want to engage in discourse with “people who are not experts in my field.”

## Intellectual property concerns

Flint and Cox explain how the syllabi become

property of the UNC System under the new policy.

Flint used the metaphor of the syllabus being a “work for hire,” and explained how it used to be recognized as part of a professor’s intellectual property.

Now, she calls the implementation of the policy a “slippery slope” about intellectual property infringement, which may lead to lawsuits against the University and the UNC System.

According to Policy 500.2 of the UNC Policy Manual, syllabi are “directed employment-related works” and are hence owned by the University.

“That is an outrageous trampling on intellectual property rights,” Cox said. “There’s no telling what might come next. They may want to have access to our Canvas pages, even to student discussions.”

However, some professors do not have any inherent concerns about the policy.

“I don’t support it, but I haven’t been in the UNC System long, and this is a very common practice in my prior experiences,” Timothy Murtha, a professor of anthropology, wrote in an email to the Niner Times.

Before joining the Department of Anthropology at Charlotte, Murtha worked in the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida and the Stuckeman School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at Pennsylvania State University.

Murtha emphasized bigger concerns with the UNC System, as opposed to a “sunshine law syllabus policy,” referring to education policies in the state of Florida — including the Phoenix Declaration, principles written by the Heritage Foundation.

“As far as I am concerned, I am more worried about the lack of a legislative budget and how that is slowly eroding the foundation of higher education in North Carolina, along with the lack of science/arts/humanities-driven academic leadership in the state system and at our institutions,” Murtha wrote.

## Niner’s Comics: Overpriced bookstore

Blaise Uy | Staff Illustrator





# Trump's second term hits one year as UNC Charlotte students voice divided views

Cassandra Schilling | Staff Writer

Jan. 20, 2026, marked one year since Donald J. Trump took office as the 47th president of the United States.

The inauguration marked the beginning of Trump's second term in office, as he previously served as the 45th U.S. president.

In the 2024 election for the 47th president, Kamala Harris, who was previously Joe Biden's vice presidential candidate, ran

against Trump.

Since being sworn into office, Trump has signed 225 executive orders. He has signed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA) into law, altered U.S. international relations and begun to enact his campaign promise to launch America's "largest deportation program" by deploying Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in cities nationwide, among other sweeping decisions.

In an email exchange with the Niner Times, Eric Heberlig, a political science and public administration professor at UNC Charlotte, pointed out that Trump's approval ratings have remained consistent.

According to Gallup's polls, Presidential Job Approval Center, his approval ratings have been low but also relatively stable.

"This suggests that despite all the policy changes and media attention, few people have changed their minds about him," Heberlig said.

In Dec. 2025, Gallup reported a 36% approval rating for the president, the same rating he had in Dec. 2017 during his first presidential term.

An AP-NORC poll from January found that approximately 40% of Americans approved of Trump's job performance as president, which is almost the same as the March 2025 poll results.

But while general opinion polls on the president remain consistent, others show that voters' views on specific policies or concerns have shifted.

Camila Surinach/Niner Times



An AP-NORC poll conducted this month found that 38% of U.S. adults approve of Trump's handling of immigration enforcement. In the spring, 49% of respondents said they supported it.

This poll came nearly a year after ICE began its raids of American cities.

Federal immigration enforcement agents came to Charlotte in November of 2025 and arrested 425 people, prompting protests across the city.

The ICE raids have not sat well with UNC Charlotte's College Democrats.

#### The UNC Charlotte community weighs in

"Make no mistake, we are dealing with authoritarianism," the UNC Charlotte Democrats' executive board wrote to the Niner Times in a

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**"This suggests that despite all the policy changes and media attention, few people have changed their minds about him."**

**- Eric Heberlig, political science and public administration professor at UNC Charlotte**

statement. "In record time, we are seeing the crumbling of our institutions and norms. We are seeing the destruction of our cities at the hands of a state-supported agency that has proven to be nothing more than inhumane and corrupt. ICE has left our nation in fear."

The student organization also expressed concerns about Trump withdrawing America from the Paris Agreement during the current climate crisis.

The Paris Agreement is an agreement among participating countries to keep global temperatures well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels to combat global warming.

But there have been components of Trump's presidency that some voters appreciate.

"I think Trump's current term has had both positives and negatives so far. Some of the biggest pros to me have been stronger border security, improved foreign affairs, and increased geopolitical strength, including his approach to Venezuela and tariffs," said fourth-year student and Turning Point USA (TPUSA) member Matthew Kingsley. "I also support his efforts to remove unnecessary federal barriers in manufacturing and construction, along with the temporary tax cuts, which I hope become permanent before the midterms."

When Trump's OBBB was signed into law, several temporary tax cuts were enacted.

From 2025 to 2028, taxpayers aged 65 or older are able to take home an additional \$6,000 off their taxable income.

Additionally, the OBBB established no tax on tips and overtime for the same number of years.

From 2025 to 2029, cap rates from the State and Local Tax (SALT) deduction, which allows taxpayers to subtract state income or property taxes from their federal taxable income, have been increased.

For incomes under \$500,000, the cap was raised to \$40,000. For modified adjusted gross incomes over \$500,000, the cap rate is reduced by 30% until it reaches \$10,000.

Furthermore, the cap and income thresholds increase by 1% each year.

But while Kingsley expressed his approval of certain operations the Trump administration has completed throughout the first year of his term, he sees areas that need improvement.

"I do not think Trump takes the deficit seriously enough, and while gas prices have improved, the cost of living is still too high," Kingsley said. "I also appreciate his bipartisan work with Senator Elizabeth Warren on credit card interest rate caps, since that could help everyday Americans. Overall, I would rate his year so far a 7.5 out of 10. He has done many things well, but I wish more of his executive actions were being codified into lasting legislation so the impacts are long term, not temporary."

On Jan. 9, Trump made a Truth Social post calling on Congress to cap credit card interest rates at 10%.

On Jan. 12, Trump called Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts to discuss capping credit card interest rates.

This came after she gave a speech discussing how Democrats can win back the majorities of the House of Representatives and Senate in the 2026 midterms, per CNBC.

In her speech, Warren chastised those who blamed the Democratic Party for becoming "too progressive," which critics said caused Americans to vote for the Republican Party in the 2024 election.

"According to some self-described experts, Democrats lost power because we were too progressive," Warren said. "They put it more politely, but those movers and shakers want the Democratic Party to respond to the 2024 losses by watering down our economic agenda and sucking up to the rich and powerful, claiming that a less progressive Democratic Party will win more elections. They are wrong. Americans are stretched to the breaking point financially, and they will vote for candidates who name what is wrong and who credibly demonstrate that they will take on a rigged system in order to fix it. Revising our economic agenda to tiptoe around that conclusion might appeal to the wealthy, but it will not help Democrats build a bigger tent, and it definitely will not help Democrats win elections."

Warren also discussed how the "top 0.1%" of America's labor force has fewer votes in elections than the rest of the country, implying that the political party should focus on Americans who hold the majority of the votes.

Meanwhile, during the 2024 election, Trump was a familiar face in the media while running his campaign. One of his key talking points was affordability and the high cost of living.

#### Three more years

With three years left of Trump's second term, public perception will continue to take form — something Herberlig believes the president has a strong grasp of.

"Thus far, Trump has had a unique ability to manage public perceptions of events that would be damaging to most politicians in ways that have not been damaging to him," Heberlig said.

Meanwhile, like Sen. Warren, the UNC Charlotte Democrats are looking forward to the 2026 midterm elections.

Currently, Republicans have the majority of the House and the Senate.

But in November 2025, the Democratic Party saw multiple victories.

In New Jersey, Democratic Rep. Mikie Sherrill was elected as the state's governor. In Virginia, Democrat Abigail Spanberger was elected governor.

Additionally, self-described Democratic Socialist Zohran Mamdani was sworn in as New York City's mayor on Jan. 1.

The student organization anticipates citizens across the U.S. to cast their ballots in "record numbers" to "send a message" to the Trump administration.

"I want to make it clear that the current president will do anything in his power to stop the likely political blowout as a result of the mid-

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**"I think Trump's current term has had both positives and negatives so far. Some of the biggest pros to me have been stronger border security, improved foreign affairs, and increased geopolitical strength, including his approach to Venezuela and tariffs."**

**- Matthew Kingsley, fourth-year**

terms," the UNC Charlotte Democrats executive board said. "We have already seen the president force his allies in red and purple states to gerrymander their congressional districts ahead of the midterm elections, undemocratically changing fairer congressional districts."





# Trash can lids and toboggans take over as Craver Road turns into a snow day free-for-all yet again

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

**F**ootprints in freshly fallen snow creating a path up to Craver Road can only mean one thing for UNC Charlotte's campus: sledding.

After icy rain turned into about an inch of powder overnight, students woke up Sunday to a rare sight in Charlotte: snow that actually stuck.

With classes already canceled on Monday, Jan. 26, students were determined to enjoy every moment they could with the snow.

Despite the 'feels like' being 11°F on Sunday morning, dozens of students came out, bundled up and ready to have some fun sledding in the snow.

Now, the parameters for what qualifies as a sled, as set by

students, are very laid back. From broken-down cardboard boxes from their latest Amazon purchases to full-on ski gear, it didn't matter where students were from or who they were with, as long as they were ready to sled down Craver Road with a smile on their face.

Some students came prepared with traditional sleds and toboggans, but creativity quickly took over. Trash can lids became makeshift sleds, with mixed results. Others used tables flipped upside down or crouched inside laundry baskets, which inevitably broke on impact.

Some riders glided smoothly to the bottom, while others spun out halfway down the hill, earning applause and laughter from the crowd.

## Students enjoying the snow

As light snow continued to fall, students who had never seen snow before watched in awe, some standing quietly in disbelief before jumping in themselves.

Purva Jagtap, a second-year master's student from India, was surrounded by her friends as she shared that they came running out to see snow for the first time.

"This was my first experience ever sledding. It was amazing, the snow is so beautiful," Jagtap said.

Not every student arrived with a sled, but that didn't slow the crowd down.

Students passed sleds back up the hill, taking turns and offering rides to strangers who showed up empty-handed. Groups formed naturally, with students helping each other by giving others a push start.

Jack Hayes, a second-year student, brought his speaker and a table, adding to the energetic crowd as some people danced along in between rides.

"I came with some of my friends from The Grove, and we're just trying to make the best of a Sunday in the snow," Hayes said.

Hayes was among the students who had to get extra creative, and his sled of choice was a miniature scooter.

There was some out-of-state representation within the group. Third-year student Lily Caden said she grew up in Alaska, so the snow on the ground was "really nothing" compared to what she's experienced.

Second-year student Abby Corville, who was using half a cardboard box as her sled, shared that she is from Rhode Island and was surprised there was any snow at all.

Everyone there shared the same familiar feeling of sledding down Craver Road. During the brief snowfall on Jan. 22, 2025, and despite the snow barely covering the ground, students rushed to the hill

Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times



on Craver Road to go sledding.

What began as a few students cautiously sliding down the road quickly spread across social media platforms such as Instagram and YikYak, cementing Craver Road as the unofficial sledding spot at UNC Charlotte.

Memories of last year's fun helped fuel Sunday's turnout. Students said group chats lit up early in the morning, with messages and photos confirming the snow had stuck just enough to make sledding possible.

By the time the footprints disappeared, you were at Craver Road, which had already reclaimed its status as the winter wonderland spot for the campus.

"I'm having a great time, and I'm

sure everyone else here is," Jacob Purchase said after he got off his inflatable tube used as a sled.

Some students decided to use the hill near the McMillan Greenhouse as their terrain, while others used the hill on the side of Woodward facing Craver Road to sled down, building momentum as they zipped onto the road.

#### A further look into Winter Storm Fern

Hopefully, everything needed from local grocers is already in the dorms and apartment kitchens. Roads are covered in a mix of slushy snow and ice and are not necessarily safe to drive on. Especially those who don't have four-wheel drive.

While the Winter Storm Fern has been modest so far, temperatures are set to drop, bringing an icy freeze that will keep most people inside.

What weather channels have shared as their main concern is the ice accumulation expected over the course of Sunday evening.

Just one inch of freezing rain or ice is equivalent to several inches of snow.

Heavy ice buildup weighs down tree limbs and power lines, creating a significant risk for widespread power outages that could last for days.

While there have been no reports of power loss or accidents in the University City area as of 3 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 25, residents are still encouraged to proceed with caution.

The radar predicts that by 5 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 25, mixed precipitation will begin bringing even more ice to the roads. The deep freeze is said to continue well into the night, but is expected to clear up early Monday morning.

The University has shared that they will provide further updates regarding campus and class operations as needed.

Mecklenburg County provided an alert update on Jan. 24, saying that the Grady Cole Center will open as a winter storm shelter for the public.

Charlotte Area Transit System buses will provide transportation to the shelter, weather permitting.





# Theft reports highlight risks of leaving items unsecured at UREC

Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | Asst. News Editor

For many students at UNC Charlotte, leaving personal belongings in a locker at the University Recreation Center (UREC) is a routine part of working out, and a risk they knowingly take.

While the UREC provides storage options, it does not assume responsibility for lost or stolen items, and reports of theft have surfaced through student discourse and police logs.

Some of the discourse has been through social media platforms such as Reddit. Police logs also include larceny-related reports at the UREC over various time periods.

In UREC's lost-and-found policies, it states that the facility is not responsible for lost or stolen property. If theft were to occur, it should be reported to staff members immediately.

The Niner Times asked UREC for a statement regarding theft, but Erin Paul, assistant director of facility operations at the UREC, declined to comment through an email below:

"Due to internal policy and the sensitive nature of our incident response protocols, we are unable to provide a comment or facilitate interviews with any UREC staff, including administrative personnel, on the topic of theft at

this time," Paul wrote.

With the UREC waiving liability for gym-goers' personal belongings and the risk of theft that comes with items being left unattended, students offer varying opinions on whether their belongings are safe at UREC.

## The safety of storage lockers

All students who spoke to the Niner Times regarding UREC security said they felt their belongings stored in the lockers were safe during that moment and throughout their time at the facility.

Arabella Read, a second-year student, explained that she owns a lock to use at the UREC. The storage lockers gave her a sense of safety, but Read didn't think the locks on those lockers were necessarily the source of that safety.

"People are pretty cautious about not going into your stuff, even if you don't have a lock," Read said. "I don't think it [theft] is a super big problem because people have common sense not to go through your stuff and do any of that."

The UREC requires students to scan their 49er ID for entry, while non-students can purchase a full membership, a guest pass or a day pass. Ad-

ditionally, a government-issued ID or another university or college ID is required to obtain the passes.

In a UNC Charlotte Reddit thread from three years ago, a user explained that his friend left \$2,500 in cash inside his bookbag, stored in the men's locker room at the UREC.

Upon returning from their workout, the cash was missing, and so were the belongings of many others in the locker room. The user reached out through the platform in hopes of helping return the cash to his friend.

Many users responded with backlash, asking why the friend did not use a lock to store his bookbag, which contained the cash.

"This isn't an unusual threat, and your friend didn't take the proper precautions. The real message here: always lock up your stuff!" commented one user.

Another user advised using the storage lockers outside locker rooms as more beneficial. It had locks attached and was publicly accessible, reducing the risk of theft.

However, one frequent visitor had a different experience regarding unsecured lockers.

## Belongings outside the locks

Josh Jones goes to the UREC weekly and serves as the director

of Business Services for Housing and Residence Life (HRL) at the University.

Having spent a lot of time at the UREC, he hadn't experienced theft or heard of it there.

"I feel that my belongings are safe. I lock my items in the locker room when I work out. However, I have played basketball a few times and left my items outside of a locker with no issues," Jones said.

Similar to Read, Jones owns a lock he uses at the UREC, but has noticed lock usage is not common among other gym-goers.

"I often see students using lockers without locks when I work out, even though the front desk provides locks for rent," Jones said.

## Larceny-related reports

Outside of student conversations, police logs offer insight for larceny-related reports at the UREC.

On June 9, 2025, a report was made from the UREC regarding an unattended bag.

"The officer met with the reporting party, who stated she had her keys inside a bag sitting on a bench, and when she returned, the bag was there, but the keys were missing. The officers had CID (Criminal Investigations Division) review the cameras inside the UREC and discovered an elderly white male sitting next to the bag and removing the keys," the report read.

The report continued that the man was identified as a retired professor. It didn't specify whether from Charlotte or not, but he was suffering from "a cognitive condition." The man ended up returning the keys.

Another report that involved unsecured lockers was dated April 14, 2025, from a residential student.

"An officer responded and met with the reporting person, who stated that his backpack, left unsecured in a locker, was missing when he returned after finishing his workout. The backpack contained the student's laptop as well as some personal clothing items," the report read.

## To file a report

Reports of stolen or missing items can be made by contacting the Police and Public Safety building or by filing a report. Located on 9151 Cameron Blvd. on campus, they can be reached by phone or in person.

Their hours of operation are Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., excluding University holidays.

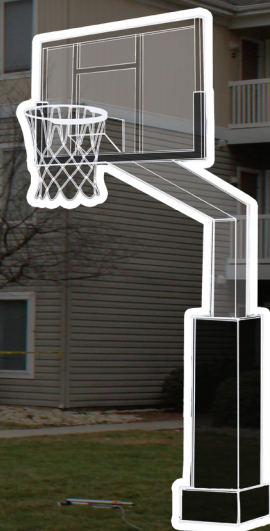




# The Edge apartment complex removes basketball court after shooting, residents voice mixed reactions

Emily Schenkel | Staff Writer

Emma Cathey & Davis Cuffe/Niner Times



After a shooting at The Edge apartment, the UNC Charlotte-owned complex, management removed the basketball court, a decision that has since brought up mixed reactions among student residents at The Edge.

In the hours following the Nov. 16, 2025 shooting, officers were stationed at the basketball court. The next morning, the court was fully taped off with yellow caution tape, and the rims of the basketball hoops were removed.

The Edge issued a statement on Nov. 17 affirming resident safety as a top priority and confirming that “all residents in our community are safe.”

“Nothing is more important to us than the safety and security of our residents. We are co-operating with CMPD during their investigation, which determined this incident occurred between non-residents. As this is an active investigation, we do not have additional details to share at this time. After the incident, we worked closely with our university partners to enhance security measures for our residents,” a spokesperson for The Edge wrote to the Niner Times regarding the incident.

The Niner Times was unable to obtain detailed information about the shooting, but police reports reveal more than \$500 in property damage to the complex and that one non-student was hospitalized with a gunshot wound after an apartment unit was shot into.

Nov. 16’s incident was not the first time that gun violence had taken place at The Edge.

On June 22, 2020, a man was shot and killed at The Edge, later leading to a murder charge filed in 2021. The man, Tavarus Lashon Taybron, was found lying in the common area of his apartment and was pronounced dead at the scene.

In December 2024, UNC Charlotte announced the \$70 million purchase of The Edge apartment complex, making the complex school property.

## Student resident reactions

Following 2025’s shooting, basketball courts were removed to prioritize “student living.”

“In coordination with UNC Charlotte, the basketball courts were removed over winter break as a part of a broader effort to enhance the student living experience at The Edge. We’re excited to transform the area into a hub for resident-focused programming such as movie nights, outdoor gatherings and pet-friendly events,” a spokesperson at The Edge said.

The basketball court had been a popular place for residents to hang out and a favorite amenity at The Edge.

A second-year student resident at The Edge, Abigail, shared that she doesn’t see the point in removing the basketball court.

“When I heard about the removal of the basketball court, I was confused and honestly thought it was a little bit stupid,” Abigail said.

Still, Leon, a second-year student and resident at The Edge, said the basketball court was often a place where fights occurred among the same groups of people.

“The root of the problem is security, but removing the basketball court is definitely a step to remove the problem because it was typically the same audience playing basketball,” Leon said. “I’ve seen that same group there sometimes arguing, like once every two weeks.”

Mary, a third-year student and resident at The Edge, also noticed frequent arguments at the basketball court.

“I think it was smart, I mean, while shootings don’t happen all the time, I feel like there were always fights starting on the basketball court. If removing the court stops the fights, then it was worth it,” Mary said.

Max, a second-year student resident at The Edge, does not understand the apartment complex’s decision to remove the basketball court.

“I mean, if the shooting happened in someone’s apartment, it’s not like they could remove the apartment, right? Removing a basketball court just doesn’t feel like a solution to any kind of violence,” Max said.

Several residents said that the removal of the court greatly affects those who used it responsibly.

“The basketball court is the most popular place at The Edge, and removing it because of some people who went too far on it doesn’t make sense. I think the real issue is the lack of security presence,” Abigail said.

Tyler, a third-year student and resident at The Edge, doesn’t play basketball himself, though he doesn’t see the court’s removal as an effective solution.

“What happened was bad, but I don’t think removing the basketball court was the right way to fix the problem,” Tyler said. “I personally never used the basketball court, but a few of my friends would play basketball there all the time. Just because one bad thing happened there, I don’t think it should be taken away for everyone.”

Third-year student and resident at The Edge, Ryan, doesn’t see the courts’ removal as an answer to help the violence, even if it happened on the basketball court.

“This is my second year living at The Edge. My roommates last year loved basketball, so I would play with them all the time, probably once or twice a week. I haven’t used the court much this year, but I hate that people who did use the courts just for fun can’t anymore,” Ryan said. “I do understand why the basketball courts got removed, but it’s not a solution.”

Although the removal of the basketball court has negatively affected many residents who used it responsibly as a shared recreational space, some said they understand why it was necessary.

“Because it’s removed for everyone, that prevents that fun from people who were using it re-

sponsibly,” Leon said. “My roommate, who plays basketball, was pretty upset about it. But, he was willing to allow it because he would rather it be gone and remove some of the problem than it be there and maybe cause future incidents.”

Abigail said she believes this will have lasting effects on the apartment complex and community, far beyond not being able to play basketball anymore.

“I have started to see memorial flowers on the basketball court. I think that this will lower the amount of people who choose to renew their lease,” Abigail said.

Security updates following shooting

After the shooting, security measures were increased throughout the apartment complex. The complex has since had more patrolling officers, fixed pedestrian gates that hung open prior and the vehicle gate is now locked at all times. And yet, some residents don’t think it is enough.

“After the shooting happened, the student door was finally fixed, and they made it to where you need your key fob to get in and out of the gate,” Leon said. “But the issue with the gate is if I’m scanning my key fob, then there’s five cars behind me, the gate stays open for the remaining time. So, say that the fourth or third car don’t live here, they can still get in here easily.”

Residents believe that a shooting should not be the only reason for more security measures to be put into place.

“I don’t get why they couldn’t have fixed the gate earlier, honestly. I believe it’s been broken for a year now, and that should be a problem even if a shooting never took place,” Ryan said.

While The Edge’s website no longer lists a basketball court as an amenity, it was included with rent for those who currently live there and signed their leases prior to the court’s removal.

The Edge offers four-bedroom, four-bathroom apartments, with rent ranging from \$809 to \$824 per person each month.



# After 80 years in print, Mullen Publications Inc. prepares to close

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

On Aug. 9, 1945, the Southern Textile News published its first edition.

It was the same day that the atomic bomb would be used in Nagasaki, Japan and an exciting venture for Mullen Publications Inc., the newspaper's parent company, which worked in printing.

The North Carolina paper would go on to cover the American South's textile industry for 64 years before shutting down in the midst of a deteriorating U.S. textile industry and declining advertising revenues. Following the closing, the business's owner, Chip Smith, was able to reorganize and go all in on Mullen Publications.

Textiles were out, but printing was still in, and that's just what Smith and Mullen Publications have done for the past 16 years. In those years, Mullen Publications has served newspapers, churches and corporate entities alike while operating out of Charlotte.

But at the end of this month, Mullen Publications will shut down its printer, stop deliveries and put an end to over 80 years of business.

"It was a decision that I had to make," Smith said regarding the closing. "It probably originated in my bed while I was lying awake in the middle of the night and through prayer and conversation with my staff and reading the tea leaves."

I spoke to Smith from behind a large wooden desk in his office in Mullen Publications' building, where they printed and shipped out paper every day. He told me that earlier that week, a textile school from Belmont, N.C., had come to his office to pick up archived issues of the Southern Textile News for their school.

Later, he tells me he almost called me that morning to say that he didn't feel like interviewing.

Smith is a friendly, sturdy man with a head of thick white hair. He's the kind of Southern man most people find easy to trust. When we spoke, he said he had cried about his business shutting down, but seemed accepting of its fate.

"We lost one of our biggest accounts this year," Smith said. "One publication we were printing three days a week bought the digital press and started doing it themselves. I think that was the final nail in our coffin. Also, I'm 68, so I'm getting kind of tired."

Smith has been around the business for a long time. He said his mother "begrudgingly" saved the business after her brother repeatedly failed to attend meetings and give the business the proper attention.

"She got ink under her fingernails, and she loved it," Smith said. "She spent the better part of 25 years doing that. We had employees come to her funeral who had worked for us 20 years

before. That was remarkable."

In 1983, Smith first walked into a printing plant and worked his way up from working with film as a "stripper" to general manager, then to president of Mullen Publications. He called his mother his "confidant" in business.

"She asked me once, 'What do you think the most difficult issue you'll face in business is?' I said, 'Cash flow.' She said, 'Yeah, that too, but dealing with people will be your biggest problem, and it doesn't need to be a problem if you have empathy,'" Smith recalls from a conversation with his mother.

Smith hasn't seemed to have forgotten that advice from his mom. His business's website has a page of testimonials from publications around the South praising his product.

"They always provide quick turnaround on the printing, delivering when they say they will. Mullen is easy to work with, and every member of their team is available when we need to ask a question. That is first-class customer service," reads a testimonial from George Zogzas of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral.

After deciding to close and letting his customers know they'd need to find someone else to print with, Smith said he's heard only positive feedback from his soon-to-be former customers.

"We've had marvelous reviews," Smith said. "I would say I've gotten a dozen or more replies to my email; it's been very fulfilling."

With all those customers served and likely millions of pages printed, comes time. Eighty years for Mullen Publications and 43 for Smith.

While we talked, he spoke of days gone by when the printing process was much different. In the company's heyday, they had upwards of 20 employees at a time; now they have only five or six. The business has maintained volume thanks to technological advancements, but it hasn't been enough.

Similar technological shifts that once helped shrink the textile industry — and ultimately shutter Southern Textile News — are now closing Mullen Publications, as information that was once printed moves increasingly online.

Still, Smith said he's enjoyed his time working with ink and paper. There was a time when conferences through Mullen Publications sent him to Italy and France.

For a while, his daughter worked with him before she left to become a paralegal.

"On a 10-point scale, I say the experience was easily an eight in terms of my experience with meeting folks and trying to pay the bills," Smith said, smiling.

Soon, that experience will come to an end.

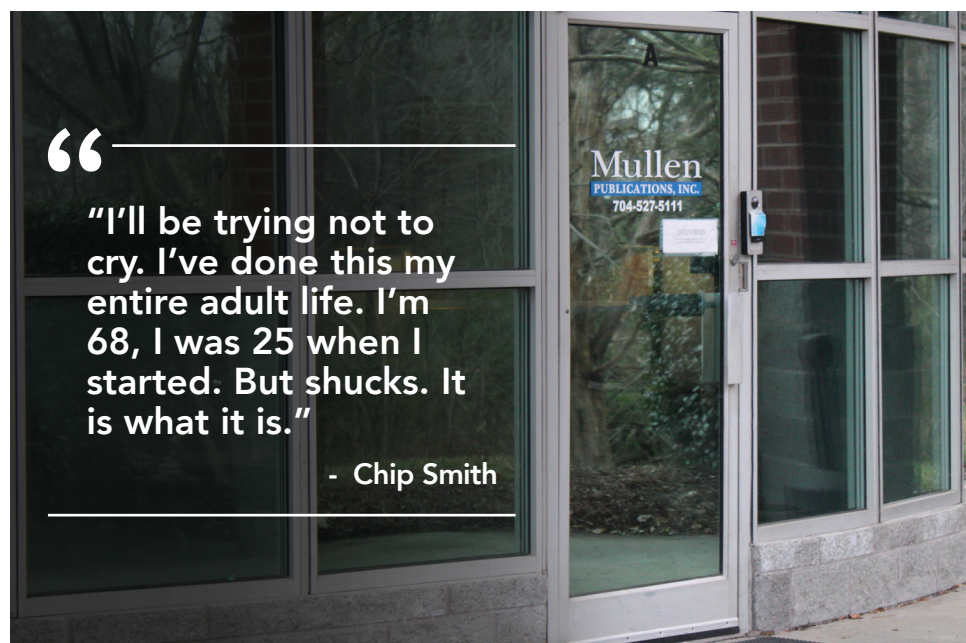
After more than 80 years of printing, Smith

will take final orders at the end of January and make his final deliveries, bringing four decades of his own work in ink and paper to a close. He says it's not a moment he'll enjoy.

"I'll be trying not to cry," Smith said. "I've done this my entire adult life. I'm 68, I was 25 when I started. But shucks. It is what it is."

Smith never told me what would come after Mullen Publications for him. Maybe he reorganizes again, like he did when Southern Textile News closed and begins a new chapter in business. Maybe he retires and can return to one of the places he visited during a prior conference — I hear France is nice.

What is clear is that Smith and Mullen Publications will be hard to forget. Their print copies will remain in archives and on bookshelves long after the printers shut off, leaving ink and paper to hold the memory of a business that did its job until the very end.



Chip Smith (left) working Mullen Publication's printer on Jan. 23





Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Ava Weaver/Niner Times & Courtesy of UNC Charlotte

Sitting on my dad's couch watching Charlotte football take their penultimate loss of the season to Tulane on a November Saturday night, my dad posed a question.

"Do you think in this guy's darkest nightmares, he thought they would go 1-11?"

The guy in his question was, of course, Charlotte football head coach Tim Albin, who left the Ohio University football program he'd coached for over two decades and found great success before leaving for Charlotte.

During Albin's first season as Charlotte's Head Coach, his 49ers' one win came against Monmouth University. Charlotte lost the rest of their games by an average of 25 points.

While Ohio's team continued the success that Albin had started, going 9-4 in 2025, Charlotte was plainly terrible. On most Saturdays in Jerry Richardson Stadium last season, the best Charlotte team playing was the band.

After one of the season's many losses to the top-ranked University of Georgia, the Niner Times' incredibly talented sports editor, Kelli Blackburn, asked Albin what he'd learned about himself this season.

Before answering, Albin took a 10-second pause, seemingly caught by her question and the reflection that the question needed before answering. In his answer, he talks about family: the one he's building in Charlotte under an interim athletic director after the one who hired him was fired midseason, the family he left in Ohio and his wife, who he said steadied him through the season.

"You can only have so much Tito's," Albin laughed to himself before righting himself. "My wife — she keeps me on the straight and narrow."

The answer doesn't exactly address Ms. Blackburn's question, but it paints a pretty glum pic-

ture of Albin's life during the season, despite his wife's best efforts. I trust Albin drinks responsibly, but I don't think he downed all that Tito's he mentioned during postgame celebrations, considering his team's record.

Albin's response does answer my dad's question, and no, I don't think Albin could have dreamt a worse season.

Of course, Albin isn't the first to have a nightmarish season as Charlotte's head coach. He arrived following the firing of Biff Poggi, a colorful figure who earned more campus notoriety for wearing cutoff shirts during game day and smoking cigars in the locker room following wins. Poggi only smoked six of those victory cigars during his 22 games as a head coach and was dismissed following a 35-point homecoming game loss.

Before Poggi was a cast of characters who all found about the same amount of success as he did at Charlotte.

To some, I may be underselling it in saying Charlotte football has struggled in its 13 years on campus. Pop into any student forum or even classroom, and you'll find students and professors alike passing snide remarks about reallocating football's funding to parking or dorms. Better yet, scroll through one of the many creatively-named burner accounts belonging to Charlotte football fans on X. In those anonymous accounts, it won't be hard to find sharp criticism of their team's coach and calls for fundamental change in the program.

Change that some believe will come from a new head coach.

I'm not one to defend my school's millionaire coach from anonymous social media accounts, but I am one to call for a little bit of hard thought before criticizing a historically successful coach

for struggling in a program that has historically struggled. But as convenient as it is to consolidate your complaints and have a figurehead to blame for a record that looks like an early-year tour date, Charlotte's issues clearly go way beyond one year of Albin.

For one, the roster was poor. Shout out to my fellow classmates and peers, you all played your hearts out last season, but the 49ers won one game, and it wasn't Albin suiting up behind center. Albin's late hiring in 2024 meant he was late to the recruiting cycle and thus, late to premier talent.

Even if he had been hired "on time," Charlotte simply would not have the funds to make those acquisitions. Like everything, college football is about money now, and Charlotte's NIL budget was almost three times lower than its competition's in 2025. While the conference winner, the University of Tulane, had roughly \$3 million to spend, Charlotte had \$1 million.

While you can buy talent, you can't buy culture. That takes time, experience and continuity — things Charlotte doesn't have.

This year's college football championship between the University of Miami and Indiana University brought together programs with a combined 216 years of history. College football powerhouses, Georgia, Alabama and Ohio State all have programs that are over 100 years old.

If Charlotte's program were a person, it wouldn't be old enough to drive a car legally.

It may be best to have a little patience in the program and a little faith in Albin, who turned a struggling Ohio program into a perennial conference contender.

For the Albin heretics, or for those who just want something to poke fun at, I offer something a bit more grim.

In Week 2 last season, Charlotte faced off against the Bill Belichick-led University of North Carolina Tar Heels. During the game, all the hallmarks of 49er football were on display: shaky quarterback play, a second-quarter glimmer of hope and even a sold-out crowd that was gone by the third quarter.

The 49ers lost that game 20-3 and left Albin to address the media that dramatically thinned out following Belichick's departure from the podium. Albin gave some defeated-sounding remarks and a quick Q&A with the press, where he would answer questions about how his team could bounce back and what adjustments he could possibly make to fix a team that'd looked painfully outmatched in their first two outings.

It looked like the writing was on the wall for another rough Charlotte season — one that would follow many before it.

Turning to another reporter in the room, I asked a question.

"What do you think it is?"

I respect this reporter quite a bit and recognize media access is valuable, so I won't identify them, but I will reveal what they said.

"I think we're cursed."

As conspiratorial as it sounds, there could be some truth to it.

In Japan, four and nine are considered unlucky numbers — associated with death and suffering.

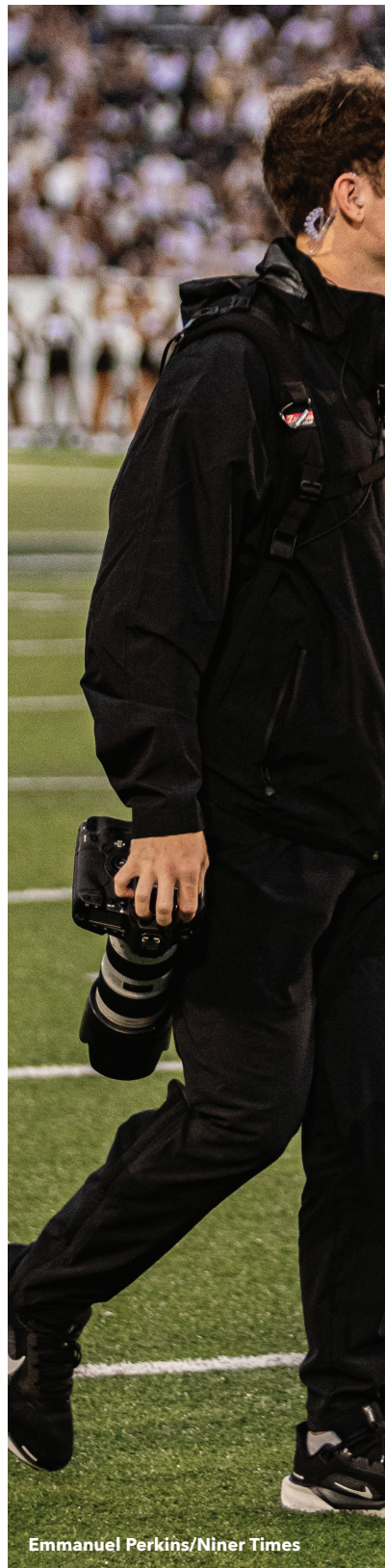
You can believe whatever you want about the cause of Charlotte football's plight.

Maybe you believe it's a poorly financed roster or a Japanese curse, but I do ask that you believe it's not Albin.



# From Charlotte to Hard Rock: Ryan Amstutz's rise to the College Football Playoff

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

The 2026 College Football National Championship took place on Jan. 19 in Miami, drawing thousands of fans and staff to one of the most prestigious events in NCAA athletics.

Before kickoff, pregame ceremonies filled the field, and the National Anthem echoed through Hard Rock Stadium — and among the crowd stood fourth-year UNC Charlotte student Ryan Amstutz, camera in hand, thinking: “Wow, I’m actually here. How do I get back here?”

Amstutz, a graphic designer for Charlotte football, was one of just 18 creatives nationwide selected to join the College Football Playoff (CFP) Content Team, a prestigious honor from a pool of more than 300 student interns.

## From athlete to artist

Creative media wasn’t a path he initially envisioned. A multisport athlete in high school, he had the opportunity to play soccer at the collegiate level, but never seriously considered it.

“That was something that was intriguing to me, but it wasn’t like jumping off the paper,” Amstutz said.

When that chapter ended, he wasn’t sure what to do next. Sports had always been central to him, so he turned to graphic design, creating projects for his high school teams that helped grow attendance.

“It wasn’t very good at all, but it was fun,” Amstutz said. “I enjoyed it.

I found a niche in that after I stopped playing sports — I mean, going from three practices a day and a lift in there too — you have a lot of time in your hands.

So, I started doing a lot of that kind of stuff, and then throughout that summer [and into college] kept going.”

## Passion to purpose

College decisions came next. He chose Charlotte, partly because he had a roommate lined up — a decision that turned out to be one of his best.

Once on campus, he posted his work again and caught the eye of former UNC Charlotte football Director of Creative Media Joe Mitchell, who brought him onto the football team’s creative staff. Early work was small, sometimes “dirty,” but Mitchell saw Amstutz’s drive and potential.

“I was rooted in athletics for so long, where, once that was gone, I didn’t really know what to do,” Amstutz said. “It was like, if I can’t be in that anymore, how can I find something that takes my time up and [that I] find enjoyable? Making a graphic, or something like that, it’s like, ‘Wow, this is my output, and I can feel good

about making something like that.”

As a first-year, Amstutz balanced school and work like a full-time job. When Mitchell left for a position at Texas A&M University, he ran the Creative Media Department for two months, testing his leadership and initiative.

A new director, Zakk Ryherd, arrived, and together they built Charlotte football’s brand. By his second year, Amstutz traveled to all away games. By his third, it was about maximizing impact — capturing the Charlotte football story.

Building an identity extended beyond the creative department, into the hands of players, coaches and staff. Amstutz capitalized on his position as a way to build relationships with everyone inside the program, rather than limiting himself to a narrow role.

As he puts it, with Head Coach Tim Albin, it feels like a tribe. Amstutz goes around to the staff asking, “What can I do for you?” and coordinates with his resources and tools to piece together content that resonates with everyone inside and outside the football team.

Over the years, he handled countless assignments, always staying true to his voice and focusing on the human side of the field. In 2025, he created weekly game posters and side projects highlighting players’ awards and recognition.

Seeing players grow became one of Amstutz’s favorite parts of the job.

From his roommate and best friend, redshirt junior punter Bronson Long, to players like Henry Rutledge and former quarterback Deshaun Purdie, whom he first met as a high school junior, Amstutz has watched athletes arrive trying to find their identities and leave as confident men.

For him, watching players grow is a reminder that beneath the spotlight and the pedestal, they are still human — and that understanding shapes every photo he takes.

Working in sports remained a grind. Amstutz would spend his day-to-day arriving at the facility at 6 a.m., leaving at 5 p.m., balancing school and projects and even preparing in the offseason.

## Getting the ‘yes’

The next opportunity found him on Instagram: a direct message from Cole Schmitt, a College Football Playoff social media intern. Amstutz had been selected to join the CFP Content Team.

“I was like, ‘Bro, this isn’t real,’” Amstutz said. “I was excited to work with a new brand, new people and learn from them after working with Charlotte’s brand for so long.”

At the CFP, graphics projects started in November, giving the team time to establish workflows and branding. The experience was a learning opportunity and a resume builder, teaching him organizational skills, new techniques and the value of collaboration.

“I keep calling it like summer camp when I talk to my friends here,” Amstutz said. “You get thrown in the room with 18 different people who all kind of have the same interests as you, but it’s then your part to figure out how you’re gonna take that and those people and small interests, then branch that out. We got into cars, went and then everything was the same.”

During championship week, Amstutz was assigned to Indiana University for graphics work. When riding back from a practice one evening, he remembers the windows rolled down to the 60-degree weather, looking out at the pink and orange sunset and thinking about how good it felt to be living out an accomplishment.

## Stepping onto the stage

Capturing moments from the favored team presented a challenge, but also an opportunity. He was everywhere on the field, seeking unique perspectives. While everyone captured Fernando Mendoza’s dive, Amstutz photographed the moment Mendoza tried to take a knee and got hit, giving his work a distinct perspective.

He even captured sideline personality: rapper Lil Uzi Vert sporting Mendoza’s jersey and other memorable moments that added life to the event.

By the end of the week, after practices, long days and bonding with his new cohort, he reflected on the experience. “It was probably the best weekend of my life,” he said. “Meeting lifelong friends, seeing everything happen around you — it was awesome.”

## What’s next?

Amstutz hopes to stay in college football, but for now, he trusts God’s plan and waits for the next opportunity.

“Ryan is an exceptional graphic designer and photographer, but an even better person,” Schmitt said. “His work ethic, personality and drive to be great elevate an already impressive skill set. Any team would be lucky to have him.”

Whatever comes next, Amstutz knows one thing — he’s already found the answer to the question he asked on the field in Miami: keep working, and find your way to the next big stage.





Megan Khor & Megan Bentley/Niner Times

# Opinion: The ‘Monk Walk’ is about PR, not peace

Sophie Sommer | Staff Writer

Fervor has swept the nation as a group of approximately two dozen monks takes a “Walk for Peace” from Fort Worth, Texas, to Washington, D.C. The buzz was impossible to ignore as they passed through University City on Jan 15. The purported goal of the walk is to spread peace and encourage unity, but how achievable are these nebulous concepts? Without concrete goals and demands, the only change the Walk for Peace actually creates is in their Instagram following.

On a personal level, the monks offer some solace in a politically tumultuous time. This is, of course, a positive, but it does little to nothing actually to change the violence and fear people are experiencing. Peace is a large, undefined concept that seems to mean something different to every person you meet.

Saying you want peace does not stop people from being shot with an unregistered firearm, and it is frankly rude to call for unity when the

federal government has been illegally removing people from their neighborhoods under unconfirmed suspicions that they may be immigrants. Asking everyone to just ‘get along’ does nothing to keep ICE agents from attacking protesters in Minneapolis.

In addition, do we really want to get along with everybody? At the press conference for the Walk for Peace, a letter of encouragement was read from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. Gov. Abbott is known for policies such as allowing people to conceal carry firearms on college campuses, installing buoys covered in razor wire in the U.S.-Mexico border and threatening to freeze property taxes for cities that tried to move parts of their police budget towards social services. These decisions do not scream peace and unity.

Along with this, practically a third of their Instagram posts are pictures of the monks wearing shawls decked out in police badges. Considering the past half-decade of politics surrounding po-

lice, the monks aligning themselves with cops, and Gov. Abbott, it seems to suggest that what they want is a return to the status quo, not peace.

The monks have one more stated goal and an unstated goal that becomes more obvious the more you learn. While not mentioned in many articles, the reason they are ending the walk in Washington, D.C., is not to make demands on how the government can improve, but rather to lobby for the Buddha’s birthday to be a federal holiday. There is nothing wrong with wanting the Buddha’s birthday to be a federal holiday, but the fact that it was not included in the original press release does feel a little disingenuous.

The unstated goal is to promote their new project, the Dhammacetiya. The Dhammacetiya Project is a \$200 million expansion over 14 acres of the Huong Dao Vipassana Bhavana Center. They are currently in the process of building 840 stupas, or shrines, on the land. The Fort Worth Zoning Commission approved the

project in 2022, which will include lodging for up to 150 people, event spaces, a food court and other amenities. Approximately a quarter of the press release for the Walk for Peace is dedicated to discussing Dhammacetiya. It’s hard to ignore its \$200 million presence looming over the walk.

When looking at the bigger picture of the monk’s journey, it seems the only things that will change are perhaps a federal holiday and astounding levels of news attention on them when they reach Washington, D.C., which, if following the trend of the press release, will be used to promote their temple’s expansion. No peace will come from this, no unity.

It is a good thing to give people comfort in trying times, but when you offer comfort, you must offer change, something the monks do not care to do.



# Column: Dear Niners, please don't take normal for granted

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

Courtesy of Lauren Simendinger

When you are disabled, your normal looks different from others.

A 'good day' for you is someone else's nightmare. Even then, good is subjective. The thing with disability and chronic illness is that it rules you, whether you like it or not. And it is not a particularly kind master. If you are lucky, you can manage the symptoms; learn to live with them. Normal is long gone, if it ever existed, but peace, however tenuous, is an option.

If you are careful, if you treasure your luck, this

peace can last for years. But peace is not heaven. It is not bliss. It is certainly not ignorance. It is simply the absence of war.

And war does not leave you easily.

Still, you are grateful for it. I certainly was.

I have always been sick. Born 29 ½ weeks, one pound 12 ounces, I was fighting battles from the start. I won't go into all the details, but my prematurity left me with a lifetime of stomach problems. My childhood was an endless journey of doctors' appointments and hospital visits. This was my normal. It sucked.

After 13 years, I finally got a diagnosis for what was wrong with my stomach, and this led to a new, better, normal. With medication and careful monitoring, I could leave the hospital behind and live like the kids who were not sick. Things were not perfect; there were scares, episodes and emergency room visits that thankfully did not become long-term.

Every decision I made — where to go to college, if I lived in a dorm or with a parent, could I, should I go on this trip — was guided by my cruel ruler. What if I had another episode? What if I had to go to the hospital again? But it had not happened in years. Would not happen again.

But war leaves marks.

2018 was the last time I was in the hospital, and everyone — me, my parents and my doctors — truly believed it was just that — the last time. And it was, until the night of Dec. 23, 2025.

My episode started that afternoon. I tried waiting it out. After all, the usual cause of an episode was absent, and when flare-ups happened in the past, they would resolve within 24 hours. There was no reason to believe this was any different. I would be fine.

War never fully leaves.

My episode did not resolve itself. In fact, it just kept getting worse. By 8 p.m. that night,

I knew I had no choice: I had to go to the hospital.

Though I had never been there before, I decided to go to Atrium Health University City. I told my dad, whom I live with, and called my mom to tell her what was happening, and we drove to the emergency room. In a few hours, my life changed forever, and I did not even realize it yet. For this was the start of the worst two-and-a-half weeks of my life.

(Yes, I did spend my Christmas and New Year's in the hospital. No, that was not even the

worst part.)

There is a common depiction of people with disabilities and living with chronic illness as warriors. Brave souls battling the demons wreaking havoc on their lives. Maybe I am a warrior, who knows? I do know that I did not feel like a warrior in that hospital. I felt like a casualty of war.

Those two-and-a-half weeks were a blur. I do know that the last half was far worse than the first. All my previous hospitalizations were no longer than a week, and this was on track to be the same. But then the night before I was going to be discharged, my stomach flared up again. My ruler was not done with me.

It got really bad. I lost a lot of weight, which only exacerbated things, and as my illness is very rare and complicated, no one seemed to really know what to do with me. I was constantly bursting into tears, exhausted and utterly numb. The farthest I got from the four bland walls of my hospital room was the hallway nearby, which, ironically enough, overlooked the UNC Charlotte campus. I doomscrolled on TikTok and let my parents do the talking when the doctors came by.

What did it matter? Even if, by some miracle, I finally got out of this hospital, what future did I have? I was hooked up to a feeding tube 24/7, which was attached to my stomach, and no one could tell me when I could get it out. I was expected to live on tube feeding and that alone. Nothing by mouth. At all. My present sucked. My future probably did too. This was my new normal. God, what I would give for my old one.

Imagine enjoying roast beef one day and nothing the next. The only way you can get nutrition is from a formula that runs through a tube in your stomach. You do not know if you will ever be able to eat again. Horrible, isn't it? Strange, too, I bet. Do not worry, it is for me too. I never thought I would not be able to eat. Food is so easy to take for granted. It keeps us alive, obviously, but we are designed for it.

Our mouths open wide to make room for it, our teeth mash it down, our taste buds savor its flavor. It travels down our esophagus into our stomach, where it's absorbed to give us nutrients. Sometimes we do not want to eat, and I get it. Me too. But now I would give anything to eat a piece of dog food, if only to savor the feeling of crunching down on it, tasting it, swallowing it. My normal is now nothing. No food, no answers. No future.

Maybe I am being dramatic. Probably, things will get better. I will find a good doctor who knows my illness and will finally put an end to it once and for all. Things will return to normal.

Except it won't.

My new normal will be foreign. Uncharted. It will be filled with its own set of challenges, as it normally is with disability. Cures are often double-edged swords. I will let you in on a secret, Niners: this new normal terrifies me.

My illness has never really traumatized me. Props of being born with it, I guess. I am sure my previous hospitalizations were traumatizing, but nothing will ever compare to those two-and-a-half weeks of hell. To my life now. There is Before Dec. 23, 2025, and After. I have re-formed. I do not know how to walk on my new legs.

It would be one thing if I were still in middle school or high school. But now I am not just in college — I am an adult, so the bills, the supplies and the appointments are all my responsibility. At the same time, I am more reliant on my parents than ever. And then there is the school of it all. I am not exactly a social person; in fact, I am quite introverted, but I do like people. I like being around them. I like being in a classroom. That is not happening anytime soon.

I am not contagious or anything; it is just too unrealistic with my reliance on tube feeding right now. I go to work for three hours a week, but that is it. Humans are social creatures, and that is hard to understand until isolation is forced upon you. The last time I felt this lonely was when I had COVID-19 in 2022, and that was only for a week. I could be living like this for months.

I am not writing this for pity or even sympathy. I will get over myself, and I am getting there, I promise. It is just hard to swim to shore when you feel like you are drowning, and I do not know if my new body knows how to swim, or how water even works in this new reality. But I will find out.

I am writing this to tell you, Niners, and anyone else reading this, to please not make my mistake. Do not take your normal for granted, whatever it looks like. You never know when it will be taken from you. I am not saying to be grateful for your life if it does genuinely suck. But things can and will change, and it is just as likely that it will get worse as it will get better. I just want you to look around, take a deep breath and appreciate all the good in your life. Treat it as the treasure it is.

I also want you to go eat your favorite meal, whatever it is. Savor that meal. And feel free to take a picture, describe what it tastes like and send it my way. Let me live vicariously through you, and plan for my first meal when I can finally eat real food again. Nothing with milk, though, I am lactose intolerant.

