



# NINERTIMES

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Jan. 14, 2026

## The Walk for Peace:

On Southern  
roads, 19  
monks have  
sparked a  
movement

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editor@ninertimes.com

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CONTRIBUTING STAFF  
Lindsay Hawkins, Mallory Evans, Nathan De Souza,  
Nicholas Hunt, Camila Surinach & Bryan Chen

LAYOUTS  
Cover photo: Walk For Peace Monks | Davis Cuffe/  
Niner Times  
Cover layout by Ava Weaver  
Interior layouts by Ava Weaver, Megan Khor & Davis  
Cuffe

MARKETING DIRECTOR  
Madison Lewis  
mktdirector@charlotte.edu

NINER MEDIA STAFF  
Kelly Merges MEDIA ADVISER  
Justin Paprocki MEDIA ADVISER  
Laurie Cuddy BUSINESS MANAGER  
Bianca Fruscello MARKETING COORDINATOR

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.

CONTACT INFORMATION  
9201 University City Blvd. SU 042  
Charlotte, NC 28223  
Phone: 704-687-7148  
Email: editor@ninertimes.com



UNC Charlotte events calendar

Winter Student Org Showcase Jan. 15, 5:30-7 p.m. Halton Arena	Women's Basketball v. Tulsa Jan. 17, 4 p.m. Halton Arena	CAB @ Nite Jan. 16, 6 - 9 p.m. Popp-Martin Student Union 340
Men's Basketball v. Tulane Jan. 25, 2 p.m. Halton Arena	Recharge Jan. 15, 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. University Recreation Center (UREC)	Martin Luther King Jr. Day Jan. 19 No Class

NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:  
Quitter's Day

Madeline Andrews | Arts & Culture Editor



Two weeks ago, you might have given your friends a monologue about how daily trips to the campus Chick-fil-A are 'so last year,' or that you'll be setting the pace in the Charlotte marathon. If you made one of those "change everything" goals on New Year's Day, you have likely gone back to your old ways. The second Friday of the year is the unofficial "Quitter's Day," the day when around 80% of people have abandoned their resolutions.

According to Psychology Today, less than 10% of people stick to their resolutions through the year. It's hard not to be tempted to want a do-over. If the calendar is resetting, then why can't I? But if you didn't make it past Jan. 9, give yourself some grace for braving an attempt at change, and if you're still going strong, congratulations on beating the odds, just try not to rub it in around the rest of us. It may feel discouraging to feel

From the UNC  
Charlotte police  
logs

Montserrat Marcelo-Morales | Staff Writer

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Dec. 10, 2025 to Jan. 9, 2026.

Dec. 20  
Trespass

A non-affiliated and a previously trespassing individual were found lying down on the ground behind the Popp-Martin Student Union. The identity of the individual was confirmed, and they were placed under arrest for second-degree trespassing and taken to the Mecklenburg County Jail.

Jan. 1  
Trespass

Officers responded to a suspicious person spotted at the light rail stop. Once the light rail arrived at the stop, the officers met with the light rail operator, who stated that a man who was banned from the train was aboard. Officers instructed the operator to let the man off at the JW Clay stop.

# Defining performances, ambitious visions headline 2025's top films

Eván Campos & Nathan De Souza | Asst. Sports Editor & Staff Writer

In 2025, genre cinema emerged as the year's most powerful creative force. From dystopian sci-fi and psychological horror to intimate historical drama and propulsive character studies, filmmakers reshaped familiar frameworks into outlets for obsession, anxiety and ambition.

The films that follow exemplify this creative momentum through thematic depth and clear authorial vision, collectively defining the year's most significant cinematic achievements.

## 10. "It Was Just an Accident," directed by Jafar Panahi

The film thrives by following everyday people navigating Iran's system and the realities they face within it, centering on former political prisoners who encounter a man they suspect is one of their former torturers. What begins as a mystery slowly becomes something far more emotionally involving, driven by a strong ensemble cast that fully inhabits this world. It is a quick, thought-provoking watch that stays with you days after viewing.

## 9. "28 Years Later," directed by Danny Boyle

Boyle reunites with writer Alex Garland to deliver a sequel that feels both formally daring and thematically assured. Employing multiple iPhones for select sequences, "28 Years Later" embraces a bold visual strategy that enhances its immediacy and unease.

Garland's writing deepens the mythology of the infected alongside Boyle's precise direction, sustaining tension through atmosphere rather than spectacle.

Together, they produce a sequel that expands its universe with purpose, reaffirming the genre's capacity for innovation and making "28 Years Later" one of the most compelling achievements of the year.

## 8. "Sinners," directed by Ryan Coogler

Coogler's "Sinners" is a bold, genre-defying epic that fuses period drama,

music and supernatural horror into what may be his most accomplished work to date. Anchored by an intoxicating score from Ludwig Göransson, music functions as a living force within the film, shaping both rhythm and cultural identity.

Michael B. Jordan delivers a remarkable dual performance as twin brothers Smoke and Stack, crafting two distinct characters whose bond anchors the film's emotional core.

Coogler's virtuosic use of IMAX photography and shifting aspect ratios heightens both spectacle and intimacy, culminating in a juke-joint sequence that stands among the year's most indelible scenes. Blending visceral entertainment with cultural resonance, "Sinners" emerges as one of 2025's most ambitious cinematic achievements.

## 7. "Weapons," directed by Zach Cregger

"Weapons" is a razor-sharp, tightly written thrill ride spearheaded by Cregger's gliding filmmaking, set around the disappearance of 17 third-graders who vanish from their homes at 2:17 a.m., leaving behind a distraught teacher, played by Julia Garner, and suspicious parents, including a grieving father (Josh Brolin). It drops slightly on rewatch once the central mystery is known, but the camera movement and storytelling remain such clear achievements that it belongs on this list regardless.

## 6. "No Other Choice," directed by Park Chan-wook

Park was already one of the most inventive filmmakers working today, but this film still feels like a superstar leap in craft. Framed around a devoted family man who is fired after 25 years at a paper company, then spirals through a quest to reclaim purpose and secure another job by any means necessary, it is packed with clever transitions that take command of the screen.

For anyone interested in filmmaking, a Park film remains an advanced education, and this one is a particularly remarkable display of technical confidence.

## 5. "Hamnet," directed by Chloé Zhao

Zhao delivers one of the year's most emotionally resonant films, transforming historical loss into an intimate lived experience. Centered on Agnes, the wife of Shakespeare, Jessie Buckley gives a career-defining performance that balances restraint and depth, while Paul Mescal delivers a subtle turn that reinforces Buckley's emotional gravity.

Through patient direction and focus on interior states, "Hamnet" becomes a profound meditation on mourning, memory and acceptance.

## 4. "Sentimental Value," directed by Joachim Trier

"Sentimental Value" transforms physical space, memory and art into vehicles for emotional reckoning. Centering on an estranged father and his daughters, particularly Nora (Renate Reinsve), a theater actor grappling with anxiety, the film explores how trauma is inherited and expressed through creative work.

Anchored by exceptional performances, it becomes a deeply humane meditation on art as refuge and repair.

## 3. "Bugonia," directed by Yorgos Lanthimos

Your mileage may vary with Lanthimos, but "Bugonia" was completely for us. It is bleak, funny and smart, led by two of the year's best performances: Jesse Plemons as Teddy, a spiraling conspiracy theorist, and Emma Stone as Michelle, the woman he kidnaps because he is convinced she is not human.

What begins as a story about a man losing his grip on reality evolves into something far more intriguing and unsettling. We really appreciate films that truly go for it, and this one absolutely does that and then some.

## 2. "Marty Supreme," directed by Josh Safdie

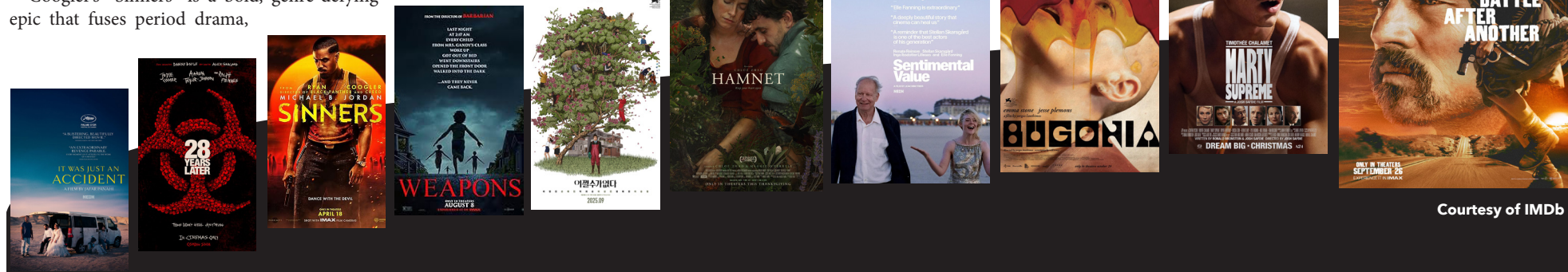
"Marty Supreme" is a relentless portrait of ambition at all costs, following a 1950s New York shoe salesman and aspiring table tennis champion, Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet), who schemes and cons his way through life while chasing a very specific version of greatness.

The film is ultimately about self-belief and confidence, the idea of becoming a supreme version of yourself and what it feels like to be young and reckless in your 20s. Safdie's control of chaos creates an anxiety-inducing momentum that never relents.

## 1. "One Battle After Another," directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Anderson turns films into events, and this is his most propulsive yet. It centers on washed-up revolutionary Bob Ferguson (Leonardo DiCaprio), who is forced into hiding to protect his daughter Willa (Chase Infiniti) after his nemesis Col. Steven J. Lockjaw (Sean Penn) resurfaces.

Bursting with craft and ideas refined over decades, the film feels destined to earn Anderson his long-overdue recognition from the Academy Awards. Right now, he stands as the defining filmmaker of this century, and this release only strengthens that case.



Courtesy of IMDb

# Charlotte professor remembers summer job as Quentin Tarantino's assistant on 'Kill Bill'

Mallory Evans | Staff Writer

“**K**ill Bill: The Whole Bloody Affair” hit theaters on Dec. 5, 2025; the first time both volumes of “Kill Bill” have been theatrically shown together, featuring new, never-before-seen content. The stories follow an assassin (Uma Thurman) as she seeks revenge against her ex-boss and former lover, the titular Bill, and her former team: the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad.

The first installment was shot primarily in Beijing in 2002, where one of UNC Charlotte's very own professors, Min Jiang, was looking for a summer job before her move to the United States for her doctorate program at Purdue University. While most would get a summer job scooping ice cream or lifeguarding at a pool, Jiang found herself on the “Kill Bill” set working as assistant to the director — Academy Award-winner Quentin Tarantino.

## Getting the job

While job searching, she was introduced to a film producer — completely by accident — who was looking for assistants to work on a movie set.

“I was told it's going to be a Hollywood production, and I did not know it was this particular film in the making. And I actually, at that point, did not know who Quentin Tarantino was,” Jiang said. “I just went for the job interview not knowing which specific department I'd work for, and then they told me, ‘Okay, I think you will be good for being Quentin's assistant.’”

At the time, Tarantino was best known for writing and directing the film “Pulp Fiction,” which proved to be a massive success during awards season and is now hailed as one of the greatest films of all time.

Anyone would be anxious at the thought of working directly beside a famous Hollywood director, so by not knowing who Tarantino was, it may have actually been to Jiang's benefit. She was spared any feelings of insecurity that could have formed had she already been a fan of his work.

“I did not know how famous he was. We treated each other respectfully as individuals, individuals with jobs. So it was actually much easier. And afterwards, then I watched ‘Pulp Fiction’ and ‘Reservoir Dogs’ and realized, ‘yeah — he's a movie genius.’”

## Working with Tarantino

The job consisted of six-day workweeks, averaging 10 to 12 hours a day over the summer months.

As assistant to the director, Jiang's primary responsibility was acting as a translator between the director and Chinese film crews. Anytime Tarantino needed to relay a message to the Chinese crew, she would be there. She would also

pick him up from the airport on occasion.

Tarantino has been described as a genre filmmaker, meaning he utilizes familiar conventions when working within a specific genre while also incorporating unique stylistic choices.

“He is a bit superstitious. He would ship his typewriter, on which he wrote ‘Pulp Fiction,’ to his Beijing office to keep working on his script... he definitely has a passion for making movies,” Jiang said.

Tarantino is also known for using violence in his films, with all 10 of his directorial feature films receiving an R-rating in the United States. Jiang recalls a day on set that proved just how dedicated he was to ensuring the action of “Kill Bill,” a martial arts movie, was done perfectly.

“I remember this one big action or fight scene that was shot 22 or 23 times in one day. So it was a big operation, obviously. Lots of people, lots of props and lots of camera work. You can feel people's respect for him [Tarantino] as we went through the same long shot some 20 plus times,” she said.

The most well-known scene shot in China was the fight sequence near the end of the first volume, where the Bride faces off against her former teammate O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu), now head of the Yakuza, and her personal army, the Crazy 88. It took eight weeks to complete the scene, and takes place in the fictional House of Blue Leaves restaurant, where Jiang and other production staff can be seen in the film as the restaurant patrons.

Outside of working on the movie, Jiang remembers one of Tarantino's favorite dishes being scrambled eggs with tomato, a common Chinese dish. On a set with American, Chinese and Japanese crews, the food selection aimed to please different flavor palettes. In 2002, it was very hard to find cheese in China. A staple in many American dishes, but hardly eaten in China. Jiang would have to visit specialty grocery stores catering to Westerners.

Jiang noted that Tarantino treated her well, helping to create what would be an invaluable work experience.

## Lasting impact

Jiang recalls that working on a movie set gave her a greater appreciation for movies and all the work that goes into making them possible.

“I appreciated the fact that the movie creators are very pliable and very flexible people, and they're very welcoming of different people and different cultural backgrounds. And there are subtle levels of hierarchy, of course. I mean, the director is at the top, right?” But Jiang learned that order isn't everything. “You need to build relationships and make

sure that everybody actually believes in the same vision. So I do think that sort of multicultural environment of being flexible, being creative on set, is very helpful to me to think about how I approach working with other people,” Jiang said.

Jiang holds a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in English and international affairs from Beijing Foreign Studies University. She moved to the United States after working on “Kill Bill” in 2002 to pursue her doctorate in communication at Purdue University.

She arrived at UNC Charlotte in 2007, where she is now a professor in the communications department, teaching both undergraduate and graduate level courses. She cites the welcoming faculty as being one of the main reasons she took the job, and feels lucky to have seen the University and communications department grow over the years.

For many, working in the movie industry is a dream. When asked why she made the switch to academia, Jiang believes that her time on a movie set may have actually validated her career goals even more.

“I realized maybe that's not the job for me. I had a great experience. I learned a lot by doing the kind of production work that requires coordination, flexibility and hard work,” she explained. “I'm still doing a lot of that in my own job today, but that experience made me see how you need to be a pretty creative talent, and also be dedicated and work long hours on a movie

set to be successful. So I think it actually confirmed that I made the right choice for my own career.”



Courtesy of UNC Charlotte



# Guide: Charlotte music venues

Nicholas Hunt | Staff Writer

Just shy of a million people, Charlotte is a city that has no plans on ending its growth. With new people moving to Charlotte every day, it is easy to get lost in the ever-changing landscape and culture of the city.

Charlotte's unique culture and has a lot to offer, especially musically. This guide goes over Charlotte's most important music venues, from the smaller independent venues to the larger corporate ones.

## The Evening Muse

The Evening Muse is an intimate venue located in NoDa. The venue hosts concerts for established and lesser-known artists of a large variety of genres and styles. In addition to traditional concerts, The Evening Muse is well known for their Monday night open mics, where musicians, comedians and poets of all skill levels can showcase their work. The venue provides a unique space to enjoy art and watch budding artists hone their craft.

## The Milestone Club

A Charlotte staple, The Milestone Club on

Tuckaseegee Road has been continuously hosting shows since 1969. Over the past five decades, the iconic punk rock venue has hosted thousands of musicians and bands, some of whom went on to become internationally recognized artists. Some of the bands that have performed at the club include Nirvana, R.E.M. and Bad Brains. The venue is a living piece of history, and continues to host new artists every night.

## Snug Harbor

Situated in the Plaza Midwood neighborhood, Snug Harbor is a venue that primarily hosts concerts for smaller local and touring independent artists of all genres. The venue is a great spot see the latest up-and-coming artists in a smaller setting.

## The Neighborhood Theatre

Located in NoDa, the Neighborhood Theatre is the premier independent music venue in Charlotte. The Neighborhood Theatre hosts concerts for music of all genres, and is popular amongst mid-to-large-sized local, touring, contemporary and legacy artists. The venue offers a main stage

for established artists, as well as a smaller room for lesser-known artists.

## The Fillmore & The Underground

Both owned and operated by Live Nation, The Fillmore and The Underground are venues located in the Fourth Ward neighborhood in Charlotte. The venues serve as a middle ground for acts and events that are too large for the independent venues, but too small for the other corporate-owned venues. The Fillmore hosts traditional concerts, as well as DJ sets and dance nights. The Underground is a secondary venue that is reserved for artists who are too small to perform at The Fillmore.

## Bojangles Coliseum

Opened in 1955, the Bojangles Coliseum is an iconic piece of Charlotte history. Throughout its 70 years, the venue has undergone numerous changes, including changes to its name, ownership and resident sports teams. Today, the Bojangles Coliseum is the home of the Charlotte Checkers hockey team and hosts concerts throughout the year.

## Spectrum Center

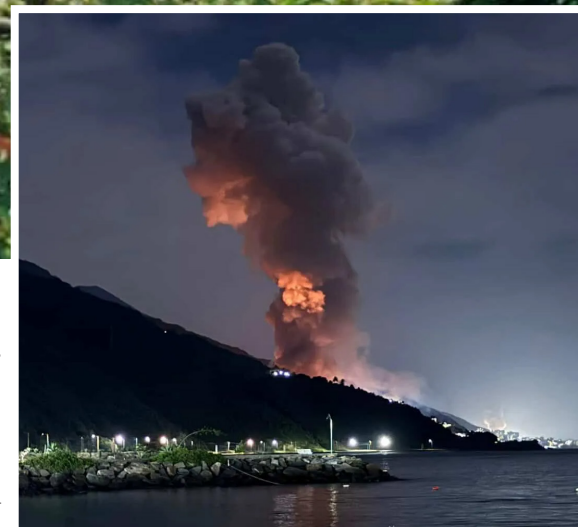
The Spectrum Center is a large multi-purpose indoor arena located in central uptown Charlotte. The arena's primary purpose is to be the home of the Charlotte Hornets, but various events, including concerts, are held at the venue throughout the year. The arena mostly hosts concerts for older, legacy musicians, as well as contemporary artists. Fleetwood Mac, Journey, Tyler, The Creator and Billie Eilish are all artists who have performed in arenas in the past.

## Bank of America Stadium

Home of the Carolina Panthers and Charlotte FC, Bank of America Stadium is Charlotte's largest venue. Bank of America Stadium primarily hosts sporting events, but concerts are also held at the stadium. With a capacity of nearly 75,000 people, Bank of America Stadium is exclusively designed for the most popular recording artists, where large audiences are expected. Artists who have performed at the stadium in the past include Billy Joel, Metallica, Luke Combs and Beyoncé.

# For Venezuelans far from home, Maduro's capture feels personal

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor  
Courtesy of Amanda Blanco



**F**ourth-year student Amanda Blanco hasn't been 'home' in 14 years.

Born in the United States, Blanco spent the majority of her childhood in Venezuela, the place where she says she feels most at home.

When Blanco moved to Venezuela to help care for her grandmother, she was living there during the final years of President Hugo Chávez's leadership.

Blanco and her parents left Venezuela just before Venezuela's current president, Nicolás Maduro, came into power.

Blanco sighed as she said that the day Maduro came into power was the day that Venezuela was changed for the worse. A life of instability, fear and violence consumed the streets.

"People don't understand. It was the best place I had ever lived. But we were under a dictatorship, with Chávez and then with Maduro. The thing is, despite all the news footage and coverage that is happening right now in the U.S., the reality of what's going on in that country is not shown," Blanco said.

Violence became normalized. At just eight years old, Blanco witnessed the murder of her neighbor right outside their home.

"That stays with you forever," Blanco said. "It changes the way you see the world."

Although she hasn't been able to return to Venezuela, she remains in frequent contact with her extended family.

Blanco shared that Venezuelans still live under constant surveillance, where there are government checkpoints that search for phones for any "anti-government" content. Several social media platforms are blocked, and certain news channels are filtered.

"People inside the country don't even know what's happening," she said. "They're getting information from relatives abroad."

Despite this isolation, word spread quickly when Maduro was captured by U.S. authorities. For Venezuelans around the world, the moment was historic.

"When I woke up that morning, I had 20

missed calls and almost 100 text messages," she said. "I thought someone had died."

Instead, the messages carried news she never thought she would hear. Maduro was gone.

"I just started crying," she said. "I ran into my parents' room and woke them up. It was the happiest moment of my life."

## 2 a.m. in Caracas, Venezuela

In the middle of the night of Saturday, Jan. 3, what the United States described as a "large-scale air strike" touched down in Caracas, Venezuela. The operation was set in motion in order to remove Maduro and his wife, Cilia Adela Flores de Maduro.

Witnesses and reporters in the area said they saw smoke rising from the target area, loud sounds at 2 a.m. and a power outage in parts of their capital.

Following several weeks of escalating military and diplomatic pressure, President Donald Trump announced the capture of Maduro and his wife, adding that they will face criminal court proceedings regarding federal charges such as drug trafficking.

"Last night and early today, at my direction, the United States armed forces conducted an extraordinary military operation in the capital of Venezuela. It was an operation against a heavily fortified military fortress in the heart of Caracas to bring outlaw dictator Nicolás Maduro to justice," Trump said.

The operation was carried out by the U.S. Delta Force Special Operations team and an FBI unit. Reportedly, there were no deaths of U.S. military personnel during the operation; however, according to the Venezuelan military, two dozen Venezuelan officers were killed during the strike.

In addition to the 24 officers who were killed, Cuba's government confirmed that 32 Cuban military/police officers were killed during the strike.

The relationship between Cuba and Venezuela is shaped by their governments' historic alignment, while citizens' perspectives may differ.

Many Cubans are in support of Maduro, and their government leaders condemn the capture and strike. However, several Cubans oppose Maduro's leadership, as do their own leaders.

## Years of tension

The capture of Nicolás Maduro and his wife follows decades of strained relations between the U.S. and Venezuela that began with the 1998 election of socialist President Hugo Chávez, whose government adopted an openly "anti-U.S. stance" and forged alliances with Cuba, Iran and Russia.

After Chávez's death in 2013, Maduro became president of Venezuela and increasingly clashed with the United States, with tensions escalating sharply in late 2025 as the Trump administration launched targeted strikes on vessels accused of narcotics trafficking.

The confrontation deepened in November 2025, when the State Department designated Venezuela's state-linked Cartel de los Soles, allegedly led by Maduro, as a terrorist organization.

"Based in Venezuela, the Cartel de los Soles is headed by Nicolás Maduro and other high-ranking individuals of the illegitimate Maduro regime who have corrupted Venezuela's military, intelligence, legislature and judiciary," Secretary of State Marco Rubio wrote in a Nov. 16, 2025, press statement. "Neither Maduro nor his cronies represent Venezuela's legitimate government. Cartel de los Soles by and with other designated FTOs, including Tren de Aragua and the Sinaloa Cartel, are responsible for terrorist violence throughout our hemisphere as well as for trafficking drugs into the United States and Europe."

## The public response

On Jan. 3, major cities all over the U.S. and in Venezuela were met with both celebrations and protests regarding Maduro's capture.

In New York City, which holds one of the highest populations of Venezuelans in the U.S. at

62,000, thousands came together outside of court to protest and celebrate.

While people cheered and chanted, some shared their concerns about the fleeting feeling of bliss.

"Let's be honest, we are happy that Maduro was detained, but this happiness is momentary. There are people still associated with Maduro in Venezuela, and as long as they stay, the country will not be free," said attendee Pedro Reyes to The Guardian. "What guarantees that we will be safe, that my children will be safe if we go back? Nobody."

UNC Charlotte's College Democrats chapter posted a statement following Maduro's capture, condemning the U.S. government's actions and questioning motives.

"The UNC Charlotte Democrats are appalled by the blatant illegality and unconstitutional invasion of Venezuela and attacks on its sovereignty. The United States government has been determined to enter Venezuela to extract its natural resources and now it has fully shown its hand. This will likely end no better than the outcomes of Iraq, Vietnam or any previous instances of the U.S. spreading democracy," read the statement.

Amid the protests, statements and political backlash, Blanco said the capture represented something far more personal for Venezuelans.

"This isn't about if you're a Democrat or Republican, this is about the Venezuelan people and Venezuelans having a sense of happiness, and a historic moment of being closer to freedom after 27 years of living under a dictatorship and fear," Blanco said. "I can't believe going home may be a possibility now."

# Four Hispanic UNC Charlotte workers share their stories after ‘Charlotte’s Web’ operation

Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | Asst. News Editor

**Editor’s Note: Individuals in this article chose to remain anonymous and were given pseudonyms. To learn more about our anonymity policies, go to [ninertimes.com](https://ninertimes.com).**

As Silvia cleans a UNC Charlotte building, her head is constantly glancing back at the doors of the building, fearful that U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) may come through to detain her.

She isn’t the only one; she’s one of four Hispanic women workers on the University’s campus who shared their stories of living with the worry that their American dream will end.

In November 2025, CBP began the week-long “Charlotte’s Web” operation that swept the streets of Charlotte for an immigration

crackdown, with arrests that exceeded 425.

While the University’s campus did not have any verified CBP presence, the four women, all with different stories and paths to the U.S., still felt the effects of the operation on campus.

## ‘No estamos seguros en ningún lado’: Reactions to ‘Charlotte’s Web’

Silvia recalled with tears in her eyes how she felt during the first few days after the CBP operation began: overwhelmed with what could happen to not just the community but her family.

Living with just her husband and four-month-old baby with no relatives in the area, she feared whether Charlotte was a safe place for them to stay, with the possibility of either parent being detained exacerbating those fears.

“Yo me sentí tan agobiada, con ganas de llorar, porque decía: ‘ay Dios, que no me vaya a pasar nada,’” Silvia said.

“I felt so overwhelmed, and wanted to cry because I kept thinking: ‘Oh God, I hope nothing bad happens to me.’”

She holds a driver’s license, pays her taxes and obeys U.S. laws, which she considers the “right thing” to do since she’s living in the country.

But she doesn’t feel that doing the “right thing” is enough to avoid being another target of the crackdown.

“Es bien duro cuando me cuentas de que vienen para acá [Charlotte], pero a ver cómo hace su [CBP] proceso le afecta mucho a uno; a uno se siente como lo discriminan, lo atacan, que no somos personas,” Silvia said. “Nosotros,

como latinos, no estamos seguros en ningún lado.”

“It’s really hard when I realize they come here [Charlotte], but seeing how they [CBP] go through the process really affects you; you feel like you’re being discriminated against, being attacked, like you’re not a person. We Latinos are not safe anywhere.”

Silvia’s co-worker, Jennifer, who calls El Salvador home, has been a permanent resident of the U.S. for three years and has been working on campus for four years.

She feels similar to Silvia, as if she was targeted, but in her case, she has thought more about the Charlotte Latino community as a whole.

“Un sentimiento de injusticia, de impotencia, porque ningún funcionario, nadie, alza la voz por esta injusticia,” Jennifer said.

“A feeling of injustice, of powerlessness because no official, no one raises their voice against this injustice.”

Jennifer spoke on how she achieved her goal of becoming a lawyer in El Salvador, only to go back to square one as a first-generation immigrant in the U.S.

“Nunca me imaginé vivir este terror por parte de la comunidad latina porque soy muy solidaria; siento el dolor de todos,” Jennifer said.

“I never imagined experiencing this terror as part of the Latino community because I am very supportive; I feel everyone’s pain.”

She kept herself in the loop by watching videos of detainments made by CBP across Charlotte.

It triggered a wave of emotions when she first saw them, bringing her to tears as she discussed the manner in which the detainees were being handled in the videos.

“Nos están persiguiendo por nuestro aspecto, por nuestro color de piel, por nuestra imagen,” Jennifer said.

“They are persecuting us because of our appearance, our skin color, our image.”

## Across campus: ‘Te tienes que sentir mal por el prójimo’

The two other women work on the opposite side of campus from Silvia and Jennifer: one is Carla, an Ecuadorian woman born in the U.S. to immigrant parents, and the other is Areli, a Costa Rican native who gained permanent residency three years ago.

Carla sat across from Areli in the building’s lounge during their break, introducing her as her cousin, not by blood but by bond.

Despite being born in the U.S., during the week of the CBP’s operation, she carried around her passport out of fear that she might be stopped by agents.

Areli listened attentively to the conversation before explaining that her entire journey to the U.S. had been legal, as she didn’t begin living in the country until she obtained her permanent residency.

She nodded in agreement with Carla; Areli had also begun carrying her permanent residency documents during the immigration crackdown.

“Como amenazada de una manera, porque, aunque yo estoy bien, estoy insegura al ver cómo mucha gente, no solo por el hecho de ser, sino por su apariencia física, los [CBP] agarran,” Areli said.

“I feel threatened in a way, because even though I’m fine, I feel unsafe seeing how many people [CBP] grab them, not just because of who they are, but because of their physical appearance.”

## What’s left after the operation

Jennifer presented a serious attitude after collecting herself, drawing on her background as a lawyer who studied the U.S.-Mexico border region to lend depth to her opinions.

“Siento que es realmente injusto porque hay asesinatos criminales de todas las nacionalidades, de todos los colores de piel, de todas las razas,” Jennifer said.

“I feel it’s really unfair because there are criminal murderers of all nationalities, all skin colors, all races.”

Two days into the “Charlotte’s Web” operation, the Department of Homeland Security stated that 44 out of the 130 arrested in those first two days had criminal records that included charges such as aggravated assault, battery and hit-and-run.

Organizations such as the Carolina Migrant Network, dedicated to providing free legal representation for undocumented immigrants who have been detained in the Carolinas, are hoping to aid the 425 or more that have been detained during the “Charlotte’s Web” operation.

“Me preocupan todos los derechos que se están violando. Se está violando el derecho a la libre circulación pacífica de las personas. Se está violentando la dignidad,” Jennifer said.

“I’m worried about all the rights that are being violated. The right to free and peaceful movement is being violated. Dignity is being violated.”

While the four women feel somewhat protected by their legal status, it doesn’t protect them from the fear they live with afterward, as they remain cautious around all doors on campus.



Davis Cuffe/  
Niner Times



# The Walk for Peace:

## On Southern roads, 19 monks have sparked a movement

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

It's not uncommon for traffic to be slow or stop as drivers take their foot off the gas and crane their necks to see whatever is on the side of the road. It's so common, in fact, that we have a term for it — rubbernecking.

On Southern roads this winter, drivers in the American Southeast have been experiencing an uptick in the annoying habit, not due to an increase in traffic stops or car problems, but monks.

Since Oct. 26, 2025, a group of 19 Buddhist monks from Fort Worth, Texas, has been trekking up the sides of highways and streets as they make their way to Washington, D.C.

The 2,300-mile, 120-day journey began as a mission to promote peace, which Bhikkhu Pannakara, the monk leading the group, said he undertook after “feeling a calling.”

During Pannakara and the monks' stop in South Carolina's State House in Columbia, it seemed like quite a few others had felt the same calling.

### A call for peace draws a crowd

Thousands crowded the city's sidewalks, awaiting the monks' arrival. Many held flowers they intended to give to the monks or signs expressing their support. As police cars blocked roadways for the monks to walk through, some onlookers leaned into the street or cautiously stepped off the sidewalk to catch a glimpse of a group of orange-robed figures walking up the street.

Linda Brown stood among others on the road's median, balancing on the concrete protrusion as she held high a sign that read “imagine peace.”

“To see how many people want to make a change, and are not willing to fall into war or divisions or politics, it's nice,” Brown said. “We need this.”

As the monks came up the road and into view, there were no cheers or applause; instead, the need that Brown described seemed to be shared as many members of the crowd thanked the monks as they walked by.

Maybe compelled by a desire to thank the monks some more, onlookers left their sidewalk posts and followed the monks up the street and to South Carolina's massive concrete capitol building.

At the State House, the monks stood behind a podium on the building's stairs. Clamoring for a better view, individuals climbed trees and stood atop any structure that could provide a better vantage point. A lucky few children sat atop parents' shoulders and gazed out into a crowd that could've been for a music festival.

First to take the podium were a few local politicians, including South Carolina Sen. Deon Tedder, who proclaimed Jan. 10, 2026, to be South Carolina Walk for Peace Day.

Last to speak was Pannakara, who addressed a silent crowd that clung to his every word.

After opening his speech with a guided meditation, Pannakara asked the crowd to write down “Today is going to be my peaceful day” on a sheet of paper that they would look at every morning to bring peace to their lives.

“We do not even slow to see our own breath,” Pannakara said. “People breathe like machines, always multitasking and never in the moment.”

During his roughly 20-minute speech, Pannakara discussed how to lead a peaceful life and his group's mission to encourage others to do just that.

“Mindfulness isn't about Buddhists, it's for all beings. We are not traveling to convert anybody,” Pannakara said. “Simply just walk with mindfulness and share the technique of mindfulness with other people to spread peace.”

## Support and skepticism

In a state deep within America's 'Bible Belt,' in a city with a Christian church on every block, the Buddhist monk's simple message was well received by the audience.

Standing within the center of the crowd, holding a string of peace cranes she'd made with her church, Julie Lumpkin was moved to tears by Pannakara's speech.

"Violence is being celebrated in our country by our leaders right now," Lumpkin said. "It's all very painful. It's not what we stand for."

Chiming in was Carly Hicks, another member of Lumpkin's church who stood next to Lumpkin during the speech.

"Community is the antidote to suffering, and I think that's something we've proven here," Hicks said. "We all have these things in our lives, but we can all be happy here because we're together, united."

Some in the audience weren't as swayed by the monk's messaging.

As the crowd dispersed after the monk's exit, a small group silently moved to the foot of the building's staircase and faced the crowd, each holding a small sign that read "Freedom for Iran."

On the 13th consecutive day of anti-government protests in Iran, a group had come with the hopes that the monks might pray with them for their country.

"I hear around 300 people died in the past couple of days, which is outrageous," Mostafa Mobli said. "We just want to see an end to the suffering of people."

Mobli said that while it was nice to see people come together for peace, the gathering did not give him hope for his country or the world.

"The powerful have to decide. Unfortunately, this is how the world works," Mobli said. "The government of Iran has to make a decision."

Following the monk's stop at the State House, they'd walk roughly three and a half miles to the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, where they'd be spending the night.

On social media, the monks invited individuals to visit the location between 6 and 9 p.m. The old stone-brick church stood atop a hill that became home to roughly 100 people who gathered there at 5 p.m., smartphones held high, hoping to again record a moment of the monks.

Pannakara and his group seemed to have no quarrel with South Carolina's ever-present crowd, as the monks smiled and waved as they walked up and into the building. After the monks' entrance, the crowd remained outside, some in lawn chairs, others on blankets, waiting for the monks to reappear.

## Behind the scenes

Inside the dormitory hall within the church, where the monks would be staying, was a scene that could have been from a special episode of a hospital drama.

A team of over a dozen doctors walked back and forth, carrying food and supplies through an old wooden hall and in and out of a large room where the monks sat in a circle of wooden chairs.

Inside the circle, doctors knelt to give medical care and food to the monks. Many of the monks' feet were covered in wounds or bandages.

During Pannakara's speech, he had alluded to some physical challenges on the road; here they were on full display.

"Blisters, stepping on nails, screws, glass — we have leg injuries, we have knee injuries, we have back problems and everything," Pannakara said during his speech. "But we have never given up."

As glamorous as the monks' Beatles-esque Columbia appearance was, the visit marked day 78 of a nonstop journey up the shoulders of America's southern roadways. Many have taken the journey barefoot.

Directing Jan. 10's medical care for the monks was Nosizwe Sellers, a tall woman who wore bright teal scrubs.

Sellers typically works with the Veterans Health Administration — not with monks — and said she learned of the opportunity to help out the monks through their journey through her "bratty younger brother."

"He got a post on Instagram that said the monks are looking for some doctors in South Carolina. I said, 'Absolutely, I want to meet the monks and get a bracelet,'" Sellers said, holding out her wrist, which wore one of the red peace bracelets the monks have been giving out during their journey.

"And then, lo and behold, here they are."

During Sellers' interview, she had to pause multiple times to answer questions and provide care to the monks. At one point, someone asked if they would be doing laundry that night. Sellers declined, explaining that the monks' robes took eight hours to dry as they were so thick.

Sellers had led the charge before the monks arrived, requesting donations for medical supplies, organizing volunteer doctors and finding suitable locations. And it all seemed to be running smoothly for Sellers on Saturday night, despite a few last-minute location change requests from the monks.

"Doctors, we're type-A, right? I like to know where I'm supposed to be, when I'm supposed to be there," Sellers said. "And the monks don't move that way. Yet, everybody showed up. I had 89 healthcare professionals sign up for tonight."

That night, Sellers and her team provided every type of foot care under the sun, debriding calluses, treating wounds and giving massages. Sellers ended the interview by politely excusing herself to help someone waiting outside who needed emergency care.

## Preserving peace

Perhaps doing some healing of the spiritual kind was Pannakara, who sat receiving care between interactions with a steady stream of guests who had found their way inside to see him. Still seated, Pannakara greeted each guest with a quiet smile. Once guests had taken their picture with him or given him a gift, he

would give a short bow and tell them, "Be well, happy and peaceful."

The peace that Pannakara has tried to spread can be hard to visualize.

On Jan. 8, a day before he'd bring together thousands in Columbia to preach peace, hundreds had marched through the same location, protesting ICE after a federal agent in Minnesota shot and killed a woman.

During his Columbia visit, attendees had raised signs calling for their country to be free after days of violence.

Is "peace" a sticker on the back of your car? Or a quiet room in a yoga studio where you can sit with your legs crossed and hum?

Pannakara explained that peace is something that comes from within.

"Peace is always inside within us. If our mind is fresh and pure, because our mind is purified, then peace is always with us for anything happening to our life, we will not react, and we just receive it as it is. Then we move on. That is peace," Pannakara said.

Later in the night, he would step out of the church and step up to another podium to return to the spotlight, facing the cameras and eager faces outside to deliver another message of peace.

On day 120 of their walk, Pannakara and his monks will end their trip in Washington, D.C.

The city is no stranger to religious figures entering the space and requesting change. Six months ago, Moral Monday demonstrations there led to arrests as clergy gathered to call attention to federal policy decisions.

Pannakara says what they will do in D.C. is still a work in progress, and their message remains apolitical.

After 76 long days of tireless walking and an uncertain journey ahead, I wondered if Pannakara was well, happy and peaceful himself.

Sitting in a busy room full of hurried doctors and hurting monks, Pannakara answered my inquiry into his health with a smile.

"Everything's good," he said. I believed him.

The Walk for Peace is coming to Charlotte, here's how to see it:

The monks are expected to visit Charlotte any day between Jan. 10-20. Their estimated arrival is Jan. 15. On the Walk for Peace online map Raleigh and Greensboro, N.C. are also listed as destinations. Their arrival is expected to be between on Jan. 19 and 24. Arrival dates are subject to change due to weather and other circumstances. Plans for the monks' visit in Charlotte have not yet been formalized but you can follow along on their Instagram page @walkforpeace.usa.

View their online map below:



Davis Cuffe/NinerTimes

# UNC System syllabi to be public record starting fall 2026, per new policy



Mareska Chettiar | Asst. Copy Editor

On Friday, Dec. 19, the UNC System approved a new policy mandating that all course syllabi be publicly available and searchable across all system schools.

The policy aims to help students plan their semesters and workloads more effectively by providing better insight into the course, as well as helping transfer students assess their fit into the institution.

Now approved by the UNC System's Board of Governors, the policy will go into effect on Jan. 15 for the 2026-27 academic year.

"Having a consistent rule on syllabi transparency, instead of 16 campuses coming up with different rules, helps ensure that everyone is on the same page and similarly committed heading into each new semester," wrote UNC System President Peter Hans in an opinion piece published in The Raleigh News & Observer.

## Contents of UNC System Policy 400.1.6

The new policy mandates North Carolina institutions to develop and publish "academic cal-

endars, grading policies and other related materials in a manner publicly available to students and the public and ensure that they are widely distributed."

It does not require the location and times of classes to be included. Though syllabi are created by instructors, they are considered direct work copyrighted by the institution (as per UNC System Policy 500.2) and are now public record.

Instructors maintain the right to submit a position to the institution's provost if they believe that copyrightable materials are included in the syllabi. This position will then be considered by the provost and general council before any public record filings are made.

The policy does not explicitly outline further steps regarding copyrighted materials in syllabi.

Previously, syllabi at UNC System schools were not considered public record. Individual institutions had jurisdiction over where and how their syllabi would be available, with most institutions (including UNC Charlotte and UNC-Chapel Hill) opting to keep them available to students and faculty only.

## How does this affect UNC Charlotte?

As part of the UNC System, UNC Charlotte will also implement this policy for the 2026-2027 academic year.

According to the University, the Department of Academic Affairs is working to ensure compliance with the policy across technology, processes and guidance for faculty.

Faculty were informed of the change through a statement on the Suggested Syllabus Policies and Notices webpage, updated by the Office of Legal Affairs.

More details on the implementation of this policy in Charlotte have yet to be released.

UNC Charlotte's American Association of University Professors (AAUP) chapter also sent a letter to the Niner Times, outlining various concerns, such as instructors' personal safety, bad actors, class interruptions and intellectual property infringement that may occur under the new policy.

## How the new policy came about

When Oversight Project, an organization af-

filiated with the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation, filed public records requests for 74 courses at UNC-Chapel Hill during the summer of 2025, it sparked a major debate about intellectual property and copyright on UNC campuses.

While UNC-Chapel Hill refused the request, the UNC-Greensboro administration complied with its public records requests.

The UNC System then drafted and passed the new policy, ending the debate and resolving opposing stances among system schools.

The policy was met with opposition while it was under review in December 2025. North Carolina's AAUP Conference created a petition to present to Hans, citing the policy as an invitation for "political actors to attack the free inquiry on our campuses."

The spring 2026 semester will follow previous guidelines regarding syllabi. Students can access their syllabus on the course's Canvas page or by contacting their professors.

## Niner's Comics: Library lock in (not)

Bryan Chen | Staff Illustrator





Camila Surinach/Niner Times

# Opinion: Bring back movie rental stores

Lindsay Hawkins | Staff Writer

About 20 years ago, the weekend looked very different from today. Instead of lying around on the couch and scrolling for an hour to find a movie on Netflix, finding entertainment used to be more interesting.

Teens, families and couples on dates would drive to the local Blockbuster Video to search for a movie. They would peruse the aisles, pick up a movie, show their friends, maybe make a new friend and go home with a fun adventure for the night. Although this is a thing of the past, some believe it should return.

Having everything at your fingertips is so common today, especially when it comes to streaming. We no longer have to leave our homes to do much of anything anymore, and that has taken away the whimsy from our lives.

Our choices have become overwhelming; we used to only go to one place and find what we needed. So many options are not always a good thing and can be frustrating for a consumer.

Navigating the costs of streaming services can also be very difficult due to the sheer number of platforms and deals available. Most bundles are tied to Disney+.

There are options for Disney+ and Hulu, with and without ads; Disney+, Hulu and HBO Max with and without ads; even Disney+, Hulu and ESPN with and without ads. That is at least six

different variations, only with Disney+; this does not even mention possible music and video game subscriptions tied in. These added expenses can become difficult to juggle with rent, groceries, utilities and more important personal expenses.

Not only is there financial stress, but streaming platform users face other issues. One in particular is how platforms go about removing movies and shows from their service.

For example, Netflix often displays a banner across the cover of a piece of content to signify that it is “leaving soon.” However, this is inconsistent across the platform. If you browse, you may discover that some things are not labeled as “leaving soon,” but actually are. When you click it, it displays the date the show will be taken off of Netflix.

Other platforms, such as Amazon Prime Video, require a subscription in addition to paying for certain movies. Something interesting about this system is that, despite paying \$20 to purchase a movie, you do not actually own that movie, and they can remove it from the platform whenever they please.

This poses an issue for users, as their favorite show can be taken away at any moment. Granted, if they own a DVD or have another streaming service that carries the show, this may not be a problem.

This opens up a new dilemma: not all original shows on these platforms have DVDs. Let’s say your favorite show is a Netflix Original that is not insanely popular; you likely will never be able to watch this show again if it is ever removed from Netflix.

Some shows like “Stranger Things,” which are really popular, do have DVD sets. Less popular shows rarely do. Additionally, because they are “Originals,” it can be assumed they will never be on a different platform, so if they ever are removed, there will be no access to them.

With all this said, one solution would be to return to video rental stores. Rental stores allowed you to make a smaller purchase for a short period to rent a movie. If you like the purchase, you can go out and buy the DVD to keep forever, so you never have to worry about ownership or price fluctuations for the foreseeable future.

Video stores can help fill the void left by the loss of third spaces in our society since the COVID-19 pandemic created a hole in our lives. Video rental stores were once places to socialize, talk about topics you cared about and potentially meet others with similar interests.

One Redditor made a post about how they loved “talking about things I found with the person who maybe came with me. Like we’d split up, walk around and find a few things, then ‘recon-

vene’ and discuss our finds, and then decide together which ones we wanted to bring home with us and watch.”

Another upside is that some rental stores, like Family Video, had video game sections. You were once able to rent a video game, play it and see if you liked it. If you were determined, you might even have completed it before it was due back at the store. This is better than the systems in place today, where you spend \$60 on a video game, then discover you do not like it and are now stuck with it.

In the end, it is unlikely that video rental stores will ever return to their original prime. The closest we will get to movie rental stores is to search your local library or the very niche specialty rental stores left, which may have much more limited options.

Despite this, it is essential to understand what you are paying for and the longevity of your purchase, especially with streaming services. If you like a show, movie, video game or even an album, go out and buy a physical copy. When it is eventually removed from your streaming platform, at least you will still have access to it and the memories it holds.

# Opinion: Everyone needs to take a psychology course

Emsley Jackson | Opinion Editor

It's a common misconception that psychology is only the study of the human brain or of mental illness. To study psychology must mean that you want to be a therapist, sit on a couch, take notes and say, "How does that make you feel?"

Psychological studies are so much more than this. Much like the human psyche, the field is like an onion, with layers that form a whole. Psychology is ultimately the study of "why." Understanding the meaning behind behavior, our own and others', allows us to move through daily life with greater insight and intention.

## Understanding the world

In an interview with the British Psychological Society, social psychologist Dr. Daniel Jolley explained that he believes "ultimately, psychology equips us with tools to understand and positively impact the world around us." That impact often happens on a small scale.

The 'butterfly effect' is the theory that every small move we make has a larger consequence elsewhere. "A butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil, and a tornado is set off in Texas." Psychology teaches us to recognize cognitive biases, question

emotional reactions and understand how behaviors spread through communities. Like the butterfly effect, small changes in how we think and respond to others can ripple outward.

One butterfly's more profound understanding of how it can positively influence its neighbor can set off a tornado of change elsewhere. Also detailed in the butterfly effect is the notion that "if the single flap of a butterfly's wings can be instrumental in generating a tornado ... as can the flaps of the wings of millions of other butterflies."

## Understanding people

Large-scale change begins with how we understand the people directly in front of us. In the most basic levels of psychology classes, you learn about the core of the discipline: human behavior. Anyone who has taken AP Psychology or Psych 1101 may remember landmark studies of behavior, like Pavlov's dog, often conducted on animals but designed to reveal broader truths about human learning and conditioning.

By learning about the studies that underpin theories, you begin to see behaviors in real time. Psychology classes teach you the "why" behind the eccentricities we have. From simple theories

like classical conditioning, to complex case studies like that of David Reimer, psychology teaches that every person is shaped by multiple, interacting forces.

This perspective is captured in the biopsychosocial model, which emphasizes the combined influence of biological, psychological and social factors in shaping behavior and illness. It has become central to psychology because it reflects a simple truth: to understand a person, you must consider the whole picture. Psychology teaches us empathy that is not just emotional, but informed.

## Understanding your relationships

Psychology courses are famous for changing how people argue, listen, interpret and even recognize patterns in their own lives and those of others. Students often notice patterns in conversations, identify defense mechanisms and become more intentional in how they interpret others' actions.

By understanding concepts like projection, attachment styles and emotional regulation, people become better equipped to navigate conflict and connection. Psychology does not just help

explain relationships; it helps improve them.

## Understanding yourself

Often, the hardest person to understand is ourselves. Psychology can encourage self-reflection, leading to lightbulb moments in which we recognize patterns in our own behavior, become aware of habits and confront discomfort as part of growth.

For college students specifically, growth is expected, but it's not always smooth or linear. Samford University published an article making the point that "many college students are on their own for the first time, trying to find their identities in their newfound independence. A psychology class can shed light on why you may think or feel certain ways."

Psychology is not just for the future therapist. Psychology is for anyone who wants to better understand themselves, others and the world around them. On a college campus, where learning, relationships and identity are constantly evolving, that understanding is especially valuable.

# Opinion: Relationships are overrated

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

Love can be found all around you — and no, I am not talking about those sappy freshman couples walking around campus or the TikTok relationships that make you think, "I wish that were me."

In today's world, people are hyperfixated on relationships and finding their 'person.' They jump from one relationship to the next, assuming the next one will finally be the right one, without ever stopping to ask if they are even ready for one.

In short, relationships are overrated.

People should not depend so heavily on being in a relationship at all times. Life offers love in countless forms — not just through a romantic partner.

College is one of the most pivotal stages of life. If we spend all our time chasing romantic

relationships or forcing connections that are not meant for us, how will we be ready — or even recognize it — when the right opportunities finally appear?

We become so hungry for that feeling of having someone by our side that we forget how to fill our own cup.

Finding yourself and learning who you are can be just as fulfilling as coupling up, without the unnecessary stress that often comes with it.

Taking time to sit back and focus on yourself can help you realize what you need — or do not have time for — when it comes to actually finding your person.

College offers endless opportunities, like building a routine that benefits you. It could be simply learning how to sit alone with your thoughts — something many people avoid.

Learning to enjoy your own company isn't sad. It's taking the time to stop and take care of you.

Real life happens outside of those feeds and the relationship posts where you are thinking, "Okay, me next." It's so easy to fall for and to become encapsulated in, but the life some people are longing for is found inside quiet moments and small wins.

The truth is, no relationship, no matter how healthy, can fix insecurity, loneliness or a lack of direction. Those things have to be addressed first.

However, it's essential to recognize that when we rush into relationships in search of fulfillment or validation, we are likely to reach a dead end. We place unfair expectations on another person to complete us, and that pressure can turn something meant to be healthy into something draining.

Focusing on yourself does not mean you hate love or you want to shut it out forever. It means building a foundation strong enough to support it when it arrives. Knowing who you are and what you want out of life is key to finding happiness, and it makes it easier to recognize the difference between connections and distractions.

Instead of constantly asking the question, "Why am I single?" Maybe the better question is, "Am I growing into someone I am proud of?"

Relationships are not the finish line. They should add to our lives—something that complements a life already full. Make time for yourself. Because one day, when you are fully committed to someone else, you might wish you had taken more of that time for yourself.

# Charlotte's early signing period offers insight into year 2 of the Albin era

Evan Campos | Asst. Sports Editor

If you tuned into a Head Coach Tim Albin press conference at any point during the second half of Charlotte football's season, there was a good chance he spent part of his time discussing recruiting. Whether asked directly or not, Albin rarely missed an opportunity to stress how vital early-period talent acquisition is for this program.

While it may have grown tiresome for fans to hear about next season while the current one was still underway, the reality is that this core pillar of college football will largely determine the long-term success of this staff. Given where Charlotte's roster stood this past season, recruiting had to become an urgent priority for Albin's braintrust even midseason if this 13-year-old program was going to win more games in 2026.

Charlotte won just one game in 2025, failed to beat an FBS opponent, went winless in the American Conference and all 11 defeats were lost by double digits. With the school also in the middle of a search for a new athletic director, the urgency for a serious talent influx has never been clearer.

## An impressive early signing class

Albin has long maintained that Charlotte must operate as a developmental program, with roughly two-thirds of the roster built through high school recruiting and the remainder filled through the junior college and transfer portal markets. That plan began to take shape in early December as the 49ers signed 28 players during the early signing period for the 2026 class.

The makeup of the class reflects that team-building philosophy while addressing several depth and talent gaps from last season. Four signees hail from the Greater Charlotte area, four are from the state of North Carolina and 16 come from the surrounding region. Twenty-five of the 28 will enroll early this spring, allowing them to participate in winter workouts and spring practice.

The nearby Queen City additions include four freshmen, highlighted by safety Josh Hines from Myers Park High School and receiver Donte Nicholson from West Charlotte High School. Receiver Kaden Catoe arrives from Greensboro, N.C., along with 335-pound defensive tackle D'Nas White from Concord. Close to campus, Charlotte also signed freshman linebacker Gray Patterson, a 6-foot-3 prospect ranked No. 43 in South Carolina, from Fort Mill, S.C.

Hines was rated a three-star prospect and the No. 60 player in North Carolina according to Top Football Recruits. Nicholson, the

6-foot wideout ranked No. 73 in the state by 247Sports, chose Charlotte over a strong list of Sun Belt Conference programs that included James Madison University, Marshall University, Old Dominion University, Coastal Carolina University and Troy University.

Catoe also brings an impressive offer sheet, drawing interest from James Madison, Appalachian State University, Marshall, Old Dominion and Liberty University. The addition of two freshman receivers is especially timely.

Redshirt junior Javen Nicholas, Charlotte's leading receiver, transferred to Duke University, while graduate receivers Sean Brown and E. Jai Mason exhausted their eligibility. Sophomore Miles Burris also entered the transfer portal, leaving redshirt freshman Derrick Eley as the only returning scholarship receiver familiar to most Charlotte fans.

Even as freshmen, these receivers will enter a room filled with opportunity. The 49ers' offense was among the worst in the FBS in 2025, averaging just 14.3 points and 285.8 yards per game, both bottom-five nationally.

## Out-of-state signees

Beyond the Carolinas, the class pulls from 12 states, including signees from Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Texas and Virginia.

The positional breakdown leans heavily toward defense. Charlotte signed 17 defenders, including four defensive linemen, four linebackers and nine defensive backs. Offensively, the class features six linemen, two receivers and one quarterback.

That quarterback is freshman Jaylen White, a 6-foot signal caller from Clearwater, Fla. A multi-sport athlete, White posted track times of 11.38 in the 100 meters, 23.19 in the 200 and 54.25 in the 400 while also competing in the high jump and long jump.

On the football field, he led Clearwater High School to a 7-4 record and a Florida 4A playoff appearance in 2024, throwing for 1,568 yards, rushing for 573 and accounting for 24 touchdowns. White held offers from Tulane University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham and projects as a long-term developmental piece rather than a contributor in 2026.

Nine of the 28 signees are transfers from the junior college or NCAA ranks and will enroll early in January,

joining 15 high school signees who have graduated ahead of schedule.

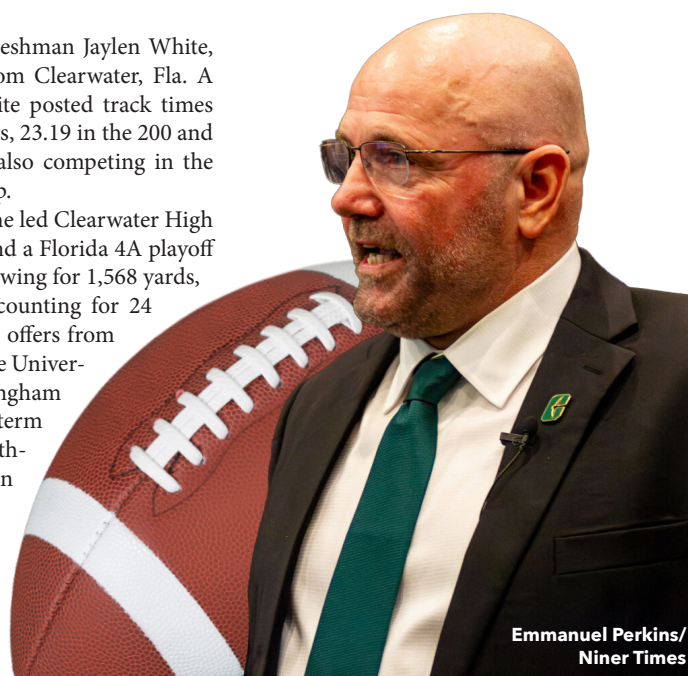
## Can Charlotte turn the ship?

Albin has engineered program turnarounds before, first at Northwestern Oklahoma State University in the late 1990s and most recently at Ohio University. His first seasons at those stops produced records of 5-5 and 3-9, respectively.

While a 1-11 debut season at Charlotte looks bleak on the surface, Albin's résumé still makes him the most qualified coach the 49ers have had in the program's short history. Resources remain the lifeblood of any rebuild, and there is growing optimism on that front.

Charlotte's public Excellence Fund has climbed to roughly \$3.8 million toward its \$5 million goal, a notable jump from last year. Even with that progress, the 49ers are not yet positioned to match the spending power of conference programs such as Tulane, University of Memphis, University of North Texas or University of South Florida.

That reality makes Charlotte's developmental model non-negotiable. As Albin often says, it takes a village. If this early signing class is any indication, that village is beginning to form. And perhaps next fall, when Albin steps to the podium in mid-October, the season will still be alive, and the conversation will not be about recruiting but about coming off a conference win and the chance to play meaningful football into bowl season.



## Column: Thank you, Cam

Kelli Blackburn |  
Sports Editor  
Courtesy of  
Kelli Blackburn



In 2011, my dad bought my brother and me Cam Newton jerseys. It was his rookie year, and I did not fully understand football yet — but I knew one thing: this guy was different.

I wore my No. 1 jersey everywhere. Summer training camps, to games, even to school. Growing up, I was one of the only Panthers fans in my class. But I didn't care. People might have had the Legion of Boom or Peyton Manning. I had Cam.

I will never forget the 2015 NFC Championship. Snow fell outside our new house as the Panthers dominated the Arizona Cardinals. We were headed to Super Bowl 50. And it all started with one man: Cam Newton.

Cam was not just a quarterback. He reset Charlotte. He made our city fun, swaggy and impossible to ignore. Suddenly, Bank of America Stadium was not just a stadium — it was the place to be. He put Charlotte on the map, on every sports highlight reel, in every conversation.

He even brought out the celebrities. Future. Metro Boomin. Charlotte native Stephen Curry. The energy was unmatched.

Cam's first chapter in Carolina ended abruptly when the Panthers released him in 2020. The city felt it. It was more than football — it was losing part of our identity.

Then he came back in 2021. The record may not have told the story, but the energy did. Watching him run out of the tunnel, seeing every seat filled with fans wearing No. 1 jerseys again — it felt like 2015 all over. His infamous Superman celebration reminded us why we loved him, why we believed in this team.

And in 2026, for the Wild Card game against the Los Angeles Rams, I witnessed it again. The electricity, the noise, the sheer thrill of hearing a pounding drum that was bigger than any one play — it was Cam. It always was.

Despite what critics might say, you cannot deny what Cam Newton did for Charlotte — and for its people. He did not just play football; he gave a city its swagger, its pride, its Sunday magic.

And the city will never forget the culture he built, the joy he sparked and the energy he brought back with the "Keep Pounding" drumbeat before the 2026 playoff game. I hope he continues to be a guiding light for Charlotte and the Panthers' new chapter.



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

# How Jenna Lord found herself again

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

Jenna Lord sat in her car following the 2025 season, quietly processing the winding journey of her college career.

Named the 2025 American Player of the Year, Lord took a moment with God, reflecting on how her story had brought her to this point—a place she was not sure she would ever reach.

The road was far from easy. Lord faced several personal moments that forced her to evaluate the balance between life and softball. After completely stepping away from the game during her sophomore year of high school

and navigating injuries throughout parts of her collegiate career, she learned how to separate the sport from her identity in order to rediscover her love for the game.

Now entering her final season of college softball, championships still matter—but for Lord, making an impact on others and fully embracing the journey one last time means even more.

## When the field lights go out

When she's not on the field, Lord is usually surrounded by her teammates, bouncing between apartments in the complex they all call home. Other times, she's with family and loved ones, reading or attending church—building a relationship with God that has become central to her life.

Those moments away from softball are what ground her. They bring peace, clarity and stability when the demands of the game become overwhelming.

"I always say that if you don't slow down, God will put something in your place to slow you down," Lord said. "That was the surgery—that was transferring. There were things that humbled me in a lot of ways. It got me to slow down where I realized, 'Hey, my identity's not in this, it's in you [God], it's in other things, that I enjoy doing outside to free my time with softball.'"

Lord's ability to find comfort beyond the sport wasn't always present. It was learned through experience, adversity and self-reflection.

## Seeking identity

An Alabama native, Lord attended high school at Hewitt Trussville High School, growing up in an athletic family and playing softball since the age of five. Like many of her teammates, she envisioned a future playing Division I softball, and by all mea-

sures, she was getting on track to do just that.

But before reaching college, the game she once loved began to feel heavy.

Instead of bringing joy, softball became a low point in her life. When she looked in the mirror, Lord no longer recognized herself; she felt like a shell of the person she once was.

When things weren't clicking on the field, they weren't clicking off it either. Relationships, friendships and school all suffered, and the pressure of the sport seeped into every part of her life.

That was when Lord realized it was time to take a step back.

She made the difficult decision to completely step away from softball during her sophomore year of high school, pressing pause to figure out what she truly needed.

"I hated it, in short terms. I was so depressed, disinterested and not in a good place. It was really crucial for me to leave the sport altogether for that reason," Lord said. "When softball was my end-all be-all, when that wasn't going good, which it wasn't for two years at that point, everything else in my life was crap. It was no longer an escape for me, which it was for so many years. It was no longer a source of friendships and people that I really wanted to be around anymore. So, I decided to leave it altogether."

During that time, Lord searched for clarity and purpose outside of the game. Eventually, her high school coach, Taylor Burt, encouraged her to give softball another chance.

## A career restarted, and restarted again

When Lord returned, she did not just come back; she thrived.

She became a top-20 recruit in the class of 2021, according to Extra Inning Softball and Fastpitch News, and committed to the University of Alabama. On paper, it seemed like everything was coming together.

But the journey was far from over.

Lord's collegiate career included stops at Alabama, the University of Mississippi and Texas Tech University. Despite competing at the highest level, she found herself searching for something more: a sense of belonging.

Instead of feeling valued as part of the team, Lord often felt like a last resort rather than someone fully trusted or appreciated.

After closing out her junior season at Texas Tech, she entered the transfer portal once again, hoping this time she would find a place that truly felt like home.

Complicating matters further were her injuries. Lord had not seen a live pitch since her sophomore year of college and underwent back surgery in 2024, leaving her future uncertain.

Three months post-operation, she was unable to swing or throw—unsure if she would ever return to form.

Then, Charlotte came calling.

"Knowing that the coaches wanted me, while I quite literally didn't know if I was ever gonna be good again, was something that I was like, 'Man, they're really trekking after me,'" Lord said. "I was like, 'Ooh, I really need to look into this if they want me that badly.'"

### Everything clicked

Lord knew she couldn't pass up the opportunity.

From the start, Charlotte felt different—not just as a program, but as a place where she could finally be herself.

That feeling showed almost immediately.

Early in the 2025 season at the Coach Cooke Memorial Tournament in Rock Hill, S.C., Lord delivered one of the most explosive performances of her career, launching four home runs across a doubleheader. The showing included a grand slam and a dramatic extra-innings walk-off blast, powering Charlotte to a two-win day and signaling that something special was unfolding.

The performance wasn't just a highlight, but it was a turning point.

"I wasn't known for hitting home runs," Lord said. "I was more of a doubles kid, and so even to hit a home run was like, 'Heck yeah.' I hit home plate and came into the dugout. All my teammates were giving me huge hugs. My trainer was crying. I started crying. My coaches were a little bit teary-eyed, and it was like that moment was so much more important than the production that I put on the field."

Under first-year Head Coach Courtney Breault, the 2025 Charlotte softball team put together a historic season. The 49ers finished 30-27 overall and 17-10 in American Conference play, placing No. 3 in the league.

That year, Charlotte ranked No. 2 all-time in program history in runs scored (315), No. 3 in home runs (60), No. 2 in RBI (276) and No. 3 in slugging percentage (.467). The season featured both the American Conference Player of the Year in Lord and the Freshman of the Year in Jaylah Jarrell.

Anchoring the infield at third base, Lord etched her name into the Charlotte record books.

She batted .410 in 178 at-bats with a .865 slugging percentage, blasting 21 home runs and driving in 65 runs, setting single-season program records in both RBI and slugging percentage.

Her numbers ranked among the top three in Charlotte history in home runs, batting average, total bases, hits and runs. She also led the American Conference in slugging percentage, home runs, hits, OPS, runs scored and RBI, earning the league's top individual honor.

"I knew I was in the running for that award, but didn't want that to be a thing at all, because that wasn't my priority," Lord said. "It was playing and winning and being productive, not for an award, but for my team. I really tried not to pay too much attention to it or harp on it at all. [But] the award wrapped it up in a pretty bow, just the experience that I've had here. It was really surreal, but it took me back to 18-year-old, 19-year-old, 20-year-old me and how I felt during those times, and it made it feel so worth it."

Everything had finally aligned.

### One last ride

Now, as she prepares for her final season of college softball, Lord's perspective has shifted.

The wins and championships still matter—but they no longer define her. Instead, she measures success by the impact she has on those around her and the joy she finds in the process.

And she always depends on the Bible passage, Romans 5:3-4: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Lord is playing freely, confidently and with gratitude—embracing every moment of the journey she once wasn't sure would continue.

Sitting in her car after the 2025 season, Lord wasn't just reflecting on awards or records.





She was looking back on growth, faith and a journey that ultimately led her back to herself.

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# The best is yet to come for Zoe Best and Charlotte basketball

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

Kaitlyn Fankboner/Niner Times



Incarnate Word Academy in St. Louis achieved a historic 100-game winning streak — the national record for high school women's basketball — and Charlotte women's basketball sophomore guard Zoe Best was right in the middle of it.

## Built by winning

Playing for one of the most dominant programs in the country, Best was surrounded by a culture built on discipline and relentless competitiveness. From a young age, she depended on her mother's coaching and the athleticism of her family to learn what it meant to prepare every day with championship expectations.

Now with the 49ers, Best brings that same mindset to a Charlotte program, continuing to build its identity in the American Conference.

"Coming from a program like that, you know what it takes to win and the steps," Best said. "Having integrity, the off hours, what you do when you know nobody's watching — things like that. I feel like if everybody at the end wants the same goal, and that's a championship, then I feel like it'll take nothing [but] a bunch of hard work, and everybody tuned in every day."

Best did not lose a single game during her junior and senior seasons at Incarnate Word Academy, where her leadership and playmaking abilities drew a lot of attention. Her poise and court vision as a guard helped extend a streak that placed the program in the history books.

That success did not come without sacrifice. Originally, Best attended Lima Shawnee High School in Ohio before moving to Missouri.

Aside from the large winning streak, Best also

led her team to the 2023 Missouri State Championship. All of her success ultimately carried her to Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO), where she began her collegiate career.

## Being the impact

Best made an immediate impact, being named Ohio Valley Conference Freshman of the Year after averaging 14.1 points per game and 5.1 rebounds per game. She scored in double figures in 21 of 28 games, including six performances of 20 points or more, quickly establishing herself as a go-to option at the collegiate level.

Yet despite her individual success, the transition to college basketball presented challenges. SEMO finished the 2024-25 season with a 6-23 overall record, a stark contrast to the undefeated seasons Best was used to in high school. The prolonged losing streak forced her to confront adversity in a way she never had before.

She opened the 2024-25 season with a career-high of 25 points at the University of Dayton, but even performances like that could not

offset the mental toll of a difficult year. By season's end, Best knew she needed a change.

"My first year, I loved my team, but I feel like me and my coach, we didn't have the same ideas," Best said. "I feel like entering the portal, coming to Charlotte and finding a coach that values the same things as me, [who] really cares about the players — I feel like that really was what I was looking for."

## Finding a fresh start

Charlotte provided a fresh start — one rooted in alignment, trust and development. Under Head Coach Tomekia Reed, Best found a system that suited her; one that emphasized player relationships and accountability, allowing her to rediscover the joy that basketball had always brought her.

"Zoe is extremely intentional and determined," Reed said. "Her basketball background is filled with winning. Every day she comes to practice with a great attitude, and that has rubbed off on the rest of the team. When it comes to game preparation, she is not afraid to come to the coaching staff to see what she can do better to help the team win. Everything she embodies is program-changing."

## Leading by example

Since arriving in Charlotte, Best has embraced a larger role both on and off the court. Her steady presence has brought experience, confidence and a winning pedigree to a young roster and culture that still defines itself within the conference.

One of her standout performances came on

Nov. 19, 2025, against Oakland University, as she recorded 19 points and eight rebounds. Recently, on Jan. 10 on the road at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Best scored 19 points again, but with four rebounds.

Best has kept a consistent offensive spark and helps steady the 49ers throughout games. Performances like those have underscored her ability to step up as a leader in key moments, while balancing all elements of the game.

More than statistics, Best's impact shows in her composure. Teammates look to her in high-pressure situations, and her understanding of preparation and winning habits has become a valuable asset as Charlotte continues to grow under Reed.

For Best, success is no longer defined solely by numbers or awards. Instead, it is about being part of a program that allows her to grow into her best self — both as a player and person — while contributing to a team moving in the right direction.

"I feel like when you lose, you learn the most," Best said. "But I feel like winning is obviously the ultimate goal, and continuing to learn and to grow every game, every practice."

After years of dominance, adversity and renewal, Best's journey has come full circle. From historic high school success to collegiate challenges and rediscovery, she has emerged with a clearer sense of purpose.

With renewed confidence and a program that believes in her, the future looks promising.

For Zoe Best and Charlotte women's basketball, the best may truly be yet to come.