

A Shared Vision: Transforming
Healthcare One Story at a Time

Fall 2025 Edition

Guardians of the Grid Get Their
Start in Cybersecurity at UNCP

UNCP TODAY



BUILT ON GRIT

UNCP's Championship Culture Takes Center Stage



UNC Pembroke proudly celebrated the achievements of 967 graduates during its undergraduate and graduate commencement ceremonies — each one a testament to hard work, perseverance and academic excellence.

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Chancellor
Robin Gary Cummings

Dr. Robin Gary Cummings has served as the sixth chancellor of UNC Pembroke since 2015, guiding the university through a remarkable era of growth and transformation. A proud Pembroke native and member of the Lumbee Tribe, he has championed initiatives that reflect both innovation and impact. His visionary leadership led to the establishment of the Thomas College of Business and Economics and the forthcoming College of Optometric Medicine — North Carolina’s first public program of its kind, opening in 2027. Under his direction, UNCP has expanded access to higher education, launched the College of Health Sciences and deepened its role as a driver of regional economic development.

CHANCELLOR’S
WELCOME

It’s an exciting time to be part of BraveNation. From record-breaking milestones to inspiring student success, UNC Pembroke continues to grow in impact and purpose. Thank you for being an essential part of our journey.

BraveNation,

As Rebecca and I reflect on completing our 10th year as Chancellor and First Lady of UNC Pembroke, we are filled with deep pride and gratitude. It has been an incredible decade — one marked by growth, transformation and an unwavering commitment to our mission. This issue of UNCP Today captures that momentum and the bright future we continue to build together as BraveNation.

When we arrived in 2015, we believed three things would move our university forward: academic excellence, a strong and vibrant athletics program and a bold vision for philanthropy. That belief has only deepened over the years. The adage that athletics is the front porch of a university rings true — athletics welcomes people in and shows the world who we are. Inside these pages, you’ll read about the incredible dynasty being built out of grit and determination by our athletics department — one that reflects the same resilience found across our campus and community.

We also highlight academic achievement in areas critical to the future of our region — from healthcare and business to education, cybersecurity and public service. UNCP is expanding its academic profile to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and create

new opportunities for students across southeastern North Carolina.

You’ll read about the impact of giving through initiatives like No Brave Left Behind, which provided immediate life-changing support to students facing financial hardship, ensuring they cross the commencement stage and achieve the very goals that brought them to UNCP.

As we look ahead to the historic launch of North Carolina’s first public Doctor of Optometry program, and beyond, one thing remains clear: UNCP is moving forward as One Team. Across academics, athletics and advancement, we are united in purpose, driven by mission and committed to building a brighter future — together.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Whether you’re a student, alumnus, parent, faculty member or supporter, your belief in UNCP — and in our mission — fuels all we do. Here’s to the next chapter of progress, purpose and BraveNation pride.

Go Braves!

Robin Gary Cummings, MD

Chancellor



UNCP RANKS AMONG THE BEST IN REGIONAL, BUSINESS & NURSING EDUCATION

Written by Mark Locklear

**“THESE
RANKINGS
REAFFIRM
UNCP’S
MISSION TO
PROVIDE AN
ACCESSIBLE,
HIGH-IMPACT
EDUCATION.”**

2025
TOP

UNC Pembroke continues to earn national recognition for its commitment to academic excellence, affordability and student success. U.S. News & World Report has ranked UNCP 18th among Top Public Schools in the Regional Universities South category, placing it in the top tier of institutions across the region. The university also ranked 41st among all regional universities in the South, 18th in Best Colleges for Veterans and 39th in Best Value Schools, reinforcing its dedication to providing high-quality education at an affordable cost.

“These rankings reaffirm UNCP’s mission to provide an accessible, high-impact education,” said Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings. “Our faculty and staff work tirelessly to ensure student success, and this recognition is a testament to their dedication.”

In addition to its regional recognition, UNCP’s McKenzie-Elliott School of Nursing has seen significant national gains, with its Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program climbing 46 spots to No. 182 among 686 undergraduate nursing programs nationwide. The program continues to excel, boasting a 100% NCLEX pass rate last year and 98% this year, well above the national average. Meanwhile, UNCP’s RN-to-BSN program ranks fifth among the 30 Best Value



Colleges for Nursing in the South, reflecting its strong academic foundation and affordability.

UNCP’s Thomas College of Business and Economics is also earning national recognition, ranking No. 79 in the nation for online business degree completion in the 2025 Best Online Programs list. The program continues to expand flexible, high-quality options that prepare students for success in today’s workforce.

These national accolades showcase UNCP’s growing reputation as a premier institution in the Southeast, offering top-tier academic programs both on campus and online.



Before Trey Allen '97 ever sat behind a judge's bench, before he advised Marine Corps generals on legal matters or counseled North Carolina's top judges, he was a young boy in Robeson County, lost in the pages of history books.

Where some kids found adventure in Nintendo games, BMX tricks or basketball courts, Allen discovered his world in the public library on Chestnut Street in downtown Lumberton.

He wasn't just a bookworm — he was a scholar in the making.

"I spent a lot of time in the public library growing up," Allen said. "That was probably the genesis of my interest in law, my views on government and its role in society."

While his peers tested their reflexes on video games, Allen exercised his intellect and imagination by devouring biographies of America's founders, English monarchs and world leaders.

That early love of history and governance would shape his life trajectory — from Chancellor Scholar at UNC Pembroke to Marine Corps judge advocate to his current seat on the North Carolina Supreme Court.

Small-Town Scholar to State Supreme Court Justice

Allen's journey from rural Robeson County to the state's highest court is a testament to the power of hard work, opportunity and service.

He graduated first in his family to earn a college degree, attending UNC Pembroke on a full Chancellor's Scholarship. Though initially drawn to academia, his time as student body president sparked a deeper interest in government and law.

At UNC School of Law, Allen honed his legal acumen before commissioning as a judge advocate in the U.S. Marine Corps. He spent much of his time overseas, including a deployment to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, advising commanding generals on military justice and assisting fellow Marines with personal legal matters.

Returning stateside, Allen clerked for Supreme Court Justice Paul Newby (now chief justice) before practicing education law at Tharrington Smith. He left the firm to serve as an associate professor of public law and government at UNC Chapel Hill. Allen later became general counsel for the Administrative Office of the Courts, where he led a team providing legal guidance to 400 judges, clerks and magistrates across North Carolina.

Now, at 50, Allen serves as an associate justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court, where he helps shape legal decisions that impact all 10 million state residents.

"I'm incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to serve on this court," Allen said. "We issue decisions that affect millions of people. It's a huge honor and responsibility."

Sitting in the walnut-paneled courtroom of the historic Law and Justice Building, Allen reflects on the journey that brought him here — a journey rooted in the faith, family values and work ethic instilled in him from childhood.

A Foundation of Faith, Family and Hard Work

Born Curtis Hudson Allen III but known as Trey, he was raised in the Littlefield community, where love of God, family and country was a guiding principle.

His father, Curtis Hudson Allen II, served 30 years in the Air Force Reserves, reinforcing the importance of patriotism and service. His parents, though not college graduates themselves, instilled in him and his younger brother, Clinton, a deep respect for education.

Allen often reminds his own children of the sacrifices that paved the way for his success.

"The difference between my grandmother and me is not ability — it's opportunity," he said, recalling how his grandmother, known for her brilliant mind, only had a sixth grade education.

Allen seized every opportunity.

His time at UNCP was marked by intellectual growth and leadership development.

"It was at UNCP that I started to push myself intellectually," he said. "Several professors and administrators took a personal interest in me — people like the late Dr. Charles Jenkins, Dr. Robert Schneider, Dr. Michael Hawthorn, Dr. Jeffery Geller and the late Dr. Tom Morley. Their mentorship shaped my path."

The Making of a Judge

Allen's early exposure to government and leadership at UNCP set the stage for his legal career.

His work ethic, sharpened at UNCP and tested in the Marine Corps, carried him through some of the most complex legal challenges in North Carolina.

"UNCP set me up for success. The personal investment my professors made in me impacted my future in ways I can't fully express," Allen said. "The leadership opportunities I had there — I don't know that I would have pursued them at another institution."

Today, from his seat on the Supreme Court, he applies those same principles of service, integrity and lifelong learning to his role in shaping state law. All qualities that earned him the 2023 Distinguished Alumni of the Year Award.

Away from the bench, Allen and his wife, Teryn, his high school sweetheart, are raising five children while supporting their interests in scouting, church activities and the arts.

Though he no longer frequents public libraries, his passion for reading burns as deeply as ever. True to form, his go-to books remain biographies — his latest read: James Rosen's bestseller "Scalia: Rise to Greatness," is a detailed account of the life of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

At his core, Allen is still the young boy at the library, flipping through pages, seeking knowledge and finding new ways to serve.

"I've always believed in the power of history," Allen said. "And in many ways, the people who came before us — our nation's founders, the great legal minds — still have something to teach us."

TREY ALLEN A LIFELONG SCHOLAR OF LAW & LEADERSHIP

Written by Mark Locklear

Allen's Top Five Book Recommendations

1. Bible
2. "A Man for All Seasons" — Robert Bolt
3. "Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation" — Joseph Ellis
4. "The Brothers Karamazov" — Fyodor Dostoyevsky
5. "The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Volume 1" — William Manchester

A LEGACY *of* GIVING

Taley and Jordan Hunt's Commitment to Student Success

Written by Mark Locklear

For Taley and Jordan Hunt, giving back to UNC Pembroke is more than just a way to honor their alma mater — it's a commitment to ensuring future students have the support they need to succeed.

As students, Taley ('18, '20) and Jordan ('17) saw firsthand how the campus food pantry provided a lifeline for classmates struggling to meet basic needs. That experience shaped their belief in the power of community support — a belief that led to their remarkable \$200,000 gift to expand and sustain the very resource that once inspired them.

Last fall, UNCP celebrated their generosity with the dedication of the newly named Taley and Jordan Hunt Braves Resource Center — a space that has evolved from a modest food pantry into a comprehensive hub for student support, offering financial assistance, mentoring and access to essential services like SNAP benefits.

"We strongly believe that if college students' basic needs aren't met, they lack the foundation they need to be successful," Taley said.

Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings praised the couple's impact, recognizing their generosity as a game-changer for students facing food insecurity.

"They understand that when a student doesn't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from or how they will get to class, they can focus on their studies, dreams and future," Cummings said. "Because of their gift, Taley and Jordan have ensured that this center will continue to serve students for years to come."

For Dr. Christie Poteet, assistant vice chancellor for Student Affairs, the dedication of the center is a full-circle moment. As one of the original staff members who helped launch the initiative in 2013, she has seen firsthand how far it has come.

"Through their remarkable contribution, Taley and Jordan are ensuring that no student in our community has to choose between a healthy meal and their education," Poteet said. "Taley and Jordan's commitment to our mission and their belief in the potential of every student has paved the way for something truly transformative."

The Hunts' commitment to servant leadership extends beyond the center. In 2023, their company, the Taley Hunt Home Group, donated \$25,000 to enhance leadership development at UNCP. That same dedication was recognized in 2024 when Taley was honored as UNCP's Young Alumni of the Year.

Though they now call Columbia, South Carolina, home, the Hunts say UNCP's impact on their lives is immeasurable.

"The things we learned here — inside and outside the classroom — shaped who we are today," Taley said. "Giving back is our way of saying 'thank-you' to the place and the people who changed our lives."



In 2024, the center served more than 5,500 students and community members.

GUARDIANS OF THE GRID

Get Their Start in Cybersecurity at UNCP

Written by Chad Locklear

At any given moment, somewhere in the world, a cyberattack is unfolding.

A hospital's patient database is locked by ransomware. A corporation's sensitive financial records are exposed in a data breach. A government agency scrambles to contain an attack aimed at critical infrastructure.

The stakes in cybersecurity have never been higher, and the need for skilled professionals who can defend against these threats has never been more urgent. Recognizing this demand, UNC Pembroke launched its Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity in fall 2022, equipping students with the tools and expertise needed to take on one of the fastest-growing fields in technology. The program has grown in leaps and bounds since its inception, attracting top students eager to gain hands-on experience, tackle real-world cyber threats and position themselves for high-demand careers in cybersecurity.

"The cybersecurity job market offers promising opportunities for graduates, ensuring that their investment in a specialized education is both valuable and rewarding," said Dr. Prashanth Reddy, director of UNCP's cybersecurity program.

Among those preparing for this high-stakes career is Shirsendu Mondal, a second-year computer science student who arrived at UNCP with a résumé that turns heads — even in elite cybersecurity circles.

At just 20 years old, Mondal became Bangladesh's youngest certified ethical hacker, earning cybersecurity certifications from internationally recognized organizations such as ISC2, CISCO, IBM, New York University and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Unlike malicious hackers, Mondal is an ethical cybersecurity professional trained to find and fix vulnerabilities before they can be exploited.

"Whenever we hear the word hacker, it creates a negative image in our minds," Mondal said. "You think, Ok, this guy will destroy my data. But an ethical hacker finds all the loopholes and vulnerabilities and notifies you."

After studying for two semesters at North South University in Dhaka, Mondal set his sights on UNCP's fast-growing cybersecurity program as the next step in his academic journey.

"At first, I looked at programs in Canada. Then I began studying the most affordable, high-quality institutions in the U.S. offering cybersecurity, and I found UNCP," Mondal said. "It was a big deal for me when I got accepted!"

His arrival was not without its challenges. A delayed passport caused him to miss the first two weeks of classes, making for less than a smooth start.

"The transition was tough at first," he admitted. "Being far from home, adapting to a new culture — it was a big adjustment.

But as time passed, I started interacting with people, making friends and meeting others from Bangladesh."

Now settled in, Mondal is already making a name for himself on campus — both in the classroom and in research. Since arriving at UNCP, he has worked as a research assistant for Reddy, an experience that has allowed him to apply his ethical hacking skills in a real-world setting.

"Shirsendu exemplifies the high-caliber students we attract, underscoring the need for skilled, ethical hackers to secure cyberinfrastructure in an increasingly connected world," Reddy said.

Continued on page 15



A CURRICULUM BUILT FOR THE FUTURE

The cybersecurity program at UNCP is designed to meet industry demands, blending math, computer science and hands-on experience in state-of-the-art cyber labs.

Unlike traditional programs, UNCP’s cybersecurity curriculum balances both technical and nontechnical aspects of the field, ensuring graduates are well-rounded professionals equipped to handle the complexities of modern cybersecurity threats.

A key highlight of the program is the Cybersecurity Capstone Course, a unique opportunity for students to collaborate with subject matter experts from the National Security Agency’s (NSA) Laboratory of Analytic Sciences. These experts provide real-world problem statements based on current cybersecurity challenges, offering students both immersive learning experiences and valuable career guidance.

UNCP earned a designation as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense in March 2023. This recognition affirms the university’s rigorous curriculum and commitment to developing highly skilled cybersecurity professionals.

Beyond the classroom, the program boasts strong industry partnerships, collaborating with major organizations such as NetFoundry, AWS and the Department of Defense.

“Our Industrial Advisory Board, which includes members from Microsoft, Red Hat, the NSA and Corvid Technologies, offers insights into job openings, career pathways and industry trends,” Reddy shared.

These connections provide students with unparalleled mentorship and networking opportunities, positioning them for success in a field projected to grow by 35% over the next decade, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Globally, the cybersecurity workforce needs to grow by 145% to keep up with demand. In North Carolina, the demand for applicants in positions such as information security analysts outpaces the trained workforce by 32%.

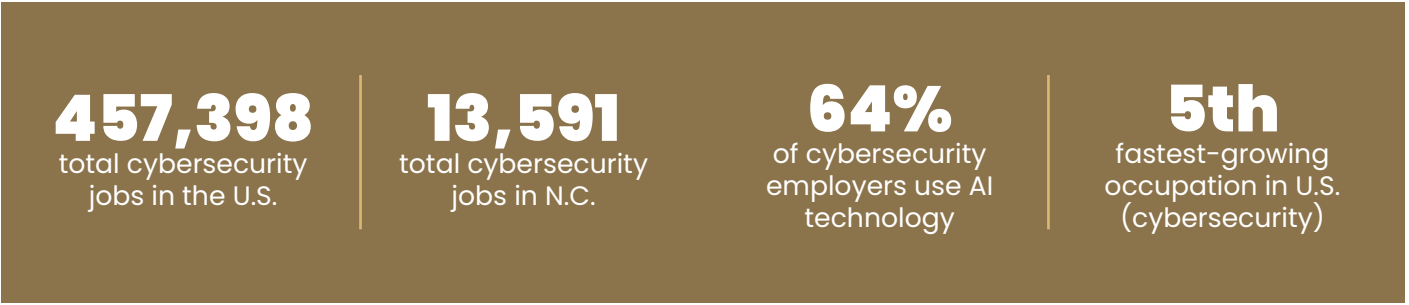
For Brian Torres, who graduated from the cybersecurity program in 2024, these industry connections and real-world projects were instrumental in shaping his career path.

Initially drawn to UNCP for its computer science program, Torres soon realized that a specialized degree in cybersecurity would set him apart in a competitive job market.

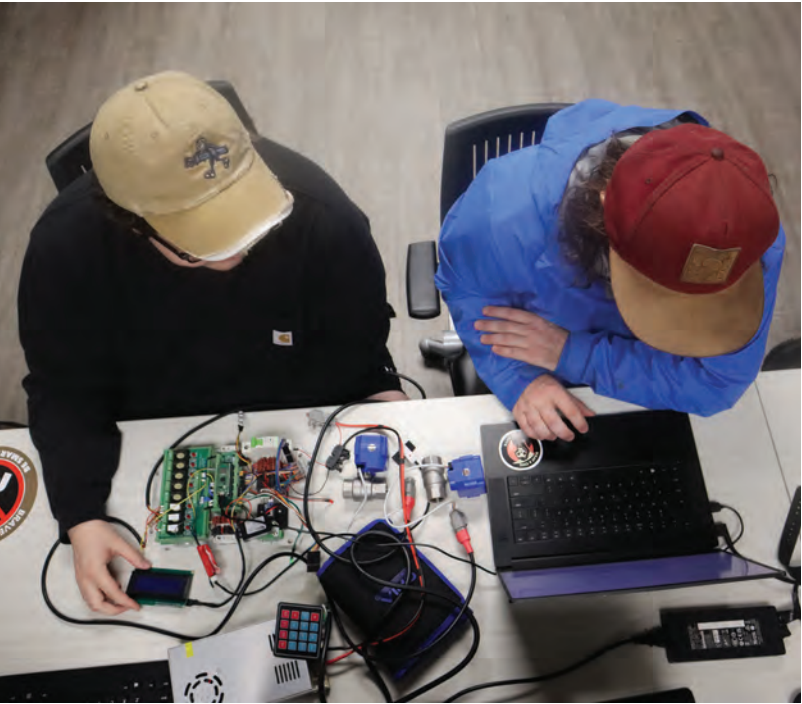
His experiences at UNCP included two high-profile research projects in collaboration with Reddy and the NSA's Laboratory of Analytic Sciences (LAS) — projects that not only sharpened his skills but also contributed to national cybersecurity priorities.



Cybersecurity students with teacher in class



Shirsendu Mondal



In 2024, researchers with the NSA’s LAS partnered with UNCP on a groundbreaking initiative to strengthen internet integrity across the U.S. As a designated Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense, UNCP provided an ideal foundation for the project, which leveraged artificial intelligence and machine learning to address critical vulnerabilities in internet routing infrastructure.

Reddy and his senior design students played a pivotal role in this effort. Together, they helped develop a custom-built platform to detect unauthorized internet routes using advanced Resource Public Key Infrastructure and Route Origin Authorization protocols. The AI-driven system integrated bulk data from the American Registry for Internet Numbers, categorized over 3 million organizations into sectors defined by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and processed more than 1 million U.S. routes with precision and scalability.

In the Synthetic Cyber Knowledge Graphs Project, Torres served as the backend development lead, working to create tools that train algorithms for processing large cybersecurity datasets. His work included developing backend code for a fully functional website with an interactive user interface, allowing researchers to simulate cyber threats and test defenses.

For his second major project, the Internet Routing Integrity Project, Torres contributed to a website designed to track the adoption of security mechanisms protecting internet routing integrity.

“This project is about creating a resource for policymakers, so they can make informed decisions about U.S. routing security,” Torres said.

Beyond the technical skills, these projects reinforced the importance of teamwork and cross-disciplinary collaboration — critical skills in today’s cybersecurity workforce.

“These experiences gave me a real-life work environment within the comfort of a classroom setting,” Torres shared. “They prepared me for my future career in ways I never expected.”

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A PROGRAM DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

As the demand for cybersecurity professionals continues to rise, UNCP is positioning itself as a leader in cybersecurity education. Looking ahead, Reddy is excited about expanding the program’s research infrastructure, launching a master’s program and participating in the Scholarship for Service CyberCorps initiative, a national effort to recruit and train the next generation of cybersecurity professionals.

Other upcoming initiatives include hosting annual cybersecurity symposia, expanding community outreach programs and integrating AI-driven cybersecurity solutions.

“We’re continuously evolving to meet the needs of this fast-growing industry because we know our students shouldn’t just learn

theories — they must apply them,” Reddy shared. “We encourage our students to participate in professional development events, competitions and hackathons nationwide. These opportunities enhance their skills and expand their career prospects.”

With state-of-the-art facilities, hands-on learning and an industry-backed curriculum, UNCP’s cybersecurity program prepares students to become the next generation of digital defenders.

For students like Mondal and Torres, the program has already proven to be life-changing — and as cyber threats grow more advanced, they’ll be ready to meet them head-on.



HackUNCP 2025: Innovation Meets Cybersecurity

UNCP’s first-ever hackathon, HackUNCP 2025, brought together creative minds from across the state to collaborate on artificial intelligence innovations. Among the standout projects was an AI-powered academic mentor designed to help students balance coursework, social life and mental well-being.

Cybersecurity played a central role in the competition, with teams tackling challenges that highlighted the growing need for digital defense solutions. “It was a test of persistence,” said Fardin Samin, a sophomore in computer science with a cybersecurity concentration. “We worked on our project very hard throughout the night. We almost gave up, but we worked together and found solutions, and somehow, it worked at the last moment.”

Supported by industry leaders and alumni, HackUNCP 2025 showcased the university’s commitment to fostering innovation, collaboration and practical experience in fields like AI and cybersecurity. Organizers hope to expand the event in the future, further solidifying UNCP as a hub for tech talent and creative problem-solving.



A FARM – GROWN WORK ETHIC POWERS

Chad Mixon's Military Success

Written by Mark Locklear

During his time as the senior instructor for the Army ROTC program at UNC Pembroke, Sgt. Johnny Torre saw countless future leaders and standout cadets come through the program.

None quite compared to Chad Mixon.

When Mixon enrolled in 1996, he was already a seasoned soldier with impressive credentials. A skilled ranger, master parachutist and recipient of the Army Expert Infantryman Badge, Mixon held the rank of staff sergeant. But it wasn't just his experience that impressed Torre — it was his confidence and natural leadership ability.

While most cadets found the demanding ROTC program challenging, Mixon thrived. Torre, who led the program for 15 years, ranks Mixon as the top cadet he ever encountered.

"His exceptional leadership qualities and outstanding physical fitness set him apart from other cadets," Torre said. "The ROTC program was easy for him. He would run those five-mile and three-mile runs without any problem."

Mixon's speed and endurance were legendary. Even while carrying a 50-pound rucksack, he excelled at litter runs — a grueling exercise that simulates transporting a wounded soldier over long distances. Mixon and his fellow cadets also took on unique training challenges, like rappelling down the three-story Givens Performing Arts Center.

The summer before his senior year, Mixon joined cadets from across the country at the Army ROTC Advanced Camp at Fort Lewis, Washington. Spanning 35 days, the camp focused on building critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Among 660 cadets, Mixon emerged as the Top Army ROTC Cadet — an achievement that foreshadowed his remarkable military career.

A DISTINGUISHED CAREER

Today, Mixon serves as the garrison commander of Fort Bragg, the world's largest military installation, which is home to nearly 54,000 troops and 14,000 civilians. Sgt. Torre attended the change of command ceremony in the summer of 2024, proudly witnessing his former cadet's success.

"I knew he would advance quickly because of his leadership potential," Torre said. "I always told him, 'You can go further with leadership and fitness,' and he did."

Mixon's journey to Fort Bragg includes a 30-year career marked by leadership and dedication. After earning his degree and commissioning as a second lieutenant in 2000, he served at Fort McPherson, Georgia, and Fort Polk, Louisiana, before returning to Fort Bragg. He rose to become the J4 Chief of Operations at the Joint Special Operations Command, completing seven deployments to the Middle East in support of the global war on terrorism.



Mixon serves as the garrison commander of Fort Bragg, the world's largest military installation, which is home to nearly 54,000 troops and 14,000 civilians.



ROOTED IN HARD WORK

Mixon's journey began far from the military on a 120-acre tobacco and watermelon farm in Live Oak, Florida. Raised with a strong work ethic, he spent long summer days cutting cabbage, baling hay and operating tractors from the age of 12.

"I didn't play sports as a teenager — I worked. I enjoyed it," Mixon said. "That's where I got my drive. I learned the importance of hard work at an early age."

While the military wasn't initially on his radar, Mixon's admiration for his grandfather, Earl Mixon — an Army veteran from the Korean War era — played a significant role in shaping his path. After high school, he enlisted in the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

"When the opportunity presented itself, I enlisted," he said. "I liked the sound of the infantryman world, and from then on, I fell in love with the Army."

From his roots on a farm to leading the nation's most extensive Army base, Mixon attributes his success to his educational foundation and his experience with the ROTC program at UNCP.

RIVER RYAN'S RESILIENCE

Shines on Baseball's Biggest Stage

Written by Mark Locklear



Becoming a Major League Pitcher

When River Ryan '21 stepped onto the pitcher's mound at Dodger Stadium on July 22, 2024, it felt nothing short of surreal. The crowd of 49,576 erupted as the rookie right-hander made his major league debut for the Los Angeles Dodgers against the San Francisco Giants. For Ryan, it was the culmination of years of dedication and hard work — a dream finally realized.

Ryan didn't disappoint.

In his first career start, he pitched five innings, striking out two and allowing just one run before being relieved. As he walked off the field toward the third-base dugout, the fans stood up and roared. The ground seemed to rumble, and Ryan couldn't help but smile at the overwhelming support.

"The ground was shaking! It was a special moment," Ryan recalled. "I couldn't help but smile when they all started cheering for me. My major league debut was something to remember, for sure."

Over his next three starts, Ryan allowed only four runs and recorded a 1.33 ERA and 18 strikeouts.

Unfortunately, Ryan's early success took a sudden turn when he tore the UCL (ulnar collateral ligament) in his throwing elbow just a few games into his career.

He underwent Tommy John surgery in mid-August, ending his season

and putting most of 2025 in doubt. While devastating, the injury wasn't Ryan's first major challenge. Back in high school, he suffered two fractured vertebrae due to violent swings as a switch hitter. Despite extensive rehab and missed time, he refused to let those setbacks define him.

Later at UNCP, he collided with a teammate while chasing a pop fly, fracturing his orbital bone and developing thoracic outlet syndrome. Doctors had to remove a rib, sidelining him for three months. Yet again, Ryan bounced back stronger than ever.

Ryan chose to attend UNC Pembroke after Division I schools lost interest due to his injuries. He became a standout player under legendary coach Paul O'Neil, excelling as a pitcher and position player. Over four years, he went 8-1 on the mound with a 2.32 ERA and 12 saves while also maintaining a .343 batting average with 12 home runs and 119 RBIs. The San Diego Padres drafted Ryan in the 11th round of the 2021 MLB June Amateur Draft. He was later traded to the Dodgers.

Coach O'Neil saw Ryan's potential from the start. "He had the 'it factor.' River is extremely athletic, whether he's playing baseball, basketball, tennis or doing flips. He could do things others just couldn't," O'Neil said.

Like O'Neil, former teammate Roberto Rivera noticed Ryan's potential for greatness early on. They both shared dreams of being drafted and called to the major league. Ryan knew he had a promising future, yet he remained humbled whenever discussing his aspirations.

"He was talented from day one," Rivera said. "No one was surprised when he got drafted and became a top prospect in the Dodgers' farm system. He had all the tools, a strong work ethic and a love for the game."

The former Braves developed a close bond while playing at Sammy Cox Field. Rivera remembers Ryan for his athletic ability and sheer resilience.

Ryan's athleticism didn't stop at baseball. Growing up, he excelled

in football, golf, diving and more. While in high school, he decided to dedicate himself solely to baseball. It runs in his veins — his dad, Sean, and uncle, Jason, played professionally. His older brother, Ryder — who he has always admired — is a relief pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates' Triple-A organization.

While Ryan considers Ryder his most significant influence, he credits his success to the educational foundation he received at UNCP and his former coaches, who helped develop his skills on the diamond.

"Coach O'Neil played a big part in my success early on," said Ryan, now 26. "He's the type of coach a player would run through the wall for. He believed in and stuck by me when I was going through the injuries. I give a lot of credit to UNCP and Coach O'Neil for sticking with me."

They have remained close since Ryan's departure. O'Neil flew out to San Francisco and was present during his major league debut against the Giants. He attended Ryan's wedding in December. UNCP is also where Ryan met his wife, former volleyball standout Caycee Bell '18.

As River Ryan stood on the mound that fateful day, with the crowd cheering and the bright lights shining down, every struggle and setback seemed worth it. The dream was no longer just a dream — it was reality.

I give a lot of credit to UNCP and Coach O'Neil for sticking with me.

River Ryan

HEAD *of the* CLASS

with Hannah Pearson

Written by Mark Locklear

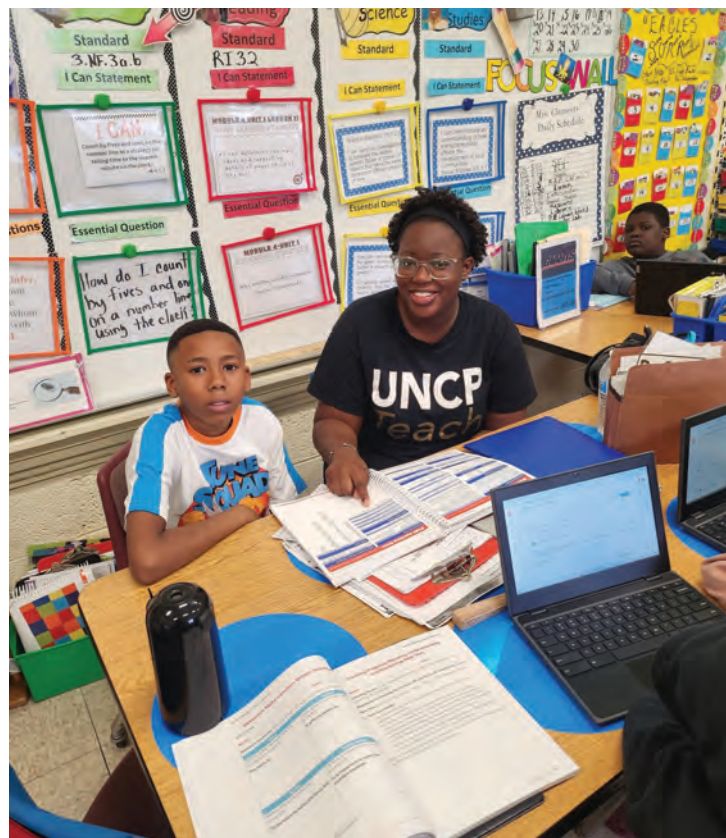
At just 18, Hannah Pearson is on the fast track to becoming one of North Carolina's youngest teachers — a passion inspired by her mother, a dedicated educator and UNCP alumna.

Pearson's love for teaching began in middle school when she started tutoring classmates and shadowing teachers. Determined to pursue education, she took advantage of dual enrollment at Fairmont High School and Robeson Community College, earning enough credits to enter UNCP as a junior in 2023.

Now a senior in UNCP's elementary education program, Pearson will graduate in December, prepared to lead her own classroom before turning 20. As a Brave Scholar, she represents the success of UNCP's early college and "Grow Your Own" pathways, designed to cultivate future educators in North Carolina. Her scholarship is made possible through the generosity of an Anonymous Trust committed to supporting future teachers.

"Hannah's journey showcases what's possible with hard work and determination," said Dr. Tracy Mulvaney, dean of the School of Education. "She is an inspiration and will undoubtedly make a lasting impact on her future students."

Pearson, whose stepfather also recently earned his teaching degree from UNCP, credits her family and early experiences for shaping her dream. "I want to be that special someone who helps students realize their potential," she said. "Changing even one life means I've achieved my goal."



Dr. Austin Deese

CHAMPION FOR ANIMAL WELFARE

Written by Mark Locklear

Austin Deese has been drawn to the world of animal care for as long as he can remember.

He has come to appreciate the human-animal bond and unconditional love from his four-legged friends. Sadly, the tragic loss of his beloved Bluetick coonhound, Katie, steered him to pursue a career in veterinarian medicine.

When he was 16, Katie wandered away and was struck by a car. Deese and his brother Norman rushed her to the local vet — who happened to be their father, Dr. Michael Deese — but were unable to save her.

"That's when I decided I was going to do what I can to treat and save every animal possible," Austin Deese said.

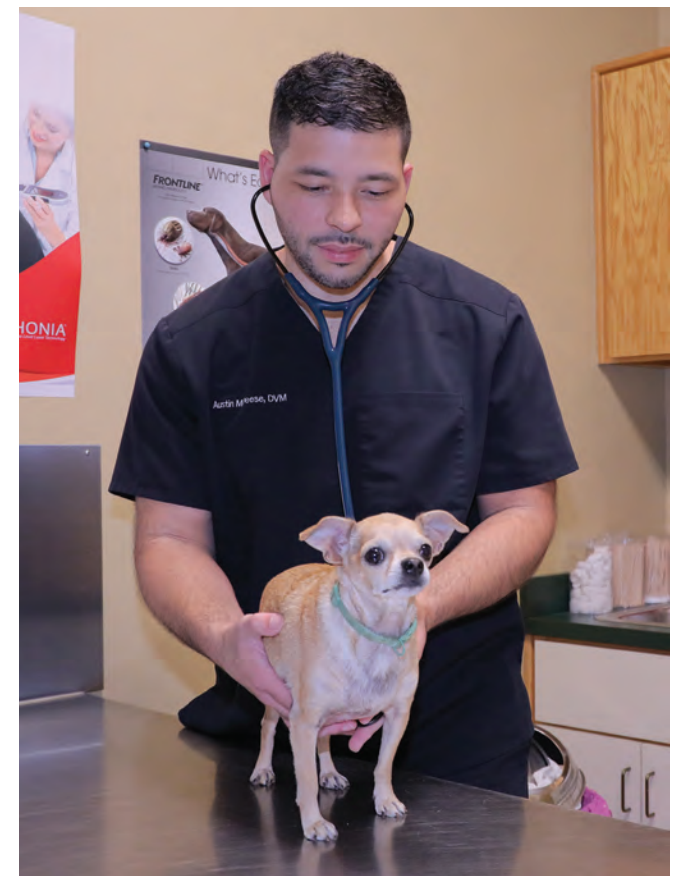
And he kept his promise.

Fresh out of veterinary school at Tuskegee University, Dr. Austin M. Deese '17 began splitting his time between Charlotte and working alongside his dad at Baird's Animal Hospital in Lumberton. Today, he continues practicing at Baird's while also serving as the owner of South Robeson Veterinary Clinic in Fairmont.

"It feels great to accomplish something I've worked so hard for," he said. "To put so much time and effort into getting my degree and finally being able to practice what I'm most passionate about and having the opportunity to learn something new about my profession every day — this is what I dreamed about. It's surreal.

"I enjoy being able to find a remedy for an animal, and in a few weeks, when the owner brings the animal in for a checkup, I get to see how well it is doing. It's a good feeling to be able to help animals live another day."

Deese earned his stripes cleaning kennels at Baird's, working his way up to the front office and, later, to a veterinarian assistant helping with surgeries and making farm calls. He continued to work and gain practical experience while completing his biology degree at UNCP. After graduating in 2017, he enrolled at Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine, following in the footsteps of his father and local



veterinarians like Dr. David Brooks, Dr. Curt Locklear Jr., Dr. Terry Clark, Dr. Melissa Chavis and Dr. Isaac Martinez.

He practices alongside his father with the same commitment and burning desire ignited on that fateful day as a teenager. He and his wife, Samantha, who works alongside him at both clinics, are building a life centered around caring for animals and their families.

The Deese family has deep ties to UNCP. While his father is not an alumnus, Dr. Austin's mother is, and both of his siblings, Kayleigh and Norman, are proud Braves. The family and Baird's Animal Hospital have been long-standing supporters of the Braves Club and UNCP Athletics.

BUILT ON GRIT

UNCP's Championship Culture Takes Center Stage

Written by Mark Locklear



24

conference titles over the past five years

8

conference titles in 2023-2024

25

seasons straight of NCAA Championship wrestling team representation

14

combined NCAA tournament appearances by men's and women's basketball

53

Academic All-Americans in the past five years

The BraveNation men's basketball team proudly posed behind the outstretched 2025 Conference Carolinas "CHAMPIONS" banner after overpowering Emmanuel College in a high-scoring title rematch inside Jerry Richardson Indoor Stadium in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Their expressions told the story. Focused. Fearless. Familiar with the moment.

This wasn't just a win — it was a statement. A second straight tournament title and a ticket to the NCAA Tournament for a historic first-ever appearance in the Sweet 16. The milestone

marked a new high for the program but underscored what many already know: A winning culture runs deep at UNC Pembroke and extends far beyond the hardwood.

"It still feels surreal," said senior guard Bradlee Haskell. "We've talked about getting to this level for years. Making the Sweet 16 wasn't just about the win — it proved that our program belongs on the national stage."

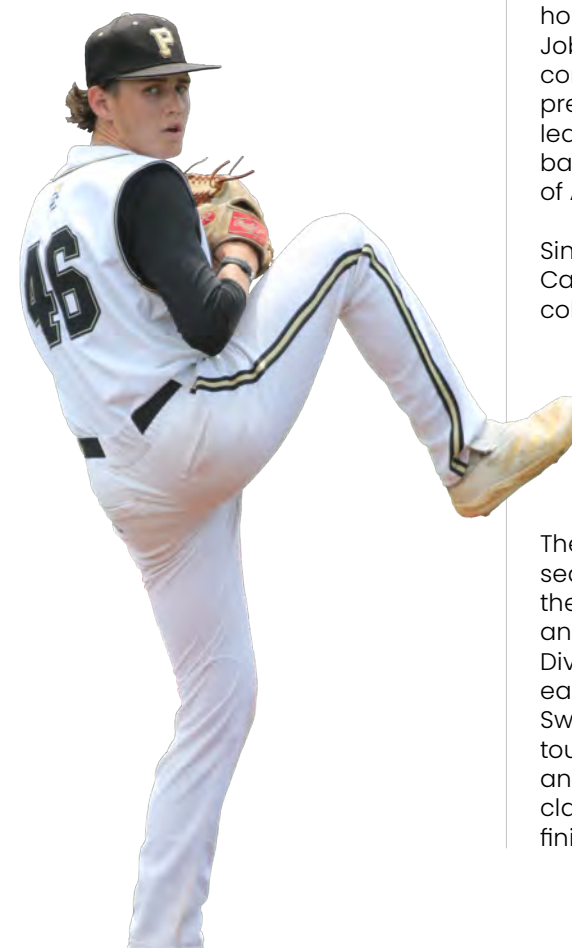
For decades, the local community, recruits and even opposing teams have noticed the Braves' winning culture — there's just something special about UNCP's athletic programs.

Leaders like Lacey Gane, Ray Pennington, English E. Jones, Charles Jenkins, Dan Kenney, Allen Meadors and Howard Dean laid a solid foundation on which to build an athletic dynasty.

In the years since, BraveNation has repeatedly established itself in nearly every sporting arena. Conference championships, national rankings and NCAA tournament bids are part of the fabric. That tradition was on full display in 1978 when Ed Crain's Pembroke State cross-country team secured the National Championship.

And when UNCP added football in 2005, BraveNation made history again, becoming the youngest football program in Division II to reach the NCAA playoffs.

Since 2010, 15 of UNCP's 16 varsity athletic teams have made a combined 79 trips to the NCAA Tournament. Numerous individual athletes have competed for national titles — including 2012 wrestling champion Mike Williams and Daniel Ownbey, the program's first two-time national champion ('14/'15).



Today, winning is the standard, and a vinyl wall wrap inside the Jones Center says it plainly: Championship Experience.

"Every time I walk past that wall, it reminds me of the legacy we're continuing," said Michelle Guerra Landa, a senior golfer from Venezuela. "It's not just words — it's who we are."

Whether it's on Lumbee Guaranty Bank Court, in Grace P. Johnson Stadium, on the Dick & Lenore Taylor Track, in Lumbee River EMC Stadium, on Sammy Cox Field — or most recently — the Sue Walsh Aquatics Center, UNCP athletes step into competition standing on the shoulders of those before them, with an eager community cheering them on to bigger and better things.

"As an athletic administrator, that's what you are shooting for," said Dick Christy, UNCP's athletic director since 2013. "It's powerful — because we work hard to ensure every program has an opportunity to be successful."

The BraveNation culture of excellence came into full focus this year when UNCP brought home the Conference Carolinas Joby Hawn Cup for the third consecutive season. The prestigious award recognizes the league's top athletic program based on the overall performance of ALL teams.

Since rejoining Conference Carolinas in 2021, UNCP has collected 17 tournament titles and five regular-season championships. (UNCP football competed in the Mountain East Conference.)

The 2023-24 and 2024-25 seasons brought success across the board. Women's soccer and basketball captured East Division and tournament titles, earning NCAA Tournament bids. Swimming earned the conference tournament championship and then repeated it. Volleyball claimed the East Division and finished as runner-up in the

conference tournament.

On the men's side, cross country secured its third straight tournament crown, while baseball and wrestling each captured program-first titles — baseball's Conference Carolinas tournament win and wrestling's division championship.



Michelle Guerra Landa

The men's basketball team tacked up the program's 11th NCAA Tournament appearance, while the wrestling team was represented at the NCAA Championship for the 25th straight time.

"As a department, we're working to get everyone to look beyond their own lanes to achieve collective excellence. It is so powerful to watch the teams challenge and support each other," Christy said.

"It's about getting one place better — what can you do to help the overall goal? — finishing third instead of fourth, second instead of third. Every small gain matters. When teams see that their success is interconnected, it drives a sense of unity and pride."

That synergy is strengthened by remarkable coaching continuity. UNCP's head coaches have over 120 years of experience in Pembroke, which Christy says is the difference maker. They had a good example to emulate: Coach John Haskins — an institution unto himself — retired in 2024 after a 35-year career. He led both the men's and women's basketball programs as well as men's golf and tennis. He capped his career with a regular-season championship, a second straight tournament title and a pair of NCAA Tournament appearances.

Baseball coach Paul O'Neil captured his 800th career victory, while Lars Andersson — with 250 wins during his tenure — has made his mark as the first and only coach in UNCP women's soccer program's history.

Wrestling coach Othello "O.T." Johnson is heading into his 15th season at the helm, having transformed the program into a national contender with multiple All-Americans, NCAA Championship appearances and a top 10 national finish in 2024.

Successful, too, are coaches like Oscar Roverato. As the head coach of the women's swimming program, he has led the team to unprecedented success, breaking nearly every school record and producing NCAA qualifiers, solidifying the program's rise as a conference and national powerhouse.

The list could easily go on.

"We've got coaches who know what kinds of students thrive at UNCP," Christy said. "They understand our majors, support systems and how to recruit student-athletes who contribute both on and off the field. Once a few programs got over the hump, that success started to spread."

THAT ENERGY IS CONTAGIOUS

"From my chair, it's clear: The hard work of our coaches and staff allows us to outpace our resources," Christy said. "When students see programs competing for championships, it becomes a powerful recruitment tool. It's attractive."



Rising from the Dark

BraveNation's success wasn't always guaranteed.

Dan Kenney — Christy's predecessor and longtime men's basketball head coach — spent more than three decades with UNCP Athletics. Across multiple roles within the program, he experienced winning seasons and gut-wrenching droughts that tested the resolve of coaches, players and fans alike.

From 1954 to 1976, UNCP competed as an NAIA independent. According to many, schools refused to schedule "the Indian school," even after integration. In 1976, the Braves joined Conference Carolinas — then moved to NCAA Division II in 1992 as a member of the Peach Belt Conference.

The leap came at a cost.

"We were woefully underfunded and up against schools like USC Upstate,

Kennesaw State and North Florida — programs that are Division I now," Kenney recalled. "It was a dark time. We had the same coaches who'd succeeded before but were stuck at the bottom."

Turning the tide took years of intentional investment and strategic implementation. The name was changed to The University of North Carolina at Pembroke in 1996. In 1999, a \$57 million statewide bond funded upgrades to the Jones Center and the addition of a new athletic training facility. During the mid-2000s, a steady rise in enrollment helped increase athletic fee revenue.

"Success in the Peach Belt came from small, consistent improvements and a shared commitment," Kenney said. This slow climb would have the Braves move from the bottom of the Peach Belt pack to multiple top three finishes before departing the league.

In 2021, UNCP returned to Conference Carolinas, bringing the program back into competitive alignment.



"We were an outlier in the Peach Belt. Too much of our budget went into travel," Christy said. "Now, that money goes into nutrition, apparel and equipment. And it's easier for families and fans to travel. We're back with schools we've had rivalries with since the '70s."

Christy credits the coaching staff for maintaining the momentum more than 400 student-athletes have bought in.

"Our coaches care about the full student experience. Most of them teach in the classroom. They understand our mission," Christy said. "When you have people like that, you do everything possible to hold on to them."

Defensive End Jamae Blank couldn't agree more.

"Coach Hall always says, 'I'm not just building football players — I'm building leaders,' and that really sticks with you," Blank said. "The coaches here want us to win, but more importantly, they want us to grow."

AS FOR THE FUTURE?

According to Haskins, it's simple.

"We're not winning just because of coaching," he said. "You need talent — but you don't compromise on character or academics to get it."

With the NC Promise Tuition Plan dramatically reducing costs and enabling one in two UNCP students to graduate debt-free, BraveNation has become even more competitive, drawing high-caliber student-athletes from beyond state lines.

"We've worked hard to maintain the underdog with a chip on its shoulder mentality," Christy said. "In some ways, we are the envy of the conference. And we must rise to the occasion. There's pride in this brand — and we have to keep pushing to protect it."

NO BRAVE LEFT BEHIND

A First Lady's Mission to Keep Students Enrolled

Written by Mark Locklear



When First Lady Rebecca Cummings learned that more than 200 UNC Pembroke students were at risk of being dropped due to small outstanding balances, she knew she had to act.

Driven by a deep commitment to student success, she launched No Brave Left Behind, a grassroots fundraising effort that quickly gained momentum. Through personal outreach — phone calls, emails and text messages — Cummings rallied the UNCP community, alumni and local supporters. Donations poured in from as far away as Raleigh, and within days, the initiative raised over \$200,000, allowing 222 students to stay in school.

Aaron Thomas, a longtime UNCP supporter, personally led the charge to raise at least \$100,000 of the total. His efforts proved to be a turning point in the campaign's success.

The campaign culminated in a massive steak plate fundraiser, where 80 volunteers — including Sen. Danny Britt, Rep. Jarrod Lowery and UNCP Trustees Allison Harrington Walters and Mickey Gregory — helped prepare and serve more than 1,300 meals.

"The chancellor and the first lady are so devoted to the students and the university, and that's what it takes — it takes commitment from the top," said Gregory, who brought friends and alumni to support the effort. "I see all they do, which inspires me to want to do more."

For many, the cause was deeply personal. Cheyenne Eckard '24, who relied on financial aid while working through school, volunteered because she knew how life-changing this support could be.

"UNCP is affordable, and financial aid has made a huge difference for me,"

she said. "But I know that sometimes, even with financial aid, students struggle to cover everything. I wouldn't want anyone to have to stop pursuing their degree because they can't afford college."

Local chefs Pat Dial and Ray Scott teamed up with Gary Strickland, and together they led the effort to organize and cook for the event in just four days, with help from dedicated community members like Jarette Sampson and others. Their commitment and coordination made the high-volume fundraiser possible.

"For four generations, this university has provided for my family," Dial said. "I want to give that same opportunity to another student."

The success of No Brave Left Behind highlights the power of community-driven support. Vice Chancellor for Advancement Anita Stallings was overwhelmed by the outpouring.

"Seeing so many alumni, volunteers and community partners unite to support our students was truly inspiring," Stallings said. "Our goal is to build on this momentum — to establish permanent, endowed funding to ensure future generations of students never have to choose between financial hardship and their education."

At UNCP, no Brave should be left behind. Thanks to First Lady Rebecca Cummings, that mission is stronger than ever.



80
volunteers

1,300
plates

Raising Over
\$200,000

Allowing
222
students to stay in school



A CAREER THAT SHAPED GENERATIONS

Dr. Richard Vela's 53-year tenure at UNCP was more than a career — it was a calling.

For more than five decades, Dr. Richard Vela's voice has echoed through UNC Pembroke, guiding students through literature, theater and film with passion and purpose.

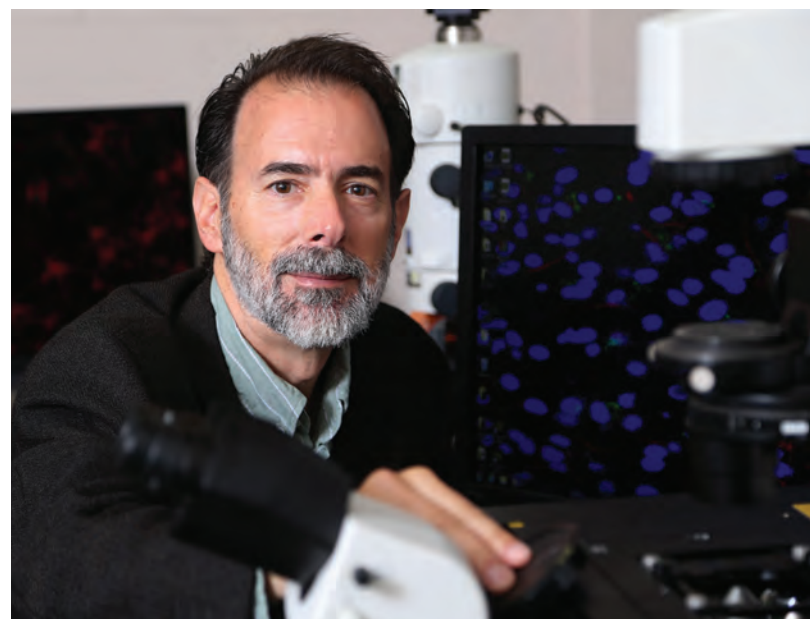
After 53 years of service, Vela has retired, and the university community gathered to celebrate a career that shaped generations. Former students, like physician assistant Phillip Stephens, credited their success to Vela's mentorship, while leaders like Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings honored his legacy with the prestigious Order of the Long Leaf Pine. A native of Del Rio, Texas, Vela began teaching at UNCP in 1971, quickly becoming a cornerstone of the university through his dynamic teaching style and deep love for the arts. Students remember him not just as a professor but as a mentor who brought literature to life and inspired countless lives.

Reflecting on his career, Vela emphasizes the relationships he built and the joy of witnessing his students thrive — proof that his impact will resonate far beyond the classroom.



DR. BEN BAHR AWARDED \$1.1M FOR ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH

Dr. Ben Bahr, William C. Friday Distinguished Professor, has received a \$1.1 million grant from NCInnovation to support his ongoing research into Alzheimer's disease. Over the next two years, the funding will help advance Bahr's innovative work on early brain vulnerabilities and treatment strategies, building on more than 30 years of groundbreaking neuroscience research. His efforts aim to pave the way for new therapeutic options for Alzheimer's patients across the state and beyond.



INSPIRING MINDS. SHAPING FUTURES.

Meet the inspiring educators who are shaping the future — one student, one discovery, one breakthrough at a time. These standout professors exemplify the passion and purpose behind UNC Pembroke's mission.



COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

Dr. Bryan Sales

As Agriculture Program director, Dr. Bryan Sales is guiding UNCP's role as a founding academic partner in the \$30 million Bezos Center for Sustainable Protein at NC State. Through mentored research, internships and summer opportunities, he's empowering students to lead in alternative protein development and tackle food insecurity with sustainable, affordable solutions.



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Dr. Melissa Wrenn

Dr. Melissa Wrenn, a seasoned literacy expert and educator, serves as the Joseph Oxendine Distinguished Scholar, advancing UNCP's literacy efforts locally, nationally and internationally. In April 2025, she represented the university at the World Literacy Summit in Oxford, England, highlighting its contributions to the science of reading and community-based literacy clinics. With over 20 years of experience, Wrenn is committed to supporting teachers, aligning with statewide reading initiatives and mentoring colleagues to expand UNCP's educational impact and national recognition.



COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES

Dr. José Rafols

Dr. José Rafols, director of the new Master of Science in Occupational Therapy program, brings four decades of experience in clinical practice, education and military service. A seasoned program builder, he is fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, forging regional clinical partnerships and developing bridge pathways to meet the healthcare needs of southeastern North Carolina — positioning the program as a cornerstone of UNCP's growing health sciences programs.



THOMAS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

Dr. Caroline Glackin

Dr. Caroline Glackin, the Thomas Family Distinguished Professor in Entrepreneurship, has nearly 40 years of experience as both a practitioner and academic. Since joining UNCP, she has launched student organizations like the Collegiate Entrepreneurs' Organization and Sigma Nu Tau, led the Braves Pitch-a-Thon and championed cross-campus collaboration and community engagement. Her leadership is helping shape UNCP into a hub of entrepreneurial innovation and regional impact.



A SHARED VISION

Transforming Healthcare, One Story at a Time

Written by Mark Locklear

Shannon Cummings doesn't remember a time when her father was healthy. From the moment she could read, she was by his side — helping manage his medications, keeping track of appointments and eventually driving him to dialysis treatments. For 18 years, Albert Hunt battled kidney failure, enduring grueling procedures that kept him alive but never truly well.

Cummings' childhood was shaped by hospital corridors, waiting rooms and whispered prayers.

While other teenagers juggled school and social lives, she balanced textbooks with caregiving, often spending nights in hospital rooms while her father recovered from surgery.

"I like to think I'm strong, but if it weren't for the grace of God, I wouldn't even be here," Cummings said.

Those years, though challenging, became the foundation for something greater. Cummings didn't just learn resilience; she discovered a calling.

Her father passed away in 2018, eight months before she crossed the stage at UNC Pembroke with a degree in biology. The loss was profound, but she pressed on, completing the physician assistant program at Pfeiffer University and returning home to join the medical team at Robeson Health Care Corporation.

"I've always had a deep-seated care for people, but my experience with my father cemented my desire to help others live healthier lives," Cummings said. "That's why I chose medicine."

Cummings' story is just one example of how healthcare challenges have shaped lives in southeastern North Carolina. It's also a testament to why UNCP is working tirelessly to change the future of healthcare in the region.

HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS FOR A HEALTHIER FUTURE

Cummings' return to her hometown of Rowland is no coincidence. She knows firsthand the challenges of growing up in a region with some of the state's poorest health outcomes. Historically, Robeson County has ranked near the bottom in obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, infant mortality and death rates for minors. These challenges have persisted for generations, making access to quality healthcare more critical than ever.

Yet, the region continues to face a severe shortage of healthcare professionals. According to a study by UNC-Chapel Hill's Sheps Center, UNCP's primary service region has fewer health professionals per 10,000 people than the state average across each profession studied.

Recognizing this crisis, UNCP launched a major health sciences expansion in 2018, committing to



improve regional healthcare in rural southeastern North Carolina and meet growing workforce demands. That year, the university formed the College of Health Sciences, bringing together four existing departments — counseling, kinesiology, nursing and social work — to tackle the region’s complex healthcare and social challenges.

To address the provider gap, UNCP developed new programs designed to meet the region’s greatest healthcare needs. Among them, the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), which became the university’s first-ever doctoral program, marked a historic milestone in 2024.

Additional graduate offerings include the Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA), a fully online, flexible program designed to prepare the next generation of healthcare leaders with a specific focus on the challenges and opportunities of rural healthcare. Students gain applied skills in policy, finance, data analysis and operations while exploring issues like provider shortages, access barriers and rural health disparities.

“We designed the MHA program to produce healthcare leaders who understand the unique challenges of rural communities — and who are ready to lead with purpose, innovation and heart,” said Eva Skuka, MD, PhD, dean of the College of Health Sciences.

The program’s interdisciplinary structure allows students to collaborate with peers in nursing, counseling, social work and kinesiology, developing a systems-level view of healthcare leadership. Graduates emerge prepared to lead hospitals, clinics, nonprofits and public health agencies that serve rural populations.

Other new graduate programs, including a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy (MSOT), were also created to expand student opportunities and help fill workforce shortages. The MSOT program prepares students to become licensed occupational therapists who serve in schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities and rehabilitation centers, particularly in regions where therapy services are limited or unavailable.

For Erika Nicholson, a graduate student from Rutherfordton, North Carolina, occupational therapy is personal. Inspired by her grandfather, a World War II veteran who recovered with the help of OT after surviving a major heart attack, Erika sees entering the profession as a way to give back.

“I can’t put into words the thankfulness I have for what OT gave my family,” she said. “It helped my grandfather heal and be with us. I want to give that back to veterans and others who are sometimes overlooked.

“There’s a level of support in this program I’ve never had before as a student,” she said. “It’s not just reading from a book. It’s constantly hands-on, always pushing us to apply what we’re learning. When we graduate, we’ll be ready.”

“Dr. Rafols truly cares about students, not just in words but in how he leads. That kind of support trickles down and creates an environment where you can grow and thrive,” stated Nicholson.



As the university continues to grow its undergraduate and graduate health sciences programs, several others are under consideration, including speech pathology, dietetics, nutrition, health sciences and two additional doctoral programs in social work and medical science.

“As a trained cardiothoracic surgeon and as someone who grew up in this county, the health of this region is close to my heart,” said Chancellor Robin G. Cummings, MD. “We are here to move the needle on healthcare outcomes in this region.

“That’s why we’re not just creating more academic programs. We’re investing in the workforce, strengthening our healthcare infrastructure and ensuring that the people of southeastern North Carolina have access to the care they deserve,” Cummings said.

Thanks to a historic investment from state legislators, \$20 million in start-up funding and \$91 million for a state-of-the-art clinical sciences building, UNCP is making good on its promise to be a catalyst for change.

Set to break ground in 2026, this facility will serve as a hub where students will learn, innovate and train alongside professionals, ultimately increasing access to high-quality healthcare in southeastern North Carolina.

A LONG-AWAITED VISION COMES TO LIFE

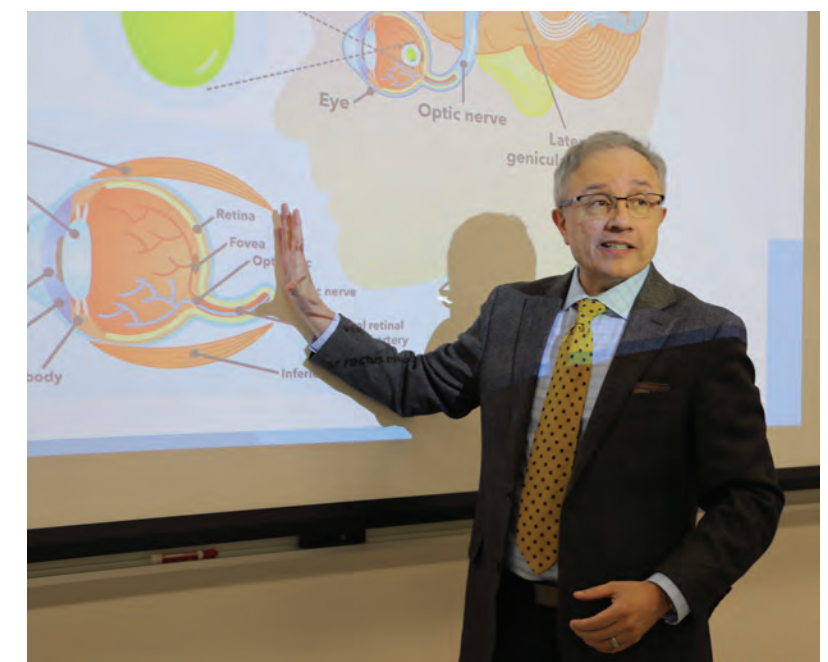
University leaders and legislators have dreamed of bringing an optometry school to UNCP for over two decades. Now, that vision is becoming a reality.

Currently, 13 counties in North Carolina lack a single optometrist, leaving many residents without access to critical eye care. With no optometry schools in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia or Georgia, UNCP’s College of Optometric Medicine, approved by the UNC System Board of Governors in 2024 with a plan to welcome its first class in fall 2027, is stepping up to fill this void.

“Optometry is a vital component of North Carolina’s healthcare system,” said Richard Castillo, OD, DO, founding dean of the College of Optometric Medicine. “UNCP is looking to meet the rising demand for eye care professionals and ensure that future optometrists are equipped to serve communities with limited access to comprehensive eye care.”

For future healthcare workers like Hannah Evington, a UNCP alumna now pursuing her optometry degree in Pennsylvania, the possibility of such new programs represents a long-overdue opportunity.

“I had to pack up and move several states away for my training,” Evington said. “Knowing that future students may be able to stay close to home for the same education is incredible.”



“I learned so much about myself and how to connect with people through the classroom, internship opportunities and interactions with medical professionals. UNCP has opened a lot of doors for me. My professors and advisers took the time to sit with me and talk through what would be expected of me in medical school, and things I can do in preparation for the next chapter of my life.”

Lindsay Branch

UNCP Graduate & ECU Brody School of Medicine Student



**BUILDING MORE THAN DEGREES —
BUILDING A HEALTHIER REGION**

In addition to expanding academic offerings, UNCP is forging key partnerships with regional healthcare providers, tribal health organizations and rural hospitals to ensure students gain hands-on training in culturally diverse and underserved environments. Partnerships with UNC Health Southeastern, Scotland Health, Cape Fear Valley Health and FirstHealth of the Carolinas allow students to engage in real-world clinical experiences while addressing regional workforce shortages.

“These vital partnerships ensure our graduates have the skills to address healthcare challenges and a deep understanding of the communities they serve,” said Eva Skuka, MD, PhD, dean of the College of Health Sciences. “By training graduates to work effectively in rural and underserved settings, we are directly expanding the healthcare workforce in areas where it is most needed.”

Partnerships, like the one with Scotland Health Care System, allow UNCP nursing students to receive Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support (ACLS) certification before graduation.

“This training gave me a clearer understanding of heart rhythms and medication administration,” said Shelby Sampson, a senior nursing student. “I now feel more confident in my ability to respond in a real-life code situation.”

Equally important are UNCP’s partnership pathways, which provide direct access to advanced healthcare training. Through agreements with ECU’s Brody School of Medicine Early Assurance Program and School of Dental Medicine, UNC Chapel Hill’s Eshelman School of Pharmacy and NC State’s College of Veterinary Medicine, students have guaranteed pathways into professional healthcare programs, ensuring that more providers are trained and retained in North Carolina.

As a Brody Scholar, Lindsay Branch was assured admission to ECU Brody School of Medicine upon completion of her degree and meeting all the requirements of admission to medical school. Branch graduated summa cum laude a full semester early and credits her UNCP experience with preparing her for medical school.

“I learned so much about myself and how to connect with people through the classroom, internship opportunities and interactions with medical professionals,” Branch said. “UNCP has opened a lot of doors for me.”

Another way UNCP is transforming the healthcare pipeline is through the Health Careers Access Program (HCAP). This long-standing initiative supports economically and educationally disadvantaged students, particularly those from rural and underrepresented communities, who aspire to careers in health professions.



HCAP students receive personalized support and early access to real-world experiences through clinical internships, mentoring and academic advising. The program is designed to build a more diverse and community-focused healthcare workforce across the region.

For Ethan Wilkins, a 2025 graduate and future physician assistant, NC-HCAP was a turning point.

“Being part of HCAP opened doors I didn’t even know existed,” said Wilkins, who also serves with the Pembroke Rescue Squad. “The mentorship and clinical exposure helped me grow as a student, but also as someone who wants to make a real difference in the lives of others.”

**CENTERING COMMUNITY THROUGH
CONVERSATION**

Each year, the College of Health Sciences hosts its Community Health & Wellness Symposium, bringing together students, faculty, community leaders and healthcare professionals to explore pressing regional health issues. With over 130 attendees and 20 presenters, recent discussions have addressed Indigenous health disparities, mental health education and postpartum depression, highlighting the university’s role as a convener of cross-sector dialogue and innovative solutions.

“Our goal with this symposium is to foster open and honest conversations about critical health issues affecting our communities,” Skuka said. “By giving students — from social work, nursing, counseling and other disciplines — a platform to present and engage, the symposium strengthens their skills in collaborative research, cultural competence and community outreach.”

And that sense of purpose and dedication to community impact permeates UNCP’s healthcare programs. For example, the Department of Social Work is nationally accredited and recognized for its commitment to rural behavioral health. Offering both BSW and CSWE-accredited MSW degrees, the program trains students to become compassionate clinicians, advocates and community leaders. Field placements across southeastern North Carolina

expose students to work in schools, behavioral health centers and public service agencies, where they gain firsthand experience addressing issues like trauma, addiction, housing instability and access to care.

The department also leads major initiatives such as OPTIMISE Rural NC, a federally funded effort to expand the behavioral health workforce through trauma-informed, telehealth-capable clinicians. With its emphasis on cultural competence and real-world impact, the program attracts students committed to making a difference in underserved areas.

“The program isn’t just teaching me how to be a social worker, it’s showing me how to be an advocate for people in communities like my own,” said Jordan Dew, Master of Social Work student. “Social work is about meeting people where they are and helping them overcome barriers. Being part of a program that values that mission, especially in rural and underserved areas, means everything to me.”

TRAINING WITH TECHNOLOGY THAT MIRRORS THE REAL WORLD

To prepare students for the demands of today’s healthcare settings, UNCP is investing in state-of-the-art technology that mirrors the real-world tools professionals use every day.

In the Clinical Learning Center, future nurses and health sciences students train using high-fidelity manikins, virtual reality equipment and simulators that replicate complex medical scenarios — from childbirth to pediatric emergencies and neurological events. These immersive experiences help students strengthen their clinical skills, make real-time decisions and build confidence in safe, controlled environments.

UNCP is also advancing training in exercise science through new technology in the Exercise Physiology Lab. The lab features a Bod Pod to assess body composition with gold-standard accuracy. Students also train with a KORR™ Metabolic Cart, a tool used to measure resting metabolic rate, VO2 max and anaerobic threshold. These systems, common in clinical, rehabilitation and athletic settings, give students firsthand experience with advanced fitness and health diagnostics.

Meanwhile, UNCP’s Mobile Health Unit, a fully equipped clinic on wheels, brings care directly to underserved communities across southeastern North Carolina. The unit provides screenings, preventive services and health education while giving students hands-on experience delivering care in the field. Regular visits to rural communities and tribal areas build trust and improve access to essential services.

“We are intentional about designing learning environments that reflect what students will experience in the field,” Skuka said. “Whether it’s in a hospital, clinic or community setting, our graduates are prepared to deliver excellent care from day one.”



A SHARED COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

What begins in the classroom and clinic is now shaping communities across the region. Through innovative programs and strategic outreach, UNCP is moving the needle on healthcare in southeastern North Carolina.

The university’s Healthy Start Connection program significantly impacts the health and well-being of families in the region. Awarded a \$5.5 million federal grant, the program works to improve maternal and infant health outcomes by offering home visits, group-based education and access to critical resources.

And for years, UNCP’s McKenzie-Elliott School of Nursing has been a cornerstone of healthcare education in the region, producing highly skilled professionals who serve in hospitals, clinics and rural healthcare settings across North Carolina.

With both undergraduate and graduate pathways, the school is actively working to address the state’s nursing shortage through a “grow your own” approach by recruiting students from southeastern North Carolina. Recent studies show that 75% of UNCP’s nursing graduates stay and practice in the area. That number rose to 85% following the 2022–23 academic year.

“Our students are deeply connected to these communities, and many of them return home to serve where they are needed most,” said Jennifer Jones-Locklear, PhD, RN, director of the McKenzie-Elliott School of Nursing. “Caring for the community — their neighbors — is at the very core of why they were drawn to the profession, and it’s what makes them good nurses.”

As it embraces a bold vision for tomorrow, UNCP continues to exemplify the power of education to transform lives, strengthen communities and drive innovation.

And for Shannon Cummings, the investment in healthcare education isn’t just about filling job shortages — it’s about changing lives.



Shannon Cummings

“I’m excited about what UNCP is doing for the future of healthcare,” she said. “And I’m honored to be a part of this change.”

CONTROLLED BURN TRAINING EXERCISE

More than 300 firefighters and instructors from 15 counties as far away as Greensboro participated in the multiday training during winter break. UNCP partnered with Robeson Community College, Creative Fire and Rescue Training Services, the State Bureau of Investigation and a host of local and regional fire departments and EMS for the controlled burn of the former Village Apartments.

The training provided hands-on experience; helped develop teamwork, problem-solving and leadership skills; and tested participants' strength and stamina. Strapped with 50 pounds of turnout gear, firefighters advanced water hoses up three flights of stairs.



"We are extremely grateful to UNCP. This was a unique experience because we seldom get to burn something of this magnitude. It will be a big advantage for the firefighters when they go into real-life situations because they've got firsthand knowledge of how fire reacts in multistory structures."

Steve West, Director of Fire and Rescue Training at RCC



Five of the six apartment complexes that were engulfed were three-story buildings.



Evans Crossroads Fire Department



Pembroke Rural Fire Department



UNCP graduate students Trenton Brown, left, and Anna Grossheim, right, double as volunteer firefighters in Robeson County.



The controlled burns prepared the site for the construction of UNCP's new \$91 million health sciences building, the future home of the state's first public Doctor of Optometry program.

Anna Grossheim Duncan: MORE THAN A JERSEY, A LEADER

Written by Mark Locklear

At first glance, Anna Grossheim Duncan’s story reads like a classic collegiate standout — record-breaking statistics, championship titles and shelves lined with awards.

But those details only scratch the surface.

Duncan’s journey at UNC Pembroke is one of rare duality: the elite athlete whose every touch on the ball was poetry and the first responder whose steady hands and calm presence changed lives off the field.

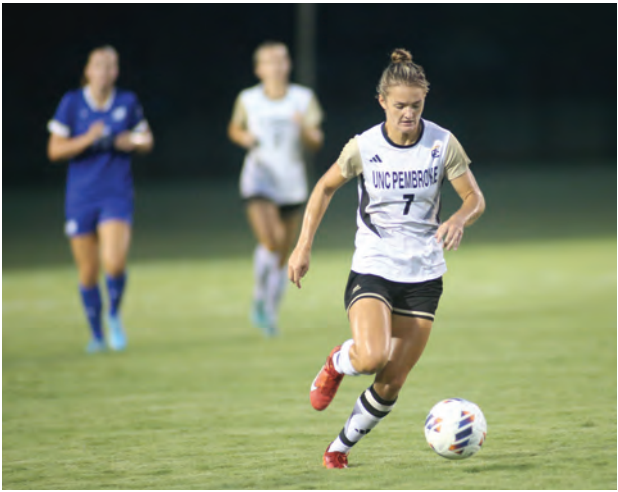
In every way, she’s a generational talent — not only because of how she plays but also because of how she lives.

Raised in Garner, North Carolina, Duncan first laced up cleats at the age of 5. Years later, she would become the most decorated soccer player in UNCP history, rewriting the record books with 44 career goals, 11 multi-goal games and a single-match record of five goals. She holds the record for assists and was a four-time All-Conference selection. Her dominance on the pitch helped steer the Braves to three straight conference tournament titles.

“I’ve been a college coach for 30 years, and I’ve had some incredible players and incredible people who have gone on to be extremely successful, but Anna is one of the most unique people I’ve ever coached,” said women’s soccer head coach Lars Andersson.

“There are so many layers to Anna. There’s Anna, the player, scholar, amazing leader and team captain. And there’s Anna, the amazing woman who has entrenched herself in the community,” Andersson said.

Yet her influence stretched far beyond Lumbee River EMC Stadium.



While most student-athletes juggle practice and class, Grossheim carried another responsibility: serving her community as an EMT and volunteer firefighter. She responded to car crashes and structure fires, dove into swift waters for rescues and helped deliver three babies, including one for a non-English-speaking mother. She brought a patient back from the brink after flatlining. Every emergency became another thread in the remarkable tapestry of her life.

Duncan’s commitment to service matched her excellence in academics. With a 3.99 GPA, she earned her sociology degree and is pursuing a master’s in public administration. Her academic and athletic achievements earned her seven All-American honors and propelled her into elite company: She was one of only nine finalists nationwide for the NCAA Woman of the Year Award — UNCP’s first-ever finalist.

This recognition comes as no surprise to those who’ve followed her career. Leadership came naturally to Duncan. A three-year team captain, she guided younger players with grace and purpose, shaping the team’s strategy and culture.

Coaches describe her as a player who doesn’t just raise the standard — she becomes the standard. And while her jersey may one day hang in the rafters, Duncan is more concerned with the lives she’s touched. The “first responder” title carries more meaning than any award for her.

“I am most proud of my work in fire and EMS,” Duncan said. “The amount of growth I’ve had individually in that aspect has been amazing.”

After she earns her MPA in 2025, she plans to pursue a career as a flight paramedic. Andersson said that replacing Duncan next season will require a collective effort.

“I don’t know if we will ever have another player like Anna come through this program,” Andersson said. “She has shown the involvement you can have in college if you open yourself to the community. Anna has embraced this community like few of us do in college.”



CLASSROOM *to the* COSMOS

Dr. Tim Ritter's Lasting Influence

Written by Jeff Bolles

The best and brightest from STEM powerhouses — MIT, Illinois, Wisconsin, Purdue — gathered at NASA's Houston campus, eager to showcase their engineering, physics and virtual reality expertise.

And then there was a group from a small regional university, a school that likely no one else in the room had ever heard of. They called themselves the Weightless Lumbees.

No one expected them to compete at this level — let alone own the room. They didn't come from a world-renowned research lab or a billion-dollar tech incubator. They came from a small North Carolina college with no household name and no Ivy League pedigree. But when they stepped onto that NASA campus, they belonged. And when it was time to prove themselves, they did.

If you asked Dr. Tim Ritter, he would tell you that mentoring the Weightless Lumbees was the proudest accomplishment of his academic career. His eyes light up when he speaks about them, recalling how he taught them that they would fail many times — but that if they kept working, they would succeed. And they did.

"Dr. Ritter encouraged and empowered us," said Mary Beth Locklear '03, '12, a founding member of the Weightless Lumbees. "He believed we were just as good as Ivy League students. And the best part? We had so much fun and made memories to last a lifetime."

But Ritter's influence stretched far beyond NASA's competitions or the walls of a classroom. He was an educator in the purest sense, believing that physics was best taught through experience, discovery and joy.



Ritter lives a life of integrity, passion and purpose.

And he follows one simple philosophy passed down from his father: "If you're a good, honest person, others will see it. They will want to follow you. They will want to listen to you. The other things will fall into place."



He led students on field trips for "amusement park physics," where they built their own accelerometers and studied the forces behind roller coasters.

He beamed when a nontraditional student explained the physics behind a bundle of shingles falling from her roof.

And he laughed when a student, much to his hunting buddies' annoyance, turned a simple afternoon of target practice into a lesson in projectile motion.

His students admired him for his passion. They loved him for his unwavering belief in them. He challenged them and pushed them beyond their limits because he knew that was where real growth happened. He had learned that lesson himself.

"I was never the smartest or most gifted student," Ritter admitted. "But I worked hard. Hard work makes up for anything you lack. Just keep working at it."

That resilience, that relentless drive, defines the battle he fights today.

THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE

ALS — amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease — has taken so much from Ritter. It is a cruel, unrelenting illness.

But Ritter refuses to surrender. Each day, he fights. He forces himself through exercises — arm curls, leg slides, standing up — tasks most people take for granted. He knows that if he can do them today just as he did them yesterday, then ALS hasn't won. And he won't let it win.

But even in the face of his greatest challenge, his focus is not just on himself. He fights for others, leading "Ritter's Recruits" in the ALS Association's Walk to Defeat ALS. Every year, his army of friends and family raises thousands of dollars to fund research and spread awareness of the disease. This year alone, they raised over \$23,000.

And Ritter would be the first to tell anyone willing to listen that he is not fighting alone.

His wife, Marie, is his rock, his hero. Friends visit him regularly, lifting his spirits and reminding him that he is not in this battle alone. His UNCP family — students and colleagues alike — continues to stand by him. Even in retirement, his legacy continues.

He and Marie recently created the Dr. Timothy M. Ritter and Marie A. Amero Endowed Research Scholarship, which encourages students to push beyond the classroom, attend conferences, present research and challenge their own limits — just as he challenged them during his years as a physics professor at UNCP.

**A LEGACY THAT
WILL NEVER FADE**

Ritter’s influence stretches far beyond the confines of the campus. Chemistry professor Dr. Meredith Storms recalled how Ritter’s energy and enthusiasm transformed the department.

Former student Candace Langston marveled at his authenticity — the way he always made time for people and never forgot a conversation, even a decade later.

And Cecelia Locklear, a fierce community advocate, remembered how he gave his time to local teachers, buying them pizza and staying late to help them navigate science fair paperwork.

After all, Ritter lives a life of integrity, passion and purpose. And he follows one simple philosophy passed down from his father: “If you’re a good, honest person, others will see it. They will want to follow you. They will want to listen to you. The other things will fall into place.”

His students, his colleagues, his friends and his family have seen it. They have followed him. They have listened. And because of that, his legacy will never fade.



Anthony Barton, principal of Fairmont High School, with students

UNC PEMBROKE’S TEACHING FELLOWS

A Pipeline for Excellence

Written by Mark Locklear

For Anthony Barton, leading a school isn’t only a job — it’s a calling. Now in his second year as principal of Fairmont High School in Robeson County, the two-time UNC Pembroke graduate is nine years into a career in administration, a path that began in the classroom as a teacher.

Barton credits the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program at UNC Pembroke with shaping his career. From 2004 to 2008, the program didn’t just help him financially — it provided a community, a support system and leadership training that prepared him for life in education.

“Teaching Fellows was a game-changer for me,” Barton said. “Had it not been for Teaching Fellows, I don’t know if I would have finished school.”

Barton’s story is one of many that highlight the lasting impact of the Teaching Fellows program, which is now being revived at UNCP.

Launched by the North Carolina General Assembly in the 1980s, the Teaching Fellows program has long been a pipeline for preparing educators. UNCP joined in 1996, providing students with leadership training, professional development and financial support in

8,500
STUDENTS HAVE GRADUATED SINCE
THE PROGRAM'S INCEPTION

2/3 OF GRADUATES
WERE STILL EMPLOYED AS TEACHERS
OR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
SIX YEARS AFTER GRADUATION

exchange for a commitment to teach in North Carolina public schools.

The program was paused after legislative funding was cut in 2012 — but its impact never faded. State leaders reinstated funding in 2017, and UNCP rejoined the program in 2021, ready to continue its mission of producing exceptional educators.

“The Teaching Fellows program not only equips future teachers with the skills they need but instills a deep sense of purpose and commitment to their chosen craft,” said Dr. Tracy Mulvaney, dean of the School of Education. “Our Teaching Fellows at UNCP feel supported, and they see the benefits of that support as they progress in their careers.”

The legacy of Teaching Fellows runs deep across North Carolina. From its inception in 1986 until 2012, more than 8,500 students graduated from the program at participating colleges and universities, including UNCP. Nearly two-thirds of those graduates were still employed as teachers or school administrators six years after graduation.

Barton is one of them.

“When I enrolled as a freshman Teaching Fellow at UNCP in 2004, the university already had a reputation for creating a family-like environment and providing leadership opportunities. That support was just as critical to my success as anything I learned in the classroom,” Barton said.

“It gave me a community,” he continued. “We lived together, went to class together and formed lifelong relationships. The opportunities UNCP provided — travel, professional development and exposure to different people and perspectives — enriched my experience. Had I not been a Teaching Fellow, I doubt I would have been exposed to them.”

HANDS-ON LEARNING
FOR FUTURE EDUCATORS

Dr. Arine Lowery, director of UNCP’s Teaching Fellows program, said providing students with real-world professional experiences remains an integral part of the curriculum.

“Last year, our Teaching Fellows attended the Council for Exceptional Children conference in Raleigh,” Lowery said. “The students loved it. They were able to interact with leading experts in special education and gain insight into best practices for working with children with special needs.”



Dr. Arine Lowery

Experiential learning opportunities like these are shaping the next generation of educators.

Jaiden Tillman, a junior in the Teaching Fellows program, recalled visiting the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, a nationally renowned school recognized for its innovative teaching methods. “We visited different classrooms and observed how their teachers teach,” said Tillman. “I learned different teaching methods and found new ways to connect with students. It was an experience that helped you remember your ‘why’ for getting into education.”

When Teaching Fellows was revived in 2017, it came with a crucial change: For the first time, graduate students were eligible.

Traditionally, the program had been limited to undergraduates, but as the nationwide teacher shortage worsened, school districts began looking beyond traditional education pathways to fill vacancies.

“Nationally, we’re in a critical teaching shortage,” Mulvaney said. “Where you would have 200 applicants for a teaching position in the past, those numbers have decreased substantially. Years ago, school superintendents weren’t supportive of lateral entry, and now it’s just part of the landscape.”

“The Teaching Fellows program not only equips future teachers with the skills they need but instills a deep sense of purpose and commitment to their chosen craft. Our Teaching Fellows at UNCP feel supported, and they see the benefits of that support as they progress in their careers.”

UNCP’s Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program is attracting Teaching Fellows as a result, Lowery said.

“These students already hold a bachelor’s degree in another field but now seek their initial teacher licensure through our MAT program,” Lowery said. “It’s another pathway into education, and our program supports them every step of the way.”

As a school principal, Barton believes expanding Teaching Fellows to graduate students was the right move.

“I’m excited they’ve opened it up to different groups of people,” Barton said. “Some of the best teachers I’ve hired have come through the nontraditional route. It’s smart to look at people who have done other things and consider them for a teaching role.”

Cynthia Liles is among the first Teaching Fellows to graduate under the new model, earning her MAT in Special Education in 2024.

“When I first applied to be a Teaching Fellow, I didn’t expect to get in,” said Liles, now a special education teacher at Grady Brown Elementary School in Hillsborough, North Carolina. “But everyone was on board to help me. I liked the fact that I wasn’t alone — that I always had someone to guide and support me.”

MORE SUPPORT, MORE SUCCESS

UNCP’s Teaching Fellows program is growing fast. The university enrolled 45 Teaching Fellows in 2024-25 — more than double the previous year’s 20. Statewide, Teaching Fellows enrollment has also surged, with 462 students accepted for the 2024-25 academic year — the most since the program resumed in 2017.

Beyond numbers, Lowery is encouraged by the support system in place for Teaching Fellows even after graduation.

Dr. Tracy Mulvaney



“It’s one thing to graduate but quite another to find success as a new teacher,” Lowery said. “Those first few years can be tough, and that’s where we lose people.”

A state-funded coaching model now provides individual mentorship and classroom support for Teaching Fellows during their first two years of teaching.

“These recent graduates have someone assigned regionally across the state who can observe them, co-teach a lesson or support them through a difficult conversation,” Lowery said. “That kind of one-on-one coaching can be the difference between a teacher staying in the classroom or leaving the profession.”

For Lowery, the goal is clear: Prepare Teaching Fellows to lead in North Carolina’s classrooms and shape the future of education.

“A North Carolina Teaching Fellow doesn’t just enter the classroom — they arrive prepared,” Mulvaney said. “They bring leadership skills, professional experience and a commitment to making a difference. And that’s what North Carolina’s students deserve.”



AMID HISTORIC FINAL FOUR RUN, KELVIN AND KAREN L. SAMPSON INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF UNCP STUDENT-ATHLETES

Written by Mark Locklear



Even while leading one of the most unforgettable seasons in recent college basketball history, University of Houston Head Coach Kelvin Sampson and his wife, UNCP Trustee Karen L. Sampson, made time to give back to their roots. The proud UNCP alumni recently made a significant gift to their alma mater, establishing the Karen L. and Kelvin Sampson Nutrition Station — a transformative resource supporting the health, wellness and performance of student-athletes.

The station, named in their honor, is a central hub for nutrition education and wellness programming. Designed to help athletes develop healthy habits and compete at their highest levels, the station underscores the Sampsons' deep commitment to student success on and off the field.

Their gift came during a historic 2024-25 season for Kelvin and the University of Houston men's basketball team. The Cougars finished the regular season with an outstanding 28-3 record.

Entering the NCAA Tournament as a national powerhouse, Houston delivered an electrifying postseason run that carried them to the national championship game, including a statement victory over the storied Duke Blue Devils. Despite a hard-fought 2-point loss to Florida, the Cougars' season is one of the most memorable in program history, marked by excellence, unity and a return to the national spotlight.

Yet, even amid that spotlight, the Sampsons never forgot where it all began.

"One thing I tell every kid I coach is, 'Don't forget where you come from,'" Kelvin said. "No matter where we've been, Pembroke has always been with us."

Both Karen and Kelvin are proud graduates of what was then Pembroke State University. Karen, Class of 1976, was active in student life and currently serves on the university's board of trustees. Kelvin, Class of 1978, captained the men's basketball team, played baseball and was inducted into the UNCP Athletics Hall of Fame in 1998.

Their legacy of giving is long-standing. In addition to being active members of the Braves Club, the Sampsons previously established the John W. (Ned) and Eva B. Sampson Endowed Basketball Scholarship, honoring Kelvin's parents.

"Karen and Kelvin know firsthand the demands placed on student-athletes," said Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings. "They understand that success on the court begins with preparation off the court — including nutrition, wellness and balance."

UNCP Athletics Director Dick Christy said the Sampsons' impact on their alma mater is invaluable.

"Karen and Kelvin have been at the forefront of athletic nutrition at the Division I level," added Christy. "Their investment in UNCP will not only elevate our athletes' performance but also impact their lives far beyond their time at UNCP."



CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSOR WINS PRESTIGIOUS STATE TEACHING AWARD

Written by Mark Locklear

Dr. Matt Hassett's classroom is more than a place of learning — it's a space where students find inspiration, mentorship and the confidence to challenge the world around them. That dedication to student success has earned him the 2025 UNC Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching, one of the highest honors in North Carolina's public universities.

An associate professor of sociology and criminal justice at UNC Pembroke, Hassett is known for his dynamic teaching style and deep investment in his students. He pushes them beyond textbooks, helping them connect coursework to real-world applications that shape their careers and lives.



"Dr. Hassett put real thought into every assignment, providing feedback that helped me improve," said Ronnie Kennedy, a former student and now a patrol sergeant with the Burgaw Police Department. "His constructive criticism showed me that my work mattered — I wasn't just completing tasks for a grade. I was genuinely learning and building career skills."

Only 17 faculty members across the UNC System receive this prestigious award each year, which recognizes exceptional teaching, mentorship and academic contributions.

"Professor Hassett exemplifies the highest standards of teaching excellence and student success," said Provost Diane Prusank. "His passion for education and innovative teaching approach have profoundly impacted our campus community. We are incredibly proud to have him as part of our faculty."

Hassett's passion for criminal justice is deeply personal. Growing up in Pennsylvania, he was surrounded by law enforcement officers, including his grandfather, Donald Kudla, a veteran Pittsburgh police officer. Though he never saw himself wearing a badge, he felt drawn to the academic side of law enforcement, studying criminology and research.

"I fell in love with research while earning my master's degree at Indiana University of Pennsylvania [IUP]," Hassett said. "Studying the legal system and criminal justice allows me to serve my community differently, just as my grandfather did."

After earning his PhD from IUP, Hassett joined UNCP's faculty in 2018. His teaching philosophy is simple yet profound: "I'm not here to tell students what to think — I'm here to help them think critically."

For junior Aiden Stewart, Hassett's approachable style made the classroom a space where students felt valued and heard. "He's one with the students," Stewart said. "Even though he's an authority figure, he makes it easy to talk to him about anything." When Stewart faced a personal hardship, Hassett didn't just offer support — he ensured she could complete her coursework online without additional stress.

"That left an impact on me," Stewart said.

For senior Katie Aguilar-Manueles, a first-generation college student, Hassett was a source of reassurance in an intimidating new world.

"He made me realize it's ok to make mistakes and learn from them," Aguilar-Manueles said. "College felt rigid and overwhelming at first, but he reminded me that we are here to learn, not to be perfect."

Hassett's influence extends far beyond the classroom, shaping students into critical thinkers, engaged citizens and future leaders. His commitment to mentorship and academic excellence isn't just a hallmark of his career — it's a legacy that will continue to inspire generations of UNCP students.

Trending on SOCIAL

Stay connected and see what's trending! Follow us on social media for the latest campus moments, student stories and events you won't want to miss. Join the conversation and be part of the excitement. BraveNation is always buzzing!



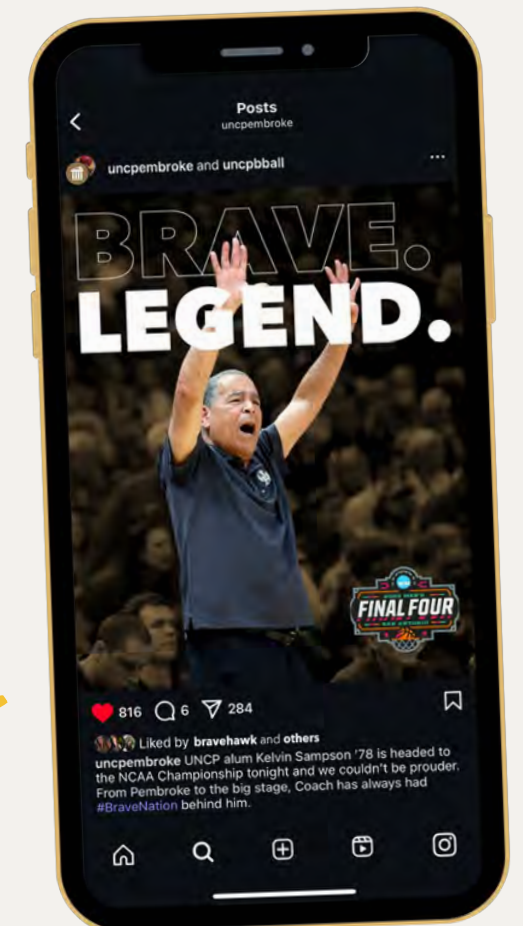
Our Founders' Day post sparked strong engagement on Facebook as we honored the rich history and legacy of UNCP. Alumni and friends flooded the comments with their favorite memories and messages of pride.



Our commencement post captured the joy and pride of graduation day, making it one of our most liked and shared moments on Instagram. Nothing beats celebrating the success of our amazing graduates!



BraveNation showed up big for Coach Kelvin Sampson as he led his team to the Final Four! This Instagram post had fans cheering on and sharing their pride in one of UNCP's legendary alumni.



SAVE THE DATE



HOMECOMING • OCTOBER 8-11, 2025



FOOTBALL

UNCP VS. SHORTER

Saturday, October 11 • 3 p.m.
Grace P. Johnson Stadium

For more Homecoming
events and information:
uncp.edu/homecoming

Ray Brayboy's Name Lives on in **BRAVENATION BASEBALL**

On a memorable afternoon at Sammy Cox Field, UNC Pembroke honored distinguished alumnus Ray Brayboy '74 by retiring his iconic No. 13 baseball jersey — making him just the fifth UNCP player to receive the honor. The ceremony celebrated Brayboy's legacy of achievement, leadership and dedication to his alma mater.

A standout first baseman for the Braves in the early 1970s, Brayboy helped build the foundation of UNCP's storied baseball program. But his impact reaches far beyond athletics. "UNC Pembroke has meant so much to me," he said. "I never imagined receiving this incredible honor."

Brayboy's commitment to UNCP has continued through decades of philanthropic support for student scholarships and American Indian education. Chancellor Robin Gary Cummings called him "a pillar of the BraveNation story," emphasizing that his legacy is defined not just by his college years but by a lifetime of service and generosity.

Lumbee Tribal Chairman John Lowery also presented Brayboy with an eagle feather — a powerful symbol of strength and respect. Now retired, Brayboy's No. 13 will serve as a lasting reminder that greatness is measured by heart, service and enduring commitment to others.





Written by Adrielle Cooper

Getting to Know Dr. Shreerekha Pillai UNCP's New Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

UNC Pembroke proudly welcomes Dr. Shreerekha Pillai as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. A seasoned educator and leader, Pillai brings over 30 years of experience in advancing academic excellence and student empowerment. Her career includes significant roles at the University of Houston–Clear Lake, where she served as associate dean and professor of humanities. A first-generation immigrant from India, Pillai's journey reflects a deep commitment to inclusive education and community engagement.

In this Q&A, Pillai shares her vision for the college, her leadership philosophy and her dedication to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and mentorship at UNCP.

Q: What inspired you to take on this role at our university?

A: Over the course of my career — from faculty roles to service-based leadership — I've been learning, growing and moving toward higher levels of impact. What drew me to UNCP was the community. Meeting people here and learning about the institution made me feel like this was a place where I could truly plant my roots. The values of this campus really speak to me.

Q: Can you share a little about your background and what led you to a career in academia?

A: I'm a first-generation immigrant who went to New York City and had the privilege of an incredible education. My teachers played a huge role in shaping my journey — they were mentors and second parents in many ways. I didn't always think I would be a teacher, but over time, I realized that teaching was my jam. That passion was solidified when I began teaching in Baltimore. My first students taught me as much as I taught them.

Q: Was there a moment that made you fall in love with literature?

A: Yes! I started undergrad as a pre-med student, but one summer while working in a factory, I picked up Toni Morrison's "Beloved." I couldn't stop reading it. That book changed everything. I used my summer job paycheck to buy her other novels and eventually called my parents to say, "I'm switching to literature." Their response? "We always knew." That moment gave me confidence, and since then, I've loved helping students discover that same joy in reading and writing.

Q: What are your thoughts on the future of the humanities and social sciences in higher education?

A: I think we are uniquely equipped to confront today's challenges. The humanities and social sciences push us to think critically, ask difficult questions and put forth creative solutions. Our college cultivates the intellectual courage and fair-mindedness needed to lead with compassion and clarity.

Q: How do you plan to support students and faculty?

A: Mentorship is one of my core values. I want to support both students and faculty in their growth. That means generating resources for professional development, building mentorship spaces, celebrating accomplishments and cultivating community.

Q: What are your thoughts on interdisciplinary collaboration?

A: It's essential. Today's workforce demands cross-cutting skills. Our students benefit from learning to think across disciplines, and our departments are set up for collaborative success. We need to keep pushing that forward.

Q: How does research shape the college's future?

A: Research not only advances our academic disciplines but also informs teaching and creates opportunities for student engagement. Our college plays a critical role in shaping knowledge and equipping students to lead with that insight.

Q: You've done important work teaching incarcerated students. How has that shaped your perspective?

A: The Transforming Lives by Degree program is one of the most meaningful parts of my journey. These students are among the most driven and committed I've ever taught. They remind me every day of the power of education to heal, to liberate and to transform lives.

Q: What has that experience taught you about the power of education?

A: Education brings light where there was once darkness. For incarcerated students, the classroom is often the only place where they feel truly seen. It builds confidence, writing skills, critical thinking and — most importantly — hope. It's a powerful reminder of why we do this work.



FATHER AND SON SHARE SPOTLIGHT AT SPRING COMMENCEMENT

Don "Big Weather" Schwenneker has delivered forecasts for decades — predicting storms, sunshine and everything in between. But there was one life milestone he couldn't predict: graduating from college side by side with his son, Mason.

That long-awaited moment finally arrived in May, 35 years after he first set foot in a college classroom. The father-and-son duo were among 967 graduates at UNCP's Spring Commencement.

"I can't believe 35 years after high school, I finally got to graduate from college," Don said. "It still feels surreal!"

In the late 1980s, Don was studying at Drake University when an offer

from WHO-TV Channel 13 News in Des Moines changed his course. His professor encouraged him to take the job, hoping he would one day return to finish his degree.

That "one day" turned into decades of weather reporting, raising a family and becoming a household name as chief meteorologist for ABC11 Eyewitness News (WTVD) in Durham. "One of my biggest regrets was that I never got my degree," Schwenneker said. "My grandparents always wanted me to finish. I'm a first-gen. My parents didn't go to college."

Don chose UNCP's online program after hearing glowing feedback from his children. His daughter, Maddie, recently graduated from UNCP and Mason crossed the stage in May.

"The professors were fantastic about working with an adult student," Don said. "Once I got into the rhythm, it wasn't bad at all."

The biggest challenge? Getting up to speed with today's technology. But Don credits support from his children, professors and the University Writing Center staff for helping him adjust.

Mason, who earned a degree in history, sees graduation day as more than a personal milestone.

"It means the world to me because [my dad] was my role model growing up," Mason said.

"He always talked about going back. Seeing him walk across that stage proves you can accomplish anything you put your mind to."

A former wrestler with a near-perfect GPA, Mason has been active on campus as a resident adviser, REACH fellow and member of the Maynor Honors College. When Don offered to postpone his graduation to December — so as not to overshadow his son's moment — Mason wouldn't hear of it.

"I said to Mason, 'I've waited 35 years. I could wait another six months,'" Don recalled. "He said, 'Dad, it would be really special to graduate with you.'"

For Don, the degree represents more than academic achievement.

"It was more about the goal," he said. "I hope to inspire other older students who may have put off their goals. Through my UNCP experience, I've expanded my horizons. The one thing I have taken away from this is that there's always more to learn."

Online Student Finds Purpose and Community at UNCP

Written by Chad Locklear

Jessica Lancaster didn't follow the traditional path to earning her UNCP degree. As a wife, mother of three and full-time employee, she had long dreamed of completing her undergraduate education. But life, responsibilities and a previous less-than-positive college experience put that dream on hold until the COVID-19 pandemic provided an unexpected opportunity.

"I went from being a full-time in-office employee to fully remote. So I thought maybe it was the right time to pursue my dream," Jessica said. "I wanted to earn my degree not only for myself but to show my daughters that they could achieve their goals without waiting until their 40s to do it."

A simple Google search led her to UNC Pembroke, where she discovered NC Promise. UNCP's affordability, smaller class sizes and online programs made it the perfect fit. She enrolled in 2021 as an online student and quickly realized that UNCP was not just a place to earn a degree. It was a place where she could become truly involved, despite living over two hours away near Charlotte.

Initially, Lancaster planned to focus solely on her online coursework and had no plans of getting involved on campus. But after attending the Truist Leadership Academy and engaging with students through virtual career fairs and networking events through the Career Center, she found herself drawn into campus life. Encouragement from advisers and peers led her to take on leadership roles, serving as a senator in the Student Government Association and joining the Dean's Student Advisory Board for the College of Business and Economics.



"UNCP saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself," Lancaster said. "It gave me confidence. It gave me purpose."

Her time at UNCP was life-changing not only for her but for her entire family. Lancaster's commitment to earning her degree inspired her husband, and he decided to return to school after an over 20-year hiatus.

"UNCP changed his life too. It gave him that confidence as well. It really solidified the importance of education and academic excellence within our home, and now we can share that within our community."

In December 2024, they proudly graduated together. He is now considering graduate studies, following Lancaster's lead as she pursues an MBA.

Lancaster's story is a testament to the power of perseverance and the impact of a supportive academic community. Now she encourages fellow alumni to stay involved and give back to the university that made such a difference in her life.

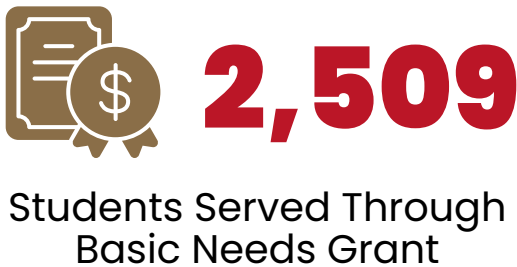
"Stay connected, stay engaged," she urged. "Our school needs us — not only for financial support but to be mentors, advocates and champions for the next generation of students."

This institution believed in me enough to accept me. I put in the work, but I also had incredible support along the way. Now it's my job to help others earn their degrees and make a difference in the world."



WHERE ACTION MEETS IMPACT

Whether it's volunteering, playing, learning or leading, here's a snapshot of how our students showed up and made a difference in the 2024-25 UNCP academic year.





Advancement
PO Box 1510
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STAY **PROUD.**
CONNECTED.
IN TOUCH.

One of the most rewarding parts of being a BraveNation alum is joining a network of UNCP graduates across the globe. Whether you want to foster campus community long after commencement, reconnect with old friends, make plans to gather a group for Homecoming or simply keep up with all the biggest news and happenings, we can help!

Make sure to update your contact information with the Alumni Office.

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