The Sumter
ITEM IMPACT
Local News for Everyone
SERVING SOUTH CAROLINA SINCE OCTOBER 15, 1894
APRIL / MAY 2026
1 SECTION, 32 PAGES | VOL. 3, NO. 2



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A22

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The festival issue

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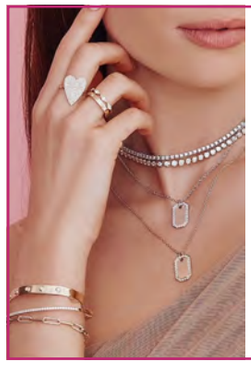
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SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

Clockwise from top right, the annual BirdFest will return May 1-2, the Lizard Man makes his way back to Bishopville in June, and the Black Cowboy Festival is coming up starting May 21. The Iris Festival also will return May 15.



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SECOND FRONT

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APRIL / MAY 2026

Enjoy this fun season of festivals and events aplenty



Melanie Smith

After the dull months of January and February without much going on because of the cooler weather, it feels like everything always ramps up so quickly in spring. There are events galore, which are the focus of this issue of *Sumter Item Impact*.

Soon the vendors will be setting up their booths among the swans and cypress trees at the annual Iris Festival, cowboys will be saddling up to compete at the Black Cowboy Festival, statues of Bishopville's Lizard Man will be available to buy as a memento of the famous local reptile, sheep will be sheared for the public to witness and so much more we can't fit it all.

From a music event named for a beloved donkey to an annual event honoring the fish that made Santee Cooper lakes famous across the country, you'll find it in the tri-county area this spring, and you can read about them in this edition. Beyond the big-name festivals, there are plenty of other events going on that we've featured in our monthly events calendar. Find it on pages A18-19 and pick out a fun activity for your family to try.

We'll feature photos from many of these events in *The Sumter Item* the next few months, so keep an eye out, and you might see your family and friends pictured.

It wouldn't be the season of celebrations if I didn't also mention the Best of Sumter! Everyone will find out who we're celebrating this year after the gala when our Best of Sumter magazine is inserted into the regular *Item* weekend edition for May 2-5. If you want to know who's been voted the best for everything from landscaper to window tinter, don't miss out on this annual magazine. It's off to the printer after we put the finishing touches on it last week.

Enjoy this fun season of the year, and we might see you out there. Try to stay cool as it heats up out there!



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO

The Striped Bass Festival's Super Weekend will be Friday-Saturday, April 25-26.

OSTEEN
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The Sumter Item is published each Wednesday and Saturday by Osteen Publishing Co., 36 W. Liberty St., Sumter, SC 29150, and delivered via USPS. Major holiday delivery may be altered due to USPS schedule.

Periodical postage paid at Sumter, SC 29150.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Osteen Publishing Co., 36 W. Liberty St., Sumter, SC 29150.

Publication No. USPS 525-900



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The Sumter ITEM BEST OF SUMTER 2025

Education

Recent headlines show new leadership, audit results, award funding

BY BRUCE MILLS
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REISENAUER IS NEW USC SUMTER CAMPUS DEAN

A familiar face is the new dean at University of South Carolina Sumter after USC Palmetto College Chancellor Craig Wilson recently appointed longtime campus leader Eric Reisenauer to the leadership post.

Reisenauer served as USC Sumter's interim dean for a little more than 1.5 years and since July 2024 before his appointment in early May. USC Palmetto College distributed a news release on the announcement on March 16, which was when Reisenauer officially began in his new role.

Wilson praised Reisenauer's extensive record of leadership and service at USC Sumter that goes back to 1997 when he came on as a faculty member. Later, Reisenauer became the college's associate dean and executive associate dean for academic and student affairs before assuming the interim dean role in 2024 when Michael Sonntag stepped down as dean.

In the release, Wilson said Reisenauer's nearly 30-year connection to the Sumter campus and his deep commitment to student success make him well suited to guide USC Sumter's continued growth and advancement.

"USC Sumter is an essential institution for our community and for South Carolina," Wilson said. "Dr. Reisenauer's strategic vision, collaborative leadership style and long service to the Sumter region demonstrate his readiness to lead the campus into a promising new chapter."



ABIGAIL PITTMAN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Eric Reisenauer, left, shakes a graduate's hand at University of South Carolina Sumter's commencement ceremony last year. During March, Reisenauer was appointed as USC Sumter's new campus dean.

AUDIT: DISTRICT FINISHES YEAR WITH $2.8M IN NET INCOME

Like district Chief Financial Officer Shatika Spearman has projected in recent months, Sumter School District closed fiscal 2025 with $2.8 million in net income in its official audit report.

Maulden and Jenkins Auditor Brian Nicholson presented the one-year snapshot report through June 30, 2025, to the district's Board of Trustees at its March 23 meeting. The $2.8 million total lifts the district's fund balance, or reserves, to $63.9 million. The net income total represents that the district's revenues exceeded its expenditures by $2.8 million for the fiscal year, which was July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025.

Additionally, the district's unassigned — or unrestricted — fund balance is $62.1 million, Nicholson reported.

Sumter's reserves amount represents about 38% of its total annual expenditures. Best practices by the Government Finance Officers Association recommend for a fund balance to be at 20% to 25% of annual expenditures, he added, and the district is well above that threshold.

The local district has been above the best practices range since fiscal 2021.

State law requires districts to have 8.33% of yearly expenditures — or one month's operational expenses — in unrestricted fund balance.

Based in Columbia, Maulden and Jenkins is the district's independent auditor and gave the district a "clean and unmodified opinion." Nicholson told the school board in his presentation that is the "best opinion" that a government entity, such as a school district, can receive in the auditing process.

Fiscal 2025 marked the ninth consecutive year that the district has had net income, or a positive change in its fund balance.

NATIONAL GROUP AWARDS $2M TO LIBERTY STEAM

A national philanthropic group focused on expanding best-in-class organizations to transform education for more children recently awarded $2 million to Liberty STEAM Charter School for its expansion efforts.

On March 19, the Yass Prize foundation awarded more than $20 million in grants and interest-free loans to 16 organizations across the U.S. to scale up their educational models, including Liberty, at the foundation's Power of Innovation Summit in Washington, according to a news release.

The Sumter-based public charter school was one of 11 previous Yass Prize winners to receive first-time "alumni awards" for expansion and growth.

During the last five years, the foundation has had more than 400 Yass Prize winners, but the criteria to apply for an alumni award in this grant cycle required a school or educational system to still be in its expansion phase. With Liberty STEAM's buildout not complete until 2033 when it becomes a K-12 school, it met the criteria.

Applicants had to pitch their growth and sustainability plans at a three-day Yass Prize Alumni Award Accelerator conference in Miami, Florida, in November to a panel of judges, according to Liberty Executive Director Trevor Ivey.

He made the school's pitch for $2.1 million at the event. That total represents the projected funding gap between state funding received by Liberty STEAM versus the total cost to educate the 150 students, or "scholars," in the founding class of 2033 until their graduation from high school, Ivey said.

Ivey's proposal centered on transforming what has long been known as the Interstate 95 "Corridor of Shame" into a "Corridor of Hope and Opportunity," redefining what is possible for communities historically underserved by public education, he said.

Ivey added the award money will be used for capital projects with a majority utilized to kickstart the school's performing arts programming for its middle-school grades ahead of schedule.

Yass Prize Founder Janine Yass said the alumni awards will allow high-performing schools to take next steps in growth.

"This new, refined Alumni Award program is the next step in providing some of our most accomplished awardees with critical support to expand their footprint in areas where families are actively seeking innovative education options," she said. "It reflects what we are seeing every day — growing demand from families for new opportunities and extraordinary leaders ready to meet that demand."

In 2024, the Yass Prize foundation awarded Liberty $200,000 in recognition of its academic outcomes, innovative educational model and demonstrated demand through its open-enrollment lottery.

Religion

Sometimes clinging to life-giving hope is all we have



Pastor Stewart Rawson

It has been almost 37 years since Hurricane Hugo unleashed its fury on this city and many others throughout the Southeast. Ask anyone who is old enough where they were that night, and they can tell you everything about it. The time it hit. They can tell you how loud it was; most will say it sounded like a freight train coming through their house. They will tell you how frightened they were.

The mayor of Sumter at the time, Steve Creech, is credited with working tirelessly to restore the majestic trees that were lost during that horrific storm. If you walk through Swan Lake Iris Gardens as I did when I first moved here, you can find the Steve Creech tree, which has a beautiful plaque that tells the story of the recovery of the city's canopy.

One of my favorite wisdom sayings goes like this: "What is the best time to plant a tree?" The answer: "One hundred years ago … or today."

My wife and I bought a house in the Historic District here in Sumter. We are incredibly partial to the magnificent oak trees in our front yard. The largest one towers over the neighborhood and branches off in about six directions.

As we have fallen deeper in love with these dignified creatures, we have learned of the most interesting and amazing features that they have. The biggest oak has a fern growing on its branches, and it is called, in the vernacular, "Resurrection Fern," and *pleopeltis polypodioides* is its Latin and scientific name.

One plant journal observes, "*Pleopeltis polypodioides* gets its common name 'resurrection fern' because it can survive long periods of drought by curling up its fronds and appearing desiccated, gray-brown and dead. However, when just a little water is present, the fern will uncurl and reopen, appearing to 'resurrect.' It has been estimated that these plants could last 100 years without water and still revive after a single exposure."

One hundred years without water and still revive. Two days after a rain the fern looks wilted and dead; I imagine many homeowners have tried to rip it out when it is in its desiccated phase. Oh, what a tragedy that would be; one small rainfall, and its incredible beauty is restored.

Back to the plant journal, "The roots have evolved to function as anchors to tree bark. They have been found to be inefficient in absorption. When in clustered groups of ferns on the bark of trees, the increased transpiration of the ferns and bark allows the middle ferns of the cluster to remain open longer than ferns on the outside. The relative humidity of the air and the closing rate of the leaves of the ferns is an inverse relationship. The greater the humidity, the slower the leaves close because of prolonged exposure to moisture in the air."

"The Resurrection Fern (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*) can severely desiccate and lose almost all its water. Experiments have shown it can lose up to 97% and remain alive, though more typically, it loses around 76% in dry spells. For comparison, most other plants would die after losing only 8–12% water. Upon rainfall or even minute exposures to water, they can fully rehydrate and return to a normal state in 24 to 48 hours. Following substantial exposures to moisture, there is an immediate increase in its water content of up to 50% after the first hour and 65–70% after three hours. When it regains moisture, the fern can once again become photosynthetically active, increasing its metabolism and release of organic compounds that provide nutrients for symbiotic bacteria that allow them both to thrive."

Christian churches teach that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead; we teach that Jesus was resurrected. This is the source of our hope in the face of death. Most of us fear dying; it is a part of the human condition. We know about life; death is an entirely different matter. In the same way that the Resurrection Fern relies on the life-giving power of water, my prayer is that all of us can cling to life-giving hope; sometimes it is all that we have. Our tradition teaches that God's light shines in the darkness; may you find light when you walk in darkness.

The Rev. Dr. Stewart Rawson is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in downtown Sumter.





LEFT: The current African Children's Choir performs earlier this year on tour in the U.S. The choir will visit Sumter on Friday, April 24, performing at Westminster Presbyterian Church on Alice Drive.

BELOW: The African Children's Choir was founded in 1984, and the first choir went on tour that year to North America.

PHOTOS PROVIDED

THE AFRICAN CHILDREN'S CHOIR CONCERT

WHEN: Friday, April 24, 7 p.m.

WHERE: Westminster Presbyterian Church, 230 Alice Drive, Sumter

ON THE WEB: *Africanchildrenschoir.com*

No tickets are required. A love offering is taken up during the show.

Transforming lives through the power of music

Popular African Children's Choir will be in Sumter on April 24

BY BRUCE MILLS
bruce@theitem.com

A fateful ride given to a little orphaned boy on a trip to war-torn Uganda has turned into a ministry that has impacted the lives of more than 100,000 children in Africa.



BARNETT



SIPP

Despite the devastation, the child sang praise songs the whole journey, and the pastor was captivated by his resiliency, beauty, dignity and potential. Birthed out of that encounter was a children's choir that has traveled to the West for 42 years and will be in Sumter on April 24.

The Canadian pastor's name was Ray Barnett, and he founded the African Children's Choir in 1984, according to Choir Manager Tina Sipp, who spoke recently to *The Sumter Item* on the group's upcoming tour stop in The Gamecock City at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Historically, East African communities have suffered from extreme poverty and many of the problems stem from the lack of affordable quality education, Sipp said.

She added that Barnett felt if the Western world could just see the need and see these children, they would want to help.

"So, that is what sparked the idea," Sipp told *The Item*. "Because the little boy sang, our founder thought, 'Maybe we could bring a choir of these children to the West and tour. And then, we could let people know the need, and I'm sure they would want to help.'

"And, here 42 years later, the West has done so, so much to help us."



The African Children's Choir tour season annually is eight months, and three areas in the Western world visited consistently are the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom.

Concert shows have no admission charge, but donations through love offerings are appreciated.

Through those event donations, a child sponsorship program and some individual donors, children from vulnerable backgrounds in Uganda become part of the choir and get life-changing opportunities for education and personal growth, Sipp added.

The broad parent organization over the choir is Music for Life, which is a major fundraising arm, and it is also

SEE **CHOIR,** PAGE A7

CHOIR FROM PAGE A6

over the boarding schools that choir students attend for free from first grade through 12th grade. Additionally, the organization pays for college or a vocational school for students upon high school graduation.

Children in Uganda are selected for the choir and associated schooling based on need, she said. The children chosen are not in any school when they go to Music for Life because their families are impoverished and cannot afford private schools, which are often boarding schools in Uganda, or even the country's government schools because they charge for uniforms and supplies.

Parents in these families generally have no education themselves and are in menial jobs and just trying to put a meal on the table for that day.

"So, you have tens of thousands of children who simply do not have any opportunity to get an education to break that cycle of poverty," Sipp said. "The money that is raised will in fact support the choir children through college. But it also supports several hundred other children in all of our educational programs. So, we're trying to help educate as many children as possible because usually if you can get one child in a family educated, they can help the entire family."

The organization's motto is "Helping Africa's most vulnerable children today so they can help Africa tomorrow."

Children in the choir only participate in one tour season and that time is during an early grade in primary school, she added. While on tour, there are seven adult chaperones who provide some schooling. When students return, they funnel back into the primary school grades and then will later enter Music for Life's secondary school to complete through 12th grade. Both school settings are boarding schools for the selected children and also provide education on Christian principles to develop the whole child spiritually and academically.

'A VERY DIFFERENT KIND OF CHILD'

Given the children's backgrounds, Sipp described the children in the choir and Music for Life schools as joyful and "just a very different kind of child."

"They come from situations where they don't have a lot of stuff, right," she said. "Here in the U.S., we have a lot of things. But these children are very rich in their soul. They know how to have fun. They live each day fully. They don't really live in yesterday or tomorrow. They live in today because back home you are just trying to eat today. The main thing is you want to provide for today, and so they live today fully. Our children really are not moody or up and down. They just find the joy in the day."



PHOTO PROVIDED

The current African Children's Choir consists of 17 children from Uganda. The choir's tour season concludes in May, and then the children will re-enter their primary school operated by Music for Life. The organization's primary and secondary schools also emphasize Christian principles to develop the whole child.

WHAT CONCERT ATTENDEES CAN EXPECT

In her 23 years with the choir, Sipp said she has continually seen that people in the West "are very gripped by people who can be happy when they have nothing."

That is an oxymoron for people in the Western world, she added.

According to Sipp, the Music for Life program does not focus on what the children's challenges are or their poverty but instead on their dignity, potential and beauty, as Barnett did when he founded the choir.

"I think what happens is people in the audience are wealthy in one way," she said, "and the children are wealthy in another way. And there is an exchange of wealth that night.

"The children come out wealthy in soul and spirit and joy and smiles and energy, and they give all of that off on the stage just by their presence. They don't have to even say it. They just are.

"But I think the Western world is a little impoverished in the spirit, and I think it touches something in us that says: 'I have a lot of stuff, but do I have that kind of joy? Do I have that kind of hope?'"

That theme somewhat "catches everybody," Sipp added, whether they articulate it or not.

"I think the people are very moved by these children who have, quote, 'so little materially,' but can be so happy," she said.

"And then we get to exchange — you know we have a little bit more in our pocket — we get to give from our wealth to them to help them better their lives.

"Honestly, I feel anyone who comes to that concert and gives $5 — it doesn't really matter how much they give — they are investing in a profound trajectory change for one of those children.

"We're going from never being able to break the cycle of poverty to be able to one day have a nice domicile to live in, regular meals and helping little brothers and sisters go to school. That is remarkably 180 degrees different than the life they would get if they did not have an education.

"So, what I hope is people will be inspired to do their part and just give what they can to turn someone's life in a completely different direction. And they are given the opportunity to do that through a love offering."

Mixed in between at shows, attendees get to worship, are inspired, get animated, are challenged and also moved to tears, she added.

"These are like little tigers up there," Sipp said. "They are 7 to 11 years old, and they are just knocking it out of the park. People recognize the energy and effort that these little ones put in night after night. So, they recognize that, they appreciate it, enjoy it, and I think everybody leaves maybe with a little bit of air put in their tank, you know. It's a wonderful night. It's an amazing night."

The current choir is winding down its tour season, which concludes in mid-May. Greenville was the choir's first stop in the Palmetto State, and Sumter will be the second. Other stops in South Carolina will include Gaffney, Liberty, Seneca, Fountain Inn and Camden.

AFRICAN CHILDREN'S CHOIR BY THE NUMBERS

2023
Year the choir last came to Sumter (at Jehovah Missionary Baptist Church)

1984
Year the African Children's Choir was founded; went on first tour to North America

110
Concert shows typically in the 8-month tour season

80
Minutes generally for a concert (1 hour, 20 minutes)

42
Years the choir has been in existence

25
States traveled in current tour season (season is mid-September to mid-May)

17
Total choir members this season

8 to 12
Children's age range in choir

2
Sumter is 2nd stop in South Carolina

1
Each child does one tour season

0
No cost to attend. A love offering is taken during the show.

Sumterite, Shriner Bradley's dreams come true as he is named 2026 Sumter Iris Festival parade's grand marshal

BY MAITI MARTIN
newsroom@theitem.com

From sneaking out as a child to watch the Iris Festival Parade to being its guest of honor as an adult, Arthur Bradley's childhood dream came true as he was named grand marshal for the 2026 parade.

Bradley, a Vietnam War veteran, is the owner of his family business, Ace Parker Tire. The business has operated in town for 47 years, and during its tenure, Bradley won the Humanitarian Award — over 80,000 dealers — for his dedication to and hard work in the Sumter community.

He not only serves his community through his business, but in his free time as well, by being involved in different events and initiatives. As the director of the Jamil Streakers in Sumter, in May 2004, he, with the help of his fellow Shriners, organized what is now known as Sumter's annual Shrine Day parade, or Iris Festival Parade originally, which has continued for 19 years.

All this dedication assures that Bradley is not new to the annual festivities and he shares the connection of community with others, including with the Iris Festival. He played an active role in the event for years, helping with setup and other needs.

But his love for the festival started at a more tender age.

As a child, Bradley snuck out to

SEE **GRAND MARSHAL,** PAGE A9



Arthur Bradley has been selected as the grand marshal for the 2026 Iris Festival Parade in Sumter.

ABIGAIL PITTMAN / THE SUMTER ITEM



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

ABOVE: A member of the Shriners gives high fives as he passes during a past Iris Festival Parade. Bradley has applications to be a Shriner and a Mason at his family-owned business, Ace Parker Tire, for community members who are interested.

BELOW: The Iris Festival Parade rolls down Liberty Street during a previous year.



WANT TO BE PART OF THE PARADE, TOO? YOU STILL HAVE TIME

Sumter Iris Festival will take place May 15-17 at Swan Lake Iris Gardens, 822 W. Liberty St. The parade will be held on that Saturday, May 16, at 10 a.m. The Evening Optimist Club is still accepting applications for the parade, whose theme is "Red, White, and Bloom," in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Schools, civic clubs, churches or businesses interested in participating can receive an application at *irisfestival.org*, or contact Gail Hyatt at (803) 983-3916 or via email at *gailhyatt@sc.rr.com*. Deadline for entry is Friday, April 24.

BRADLEY FROM PAGE A8

watch the Iris Festival Parade and was asked by a police officer if he was lost. His answer: "No, sir, I'm exactly where I need to be, and one day I'm going to ride in a go-kart like the Shriners."

"Every time there's a parade, there's a Shriner, and I had made up my mind that I was going to see those Shriners," Bradley said as his reason for sneaking out.

He had been drawn to the Shriners at a young age after seeing them on TV and hearing so much about them. He said that joining was a passion of his and a dream that came true.

For those who may not know, Jamil Shriners is a distinguished fraternity dedicated to community service and philanthropy. According to the organization's website, "every Jamil Shriner is a Master Mason committed to the principles of brotherhood, charity and fellowship."

The Shriners are also known for their work with children's hospitals.

"That's what the Shriners are all about," Bradley said. "The Shriners Hospital and helping kids."

Anyone interested in joining the Shriners is welcome, though Bradley explained one must have been a Mason beforehand. He has applications for both available at his shop at 930 N. Lafayette Drive.

Bradley is extremely honored and humbled to be riding in the Sumter Iris Festival this year.

"It's an honor. It really is an honor," he said. "I never was expecting anything. What I do, I enjoy doing. I don't expect anything out of it, but it is an honor."

His message to the young people in the community who may be sitting on the street watching the parade that day as he did when he was a young boy is to never lose sight of your dreams, have faith and you will be truly blessed.



ABIGAIL PITTMAN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Arthur Bradley is a veteran of the Vietnam War and with his fellow Shriners organized the annual Shrine Day Parade, which was formerly the Iris Festival Parade, though it is still also known by its original name. He has been selected as the grand marshal for the 2026 Iris Festival parade in Sumter. He is seen at his business, Ace Parker Tire, on March 31.

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Red, White and Bloom! 2026 Iris Fest celebrates America's 250th year



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO

A motorcycle makes its way down Alice Drive during the Iris Festival Parade during a past event. This year's theme is "Red, White and Bloom!"

BY RHIANNON O'BERRY
The Sumter Item

May at Swan Lake Iris Gardens in Sumter means the irises are blooming, and for three days, the Sumter community will convene for nonstop and diverse entertainment, shopping, food and special events at the annual Iris Festival, which began in 1940 and draws vendors and attendees from across the region, country and even world.

This year, the theme is Red, White and Bloom! because this special festival will coincide with the 250th anniversary of the American Revolutionary War and be held in conjunction with South Carolina 250 and America 250 celebrations. Sumter Museum is collaborating, and there will be live interpreters such as from Sumter Tribe of Cheraw Indians with hands-on activities. Attendees are encouraged to come in their best — and most creative — patriotic gear.

The Iris Festival Commission Inc. is a 501(c)(3) organization that continues the state's oldest continuous three-day festival, which is consistently ranked among the top festivals in the Southeast. Carter James, communications manager and tourism manager for City of Sumter, is assisting with the Iris Festival Commission and its marketing for the third straight year.

SEE **IRIS FESTIVAL,** PAGE A11





IRIS FESTIVAL

FROM PAGE A10

James said input from vendors and school districts led to the date change last year to the weekend before Memorial Day weekend, which was ultimately a huge success. The 2025 Iris Festival saw more than 55,000 attendees and more than 100 vendors and was named a 2025 Top 20 Signature Event by Southeast Tourism Society.

"The weekend of the Iris Festival is just a celebration of the flower itself and an opportunity for the community and the Southeast as a whole just to come together to celebrate not only irises, not only Swan Lake, but Sumter," James said. "We are always, every year, looking to maintain the integrity of the festival and looking to maintain what makes it so unique — which, of course, are the irises."

Sumter Master Gardeners will be set up with potted live Japanese irises, which James said can only be purchased from the gardens this time of the year.

There will be a lot more to enjoy as well. Thursday night kicks off events with the Taste at the Gardens, followed by live music. That night will have unique restaurant vendors that won't be there the rest of the weekend.

"We have live music the entire weekend, different bands, different performers lined up," James said. "It's a real eclectic and unique mix for the food."

Live sketches, local T-shirt makers and artists and craft vendors are included in the shopping options.

Friday is Education Day.

"We're inviting schools out to come learn a little bit about not only Swan Lake, but just the environment," James said, "which is always really popular and really fun."

The parade hosted by Evening Optimist Club of Sumter will go down Liberty Street in front of Swan Lake again. There will be the King and Queen Scholarship, beauty pageant, Famous Faces event and abundant kid-friendly activities.

Keep up with more details and the full lineup on the website and social media pages. Last year it ultimately included boat rides on Swan Lake, butterfly releases, health screenings by Tandem Health and Prisma Health, a children's carnival, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources archery, pet adoptions, shag dance and line dancing tutorials, stilt walkers and the Annual Spring Blast Classic Rides Show by the Head Turnerz Car Club.

The blooming Japanese irises are always a draw for festival-goers at the annual event.

SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO



WANT TO GO?

WHEN: May 15-17, 2026

WHERE: Swan Lake Iris Gardens in Sumter, South Carolina

The 150-acre gift to the community from the Bland and Heath families with a Certified Level II Arboretum features more than 100 varieties of iris that bloom in late spring among many other plants and animals, including all eight species of swan in the world. The playground under construction will only slightly alter operations.

PARKING: Sumter County Civic Center will again be a parking lot for the festival, with buses transporting people from the civic center into the park.

Get involved, learn more and stay up to date at *www.facebook.com/IrisFestival.*

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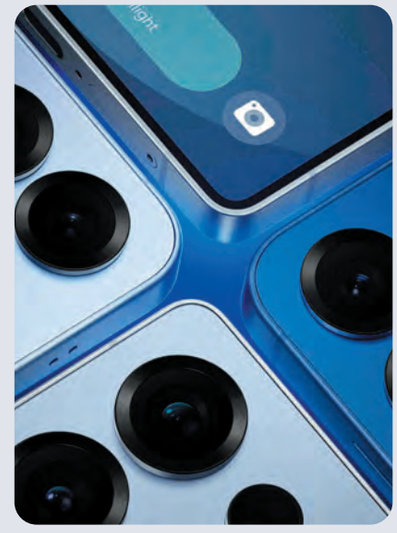
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When you aren't out enjoying one of the many festivals in our area, check out these easy, tasty recipes at home



Cheesy chicken in a one-pan solution

FEATURE IMPACT

On those nights when you're just too busy to think about cooking, let a one-pan dish do the work for you. Customize this Cheesy Spinach Chicken Bake to your family's liking with broccoli or cauliflower in place of spinach, if desired, and let it bake while finishing homework with the kids or prepping for the day ahead.

Find more quick dinner ideas at *Culinary.net*.

CHEESY SPINACH CHICKEN BAKE

Recipe courtesy of "Cookin' Savvy"
Servings: 4-6
2 cups chopped rotisserie chicken
10 ounces frozen spinach, thawed and drained
15 ounces ricotta cheese
2 cups mozzarella cheese
1 cup Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon Italian seasoning
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon onion powder
1 tablespoon lemon thyme

Heat oven to 375 F.

Cut rotisserie chicken and spinach into bite-sized pieces. In baking dish, mix chicken and spinach with ricotta cheese.

Add mozzarella, Parmesan, Italian seasoning, garlic powder, onion powder and lemon thyme. Mix well then bake 30 minutes.

Source: Culinary.net

Go green with a fresh spring salad

FEATURE IMPACT

While most people think of dirty kitchens, cramped closets and grimy garages when they hear "spring cleaning," the popular phrase can apply to your menu, too. Refresh your family's regular dining routines with fresh ingredients that call to mind the flavors of the season.

When it's time to put the slow cooker away, consider this Spring Greens Salad with Mozzarella. Paired with an easy homemade lemon vinaigrette, it's a delicious way to swap out heavier meals for a lighter lunch.

To find more springtime solutions, visit *Culinary.net*.

SPRING GREENS SALAD WITH MOZZARELLA

Recipe adapted from Organic Authority
Servings: 4
4 cups baby arugula or spring mix
1/2 cup cubed mozzarella cheese
1 tablespoon lemon zest
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
sea salt, to taste
freshly ground black pepper, to taste
halved cherry tomatoes (optional)

In large mixing bowl, combine arugula or spring mix, mozzarella and lemon zest; set aside.

In small bowl, whisk olive oil and lemon juice vigorously with fork until smooth. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Pour vinaigrette over greens; toss gently to coat. Top with halved cherry tomatoes, if desired.

Source: Culinary.net



Bluegrass, family fun come to Pinewood

BirdFest filled with music, vendors and outdoor entertainment for all

BY BRUCE MILLS
bruce@theitem.com

For those interested in bluegrass music and looking for a down-home festival this spring with activities for kids as well, look no further than BirdFest, scheduled for early May in Clarendon County.

The annual event is described by organizers as "the ultimate bluegrass music festival," family oriented and will take place outdoors on May 1-2 at the S.C. Waterfowl Association's Wildlife Education Center in the small town of Pinewood, according to association Marketing Director Chandler James.

It will be the 22nd-annual BirdFest, and host band Steep Canyon Rangers again leads the lineup. A Grammy Award-winning group for its bluegrass/Americana music, the Rangers perform nationwide and have become widely known for collaborating with actor/comedian (and banjoist) Steve Martin and performing at his standup tour shows.

Originally formed in 2000, Steep Canyon Rangers is based in Asheville, North Carolina, and has a large fan base, James said.

"They are well known for their association with Steve Martin," she said, "but they have quite a loyal following, and every year those loyal followers come to BirdFest. So that helps make it a great community atmosphere at the event."

Other headliners this year include the Dan Tyminski Band and the Trey Hensley Band, both of which are also Grammy Award winners in bluegrass.

Fans of bluegrass come from across the Southeast to BirdFest annually, according to James.

Most attendees camp on site at the outdoor venue in RVs or tents for convenience, she added.

The S.C. Waterfowl Association, which is the event organizer, also recommends local cabins and hotels nearby in the Santee area for people traveling to the two-day festival.

Gates will open on Friday, May 1, at 10 a.m. and 8 a.m. on Saturday, May 2, and the bluegrass starts at 5 p.m. on Friday and 12:45 p.m. Saturday.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Several bands perform each year at BirdFest, which is marking its 22nd year this May. Steep Canyon Rangers will again headline the event, with Dan Tyminski Band, Trey Hensley Band, Don Flemons and the Traveling Wildfires, Woody Platt and Shannon Whitworth, Jim Lauderdale, Admiral Radio, Cosmic Possum, The Cody Sisters, Thunder and Rain and Pickers Anonymous also performing.

A "Vendor Village" with food and craft vendors is also fun for attendees, James said.

Children 12 and under are admitted for free, and a Kid Zone area has activities specifically for kids on the grounds. Those include a Sky Park and zip line, which are part of the association's youth summer camp activities, she added.

This will be the fourth year that the association has hosted BirdFest. Last year, attendance grew to about 900 attendees with country and bluegrass legend Ricky Skaggs performing, according to James.

"This year, we are hoping for another great turnout," she added.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Even though BirdFest is coordinated by the waterfowl association, the festival name does not come from any type of bird.

The father of Steep Canyon Rangers member Barrett Smith started the festival in the early 2000s, and "Bird" was the name of a beloved mule that was part of the family.

When she passed away, the Smith family had her head mounted to forever honor her memory, and the festival was named "BirdFest," James said.

"'Bird'" makes an appearance at every BirdFest festival as a loved tribute," she said. "People know her. She is always the centerpiece of our poster art. She will be brought out and put right by the stage."

Even though the festival is not tied directly into waterfowl, the S.C. Waterfowl Association — a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization — does connect all its events to its mission of conservation education, according to James.

In the Kid Zone, the waterfowl aviary will be open, and staff will teach the youth conservation principles in some of the activities.

POPULARITY AND TICKETS

BirdFest has a welcoming atmosphere that contributes to its popularity, according to festival survey reviews, James said.

"It feels very local, even though we have people from everywhere," she said. "It's very family and community oriented. People are extremely friendly and welcoming to all who attend BirdFest. That's the biggest compliment we receive.

"Also, people love that we have entertainment for children in the Kid Zone, specifically. That sets us apart from other festivals, and it helps parents enjoy the weekend a little bit more when there is something for their kids to do.

"The festival appeals to people with an interest in bluegrass or to those who want a family weekend outside enjoying some live music and beautiful scenery."

The waterfowl association encourages attendees to buy tickets online beforehand at birdfestmusic.com as tickets can sell out, but they can also be purchased at the entry gates while supplies last.

The most popular package is the weekend pass that is good for both Friday and Saturday, James added. Day passes are also available for those driving in for the day.



WHEN: Friday, May 1, and Saturday, May 2. Gates open at 10 a.m. Friday, 8 a.m. Saturday.

WHERE: S.C. Waterfowl Association Wildlife Education Center, 8444 Old River Road, Pinewood, SC 29125

TICKETS: Officials recommend buying tickets online at *birdfestmusic.com* beforehand, but attendees can also purchase when they arrive at gate area. Various packages available to include both days and also single-day passes. RV and tent camping passes are add-ons. Children 12 and under have free admission.

MORE INFO: See *birdfestmusic.com* and on Facebook search for birdfestmusicfestival.

RV and tent camping available for attendees.

Striped Bass Festival returns to Clarendon for 45th year

BY KAYLA GREEN
kayla@theitem.com

Striped Bass Festival is a celebration of spring. It's a tribute to the beauty of the county and the region, and it's a salute to the fish that fills Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie, which make up Santee Cooper Lakes and put the region on the fishing map of the world.

April in Clarendon County is a sight for winter-weary eyes. Festivalgoers will be surrounded by azaleas, wisteria, irises, tulips, geraniums, roses, magnolias and more colors and blooms amid a landscape with strokes of rural countryside, small-town architecture and lake views.

The event is an economic driver for Manning and Clarendon County, and the Clarendon County Chamber of Commerce has a lineup with something for everyone, from food and activities to exercise and community taking over Manning April 24-25 with separate, related events in the weeks leading up to Super Weekend. About 20,000 people typically attend the event during the weekend.

Entrance to the festival, in its 45th year, such as attending the parade, listening to the live entertainment, checking out the vendors and watching the weigh-in for the fishing tournament, is free. Other aspects, such as buying from the around 100 vendors, food options and participating in the fishing tournament, have fees.

Festival T-shirts will be available for purchase at the event. They are also for sale at Clarendon County Chamber of Commerce.

LEARN MORE

For more information, contact Clarendon County Chamber of Commerce, go to its Facebook page @ClarendonSCChamber, or visit *www.ClarendonCounty.com/SBF*.

SCHEDULE



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO

Saturday, April 18

— S.C.O.T.T. – Cast into the Santee Cooper Open Team Tournament, "where the big ones are waiting!" Grab your gear, reel in some memories, and let's see who has the best catch. | John C. Land III Sports Fishing Facility, Summerton | Entry fee $160; optional $10 Big Fish | Guaranteed $5,000 prize | Pick up your application at the Chamber office

— Dam Run 5K – Lace up for the Striped Bass Festival 5K on the Santee Cooper Dam. Run against the beautiful backdrop of the dam, enjoy the fresh air, and embrace the festival spirit. | 1022 Randolph's Landing Way | $30 per runner | *www.strictlyrunning.com*

Friday, April 24

— Opening Ceremonies – Join the community as Manning kicks off Super Weekend | 6 p.m. | Live music by FlashBack | Carnival rides | Food from vendors | downtown Manning gazebo

Saturday, April 25

— Parade – "March to the rhythm of the community joy" at the Striped Bass Festival Parade | 10 a.m. | Bring the family and make lasting memories on the festival route | Courthouse Square

— Car Show – "Rev up the fun" at the Striped Bass Festival Car Show, hosted by the Blinking Buzzards Car Club. This is a laid-back day of wheels that you won't want to miss. | Registration starts at 9 a.m. | Awards at 3 p.m. | 49 W. Boyce St. | Contact Todd Touchberry for more information at (803) 983-5430.

— Downtown vendors – Get ready to enjoy vendors throughout Super Weekend. Taste delicious bites, snag unique crafts and soak in the good vibes.





Lizard Man Stomp 'keeps legend alive,' event organizer says

BY BRUCE MILLS
bruce@theitem.com

Lee County made national headlines with the sighting of the Lizard Man on June 29, 1988, in Bishopville's Scape Ore Swamp, and this year will be the fifth for the festival commemorating the landmark event.

The Lizard Man Stomp has become Bishopville and Lee County's annual festival in recent years to draw out-of-towners into the community. "The Stomp" — as many simply call the event — is centered on the county's famous giant, red-eyed reptile that walks upright like a man, and event organizer Margaret Copeland provided a preview of the festival to be held on June 27.

As folklore goes, the Lizard Man was first spotted on that fateful night in June 1988 in the Browntown community.

That summer, local, state and national media descended upon Bishopville to hear residents' stories of sightings of the 8-foot swamp monster that soon came to be known as the Lizard Man. Then-Lee County Sheriff Liston Truesdale launched a full-scale investigation to locate the creature from the area swamp but with no luck.

Since then, there have been sightings throughout the county of big footprints and scraped-up car hoods, among other damage to vehicles. However, the monster has never been reported to hurt a person, according to the legend.

Since 2022, the county has hosted The Stomp in downtown Bishopville, and the free festival this year will again include arts and crafts, kids' games, face painting, a local car show, vendors and food trucks, Copeland said.



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTO

She added live music this year will include DJ Tiz Laney, among others.

Always occurring on the last Saturday in June, festival hours are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and the family-friendly event will begin with a parade down Main Street.

According to Copeland, the Lizard Man will appear again for pictures with festivalgoers. She said the Lizard Man is Lee County's version of Big Foot and festival themes are "keeping the legend alive" and helping to support downtown businesses.

Retailers along Main Street include an arts and crafts business, variety store, a few clothing stores, a sporting goods store, a bakery and an ice cream shop, among others, Copeland said. Like in recent years, locally owned Smith Concrete Products will again sell Lizard Man statues, ranging from 3 to 5 feet tall. She added that the business also has a smaller version that can sit on a desk.

Additionally, The Stomp will feature numerous varieties of Lizard Man T-shirts for sale, Copeland said. In 1988 when news broke about the Lizard Man, thousands of commemorative T-shirts were sold, she added.

"I have no idea how many T-shirts were sold back then, but it was thousands of them because they shipped them everywhere," Copeland said. "I talked to a guy when the Lizard Man was first sighted, and he sold over a thousand himself right here in Bishopville."

THE RUNDOWN

When: Saturday, June 27
Where: Downtown Bishopville





Black Cowboy Festival shares cowboy heritage, education and much more at Sumter farm

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE
alaysha@theitem.com

For nearly three decades, the sound of hooves against Carolina clay and the spirit of the cowboy heritage have converged for one special occasion in Sumter's countryside: the Black Cowboy Festival.

The celebration has grown into a "cultural cornerstone" that honors the rich legacy and lasting contributions of African-American cowboys and frontiersmen through dancing, riding, learning and connecting with the community. Since the late 1990s, it has highlighted the vital role African Americans played in shaping Western heritage, both historically and today. From riders and trail clubs to families and visitors from around the world, the festival creates a space for elders to share stories, youth to explore the heritage and guests to learn about the history of the American West.

The festival is the vision of Mark and Sandra Myers. Native to South Carolina and descendants of African American farmers and sharecroppers, they bought acreage, formerly sharecropped by Sandra's family, which would become Greenfield Farm.

From a young age, Mark cherished his strong family ties and cowboy values. He began to research the history of African American cowboys who roamed the land of the Wild West to Texas, those who were descendants of slaves and sought a better life for themselves.

The farmland, nestled in Rembert, is the grazing ground for several horses and cattle, making enough work for the Myerses, from growing hay to offering horse riding lessons. The pair is committed to outreach activities, from helping with projects in 4-H Club and agriculture to providing day retreats for children, adults and those with disabilities.

The farm is also available for family reunions and special occasions.

To further the African-American heritage through culture, community, agriculture and education, the couple founded the Black Cultural Enlightenment Society. This nonprofit seeks to improve the quality of community relations by uniting people from diverse backgrounds, develop an equine education and riding facility, promote agricultural interest and self-reliance and increase visitation through tourism, recreation, entertainment, education and the arts.

The nonprofit also sponsors the Black Cowboy Festival.

The 29th-annual Black Cowboy Festival will be held at Greenfield Farm, 4585 Spencer Road in Rembert.

For more information and to buy tickets, visit *www.blackcowboyfestival.net/index.html*, call (803) 499-9658 or email *bcesociety@aol.com*.

SCHEDULE

Thursday, May 21

Education Day – 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Activities include: Agriculture and heritage exhibits, horsemanship presentation, documentaries on the African American cowboy, Buffalo Soldier presentation, vendor marketplace and business networking panel and mixer
Free admission, $5 parking fee
All daytime events are free.
Fish fry – 6 p.m.
Tickets are required for the fish fry.



ABIGAIL PITTMAN / SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

Friday, May 22

10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Free admission – $5 parking fee
Cowboy Trail Ride
Documentaries on the African American Cowboy
Line Dance Class
Business Networking Mixer
Western Dinner/Dance – 7:30 p.m.
Tickets are required for the Western Dinner.

Saturday, May 23

Gospel Show
Main events and horse competitions:
— Buffalo Soldiers and presentation of the flags
— Gaited Horse Show and competition
— Historical presentation
— Rodeo events
— The Delta Blues
— Jazz Show
— Black son of the West by Cowboy Mark Myers
Line Dance – Boots on the Ground
Saturday night
After Bash – Southern Soul Jam Night – 8:30 p.m. to midnight

Sunday, May 24

Church services
Brunch



Entertainment

‘Project Hail Mary’ is emotionally powerful, beautiful



A REVIEW BY ISAIAH RIDLEY

During formative childhood and into my teenage years, the study of space exploration created a deep fascination. I have memories of participating in Starlab activities in elementary school learning about star constellations, names of planets and understanding distance in light years outside of our solar system. That fascination found a translation into research of the scientific possibility of life existing outside of our planetary atmosphere.

Stories of space exploration serve as a powerful structural foundation in memorable films, series and novelizations ranging from "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" to "Stargate," "Aliens," "Starman" and "Contact." I can remember my father introducing me to those elements of science fiction at an early age. From that point on, learning, reading and maintaining a strong principled belief in alien life deep into the vastness of space remains.

"Project Hail Mary" originally came in the form of a novelization, written by Andy Weir, author of "The Martian," which went on to receive a successful live-action cinematic adaptation starring Matt Damon and directed by Ridley Scott. My familiarity with the source material itself admittedly is not expert. I have heard and read fantastic reviews about the book, regarding it as an excellently written science fiction piece. Christopher Miller and Phil Lord direct this adaptation. These two brought forth "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs," "The Lego Movie" and "21 and 22 Jump Street." It stars Ryan Gosling portraying molecular scientist/instructor Dr. Ryland Grace, tasked by the government to find a solution to why the Earth’s sun is dying. The sun dying creates an apocalyptic scenario of impending famine and human extinction with an oncoming winter temperature eliminating all of life. He awakens on a spaceship with no memory, completely isolated from any communication from all living beings.



PHOTO BY EVAN AGOSTINI / INVISION / AP

Ryan Gosling attends the premiere of “Project Hail Mary” at Lincoln Center Plaza on March 18 in New York.

Ryland begins his journey of hypothesizing, formulating answers of his purpose, using the scientific method to bring true understanding as to why he is on this perilous journey in an intentionally non-sequential linear story. Unexpectedly he encounters a mysterious alien rock species. Revelations unveil the alien is on the exact mission, as the sun on his world is dying, too.

What follows is a developing relationship between two species translating into moments involving humor, intensity and powerful emotions with the bond signifying the definition of inseparable. I will say the visuals of space and the environment in which Grace communicates with the alien have an eerie, hauntingly beautiful presentation resembling an ethereal perspective. I found how they accomplished the set design relying more on practicality and organic atmosphere rather than computer-generated imagery refreshing. There is an authentic immersion of being able to escape within the narrative, placing the viewer into that world, granting this feeling as if you are living in the vastness of space communicating with an unknown species.

Ryland's affection grows for the alien rock, naming him “Rocky” after the character Rocky Balboa. Their relationship deepens in an unexpected way with how they are learning about each other’s intellect, differences in their worlds and how they eventually depend on one another for their survival. Gosling’s performance is an absolute highlight as a one-of-a-kind demonstration of elite, quality and emotive acting. The way he carries this film as a solo performance acting along with an animatronic/puppetry creation offers a sincere, raw, realistic portrayal of a man finding courage and friendship amid impossible odds.

The innovative technique of using animatronic and practical effects for “Rocky” is a reminder of what is solely missing within the foundation of cinema in our modern era. There is a magic emotional appreciation for real effects instead of pretending to interact with a character that is not in the vicinity of the actual set. Rocky is an adorable creature who is easily lovable, and like Ryland, viewers immediately become attached in a strict emotional and protective point of view.

Where Lord and Miller capture your heart is with Rocky. Full disclosure: Films revolving around a strong emotional character arc involving animals, inanimate objects, human characters or intentional depressing themes are problematic for me for personal reasons. Certain films, television series, images and novels I am unable to allow myself to engage in due to the harsh impact emotionally. There were moments in the film where it was imperative for me to regain my composure because of the powerful narrative and the memories it conjured. There are never-ending elements of beautiful moments visually, thematically, intended to bring about the appropriate reactions organically. For me personally, moments in those scenes specifically impacted me significantly. Those scenes are very moving with beautiful emotion and intentional pulling at the heart strings.

"Project Hail Mary" is a solo vehicle of Gosling carrying the story on his shoulders, and he channels all his charm, intense passion and realistic reactions that bring the narrative to life. His performance challenged me to seek out other cinematic outings from his filmography that I have not had the chance to view. This film is the perfect blend of powerful acting and humor, scientifically interesting, and even had me remembering the hope I experienced from past viewings of films centering on extraterrestrial intelligence in space, the hope that if an encounter occurred it would be one of peace and understanding of one another.

"Project Hail Mary" is a powerful and beautiful emotional journey. Perfect in every sense of the word, and I have no negative connotations about this epic adventure of friendship, science, courage and wonderment. A resounding 10/10 and two thumbs up is my reaction. It is a must see.

To watch Isaiah Ridley's movie reviews online, find him @Izzy's Cinematic Escape on YouTube.

From CCTC S.E.E. Car Show in Sumter to WWW Friday Night SmackDown in Columbia, there is an event for everyone

SUMTER COUNTY

If you want to see how a real farm works, don't miss the **16th Annual Sheep Shearing Event** from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, April 18, at Old McCaskill's Farm, 377 Cantey Lane, Rembert. Highlights of the day are: wool from sheep to shawl; shearing the sheep; Border Collie demonstrations; concessions; tractor simulator; horseback rides; bluegrass music; knitters, spinners and weavers; hayrides; goats milk; soapmaking; face painting and more. Tickets are available at *https://tinyurl.com/bd92nzru*.

Join a morning of open play, crafts and snacks at **Giggles on the Go's Calling All Units Event** from 9 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday, April 18, at 741 Bultman Drive, Suite 11. City of Sumter will bring a fire truck, police car and an ambulance for free viewing. Marshall from Paw Patrol will be a guest.

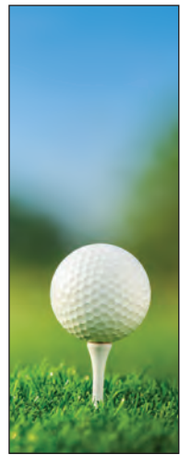
Got a nice ride? Show it off at the **CCTC S.E.E. Car Show** on Saturday, April 18, at Central Carolina Technical College, 506 N. Guignard Drive. The event by Ken Bernard and Sumter Car Meets and Events will include trophies for Classic, Modern and Truck/Jeep vehicles, as well as Best in Show and People's Choice. The show is from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. with late registration until 11:30 a.m.

Looking for fun for the entire family? Check out **Zerbini Family Circus** from 3 to 7 p.m. Sunday, April 19, or from 6 to 10 p.m. Monday, April 20, at Sumter Speedway, 3150 Wedgefield Road. Purchase tickets at eventticketscenter.com.

Join **Sumter Museum's 24th-annual Shrimp Feast** from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday, April 23, at the museum, 122 N. Washington St. Tickets are $50 for members and $75 for the public and get you all-you-can-eat shrimp skewers, boiled shrimp, grilled shrimp, shrimp and grits, barbecue, Lowcountry boil and all-you-can drink beer, wine and soft drinks. For additional information, visit *Sumter Museum.org* or follow the museum on Facebook.

Looking to see high-level college tennis? Check out the **Conference Carolinas Championship** Friday-Monday, April 24-27, at Palmetto Tennis Center, 400 Theatre Drive. The event brings together collegiate teams from across the Southeast for four days of competition. Visit *www.sumtersc.gov/palmetto-tennis-center/tournament-schedule*.

Grab your golf clubs for the 2026 **Chamber Cup Golf Tournament presented by SAFE Federal Credit Union** from noon to 5 p.m. Friday, April 24, at Beech Creek Golf Club, 1800 Sam Gillespie Blvd. "The Chamber Cup is the Greater Sumter Chamber of Commerce's signature golf tournament — bringing together business leaders, professionals, and partners to celebrate relationships, collaboration and community growth." Visit *https://tinyurl.com/38e9d4bd*.



See who is crowned at the next **Iris Festival Pageant** at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, April 25, at Lakewood High School Fine Arts Center, 350 Old Manning Road. For additional information, visit Iris Festival Pageant on Facebook.

Up for a challenge? Join **Sumter Family YMCA for its Indoor TRYathlon** at 9 a.m. Saturday, May 2, at 510 Miller Road. The sprint-style triathlon is designed for all fitness levels. Participants will complete a 500-yard swim in the lap pool, a 10-mile indoor bike ride and a 1-mile run along Shot Pouch Greenway. Modified options are available, including water walking, recumbent bike and treadmill, so everyone can participate comfortably. Registration includes a commemorative event T-shirt. The event is open to the public.

Temple Sinai Jewish History Center, 11 Church St., welcomes the public to **If the Windows Could Talk: Children's Bible Stories Series** from 1:30 to 2:15 p.m. on the following dates: May 2, The Blessing (featuring Isaac and Jacob); June 6, David the Shepherd; Aug. 1, The Burning Bush (featuring Moses); and Sept. 5, The 10 Commandments (featuring Moses). The series "is designed to be a fun experience for your children to hear the stories associated with Temple Sinai's beautiful and historic stained glass windows."

Shop local, try out treats from various food trucks and spend time with friends at the **Craft and Vendor Fair hosted by American Heritage Girls Troop SC2911** from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, May 2, at New Salem Baptist Church, 2500 W. Oakland Ave.

See the beauty of Swan Lake Iris Gardens at the perfect time of year — when the irises are in bloom. Attend the **Sumter Iris Festival** Thursday-Sunday, May 14-17, at the gardens at 822 W. Liberty St. Touted as one of South Carolina's longest-running festivals and one of the Southeast's top-rated events, the three-day celebration features live concerts, arts and crafts, plants and flowers, a showcase of antique and classic cars, contests and plenty of activities just for kids. The festivities begin with the "Crowning of the King and Queen" ceremony, followed by the "Taste at the Gardens" featuring live music and tasty dishes from the area's finest restaurants, chefs and caterers.

Don't miss the sounds of the **282D Army Brass Band Heat Cat. VI at Sumter Iris Festival** at 4 p.m. Friday, May 15, and the 282D Jazz Combo at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 16, at the gardens on Liberty Street. The don't-want-to-miss performances are free.

Celebrate the legacy and contributions of the African American cowboys and frontiersmen at **Black Cowboy Festival and Rodeo** Thursday-Sunday, May 21-24, at Greenfield Farm, 4585 Spencer Road, Rembert. Enjoy agricultural workshops, a fish fry and Western dinner, trail rides, horse shows, line dance, live entertainment, vendor booths and of course a rodeo.

CLARENDON

Join Laurence Manning Academy Drama-Chorus for an afternoon of drama, music and relationship chaos

SEE **EVENTS,** PAGE A19

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EVENTS FROM PAGE A18

as it presents **"Breaking Up Is Hard to Do ... Sometimes"** at 3 p.m. Sunday, April 19, in Bubba Davis Gymnasium, 1154 Academy Drive, Manning. The show is "inspired by TV breakups and not-so-breakups," and "blends humor, heart and familiar moments with a modern twist " Tickets are $10 for adults and $5 for students.

FLORENCE

The **Pee Dee Spring Plant and Flower Festival** returns to the Pee Dee State Farmers Market, 2513 W. Lucas St., Florence, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday-Saturday, April 17-18, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, April 19. This free event features home, yard and garden decor, along with crafts, spring plants, in-season certified S.C. produce and more.

The 44th-Annual Florence Greek Festival will be held Thursday, April 30, to Saturday, May 2, at 2990 S. Cashua. Enjoy Greek food, beer and wine, as well as hear live music, watch Greek dancers and take a church tour. For additional information, call (843) 662-5471 or email *info@gotflorence.com*.

The **Florence Food Truck Festival** is returning to Florence for two days — Friday, May 1, 4-8 p.m., and Saturday, May 2, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. More than 20 food trucks will be at Florence Center serving up a variety of cuisines — savory to sweet. The festival is pet and family friendly. There will be designated seating areas, entertainment, non-food vendors and a kids area.



Saturday will feature a classic car show by the Swamp Fox Old Car Club, and families can participate in free car seat safety checks provided by SAFE KIDS. For updates to the schedule, follow Florence Center on social media or visit *florencecenter.com*.

LAKE CITY

Every plant lover should mark their calendar for the **Moore Farms Botanical Garden Spring Plant Sale** from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, April 25, at the farm at 100 New Zion Road, Lake City. Purchase unique plants from the Moore private collection — many grown exclusively for this sale — including rare and hard-to-find annuals and perennials. Prices are set low to encourage gardening and botanical exploration. Bring a wagon to make sure you can take plenty home. The Vendor Market will feature local and regional nurseries, greenhouses and gardens, plus craft vendors and food trucks. Explore the 65-acre property in full spring bloom all for free while you shop. The 2026 Spring Plant Sale list is on the website *moorefarmsbg.org*.

Join Jay Keck, SCWF's expert bird guide and birdwatcher, for the **Birding 101 / Walking Workshop** at Moore Farms Botanical Garden, 100 New Zion Road, Lake City. Explore the garden as Keck teaches how to identify songbird species by their calls, spot visual cues and discover where birds are most likely to be found. After the walk, bring your lunch (not provided) and enjoy an informative presentation. The event is perfect for beginners and seasoned birders. For tickets, visit *https://tinyurl.com/23nw3xtx*.

ORANGEBURG

Don't forget to smell the roses at the free **2026 Orangeburg Festival of Roses.** This year's event features vendors from across the Southeast, award-winning food trucks and family-friendly events of all kinds — from musical performances to bingo — from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday, May 2, and 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday, May 3, at Edisto Memorial Gardens, 200 Riverside Drive South West.

COLUMBIA

Experience the music, culture, food and performing arts of nearly 60 countries at the **Columbia International Festival** on Saturday-Sunday, April 18-19, at 1200 Rosewood Drive, Columbia. Sample exotic flavors, watch staged performances, see traditionally dressed representatives from other countries and shop booths of authentic clothing, crafts, jewelry and souvenirs from across the world, all while learning about other cultures. To learn more, visit *cifonline.org* or call (803) 799-3452.

Enjoy the finest plates and pours Columbia has to offer at the **Columbia Food and Wine Festival** Wednesday-Sunday, April 22-26. This award-winning festival has earned recognition as a must-attend event for foodies across the Southeast. Since its beginning, the festival has welcomed more than 15,600 guests and featured more than 375 culinary partners. To learn more, visit *colafoodandwine.com*.

See, hear and taste the flavors, sounds and stories of cultures from across the world at the **Sharpvue Irmo International Festival** on Sunday, April 26, at Moore Park in Irmo. According to its website, "The SIIF is a non-profit event dedicated to celebrating the cultures, traditions and people that make our community vibrant." The festival will include international foods, live music, dancers, vendors and booths, art exhibits, a helicopter display, car show and a free kid zone. To learn more, visit *www.irmoscinternationalfestival.com*.

"Swan Lake" just got better. The World Ballet Company will present **"Swan Lake" along with a live orchestra** at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 28, at Koger Center for the Arts, 1051 Greene St., Columbia. "The legendary tale of 'Swan Lake' takes flight in a breathtaking production from World Ballet Company, as fate and magic entwine in a timeless battle between good and evil. Performing with a live orchestra, and featuring a cast of 50 international dancers, over 150 radiant hand-sewn costumes and stunning hand-crafted sets, this spellbinding ballet captures every heart-pounding moment — from the Dance of the Little Swans to the Black Swan's 32 fouettés, and every pirouette in between." For additional information on the World Ballet Company, visit *https://worldballetcompany.com/columbia*. To purchase tickets, visit *https://tinyurl.com/779thtae*.



Get your tickets now for the action-packed **WWW Friday Night SmackDown** at 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 15, at Colonial Life Arena, 801 Lincoln St., Columbia. Purchase tickets at *ticketmaster.com* and at the Prisma Health Box Office. The event will feature undisputed WWE Champion Drew McIntyre, The American Nightmare Cody Rhodes, WWE Women's Champion Jade Cargill, United States Champion Carmelo Hayes, Tiffany Stratton, Sami Zayn, Randy Orton and many more. Talent subject to change. The Ringsider Package will be available at *ticketmaster.com* and includes the best seats in the house (ringside, directly across from cameras) and exclusive merchandise.



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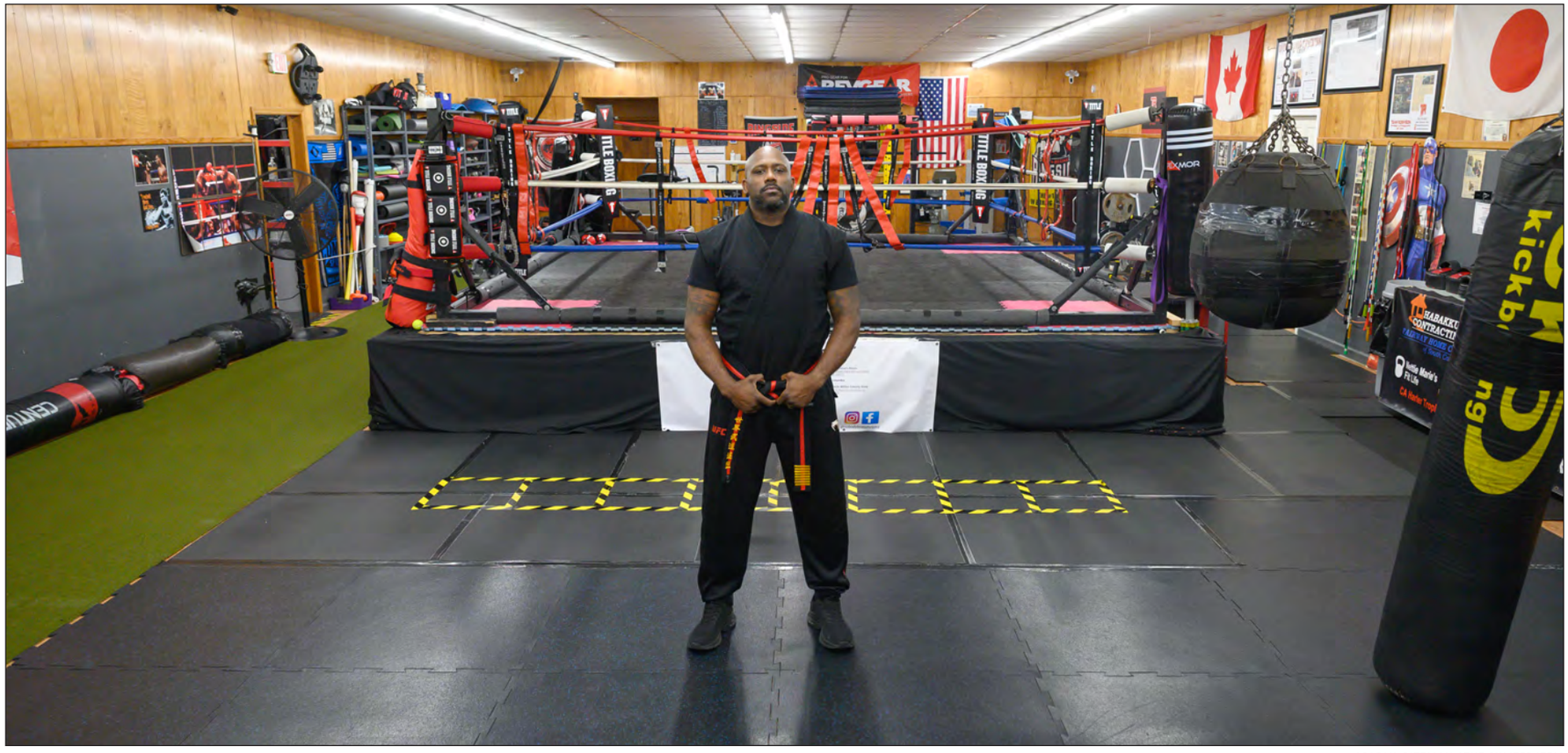
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SPORTS

E-mail: sports@theitem.com

APRIL / MAY 2026



ABIGAIL PITTMAN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Jerome Robinson stands in the Team Robinson MMA gym on April 8 after being inducted into the World Martial Arts Federation Hall of Fame.

Robinson focused on building community as he's inducted into WMAF Hall of Fame

BY TIM LEIBLE
tim@item.com

When Jerome Robinson first started training aspiring athletes in the world of martial arts in 2000, he never could've dreamed where the endeavor would take him. In 2004, he created Team Robinson, training clients in his garage, and has since built a company that was named top martial arts gym in *The Item*'s Best of Sumter seven times in a row.

Throughout a quarter century in the world of MMA training, Robinson has the same values at the core. Simply put, Robinson isn't a fan of bullies and wants his community to be able to defend itself from that hatred. As someone who was unable to get to train in the world of martial arts as a kid, he wanted to provide that outlet for anyone who needs it.

"When I was 20 years old, I found an instructor; from there, I was hooked. The excitement that I had from finding an instructor, learning martial arts and getting the confidence — not that I got into a whole lot of trouble when I was younger — but if someone tried to approach me or tried to intimidate me and threaten me, I'd be able to handle that. Watching me be able to help individuals do that, that's been my biggest passion, helping people defend themselves and not be the victims of bullying," Robinson said. "Our biggest success has been with our children's program. With kids who are lacking confidence and getting bullied, we're able to instill some positive values in them and help them become better students, athletes and all of that good stuff through martial arts.

"You're not just teaching martial arts, you're making people feel that connection like a family atmosphere."

Those core values helped build an incredible environment at Team Robinson. The company's founder added to his long list of recognitions earlier this year when he traveled to Ohio for the latest World Martial Arts Federation conference. There, he was promoted to

SEE **ROBINSON,** PAGE A23



PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL PITTMAN / THE SUMTER ITEM

Jerome Robinson trains Kim McCaskill at Team Robinson MMA on April 8, 2026.



Jerome Robinson, left, trains Jemere Pack at Team Robinson MMA on April 8.



Jerome Robinson, center, trains with Whit Whitaker, left, and Jemere Pack during a session at Team Robinson MMA on April 8.

ROBINSON FROM PAGE A22

eighth-degree black belt by WMAF founder Danny Lane and inducted into the organization's hall of fame. As an extra surprise, he was named Most Inspirational Instructor to put a cherry on top of an incredible experience.

"It was no different than when I'm passing out awards and recognition for the children here; whenever someone feels like someone's about to get something, everybody gets quiet and they're on their best behavior because they're hoping that prize or gift is going to be theirs. It was funny to see that with grown men and women," Robinson joked about the room full of instructors who had their eyes on the awards at the WMAF conference. "I didn't know it was me until I heard Sumter, South Carolina, and 'in my garage.' When he announced I was the most inspirational, that was huge.

"Walking through the airport, people probably thought I had an Oscar or something. It ain't an Oscar, but it's a pretty cool trophy."

Team Robinson trains people across age groups and genders, anyone who is willing to come in and learn. Robinson takes great pride in his work with children, partnering with schools to provide instruction, along with programs like reading to students or hosting a small library in the gym.

"Working with the schools is huge because, especially in certain neighborhoods or certain areas of Sumter, there are some students whose parents can't afford for them to come in and do classes like this, so to go in and do a class with 50 to 100 students and class is supposed to be a 20-minute presentation and it turns into an hour and 15 minutes because the kids are asking questions, they're engaged," Robinson said. "Sometimes months later, sometimes years later, I'll hear, 'You came to my school when I was such and such.' It's wild.

"We're able to do those things and pour into the community, and the community has always supported me."

Robinson also does a lot of work with the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), helping empower women in Sumter and the surrounding area.

"We've donated items, money and training at no cost to the ladies because a lot of them were victims of domestic violence," he said. "I can only imagine the fear. I hate bullies, and knowing that, it's not always the case, but more than likely it's a bigger, stronger male beating up or taking advantage of a weaker or smaller female. I'm trying to give them some tools to help defend themselves in that situation but also protecting their privacy. Any time we've done classes for them, we don't do any videos or pictures, we just come in and train them and they can go on their way."

Robinson said the recent recognitions gave him an excuse to think back on the decades he's spent training martial artists and boxers in Sumter. He's thankful that the community that raised him also helped him find a way to give back with his greatest passion.

"When I was younger and people said, 'You better enjoy it now because when you get older, time is going to fly,' I didn't think they knew what they were talking about," Robinson. "I've had some students for years. I have one student, Ethan. He started with me when he was 3, and he's like 18 now. He's like my longest-running student. He was this tall, and now he's almost eye level with me. It's unreal. I have definitely done something."



Team Robinson founder Jerome Robinson was named the Most Inspirational Coach by the World Martial Arts Federation and inducted into its hall of fame.



PHOTOS BY TIM LEIBLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Sumter High quarterback Frank Richardson has picked up quite a bit of steam in his recruitment, earning five Division I offers, including from South Carolina.

Sumter High's Richardson enjoying the process as recruitment gains speed

BY TIM LEIBLE
tim@theitem.com

Sumter High quarterback Frank Richardson has been a staple for the Gamecock offense for the last two years. Now, the college football world is starting to catch on.

Richardson, who is heading into his senior season at Sumter High in the fall, has seen his recruitment skyrocket since February. While he picked up his first Division I offer in the fall from East Carolina, an offer from Duke on Feb. 2 opened the floodgates. Richardson added an offer from Coastal Carolina on March 27 before the other Gamecocks put an offer on the table two days later, as a spring practice visit to South Carolina turned into yet another Power 4 opportunity. The SHS QB added his fifth DI offer on April 1 from UConn.

"It's been great," Richardson said of the attention from Power 4 programs. "It really shows that all of the work I've been putting in hasn't been for nothing."

College recruitment can seem like a wildfire at times. Often, one spark from a DI offer can lead to a flurry of scholarship opportunities.

While at Duke, Richardson was able to get an inside look at his potential future in college football. He attended practice and was able to sit in on meetings to really immerse himself in the program.



Sumter High's Frank Richardson has been a staple of the SHS offense for the last two years, combining for 1,860 yards and 19 touchdowns through the air and 2,408 yards and 42 touchdowns on the ground.

"It was kind of like a day in the life, so we went to all of the meetings and got to sit down with the coaches, so that's when we really got down to talk about the scholarship, my position and the school itself," Richardson said. "(Their meetings) were really different than what I thought. I thought it was going to be like some big thing, but it's really a

SEE **RICHARDSON,** PAGE A25

'I think I'll play running back at the college level, to be honest. I've thought about it a lot. I do like linebacker, but I really think it would be better for me at running back.'

FRANK RICHARDSON

Quarterback for Sumter High School Gamecocks



RICHARDSON

FROM PAGE A24

controlled area with the coaches and his one-on-one time with the players and really explaining and going in-depth over what the plays are."

Of course, as a South Carolina native, an offer from the Gamecocks was particularly special for Richardson.

"It means a lot actually; it was my first SEC offer," Richardson said. "It was great being on the campus, meeting all the coaches. Even before I got the offer, it was a great experience."

Richardson has a unique recruitment because he'll be making a position change in college. He's really served as an all-around athlete for the Gamecocks, using his legs more than his arm. As a sophomore, he passed for 1,209 yards and 15 touchdowns, while adding 984 yards and 11 scores on the ground. He was able to share the load on the ground with a pair of star seniors, John Peeples and Kam Fortune. Once they graduated, Richardson was the center of the rushing attack. As a junior, he rushed for 1,424 yards and 31 touchdowns to go along with 651 yards and four touchdowns through the air.

College programs have looked at Richardson to fill a few different positions. He's heard everything from running back to linebacker throughout the process. Richardson is no stranger to moving around. When he plays 7-on-7 with 803 United, he lines up at receiver, and Richardson played some running back before making the jump to varsity.

"Some schools want me to play defense, a lot want me to play running back, some are open to both because they really don't know where they want to use me, right now," Richardson said. "I think I'll play running back at the college level, to be honest. I've thought about it a lot. I do like linebacker, but I really think it would be better for me at running back."

The biggest difference for Richardson might be the fact that he'd have to get ready to drop a block for his quarterback in passing situations, but he isn't afraid to get in the mix in pass protection.

"I'll get down there in pass protection and block somebody, there's no worry about that," Richardson said emphatically.

Of course, before Richardson makes that positional transition, he still has another season at quarterback at Sumter High. He's not putting the cart before the horse; Richardson wants to be prepared to lead the Gamecocks to a successful season before worrying about playing at the next level.

"I've changed up my workouts a little bit to include some running back stuff like footwork and ball security and stuff like that, but I still do have quarterback parts of my workout," Richardson said. "I'm not really rushing to make a decision right now, I'm just waiting to see what else comes. I'm just going to play, the same thing I've been doing.

"I'm really excited to see how this season goes. I feel like we can go really far this season."

Being a senior with extra attention from colleges can come with a mix of thrill and pressure. Richardson is more focused on the positives that come with his recruitment; he doesn't tend to pay too much attention to the outside noise around his game.

"It's not really pressure; I really look at it as a blessing from God," Richardson said. "This is what I asked for, so it ain't no pressure. It's really cool that I can be in this position. It's really just a blessing."



TIM LEIBLE / THE SUMTER ITEM

Sumter High's Franklin Richardson plays quarterback for the Gamecocks, but he'll likely shift to running back at the college level.

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Shrimp Feast returns to Sumter Museum on April 23

Annual fundraiser to include food, music, silent auction

BY ALAYSHA MAPLE
alaysha@theitem.com

One of Sumter's favorite events returns this month.

For its 24th year, Sumter Museum returns with one of its most anticipated traditions of the year, Shrimp Feast, presented by SAFE Federal Credit Union.

"The Shrimp Feast has become a favorite annual gathering that brings our community together in support of the museum's educational programs and preservation efforts," Museum Executive Director Annie Rivers said.

Attendees will enjoy an evening of Lowcountry flavors, from shrimp skewers, boiled shrimp and grilled shrimp to shrimp and grits, barbecue and classic Lowcountry boil. To wash it all down, unlimited beer, wine and soft drinks will be available.

To aid in the night's ambiance, Chappell Court Band will provide entertainment while attendees taste different selections.

Those interested can bid on a variety of unique items and experiences for the silent auction happening in McKenzie Hall as well as try their luck at the 50/50 drawing where the winner takes home half of the proceeds.

"It's a fun, relaxed evening filled with great food, music and opportunities to support the Sumter Museum's mission," Rivers said.

Shrimp Feast is from 6 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, April 23, at Sumter Museum, 122 N. Washington St.

Tickets are $50 for members and $75 for the public.

Availability is limited, and the event often sells out. Early purchase is encouraged.

For tickets or more information, visit *www.sumtermuseum.org* or call (803) 775-0908.



SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

Sumter Museum's 24th-annual Shrimp Feast, presented by SAFE Federal Credit Union, returns on April 23 for another year of food, music and fun.





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Social Security Matters

'Retiring Soon' is incorrect about DRCs

BY RUSSELL GLOOR
National Social Security Advisor at the AMAC Foundation, the non-profit arm of the Association of Mature American Citizens

Dear Rusty — The time is nearing that I want to move from my current Social Security survivor benefit to my own SS retirement benefit at 70 years of age. I have been looking more deeply into the application of Delayed Retirement Credits (DRCs), and I have read that DRCs accumulated in the year that I turn 70 (September 2026) will not be effective when I actually turn 70. Rather, those DRCs won't be paid until the following year. Can you verify that this is correct? I presume that if the DRCs are not applied at age 70, they will be applied sometime after the first of the year and any increase will be paid retroactively.



RUSSELL GLOOR

Signed: Retiring Soon

Dear Retiring Soon —The Delayed Retirement Credits (DRCs) you speak of have accumulated at the rate of 8% per year (.667% per month) since you reached your SS full retirement age (FRA), which means that at age 70 your monthly SS benefit will be about 129% of the amount you were entitled to at your FRA of 66 years plus 4 months.

However, your understanding of how DRCs will work for you at age 70 is not correct. If you claim for your Social Security retirement benefits to begin in September 2026 (the month you turn 70) you will receive all DRCs you have accumulated up to that point in time. In other words, you will get your full age 70 benefit amount immediately, including all DRCs earned until then, effective with your first SS retirement payment (which you will get in October 2026). What you have likely read about is that DRCs work a bit differently for those who claim SS after their full retirement age but before their 70th birthday month.

For those who claim mid-year but before age 70, only DRCs earned through the end of the preceding year are initially applied, and DRCs earned during the current year are not paid until the following January. This results in a loss of some SS benefit between the time benefits start and the following January, because only the amount earned as of the end of the previous year are first paid, and the full number of DRCs earned during the current year are applied in January. But, as is the case for you, when benefits are claimed to start in the month you reach 70 years of age, all DRCs earned up to the month of your 70th birthday are immediately applied.

Congratulations on selecting a strategy which will maximize your monthly Social Security benefit.

This article is intended for information purposes only and does not represent legal or financial guidance. It presents the opinions and interpretations of the AMAC Foundation's staff, trained and accredited by the National Social Security Association (NSSA). NSSA and the AMAC Foundation and its staff are not affiliated with or endorsed by the Social Security Administration (amacfoundation.org/programs/social-security-dvisory) or email us at ssadvisor@amacfoundation.org.

ABOUT AMAC

The 2.4 million member Association of Mature American Citizens [AMAC] amac.us is a vibrant, vital senior advocacy organization that takes its marching orders from its members. AMAC Action is a non-profit, non-partisan organization representing the membership in our nation's capital and in local Congressional Districts throughout the country. And the AMAC Foundation (www.AmacFoundation.org) is the Association's non-profit organization, dedicated to supporting and educating America's Seniors. Together, we act and speak on the Association members' behalf, protecting their interests and offering a practical insight on how to best solve the problems they face today. Live long and make a difference by joining us today at www.amac.us/join-amac.

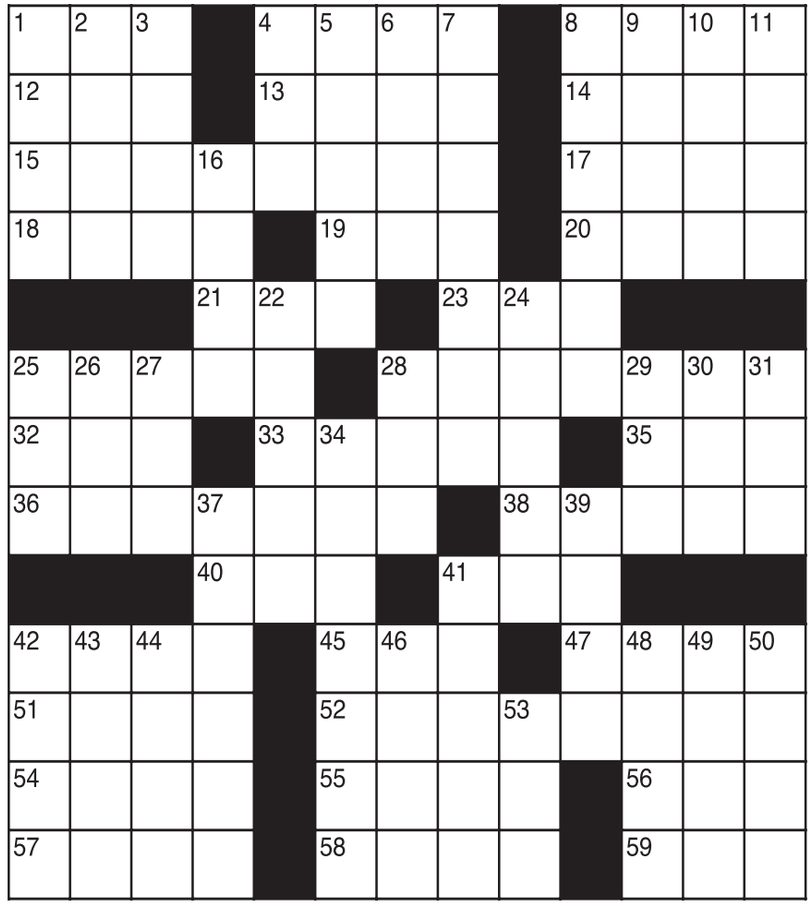


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PUZZLES

APRIL / MAY 2026

CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1. Falsehood
4. Shopper's mecca
8. Love too much
12. Verse poem
13. Burn-soothing plant
14. Something wicked
15. Warning
17. Church ringer
18. Flat-topped hill
19. Flying formation
20. Colony insects
21. Drink chiller
23. Fisherman's snare
25. Stroll
28. Action word modifiers
32. Negative response
33. Get up
35. Lubricate
36. Bureau
38. Reddish
40. Verve
41. Health club
42. Not nearby
45. Nocturnal bird
47. High-school dance
51. Christen
52. "_____ in Blue"
54. Expanse
55. Car need
56. Cain, to Adam
57. Mail
58. Spout
59. Historic time

DOWN
1. Bubble
2. Sluggish
3. Honey makers
4. Welcome _____
5. Dynamic
6. Solitary
7. Fables
8. Organized argument
9. Baking site
10. Incline
11. House extensions
16. Metal bar
22. Leave off
24. "_____ Breath You Take"
25. Also
26. Injure
27. See you!
28. Hot-_____ balloon
29. Author Serling
30. Auction offer
31. Crafty
34. News stories
37. Oleo, for one
39. Refs' kin
41. Fierce look
42. Actress Alicia et al.
43. Subway fee
44. Prayer's last word
46. Flog
48. Garden bloom
49. Fragrance
50. Mimicking bird
53. Bench for the faithful

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SOLUTION



SUDOKU

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HOW TO PLAY:

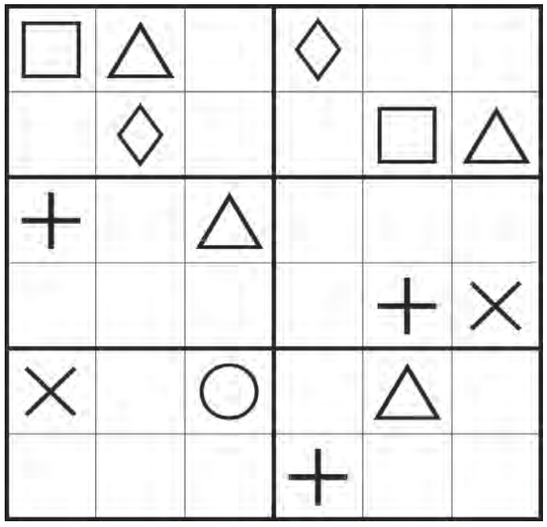
Fill the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 through 9 only once.
Each 3x3 box is outlined with a darker line. You already have a few numbers to get you started. Remember: you must not repeat the numbers 1 through 9 in the same line, column or 3x3 box.

SOLUTION

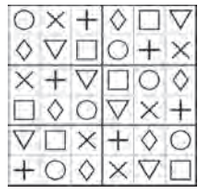
7	5	9	6	1	8	3	4	2
2	4	6	7	9	3	8	5	1
1	8	3	5	4	2	6	7	9
5	6	7	9	3	1	2	8	4
3	2	1	8	5	4	7	9	6
8	9	4	2	6	7	1	3	5
6	3	5	1	7	9	4	2	8
4	1	8	3	2	5	9	6	7
9	7	2	4	8	6	5	1	3

KID ZONE

Sudoku 6x6



COMPLETE EACH GRID WITH NUMBERS FROM 1 TO 6, KEEPING IN MIND THAT:
- a number can only appear once per row
- a number can only appear once per column
- a number can only appear once in each box of 6 squares.



ANSWER

Can you drown in quicksand?

In movies and cartoons, characters sometimes fall into quicksand. You see them sinking in panic while their friends try to help them by reaching out a hand or extending a tree branch. In some cases, the character sinks and disappears completely! But can you actually drown in quicksand? Here's the truth.

First, you should know that quicksand is mostly made up of water, not sand, as you might think. More specifically, it contains about 40 percent sand and 60 percent a mixture of water and clay, also called "loam."

When these elements are combined, they form quicksand. When someone steps into quicksand, the tiny grains of sand and clay shift and move. Water then fills the empty spaces. The more the person moves, the deeper they sink and the more they get stuck. As you can imagine, struggling in quicksand is not the best way to get out.

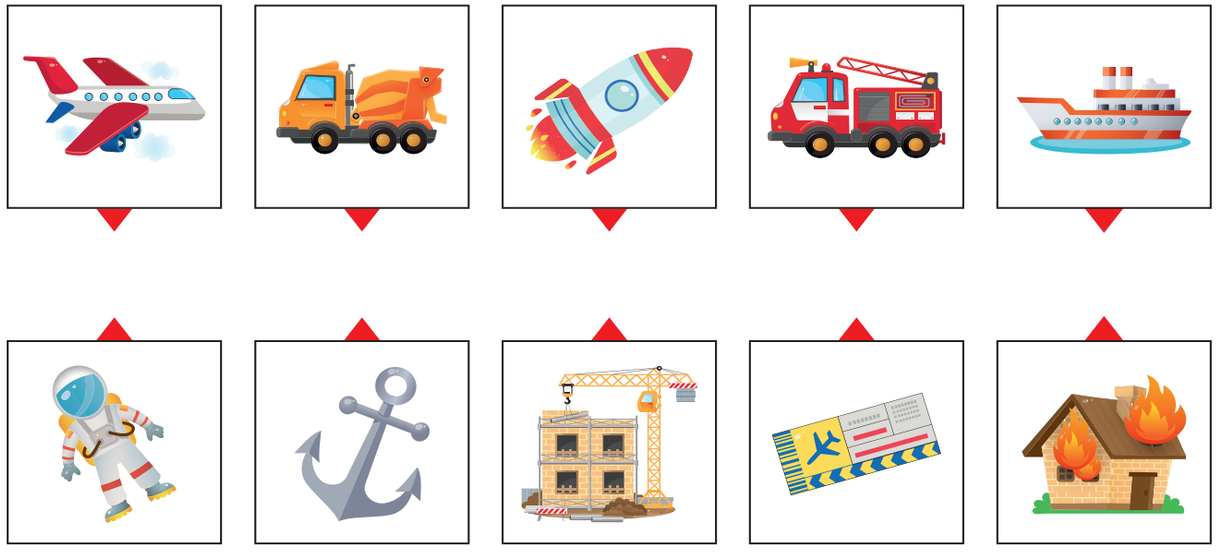
According to experts, if you ever get stuck in quicksand, you should make small, gentle circles with one foot. This motion lets water flow back underneath your foot and makes it easier to lift your leg so you can then get out. Staying calm is the key.

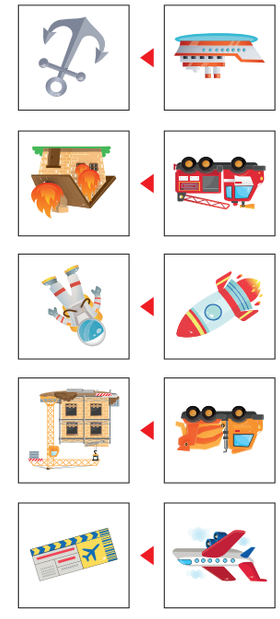


Can you drown in quicksand? The answer is both no and yes. The good news is that a phenomenon called the Archimedes principle ensures your head will always stay above the quicksand. However, if you become stuck in quicksand near the ocean and the tide comes in, rising water can create a real danger.

Together is better

Connect the images that go together





ANSWER:

Master Gardener training program begins again after 3 years

STAFF REPORT

After a hiatus of about three years, Master Gardener classes are starting again this year in Sumter. The first cohort is ongoing, with its final exam in June, and the second cohort begins in July.

The program administered through Clemson Extension has about 70 members who meet once a month and have multiple programs throughout the year, like the Ask a Master Gardener program, which recently had a booth at Art in the Park. They also showcase what they do and sell irises at the Iris Festival in May every year.

In her second week in the Master Gardener program, Lynne Maroney said learning about soil types and how they retain water was a highlight and said on her way to B's Nursery for a class excursion, she was eyeing clover and thinking about how it can be nitrogen fixing and thus reduce the need for fertilizers.

"I'm retired now, so I'm hoping I can use the skills that I'm learning from this Master Gardener program to better my community," she said.



"If I wanted to be with my dad, I'd be working outside in the yard," Maroney said about growing up on a farm in Darlington, where the family bought meat but grew all their own vegetables as well as tobacco. Now, she's joined the Master Gardener training program.

Bradley Secraw is consumer horticulture agent with Clemson Extension's Sumter, Clarendon and Lee offices after relocating from Oklahoma and starting his current role in November. He said many people in the Master Gardener class are transplants as well. He assisted with the Master Gardener program in Oklahoma, helping with the "interns" who did 40 hours of educational service.



PHOTOS BY RHIANNON O'BERRY / THE SUMTER ITEM

ABOVE: Master Gardener program trainees compare notes in a greenhouse during an educational trip to B's Nursery recently.

LEFT: Bradley Secraw, consumer horticulture agent with Clemson Extension's Sumter, Clarendon and Lee offices, speaks to Master Gardener program trainees during a recent visit to B's Nursery.

Secraw said that while some of the knowledge they teach can be attained through online and individual research, the Master Gardener training program is condensed, all in one and application-oriented, intended to train them for various situations with hands-on learning and teaching opportunities.

First for trainees is the classroom portion with 40 hours of training that includes excursions — such as the one to B's Nursery recently with hands-on demonstrations. There is curriculum and quizzes for participants to use on their own time; at B's Nursery, they collaborated to identify plants that matched characteristics listed on a scavenger hunt, then convened as a group to discuss answers and get more context from Carmen Ketron with Clemson Extension.

One activity Secraw is interested in walking participants through is appropriate soil sample measures and said they do many different activities.

"Part of it is to keep it interesting," Secraw said about the hands-on activities and excursions. "We definitely want to make sure that this is a very unique program."

Once the classroom part is complete, participants are known as interns, and the next step is 40 hours of volunteer service during a year. Those hours can be with the extension office answering questions and helping with projects such as with nonprofit collaborators, community gardens and school gardens.

"More experienced Master Gardeners that are with the association that's local here serve as mentors for the new interns as well," Secraw said, "so that helps them bridge that gap."

Secraw said it can be intimidating to answer questions from people as someone with a Master Gardener label and the high expectations that come along with it.

"In Extension, in general, we're used to getting people's problems — and so

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one person's once-in-a-lifetime problem I may have heard five times this week," Secraw said and added that Master Gardeners get approached in this way as well.

Jan Hilton, the chief of the Ask a Master Gardener program, said, "When people find out you're a Master Gardener, they go, 'Oh, you're a Master Gardener — you must know everything!' and that's not the case at all. We have very knowledgeable people on a variety of subjects, but I tell people, no, I don't know everything, but I know where to find most answers. That's what we're about." If personal experience or formal education don't cover a question, the Master Gardeners can find Clemson resources and science to answer most things.

Secraw said the Extension Office is an education resource for the public, and the Master Gardeners Association is an ally in that. While the Master Gardeners Association is technically separate from Clemson and manages its own finances, the relationship between the two is close, and Master Gardeners represent Clemson in the community through volunteering. They often direct people toward Clemson for horticulture and farm specialists, as Master Gardeners don't consult for professional or commercial farmers.

Pat Sakole is the president of the Sumter Master Gardeners Association, and he recruits speakers for the group's monthly educational program, who have ranged from beekeepers to engineers and educators with University of South Carolina.

"We open it up to any possibility that it's generally related to gardening in some aspect or another, environmental or water or something, but it's a pretty diverse group," he said.

Ketron has worked with Clemson Extension for more than four years and about 15 years at different organizations in South Carolina.

"I love to educate people on topics that can help them make the state, our world and their environments a little bit better," she said.

She said things are constantly changing with new plants — edible gardens and raised bed gardens have become mandatory topics because of a surge in popularity in recent years, as has more resilient and weather-wise gardening techniques.

"Now a lot of people want their landscapes to do double and triple duty. It's not that I just want a pretty garden — I also want it to be a workhorse for sustainable stormwater management, I want it to be a wildlife habitat; I want it to do all the things, and so being able to redesign how we educate about the plants, how we design landscapes, that has changed to new desires and it is honestly for the better, so that's exciting."

Secraw said he is excited about his new role with the Extension office and working with the trainees.

"It's always great to see people excited about gardening. A lot of these Master Gardeners have done things that are either in agriculture their entire life or agriculture adjacent. One of our Master Gardeners currently is a retired biology teacher. I have another one who's going to be teaching the turf section because I believe he is a retired high school agriculture teacher."

He looks forward to being exposed to the knowledge and experiences of participants as well.

"They're gonna know things that I don't know, and I know that's going to happen because most of them have been on the planet longer than I have," he said.

Master Gardeners also coordinate multiple community gardens — two more are being put together in Sumter, with one across from the South Sumter gym that will have an after-school program for youth that Sumter City Councilman Calvin Hastie helped coordinate.Secraw is looking into the soil composition of the area now. The other is Shiloh Community Garden across from St. John's Elementary on Narrow Paved Road. Those are in collaboration with 4-H.

Program participant Maroney talked about how gardening could help restore relationships that may have deteriorated during the pandemic.

"I would like to see in my community some of that fracturing heal so that people can get back together," Maroney said about how COVID-19 changed relationships. "I have found that people are fascinated by children [and] that brings people together — plants will also bring people together."

If you'd like to be notified of the next Master Gardener Volunteer Training Course, complete the interest form at *https://tinyurl.com/ye7kdcay*. This will allow the local coordinator to contact you when the next course registration is available.



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Sumter's Dr. Pepper bottling facility opened in 1936



Sammy Way
REFLECTIONS

Reflections revisits the Sumter Dr. Pepper Bottling Company which was completed in July 1936. This company was founded by 1st Lt. Walter S. Sowell, who served in the United States Army during World War II. The company was initially at 118 S. Washington St. This building, once used for bottling and storage, remains standing; however, it is no longer used as a bottling company.

The Dr. Pepper Bottling Company once bottled, advertised and distributed Dr. Pepper in the Sumter community. The owner, Sowell, a native of Birmingham, Alabama, graduated from University of Alabama in 1934 and was connected with the Dr. Pepper Company in Birmingham before the establishment was built in Sumter. He married Rosalie Deschamps, who lived in Sumter; together they had a daughter, Pamela.

While Lt. Sowell was serving his tour of duty with the military, his mother, Lucy Sowell, took over the management of the company. Under her able management, the Sumter Dr. Pepper grew rapidly, and the popularity of the drink grew also. She hired C. K. Dudley as plant manager, and throughout the war, he continued to have the soda delivered to the counties of Sumter, Kershaw, Lee, Clarendon, Williamsburg and Georgetown. Seven trucks were required to complete the distribution. With Mrs. Sowell at the head of the company, it grew rapidly, and more people began to stop at 10, 2 and 4 to have a Dr. Pepper. The information and photos used to prepare this piece were acquired from *The Item* archives.





SUMTER ITEM FILE PHOTOS

ABOVE: The Sumter Dr. Pepper Bottling Company was completed in July 1936.

LEFT: This advertisement for Dr. Pepper was published in May 1943.



First Lt. W. S. Sowell founded the Sumter Dr. Pepper Bottling Company, which opened in July 1936.