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THE GREENVILLE REGION STEERS CHANGE BY WORKING TOGETHER

INNOVATE...COLLABORATE...ACCELERATE. Anybody remember that phrase from 2009? It's a phrase we live everyday in the Greenville, N.C., metropolitan area that includes all of Pitt County, whether or not we say the words. It's who we are, what we do, and what our community has always been. Innovation and change steer our course, and we strive to collaborate like geese in formation, taking turns bearing the responsibility of



Wanda Yuhas, PCDC executive director

From startups and small business to large companies, innovation and collaboration are at the heart of success in Pitt County.

leadership, but always together. Acceleration is the reward, as we fly higher, faster, and stronger.

Entrepreneurship is the first thought the three words bring to mind, and we are, indeed, incredibly proud of our entrepreneurial ecosystem. A significant part of our economy is composed of highly successful local startups such as Grady-White Boats, The Hammock Source, Mayne Pharmaceuticals, and Duck Rabbit Beer. A new generation of entrepreneurs are creating exciting new ventures in food and beverage, commercial/retail, and personal care options.

THAT'S GREAT, BUT IT'S NOT ALL. INNOVATE...COLLABORATE...ACCELERATE.

Our major manufacturers maintain their success using those same principles. Their products and methods are the result of continuous innovation, whether it's the controlled dissolve of a tablet or an unsinkable boat. Collaboration with a wide variety of partners ranging from utility providers to the ECU College of Engineering bring big ideas to fruition. Support for our corporate community enables our diversified industries to put down deep roots and accelerate growth.

Innovation, collaboration, and acceleration don't stop at county lines. The BioPharma Crescent is our newest formalized relationship. Pitt, Wilson, Johnston, and Nash counties are home to most of North Carolina's pharmaceutical manufacturing. The North Carolina Biotechnology Center and our educational institutions are actively involved. Our nascent brand is catching on fast and our project portfolios are accelerating daily.

Pitt County continues to grow and change through the efforts of many partners. We are adaptable to the changes that come our way and actively work to create the future we want. We are prepared to tackle important issues — workforce development, infrastructure, our "Cool Quotient," and even our delivery of economic development services — as a team. We want to work together for positive change and grow in effective, sustainable ways.

INNOVATE. COLLABORATE. ACCELERATE.



Taylor Hicks, right, and her company, Simple & Sentimental LLC, took top place in the inaugural Pirate Entrepreneurship Challenge at East Carolina University. She has since leveraged local economic-development tools to grow her business in Pitt County.

REGIONAL REPORT: PITT COUNTY

A MAGIC FORMULA:

Pitt County partnerships are cultivating homegrown economic success.

Taylor Hicks knew she was leaving a hobby behind and running a real business when she realized she had cleared \$30,000 in profit from her startup, Simple & Sentimental, an online Etsy shop that sells personalized giftware.

Just one year ago, she was a 19-year-old sophomore at East Carolina University. Now 20, she expects to hit the \$250,000 revenue mark this year, and as a student entrepreneur, she is

PITT COUNTY'S VISITOR APPEAL RISES

Visitors are increasingly drawn to Pitt County, statistics released earlier this year show.

According to Visit North Carolina, domestic visitors to and within Pitt County spent \$246.7 million in 2017, an increase of 6.6% from 2016. That's a strong showing. Pitt's increase was the fourth-largest in the state.

"I am both excited and pleased at the rapid growth of economic impact generated by tourism dollars in Greenville and Pitt County," says Andrew Schmidt, executive director of the Greenville-Pitt County Convention & Visitors Bureau. "These numbers validate our message that Greenville-Pitt County is an emerging destination that continues to attract more visitors to enjoy our growing hospitality infrastructure and meeting, and athletic facilities."

Pitt County's growth was part of an overall increase in visitors and spending in the state in 2017. The \$24 billion in total spending represented an increase of 4.2% from 2016.

"All eight economic development regions of the state had spending growth

of 3% or more, and 90% of the state's counties saw direct tourism employment growth from 2016 to 2017," says Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit North Carolina.

Schmidt told BUSINESS NORTH CAROLINA this summer that the growth of Vidant Medical Center and East Carolina University, along with the presence of major corporate offices such as the Americas headquarters for Hyster-Yale Materials Handling, have contributed to the region's attractiveness for tourists. Greenville's location in the middle of the eastern part of North Carolina has also made it a draw.

"You've got a pretty well-rounded situation," Schmidt said. "We want to showcase what we've got."

And Pitt County has a lot. Greenville is now the 10th-largest city in North Carolina and it's growing. Nearly 185,000 people call Pitt County home, and construction cranes have become a common site in Greenville, which has about \$650 million in development underway.

The travel and tourism industry directly employs more than 2,270 people in Pitt County. The total payroll of the industry as of 2017 was \$52.25 million.

Travelers who come to the city for health care are one portion of the increasing visitor numbers. So are association and religious conventions. Such attractions as the Eastern Carolina Village & Farm Museum 1840-1940 and the Pitt County Brew & 'Cue trail of craft beer and barbecue restaurants help round out the region's offerings. ■

well on her way to building a sustainable business in Greenville.

A native of Clemmons, Hicks enrolled in ECU as a freshman interior design major in 2016 and started doing calligraphy as a hobby to exercise her creative muscle and personalize the sentimental gifts she enjoyed making for her fiancé, Nick Walden.

"I had some free time after classes, so I would make little bookmarks and write Bible verses and inspirational messages on them and put them in a basket outside my dorm room for people to stop by and pick up," she says from her recently acquired workspace in Pitt County's Technology Enterprise Center in Greenville.

Hicks recalls getting up at 3 a.m. the morning after Thanksgiving to take advantage of a Black Friday sale at a local craft store and buy a Cricut machine, a device that cuts shapes out of a variety of materials, which she planned to use to make stickers out of her calligraphy creations.

"I had \$500 in my bank account, and I thought it would be cool to buy the machine and make stickers and sell them to people," she says. "In December, I got [my] products listed on Etsy, and they started selling."

She also sold them to her sorority sisters, and before long, she was known around campus as "the sticker girl."

In 2017, she moved into an apartment where she was able to expand and started selling personalized gift items. Her most popular offering is a bridesmaid's proposal box, a gift for brides to give when they ask their friends to be part of their wedding. It comes with a wine glass, two rosebuds, two hair ties and a card that says, "Will you be my bridesmaid?"

The regular proposal box sells for \$29.99, Hicks says. She offers a



The Greenville Convention Center draws visitors including religious groups and associations for meetings.

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The Miller School recently introduced a Summer Innovation Academy for middle- and high-school students. The students play games such as dodgeball to help them learn about picking ideal team members.

deluxe box for \$60 and continues to add products to her giftware line.

Early in 2018, Hicks intersected with the Miller School of Entrepreneurship at ECU, an accidental encounter that changed the course of her classwork, her career and her life.

"I was walking on campus one day and I saw a sign in the grass that said 'Pirate Entrepreneurship Challenge — Win Money for Your Business,'" she says. "I didn't realize I actually had a business, but at that point, I had cleared \$30,000 and thought I was hot stuff. But I went into the Miller School where they have an idea lab for students to come and talk about their ideas, and I learned how to spell the word 'entrepreneur.' I literally did not know anything."

In 2015, ECU alumnus J. Fielding Miller, who founded Captrust Financial Advisors in Raleigh, and his wife, Kim Grice Miller, donated \$5 million to fund the Miller School of Entrepreneurship at ECU's College of Business. The Miller School is the first school of entrepreneurship in the region, serving as a hub for preparing students to inject a startup spirit into their communities. The school also connects with key strategic partners to offer programs that help serve as a catalyst for regional growth and transformation.

Eventually, Hicks joined Greenville SEED @ ECU, a collaborative partnership aimed at fostering local entrepreneurship. Two years ago, the program was located in the Willis Building, a startup incubator on the ECU campus. She moved

Simple & Sentimental into a small space there and embarked on a growth spurt.

She took her first paycheck when she hired her first employee and pays herself enough to cover her rent and school expenses. She now employs five people, who are also ECU students. Anticipating a busy holiday season, she plans to bring in at least two seasonal staffers.

It is no accident that Hicks is attaining success. Rather, it is part of a grand plan born out of a partnership among ECU, the Pitt County Economic Development Commission, Uptown Greenville and the Greenville Chamber of Commerce.

This partnership was on full display last February during back-to-back competitions offering entrepreneurs a chance to pitch



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GRADY-WHITE BOATS ADDS ITS POWER TO PITT COUNTY'S SUCCESS.

A long relationship with the community and a newly-expanded manufacturing facility anchor one of the nation's premier boat-building companies to Pitt County.

Established in 1959 in Greenville, Grady-White has earned a reputation for building ruggedly elegant coastal fishing boats, developing great craftsmen and nurturing strong customer relationships. Grady-White builds 28 models of fiberglass offshore, sportfishing and family fishing boats ranging from 18 to 45 feet.

"I never wanted to be the biggest," says Eddie Smith, who bought the company in 1968, "I wanted to be the best."

That attitude has paid off in loyal customers and employees.

The company's leadership team reads every customer survey and has two-way communication through the website, informal customer forums and social media as well. Grady-White posts the highest satisfaction rankings in every third-party survey ever done in the marine industry.

More than 50 of the company's craftsmen and leaders are members of the Grady-White Captain's Club, signifying over 25 years' experience at Grady-White. Every Friday, Grady-

White's workforce gathers for their "Friday Morning Focus". There, they reinforce values and principles and teach serious lessons, while reviewing key goals, issues and future plans.

Kris Carroll, president of Grady-White, says, "Human hearts and hands are the most important part of boat building. Grady-White produces exceptional quality with engaged, focused and happy craftsmen."

The company hasn't stood still, though, and has worked with local and state leaders to ensure Grady-White's continued position as an important corporate citizen of Pitt County. The company is an advocate and contributor to fisheries conservation, education and waterways management.

This summer, Grady-White reaffirmed its commitment to the community with the expansion of its manufacturing facility northeast of Greenville. The project added 70,000 square feet and more than 65 jobs.

The North Carolina Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Grant program, matching funds from the Pitt County Development Commission and funds for educational credits for training at Pitt Community College all went toward the project.

"It is exciting and rewarding to work with a company like Grady-White Boats on this project. Grady-White has been here since 1959, employing our residents, paying taxes and being an excellent corporate citizen. We are thrilled to give this long-term company this support," said Wanda Yuhas, PCDC executive director. ■

their businesses and products. The long-running pitch competition is sponsored by the Pitt County EDC, Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce and Uptown Greenville. The contest offered \$13,000 in total prize money. The second contest was the Pirate Entrepreneurship Challenge, the Miller School's initiative, which awarded \$20,000 in prize money.

Hicks won first place in both competitions, taking home total winnings of \$18,500. She used the money to pay for more space in the Technology Enterprise Center of Eastern North Carolina, a 35,130-square-foot building that previously housed a manufacturing plant. The Pitt County EDC purchased the building in 1995 and has repurposed it to foster the development of technology-based businesses by offering short-term leases for office, laboratory and light-manufacturing space, according to Brad Hufford, associate director of retention and expansion at the Pitt County EDC.

"The building was formerly the Prepshirt factory, a textile plant in our industrial area that produced a little bit of everything, from shirts to towels back in the 1960s," Hufford says. "But by the '80s and '90s, when many industrial jobs went overseas, the building was no longer in use so the county got some grant funding and purchased the facility."

Hicks leased 1,500 square feet last spring and joined five other businesses and service providers who collectively employ 70 people.

The SEED incubator and the Technology Enterprise Center are part of a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem in Greenville, and Hufford views the Miller School as a key to fostering an environment of startup businesses. The center's goal is to provide entrepreneurs with below-market rent and subsidized utilities, and to help start-



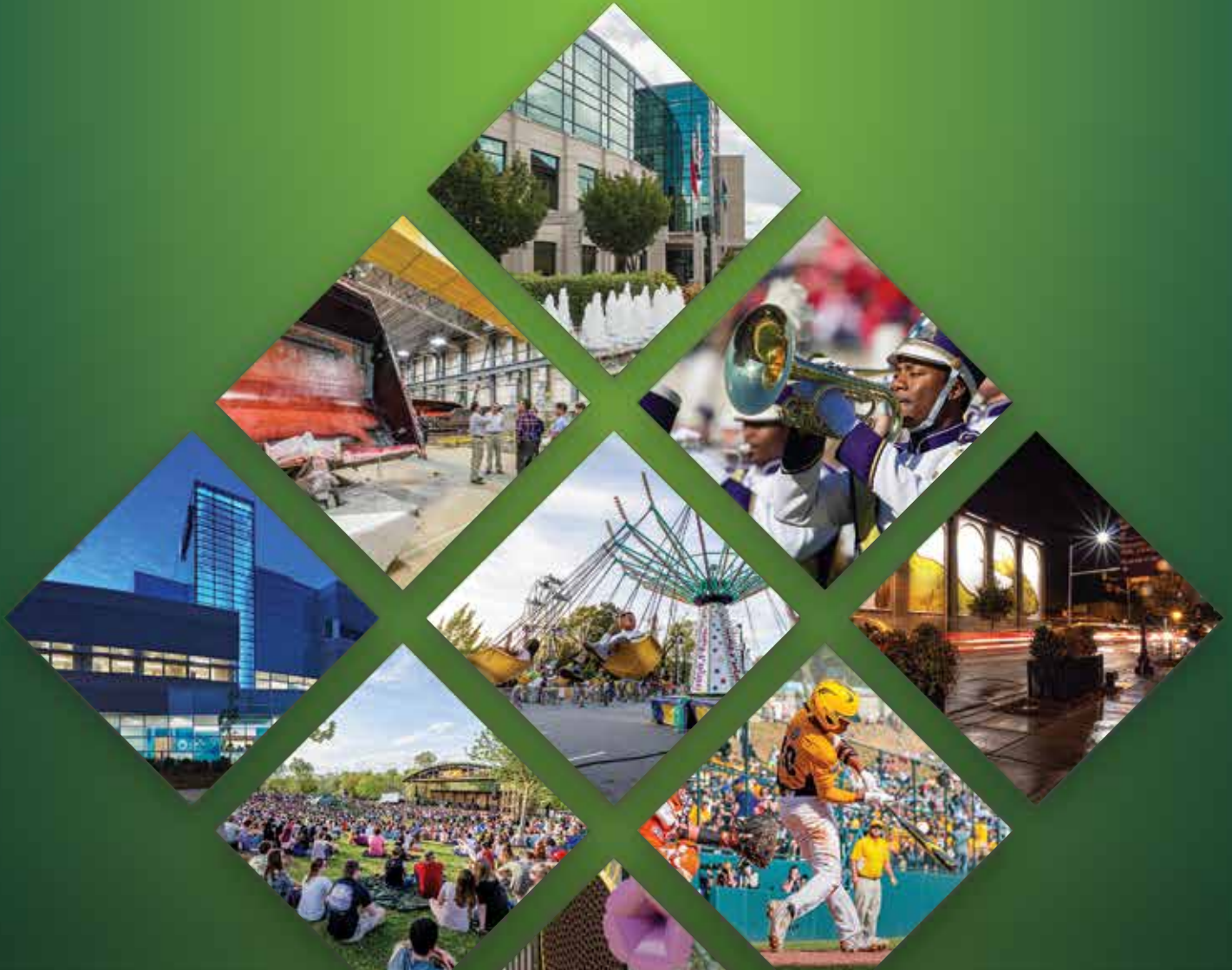
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ups build a solid foundation so they can eventually support themselves in the commercial marketplace.

"We've had successes there with businesses such as SpeechEasy, a company that manufactures a device to help people overcome stuttering," he says, created in partnership with the ECU Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. "They spun out of the incubator a few years ago to their own facility here in Greenville, and today the devices are sold all over the country."

These joint efforts among the university and local government and civic organizations are contributing to Pitt County's overall prosperity initiative, according to Michael Harris, director of the Miller School. "ECU is committed to leveraging its resources and talent to help the eastern region of North Carolina," he says. "Growing entrepreneurs is a way to foster growth and prosperity in the east."

This growth marks a significant trend in Greenville and Pitt County,

according to Bianca Shoneman, president and CEO of Uptown Greenville.

"One of our goals is to create a startup culture, and we sense an air of potentiality through students and entrepreneurs who are locating here," she says.

Uptown Greenville has started attracting an influx of new small businesses in technology, gaming, graphic design and marketing, according to Shoneman.

"We're also seeing a growth in culinary arts, artists' studios and galleries coming together to create a nice walkable urban space," she says. "We have placed 14 new businesses on the streets in 2017. In the last five years, we have seen the creation of 600 new jobs associated with the creative class of businesses, and the average salaries range from \$45,000 to \$50,000 per year."

This economic boom impacts a 10-by-six-block area, where there is 40,000 square feet of existing or planned retail business, 200,000 gross square feet of office and institutional space, and 600,000 square feet of residential space both new and under construction, according to Shoneman.

"Put on your sunglasses because the future is bright," she says.

Even Hufford is taking advantage of efforts to foster startups and entrepreneurialism. He, his wife and their business partner won a \$15,000 revitalization grant through a local business plan competition and have started the Dickinson Avenue Public House, an uptown Greenville restaurant in one of the city's up-and-coming neighborhoods. The grant was funded through a recent bond package to fund uptown development and help west Greenville.

The Pitt County Development Commission recently unveiled Pitt County Vertically Integrated Net-

work of Entrepreneurial Success, a program that brings local service providers together on one online directory at vines.com, where they offer resources, technical support, capital assistance, human resources and accounting help.

"The ECU School of Business considered this network a great concept and offered to take it regionwide,"

Hufford says. "The Miller School now maintains it. On it, you can search for help depending on your status — early-stage startup, growth or expansion. If you need grants, legal assistance or any other information, you just click on the links and they take you to available assets. We see this as a unique way to harness resources for entrepreneurs."



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Beyond its offerings for college students, the Miller School recently introduced the Summer Innovation Academy for middle- and high-school students.

"We know we have talented kids with creative ideas who are looking for coaching and mentorship," Harris says. "Our goal is to connect these kids with ECU alumni and

friends who have started companies and are eager to coach and mentor others."

It is also beneficial for Greenville's growing entrepreneurial ecosystem. Fostering a startup mentality among young people is a way the city is banking on encouraging young businesspeople to put down roots and grow business in their hometown.

The Innovation Academy is a weeklong summer institute that helps young students come up with ideas for startups and teaches them how to vet those ideas and choose the most viable ones to develop in teams. The academy ended with a trade show where the kids could hone their skills at pitching their ideas to parents, advisers and stakeholders.

Ideas included a meet-up app for kids, a coffee shop that featured products aimed at stress reduction and a simple program designed to teach people to speak basic Mandarin in the time it takes them to travel to China.

"We had 22 students in attendance," says Corey Pulido, an instructor in the Miller School who helped organize the academy. "Most of the kids rose to the occasion, and they really blossomed in the end."

He expects to expand the program next summer, possibly adding a second week to the academy.

"Our goal is to plant seeds throughout the process and possibly steer kids to the Miller School, where they could eventually serve as mentors and become building blocks for the future," he says. "Our ultimate goal is to show them how they can generate ideas and develop them into a real business."

Both Harris and Hufford view Hicks as a success story and hope her experience leads to another successful company in Pitt County, which has been home to a number of home-grown entrepreneurs.

"Most jobs in America are at small firms of less than 25 employees, but you never know what might be the next big thing," Hufford says. "We've got some great examples of entrepreneurship in Pitt County."

Parker Overton started out selling water skis in the back of a grocery store. The company, Overton's, had grown to become the world's largest water sports and marine-accessories



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dealer through its catalog and internet operations when Overton sold it in 2003. It is now part of the Camping World Inc. conglomerate.

Local entrepreneur Walter Perkins Jr. started The Hammock Source out of the back of a Toyota pickup truck in 1971 as a hobby and grew it into a worldwide hammock manufacturer.

Phil Hodges of Bear Grass is a former Burroughs Wellcome scientist who started Metrics, a small contract analytical laboratory, with help from local investors in 1994. Mayne Pharma, one of the area's largest industries, acquired Metrics in 2014.

"The lesson here is, however small we believe our startups to be, you never know how much they are going to grow," Hufford says. "We want to cast a wide net to catch and support these entrepreneurs and hope they make a connection and stay here."

Hicks, who grew up in the western Piedmont, is sold on eastern North Carolina and has no plans to move away after graduating.

Her fiancé is an ECU student majoring in engineering with an internship coming up at a local firm. Their ultimate dream is to run the business together, and he already helps with business details such as accounting and payroll management, while Hicks manages her five employees and continues to hone her management skills through her coursework at the Miller School and with help from Harris and other advisers.

"I love Greenville, and I do intend to stay," she says. "I would worry that if I tried to start my business in cities like Raleigh or Winston-Salem, I wouldn't have the same mentorship. I can walk in my Miller School adviser's office at any time and they're ready to help me. The same goes for the Pitt County EDC. I feel like I wouldn't have had those same opportunities if I had tried to start my business somewhere

else, but in Greenville, it is such a family environment. I feel like I can go to them with anything, and they're ready to help."

The feeling is mutual, according to Hufford, who sees the return on his agency's investment already emerging.

"For not a very big investment on our part, we put together a prize pool, and Taylor won a little seed money. Now

she is renting space from us and she has created five jobs. Her revenue has reached a quarter million dollars and her sales grow every month. She pays sales tax. Her employees' paychecks will go into the economy," he says. "That's economic development." ■

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from Raleigh.

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