



COMING TOGETHER

By Kevin Ellis, David Mildenberg and Chris Roush

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elebrating diverse leaders in the state is a tradition at *Business North Carolina*, culminating in this year's features on people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds from across the state.

As in previous years, the list includes folks with widely different careers, ranging from a leading hotel-industry magnate to a small-town restaurateur. Many credit strong family influences for motivating their success. Each traveled a challenging path to achieve noteworthy success.

The importance of diversity is an increasingly contentious issue after last year's landmark Supreme Court ruling against race-conscious admissions at UNC Chapel Hill and mounting criticism of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs at businesses, universities and other institutions. That tension doesn't surprise Lucretia Berry, who is featured on Page 48. She teaches courses aimed at helping people understand racial issues and improve their communications with people of differing backgrounds. "It took a few hundred years until it became part of our culture where we could even discuss these issues," she notes. "I'm optimistic, else I would quit."

Niti Singh Armistead, the chief quality officer and chief clinical officer at ECU Health in Greenville, keeps making the right career choices.

In college at George Mason University, she switched her major from engineering to physics and pre-medicine after she discovered that there were loans available to pay for medical school. “I appreciate what programmers do every day, but I realized that my own joy was working in the medical field,” she says.

After graduating from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, she specialized in anesthesiology, thinking her physics background would be helpful. She switched to internal medicine because she found the long-term relationships with patients more enduring and satisfying.

Now, at ECU Health, she’s focused on acute care and still sees patients on a regular basis. She took on administrative roles in 2018 and 2019 before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, successfully helping steer the healthcare system during a challenging time.

“None of us knew what we were in for,” says Armistead. “For me, it all just kind of came together. How do you support an already underserved population? How do you rise to the occasion as the only healthcare system east of I-95 with an academic arm to do it all, to build the infrastructure for the testing and to educate the community? Those were the kind of interventions I got to lead.”

Armistead was 18 when her parents, Narendra and Asha, immigrated to the United States from India. She worked as a waitress and a cook at a Pizza Hut while in college. After medical school, she completed her internship, residence and a chief medical resident year in Richmond at Virginia Commonwealth University. Before joining ECU Health, she was the chief quality officer at West Virginia University Hospitals.

ECU Health has 1,708 beds across an academic medical center with two campuses, and is a teaching hospital for the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. It also operates eight community hospitals as well as outpatient facilities, home health, hospice and wellness centers in 110 locations.

Armistead, who joined ECU in 2012, became senior medical director for quality in 2014 and director of the Teachers of Quality Academy at ECU’s Brody School of Medicine in 2016. She became chief medical officer in July 2018 and chief quality and safety officer a year later. “[The public] should have confidence that they’re going to get evidence-based care in a highly reliable way all the time.”

Technology, she adds, is a big component, and the speed at which changes were made increased during COVID. Armistead says she’s a big believer in responding to data to drive improvements.

Armistead and her dermatologist husband, Dr. Drury Armistead, have two daughters, Veda and Asha, who are in their 20s. She says being a parent has been just as important to her development as treating patients and holding administrative roles. “I find it the most fulfilling,” she says. “It’s allowed me to be a better leader and a better human.” 🌍



NITI SINGH ARMISTEAD

CHIEF QUALITY OFFICER AND
CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER

ECU HEALTH
GREENVILLE

CHAUNCEY BARNHILL

OPERATIONS DIRECTOR, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
WELLS FARGO
CHARLOTTE

One of the first diverse employees Chauncey Barnhill hired at Wells Fargo was an autistic woman whose struggle with social interactions prompted her to eat lunch in the bathroom. That was more than 10 years ago. She still works for the bank, has been promoted several times, has lived on her own and now counts co-workers as friends.

“Just the joy of seeing someone get a paycheck and the confidence that brings and how they stand a little taller and look you in the eye,” says Barnhill, a senior vice president in Charlotte. “That’s the biggest reward in the world to me.”

The woman’s success also meant her father, a peer of Barnhill’s, could worry less about his daughter’s future. “He hugged me as a grown man, just thanking me for giving her an opportunity,” says Barnhill. “That moment just motivated me to want to do more in this space.”

In his operations job, Barnhill oversees about 350 employees at four U.S. sites and 150 workers in the Philippines. His team processes about 260 million images, which include new-customer packets and loan applications, a year. Barnhill says he has hired more than 100 people who are either neurodivergent — meaning brain differences affect how their brain works — or those with mobility issues, sight or hearing impairment. While these employees may need some accommodations, he adds that all new employees need some help.

Wells Fargo initiated its STRIDE program, which stands for Success Through Identifying Diverse Employees, in 2019. It has hired about 15 workers with a goal of them becoming full-time bank employees. Barnhill sees the program as an extension of his inclusive hiring approach. “Each year we want to employ more than we did the year before.”

Expanding the potential workforce helps Wells Fargo by filling jobs in a tight labor market. Many workers hired by Barnhill often



have less absenteeism and fewer HR issues. He recalls a worker who rode two buses and a bicycle on his commute, often arriving 30 minutes early.

“Having to overcome diversity just to get through day-to-day builds a certain set of resilience skills that translate well into the workforce,” says Barnhill. “There’s a desire to show they can do it, that they’re just as good if not better.”

Barnhill knows how it feels to be different. Born with limited hearing in his left ear, Barnhill learned to position himself to be closer to classroom teachers. Early supervisors at Wells Fargo deemed him less engaged on job reviews, which Barnhill blames on being self-conscious about his disability and a difficulty to gauge the volume of his voice.

He kept his hearing issue a secret at first, fearing it would hurt his advancement and not wanting preferential treatment. Over time, he felt comfortable speaking about his experiences. It also prompted teammates to disclose more. “My peers started saying, ‘I don’t have a disability, but my son or my daughter has a disability.’”

Barnhill, who has an MBA from Liberty University, is on the boards of the Disability:IN North Carolina advocacy group and the N.C. Commission on Inclusion. “No matter what I’ve done as far as titles and things of that nature – the work that I’ve done in this space is what I will be most proud of,” he says. “It’s what I want my children to remember me for.” 🌈



LUCRETIA CARTER BERRY

FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT
BROWNICITY
CHARLOTTE

Lucretia Carter Berry has a life mission to promote racial justice and understanding, including helping both children and adults learn how to discuss complex issues that can divide rather than unite.

She’s putting her skills to practice in a variety of ways.

Since 2015, her consulting company, Brownicity, has offered training programs and educational materials for schools, nonprofits, businesses and more informal groups that want to promote unity and a sense of belonging. She also teaches an elective course, “Antiracism 101,” for senior high school students



JESUS AND DIEGO RUIZ

JESUS RUIZ, FOUNDER
DIEGO RUIZ, MANAGING DIRECTOR
MI PUEBLO RESTAURANTS
WINSTON-SALEM

godfathers of Mexican restaurants in the Southeast,” notes his son Diego, who is managing director of the business.

“My father’s ethos has been to do something better than the rest,” he adds. “It’s more than about the money for him. It’s more of a passion.”

He points to the Mi Pueblo site in north Charlotte, where a \$5 million investment a few years ago led to an 11,000-square-foot restaurant considered the chain’s crown jewel. A smaller, more efficient restaurant with fewer than the site’s 40 or 50 employees might have made better financial sense, Diego says. But the senior Ruiz “wanted a beautiful restaurant.”

Mi Pueblo’s steady growth stems from attention to detail, the use of high-quality food ingredients, devoted staffers and shrewd business strategies, Diego Ruiz says. He credits his mother, Maria, for also being a pivotal part of the business. “No one can compete with the level of commitment we have.”

The family has limited its use of debt while acquiring the real estate underlying each of its restaurants. Diego’s two siblings are also involved with the business.

Diego, 33, is a graduate of Bishop McGuinness High School in Kernersville and UNC Chapel Hill. He started washing dishes on weekends at age 12 and was a relief restaurant manager as a teenager.

He expects the business to grow with a new Mi Pueblo location in Mooresville that will likely have more of a “fast-casual” approach. A drive-through lane is planned. It is expected to open in 2024.

Diego is also investing in franchised restaurants affiliated with the Dallas-based Pollo Campero chain, which features Guatemalan-flavored chicken. He bought a Pollo Campero in Kenner, Louisiana, with plans to add more in coming years. “It’s the biggest risk I’ve taken in my life.”

What won’t change, Ruiz insists, is the family’s focus on satisfying its guests. 🌍

Fans of Mexican food in North Carolina have likely been influenced by the Ruiz family of Winston-Salem, which is marking its 35th year of operations this year.

Mexican native Jesus Ruiz opened his first restaurant in the Twin City after working at diners in the Atlanta area. There are now 10 Mi Pueblo restaurants and about 400 employees in the state, mostly in the Triad and Charlotte areas. Ruiz has assisted many other Latino restaurateurs, making him one of “the

at the Community School of Davidson, a public charter school in north Mecklenburg County.

“The course helps students with a fundamental, practical understanding of the history of race,” she says. “Parents want to know how to raise and educate their children to talk about race.”

Berry’s life experience has been a catalyst for her work. The Winston-Salem native earned a bachelor’s degree at South Carolina State University, a historically Black university in Orangeburg. She then earned a doctorate in educational curriculum and instruction at Iowa State University in Ames, where she met her husband, Nathan Berry, a tech industry manager who is Caucasian. The couple have three daughters.

“Even before we got married, we had conscious conversations about race and ethnicity,” she says. “No matter where we lived, people found us to be a credible, judgment-free resource.”

The Berrys moved back to North Carolina about 15 years

ago for job opportunities and a better climate. They launched Brownicity amid growing racial tensions across the United States, culminating in the 2020 police-involved death of George Floyd.

“Systemic racism became a household word in 2020, and almost anybody could see themselves as an expert, which I think has caused a lot of harm to the movement in some ways,” Berry says. “But I’m optimistic, else I would quit. I continue to be asked to come into spaces to teach and share, and I know growth takes time.”

Berry has published two books in recent years, including “Teaching for Justice and Belonging,” which she co-authored with Tehia Starker Glass, an education professor at UNC Charlotte.

“If we study American history, there has always been resistance to efforts for racial justice,” she says. “I have the capacity to step back and see the strategies of that resistance. It is so important to give children the tools. We have to keep moving forward.” 🌍



JAMES BOYD

OWNER AND CHEF

THE FLAME CATERING AND BANQUET CENTER
NEW BERN

Flooding from Hurricane Florence in 2018 caused millions of dollars in property damage in Craven County and left residents reeling. In response, James Boyd used his two food trucks to feed hundreds of people for two weeks with food donated from area businesses. That's how a "community guy" shows love for the residents of New Bern, he says.

"In a small town, it's about relationships," says Boyd, who's known as Chef Smoke. "If you build those relationships and make a difference in your community, then your community will make a difference for you."

Boyd took ownership of The Flame Steakhouse in New Bern more than 20 years ago after working several years for the former owner. Early on, he says he understood the need to support the community. He joined the Chamber of Commerce, gave to youth programs, provided meals once a week at the soup kitchen. "You can talk about it all day long, but you've got to show it," he says.

Boyd's business became The Flame Catering and Banquet Center after he bought an adjacent, long-vacant bank building in 2008 and turned it into a 300-seat event venue. The conversion made it easier to manage costs, staffing and the ebb and flow of the restaurant business.

Boyd also serves as executive chef and consultant at Captain Ratty's, a decades-old seafood and steak restaurant in downtown New Bern. Veteran New Bern lawyer Buzzy Stubbs and his wife, Carol, bought the restaurant in 2021 and asked for Boyd's help. The relationship was supposed to only last for a few months, but is entering its third year. The restaurant "is taking off like a rocket," Boyd says.

Boyd, who doesn't have formal culinary training, got his introduction at a part-time job at the former Craven County Hospital (now CarolinaEast Medical Center) while attending New Bern High School. "I watched these older ladies in the kitchen do all their cooking from scratch and the smiles on the faces of the people who ate their meals, so that's where the real love of cooking came from."

Boyd's success may have never occurred had it not been for a conversation he had at another job. In 1992, he took a job at the Weyerhaeuser paper mill in Vanceboro for the good pay and benefits. "It was a great job, but it wasn't creative enough for me," he says.

He worked there 11 years, mostly on overnight shifts so he could also work at The Flame during the day. He was operating a large machine on an overnight shift when an older colleague came by at 3 a.m. and asked what he was doing? "I'm doing my job? What do you mean, 'What am I doing?'" was Boyd's reply as he grew frustrated with the questioning.

"Finally, he asked me, 'Why are you out here chasing pennies when you got an opportunity to make dollars?'" says Boyd. "He said it's never going to work unless you're putting your all into it."

Boyd only slept about two hours after that talk as he kept doing the math in his head. The next day, he turned in his two week's notice at the paper mill. That was 20 years ago, and Boyd had owned The Flame for about three years.

"I was sitting on my dream instead of doing what I had a passion for, but I couldn't see it at the time," says Boyd. "I would have never known from that conversation that I would quit my job, but it was the best move I could ever make and I've never looked back.

"I encourage anybody to this day, 'Don't be scared to jump. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there.'" 🌈



THADD JONES

MANAGING PARTNER AND FOUNDER
NEXUS SEARCH PARTNERS
CHARLOTTE

Years spent helping large corporations hire executives also exposed gaps in the process for Thadd Jones, who thought he had a better way. Recruiters would bring in viable candidates but fail to consider the company's leadership strengths or weaknesses. Other times, a recruiter pitched prospects Jones deemed "recycled candidates," good people who floated to the top after being runner-up for an earlier position.

"That list was not diverse," he says. "That list looked like white men who had been contacted for years and had built up their networks for years. I started thinking, maybe my colleagues and peers are looking for something they also couldn't find."

In early 2023, Jones launched his Charlotte Nexus Search Partners recruitment firm with five employees. Nexus specializes in helping companies develop talent with a focus on diversity.

"I always knew I wanted to build a purpose-driven company that could really reimagine how executive-level hiring takes place," he says.

Jones grew up in Okolona, a small north Mississippi town. Jones played basketball for four years at historically Black Tennessee State University. His first job was as a recruiter for retailer Tractor Supply in Nashville, Tennessee, where his wife, Tiffani, was attending medical school. The couple later moved to New Orleans for her medical residency, then headed to Charlotte, where Dr. Jones is an OB-GYN with Novant Health.

From 2014 to 2017 Jones worked at Mooresville-based Lowe's as director of talent acquisition/inclusion and diversity, then spent four years at Amazon as head of talent acquisition and global diversity. During his tenure, the e-commerce giant added about 1 million employees globally.

A business connection with Red Ventures co-founder Dan Feldstein prompted Jones to join the fast-growing digital marketer in 2021 as chief talent officer. He told CEO Ric Elias of his goal to stay two years, then start his own company.

"I don't know what MBA you can get that is better than working with someone [like Elias], who's built a business from nothing into a multi-billion dollar business," says Jones.

In its first year, Nexus exceeded expectations by completing 10 executive searches, a process that typically takes about 75 days, Jones says. As of January, Nexus had seven searches under contract and is adding three staffers.

"It's scary. It's not easy because you're starting something with an idea, a thesis, but you have to prove it," Jones says.

One of the first clients for Nexus was Charlotte Pipe & Foundry, which was in search of a new chief human resources officer. Tim Clinkenbeard would fill that role for Charlotte Pipe in October. Says Charlotte Pipe CEO Hooper Hardison, "Nexus' dedication to thoroughly understanding our company's culture and industry was instrumental in helping Charlotte Pipe locate a top executive leader like Tim."

In searches for higher-level executives, it's important that both the candidate and the client "find out if the destination is really where they both want to be," Jones says. Spending time with the company is key to understanding its personnel needs.

"We bring them people who are qualified first, and who have diverse backgrounds, which makes that pool really rich," says Jones. "We think we are onto something that's unique in the industry."

Companies want leaders with different points of view, he adds. "If you are one homogenous way of leadership, it's hard for you to have views that are going to allow you to think about customers who may look different than you over the next five, 20 or 30 years."

Jones wouldn't share his company's financial results. "Nexus is on a journey and that journey does not have a destination, an end point," he says. "We have a deep commitment to giving back to the community and growing the next generation of great, diverse leaders." 🌍

LINELL JOHNSON

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

TRULIANT

KERNERSVILLE

When Truliant Federal Credit Union Chief Financial Officer Linell Johnson was in high school, he noticed his father up late one night in the kitchen, studying. The next morning, Johnson asked his dad what he was doing.

“I’m studying accounting,” his dad said. “I always wanted to do accounting.”

Johnson’s dad never became an accountant, but the conversation stuck with his son. At the time, Johnson wanted to be an engineer, but at High Point University, where he graduated in 1998, he majored in accounting. “It’s been the best decision I ever made.”

Johnson was named CFO of the Winston-Salem-based credit union in December after 18 months as senior vice president and controller. He succeeded Cosby Davis, who retired. Johnson now leads financial administration, accounting and budgeting, as well as oversight of electronic funds and payment processing, risk management and treasury. Johnson reports to CEO Todd Hall at the state’s second-largest credit union, with \$5 billion in assets.

He joined the credit union in 1994 when it was called AT&T Family Federal Credit Union and worked in accounting before becoming its first financial analyst in 1997. In that job, he developed organizational and profit systems and refined budgeting processes.

Johnson left Truliant in September 2013 to become controller and then vice president of finance for Piedmont Advantage Credit Union, a local peer. When he left, Johnson met with Hall, who at the time was chief operating officer. Hall asked him to stay. “At the time I didn’t listen,” says Johnson. “But I watched.”

He returned to Truliant in September 2015 as assistant controller and was promoted to vice president and controller in 2017. He led the credit union’s financial reporting, operational accounting, internal controls and financial policies.



Johnson, who is treasurer of Truliant’s political action committee, says he appreciates how Truliant’s management recognizes his work and focuses on families and communities.

“I was able to come into Truliant and work my way through the organization,” he says. “If you work hard, you will get noticed.”

Now, he says, his job is to provide an example to those who may be starting out at the company.

“I’ve had a wonderful career here,” says Johnson. “I want to make sure that I can be a role model for others who want to be an accountant or CFO. Don’t sell yourself short. If you work hard and have great relationships and listen to those who are mentors to you, you can grow. I’m not just here on my own. I’ve had a lot of help.” 🌍



LIZETTE CRUZ WATKO

FOUNDER, **DIAMANTE ARTS & CULTURAL CENTER**

PRESIDENT, **WATKO ENTERTAINMENT**

CARY

In 1993 when Lizette Watko started North Carolina’s first Spanish-language newspaper, *La Voz de Carolina* (Carolina’s Voice), she estimated there were fewer than 60,000 Latino residents in the state. Now, there are more than 1 million.

While she sold the newspaper five years later, she’s made promoting Latino culture a big part of her life’s work throughout her career as a nonprofit leader. In 1998, she founded the Diamante Arts and Cultural Center in Raleigh to raise awareness

SHANA FULTON

LAWYER, PARTNER
BROOKS PIERCE
RALEIGH



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hen Shana Fulton was a student at UNC Chapel Hill, she asked a political science professor, Jeffrey Obler, to write a letter of recommendation for graduate school.

Obler said no. “I was shocked,” remembers Fulton, a Morehead Scholar. “I was about to pass out.” Instead, Obler told Fulton he would write her a letter of recommendation for law school, which she hadn’t considered. Fulton used that letter in her successful application to Columbia University in New York.

Fulton now ranks as a leader in her field, having been included in “The Best Lawyers in America” in the commercial litigation section for the last four years. She’s also been featured in *Business North Carolina’s* “Legal Elite” in criminal law.

Fulton says she gained her love of justice from her parents. Her father, Earnest, was a major in the Air Force and flew B-52s in the Vietnam War. Her mother, Phyllis, was a social worker. “Public

service has always been important,” she says. “Being a military brat contributed to that.” She grew up in Indiana, Idaho, England and West Germany.

Fulton’s family moved to Garner from South Carolina when she was a sophomore in high school. At UNC, she graduated with highest honors in English and political science and was inducted into the Order of the Golden Fleece, the oldest and highest honorary at the university. At Columbia, she was a Harlan Fisk Stone Scholar and articles editor of the *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*. She also made it clear to her classmates she was “appalled and upset” over New York City’s version of barbecue.

After graduation, Fulton worked for the Williams & Connolly law firm in Washington, D.C., handling criminal and civil litigation. She then spent more than a decade as an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, handling criminal cases. Among her successful prosecutions were a 2015 murder in the Donovan Hotel and the “Double Hammer” homicide case, a love triangle gone bad. She was pregnant during the latter case.

In early 2018, she and her husband, Tom Finigan, a real estate broker, moved back to North Carolina, where she joined the Brooks Pierce firm. “I think D.C. is an awesome place,” says Fulton. “But if you looked at my Facebook posts from then, I was all about what was going on in North Carolina. My heart has always been in this state.”

Fulton specializes in white-collar cases as well as complex civil litigation. “I’m interested in justice, period,” she says. “There has to be just actions happening on both sides for the system to work properly. Everybody has to do their job right in a just manner that is fair to everybody. That philosophy hasn’t changed for me.”

She also likes handling internal investigations for corporations and government entities. “It’s not only what went wrong, but how to possibly fix what went wrong and not let it happen again,” she says. “I could be talking at the board level and to leadership about corporate governance and responsibility.”

Returning to North Carolina has been the right decision, Fulton says. “It’s not the same place that it was when I graduated from UNC in 1998,” she notes. “It’s such a fascinating and complex state. To be back here in the middle of this great hub of positive energy is really cool.” 🌍

of artists, cuisine, music and other facets of the community.

Diamante, which means diamond in Spanish, continues to offer exhibits and provide leadership programs for aspiring artists. This year marked the 20th anniversary of the group’s Three Kings celebration on the 12th day of Christmas, which is a widely celebrated annual holiday throughout Latin America. The annual Ritmo Latino festival in May has attracted more than 12,000 people.

“We consider every artist to be a small business, so we consider our work to be economic development,” she says. “People misunderstand that the arts drive everything in our community because a lot of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) is based on art because someone has to design TVs, cars, newspapers, magazines. There’s an artist behind those designs.”

Watko’s mother was Dominican while her father was from

Puerto Rico. Raised in Los Angeles, she and her husband, Eric, came to North Carolina when he enrolled at N.C. State University’s graduate school. He’s a telecommunication industry executive.

Diamante, which has three part-time staffers, just moved into new leased space in west Raleigh. “If I had a wish, it would be for us to raise \$1 million to create a center where we don’t need to spend money on a lease because the costs are astronomical,” she says. “But arts and culture aren’t supported as widely as they should be.”

This year, Watko says she’s going to focus on reinvigorating her entertainment company, which has included event planning, blogs and podcasts. Building greater Latino participation in civic affairs is also a constant goal.

“It takes time for people in the community to gain influence, particularly because many aren’t eligible to vote until they gain citizenship,” she says. 🌍



VIMAL KOLAPPA

FOUNDER AND CEO

EAST COAST HOSPITALITY

WASHINGTON, N.C.

At his first meeting on the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Trustees late last year, someone asked Vimal Kolappa if he had attended the university. “No, but my heart beats UNC, UNC, UNC,” he responded, noting that he had undergone a heart valve surgery at UNC Hospitals.

Kolappa is an unabashed promoter of the American dream. He emigrated to the United States at age 22 in the 1970s with \$8 and an engineering degree from an Indian university. His goal was to earn an MBA at Roosevelt University in Chicago. After working for a suburban Chicago bank for five years and earning his green card, he moved to North Carolina. He spent more than a decade in the telecommunications industry before launching his hotel business. His first stake was a Comfort Inn in Havelock in Craven County.

East Coast Hospitality, the lodging company that he owns with his wife, Kalavathi, now controls 17 hotels with four more expected to open this year.

Kolappa’s profile has risen because of his UNC appointment, but he’s also been a longtime director of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, the state’s key industry recruiting organization. Former Gov. Pat McCrory made him one of the group’s initial directors in 2014, and he was later reappointed by the N.C. House of Rep. Speaker Tim Moore. He’s been a prolific bipartisan donor to N.C. politicians.

“This is the greatest country in the world,” says Kolappa. “No other country offers the opportunity that allows you, with hard work, to make anything you want to make.”

All of Kolappa’s hotels are in smaller cities in North Carolina like Goldsboro and Williamston, with the exception of a suburban Hampton Inn in Cincinnati. That’s by design because of the owner’s preference for less competitive markets. “The cost of operations is less, and hospitality is engrained in the people in rural North Carolina areas,” he says. “Our business is all about customer service because everybody has the same rooms. The difference is the people that work with you.”

Kolappa also credits his company’s success to his experiences with the downside of corporate America during his nine years at Northern Telecom, the Canadian company that had a spectacular collapse starting in the early 2000s. He’d left his job there as a strategic pricing analyst in Durham several years earlier, having concluded his work was largely meaningless amid what he describes as a mismanaged multinational.

So he started his hotel business, building gradually with limited debt. He was living in Beaufort County; his wife is a psychiatrist who has worked for Greenville-based ECU Health and other medical groups for many years. The Kolappas have lived in Chocowinity, population 720, for more than 20 years. Their two children are physicians and not part of the hotel business.

Kolappa targeted towns near beaches and military bases, providing a steady source of visitors throughout the year. Half of his hotels have the Holiday Inn Express brand. He notes that he’s not a Patel, referring to the Indian family whose members are dominant forces in the U.S. lodging industry, though he has partnered with some over the years.

East Coast now employs more than 400 people, including several managers who have had 20-year-plus tenures with the company, he says. “I urge them to run the hotels like it is your own business. I’m here to coach and help and I try to give them a lot of freedom. If the business does well, then I give them a very good bonus.”

Kolappa’s confidence in his adopted state is shown in his plans to open new hotels this year in New Bern, Rockingham and Sanford. “If there’s a heaven on earth, it’s North Carolina.” 🌈



KEN LEMON

PRESIDENT, **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK JOURNALISTS**
TV JOURNALIST, **WSOC TV**
GASTONIA

As a TV journalist, Ken Lemon often talks to people in crisis. Armed with a video camera, he approaches people who may have just lost their home or a loved one, been the victim of crime or facing accusations themselves.

“You have to be honest with people and help them understand that I understand it’s the worst day of their life,” says Lemon, who works for WSOC TV, the ABC affiliate in Charlotte. “But you also tell them that I’d rather let people know what someone’s smile looked like rather than what their mangled car looks like.”

Lemon celebrated his 25th year anniversary working for WSOC last year, married Kortni Alston, chair of the department of Communications, Art and Design at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, and was elected president of the 4,000-member National Association of Black Journalists.

Lemon says he campaigned for the position because he believes in “championing diversity in the media.” He wants to see diversity spread beyond just those on camera or whose bylines appear on stories, to those who make newsroom decisions.

“The more Black people you have in journalism, the more stories you’re going to have from communities that are often overlooked,” says Lemon. “When you have diversity in your ranks, no matter what you are producing, studies show you tend to produce a better product.”

Lemon’s first inkling of a journalism career began when he took an aptitude test at New Hanover High School in his native Wilmington. It suggested five career choices. “I can’t even remember what the other four jobs were, but TV reporter was one of them.”

At UNC Wilmington, where he would serve as student body president, he had an internship with local radio station WFMD’s

news department. Radio was not his calling, but from that internship Lemon earned a job recommendation with WECT TV in Wilmington after he graduated in 1992.

He started by editing video that TV news anchors read over the air. It was a low-profile job, one where the dress code allowed for jeans and a T-shirt. Co-workers razzed him because he often wore a shirt and tie. “I said, ‘One day I’m going to go into that manager’s office and I need him to see me as a reporter and not a news director,’” says Lemon. He had a reporter’s job within six months.

At WSOC, Lemon has won an Edward R. Murrow award, one of the highest honors in TV journalism, for his coverage of a church fire in Ranlo in Gaston County. He has also won three Emmy awards for news coverage in addition to several honors from The Associated Press.

He held several leadership roles with NABJ, an organization headquartered at the University of Maryland, before his election to president. He was a two-time president of the Charlotte Area Association of Black Journalists, an organization he helped re-establish in 2008.

The Charlotte group last year awarded Lemon its Lifetime Achievement award. Also last year, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston awarded him a congressional recognition for his work in media diversity.

Lemon says his natural curiosity — questioning why something happened — has been one secret to his success in journalism. He considers it an honor when people allow him to tell their stories. Every day remains a challenge. “The minute you stop growing, there’s nothing left to do, and you become stale,” he says.

After three decades, Lemon says, he still loves his job.

“At the end of the day it’s an opportunity to elevate voices.” 🌍

PAM CASHWELL

SECRETARY

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION

RALEIGH

Growing up in eastern North Carolina, Pam Cashwell spent summers picking cucumbers and toiling in tobacco fields at her grandmother's Sampson County farm. "My parents made sure that my siblings and I knew what it was all about to work hard," says Cashwell, who is secretary of the N.C. Department of Administration.

Hot, sweaty summers in the fields also served as a motivator, she says. "I think that my parents' objective was for us to know that we needed to get an education and make a better way," says Cashwell, who went to high school in Fayetteville, then earned undergraduate and law degrees from UNC Chapel Hill. "It definitely created in me a strong work ethic."

Cashwell also credits her mother, Gertie Brewington, now 93 and living in Fayetteville, with inspiring her career in public service. As a teenager, Cashwell often tagged along with her mom, who worked for the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs, a division in the agency Cashwell now leads.

Her mother went into mostly rural North Carolina communities to help establish food banks, literacy programs and other services. "Traveling with my mom, I was able to see the impact of one person going out into a community," says Cashwell.

Gov. Roy Cooper made Cashwell the first American Indian woman to head a state cabinet department in April 2021. She had previously held several state and federal government jobs, including stints with the N.C. Department of Public Safety, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a U.S. Attorney's Office in Virginia.

The 520-employee Department of Administration acts as a business manager for state government, with a focus on aiding underserved communities. Among many other things, it offers grants to curb domestic violence and support shelters for those who have been sexually assaulted.

"When you can go into work every single day and know there's



something you can do to make North Carolina a better place to work, live and raise a family, it's hard to beat that."

Cashwell's parents were born in the 1930s and as members of the Coharie and Lumbee tribes, they attended the East Carolina American Indian school in Sampson County. It was the only option for Indigenous kids in that area.

"My mom had to travel from Fayetteville to Sampson County. It all worked out," she says, noting that her parents met at the school.

Her father, Samuel Brewington, who died in 2013, was an independent truck driver and her mother owned a beauty salon and dress shop. Owning small businesses "was their way to avoid the kinds of discrimination they would have faced," she says. "It was very difficult getting into the private sector in anything other than an entry-level job, so they started their own businesses and did very well."

Her mom would often work long days in the beauty salon, charging women \$5 for a process that took hours to complete. A desire to have more time with her family pushed Cashwell to take a different career path. Cashwell and her husband live in Wake County. They have two sons, one in high school and the other in college.

Her state post could end after the 2024 election cycle with the election of a new governor, but she hasn't thought much about what's next. "I'm sure God's got a plan for me," she says. "We will see." 🌈



STELFANIE WILLIAMS

VICE PRESIDENT FOR DURHAM AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

DUKE UNIVERSITY

DURHAM

Stelfanie Williams spent more than six years as president of Vance-Granville Community College before leaving in 2018 to join Duke University as vice president for community affairs.

The decision allowed Williams to return to her alma mater, where she earned bachelor's degrees in public policy and Spanish, and to change her career focus.

"This role has been an opportunity to transfer my experiences from community colleges in many rural settings to a research university in an urban environment and to work with others collaboratively to address shared concerns and interests that support basic human needs and rights," she says.

CAROL NGUYEN STEEN

VICE PRESIDENT TALENT AND HUMAN RESOURCES
BILTMORE FARMS
ASHEVILLE



Carol Nguyen Steen has a personal reason to be involved in her community, whether that be serving with groups that help laid-off workers brush up on interviewing skills, people facing eviction or someone having difficulty navigating the healthcare system.

Her parents, Nguyễn Văn Tinh and Nguyễn Thị Hiệp, came to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1975, the year the war ended there. Her father had fought against the North Vietnamese and would have gone to prison if he had stayed, Steen says.

“When he and my mom came over with the first wave of refugees, there were companies that made a difference in their lives,” she adds. “That was a great opportunity for them to have. That gift was just instilled in myself and my brothers.

“It’s a way for me to feel like I’m honoring my parents, by giving

Williams started her second, five-year stint in her role in July. Williams helps Duke work on quality of life issues through education, healthcare, housing and employment initiatives. She works with Durham Public Schools, Durham Technical Community College and N.C. Central University, an historically Black institution. She also serves on the boards of many Durham civic groups and has been a director at the \$50 billion State Employees’ Credit Union since 2017.

Williams led Vance-Granville from 2012 to 2018, receiving the state community college system board’s award for “president of the year.” The college serves more than 8,000 students a year at campuses in Vance, Granville, Franklin and Warren counties in northeast North Carolina. She was the first woman and the first person of color to serve as president of the college, where nearly half of the students at the time were Black or Hispanic.

“Being able to open doors for others is an important responsibility. It is something that I have done professionally,

back to a country that opened its doors to my family,” she added.

Her parents, along with four aunts and uncles, worked for IBM in upstate New York before the company relocated the family to Charlotte in 1981, when the company opened its computer manufacturing plant. That was the year of Steen’s birth.

A graduate of Charlotte’s Independence High School, Steen has a bachelor’s degree from UNC Chapel Hill and an MBA from N.C. State University. After a decade in the Triangle, she followed her boyfriend, and now husband, Justin Steen, to Mars Hill in western North Carolina, where he was raised. They now live in Asheville with their 9-year-old twins.

She is vice president of talent and human resources for the Cecil family’s Biltmore Farms development firm, which owns hotels, apartments and other commercial real estate property in Buncombe County. Justin Steen is an assistant prosecutor with the District Attorney’s Office.

Her original move west was in 2009, and she says she felt a bit like a “trailing spouse,” even though she was not yet married. Steen says she missed her connections in the Triangle but found her in the Young Professionals group of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce.

“I first got involved because I was trying to find a connection not being from here,” she says.

Before joining Biltmore Farms, Steen worked in human resources for the city and Mountain Area Health Education Center. She’s active in many community groups, including an informal group of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, who held a series of events in Buncombe County in January involving food, traditional dress and customs. The group came together during the pandemic, when Asians reported more instances of violence and harassment nationally. Unlike her previous haunts, Asheville does not have a large Asian population.

“Hate is what sort of brought us together and since that time there’s been more gatherings to celebrate our heritage and really being proud of who we are in a community that may not look like us,” she says.

The community events held last month may be a “first step toward us serving as a community and displaying our positive cultural history.” 🌍

and, as importantly, it is a personal disposition,” she says.

Williams, who has a doctorate in adult and higher education from N.C. State University, continued to teach courses while at both Vance-Granville and Duke. “Teaching is a role that brings me tremendous joy, and I have learned as much from others as I ever taught,” she says.

Williams was motivated to pursue education as a career by a family member who could not read. “This inspired my interest in literacy and education,” she says. “My family instilled in me a belief in the dignity of all humans.”

Williams credits her parents with placing a high value on understanding the world “through eyes and voices other than one’s own.” She says that direction instilled in her the benefit of traveling globally, while appreciating the importance of local connections and community development. It also influenced her decision to earn a second bachelor’s degree in a foreign language, she says. 🌍