

GOODBYE

2020



A LOOK BACK AT SOME OF ROBESON COUNTY'S BIGGEST STORIES OF 2020

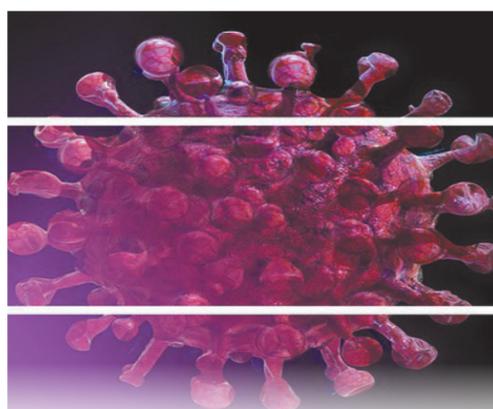
It was a bad year for many, but there were also stories of strength and hope.



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Doctor: 2020 has been 'surreal'

By **Tomeka Sinclair**
Staff writer

"Surreal," "surprising," "overwhelming," and "unprecedented" are just a few of the words Dr. Obiefuna Okoye would use to describe the year that was 2020.

"I don't think to this extent anyone expected this," he said. "We keep reassessing and adjusting, but it's really unprecedented and surreal."

For the past 10 months the Infection Control medical director and infectious disease specialist has been on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic, coming face-to-face with every COVID-19 patient admitted to UNC Health Southeastern. Never in his "wildest dreams" would he have thought his life would be where it is now.

"Going to medical school, I never ever felt, or thought, I would be in a situation," the doctor said.

Okoye's moment of clarity of the magnitude of the situation came in February when Dr. Nancy Messonnier, the director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, released a statement on the matter.

Until that moment Okoye had seen the new coronavirus as a serious outbreak but nothing the government could not contain as it has with past outbreaks, such as the swine flu.

"She said 'It wasn't if this was going to destruct our lives, but when,'" he said. "I think that night, when I saw that statement, it donned on me that this was going to be a life-changing situation."

After that pivotal moment the doctor hit the ground running, becoming a key member in UNC Health Southeastern's Infection Control Team, which has been tasked with reviewing procedures that were already in place to determine what, if anything, needed to be changed to address the type of threat presented by COVID-19.

For weeks the team planned, conducted drills, reviewed procedures, implemented new processes, acquired personal protective equipment and other related supplies, and

tended to countless other tasks.

"We kept up with what was coming out of the CDC, coming out from the federal and state health officials, and then we drafted our own plans on how the surge would be handled," Okoye said. "We continue to have ongoing meetings to adapt as things continue to change."

Throughout the past year coming face-to-face with one's mortality was the biggest challenge faced by Okoye and other staff members.

"It's made a lot of people look at how they view life," he said. "You realize you're the only one next to these patients. They don't have family. It's really been a challenge to see these things happen."

Okoye has often come to work and seen staff members shedding tears because of the emotional toll.

"Some of my colleagues have actually left the profession," he said. "You're taking calls, you're responding to text messages, you're responding to emails, you're taking care of patients, you're in meetings, there's a lot of questions out there, there's issues with testing with the vaccinations."

"All of these keeping at you."

His daily 4- to 5-mile run is how he decompresses from the day-to-day stress the pandemic has caused.

"If I do not do that, I would not be able to keep up with this," he said.

The light at the end of the tunnel for Okoye has been the vaccine. With the vaccine, the health care system has the opportunity to get ahead of the pandemic, he said.

"For the last months we have been chasing this virus from behind," Okoye said.

This is the reason he has championed the vaccine from the beginning and was the first person in Robeson County to be administered the first dose on Dec. 17.

"I wanted people to believe in this vaccine," he said. "I want to give people confidence and trust in this vaccine."

"I have noticed that more and more people are

stepping up to take the vaccines. I tell them 'I'm proud of you because you are making us safe. You want our families together. You want our grandparents to still be there for us, to be able to hug us.'"

He has hope and confidence that the country will resemble what it use to be by the fall of this year.

"If we build up anywhere between 75 and 80% of our population getting this vaccine I believe we should be able to put this vaccine behind us," he said.

His main goal today is advocating for the vaccine.

"As soon as it becomes available, we want people to, please, get in line because this is the only way we're going to beat this," he said. "That's what I'm trying to put out every day, every moment of my life at this time. We should get out, get in line and get the vaccine."

As the new year brings record positive COVID-19 cases and the UNC Health Southeastern medical center has reached its capacity, it will get worse before it gets better, he said.

"This surge is going to get worse in the next couple of weeks," Okoye said. "As we get into the spring we believe things will stabilize."

Until then he challenges those who fear the vaccine to take the time to research the studies and tests that were conducted to get the vaccine approved.

"This was one of the most scrutinized vaccines," he said. "It is out there. You can see the studies."

Okoye harbors no apprehension about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

"You're really in one of the most dynamic countries in the world," Okoye said. "This is a country that sends people to the moon. This is a country where you have self-driving cars. This is a country where technology is advanced."

"I don't have any doubts in my mind about the vaccines."

Tomeka Sinclair can be reached at tsinclair@robsonian.com or 910-416-5865.



Okoye



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Love defies COVID

By Jessica Horne
Staff writer

Two Robeson county natives did not let the arrival of COVID-19 stop them from tying the knot, the couple instead planned two separate celebrations.

Michael Simmons, 24, of Fairmont and 24-year-old Mariah Simmons, of Orrum, were on their way to a perfect wedding day in April, when COVID-19 restrictions threw a wrench in their plans.

"We didn't really plan the wedding during the pandemic," Mariah Simmons said. "COVID happened about a month before the wedding, which was very stressful because we had to postpone everything."

On March 13, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency because of COVID-19 outbreaks across the United States. North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper issued stay-at-home orders and banned gatherings of 10 or more people to reduce the spread of the virus, effective March 30.

And the couple already had a marriage license, which would expire in 30 days, she said.

"So we decided to have a small ceremony in the backyard (of a family member's home) to go ahead and get married. It was outside with just close family and friends," Simmons said.

The two were married on the original wedding date of April 25, but had to postpone a larger more formal wedding celebration that would allow others to attend. Simmons wouldn't don her wedding dress until the larger wedding celebration on July 4.

"This was the only date we could get at our venue," she said.

The next available date to rent the venue was in 2021.

"We tried to cancel it altogether but the

venue refused to give us any of our money back," Simmons said.

So she put on her wedding dress, took a lot of pictures and enjoyed the wedding she had been planning for about two years, surrounded by her family members and friends.

"I loved how my actual wedding ceremony turned out, but if I learned something, it is that you don't need a fancy dress or wedding to be happy," she said. "I loved my first wedding just as much!"

Simmons offered advice for others tying the knot during the not-so-certain times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"For people planning a wedding during COVID, it is possible to do it. Just keep in mind the amount of people attending and the size of the venue. Outside is always best so people can spread out," she said.

She also advises people to put one person in charge of serving food, to minimize germs.

"I definitely feel like COVID has made this year one to never forget!" she said.

So much changed for Simmons during 2020. She got married, started her career as a registered nurse and bought a home, all during the pandemic. She also watched her brother Cole get married shortly after she did and is excited about becoming an aunt in 2021.

"It has been such a year!" she said. "Even though we haven't seen family as much, it has made time together sweeter."

The Simmons dated for seven years before tying the knot, and now live happily together in Leland.

Reach Jessica Horne at 910-416-5165 or via email at jhorne@robsonian.com.

Mariah Simmons, left, and Michael Simmons didn't let COVID-19 stop their wedding plans this past year. Instead, the couple planned two ceremonies that allowed them to celebrate their love with family and friends amid a global pandemic.

Courtesy photo | Mariah Simmons



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PANDEMIC FELT AT FUNERAL HOMES

Adjustments made to keep everyone safe



Courtesy photo
Colvin Funeral Home of Lumberton underwent a series of changes during the year 2020. Despite the pandemic, the funeral home has continued services to the public all year.

By **Tomeka Sinclair**
Staff writer

A total of 149 Robeson County residents have died in 2020 after contracting COVID-19, according to the county's Health Department, and local funeral homes have felt those numbers.

Revels Funeral Home has been in operation for nearly 70 years, with one location each in Pembroke and Lumberton, but the previous year has been one of the most unprecedented. The funeral home handled a record number of cases in 2020, nearly 40 more than in 2019, according to Trent Lloyd, one of Revels Funeral Home's directors.

The same can be said for Colvin Funeral Home in Lumberton, which also has seen a note-worthy increase of about 25% from 2019.

"I can't say that's all related to COVID, but I'm sure a lot of it is," owner Mitch Colvin said.

In March 2020, Revels Funeral Home received its first COVID-19 case. At the time there was no cause for alarm, but there was little information on what precautions to take.

"The hospitals at that time were not sure what we might need to do, so they just said 'Be very careful,'" Lloyd said.

The funeral home reached out to other directors and embalmers to better understand ways to stay safe and what methods should be set in place.

"Universal precautions seemed to have worked," Lloyd said.

As time passed it became more of a challenge to figure out how to conduct services safely.

"Everyone was asking 'What are you doing?'" Lloyd said. "Can we do this, and this?" We were trying to get things as close to a traditional funeral as we could."

Those first few months of the pandemic also

were a guessing game for funeral directors at Colvin Funeral Home.

"When it first came out the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) didn't have clear guidance on what we were suppose to be doing, so we aired on the side of caution," Colvin said.



Colvin

During the earlier stages of the pandemic, the funeral home implemented a maximum capacity of only five people and began encouraging outdoor services.

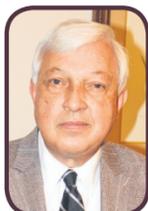
"It was a big adjustment for people," Colvin said. "People cooperated a lot, but it was a big adjustment."

Once information was released on proper procedures, both funeral homes quickly adhered to the changes.

Colvin received more information about proper social distancing and set the measures in place.

"As we learned a little more about it and the social distancing part, we made the adjustment," Colvin said.

"The governor's mandates started coming out and we started limiting the number of persons that could be at the chapel at a time and trying to space pews out so that people wouldn't be close together," Lloyd said.



Lloyd

For a time both funeral homes did away with the tradition of using the family car, and adjusted visitation hours. Colvin stretched its visitation hours to space out when families visit, and Revels has at times done away with evening services.

According to Lloyd, now 75% of funeral service are held graveside, and some families have done away with visitations and post funeral gatherings.

Revels Funeral Home Director Trent Lloyd increases the capacity of the funeral chapel in Lumberton to allow for proper social distancing. The director has completed the act several times in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions.

Tomeka Sinclair | The Robesonian



Despite the challenges, both Colvin and Lloyd agree that the family's willingness to protect their loved ones contributed to their ability to operate under less than stellar circumstances.

"Folks here, or at the least the families we've served, they received this very well," Lloyd said. "Those that had loved ones that died from that, they were very cautious. They seemed to be concerned about other people's welfare."

"For the most part the families understand," Colvin said. "A lot of them, particularly families who have had loved ones who passed away from it, are very sensitive to it and certainly don't want to put anyone else at risk. They're really our biggest advocate for safety."

The directors are unsure about the future and what is to come next.

"We're getting a little bit more normalcy," Colvin said. "We have to continue to be mindful that this is real. I see the realities of people affected. When they sit around this table because they lost someone from COVID, they know it's real."

Getting staff at both funeral homes vaccinated is the next step. Both have been notified that they qualify for the vaccines.

"We're just waiting right now," Lloyd said. "This is a day-by-day thing. We just try to be careful."

Tomeka Sinclair can be reached at tsinclair@robsonian.com or 910-416-5865.

Southeastern Health is no more

Health-care system joins UNC Health, changes its name

This article originally was published in the Dec. 4, 2020 edition of The Robesonian.

Staff report

LUMBERTON — Southeastern Health leaders announced Thursday the hospital's entry into the UNC Health system during a ceremony livestreamed over social media.

Southeastern Health leaders have signed a comprehensive, 10-year Management Services Agreement and the Lumberton-based health-care system is now a part of UNC Health, North Carolina's leading public academic health system. Southeastern Health now will be known as UNC Health Southeastern.

"It's my pleasure to be here this morning to commemorate this momentous occasion. Two great organizations are coming together to continue their legacy," said Joann Anderson, who was president and CEO of Southeastern Health and maintained those titles with UNC Health Southeastern.

The new name and logo were displayed during a ceremony that lasted less than 10 minutes and took place in a Southeastern Regional Medical Center parking lot.

The hospital will transition its daily operations to align with policies and practices set forth by other hospitals in the UNC Health Care network, Anderson said.

High clinical standards established by UNC Health and used throughout the health system also will be adopted, along with the ONE UNC Health System Values to guide the cultural integration, according to information from UNC Health Southeastern.

"I am confident today that the direction we are headed in is the right direction," Anderson said.

The search for a system with similar values and a mission aligning with Southeastern Health began more than a year ago, said Kenneth Rust, chairman of the board of trustees at Southeastern Health and now UNC Health Southeastern.

"Through our conversations with UNC Health it

became clear that UNC was the right organization to move Southeastern forward," he said.

"As we shared last month, this partnership is all about our shared commitment to expand access to high-quality, cost-effective care here in Robeson County and the surrounding region," he said in a statement released by UNC Health Southeastern.

Rust said the former Southeastern Health is eager to begin integrating into the UNC Health System.

"This really is a win-win for UNC Health, Robeson County and Southeastern Health," said Chris Ellington, president of UNC Health Care Network Hospitals.

The UNC system expects to take some practices from the hospital and apply them to the other hospitals in the network as the hospital adopts its practices, he said. Representatives of UNC Health will begin working soon with doctors and physicians to improve care and begin integration into the system.

"We strive to keep care local," Ellington said.

"We're just excited to be here and look forward to what the future has to hold for both entities," he added.

Anderson thanked the community, board of trustees and hospital leaders for their patience during the process.

"Aligning with UNC Health will allow UNC Health Southeastern to become an even stronger regional health-care leader," Anderson said in a written statement.

"Through this relationship, we'll be able to leverage enhanced opportunities to recruit and retain highly skilled physicians and caregivers to the area and maintain and grow the services we offer today — all while keeping care local. This is a great move that will positively impact the health and well-being of the community we serve," her statement reads in part.

Thursday's ceremony can be watched on the Southeastern Health Facebook page.

Quickie gives to schools
Categories: cleaning supplies

Southeastern Health is no more

Health-care system joins UNC Health, changes its name

LEAF board picks officers
Lumberton man reelected chairman

ELECTION REVEALS CHANGE

Results shows Robeson County has shifted red

This article originally was published in the Nov. 5, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Tomeka Sinclair
and Jessica Horne
Staff writers

LUMBERTON — The chairs of the local Democrat and Republican parties agree that the results from Tuesday's general election show a change in Robeson County's political climate.

Robeson County, which has been known as a Democrat-dominated county, voted red Tuesday in key political races up and down the ballot.

"The Democratic county, I guess, isn't a Democratic county anymore," said Pearlean Revels, chair of the Robeson County Democratic Party. "Yesterday has shown what we've come to, and I hate that it's happened this way but people have a trend and they do what they want to do."

"It is what it is. I just hate it, but it is what it is."

State Sen. Danny Britt Jr., a Lumberton Republican, won 62.93% of the vote, with 26,854 votes cast for him and 15,820 for Barbara Yates-Lockamy, his Democratic challenger. In the race for the District 9 seat in the U.S. House, incumbent Dan Bishop received 24,940 votes, or 57.99%, to Democratic challenger Cynthia L. Wallace's 18,065, or 42.01%.

Incumbent U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis took 23,606, or 54.66% of the votes cast, from Robeson County. Democratic challenger Cal Cunningham received 18,101 votes, or 41.92%. The race was not called as of Wednesday evening.

And President Donald Trump won big over his Democrat opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden. Trump received 25,927, or 58.57%, of the votes cast in Robeson County, compared to 17,998, or 40.66%, for Biden.

All of the results of Tuesday's election are unofficial until votes are certified.

"Obviously we're excited to see Robeson continue to trend Republican," said Phillip Stephens, the county's Republican Party chairman.

Stephens said the president's recent visit to the county played a significant role in the party's success.

"Our local models actually projected 52% in Robeson for the president," he said. "The margin of error was several points, so he probably enjoyed a several point bounce after his recent visit to the county."

"We've never had a projection that high for a

Republican presidential candidate. Trump's 58% win here was certainly historic."

Overall the Republican Party has established Robeson County as a battleground county, Stephens said.

"We now have more than simply statewide impact. Robeson now has notoriety and influences nationally," he said. "Being a swing county is a good thing for both Republicans and our Democrat colleagues as we both really just want the best for Robeson at the end of the day."

Stephens said conservative Democrats that feel left behind by "liberal trends" will find a "comfortable home with the Republican platform."

"There are a lot of conservatives we'd like to attract across our demographics," he said. On the local level, Revels said one of the major casualties of the red wave is the loss of Robeson County Commissioner Roger Oxendine, a Democrat who held his District 3 seat for 14 years.

"We've lost one of our best, Mr. Roger Oxendine," Revels said. "He's been one of our best, one of our longest-standing county commissioners."

Revels believes her party did all they could to bring out voters, but the Trump support was too strong within the county.

"We did what we could do but the county as a whole was Trump motivated and that just meant that instead of splitting the ballot, we had a lot of people that voted straight Republican," she said.

She is not happy with the national performance either.

"I thought that we would do better nationally, and it was close races, but it didn't happen. I think nationally we did good but we couldn't hold on to our leg," Revels said.

A win for the Democrats, however, is the voter turnout.

"I'm proud of the turnout, and hope that this will be a trend to continue to come out to the polls just like they did yesterday," Revels said Wednesday. "It's up to the people what this county is going to come down to. We're a poor county and we need people to vote so that our leaders will know that we're here and need help."

COVID-19 has played a significant roll in the election's results, a fact known firsthand by state Rep. Charles Graham. The Democrat was one of his party's success stories, winning reelection to his seat in the N.C. House of Representatives. Graham received 13,484 votes, edging out Olivia Oxendine, a Republican, by 1,170 votes, according to unofficial election results.

Graham said COVID-19 made campaigning more of a "challenge." It forced all candidates to use media platforms like TV, print and radio, which was more expensive, he said.

"We had to, we didn't have a choice," Graham said. "It was a very challenging way to campaign."

Sen. Britt said the election was what he expected in some ways and not in others.

"I was both amazed and excited about the turnout," Britt said. "I am very disappointed, however, in the governor's race as I was pulling for Dan Forest very hard and he has become a close friend. I am afraid Gov. (Roy) Cooper will send us into another full shutdown that will continue to destroy our economy. I am also very concerned that our children need to be back in school."

With results the presidential race still up in the air, political officials are hoping the courts will not be the deciding factor.

"We hope this election isn't decided in the courts," Stephens said.

Revels said the courts deciding who will be president undermines the election process.

"When the people vote, they have spoken, but when you have minor problems that's causing it to go back to the courts, that's where you start having questions wondering 'What happened to the people's vote?'" Revels said.

Britt anticipates litigation but a conclusion to the election before the courts decide the outcome. He said legitimacy in the election is been a problem the county is familiar with.

"I believe many voters already doubt the election system," he said. "I also believe many voters question the legitimacy of the provisional and absentee ballot process."

"I have the same concerns as I have witnessed people who appear to vote at a poll site only to discover a ballot has already been cast in their name. I have also witnessed absentee ballots filled out and turned in by caretakers, and candidates for folks who had no intention to vote as the caretaker or candidate has voted for them," he added.

Rep. Graham said he hopes voters will not lose trust in the government, no matter the outcome of the presidential race.

"I hope the voters will trust in our leaders, trust that they're making the right choices," he said.

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Trump reaffirms support of Lumbees

Says if reelected he will sign federal recognition legislation

This article was published originally in the Oct. 28, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By T.C. Hunter
Managing editor

LUMBERTON — Two messages ran ramrod straight and hard as steel during the campaign rally Saturday at the Robeson County Fairgrounds: reelect President Donald Trump and obtain full federal recognition for the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina.

Each message energized the more than 3,000 people attending the rally. But one statement about recognition of the tribe drew perhaps the loudest cheers and the longest round of applause of the day.

"When I'm reelected I will sign the Lumbee Recognition Act," Trump said.

The president was speaking about the legislation sent Sept. 30 to the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives by the House Natural Resources Committee.

Trump's recognition message fit well with the rally's theme: "Fighting for the Forgotten Men and Women."

As for Lumbee recognition, it is time to right a wrong that has persisted for more than one hundred years, the president said. The people of North Carolina want to see the tribe get federal recognition.

Both messages dominated the short speeches given before Trump took the stage at 1:04 p.m.

The first speaker was Jarrod Lowery, one of the two District 5 representatives on the Lumbee Tribal Council. Lowery began by speaking about something he said he wouldn't have believed would happen five years ago.

"Can you believe the president of the United States coming to Robeson County?" he asked the people in the audience.

Trump is the first sitting president to support federal recognition of the Lumbee Tribe, Lowery said.

"Trump sees Robeson County because we are working class Americans," he said.

The president supports working-class Americans, Lowery said.

"I want all of you here to work with me to give Donald J. Trump four more years," the Tribal Council member said.

Lowery was followed by U.S. Rep. Dan Bishop, R-N.C. 9. The congressman said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, a Democrat from Maryland, told him the House would vote on the Lumbee Recognition Act by the end of the year.

"Thank you President Trump for finally righting a wrong. Thank you President Trump for backing recognition of the Lumbee Tribe," said U.S. Rep. Richard Hudson, who represents N.C. District 8.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue came to the stage and asked if the people at the rally were ready to "make America great again, again."

The people cheered in the affirmative.

Then Perdue asked a question that fit with the rally's theme.

"Are you all tired of being forgotten and taken for granted?" Perdue asked.

He was answered with cheers, applause and shouts of "Yes."

Perdue praised Trump as a president who hasn't forgotten them. He praised the members of the audience, calling them

the type of people who will help rebuild America. He praised Trump for backing recognition for the Lumbee Tribe.

The Ag secretary urged the people to reelect Trump and warned this election presents a sharp choice.

"This is 'T' in the road," Perdue said. "We're either going left to socialism or right to make America great again."

During his speech, Trump thanked Bishop, Hudson and others who have fought to get federal recognition for the Lumbee Tribe.

The words spoken at the rally were greeted enthusiastically by a crowd that included the young and the old. The rally was attended by people representing every major racial group in the county. The audience members entered the fairgrounds on foot, using crutches, on walkers and riding scooters.

Some were from outside Robeson County.

Heather Ballard, 30, came from Concord with her husband, Bryan.

"It has been like my dream to see the president speak," she said. "And it was too close to home not to come."

She didn't come to hear Trump say anything specific, Heather said. The fact that he was in Robeson County speaks to how important he considers small towns and rural America.

When asked if she believes Trump will win North Carolina on Election Day, she answered with an emphatic, "Yes I do."

Trump will win because of all the lockdowns and the people watching America being torn apart, she said.

"We're not going to let America go up in flames," Heather said.

Sam Malthen, a 20-year-old Marine, and 17-year-old Will Lawson came from Apex.

"I love Trump," Malthen said.

They both said it was a way to get out from under the pandemic-related lockdown, at least for a while.

"I wanted to be out with like-minded people," Malthen said.

Both predicted a Trump victory.

He's seeing a lot of similarities between this year and 2016, when Trump beat Hillary Clinton despite the national polls showing Clinton in the lead going into Election Day. The president will be helped by holding so many rallies, like the one in Lumberton.

"I may have to move if he doesn't (win)," Lawson said with a smile.

St. Pauls resident Cathy Jackson missed her 46-year-old son's birthday party and a grandson's baseball game to come to the rally. But, the son shouldn't be too mad at her because she bought him a .45 caliber handgun with Trump's picture on it as a birthday gift, she said.

When asked if she believes Trump will carry Robeson County, Jackson said, "Trump's going to carry the world."

Fifteen-year-old Joseph Hardee, of Lumberton, nodded when asked if he thinks Trump will take Robeson County on Election Day. It was Hardee's first rally, and he wanted to hear Trump say he's going to beat former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee for president.

And in a freewheeling speech that was classic Donald Trump, the president declared, that, with the people's help, he will beat Biden.

Reach T.C. Hunter via email at tchunter@robsonian.com or by calling 910-816-1974.



President Donald Trump speaks Saturday during a reelection campaign at the Robeson County Fairgrounds in Lumberton. During his speech, the president reaffirmed his support of federal recognition of the Lumbee Tribe. T.C. Hunter | The Robesonian

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L to R: Dr. Katie Lowry // Victoria Locklear, PA-C // Benjamin McMillan, CPNP

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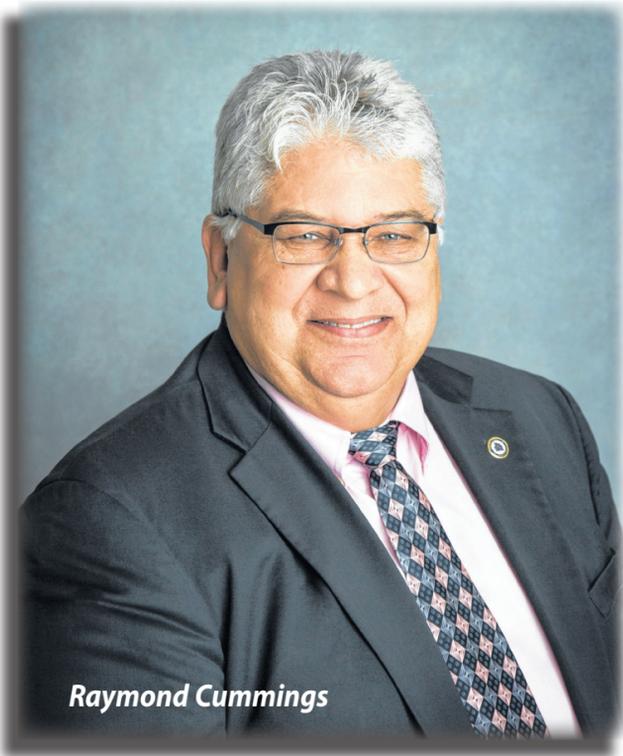
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Raymond Cummings

This article originally was published in the Aug. 12, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Jessica Horne
Staff writer

LUMBERTON — Family and friends will gather Friday to honor the memory of a Robeson County commissioner who died Aug. 7.

Raymond Cummings, 62, the longest serving member of the Board of Commissioners, died Friday evening at Duke University Hospital in Durham. Cummings had represented District 5 on the board since 1996. The commissioner battled health issues for much of 2019.

There will be a public visitation from 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday at Heritage Funeral Home, located at 812 S. Main St. in Red Springs. Cummings' family will receive friends from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. A graveside service is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Friday at Lumbee Memorial Gardens, located at 774 Moss Neck Road in Lumberton.

Cummings served about 24 years on the Board of Commissioners, acting as board chairman in 2018 and vice chairman in 2017. Cummings served on the National Association of County Officials, Lumber River Workforce Development, Lumber River Rural Transportation Planning Organization Transportation Advisory Committee, Robeson County Clean and Green, Robeson Community College board of trustees, as Public Schools of Robeson County Transportation director, and N.C. Association of Public Education Steering Committee, among other boards and organizations.

Funeral for Cummings is Friday

Cummings also served his country United States Army Reserves, raising to the rank of captain. He served in the Army from Jan. 13, 1986, to May 10, 1993, according to information from the county.

Cummings is a two-time graduate of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, receiving a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1980 and a Master of Arts degree in education in 1991. He worked as director of the UNCP Student Center in August 1987 until he was promoted to Student Activities director in November 1993, where he worked until January 1999.

Cummings leaves behind his wife, Betsy Cummings; three sons and two daughters.

"We certainly mourn his loss and have his family in our prayers," said Lance Herndon, Board of Commissioners chairman.

Herndon described Cummings as a "staunch advocate for his constituents" who was well-spoken and kind to those he was around.

As the Board of Commissioners mourns the loss of a member, it must work to appoint someone to finish Cummings' term in accordance with N.C. law.

"Since Commissioner Cummings had not filed for re-election, but still had until the first Monday in December 2020 remaining on his term, the remaining members of the board have 60 days to fill the vacancy," County Attorney Rob Davis said.

If the seat is not filled within 60 days, the Clerk of Superior Court must fill the vacancy in 10 days, he said.

The person who replaces Cummings must live in District 5 and be of the same political party, according to state law.

"It (N.C. law) further states that the Board of Commissioners shall consult with the Robeson County Democratic Executive Committee before filling the vacancy. However they are not bound by the Executive Committee's recommendation," Davis said.

Members of the Robeson County Democratic Party is scheduled to meet 6 p.m. Thursday via Zoom video call to discuss appointing Judy Sampson, a Democrat, to the seat. Sampson won the District 5 seat in the March primaries, garnering 211 votes

more than Lacy Cummings, and was due to be sworn in early in December. There was no Republican candidate for the seat.

"This is just us taking action in the process," said Pearlean Revels, county Democratic Party chair.

"It's just a matter of us submitting Miss Sampson's name," Revels added.

Historically, the Board of Commissioners has acted on recommendations from the party in these matters, she said.

Board Chairman Herndon said there had been no discussions about filling the seat as of Monday. But he anticipated a conversation during the board's September meeting.

Many local and civic leaders continue to express condolences to Cummings' family.

"Raymond Cummings was a true advocate for the Lumbee people and the citizens of Robeson County," said Harvey Godwin Jr., Lumbee Tribe chairman.

"He served our community for many years and his contributions will always be remembered. My prayers are with his family and friends during this time."

Cummings is credited with being one of the original crafters of the Lumbee Constitution, according to a statement from the Lumbee Tribe.

Board of Commissioners member Pauline Campbell said Cummings was a well-respected servant of county residents.

"Even though I have only worked with him a short time, we built a relationship throughout the years as he worked with my husband, Berlester. Raymond worked hard for what he believed in. His death is a great loss, and he will be missed on the commissioners' board," she said.

Sammy Cox, Robeson Community College's board of trustees chairman, said he enjoyed working with Cummings during Cummings' three years on the board of trustees.

Cummings was involved in decision-making that led to the construction of the college's burn building, emergency services building and the law enforcement center on campus, he said.

"He was great to work with and always very supportive (of the board)," Cox said.

Cox also remembers training Cummings as he attended the Army ROTC program while at UNCP.

"He was very active in our reserve program," Cox said.

He also described Cummings as a great soldier. County Manager Kellie Blue said she will miss Cummings' "zest for life" and sense of humor.

"His belief was that we may not all agree on the issue, but we shouldn't allow it to cause anger and dissension," Blue said. "He believed in the art of healthy debate and thought it to be good for the soul."

Blue had one statement to best describe Cummings.

"Whatever you want to do, do it now. There are only so many tomorrows," the county manager said.

Reach Jessica Horne at 910-416-5165 or via email at jhorne@robsonian.com.

Buddy Shooter remembered for service to town

This article originally was published in the Oct. 21, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Tomeka Sinclair
Staff writer

ROWLAND — The people who worked alongside the late Marvin "Buddy" Shooter Jr. are remembering him for his many years of service to the Rowland community.

Shooter passed away Sunday after contracting COVID-19. He was 82 years old.

He was the longest-sitting member of the Rowland Board of Commissioners, having served for 47 consecutive years after being elected for the first time in 1973.

"I guess once our citizens got him on board, they wouldn't let him go," Town Clerk David Townsend said.

His fellow board members remember him for his knowledge and dedication to the Town of Rowland.

The late commissioner was an "encyclopedia" for the Town of Rowland and always made himself available to answer any questions she had, Mayor Michelle Shooter said.

"He knew everything from the depth of the coverts to why the streets were named what they were," Shooter said. "He's just absolutely irreplaceable with his knowledge."

The mayor said he was always a phone call away if she had any questions or concerns, even when it interrupted a poker game.

"I could be frustrated about something or I could be worried about something or even just to want to share something with him, and he always took my calls," Mayor Shooter said.

One of the last times she spoke with "Buddy" was to schedule a meeting to help a business owner on Main Street, the mayor said.

"When she (the business owner) first opened her business, he told her that running a business is about 'dollars and sense,'" Shooter said.

Having been new to the board, serving her second two-year term, Shooter said Marvin was always encouraging her.

"When he saw me, he always told me I was doing a great job," Shooter said.

Commissioner Jean Love is the second-longest-sitting member of the Rowland Board of Commissioners and recalled the past 17 years she sat alongside him.

"I couldn't ask for a better person to work with," Love said. "We could discuss things and agree and discuss things and disagree and move right along. It was a pleasure working with him."

Love said she and "Buddy" knew each other since they were children, having grown up in the same area.

"He taught me a lot," Love said. "He was an asset to the community, and he's going to be missed."

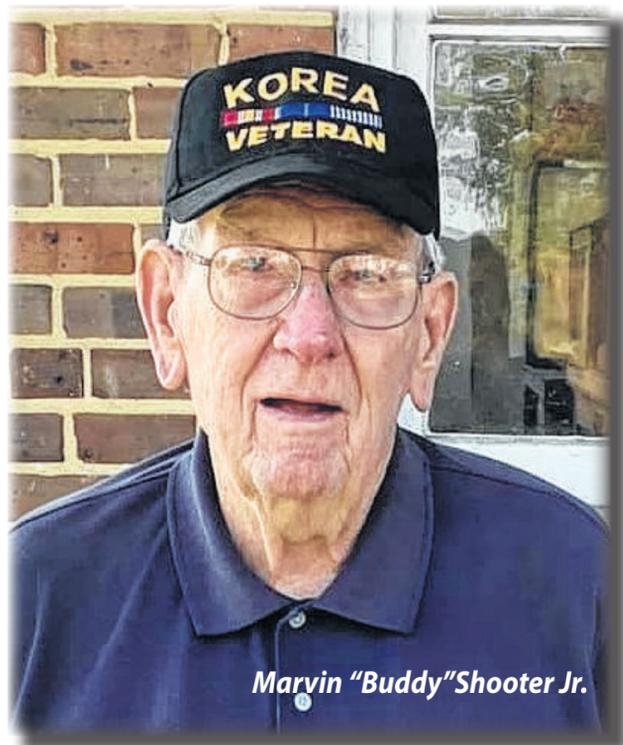
David Townsend said he also had known Shooter since he was child.

"I remember Buddy when I was a little boy because he worked at the post office here," Townsend said. "I've been fortunate to work with him the five years I've been working for the town."

Like the mayor, Townsend said Shooter knew all there was to know about Rowland and its people.

"He knew the history, and he everybody in our little bitty town," Townsend said. "Somewhere along the way he has reached out and touched everybody in our small town."

In addition to serving on the board, Shooter was a charter member of the Rowland Rescue Squad, where he was a designated life member after serving in many capacities. He also was a N.C. Emergency Medical Technician. He was recognized recently for his 60 years of service to the Rowland Volunteer Fire Department, which he was instrumental in forming. He also served for years as a postmaster, until his



Marvin "Buddy" Shooter Jr.

retirement.

In addition to serving his community, he served his country in the U.S. Army in Korea.

In December his works for the town were acknowledged by the state when he was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

The commissioners will talk Wednesday about the next steps toward filling the Board of Commissioners seat vacated by Shooter. Shooter was serving a four-year term that expires in 2021.

See the obituary inside today's paper for information about service arrangements for Shooter.

Tomeka Sinclair can be reached at tsinclair@robsonian.com or 910-416-5865.

NCHSAA NAMES PIRATES CO-CHAMPS



Lumberton senior Michael Todd (50) dances among his teammates after the Pirates defeated Pinecrest in the NCHSAA 4A East Regional final, which would be the final game of the season for the Pirates.
Jonathan Bym | The Robesonian file photo

The article was published originally in the April 30, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Jonathan Bym
Sports editor

LUMBERTON — More than seven weeks since stepping on the hardwood for a game, the Lumberton Pirates are state champions.

For Lumberton first-year coach Bryant Edwards, the end of a long seven-plus weeks brings closure for the team.

"It's finally been announced now so I can finally get to my team and have a closing meeting to close things down on a positive note. There's not many teams that finish their year on a win. To have that in one of my seasons as a head coach feels really good," Edwards said.

"I just knew we was going to get a ring," Lumberton senior Jordan McNeill said. "I felt like with all of those 16 teams playing for a title that they all deserved it. It was only right. ... I thank God because it's a blessing."

The North Carolina High School Athletic Association's board of directors on Wednesday awarded all 16 teams that qualified for the state basketball championships the title of co-champion.

"It's finally been announced now so I can finally get to my team and have a closing meeting to close things down on a positive note. There's not many teams that finish their year on a win. To have that in one of my seasons as a head coach feels really good."

— Bryant Edwards, Lumberton coach

The Pirates share the 2020 4A boys crown with North Mecklenburg, who was set to play Lumberton for the title on March 14 in Chapel Hill before the game was postponed and later canceled.

"A state championship was not in reaching distance from me. I wanted to win a conference championship, I would like to go on a good run in the playoffs, I'd like to do stuff like this at this level," Edwards said "For my first year going in and being awarded a state champion, it's awesome, but it's all about the guys and the coaching staff that made it possible."

This is the first instance since the 1960's when the NCHSAA did not have a sole champion for a team sport. The board voted on the matter to make both sides co-state champions.

"We actually took a vote on it and we felt like in this crazy time in which we are in that crowning an East Region and West Region champion did not do either side justice and we felt like co-champions

was the best thing we could do to honor all the work student-athletes and what they have put into it," said Brad Craddock, NCHSAA board of directors president.

The state championship is the first basketball title in Robeson County since 2001 when the Lumberton girls basketball team defeated East Wake, and the first for the Lumberton boys program.

On the Thursday before the state championships, the NCHSAA elected to postpone the state championship games, and at the same time put a hold on the spring sports season.

After Gov. Roy Cooper announced last week that public schools in North Carolina would no return to in-person classes this school year due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the NCHSAA responded by canceling the spring sports season as well as the basketball championships.

See CHAMPS | 10

School board fires superintendent

Excerpt from article originally published in the Sept. 9, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Jessica Horne
Staff writer

LUMBERTON — The chairman of the Public Schools of Robeson County's Board of Education cast three tie-breaking votes including one to remove and replace the superintendent.

After closed session, the board split in a vote to fire Shanita Wooten and in another to hire former board member Loistine DeFreece in her place. DeFreece resigned her District 1 seat in October 2019 after questions were raised about her residing outside her district.

Chairman Craig Lowry acted as the tiebreaker in both votes, including voting not to hire former South Robeson High School Principal DeRay Cole to take Wooten's place. Cole also once served as an assistant superintendent for the PSRC.

No reason was given for the firing of Wooten, nor was a date for Wooten's departure.

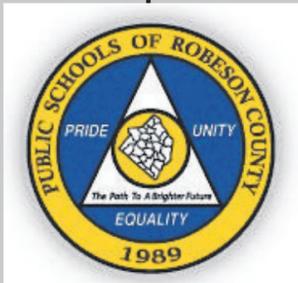
DeFreece will take an interim superintendent position on a month-to-month basis until a full-time superintendent is hire. The board also voted to hire Tony Parker as a weekly

consultant to DeFreece. Parker has experience serving as schools superintendent in Johnston and Berkeley counties.

Tyrone Watson, president of the Unified Robeson County NAACP, urged board members not to fire Wooten after he made a separate presentation about technology updates. Watson said he would make the same request as he did last year when it was first rumored that the board would fire Wooten.

"I ask this board once more do not allow, do not allow your personal agendas to affect your duties nor to affect the decisions that you were elected to make on behalf of the students of Robeson County," Watson said. "We are in the midst of a historic health crisis, a great racial divide in our nation ... more than anything else in our county we need solidarity."

Reach Jessica Horne at 910-416-5165 or via email at jhorne@robsonian.com.



PSRC hires new superintendent

This article originally was published in the Nov. 17, 2020 edition of *The Robesonian*.

By Chris Stiles
Sports editor

LUMBERTON — The Public Schools of Robeson County Board of Education voted Monday to hire Freddie Williamson as its new superintendent.

The unanimous decision came after a four-hour closed session during the reconvening of the board's regular meeting of Nov. 10.

Williamson, who has served as superintendent of Hoke County Schools for 15 years, was given a four-year contract that carries a salary of \$200,000 a year.

"Thank you for your vote of confidence," Williamson told the Education Board members Monday. "I'm excited. I've always had a strong desire to serve in Robeson County, so thank you for that opportunity. I will say to you, it's a good investment for the students of Robeson County, and I promise you I will work extremely hard to be open and transparent. (I'm) ready to get to work."

No date was given for when Williamson will start his new job, but board Chairman Craig Lowry said Williamson would likely assume his duties sometime in January. Loistine DeFreece will continue serving as interim superintendent until that time.

DeFreece has been interim since Sept. 8, when the board voted to remove then-Superintendent Shanita Wooten.

Board member Dwayne Smith made the motion to approve Williamson's hiring, and

Vonta Leach seconded.

Before serving as Hoke County superintendent, Williamson worked in Sampson County Schools as a principal, director of Secondary School Education and Accountability, and director of Personnel. He also worked in Scotland County Schools as an associate superintendent of Human Resources, Auxiliary Services and Student Support Services.

Williamson has a doctorate in educational leadership from Fayetteville State University, a master's in educational leadership and bachelor's degree in agricultural education from North Carolina A&T State University, and an education specialist degree in educational leadership from East Carolina University.

Williamson's educational philosophy, according to a PSRC release, is that he believes in "one team, one goal," working in an aligned management system, building capacity in employees and students, and providing them the opportunities to ready themselves for college, career and life.

"The Public Schools of Robeson County can be a high-functioning organization focused on continuous improvement," Williamson said in the release. "We must be determined and never be satisfied with being good when great is possible. Students will continue to thrive when they know they are valued, loved, supported, and when they are challenged to excel in academics, character, services, and all aspects of their lives."

Williamson already has developed a 90-day plan for review, according to the release, though he says this plan is just a plan and subject to change based on feedback.

Chris Stiles can be reached at 910-816-1977 or by email at cstiles@robsonian.com.

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The Lumberton boys basketball team lifts the 4A East Regional title trophy up on March 7 after the Pirates defeated Pinecrest at Fayetteville State to punch their ticket to their first NCHSAA state basketball title game. On Wednesday, the NCHSAA named the Pirates state co-champions with North Mecklenburg since the state title game was not played.

Jonathan Bym | The Robesonian file photo

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Champs

From page 8

"Whenever Gov. Cooper canceled school, I was talking to some people and they were telling me, 'Hey, we really don't think North Carolina is going to go co-state champions,'" Edwards said. "In my mind, I was just getting my mind prepared for Eastern finals champion, which we were already are. The guys deserve it, both sides. It's out of our control."

The appearance in the state championship game would've been the Lumberton boys program's first time on that stage taking on a nationally-ranked North Mecklenburg team.

"Me, personally, I wanted to play just to get the experience," McNeill said. "I felt like we had a good chance with the momentum we had. It was crazy. I know everyone in the community and my teammates wanted to play the game as well."

To get to the state championship, Lumberton also made its first

appearance in a NCHSAA regional final, and defeated Pinecrest, 66-47, at Fayetteville State on March 7.

Lumberton's run to the state championship also included three straight road wins over the Nos. 1, 4 and 8 seeds in the East Region to set up the third meeting against Pinecrest this season. That came after the Pirates defeated South Central, the 2019 4A state champs, at home in the first round.

"You could tell we had a lot of growth each game and we just kept moving forward," McNeill said. "Everyone was doubting us but we proved them wrong each game."

The Pirates were featured on ESPN's SportsCenter as a part of its "Senior Night" segment on March 25 that honored teams and players that had their season cut short.

"It's been really good to get a lot of recognition for a program that's never really had much recognition to show for," Edwards said. "It's good our guys got to experience this, especially the seniors."



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I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all healthcare workers, but especially UNC Health Southeastern's team, for their dedication and bravery as we fight the coronavirus pandemic. Employees throughout our organization have been challenged to work harder and safer than ever before. Because of their unwavering commitment to win this battle, we are providing our community the quality, compassionate care they need during ever-changing and uncertain times. To our entire UNC Health Southeastern family and healthcare professionals all over the country – thank you! You are our Healthcare Heroes!

Joann Anderson, President/CEO, UNC Health Southeastern

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Get the latest on COVID-19 testing, vaccines, steps we're taking to keep you safe, visitor restrictions and additional resources and information at srmc.org/main/covid-19-update.