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A SEASON FOR GRATITUDE

DEAR NEIGHBORS,

There's something about fall that seems to invite us to slow down. The days grow shorter, the air turns cooler and before we know it, the holiday season is upon us. November, in particular, offers a welcome reminder to pause and appreciate what matters most.

Thanksgiving naturally brings gratitude to the forefront, but often it's the smaller things that mean the most: a quiet morning with a cup of coffee, dinner around the table, a walk through the neighborhood on a crisp afternoon or an unexpected conversation with a friend. It's easy to move quickly through our days without stopping to notice just how many good things surround us.

That sense of gratitude extends to our community, too. A neighborhood is so much more than the homes and streets that make it up. It's the familiar faces we see on our walks, the friends who gather around our tables, the neighbors who lend a hand and the traditions that bring us together year after year.

As you prepare for Thanksgiving and the busy holiday season ahead, I hope you'll find time to enjoy the simple pleasures of fall and the people who make this season special.

And from all of us at *Stroll*, thank you for welcoming us into your homes each month and for continuing to share your families, celebrations, milestones and stories with us. We are truly grateful to be part of this community.

Wishing you and your family a very happy Thanksgiving!

Warmly,
Ashley and Nathan Grimm
Publishers, *Stroll*



Please share your stories and photos with us by scanning the QR code here and tagging us on social media @strollfirethorne.

MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS



MAH JONGG

BRINGS FRIENDS TO THE TABLE

THERE'S STRATEGY. THERE'S LUCK. There's plenty of laughter. And when someone discards a certain bird tile, there might even be a chorus of "One Bird Bang Cheers!" or a few good-natured "Caw, caws!" Welcome to mah jongg at The Country Club of the Carolinas, formerly Firethorne Country Club, where interest in the tile game has grown enough to support several opportunities to play each week.

For Lisa Merritt, who joined the Monday afternoon group after retiring a year ago, mah jongg has become much more than another hobby. "It's definitely all three!" Lisa says when asked whether the appeal is competition, strategy or friendship. "It's so fun to personally win, but it's fun to see how someone else has strategized to win their game."

The roots of the local group go back about 12 years, when Andree Manheimer began encouraging and teaching friends from the club to play. Another group of women who played at a local Whole Foods joined in, and Monday afternoons became their regular gathering time. Many of the women also play golf, making a non-golf day especially convenient.



Several months ago, Lisa started a Thursday evening game so working friends could participate. Members and their non-member friends are welcome, and a WhatsApp poll helps determine who will be playing each week. More recently, growing interest led to a Sunday afternoon game organized by Taylor Stier and Stacey Cohen with the club's director of member experience, Allison Doane.

Typically, about 12 players gather, with four people to a table. When the numbers don't divide evenly, the women jokingly play with a "ghost" they've dubbed Bob — or, in Lisa's version, Greta.

The group plays American mah jongg, using the annual card issued by the National Mah Jongg League. Players choose among the combinations on the card and then draw, discard and exchange tiles as they work toward a winning hand. Lisa describes the process as bringing tiles "from a pile of chaos" into order.

She learned from friends Stacey and Andree, then sharpened her skills through books and online play. Lisa now frequently plays online and credits the extra practice with making her

quicker and more confident at the table. She has also introduced numerous friends to the game.

For beginners, however, that card full of possible combinations can look intimidating. "At first the game seems super complicated, but after playing it a few times it starts to click," Lisa says.

Having an experienced teacher helps. Several women in the group teach newcomers, and friends Fran and Julie have organized times for those interested in learning.

While the players take the rules seriously, the atmosphere is decidedly lighthearted. Games generally last about two hours, allowing time for four to six rounds. The group doesn't play for money, but there are a few prizes and traditions. A winner gets to strike a miniature gong and choose a little duck to take home.

The social side of the game is a big part of its appeal. Monday players generally skip snacks, while the evening group might enjoy dinner beforehand and a cocktail at the table. The Sunday gathering includes light hors d'oeuvres through the club.

The game is also reaching a new generation. Lisa's adult daughter, Kierstin, plays with the Thursday night group and has brought several friends along. Lisa believes younger players are helping fuel mah jongg's resurgence, along with colorful modern sets, accessories and tournaments.

The men in their lives haven't necessarily caught the bug. "Even though there are men who play, our husbands think we are a cult!" Lisa jokes.

For Lisa, retirement has brought the opportunity to try new things, and mah jongg has become a favorite addition. "It's a great brain game and brings a lot of laughter and fun when played with friends!"

And perhaps that is the real winning combination: a little strategy, a little luck and plenty of friends around the table.



To recommend a family, please email Delia at ballantyne@strollmag.com.

"Everywhere you turn there is another mah jongg group!"

—LISA MERRITT

MAH JONGG 101

New to the game? Here are a few terms you might hear around the table.

The Charleston: An exchange of tiles that takes place at the beginning of an American mah jongg game, giving players an opportunity to improve their hands before regular play begins.

Dead Hand: Something players definitely want to avoid! A hand may be declared "dead" when a player makes certain errors or violates a rule, meaning that player can no longer win the game.

Wall Game: When play continues until the available tiles have been exhausted and no one has declared mah jongg, the game ends without a winner.

Concealed Hand: Certain combinations on the annual card must be completed without exposing tiles during regular play, making these hands particularly challenging — and satisfying — to complete.

PUMPKIN PATCH PATIOS

FALL MAGIC: DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR

There’s something about a beautifully decorated front porch that makes fall feel official. But sourcing dozens of pumpkins, hauling hay bales and arranging it all just right? That can take some of the fun out of the season. Pumpkin Patch Patios takes care of it all. Known as Charlotte’s “Original Pumpkin Concierge Decorating Service,” Pumpkin Patch Patios creates and installs curated fall displays for homes and businesses throughout the Charlotte area. The company is owned by longtime friends McCaulley and Drew Patterson and Caroline and Jake Meinzer, two husband-and-wife teams who turned their shared love of fall and beautiful spaces into a family business.



The idea came after the friends noticed pumpkin porch decorating services becoming popular in other cities. “We saw pumpkin porch decorating taking off in other cities and thought, ‘Why doesn’t Charlotte have this?’” they say. “From there, Pumpkin Patch Patios was born!” Today, the business helps busy families and local businesses create beautiful seasonal spaces without all the work. Clients simply select a package, and the Pumpkin Patch Patios team handles the rest — sourcing the pumpkins and seasonal décor, delivering everything and designing the display on-site. Each installation is customized to complement the home or business, using a mix of specialty pumpkins, gourds, hay bales and other fall touches. Their displays can be found everywhere from family front porches to schools, local businesses and country clubs. For the owners, one of the best parts has been watching what began as an idea among friends grow into something their entire families can enjoy. “Our friendship is really at the heart of the



business,” they say. “What started as an idea between friends has turned into something our whole families get to be part of, with little helpers included!” They’ve also developed a loyal following, with many clients inviting them back each fall. “Many of our clients return year after year, and that is the biggest compliment we could receive!” For those decorating with real pumpkins themselves, the team offers one important tip: location matters. Pumpkins last longer when placed in a shaded, dry area and kept off grass or mulch whenever possible. With thoughtful placement and a little care, a display can remain beautiful throughout much of the fall season. As the 2026 season winds down, Pumpkin Patch Patios is already looking ahead to another season of bringing fall color — and a little extra magic — to Charlotte.

Follow @pumpkinpatchpatios to see their latest creations and keep them in mind for fall 2027. For more information, visit pumpkinpatchpatios.com or email pumpkinpatchpatios@gmail.com. This publication is made possible because of our Firethorne sponsors. When searching for vendors for your home or business, please consider working with these invaluable neighborhood and area establishments.



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Catering to Cats and Dogs

Helping homeless pets find their people

This month, instead of introducing you to one neighborhood pet, we’re shining the spotlight on dozens of cats and dogs waiting for families of their own.

Catering To Cats & Dogs (C2CND) has been helping homeless animals throughout the greater Charlotte and surrounding areas since 2008. The volunteer-run nonprofit began with just 10 cats and has grown into a foster-based rescue that can have 70 to 80 cats and 90 to 100 dogs in its care at any given time – with even more arriving during busy kitten and puppy season.

Unlike a traditional shelter, C2CND does not have a facility. Instead, its animals live in foster homes, where they receive care, attention and a chance to become comfortable in a home environment while waiting for adoption. Many are pulled from area animal control facilities when they are at risk of euthanasia. C2CND provides necessary medical care and ensures its animals



Bella Vida



Pearson



Reginald

are spayed or neutered before or following adoption at the appropriate age.

And you don’t have to be ready to adopt to make a difference. C2CND relies on volunteers to foster animals, help at weekend adoption events, transport pets to veterinary appointments and assist with fundraising. Because opening a foster home allows the rescue to take another animal out of a shelter, fostering can quite literally make room to save another life.

Of course, for families who are ready to add four paws to the household, there are plenty of hopeful candidates waiting to



Skye



Mirabelle



Eli

meet them – from playful puppies and kittens to adult pets simply looking for a second chance.

Perhaps next month’s Precious Pet is already waiting for you.

Note: Pictured pets may not be available for fostering/adopting.

To have your pet featured, please email Delia at ballantyne@strollmag.com.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

- You don’t have to adopt a pet to make a difference for Catering To Cats & Dogs. There are several ways to support animals waiting for their forever homes:
- Adopt** – Give a deserving cat or dog a family and home of its own.
 - Foster** – Provide a temporary home for an animal while C2CND searches for the right adopter. Every foster home helps create space to save another pet.
 - Volunteer** – Help with adoption events, animal transportation, fundraising and other needs.
 - Donate** – Contributions help cover veterinary care, food, supplies and other expenses associated with caring for rescued animals.
- Learn more about getting involved at c2cnd.org.

COFFEE WITH A COP

Building relationships, one cup at a time



Each month, *Stroll* joins **Coffee with a Cop**, and we'd love for more of our residents and community partners to come along. These gatherings offer a simple yet meaningful way to connect—sharing a cup of coffee while building trust and understanding between Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) officers and the neighbors they serve.

Coffee with a Cop creates space for open dialogue in a relaxed setting, where residents can ask questions, voice concerns and get to know the officers who help keep our community safe. Events aren't on a fixed schedule, but updates are regularly shared via *Stroll*, CMPD Facebook page, the City of Charlotte website and the official Coffee with a Cop page.

Together, we're building stronger communities—one cup at a time.



**PLEASE JOIN US THE
SECOND FRIDAY OF EVERY
MONTH FROM 9 TO 11 A.M.**

Location: Ballantyne Summit Coffee,
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Upcoming Dates:

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Friday, December 11



To share your photos, please email Delia at ballantyne@strollmag.com.

Social Pet Hotel & Daycare: Raising the Standard of Care

NEW INVESTMENTS, PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCES AND A CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO EVERY DOG



For more than a decade, Social Pet Hotel & Daycare has built its business around a simple idea: dogs aren't one-size-fits-all. As 2026 comes to a close, owners Amy and Bill Hillis are continuing to build on that philosophy with new facility investments, expanded enrichment opportunities and plans to enhance the customer experience across all three Social Pet locations.



“Every dog has a unique personality, energy level and set of needs.”

One of this year's biggest improvements happened at the Pineville location, where Social Pet completed the installation of a whole-facility generator. The project began in 2023 and required extensive planning and approvals from Mecklenburg County and the Town of Pineville.

The investment goes far beyond convenience during a power outage. Because air cleanliness and circulation are critical to the dogs' safety and well-being, the generator is large enough to keep the entire facility operating during outages caused by severe weather or other environmental conditions.

Another anticipated addition became a reality this year when the Northlake sensory enrichment garden opened.

Social Pet introduced its first purpose-built sensory garden at the Charlotte location in September 2025, an initiative highlighted in the February *Stroll* feature. Since then, the concept has proven popular, with enrichment sessions booking in advance.

“We've seen firsthand that enrichment can be just as valuable as physical exercise,” the Social Pet team says. Filled with different scents, textures and interactive elements, the gardens allow dogs to explore and engage their natural instincts in a calm, stimulating environment. They can be especially helpful for dogs more selective about socializing or participating in group play.

That individualized approach remains central to Social Pet. A shy dog might do



best in a smaller playgroup with extra one-on-one attention, while a senior dog may need a quieter schedule and more rest. High-energy dogs can enjoy additional physical and mental stimulation in the Adventure Park, while dogs less interested in group play can participate in individualized enrichment sessions or spend time in the sensory gardens.

For first-time guests, that personalization begins with an assessment designed to help the team understand the dog's personality, play style and comfort level. Pet parents are encouraged to provide details about routines, preferences and medications so the team can make the transition as comfortable as possible. Current vaccination records and a negative fecal test are required.

For Amy and Bill, however, one of the most meaningful measures of Social Pet's growth isn't a new facility feature



or service. It's the team and culture they have built.

When Social Pet opened in summer 2014, it had just a couple of employees and fewer than 10 dogs. Today, the business has grown into three locations and serves thousands of families. Amy and Bill say they are especially proud of creating meaningful careers while building a community that pet owners trust.

And they're already looking toward 2027. Social Pet plans to focus on further improving the customer experience, with additional emphasis on staff training and customer service. Grooming and training services are expected to expand across all three locations, and the team is exploring additional ways to serve dogs that thrive with individualized, one-on-one attention rather than traditional group play.

The goal is growth without losing the personal approach that has defined Social Pet from the beginning — continuing to evolve while making sure every dog receives the experience that works best for them.

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To have your business featured in an upcoming issue, please email ashley.grimm@n2co.com.

“We've seen firsthand that enrichment can be just as valuable as physical exercise.”



HOLIDAY PET CARE: PLAN AHEAD

Holiday travel can mean a busy season at Social Pet, so families needing lodging are encouraged to reserve as early as possible — ideally several weeks to a couple of months in advance for major holidays. Once travel dates are set, booking early can help ensure your dog has a spot.

Before a stay, make sure vaccinations are current and let the Social Pet team know about your dog's routines, preferences, medications or other special needs. A little preparation can help make the experience more comfortable for both pets and their families.

Holiday grooming is also popular for pups getting ready for family gatherings and photos. For an extra dose of holiday cheer, Social Pet will offer photos with Santa November 17 through December 3, with specific dates varying by location.

AI in the Workplace

What employers and employees should know

BY FROSINI KIARIS, ATTORNEY, MORTON & GETTYS, LLC



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, or AI, has quickly become one of the biggest topics of conversation. Whether it's recommending a book or restaurant, scaling a recipe, planning a weekly menu or creating an image, AI has moved from being a concept of futuristic sci-fi movies to an integral part of our everyday lives.

AI has also become increasingly common in the workplace. It's being used to screen job applicants, analyze data and help employees work more efficiently. However, the most intriguing question is not simply what AI can do, but how it should be used. As the technology continues to evolve, so do the questions surrounding its use.

For employers, AI can be a powerful tool that boosts efficiency and productivity. In a matter of seconds, an AI tool can identify qualified candidates, summarize long documents, create job descriptions and explain complex concepts—including some legal ones. However, employers should not forget that AI cannot replace their own judgment or the guidance of an attorney. For example, AI can make tasks like sorting through job applications more efficient, but it can also produce discriminatory results that a process reviewed by legal counsel might have caught. Saying “the computer made the decision” will not be an effective defense. AI should be used with caution and supervised by a responsible representative of the employer.

AI can also be a valuable tool for employees. It can help employees work more efficiently and productively, brainstorm ideas and organize information. However, AI is not foolproof. Unquestioning reliance on AI can introduce errors in people's work, particularly when complex or specialized information is involved. Without appropriate monitoring, misleading or false information can make its way into an employee's work product. Employees should not assume that something is correct simply because AI said it is.

AI also creates privacy concerns. Both employers and employees need to be careful when entering confidential data or customer information into AI chatbots — and should avoid doing so with publicly available free AI tools that are not covered by a business agreement. It may not be clear where that information goes, who can access it or whether it may be used to further train AI systems. Companies should have clear policies that address these concerns and advise employees on what they may or may not upload into AI tools.

The goal is not to avoid AI, but to use it responsibly. Whether your company needs help developing policies that provide clear guidance on the use of AI tools or identifying potential privacy concerns related to their use, our employment law team is here to help.

This information should not be construed as establishing an attorney-client relationship or as legal advice. For advice about your specific situation, please consult one of our attorneys. For more information, visit [MortonGettys.com](https://mortongettys.com).



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CRISIS ASSISTANCE MINISTRY

Neighbors helping neighbors

BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER NICOLE AYERS, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

Most in this community have never had to wonder whether a single surprise expense or one missed paycheck could cost us our home. For thousands of families across Charlotte-Mecklenburg, that worry is a daily companion.

Consider Nikki. She was thrilled to start a new job, but a short gap between paychecks left a hole in her budget, and landlords rarely make exceptions. Nervous and a little scared, she walked into Crisis Assistance Ministry not knowing what to expect. A caseworker listened with compassion, arranged an emergency rent payment to stop her eviction and connected her to additional resources. Nikki left with her home stabilized and with her confidence restored.

Stories like hers are repeated every day, and the numbers explain why. Since 2010, average rent in Charlotte has climbed 61%, while wages have barely moved. A minimum-wage worker would need to log 125 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment at \$1,180. Last fiscal year, Crisis Assistance Ministry

helped 44,000 people with \$5.6 million in emergency housing assistance, keeping families in their homes and their lights on.

Founded in 1975 by local faith leaders, Crisis Assistance Ministry has been the community's basic-needs safety net for half a century. Its focus is families who are not yet homeless but are one setback away. Beyond rent and utility help, it offers financial empowerment coaching and a Free Store stocked with donated clothing, shoes, coats, school uniforms and household essentials, all at no charge.

For neighbors who want to help, the path is simple. Give a financial gift, which goes directly toward keeping families stably housed. Provide a winter coat. Donate new or gently used items to the Free Store. Volunteer your time. Or share what you've learned with a friend.

A stable home changes everything for a family and for a community. Join us in making sure Nikki's story is the rule rather than the exception.



Founded in 1975 by local faith leaders, Crisis Assistance Ministry has been the community's basic-needs safety net for half a century.



Carol Hardison and Katie Weeks of Armstrong Maguire

SEARCH FOR A NEW LEADER

Carol Hardison, CEO of Crisis Assistance Ministry, will be retiring soon after leading the agency for 26 years. Armstrong Maguire's Katie Weeks is leading the search for a new CEO.

Crisis Assistance Ministry is entering this transition from a position of organizational strength. The agency has an exceptional leadership team, dedicated staff, committed volunteers, strong governance and a clear vision for the future.

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STORM GUARD OF CHARLOTTE

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“... how we treat
people matters
just as much as the
finished product.”

For Storm Guard of Charlotte owners Tim Weber and Nathan Grimm, taking care of homes is about more than roofing, siding and exterior renovations. It's about taking care of people, building lasting relationships and being a company their neighbors can count on.

As proud *Stroll* business partners and longtime Charlotte-area residents, Tim and Nathan understand the importance of trust, reputation and community. Their goal is simple: provide homeowners with honest guidance, quality workmanship and an experience that makes home improvement feel a little less overwhelming.

A New Chapter, Built Together

Storm Guard of Charlotte began as an opportunity for both Tim and Nathan to start a new chapter professionally while building something meaningful in the community they call home.

“We were both at a point where we wanted to build something locally that we could really put our names behind,” Nathan shares. “Storm Guard gave us the opportunity to combine the resources of an established national brand with the personal service and accountability of a locally owned business.”

Originally from Southwest Florida and Indiana, respectively, Nathan and Tim have both made the Charlotte area home for years. Nathan and his wife, Ashley, are raising their three children here, and both partners share a strong commitment to family and community. “When you're serving the same neighborhoods where you live, raise your family and spend your time, the work becomes personal,” Nathan explains.

Helping Homeowners Protect What Matters

Storm Guard of Charlotte offers a full range of exterior home services, including roofing, siding, gutters, windows and repairs. From small maintenance needs to major renovations, their team works closely with homeowners to identify problems, explain available options and recommend solutions built to last.

What sets their approach apart is their commitment to communication and follow-through.

“We want homeowners to feel comfortable throughout the entire process,” Nathan says. “That means showing up when we say we will, explaining what



we're seeing, keeping people informed and standing behind our work.”

For Tim and Nathan, some of the most rewarding moments come after a project is completed.

“When a homeowner tells us we made the process easier than they expected, that's a win,” Nathan shares. “It reminds us that how we treat people matters just as much as the finished product.”

A Helpful Tip for Homeowners

One piece of advice they frequently share is to stay ahead of potential roofing problems.

“Don't wait until you have a leak to get your roof looked at,” Nathan recommends. “Small issues are often easier and less expensive to address early. And when you hire someone, make sure they're willing to show you photos, explain what they find and walk you through your options.”

Proud to Be Part of the Stroll Community

As *Stroll* partners, Tim and Nathan look forward to connecting with more local families and becoming a trusted resource for homeowners throughout the community. “We don't want to be just the company someone calls when something goes wrong,” Nathan says. “We want to build relationships, earn people's trust and be the company they're comfortable recommending to a friend or neighbor.” For Storm Guard of Charlotte, it's a commitment that starts close to home.

This publication is made possible because of our Firethorne sponsors. When searching for vendors for your home or business, please consider working with these invaluable neighborhood and area establishments.

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SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON YOUNG ACHIEVERS!

Do you know a young neighbor who deserves to be celebrated? Whether it's sports, the arts, academics or giving back through community service, we want to hear about it!

Our *Athlete of the Month/Young Achiever* section is dedicated to highlighting the incredible talents and accomplishments of local kids and teens. This is your chance to showcase their hard work, inspire others and give them the recognition they deserve. Submit your nominations, story ideas or even a quick note about your child's achievements—we'll take it from there! Share your ideas with us today and help us feature standout kids and teens in our community.

Please email Delia at ballantyne@strollmag.com with ideas!

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Call for Holiday Recipes

Do you have a treasured family recipe that's always on the table for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas or another holiday celebration? We'd love to feature your favorite dishes and the stories behind them. Send us your recipe, a photo and what makes it a holiday tradition in your home!



To share your recipe, please email Delia at ballantyne@strollmag.com.

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Monthly Meetup

These intimate monthly mixers bring together local business owners who are creating meaningful change in our community, and we'd love for you to be part of it.

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ROYAL LILAC PRODUCTIONS

AC Ballantyne Hotel Lobby Bar

Date: 3rd Wednesday of each month

Time: 5:00-6:30 p.m.

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There will be drinks available to purchase at the bar, a cozy environment and a chance to network. We hope to see you all there!



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A call for
community &
connection.

WE LOVE YOUR IDEAS!

Recommend a neighbor, pet, nonprofit, student, Veteran or other story for *Stroll Firethorne*. We also welcome your favorite neighborhood photos—family gatherings, celebrations, travel adventures, sports, holidays and everyday moments.



Email: ballantyne@strollmag.com

NEW TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

Welcome! We'd love to get to know you.

Email ballantyne@strollmag.com to be added to our invitation list and receive calls for content, events and magazine updates.

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Use #StrollFirethorne when you post for a chance to be featured in an upcoming issue.

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We're looking for Resident Reporters! High school students can build their resumes by writing stories and taking photos for *Stroll Firethorne*. Email us to learn more.

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SHARE YOUR PHOTOS

WHAT WE'D LOVE TO SEE

- **Fall Break** – From exotic getaways to nearby mountains, lakes and beaches, show us how you spent your long weekends!
- **Halloween** – Share your spookiest costumes, parties and trick-or-treating photos!
- **Thanksgiving** – From turkey trots and parades to family feasts, show us how you celebrated!
- **Fall Sports** – Send us your favorite action shots from the field, court or sidelines!
- **Panthers Pride** – Share your tailgating and game-day photos from Bank of America Stadium!
- **Milestone Celebrations** – Celebrating a special birthday or anniversary? Send us a memorable photo!
- **Weddings** – Share the love! We'd love to feature photos from fall and winter weddings in our community.

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