

MAY 2024

STANLY

the magazine

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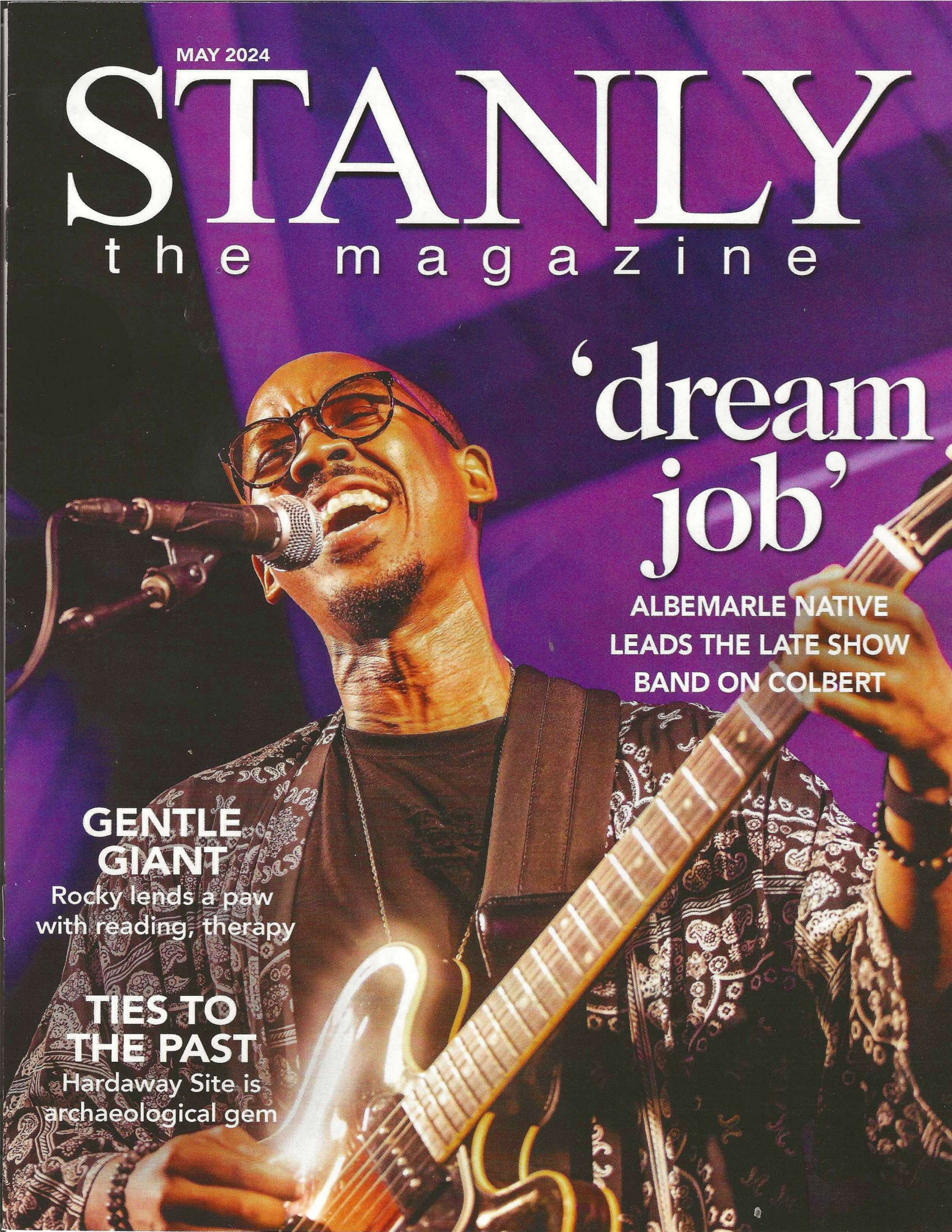
ALBEMARLE NATIVE
LEADS THE LATE SHOW
BAND ON COLBERT

**GENTLE
GIANT**

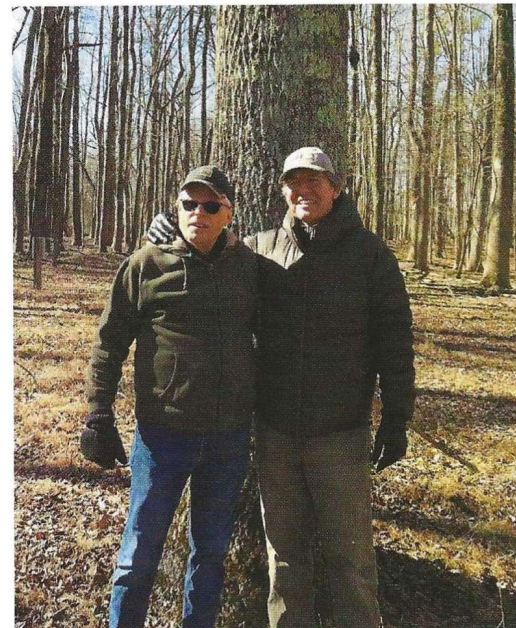
Rocky lends a paw
with reading, therapy

**TIES TO
THE PAST**

Hardaway Site is
archaeological gem



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About STANLY the magazine

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ON THE WEB: thesnaponline.com

GENERAL MANAGER/ EDITOR

B.J. Drye

bj.drye@stanlynewspress.com

LAYOUT/DESIGN

Andy Mooney

andy.mooney@stanlynewspress.com

ADVERTISING

Susan Wolf

susan.wolf@stanlynewspress.com

Shelby Sides

shelby.sides@stanlynewspress.com

CIRCULATION


Debbie Holt

debbie.holt@stanlynewspress.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Jo Grey, Toby Thorpe

On the cover: Louis Cato performs at Millpond.
(Photo by Cedric Pilard)



Jessica Gise and Rocky are a certified pet therapy team with North Carolina Pet Partners. They often make stops at the Locust Library.

Gentle GIANT

Rocky lends a paw with reading, therapy

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JO GREY

Meeting a 140-pound shaggy dog in the library can be disconcerting, even for an adult.

“But Rocky’s a gentle giant,” says Jessica Gise, who teams up with her registered therapy pet for monthly visits at Stanly County branch libraries. “He gets his kid-fix at the library.”

Rocky was taught to greet smaller children on their level.

“He naturally notices little kids,” said Gise. “He’s drawn to them and watches over them.”

Even before the 3 ½-year-old Newfoundland sprawls on his floor mat, children’s faces light up and they instinctively reach for him. The scene in the Locust Library leaves no doubt that dogs, children and books go together.

Leah McIlwaine said she brought her grandchildren to meet Rocky, hoping to foster a love of reading.

Elon picked a “Berenstein Bears” story to share with Rocky, and Caroline read the picture book “Thelma the Unicorn,” while their younger brother Ellis stroked Rocky. The children’s new giant canine friend showed he can chase away

timidity or calm the fidgety.

Second grader Madelyn Rigdon is a frequent reading buddy to Rocky. She’s a confident, fluent reader who shares snuggles and books with him. And Rocky feels more comfortable when the children pet him and give him belly rubs, says Gise.

Stanly County Public Library Director Sara Hahn knows children also need to feel comfortable, and reading aloud can be intimidating.

“Children have to experience no judgment when reading aloud to an audience,” said Hahn.

She knows of a child who stumbled over words and was afraid of being laughed at. The repeated practice of reading aloud to Rocky helped her gain confidence.

“Children feel that dogs are their friends,” said Hahn.

Hahn has a knack for alliterative. Literacy on a Leash — at the Locust Library — came about last year when Gise offered to bring Rocky once a month to Locust and Oakboro.

Reading with a Pet was a program offered several years ago, facilitated by a dog handler from

Charlotte, but no replacement had been found. Gise and Rocky have a full schedule, but depending on future availability Hahn would like to expand the program to other branches in the county.

For sure, qualifying as a pet therapy team takes time and practice, and dedication. After completing necessary online coursework for handlers, Gise took Rocky to Greensboro where they were evaluated in person. In January 2023, Gise and Rocky earned their certification as a pet therapy team with North Carolina Pet Partners, an organization which educates, trains and certifies teams of humans and pets — both ends of the leash, as they say.

The duo was eager to begin serving when they made their first visit to Atrium Health Stanly. Rocky was introduced to patients and to hospital staff, and to Kim Davis, director of volunteer services.

“Kim has been a huge supporter of Rocky,” said Gise. “She presented Rocky with his hospital badge.”

Davis also greets him during monthly visits in

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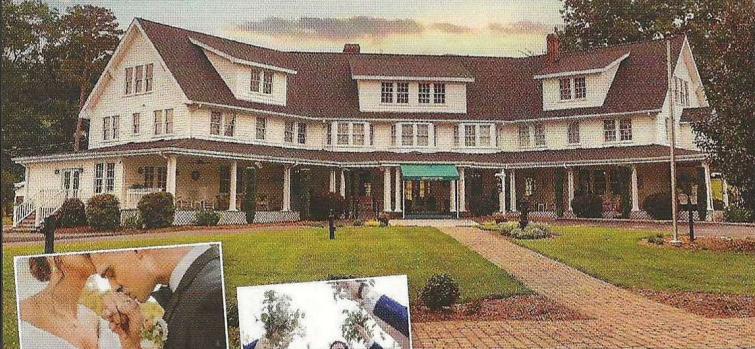
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Elon, Ellis and Caroline Melhwaive enjoy reading with Rocky.

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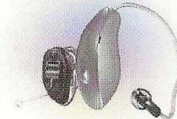
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the Cheer Shop when the nighttime staff welcome the diversion of seeing Rocky.

“They love on him and he loves them,” said Davis. “It calms their nerves.”

In the first year of volunteering with Pet Partners and with Newfie Therapy, Rocky was named Newfie Therapy Dog of the Year for 2023. Rocky received the honor, but don't forget his human. Together, in 12 months, even though she has a full-time job, Gise and Rocky made 111 week-end or evening therapy visits — with Gise as chauffeur, groomer, handler, advocate, cheerleader and friend.

Madelyn Rigdon enjoys time with Rocky.

Besides the hospital and library, Stanly County stops include West Stanly Christian Ministries, Love's Grove Methodist at Easter and Halloween, the Atrium Health Veterans Brunch, the Oakboro Parade and monthly Sunday Fundays which can be all sorts of outings.

This team also visits families at the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Greater Charlotte, residents of the Easter Seals Home and recently at the Church of God Children's Home in Cabarrus County.

Pet therapy volunteer work is new to Gise, but Newfoundland dogs are not. Rocky is her fourth. He joined Jessica and

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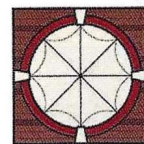
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her husband Mark just two weeks after they accepted an 8-year-old Newfoundland rescue dog named Jake.

"Rocky and Jake are now best of buddies," says Gise, and they show it — swimming, camping, trail-walking together.

Since Rocky is a purebred Newfoundland, Gise wants to strengthen his natural ability for water rescue and drafting, or hauling.

The Newfoundland Club of America provides opportunities for draft tests, which are exercises performed with the handler to demonstrate the dog's natural skills and degree of training. Gise also plans for Rocky to water test in the fall which depends on teamwork in realistic water rescue situations.

"Rocky loves water and helping people, so it's a perfect combination," says Gise.

Gise and Rocky share a calling.

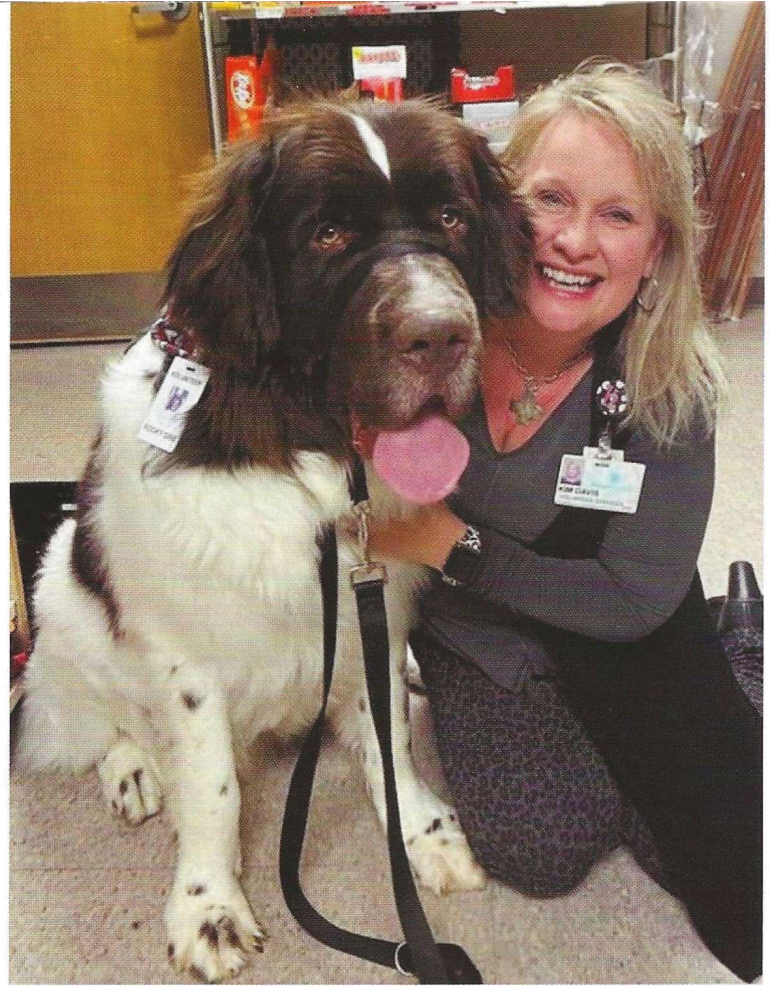
"I love being able to serve and give back to the community and Rocky's true calling is his caring nature and passion for sharing love through therapy work," said Gise.

And it doesn't hurt that belly rubs are his on-the-job perk.

"It's a win-win," said Gise. **S**

Jo Grey is a freelance writer.

Rocky, a frequent visitor at Atrium Health Stanly, was presented with his hospital badge by Kim Davis, director of volunteer services and the cheer shop at Atrium Health Stanly.



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