

GREENVILLE, N.C. (March 18, 2024) — At a luncheon today featuring an appearance by Gov. Roy Cooper, [Visit North Carolina](#) presented its Esse Quam Videri Award to Glenn Patterson Wilson for leading a revival of her hometown of Halifax, a Roanoke River town with rich Revolutionary War history. The annual presentation is a highlight of the [Visit NC Tourism Conference](#) at the Greenville Convention Center.

Also honored at the conference with entry into Visit NC's longstanding Winners Circle:

- Mike Butts, executive director of [Visit Charlotte](#) and vice president, sales, at the [Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority](#).
- Allen C. Harper and his family, owners of [Great Smoky Mountains Railroad](#) in Bryson City and [American Heritage Railways](#), its Colorado-based parent company.
- Sam Jones, co-owner of [Sam Jones BBQ](#) in Winterville and Raleigh and the [Skylight Inn BBQ](#) in Ayden.

Wilson, who traveled the world during her 32-year corporate career with Marriott International, returned to Halifax in 2015 for a visit and found everything in the heart of town closed except for the bank and Post Office. She traded her Marriott title of vice president of Global Design Strategies for a mission to reverse the town's fortunes. As with her career, she found success with a series of enterprises, from [The Hen & the Hog](#) restaurant and [The Bass House](#) gift shop to her [Halifax Studios](#) art space and the new coffee-tea-dessert spot [Two Doors Down](#).

"Patterson embodies the meaning of *esse quam videri*, the state's motto," said Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit NC, a part of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#). "It means 'to be, rather than to seem,' and her decisive action personifies the spirit that drives our state to greatness."

Since Wilson's return, Halifax's renewal includes the arrival of [The Trophy Room Bar](#), the [John Brown House & Inn](#), the [Parlor on Pitt](#) salon, [Hasty's Holistic Health & Wellness](#), a new apartment complex and the [Bradford-Denton House](#), a Colonial history museum. The museum complements the [Halifax State Historic Site](#) and the story of the Halifax Resolves, which made North Carolina the first colony to call for independence from Great Britain.

"North Carolina's [observance](#) of the America250 commemoration begins in Halifax in April," Tuttell said. "The town can expect flocks of visitors who'll enjoy the fresh vitality that Patterson inspired. Even without the lure of history, Halifax has become an appealing destination with easy access to Interstate 95."

Previous winners of the Esse Quam Videri Award, established in 2019, include Old Fort's trailblazing Catawba Vale Collective; the High Point Market Authority; Bill Carson, co-founder of the Orchard at Altapass in Spruce Pine; and Kinston business leaders Stephen Hill of Mother Earth Brewing and Vivian Howard of Chef & the Farmer.

Visit NC also welcomed new members to the Winners Circle, an awards program that's marking its 20th year.

Mike Butts' service to the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority spans nearly 25 years. He oversees a team of more than 40 professionals on a mission to promote the region as a destination for business and leisure travelers, meetings and conventions, and sporting events. Beyond his CRVA role, Butts has served as chairman of the [N.C. Travel & Tourism Board](#) and the [N.C. Travel and Tourism Coalition](#), president of the [Destination Marketing Association of North Carolina](#), and a board

member for the Destination Marketing Association International (now [Destinations International](#)) and the [American Bus Association](#). His previous positions include vice president of marketing and general manager for [Signature Hospitality Resources](#), a nationwide operator of prestigious brand names in the hospitality industry. The efforts of Butts and the CRVA helped generate more than \$5.3 billion in visitor spending in Mecklenburg County in 2022 and \$7.3 billion for the greater Charlotte region.

The Harper family's investment in the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad began in 1999 with their company's purchase of the line from Malcom McNeil, who a decade earlier had led the effort to save the historic Southern Railway line from being dismantled. Today, the railroad ranks among the nation's most popular train attractions with about 200,000 passengers a year enjoying scenic routes from Bryson City to Nantahala and Dillsboro, its former headquarters. Excursions include combos (Raft & Rail, the Tarzan Train, Rail & Trail) and special events such as the popular Polar Express ride. The Harpers' American Heritage Railways also owns [Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad](#), the [Rail Events](#) licensing operation and the [Grand Imperial Hotel](#), all in Durango, Colo., plus the [Mt. Rainier Scenic Railroad](#) in Elbe, Wash.

As a third-generation owner of Skylight Inn BBQ and Sam Jones BBQ, Sam Jones extends the glory of North Carolina's most celebrated heritage food. Earlier this month, he was inducted into the inaugural class of the [N.C. Bar-B-Q Hall of Fame](#) for the wood-smoked, whole hog barbecue that distinguishes Eastern North Carolina's favored fare. Jones, a 2018 James Beard semifinalist for Best Chef Southeast, grew up working for his legendary grandfather Pete Jones, who opened the Skylight Inn in 1947. He now co-owns the Ayden restaurant, a James Beard America's Classic, with his father (Bruce Jones) and uncle (Jeff Jones). In 2015, Jones opened Sam Jones BBQ in Winterville with friend Michael Letchworth; a Raleigh location followed in 2021. Jones also wrote the 2019 memory-filled cookbook "[Whole Hog BBQ: The Gospel of Carolina Barbecue with Recipes from Skylight Inn and Sam Jones BBQ](#)" (Ten Speed Press) with Texas Monthly barbecue editor Daniel Vaughn.

The Winners Circle, created in 2004, recognizes significant and continuing contributions to the growth and success of North Carolina's tourism industry. Previous recipients include Frank Capra Jr. of the former E.U.E. Screen Gems' Wilmington studios, the late Peggy Kirk Bell of Mid-Pines & Pine Needles and Dr. Dana Clark of Appalachian State University.

With more than 500 tourism leaders from across the state in attendance, the Visit NC Tourism Conference continues through Tuesday.

Note: Photos of the award recipients will be uploaded to this [Google folder](#).

About Visit North Carolina:

Visit North Carolina is part of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), a private nonprofit corporation that serves as North Carolina's economic development organization. The EDPNC focuses on business and job recruitment, existing industry support, international trade, tourism and film marketing.

As the official destination organization for the state, Visit North Carolina's mission is to unify and lead the state in positioning North Carolina as a preferred destination for leisure travel, group tours, meetings and conventions, sports events and film production, maximizing economic vitality statewide. North Carolina welcomes approximately 43 million visitors annually whose spend more than \$33 billion in the state. The tourism industry employs more than 216,000 jobs throughout the state and generates nearly \$2.5 billion in state and local tax revenues. For more information about Visit North Carolina, go to [VisitNC.com](#).

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