



FLYING HIGH

Goldsboro's downtown is poised for takeoff — boutiques, a taproom, and even a burger-and-sushi joint have all opened in the once-sleepy town center. From airmen passing through to longtime locals, now everyone's got a place to be a regular.

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Zak Fein spent six years stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro. When he left the military, he didn't leave town.



Center Street is adorned with whimsical public art; nearby, Lilian Danieli (top right) sells African clothing at her shop, Nashona. On John Street, Chef Koji Kimura (bottom left) whips up a mean burger at Jay's Sushi and Burger Bar.





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Goldsboro isn't, by outward appearances, a military town. Seymour Johnson is more of a helpful roommate than a landlord.
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The first F-15E Strike Eagle arrived in Goldsboro in December 1988. Since then, it's been the pride of the 4th Fighter Wing.

THE CHALK PAINT IS IN THE back of Carolina Pine Country Store, past the flower arrangements, the tin and reclaimed wood, and the Mason jar candles that Kathy Stanczak cannot restock fast enough. There are shelves full of Annie Sloan Chalk Paint, an HGTV favorite — sought-after stuff for customers and vendors. Carolina Pine had to pass the company's thorough application process because, in Kathy's words, "they don't want just any willy-nilly store selling it." Now, people drive 30 miles, coming from Greenville and Jacksonville, to buy quarts and gallons, and on weekends, more than two dozen cans may fly out the door.

But it's the locals who really love Chalk Paint, Kathy says. A lot of times, when airmen and their families end up stationed down the road at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, they can't bring their furniture with them. Too expensive. Instead, they hunt for new stuff at yard sales around Goldsboro, often being sold by airmen lightening their load before

transferring somewhere else. For \$10 or \$20, they walk away with dressers and end tables in middling condition. Next, they head to Pinterest to get some restoration ideas, and watch YouTube painting tutorials to build up confidence. A crafty friend might even come over to help. The end result — a castoff gets a second chance — is addictive, Kathy says: "[A coat of paint] transforms it into something that looks completely new and different."

Kathy, an Air Force veteran with a big smile, flower tattoos on both arms, and the Lord's Prayer etched into her ring, remembers moving Carolina Pine from the edge of town to downtown Goldsboro, which, at the time, was still a work in progress. For years, the center of the city languished, empty and outdated. But when Kathy saw what the city planned to do to Center Street, she was inspired.

Her customers were not. *You'll go out of business*, they'd tell her. "I know what I'm doing," Kathy would reply. Today, she's pulling in seven times the business she did on the outskirts, all because she



Kathy Stanczak owns Carolina Pine Country Store on Center Street. Before that, she spent eight years in the Air Force as a biomedical engineer.





Carson Clark (left) and Zak Fein worked on F-15Es together. Today, they own Goldsboro Brew Works.

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She saw downtown Goldsboro's future, not its past.

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saw downtown Goldsboro's future, not its past. "A lot of us got tired of people complaining and not doing anything about it," she says. "So we got up and did something about it. You want an innovative downtown? Well, we gave you one. Here it is."

DOWN THE BLOCK FROM CAROLINA PINE, atop an old hotel marquee that overlooks Center Street, David Weil tells the hidden backstory of the roadway below. His family has deep roots here, and, now in his 80s, David gets animated when he talks about Goldsboro. This city, he explains, boomed after the construction of the rail lines that intersected here, and for decades, they ran right through the center of town. But by the 1920s, city leaders were tired of it. The rumbling was incessant. Horses were getting scared. Sparks set wooden buildings on fire.

After negotiations with the railroads hit an impasse, city leaders came up with a secret plan. On the night of April 2, 1926, 100 men, paid in corn liquor, tore up the tracks. Police watched silently. The local newspaper said nothing. It was like it

never happened. The railroads filed a lawsuit, but later settled and found another way to get trains through town. "Downtown, which was laid out because of the railroad, no longer had a railroad," David says, gesturing to the roadway below. "We had a nice, wide center street."

The city had always functioned as a hub for both trains and farmers. That changed in 1942, when the military built a facility at the small airfield in town to train pilots for World War II. It was named for a Navy lieutenant from Goldsboro, Seymour Johnson, who died while test piloting a Grumman F4F-3 fighter plane. After the base was deactivated in 1946, the city rallied for its reopening, and the facility was reactivated 10 years later. Today, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base provides 9,000 jobs — and a sense of pride.

The front gate is a few miles from downtown, out toward Wilber's Barbecue, a legendary spot that is constantly being buzzed by jets landing or lifting off from the runway nearby. On the base, a variety of fighter planes have been placed on display atop thick poles. A functioning community, Seymour Johnson has its own commissary, medical



A day in Goldsboro might include a song on the piano at the corner of Center and Walnut, lunch at Wilber's Barbecue, and a stroll by the murals downtown.



An F-15E Strike Eagle and its crew from the 4th Fighter Wing prepare for takeoff.

center, homes, barracks, dog park, splash pad, and golf course. Groceries are often cheaper on base. "Quality of life, man," says Robert Kerns, the civilian public affairs officer, as he drives along the well-laid-out streets with pines inside the fences. Still, people prefer to live off base, particularly after reaching a certain pay grade or getting married. "When they can move," he says, "they do move."

Zak Fein knows this firsthand. Today, Zak has a long beard, a trucker hat with a small light clipped on, and tattoos on his arms. He has a joke for everything. "I love freedom," he says dryly, "but I hate jet noise." He's probably heard more of it than most: For six years, Zak was an airplane mechanic on the base, repairing F-15Es, a jet designed to fight its way into a war zone, take out a target, and then fight its way back out. Zak got here in 2010, and back then, Goldsboro and the air base were different. There just wasn't much going on. "The Olive Garden opening up made front-page news," he says. "I wish that was a joke."

Things have changed, and that's obvious by at least one metric: Zak stayed. He got out of the Air Force in 2016 and decided to start a brewery in town with his fellow mechanic Carson Clark. So far, they just have a taproom on North John Street,

called Goldsboro Brew Works, with a home-brewing store on one side and a small events space on the other. Their clientele is a mix of locals and airmen, and the base, Zak says, "brings a lot of diversity."

The base, as air bases go, is small, and its presence doesn't overwhelm the city or completely define its character. "Fort Bragg's like a county," Zak notes. "This is like a subdivision." Seymour Johnson is more of a helpful roommate than a landlord.

As such, there's not an overwhelming number of military men and women who show up at the taproom. They tend to come in on Fridays and Saturdays, Zak and Carson say, but often, when they leave the base, they're heading out on a road trip to the beach or up to Raleigh. Locals, it seems, are really the ones champing at the bit for new places to go. Many of them now ask Zak and Carson the same thing: "Where did we go out *before*?" The answer: *We didn't go out.*

Now, they belly up to the concrete bar that Zak and Carson built themselves, with no prior training. "Once you work on F-15s for long enough, you just think, *How hard can it be?*" Zak says.

"Once you work on F-15s, you just think, *How hard can it be?*"



The Paramount Theatre, rebuilt in 2008, looks like the original, which burned in 2005. Today, it attracts the North Carolina Symphony.

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“I never realized how many millennials were in Goldsboro.”

RIGHT NOW, GOLDSBORO SEEMS TO BE AN ENTIRE city of fixer-uppers. Across John Street from Goldsboro Brew Works, workers are putting a new coat of yellow paint on a stately old home, and others nearby are also getting tune-ups. The smell of sawdust lingers in the air, along with the clanging of pipes and conduit being installed. New apartments, according to banners, are coming soon.

Just a year ago, Lilian Danieli opened Nashona (Swahili for “I sew”) on Center Street, and today she sells handmade Tanzanian clothing. Lilian came to Goldsboro seven years ago when her husband got a job at the local hospital. Inspired by trips to her native Tanzania, she wanted to give back, so she started paying for kids in orphanages there to attend better schools. So far, she’s sponsored four children, thanks to profits from her boutique. “I prayed to God: If you can ever give it to me, I’ll give,” she says.

Lilian’s customers are a mix, teenagers to 70-year-olds, black, white, and Asian. The actress Angela Bassett buys from her, and her business, which has been mostly online, is now picking up in the store. “Here,” she says, “people are warming up to it.”

The hardest part for Nashona, Lilian says, is the changing of long-held beliefs. “We still need help telling people that downtown isn’t the downtown it used to be,” she says. The change started with a master plan for redevelopment completed in 2007,

and took off when the city was awarded a \$10 million federal grant in 2013.

The money changed everything. Now, the sidewalks are wide, and the thoroughfare has traffic circles containing a modern-looking fountain and large metal sculptures. It has a certain cobblestone chic, with plenty of parking, and most spots are full on weekday mornings. Sheriff’s deputies walk down the street from the courthouse. Music plays unobtrusively from speakers on every other lamppost, and you’d think it was an adult contemporary station until you hear, every few minutes, a voice welcoming you to town. Families are out for strolls. Retirees gather in front of a brightly painted piano on the corner of Walnut Street, one that’s there for anyone to play.

There are new places to eat, including Jay’s, which serves burgers and sushi. “I never realized how many millennials were in Goldsboro until these restaurants opened up,” says Julie Metz, the downtown development director for the city and longtime executive director for the Downtown Goldsboro Development Corporation.

The whole city has been on a bit of a hot streak. The hospital in town got a shot in the arm, thanks to a takeover by UNC Health Care. The state renovated and expanded Cherry Hospital, bringing around 400 jobs. A bypass opened. And a new flying fleet of refueling tankers is coming to Seymour Johnson in 2020. Yes, unemployment is still high, and Goldsboro is still struggling with the

same poverty and crime issues that plague many towns across eastern North Carolina. But there's an energy coming from downtown Goldsboro that hasn't been here in decades. Will it spread across the rest of town? "That's our hope," Julie says.

THE ENERGY HERE HAS, FOR A LONG TIME, COME from the people. The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, creator of the Moral Mondays movement and a now-prominent civil rights activist, has been the pastor at Greenleaf Christian Church on North William Street since 1993, and he still regularly delivers sermons there on Sundays. Much earlier, Gertrude Weil, who was born into one of Goldsboro's most prominent families in 1879, threw her time, effort, and money behind women's suffrage, labor reform, and civil rights. When the city wouldn't let African-Americans into its municipal swimming pool, Weil donated the land and money to build one in a black part of town, and then, at its dedication, the elderly Weil threw off her coat to reveal a swimsuit and jumped in.

Weil's great-nephew, the aforementioned David, now owns buildings downtown, and they're filling back up with people and businesses. After

he finishes pointing things out from the hotel, which is now senior housing, David takes a short walk down the block to the Paramount Theatre. Employees greet him as "Mr. Weil" when he walks inside. The original theater opened about a century ago on this spot; David's great-grandfather built the three-story building that first housed it. When the Paramount burned in 2005, "citizens lined the streets and watched in disbelief," according to one account.

In hindsight, David says, "the burning of the Paramount was another very good thing." In 2008, a new Paramount rose from the ashes. It has seating for 500 people and a stage big enough to hold the North Carolina Symphony, which makes trips out here. David points at the windows in the front, which open onto the ornate facade. Why have windows? Don't you want it dark inside? "Look at this picture," David says, gesturing at a painting of the theater lit up at night. "The windows are to let light *out*. When there's activity here, it glows. It's alive with light." **Os**

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