

NEWS RELEASE

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Two Titans, One Night: NC Business Hall of Fame Welcomes New Inductees Fred Whitfield and Gene Johnson

Charlotte, NC - Junior Achievement of Central Carolinas (JA) is proud to announce the 2026 North Carolina Business Hall of Fame induction ceremony, honoring two of the state's most influential business leaders: Fred Whitfield, retired President, Vice Chairman, and Minority Owner of the Charlotte Hornets, and Gene Johnson, retired Chairman of United Communications.

The event will take place on February 17, 2026, at The Revelry in Camp North End, bringing together top executives, entrepreneurs, educators, and students from across the Carolinas to celebrate excellence in business and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs and changemakers.

The North Carolina Business Hall of Fame recognizes individuals whose careers reflect significant business achievements and a deep commitment to community service. These laureates exemplify visionary thinking, innovative practices, and leadership that strengthen the regional economy.

This year's ceremony also highlights a new era of leadership at Junior Achievement of Central Carolinas, with Melissa Kilby stepping into her role as President & CEO earlier this year. In her first six months, Kilby has brought fresh energy and a bold vision to JA's mission, preparing young people for success in an evolving economy through real-world learning, mentorship, and leadership development.

"Fred Whitfield and Gene Johnson represent the kind of leadership and impact we strive to instill in every student we serve," said Melissa Kilby. "It's an honor to celebrate their legacy while advancing our mission to connect today's business leaders with tomorrow's changemakers."

"Being inducted into the North Carolina Business Hall of Fame is a tremendous honor," said Fred Whitfield. "I've always believed in the power of business to uplift communities, and I'm proud to be recognized alongside so many leaders who've made a lasting impact on our state."

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“This recognition is deeply meaningful,” said Gene Johnson. “Throughout my career, I’ve been fortunate to work with incredible teams and mentors. I hope this honor encourages young people to pursue their goals with purpose and integrity.”

Proceeds from the event will support JA programs across the region, helping thousands of students build the skills and confidence they need to succeed in school, work, and life.

For more information about the event, sponsorship opportunities, or to reserve your seat, visit <https://bit.ly/2026-HOF>.

About the North Carolina Business Hall of Fame

The North Carolina Business Hall of Fame celebrates individuals whose lifetime achievements embody business excellence, leadership, and community support. These laureates serve as role models, inspiring the next generation to pursue their dreams and make a positive impact.

About Junior Achievement of Central Carolinas (JA)

Junior Achievement® is the world's largest organization dedicated to empowering young people with the skills they need to compete in a global economy. Through hands-on experiences in financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurship, JA programs equip students from kindergarten through high school for future challenges. With support from business and community volunteers, JA serves more than **29,000 students annually** across **52 counties** in the Carolinas. For more information, visit www.jacarolinas.org.

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LAUREATE BIOS

Fred Whitfield

Fred Whitfield is a seasoned leader in the sports and entertainment industry, with experience as a player, coach, agent, sports marketer, and executive in both business and basketball operations. He retired from Hornets Sports & Entertainment in 2023 after overseeing its sale for a ten-fold gain.

Whitfield has served on the Board of Directors for O'Reilly Automotive, Inc. (\$65B) since 2021, contributing to the Human Capital/Compensation and Corporate Governance Committees and previously the Audit Committee. He is also a principal in 23XI Racing, the NASCAR team he co-founded in 2020 with Denny Hamlin, Michael Jordan, and Curtis Polk.

Joining Bobcats Sports & Entertainment in 2006 as President, COO, and Alternate Governor, Whitfield led the transition of majority ownership from Bob Johnson to Michael Jordan in 2010. He spearheaded the rebrand to the Charlotte Hornets in 2014, expanded operations to include the Greensboro Swarm (NBA G League) and Venom GT (NBA 2K League), and was elevated to President, Vice Chairman & Alternate Governor in 2018. Throughout his NBA tenure, he served on the NBA Board of Governors.

Prior to his NBA leadership roles, Whitfield held senior positions with NIKE Basketball, Falk Associates Management Enterprises (F.A.M.E.), Jordan Brand, and the Washington Wizards. A dedicated civic leader, Whitfield has earned North Carolina's highest civilian honors: the North Carolina Award and The Order of the Long Leaf Pine, along with the Dogwood Award and the Citizen of the Carolinas Award. The Charlotte Business Journal recognized him five times as one of The Most Admired CEOs, culminating in the 2023 Most Admired CEO Lifetime Achievement Award.

He founded Achievements Unlimited Basketball School, which has served more than 15,000 disadvantaged youth since 1985, and HoopTee Charities, Inc., supporting academic opportunities for underserved students.

Whitfield holds a BBA and MBA in Economics from Campbell University and a JD from North Carolina Central University School of Law, where he served as Student Bar Association President. He and his wife, Mary, reside in Charlotte.

Gene Johnson

Eugene B. (Gene) Johnson is the retired Chairman of United Communications, Inc. and former Chairman and CEO of FairPoint Communications, which he co-founded in 1991 and led until his retirement in 2009. Before FairPoint, he was President and sole shareholder of JC&A, Inc., a boutique investment banking firm serving the cable, telecommunications, and related industries. Johnson began his career as a CPA with Haskins and Sells, a predecessor to Deloitte & Touche.

A U.S. Army veteran, he attained the rank of Captain and served in South Korea and at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point before his discharge in 1971.

In 2023–2024, Johnson served as Interim President & CEO of the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, and later as Interim Director of the Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation at UNC Charlotte.

A UNC Charlotte alumnus, Johnson was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa and became the first graduate to chair both the UNC Charlotte Board of Trustees and the UNC Charlotte Foundation Board. He chaired the Football Capital Campaign, Marching Band Fundraising Committee, and \$200 million EXPONENTIAL Capital Campaign, and served on the Investment Fund Board and Belk College of Business Advisory Council. He also led the UNC Charlotte Athletic Foundation and Alumni Association, and, alongside his wife Vickie, was inducted into the Charlotte 49ers Athletics Hall of Fame in 2022.

A devoted civic leader, Johnson has served on numerous nonprofit and faith-based boards and as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA). His philanthropic involvement includes the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, Levine Museum of the New South, Teach for America, Hospice and Palliative Care, Communities in Schools, the Sullenberger Aviation Museum, and Roof Above.

Johnson's distinguished contributions have earned him the UNC Charlotte Alumni Hall of Fame (1997), the Bonnie E. Cone Lifetime Achievement Award (2000), an Honorary Doctorate (2014), and The Order of the Long Leaf Pine (2016).