

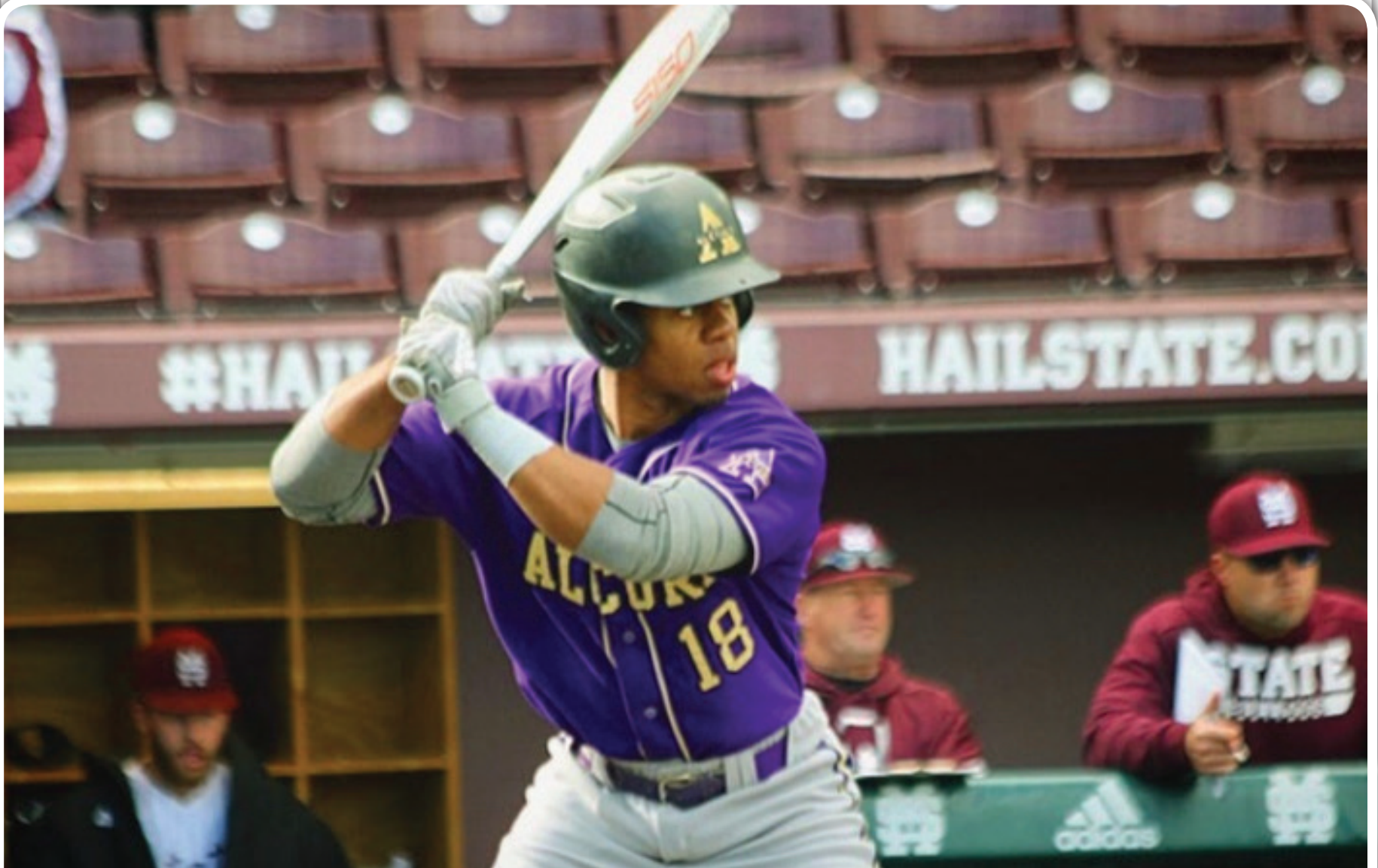
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HBCU Alumnus Lands Work Opportunity with MLB Organization



Brandon Rembert in action playing baseball for the Alcorn State University Braves against the Mississippi State University Bulldogs in 2020. Rembert, a former collegiate baseball player at Alcorn State University, now works for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team. Although his childhood dream was to play Division 1 baseball and to get drafted to a professional organization, Rembert found his niche working as a minor league operations assistant. Next year, he will work in the amateur scouting department. (See article on page 7.)

Photo Credit: Brian Baublitz

Year-end Tax Resolutions to Make Your New Year Bright

At the start of a new year, many resolve to make big changes during the next 365 days—whether it's to save more, eat better, exercise, lose weight or even complete our taxes long before the filing deadline.

The best tax-planning resolutions, however, might be the ones we complete before Jan. 1. Leading up to the new year, consider these timely money moves, which could help increase your tax refund or reduce the amount you'll owe

Boost your retirement savings

If you have a 401(k) plan through an employer, consider increasing your contribution. Money placed in a 401(k) at any time reduces your taxable income, lowering your adjusted gross income, potentially lowering it enough to help you qualify for other tax credits.

Individuals can contribute up to \$22,500 to their 401(k) plans for 2023. If you're putting money in an individual retirement account, or IRA, the limit on annual contributions is \$6,500. If you're 50 or older, you can put in an additional \$1,000 in catch-up funds.

You must contribute to your 401(k) by Dec. 31 for it to count for your 2023 return. But for a traditional or Roth IRA, you can contribute money through April 15, 2024, or the tax filing deadline, and have it apply for 2023.

Use up your FSA funds

If you have a flexible spending account (FSA) for health care or dependent care, you're expected to use almost all or all of your funds by Dec. 31, 2023. Depending on your plan, you might have a grace period to spend a portion in early 2024, or you may be able to roll over some of your unspent funds into next year's FSA. Check your plan guidelines to make sure, but either way, you don't want to lose money

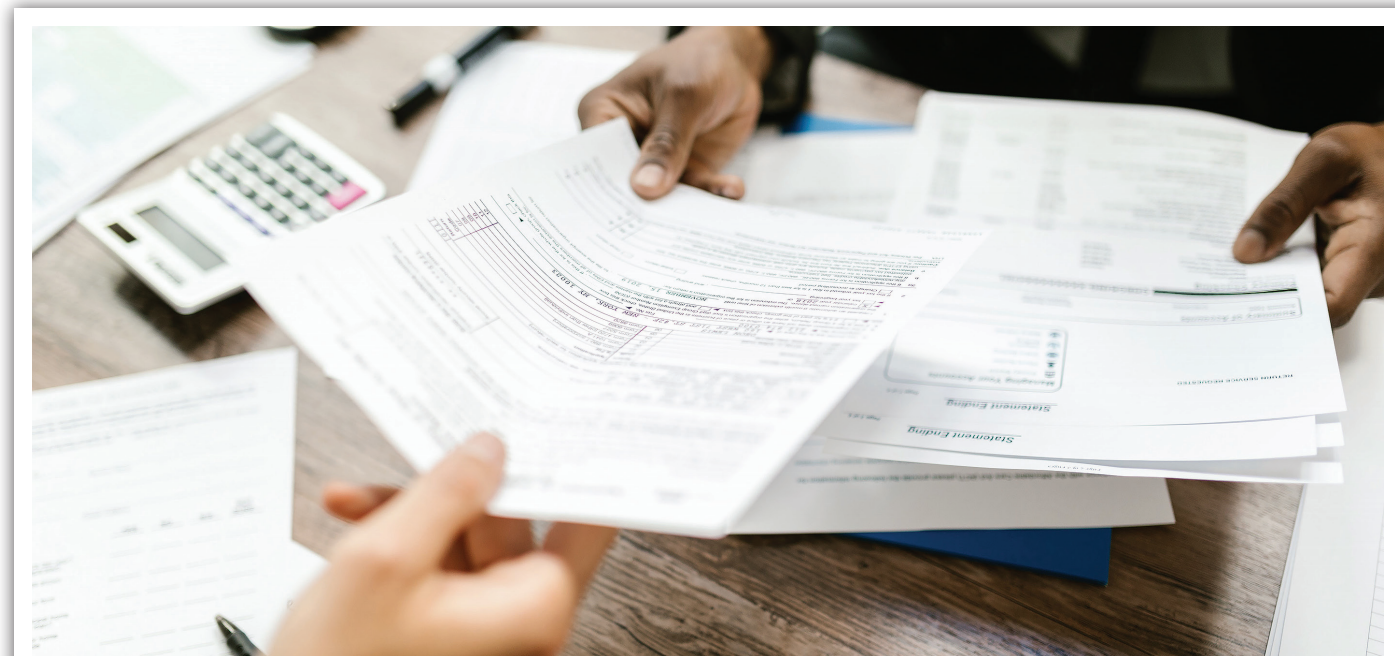


Photo courtesy of Pexels.com

already withdrawn from your paycheck.

You might be surprised what's eligible as a qualified expense under your FSA. Use this time to stock up on over-the-counter medications, sunscreens, eyeglasses, prenatal vitamins and more to spend down your FSA. If you've been putting off medical appointments or procedures, complete them before the end of the year. Other options include refilling eligible prescriptions by Dec. 31 and prepaying any childcare or summer camp expenses if you have a dependent care spending account.

How's your withholding?

If you got married, divorced or had a child in 2023—among other life changes—you may need to adjust how much your employer withholds from your paycheck for federal taxes. Other big changes, such as buying a home or getting a raise, might also call for a withholding change.

Contact your employer and fill

out a new W-4 form to change your withholding. This will help ensure you're paying enough from each check to avoid a large tax bill in 2024 – or help you avoid paying too much.

Will you itemize?

If you think your qualified expenses will be more than the 2023 standard deduction (\$13,850 for most singles, \$20,800 for heads of households and \$27,700 for most married couples filing jointly), you might get a larger return or pay less if you itemize your deductions. Estimate how much you can potentially deduct, and see if you can find additional expenses before Dec. 31 to add to that list.

You may also want to consider making a donation to your favorite charity – a percentage of your cash and non-cash charitable giving is tax-deductible. Many nonprofits have the greatest needs during the holidays, so additional donations you make

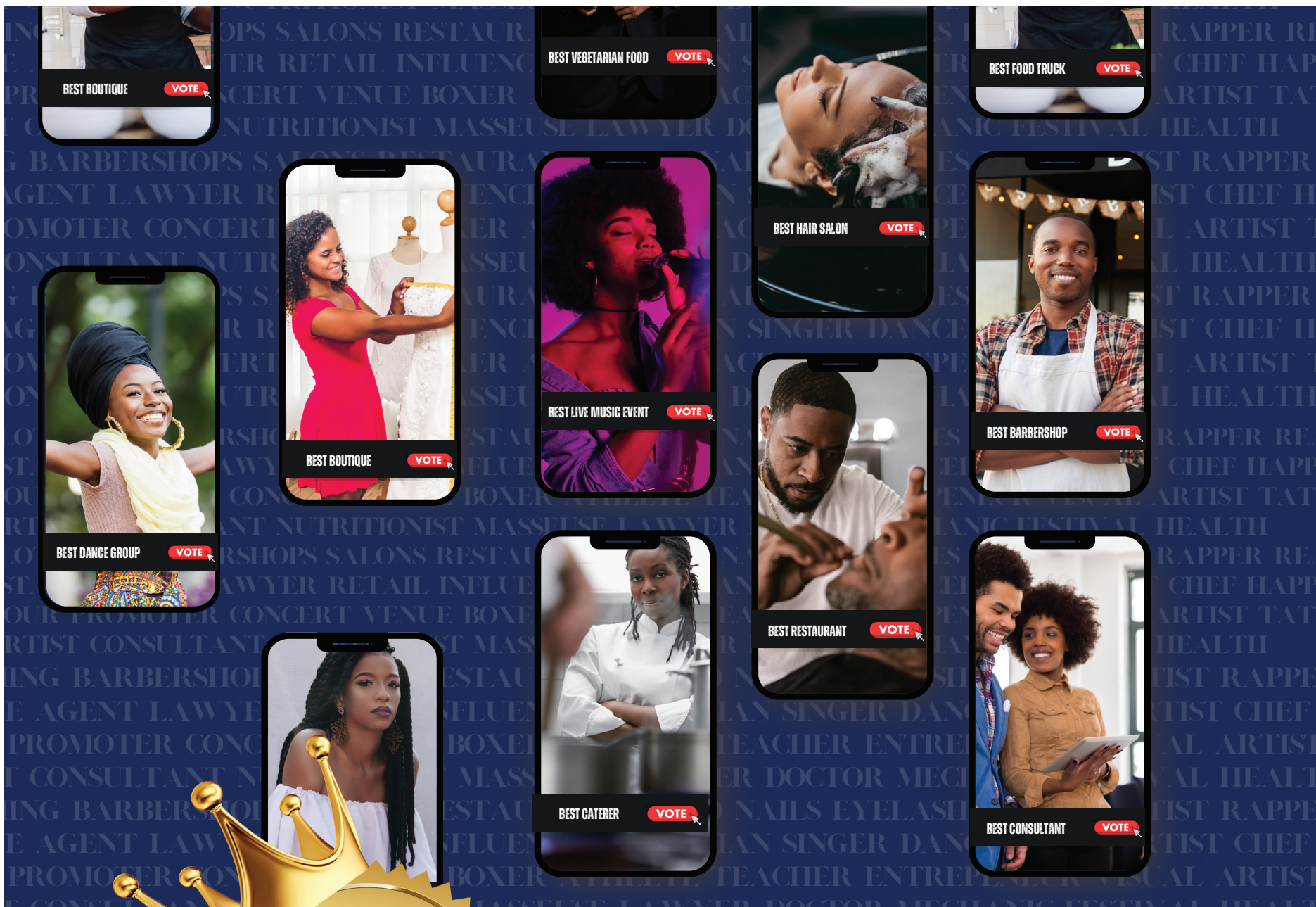
this season will go a long way toward helping others, and yourself.

Start the countdown

Take advantage of this crucial window of opportunity to maximize your 2023 tax return next year. While there's no bad time to take steps to cut your tax bill, November and December offer a final chance to make adjustments before closing out the tax year.

Year-end tax planning is one of the best New Year's resolutions you can make – just remember to get it done before the clock strikes midnight.

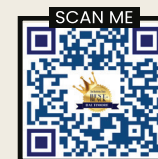
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Jayne Hopson
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On a Sesame Seed Bun: From Ancient Food Staple to FDA-Listed Allergen

sesame seeds pose a “hidden” threat to consumers with food allergies. Without proper labeling, the risk of cross-contamination is heightened. This unwitting exposure to sesame seeds can trigger a life-threatening allergic reaction.

Ancient cultures considered sesame seeds a culinary treasure. They were originally found in India and Africa. Spreading to the Middle East and Asia, the seeds became a vital ingredient in cuisines throughout these regions. Their distinctive nutty flavor made them an addition to a wide range of dishes, from bread and pastries to sauces and condiments.

While sesame seeds have been universally cherished for their culinary attributes, it was not until recently that their allergenic potential became widely known. The journey to understanding the allergenicity of sesame seeds involved several key milestones.

Looking ahead, the process of recognizing sesame seeds as an allergen could serve as a playbook for requiring another tiny, but very popular spice called pink peppercorns to be added to the list of FDA allergens. This crimson-colored spice is not a true pepper. It is a dried fruit that is a member of the tree nut family. When packaged as part of a peppercorn medley, pink peppercorns become an unlabeled tree nut allergy trigger.

The first documented cases of sesame allergies began appearing in medical literature in the late 20th century. Allergic reactions to sesame seeds were initially considered relatively rare, but as awareness increased, more cases were reported. Symptoms of sesame allergies varied from mild hives and gastrointestinal discomfort to severe anaphylaxis, a life-threatening allergic reaction.

As awareness of sesame allergies grew,



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Sesame seeds are one of the earth’s oldest cultivated crops. For 3,000 years these tiny, flavorful seeds have enhanced the taste and texture of dishes around the world. Easily grown and drought-resistant, sesame seeds are a reliable source of protein and a heart-healthy cooking oil choice.

However, after a long and popular culinary reign, sesame seeds are now classified as a food allergen by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). On January 1, 2023, sesame seeds came under the jurisdiction of the FDA’s mandate for food allergy warning labeling.

This decision marked a critical moment in the effort to recognize sesame seeds as an allergen, acknowledging the risks they posed to individuals with allergies and addressing the need for proper labeling and consumer protection.

Although less prevalent than other food allergens, sesame seed allergies have been known and documented in medical literature for several decades. Some allergists and healthcare professionals are aware of sesame seed allergies. Through clinical testing and evaluation of symptoms, providers have been diagnosing an increasing number of patients who are allergic to sesame seeds.

The versatility and widening use of

so did the number of reported cases. This increase in cases raised concerns within the medical community and prompted further research into the allergenic properties of sesame seeds. Studies began to investigate the mechanisms underlying sesame allergies and the factors contributing to their rise.

Scientific research played a crucial role in understanding the allergenicity of sesame seeds. Studies revealed that sesame allergies were not only on the rise but also exhibited cross-reactivity with other allergens, such as tree nuts and peanuts.

The FDA’s inclusion of sesame seeds as an allergen mandates clearer labeling on packaged food products. Manufacturers are required to disclose the presence of sesame seeds on product labels, making it easier for consumers with allergies to identify and avoid potentially harmful products.

There are also health literacy implications to the FDA decision. Healthcare professionals, food manufacturers, and consumers needed to be informed about sesame allergies and their potential consequences. To promote and ensure wellness

in communities with high rates of illiteracy, health providers need to be prepared to explain the printed precautions to patients who are poor readers.

Research shows sesame allergies may exhibit cross-reactivity with other allergens, particularly tree nuts and peanuts. This means that individuals with sesame allergies may also have allergic reactions to certain tree nuts or peanuts, and vice versa. It underscores the importance of comprehensive allergy testing and management.

It’s essential for individuals with sesame allergies to carefully read food labels and inquire about ingredients when dining out, as sesame seeds and sesame-derived products can be hidden in various foods.

Additionally, cross-contamination is a concern, so people with sesame allergies should take precautions to avoid accidental exposure to the allergen. The inclusion of sesame on allergen labeling lists in many countries, including the United States, has helped individuals with sesame allergies make more informed choices about the foods they consume.

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Technology and You

Google to Purge Inactive Accounts



Karen Clay
Courtesy photo

By Karen Clay
Clay Technology and Multimedia, L.L.C.

In May of this year, Google changed its policy for inactive, personal accounts created on its platform. Over the last several months, Google has been announcing via email and other avenues its intent to purge these inactive accounts, beginning this December. They define inactive accounts as those which have not been used in at least two years. While this new policy extends to all personal Google accounts, including content within Google Workspace (Gmail, Docs, Drive, Meet, Calendar) and Google Photos, it will not affect accounts for organizations like schools or businesses.

So why is Google making this change? There are several reasons, but the most important one has to do with cybersecurity. Google has invested in technology and tools to protect users from security threats, such as spam, phishing scams, and account hijacking. Even so, an account that has been dormant for an extended period is more likely to be compromised. This is because forgotten or unattended accounts have often been created with weak or reused passwords that may have been compromised over time. This creates an increased opportunity for that account to be hacked and used for anything from identity theft to a vector for unwanted or



Google will be purging accounts starting this December.
Graphic design by Karen Clay

even malicious content, like spam.

If you have a Google account or accounts that you have not used in at least two years, and you want to keep that account, sign into your account now and complete an activity. If you do this, your account will be considered active and will not be deleted. Activity might include the following:

- Reading or sending an email.
- Using Google Drive.
- Watching a YouTube video.
- Downloading an app on the Google Play Store.
- Using Google Search.
- Using “Sign In with Google” to sign into a third-party app or service.

If you have an existing subscription set up through your Google account, for example to Google One, a news publication or an app, Google also considers this account activity, and your account will not be impacted. Any of these actions will keep your account in an active status for another two years.

While you are at it, take this time to implement these recommended security strategies:

- Update your Google account password. A strong password will be

at least 13 characters long and include upper and lowercase letters, numbers, and symbols.

- Provide a recovery email for your Google account. This can be a lifesaver if you get locked out of your mail account or it’s hacked in the future. If you don’t have a secondary email address, you can add the email of someone else close to you and who you trust.

- Implement multifactor authentication (MFA) The most significant advantage of MFA is the added layer of protection. Even if a malicious actor acquires your password, they will still need the second (or third) factor to gain access. This combination of identity verification protects your accounts and reduces your chances of getting hacked.

- Backup up your data using Google Takeout. You can backup pretty much everything in your Google account using this tool. (In the Google Help Center, search for “How to use Google Takeout.”)

Take care of this ASAP and at least every two years to assure you continue to have access to the free accounts Google provides.

Baltimoreans, Production Company Help BCPS Students with Career Exploration

Inexperience did not prevent Larry Harris and Leonard Martin from trying their hand at film production in 2016.

“Leonard bought two cameras and we started creating,” Harrison said, reflecting on how their dream of storytelling started. “We’re actually self-taught. We reached out to people who were doing the same thing that we were doing, but we never received responses back, so we learned from Google, YouTube and trial and error.”

The co-CEO and creators of ArieCan Productions who grew up in Baltimore, provide a subscription-based model. Users stream their award-winning shows from their ariecanproductions.com website.

Harris added, “We’re currently gearing up for our movie theater premiere for season two of our series, ‘SECRETS,’ which will be premiering in February 2024 in theaters.”

Harris and Martin also nurture young, local talent through collaborative efforts with Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). They teach film to BCPS students with disabilities.

“We both work with BCPS. They reached out to us and told us about their initiative about wanting to get the students interested in the arts again. They asked us if we could come up with a curriculum. Larry and I came up with a six-week program,” Martin said.

Harris explained that BCPS students are taught everything that he and Martin learned over the past six years, including script writing, directing, acting, cinematography, editing and budget management.

ArieCan Production’s founders have plans for the students after they graduate from the program.

Harris added, “We’ll be teaming up with Youth Works so that we can hire the students to work for us as interns and be a part of ArieCan’s production team.”

Martin stated that ArieCan Productions has had the opportunity to work with 10 students in the new program.

“We’re hoping that as time goes on, we can increase that number,” he also said.

A cohort is still in progress. The second half of the BCPS student’s training course starts on January 13, 2024.

Shanieka Johnson, BCPS’ coordinator for secondary supports and transition services, explained more about how BCPS’s relationship with ArieCan developed. Johnson’s work impacts special education students. She works out of the Office of Special Education. Preparing students for adult life after they leave high school is an aspect of secondary transition that is addressed.

“One of the barriers that I found when I became coordinator is that there are plenty of opportunities out there in our local communities that can tap into our students’ talents and skills. However, we did not have a pipeline, or any type of support that we could offer to the students in our district, to be able to get exposure to those job development or fine arts opportunities,” Johnson said.

Grant funding supported the hiring of temporary staff members who focus on job development. The job developers network with local organizations in the community.

“So basically, we look at the students’ individual education plans to determine what their trajectory is and what their post-secondary goals are, and we go out and find organizations and/or agencies that pretty much would cater to those students’ needs, and what they want to do when they graduate, to give them those opportunities and expose them to those opportunities prior to graduation,” Johnson explained.

She also stated that grant funding



Three BCPS students hold up their certificates for graduating the program, *Intro into the Film Industry.*
Courtesy of ArieCan Productions

covers expenses including equipment, laptops and uniforms, if it is needed through the partnership with ArieCan Productions. Service is provided free for students.

Johnson further noted that a plethora of BCPS students who are supported through her office are interested in the arts, media and communication field. Johnson’s team is involved in the recruitment process of students. School teams provide leads about appropriate students who would fit well with a particular partner’s offerings. ArieCan Productions has worked with a wide range of students who are served by Johnson’s office, but ArieCan Productions gives them a quality training experience.

Jordan Wilson, a 12th grader, is a program participant. He has been interested in movies since he could talk. Jordan has been engaged and learning about the different characters in movie scripts through ArieCan. “A Dog’s Great Adventure” is one of Jordan’s scripts.

He hopes that Nickelodeon will pick up the animated movie and series. Jordan is interested in acting in movies, creating animation and doing



Larry Harris and Leonard Martin, co-CEO and creators of *ArieCan Productions.*
Courtesy of ArieCan Productions

voice-overs. ArieCan’s training has been helpful to build skills for his future.

“We learn about animation, filmmaking and photography,” Jordan said.

Parents and school staff can learn about programming that is offered through Johnson’s office via the Secondary Transition Services Resource Hub: <https://sites.google.com/bcps.k12.md.us/transitionservices/transition-home>.

HBCU Alumnus Lands Work Opportunity with MLB Organization

By **Andrea Blackstone**

April 15, 1947 was the landmark date that Jackie Robinson integrated baseball upon joining the Brooklyn Dodgers. Although it was a major stride, the passage of time does not mean that baseball's diversity issue vanished after Robinson joined a Major League Baseball (MLB) team.

U.S. born African American MLB players have been on the decline in recent years. Additionally, who runs baseball and how to move up the ranks in leadership roles is another conversation about diversity that intersects with playing ball.

"There is a way to get in. Don't count yourself out just because of your skin color and your background or ethnicity, just because it's not a predominantly Black sport," said Brandon Rembert. "I work in the Pittsburgh Pirates organization. The last two years I was a minor league operations assistant. My new role coming into next year will be in the amateur scouting department."

Rembert, who was born and raised in Pensacola, Florida, is a former HBCU baseball standout who played on the Alcorn State Braves team from 2019-2021. When he reached the baseball diamond in college, Rembert already had 17 or 18 years of baseball experience under his belt.

Some of Rembert's notoriety during his time at Alcorn State included being named a two-time Southwestern Athletic Conference Pre-Season All-Conference First-Team selection prior to his 2020 and 2021 campaigns. He was also named the tenth ranked HBCU MLB Draft prospect going into the 2021 season by Black College Nines.

"I had a baseball scholarship along with some academic money as well,"



Brandon Rembert overlooking PNC Park in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
Photo credit: Rocco Liberatore

Rembert said, explaining that he maintained good grades. "The goal obviously was to play professional baseball. Going into my last year, I thought I was going to be in a good spot to be able to get picked up, either as a free agent or in the draft, but then I had a hamstring injury. So, in my last year I was sidelined for most of the season."

Rembert's plan to play professional baseball was cut short. He was limited to playing 10 games. The forced pivot was hard for Rembert to accept. After regrouping, a new plan took shape.

"I was coaching for a travel team around the area that I was in, and then I also was the assistant hitting and outfield coach for my high school alma mater, Booker T. Washington [in

Pensacola, Florida]," Rembert said.

The Pittsburgh Pirates found Rembert in 2022. Tyrone Brooks, senior director of front office and field staff diversity pipeline program at Major League Baseball, spoke to Rembert's college baseball team about an MLB diversity program that he was running. Rembert stayed in touch with him.

"And then crazy enough, he used to work for the Pittsburgh Pirates. He had my resume and he sent over my resume to the Pirates. They took a look at it, and they started giving me calls and interviews. I kept reaching the next level, the next level and then eventually they liked what they saw. They brought me on," Rembert said.

Rembert was hired by the Pittsburgh Pirates as minor league baseball

operations assistant. During his first year with the organization, he was based in the Dominican Republic. He finished his second season with the Pirates this year. Rembert mainly worked with the Low-A affiliate Bradenton Marauders. Video and data collection, assisting with cage and on field work and other administrative responsibilities kept Rembert busy.

He will take on a new role next year, making a transition into the amateur scouting department for the Pirates. Along with scouting, he hopes to capture footage of certain prospects that the team needs.

Rembert wants HBCU students, and African Americans who want to pursue a career in professional baseball, to understand that there are a lot of moving parts in baseball that require many different staffing needs. Digging for internship opportunities, programs and fellowships can be a part of the process.

"My advice would be to just do the research. Go online and see what's out there. Even LinkedIn is a good tool now to research and connect with people that are in the game," Rembert said.

He added that the Pirates organization is a rather diverse organization compared to others, in his opinion. Rembert believes that baseball employment diversity will improve, even gender wise, especially because of Brooks' work.

Rembert remains hopeful about what is in store for his professional future, too.

"I want to continue to climb the ladder within the Pirates organization. They've been really good to me. I've had a lot of growth," Rembert said. "I want to continue to grow and I want to continue to learn."

Mother and Daughter Form Special Bond Through a Gift to Remember

By Andrea Blackstone

Katura Britt is a 24-year-old with an infectious smile and a bright future ahead of her. The graduate student who is studying integrative health and wellness at the University of Maryland's Baltimore campus has had to display resilience and maturity beyond her years.

Not all liver disease results from years of excess alcohol use. Liver disease crept into Katura's life when she was just a baby. Britt's childhood memories include trekking to doctor offices and hospitals countless times.

"Just about two weeks after being born, I started showing signs of liver failure, like jaundice and other symptoms," Britt said. "Pretty much ever since those two weeks, I was thrown onto a completely different path. So were my parents [Ned Britt and Sharon Fries-Britt]."

After multiple misdiagnoses in 1999, Katura was finally diagnosed with biliary atresia. The rare liver disease occurs in infants.

"The disorder affects tubes in the liver called bile ducts. If not treated with surgery, it can be fatal," according to Stanford Medicine Children's Health. "Bile is a fluid made by the liver. Normally the bile ducts take bile to the small intestine. Bile helps with digestion and also carries waste products. When a child has biliary atresia, the bile ducts in the liver are blocked. Bile becomes backed up in the liver. This damages the liver."

Katura said that her first surgery, a kasai procedure, was performed when she was four months old.

"This surgery connects the bile drainage from the liver directly to the intestinal tract. It goes around (bypasses) the blocked bile ducts. This surgery can allow a child to grow and be in fairly good health for a few



Katura Britt at home with her mom as a baby. Courtesy photo



Katura Britt and her mother in San Diego. Katura Britt

years," per information provided by Stanford Medicine Children's Health.

Her mother, Sharon Fries-Britt added that Katura's diagnosis of having biliary atresia required her to have a kasai procedure that unfortunately did not work.

"Thus, by six months [old], her condition was life threatening, and we were informed that without a [liver] transplant, she would have a shortened life," she said.

Since the liver is the only organ that can regenerate itself, a living donor transplant is possible.

Fries-Britt added, "As an interested donor, the decision that I had to make was to go through the stages of review to see if I qualified. This process took a while and required a number of tests. After being cleared as eligible, I then had to make the decision to move forward and I was delighted to have this option."

Katura stated that she received a liver transplant at 13 months old. Since she had a living, related organ donor, it significantly reduced organ transplant rejection, although Katura does take anti-rejection medication daily.

Today, Katura deals with having an enlarged spleen and low platelets in her blood that requires her to be cautious about injuries because of clotting issues.

The liver transplant recipient said that she felt isolated while growing up. "I kept it (the liver transplant) secret from my friends pretty much up until sophomore year of high school, when I started being seen by my gastroenterologist at the time," Katura said.

When her school year had to be extended at the age of 16 due to medical treatment, her close circle of friends wondered what was going on.

Today, Katura bravely raises awareness about organ, eye and tissue donation as an ambassador for Infinite Legacy, a nonprofit organization that connects organ, eye and tissue donors and recipients in Maryland and the metro D.C. area. She also was a proud member of a task force that Infinite Legacy was a part of, along with National Minority Organ Tissue Transplant Education Program (MOTTEP). MOTTEP was established by Dr. Clive O. Callender, a Professor



Katura Britt speaking as a guest at Charles Hart Middle School for their Organ Donation Pep Rally with Infinite Legacy in June of 2023. Danielle from Infinite Legacy

of Surgery at Howard University College of Medicine. He is also a transplant surgeon.

Minorities need more support to have transplant opportunities.

"African Americans make up the largest group of minorities in need of an organ transplant. In 2021, non-Hispanic Blacks made up 12.1 percent of the national population," according to the Office of Minority Health.

Katura's parents were able to put their daughter on a successful path, despite the hurdles of getting Katura much-needed help.

"I am very grateful for all the expertise of the medical staff and all levels of professionals who interacted with us throughout this journey," Fries-Britt said.

Please visit <https://www.donatelifemaryland.org/> to learn more about registering to become an organ, eye and tissue donor.



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Ravens Need Group Effort to Replace Mark Andrews

By Tyler Hamilton

Losing tight end Mark Andrews made the Baltimore Ravens' 34-20 win over AFC North division rival Cincinnati Bengals a bitter one. Andrews suffered a cracked fibula and ankle ligament injury on Thursday, November 16, 2023.

Ravens coach, John Harbaugh, contemplated the loss after the game. "I don't know, maybe it's like sand or water [where] everybody's going to have to fill that hole in and just smooth it over, and that's what they'll do," Harbaugh said. "Those tight ends [Isaiah Likely and Charlie Kolar] are going to do great. Those guys work hard every day, [and they're] very talented, but everybody else is going to have to step up as well. As a leader, he's going to be missed. He's a fiery, emotional guy. He's an energy-bringer every single day, so we're going to have to all make up for that, too."

Andrews had 45 receptions for 544 yards and six touchdowns before the injury. He set the Ravens up for their first touchdown when he got hurt. The Ravens will rely upon 2021 fourth-round pick Isaiah Likely to fill in for Andrews. The shoes will be too big to fill solely. Fellow 2022 day 3 pick Charlie Kolar will also get opportunities.

"You say next man up, it's not just the next player in that position, it's all the men, it's all the players stepping up and filling that," Harbaugh said. "To replace a player like Mark Andrews, it's going to take everybody. It's going to take a team to do it, and our guys will be up for the challenge and up for the task."

"I believe it's going to be a huge challenge, but like I said we have Charlie [Kolar] and [Isaiah] Likely," quarterback Lamar Jackson said.



Mark Andrews
Getty Images

"Those guys are going to step up, and they've been playing their tail off as well, but we're going to build chemistry. I don't want to say it's like Mark [Andrews] isn't there, but he's not going to be there, because it's [likely] a season-ending injury. Those guys are going to step up and do what they're supposed to do."

Jackson went to the receivers to help offset the loss of Andrews. Nelson Agholor and Rashod Bateman scored a touchdown and Odell Beckham Jr. and Zay Flowers contributed against the Bengals also. They'll be relied upon to help the passing game while

Andrews is away.

Baltimore has seven games remaining in the season and sit on top of the AFC North with an 8-2 record. The playoffs are well within the Ravens sights. It's not a far-fetched idea that they could represent the AFC in the Super Bowl. A deep playoff run could include Andrews returning to the lineup. Harbaugh said a return this season hasn't been ruled out yet for Andrews.

"Nothing's completely definitive yet," Harbaugh added. "But my understanding in talking with our trainer [Adrian Dixon] and the

doctors, is that it wasn't as bad as initially feared right after the game. There is the type of damage that's done sometimes in that kind of an action, what happens to the ankle, but it wasn't as bad as it could've been. It's cleaner than they thought based on the MRI. He's going to be involved with Dr. [Robert] Anderson down there in [North] Carolina in Charlotte [in] the next few days. We'll know more, but there might be an outside chance he could get back at some point in time."

Getting Andrews back would come right on time to help the Ravens make a run for their third Super Bowl trophy.

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