

WEEKEND

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‘When we love, we love hard’

South Carolina Gamecocks head coach Dawn Staley reacts April 4 after defeating the Texas Longhorns during the semifinal of the women’s 2025 NCAA tournament at Amalie Arena in Tampa, FL. NATHAN RAY SEEBECK/IMAGN IMAGES

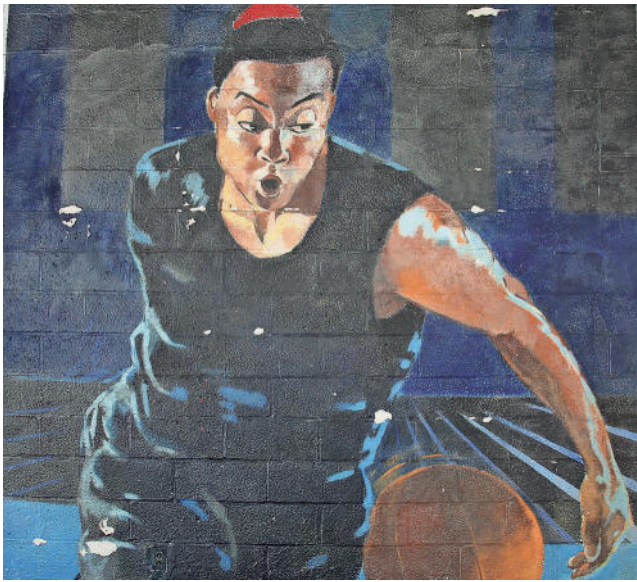
Staley’s home is with USC, but she’s forever Philadelphia

Lulu Kesin Greenville News | USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

PHILADELPHIA

Dawn Staley doesn’t want to move back to Philadelphia. For one thing, it’s cold in the winter. • Staley, who has lived in Columbia since she started coaching South Carolina women’s basketball in 2008, told her childhood best friend, Dexter Matthews, she isn’t coming back.

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A mural of Dawn Staley adorns Hank Gathers Recreation Center in Philadelphia. Staley practiced basketball at the center during her childhood before attending University of Virginia. LULU KESIN/GREENVILLE NEWS

Million dollar listings show luxury living in downtown Greenville

A.J. Jackson Greenville News USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

It could have been a multi-million-dollar property overlooking the waters of Lake Hartwell or a house embedded into the hills at Paris Mountain. Instead, Lee and Pam Foster felt their best chance at luxury living in the Up-state would be downtown Greenville, specifically, in the 29601 zip code — an area with live music venues, sporting events, quality restaurants, and more, all within a walkable distance. After selling their five-bedroom, seven-bathroom Collins Creek estate in 2024 for nearly \$2.6 million, the Fosters

happily downsized their home square footage by more than six times to get into an apartment in downtown Greenville. “True luxury isn’t about size,” said Pam Foster, real estate agent at Blackstream Christie’s International of Greenville and current resident at DECA Camperdown. “It’s about how a space makes you feel, and the life you get to live within it.” However, the search for their perfect home within the same zip code is ongoing, as the Fosters are looking for a condo or townhome with a rooftop. “What we craved was freedom, so we

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Pam Foster of Greenville, looks over downtown at Deca Apartments, where her family moved from a 10,000 square-foot home in the city to the 1,500 square-foot living space with a whole different a new set of amenities she says. KEN RUINARD/GREENVILLE NEWS

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Staley

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Philadelphia wants a WNBA team but when Staley returned home May 23 to promote her book “Uncommon Favor: Basketball, North Philly, My Mother and Life Lessons I learned from All Three,” she shut down any hope she’d coach pro basketball. Maybe as a “ghost owner,” someone involved but not required to be physically present, she joked.

Her hometown has changed though Matthews said Staley, now 55, is *still* there.

“It’s a deep love,” Staley said, adjusting her gaze to the audience, with a straighter posture than five seconds prior when her spine curved into the chair. “When Philly loves, when we love, we love hard. When something is a part of who we are, when something is part of the community, we love extremely hard.”

Without Philly, there’s no South Carolina. Now, she’s just in two places at once. The lights shine bright in Columbia but Staley’s marquee in Philadelphia has yet to dim.

Dawn Staley wows her fans in Philadelphia

Eight-year-old Joni Scott walked into Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church donning a black tracksuit with white trim. She carried a blush pink Wilson brand basketball, still in its cardboard case into Staley’s book event. The young Philly baller watches every South Carolina game.

“She means a lot to me,” Joni told The Greenville News. “It means the world to be here.”

Not just Joni, the essence and influence of Staley was sewn in the fabric of nearly every shirt represented in the multigenerational crowd.

South Carolina gear, WNBA jerseys, shirts with Staley’s SLAM Magazine cover on it, TOGETHXR’s “Everyone Watches Women’s Sports” shirt that Staley has sported numerous times, worn in various colors.

USA Basketball No. 5 jerseys, Playa Society — a clothing brand specializing in women’s sports gear — spotted in the seats of nearly every section. Each an individual way of showing how Staley impacted their life.

Carla Wright was in the King of Prus-



Dawn Staley poses with her new statue in Columbia. LULU KESIN/GREENVILLE NEWS

sia Mall, just trying to get a ring sized properly when the manager immediately pointed to Wright’s South Carolina sweatshirt.

“I’m a Dawn Staley fan,” Wright said. “So am I,” the manager replied.

That led to an exchange of numbers, then photos and conversations regularly sent after the manager told Wright she travels to games just for Staley.

“Even if people don’t know about basketball they know about Dawn Staley,” Wright said. “I met this lady in the mall, just wearing this shirt. Dawn is just powerful.”

Staley is a magnet. She surprised the crowd 30 minutes shy of the scheduled

start time and when a security guard aimed to control the group that trailed her like a spotlight, she kept socializing. When gently persuaded to wrap up her conversations, Staley wrapped her arms around even more people.

Philly is where it all began but basketball, that was her ticket to stardom.

Dawn Staley’s basketball journey in North Philadelphia

Matthews moved to Raymond Rosen housing projects right on the Staley family’s block in North Philadelphia when he was 13. “Herb” to her and “Lyte” to him, named after her 1990s hairstyle

that swooped in the front like the rapper MC Lyte.

Staley, three years his junior, went from knocking on his door for quests to the supermarket to picking him up for two-a-day workouts when she was an Olympic hopeful in the mid 1990s.

He claims he was her first coach, and Staley, while acknowledging his story is a version where he taught her everything about basketball, she jokes in the book that he was really “just a rebounder.”

The recreation center was a six-minute walk away. It was more than a neighborhood spot, it was Staley’s canvas. Where her game developed, her creativity came alive and her craft was perfected.

It was Moylan Recreation Center until 1991, when it was posthumously renamed to Hank Gathers Recreation Center, to honor Gathers, who Staley called the “the epitome of hard work,” in her book. Gathers, who died tragically after collapsing in a college basketball game, graduated from Dobbins Technical High School four years before Staley.

The inside court is a blue rubber and the outside is quintessential concrete. Each basket with thick rims, some nets new, some half ripped. In retrospect, it’s the same court. The same ground responsible for the limp Staley walks with, but it differs.

A large mural of Gathers has coated the brick wall facing the outdoor courts since 2022, replacing one from 2005. Staley’s words now drape the same court she grew up dribbling over.

“The disciplined person can do anything,” – Dawn Staley, it reads.

Inside, a replica of the Gamecocks 2017 national championship trophy greets every young basketball hopeful. Staley’s team photos with USA Basketball are taped to the walls.

Two paintings hang beyond the playing surface: one of Gathers, one of Staley.

The stretch of Diamond Street between 23rd and 25th Street was where Staley flourished. The city renamed it Dawn Staley Lane seven years ago.

How Dawn Staley’s skill brought multiple generations together

Closing the chapter on a childhood spent playing every sport with Staley, Matthews inadvertently assumed the

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Staley

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role of an agent as a 19-year-old. He told his roommate Delgreco Wilson at Lincoln University about Staley, and Wilson was skeptical but one glance at her game during the summer validated the scouting report. From that moment on, Wilson bought every newspaper that had Staley’s name in it. “Dawn was part of a clique of elite North Philadelphia athletes,” Wilson said. “Mostly all male, except for her, and she was considered an equal to all of them in every regard.” And she’d let everyone know. In 1986, Tina Williams got her first taste of Staley’s smack talk. Williams, a player at Lambertson High School, met Staley in the All Public All-Star Game.

“You can’t stay in front of me,” Staley told her, and 39 years later at Staley’s book signing, Williams admitted she was entirely right. “I would see Kobe (Bryant) and it was the same kind of thing, the aura about her, better than anyone out there,” Williams said. “Quicker, better, stronger, faster, you could tell she would take it to the next level.”

North Philadelphia knew her game, and she was her generation’s icon. Yolanda Laney of West Philly, 21 at the time, saw 13-year-old Staley walk into the gym with mid-ankle socks, long shorts and a baggy T-shirt, curious what the young hooper could do. “I was blown away,” Laney said. “She was the best point guard I’d ever seen. Her joy, her humanity, her love for the game. That’s what made her a great player, too.”

Staley’s speed, her court vision, the way defenders’ ankles were guaranteed to drop at the hands of her fluid yet jolty movements. Her game contained a multitude of versatile and necessary elements. Like a poet, with grace and rhythm, Laney described. The eight-year age gap meant their impact spanned different groups and generations but both grew up playing with boys in respective parts of Philadelphia. Laney ultimately started the Developmental Basketball League which Staley played in. Laney played at Cheyney University under legendary coach C. Vivian Stringer, another Pennsylvania native and mentor for Staley. In 1982, Cheyney



Dawn Staley Lane is seen in North Philadelphia on May 23. LULU KESIN/GREENVILLE NEWS

State made it to the national championship, and still, the Wolves remain the only women’s basketball team from an HBCU to play in a Final Four or Division I championship. On March 19, 2023, Staley honored them both and the school, located roughly 30 miles from where she grew up, by coaching in a Cheney State jersey. Like Wright and Laney, Tanya Williford knew Staley long before her success at Virginia, before she became a six-time WNBA All-Star with the Charlotte Sting and three-time Olympic gold medalist. They all saw the young phenom and decades later, Williford travels to South Carolina for games. “She was always making progress in the community,” Williford said. “She’s changed the culture of women’s basketball.”

How Temple University prepared Dawn Staley for national impact

In her book, Staley recalls John Chaney, the legendary Temple men’s basketball coach, first catching a glimpse of her playing in the school’s McGonigle Hall as an eighth grader. That led to an invite to Chaney’s co-ed basketball camp. Chaney revolutionized Philadelphia basketball. He wasn’t just a coach transforming a program, he was an advocate for Black athletes and for Black Philadelphia. She became his mentee, and as she writes in her book, that feeling of then becoming his peer and co-worker

1,000 times over tell her to go have an impact and do everything that she’s done.” Landry had three years of Staley’s direct influence but it’s never ending. Staley’s work impacts Landry, who is still with the Temple program as the director of player personnel. For a different generation like Wilson, who lost an indescribably influential figure when Chaney died in 2021, he sees how Staley’s status continues to rise but she authentically carries on his spirit, beyond Philadelphia. “Chaney used to talk about equality, fairness and justice,” Wilson said. “Now, Dawn is the one and does it in such an unassuming, dignified, and quiet manner. She doesn’t bring attention to it. If asked the question, she’ll answer in a very direct and frank manner. She’ll deal with the heat that comes with that. I love that about her.”

Dawn Staley, forever and always Philadelphia

The night back home for Staley resembled a concert with no last song to skip. The audience was glued to their seat for every last word before swallowing her in a sea of hands, cell phones, and mementos but she didn’t care. Leaving through a back door made no sense, she took the public way out. It was a room full of people who feel a little more connected, a little more loved, and a little more capable because of her. She embodies both a confident star – spending too much money on clothes according to her friends – and a humble fan. When asked for outfit details, Staley, a little shyly, sunk into her chair. Her eyes darted left to right, her shoulders curled inward and up ever so slightly. “Gucci,” she whispered. A coach but a comedian, both pomp and puerile, Staley balanced life lessons with a clear refusal to take herself too seriously. Fighting through the crowd to stand out, as Staley herself had done her whole life, Joni was determined. She popped out of the masses with her basketball freshly inked. Strangers began to clap for Joni as her smile grew. That’s Philly love. Lulu Kesin covers South Carolina athletics for The Greenville News and the USA TODAY Network. Email her at lkesin@gannett.com and follow her on X, formerly known as Twitter, @Lulukesin

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