



PITY PARTY

Carolina's favorite bricks and steps came about as something of an afterthought, then quickly became *the* spot to celebrate, congregate and agitate. Now, renovations aim to transform it into a more thought-out gathering space.

*by Cameron Hayes Fardy '23
and Laurie D. Willis '86*

It doesn't appear in University promotional materials as frequently as the Bell Tower. Students don't have their graduation pictures taken near it like the Old Well. But there's one Carolina landmark some would argue is more intricately woven into the fabric of UNC student life: the Pit.

The Pit's endearing quality may just lie in its simple, unassuming form, a spontaneous, unintentional space that rose — or is that sunk? — out of the construction of the Student Stores, the Frank Porter Graham Student Union and the Robert B. House Undergraduate Library in 1967 and 1968. The Pit sits on the former site of Emerson Field, where UNC's baseball team played from 1916 until construction started on the buildings.

Since then, the brick depression, with its two oak sentinels, has been the hub of activity at Carolina and has played a central role in student life as much as, or maybe more than, any other space on campus. Now University leaders have plans that will transform the area. Officials are deliberating between design options that include a beach-style slope, a bridge walkway that bisects the Pit and a plaza area that would level the space. (See "Beach, Plaza or Bridge," page 64.) University planners say the renovations are necessary to resolve storm drainage problems. In 2013, a storm flooded the Pit entirely.

The University previously considered renovating the Pit, but delayed the work for as long as possible because it would mean losing the two Overcup oaks, said University landscape architect Daniel Widis '09 ('13 MRP). Now, UNC plans to have the final designs completed this fall.

Whatever the space will look like, it will most likely remain the center of campus life. Campus lore says if you spend 24 hours sitting at the Pit, you'll see all of the University's 30,000 students pass by. That may be an exaggeration, but it's almost certain that almost every alumnus since the late '60s participated in or watched myriad activities at the Pit, from Earth Day events to concerts to Fall Fest to Last Day of Classes celebrations. The Pit was where students ventured to meet up with friends between classes, grabbed a free Krispy Kreme doughnut or nabbed Carolina swag that clubs handed out to attract new members.

Black Greek step shows have been popular in the Pit for decades. Sororities and fraternities use the area as a gathering place for events, including "pie-in-the-face" fundraisers.

Voter registration drives have been held there, and it's virtually impossible

to forget the Pit preachers, who, armed with Bibles and bullhorns, spent hours quoting scripture, trying to save souls.

It didn't take long for activists to understand the soapbox the Pit provided, using it as their go-to place to champion causes or protest issues. Within a couple of months of the Pit's completion in fall 1969, students used the space to rally around food workers in their fight for higher wages. The next year, it served as one of two polling places for students to vote on a referendum to end the Vietnam War.

That same year, James Cates Jr., a Black Chapel Hill resident, was stabbed in the Pit while attending a Homecoming dance held to promote unity. A memorial for Cates, who died later at nearby N.C. Memorial Hospital, was dedicated in 2022 and sits on the northwest corner of the iconic University landmark.

In April 2023, hundreds of students and Chapel Hill residents gathered in the Pit to support or protest the University's decision to bring former vice president and then-presidential candidate Mike Pence to the Student Union to deliver a speech. Last August, it was the Pit where students gathered for a vigil for slain Professor Zijie Yan.

Walk with us now down "Pit Memory Lane" as we highlight the extraordinary and mundane events that have happened at that unpretentious brick block, UNC's undisputed campus hub.

Origin story: At first, the area now called the Pit was a large, shallow dirt depression created during the construction of the surrounding buildings. It created a major navigational headache for students.

Instead of hiring an architect and a construction company to determine what to do with the eyesore, the University announced in August 1969 that the campus grounds crew had begun work on "a sunken brick patio to be surrounded by brick steps" with two shade trees planted in the center, according to *The Daily Tar Heel*. Carolina students pitched in, cutting the cost of the project "almost in half." Given the central role the Pit has had on student life, perhaps it was fitting that students literally had their hands in its creation. When students returned to campus that year, work had been completed, and *The DTH* and the Student Handbook began referring to the area as the Pit.

"That mass of dirt, dust and bricks (and occasional mud) in front of the Book Ex now has a name. It's called the Pit," *The DTH* reported Aug. 14, 1969. The editors said they liked the name. "It has a nice sound to it. You know, short, snappy and easy to remember."

Pit Is The Pit And We Like It

That mass of dirt, dust and bricks (and occasionally mud) in front of the Book Ex now has a name. It is called The Pit.
Or at least that's what the orientation handbook is calling it.
We sort of expect the officials in South Building to come up with something like the Frank Edward Jones Memorial Square when work on The Pit is finally completed.
Personally, we like "The Pit."
It has a nice sound to it. You know, short, snappy and easy to remember.

Daily Tar Heel, Aug. 14, 1969



CAROLINA ALUMNI/JASON SMITH '94

Have you been saved? Since the 1980s, evangelical Christians have chosen the Pit to preach to students. The famed "Pit preachers" take advantage of a large, ready audience and free speech protections to try to educate, convert or, at times, chastise passing students.

Occasionally, a group of students debates a Pit preacher on the fine theological points of sin and college life in general. One of the most famous of the Pit preachers is Gary Birdsong, a former Hells Angels member who last preached at Carolina March 18, according to his Facebook page. Birdsong can be found on campus carrying a sign reading "Fear God" and answering questions from students. When he first appeared in the Pit in the early 1980s, he showed up in his "Sunday best" suit and tie. Later he took a more informal approach, wearing a T-shirt and hat. The sign didn't change.

In 2007, Birdsong was banned from the Pit for two years after refusing a University order to leave his spot on the steps. That didn't stop him from preaching elsewhere on campus, such as outside Davis Library, just a few paces from the Pit. (See "Pit Preacher Moves Off His Stage After Conflict," May/June 2007 *Review*.) Once the ban was lifted, he was right back on his spot. Birdsong also preached on other college campuses in and out of the state. At North Carolina State University he's known as the "Brickyard Preacher." He's called "The New Quad Preacher" at UNC-Charlotte, "The Joyner Steps Preacher" at East Carolina University and "Sanford Mall Preacher" at Appalachian State University.



Above: Gary Birdsong at the Pit, 1986.
Top: Birdsong in the Pit, 2016.

YACKETY YACK/AVA LONG '87

Pit Sitting: Active members of one of the more than 800 Carolina clubs are likely to be familiar with "Pit sitting," which refers to pulling up a chair behind a card table to find new members. Students Pit sit while selling T-shirts to raise money, singing to promote an a cappella group or distributing information about their club or organization.

During Homecoming Week, Carolina Alumni employees gather in the Pit to sell T-shirts and promote events to increase excitement among students for one of the biggest weekends of the year.

Pit sitting hasn't always been about clubs or big events. A 1985 edition of *The University Report* says, "pit-sitting as a pastime is popular and simple — just sit down, pretend you're reading *The DTH* and observe the potential passing by" — as in potential suitors. (See *The University Report*, March 1986.)



A step show by members of Kappa Alpha Psi in 2014

Students crowd Pit, Union during lunch



Daily Tar Heel, Aug. 20, 1997

Camp Lenoir: In 1997, the Pit closed to provide seating for Lenoir Dining Hall, which was undergoing renovations. A temporary structure erected in the Pit was called Camp Lenoir — see the rendering below — and it stuck around for a year. (See May/June 1997 *Review*.) *The DTH* reported students’ distaste over the structure and later wrote about the joy when it was dismantled in 1998.



A rendering of the temporary dining shelter nicknamed Camp Lenoir

CAROLINA ALUMNI FILES

Steppin’ out: Since the Psi Delta chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. began as the first Black Greek organization at UNC, in 1973, Black fraternities and sororities have thrown parties or performed step shows and strolls in the Pit.

“We held several parties in the Pit during summer school,” said Julian Rosemond Jr. ’75, a member of the second line of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. and former Navy officer. The fraternity brothers would put up flyers around campus advertising Saturday night parties. “People would come out to dance and bring their own libations and whatever else they were going to use to make themselves feel good,” Rosemond said. “It was a lot of fun. That’s when the hot pants were out. That’s the thing I remember about the Pit.”

Today, members of Black Greek sororities and fraternities hold strolls in the Pit, when members move together in a line expressing pride for their organization through their call, sign or custom dances.

Members of majority white sororities and fraternities hold events such as fundraisers that include throwing pies at members’ faces. In an event titled Southern Smash held during National Eating Disorder Awareness Week, students use baseball bats to smash scales. The event informs students about eating disorders and promotes positivity and self-love, according to the UNC Panhellenic Association.



Members and alumnae of the Kappa Omicron chapter of Delta Sigma Theta prepare for a step performance in 2014.

CAROLINA ALUMNI/JASON D. SMITH '94



The Cube: On March 24, 1971, The Graffiti Cube made its debut at the Pit outside the Student Union, where it still stands today. At first, it was a site for students to express themselves, allowing anyone to write a message or draw on one of the four sides.

Now simply called “The Cube,” it serves as a spot where student organizations can promote events. The Cube’s shape has changed, now resembling a diagonal wall of smaller cubes, and it is much larger than it was in 1971. Students must get permission from the Carolina Union Activities Board to paint on The Cube, and the information they display must be related to a student organization.



UNC/JUSTIN SMITH '07

Student drives through the Pit: Just before noon on March 3, 2006, Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar '05 drove a Jeep Cherokee through the Pit, injuring five students and a campus visitor, all of whom were treated at area hospitals. Taheri-azar, an Iranian native who was 22 at the time, told investigators he wanted to “avenge the deaths or murders of Muslims around the world,” Derek Poarch, then chief of campus police, told NBC News.

Taheri-azar was apprehended after he called police to surrender and waited for officers two miles from campus. He pled guilty to attempted first-degree murder and is serving a 33-year sentence at the Avery/Mitchell Correctional Institute in Spruce Pine, according to *Spectrum News*.

A few weeks later on March 20, 2006, students gathered in the Pit for a moment of silence and reflection during the midday class break. The students called it a celebration to “reclaim the Pit,” according to *The DTH*.



Daily Tar Heel, March 6, 2006



1969 YACKEY YACK

In late 1968 and all through 1969, a campus dining crisis played out in and around the Pit as dining hall workers, backed by student supporters, went on strike for more pay and better working conditions.

A place to protest: Since its inception, the Pit has been a place where students congregate to champion for or against different causes. In October 1969, about 500 people, mostly students, gathered for an “aesthetic protest” of the Vietnam War, singing folk songs led by Jim Wann Jr. ’70 and Jan Davidson Jr. ’70 (’72 MA), and listening to “Liberty” by Walt Whitman and Herman Melville’s “American Flag.”

During the event, students tied white cloth strips around their arms and to the collars of dogs, which ran unleashed through the Pit, to honor soldiers killed in Vietnam and to bond themselves to the cause of the Washington, D.C., based Vietnam Moratorium Committee, which sponsored pro-peace and anti-war moratoriums worldwide.

A month later, students gathered in the Pit again — this time in a show of solidarity for the University’s food-service workers, who were in the midst of their second strike in less than eight months.

Cureton Johnson ’71, the inaugural editor of *Black Ink*, a student newspaper sponsored by the Black Student Movement, was among those who spoke during a rally in the Pit Nov. 8, 1969. Food-service workers complained at the time they were “being forced to double-up on work” and were getting laid off without notice, according to *The DTH*.

Johnson said students from universities across the state — including N.C. A&T State University, N.C. Central University and Shaw University — came to the Pit that day, as did civil rights activist leader Ralph Abernathy, a close friend and mentor of Martin Luther King Jr.

“The Pit was a rallying point to voice your hurts and your pains and your hopes and your frustrations and your demands,” said Johnson, pastor emeritus of First Missionary Baptist Church in Fayetteville. “Whenever there were going to be protests or demonstrations or times to sound off to speak to the needs of the workers or any other group that was oppressed, the Pit was the crossroads of the campus, so to speak.”

Beach, Plaza or Bridge?

University architects have said the Pit must be redeveloped to solve storm-water drainage problems and to create more usable outdoor space.

“The existing terracotta [drain] pipes were likely installed when the muddy construction staging area that became ‘the Pit’ was bricked over in 1969,” University landscape architect Daniel Widis ’09 (’13 MRP) told the *Review*. “Between the lifespan of that building material and the adjacent tree roots putting pressure on the pipes, it is not surprising they need to be replaced.”

Widis said while the Pit is a hub of activity, it isn’t being used to its full potential. “The daily movement in and around the space is a challenge, programming favors large formal events instead of daily interactions, and its sunken nature raises a significant accessibility question,” he said.

Widis and his team has sought community input on three designs developed by UNC Facilities Planning and Design department in partnership with Reed Hilderbrand Landscape Architects. The options include a sloped area called the beach that extends from the middle of the Pit toward the Student Union, a bridge-like walkway across the Pit with sunken spaces on either side for people to gather and a raised wooden stage, and an area called The Plaza, which would level the space, removing the steps and adding more trees and seating areas. A final plan could include portions of all three designs.

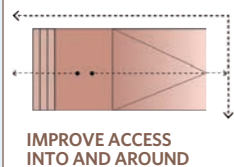
Facilities Planning and Design held two sessions in April to gather feedback. Students expressed they wanted to keep the community feel of the Pit while making it more accessible. “I heard someone say the Pit is where every student walks by in a day,” rising sophomore Ria Sharma told *The Daily Tar Heel*. “And so it is definitely the center of campus, and I wouldn’t want it to feel any different or disconnected from what UNC feels like right now.”

Currently, there is no preferred design plan or frontrunner, Widis said. He said if the project moves forward, the ultimate design will try to include all concerns and considerations. The University plans to work on final designs in the fall.



A bridge-like walkway such as this is one of the potential plans for redeveloping the Pit. UNC/REED HILDERBRAND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

The “Beach”



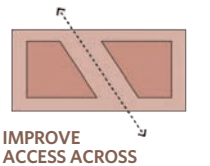
Sloped area extends from the middle of the Pit toward the Student Union

The “Plaza”

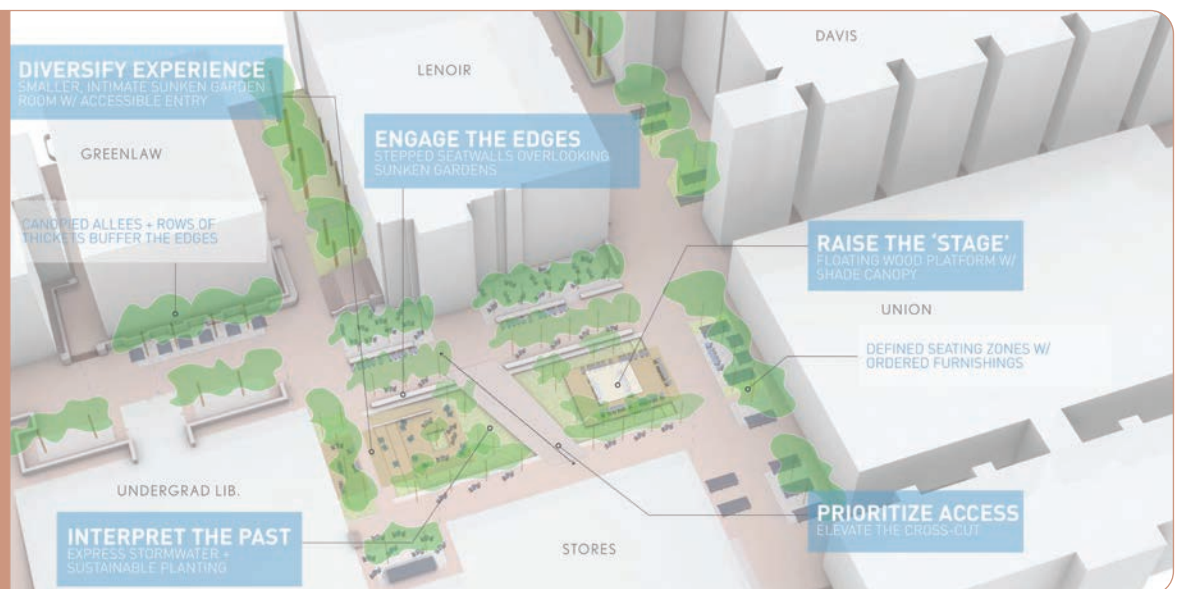
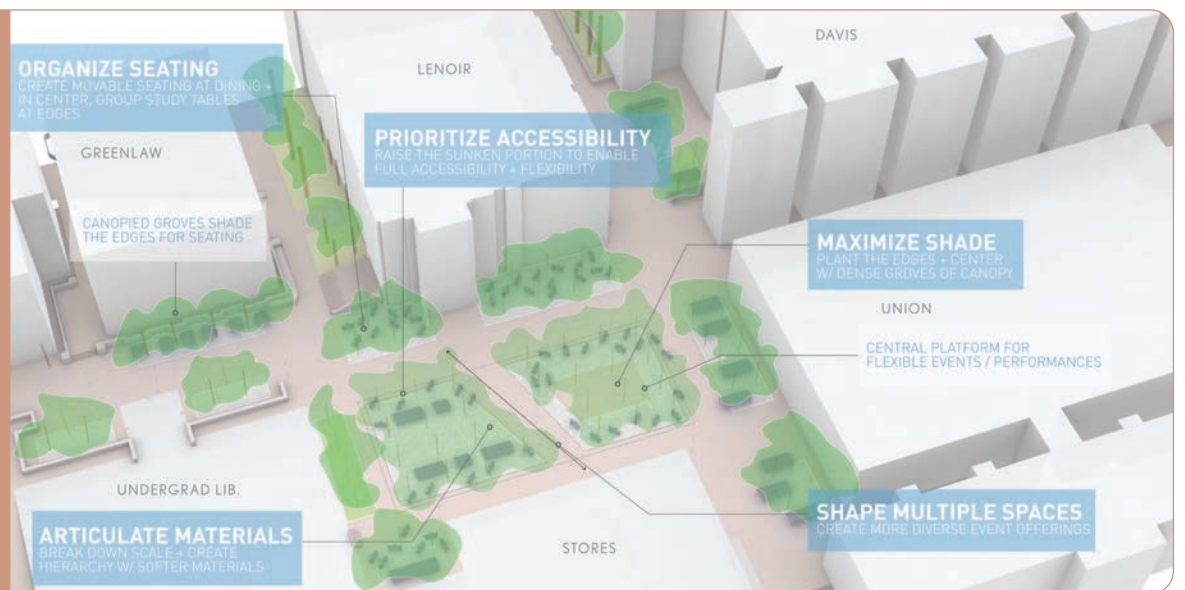
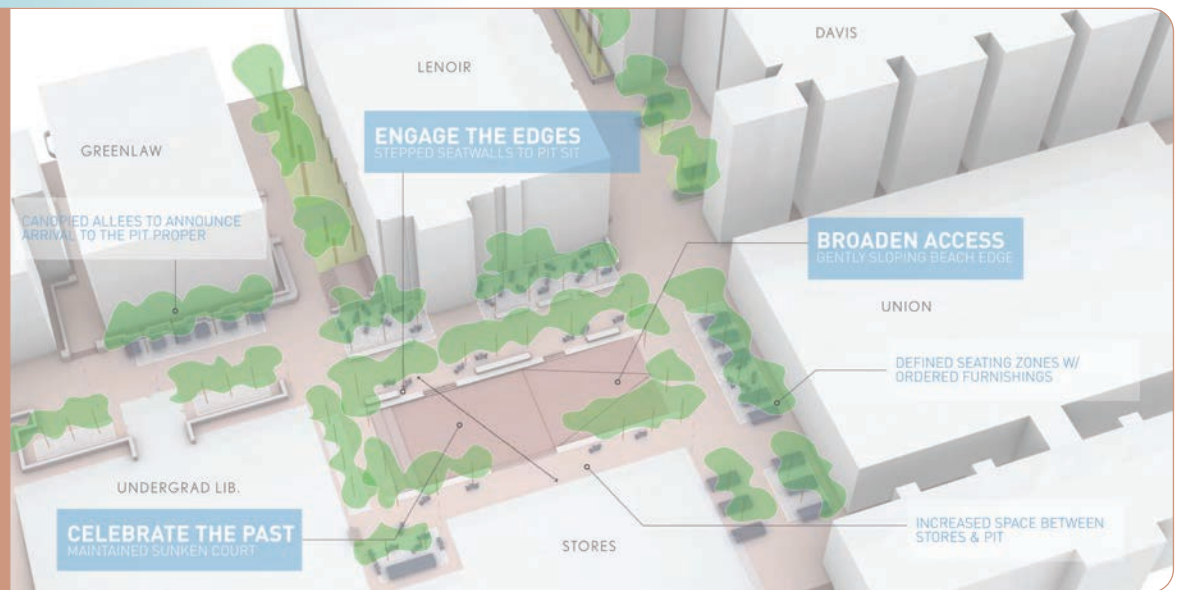


Pit is leveled, with steps removed. More trees and seating areas added

The “Bridge”



Walkway across the Pit with sunken spaces on either side and a raised wooden stage





Daily Tar Heel, Dec. 3, 1970

The coronation of King Nyle: On Dec. 3, 1970, graduate student Nyle Frank '69 (MA) was crowned the “king of the invisible kingdom,” a fake university for which he solicited other students to teach classes.

“I thought I’d start my own school, but I didn’t have any money for buildings or classrooms,” Frank recalled in a telephone interview. “I basically put up signup sheets in the dorms and said people could teach whatever they wanted. Somebody said, ‘I can teach jewelry in my dorm room on Wednesday night at 7:30,’ for example.”

More than 2,000 spectators attended the three-and-a-half-hour ceremony, and decorations included a huge tapestry over Student Stores and multicolored pennants dangling from the Pit lamp posts.

The spectacle also included Nyle outlining his programs, including an increase in the number of fountains, swings and slides for all college campuses, Friday night Pit jam sessions for jazz enthusiasts and special events such as “Frisbee days,” according to *The DTH*.

“A piano was wheeled to the Pit from the Student Union, and I played a few songs,” Frank said. “I had a lot of original songs about animals and things in those days. ... There were three trumpeters playing on top of the Student Stores.”

Frank, a musician who now lives in San Jose, California, created the “Invisible University of North Carolina” in fall 1970. Classes were taught in 1960s-style teach-ins and included topics such as Cooperation between the Fuzz and the Fuzzies, graffiti interpretation and pumpkin carving. Frank was easily recognizable with his “goastache,” half mustache, half goatee. His reign lasted almost two years before he “mysteriously disappeared,” according to *The DTH*.



UNC/JOHNNY ANDREWS '97

A stabbing death: On Nov. 21, 1970, Chapel Hill resident James Cates Jr. was on campus for a Homecoming weekend dance at the Carolina Union, co-sponsored by UNC’s Afro-American Awareness Committee and the Union. A fight erupted among students, community residents and members of a motorcycle gang. Cates was stabbed and bled for up to 45 minutes in the Pit before being transported to N.C. Memorial Hospital, where he died.

Three members of the motorcycle gang were charged with murder but later acquitted.

On Nov. 21, 2022, more than 50 years after his death, the University honored Cates with a memorial in the Pit.

“Our University’s motto is lux et libertas — light and liberty,” former chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said at the dedication. “Our job as a university is to shine a light on the truth, even when that truth is painful.” UNC students and community members helped bring the memorial to fruition.



James Cates Jr.

CAROLINA ALUMNI FILES

Hinton James and Pit-nics: In the 1970s, the Carolina Union Activities Group planned Pit parties and ice cream socials so students could mingle and take a break from classes. CUAG, now known as the Carolina Union Activities Board, also held Bluegrass concerts and barbecues there.

Before home football games in 1982, the University invited students, alumni and family members to a “pre-game Pit-nic,” which provided hamburgers, hotdogs and other picnic favorites and included music from the University Marching Band. (See “Pre-game Pit-nics,” October 1982 *Carolina Alumni Review*.)

For many years on Feb. 12, it was common to see someone posing as Hinton James, Carolina’s first student who arrived on campus on that date in 1795,

roaming around the Pit. Order of the Bell Tower, Carolina Alumni’s oldest student group, would convince someone to dress up as James to greet students and answer questions in celebration of the anniversary of his arrival on campus. The James visits may have waned. It’s been four years since Order of the Bell Tower arranged for James to come to campus, according to OBT’s Instagram page.

Today, a major Pit event is the Last Day of Classes, or LDOC, a day of fun before final exams. The day features carnival games, free pizza and other munchies and Carolina swag giveaways — all organized by the Carolina Union Activities Board and other campus organizations and departments. Students can make custom street signs and Rameses balloon animals.



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April 25, 2024: Lillian Zwemer, a teaching assistant professor in the biology department, found herself underwater in the Pit as part of the “Dunk a Professor” fundraiser for adolescent and young adult cancer patients at UNC Hospitals.

PHOTO: UNC/JON GARDINER '98