

New leadership marks next chapter in Network's evolution

After 28 years at the helm of the SC Progressive Network, co-founder and Executive Director **Brett Bursey** is passing the torch to **Brandon Upson**, who signed on last fall. "Brandon brings new energy and fresh ideas," Bursey said. "I trust him to maintain the spirit and integrity of the organization while taking our work to the next level."



Incoming Executive Director Brandon Upson (left) talks shop with Brett Bursey at GROW, the Network's HQ in Columbia.

Upson said, "I join the **SC Progressive Network** family with great reverence and excitement.

I don't take this lightly at all. It takes a lot to build an organization, to put everything you have into that organization — the blood, sweat, and tears — and then pass it on to the next generation. To build upon the great work that has helped fuel four decades of the South Carolina progressive movement is an honor."

Upson, who was 10 years old when the Network was founded, is young but not naive. He spent 13 years leading campaigns and legislative caucuses, and knows first-hand how the political system works in South Carolina. And how it doesn't.

Upson was a rising star in the Democratic Party when he nearly beat Jim Clyburn's nominee for party chair at last year's convention. "Brandon knows how the political game is played," Bursey said. "He understands that we can't fix our state's problems with the tools that keep it broken."

Upson's roots in the Palmetto State run eight generations deep. He served eight years and two combat tours in the US Army. In 2013, he graduated from the College of Charleston, where he met his wife,

Monica. They live in Tega Cay with their three young children. (Read more about Upson's background and his plans for the Network at SCProgBlog.com.)

Upson's priority in 2024 is to revitalize the Network's **Missing Voter Project**. "The traditional playbook has failed us," he said. "It's time to rewrite the script. It's time to truly listen to the voices of working-class people, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised—our missing voters."

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Know more. Do More. Be more.

Modjeska Simkins School

APPLY NOW
for Spring Session
Mar 2 – Jun 22



DETAILS INSIDE (👉)

Celebrating the radical Dr. King on his birthday

Brandon Upson was part of an all-star line-up at this year's MLK Day march and rally Jan. 15 in Columbia. **Vice-President Kamala Harris** warned that the freedoms Dr. King helped secure are at risk or already lost, including voting rights and the right to be safe from gun violence. She challenged young people to get active.



Assembling for the march to the State House.

Upson noted that just 10 percent of SC voters under age 26 turned out in 2022. It's that demographic the Network is committed to educating, inspiring, and mobilizing.

"These young people are tired of the rhetoric and gatekeepers," Upson said. "They are tired of the patronizing dismissiveness. They are ready to be empowered." He also recognized labor allies, promising to

stand with them in their fight for fairness in the workplace. He pledged to help those working to pass a hate crimes bill in South Carolina, one of two states without one, and where, "Black families are seeing their land stolen from them, Black children are being murdered in our streets, and Black women are dying after childbirth at some of the highest rates in the world." 🌟

Modjeska Simkins School challenges students of all ages and backgrounds

The Modjeska Simkins School, the crown jewel of the Network's projects, is set to launch its spring semester on March 2, with classes meeting on Monday evenings through June 22.

Students may attend online or in-person at GROW, 1340 Elmwood Ave. in Columbia.

"The Modjeska Simkins School remains a bulwark for truth against disinformation," said **Robert Greene II**, Assistant Professor of History at Claflin University

and lead instructor for the Modjeska School since 2019.

"This year's session comes at a pivotal time in the history of our state, our nation, and our world," he said. "Historical truth is under attack as never before. Freedoms and rights once taken for granted are now under siege, threatening to reverse the great social movements of the 20th Century.



Each session of the school is different, with updated course material and new guest speakers. What remains the same is the intensive, immersive experience that is unlike any other course being offered in South Carolina.

The school offers students and the public Deep Dives, free Sunday afternoon programs with special panels of historians, teachers, and writers that allow in-depth exploration of topics with historical or current interest.

To be notified of Deep Dives and other public programs, sign up for our elist at scpronet.com. 🌸



Dr. Robert Greene II congratulates graduate Luevenia Bluefort

"At the Modjeska School, we believe in not only learning history for the sake of knowing our past, but learning how to think critically and how to think democratically. Contrary to popular belief, there is a tradition of human rights—exemplified by Modjeska herself—in South Carolina."

This is the 10th year the school has offered its unique curriculum to students of all ages and backgrounds interested in deepening their understanding of South Carolina's complex history, and in learning ways to be more effective voters, citizens, and community organizers.

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Upson knows that to be relevant to disaffected voters requires honesty. "Young voters say, 'My vote doesn't count.' Too often, they are right." The game *is* rigged. Partisan and racial gerrymandering has rendered many votes meaningless — just as the lawmakers who drew the maps intended. Still, there are ways to win. The MVP has detailed plans to do so.

The transition to new leadership has been years in the making and, according to our newly updated bylaws, includes interim status for the incoming ED as well as recently elected directors on our board. They will serve until November, when the Network's membership will vote on their status.

The Network's board and staff met the weekend of Jan. 20 to take a long view, thinking about what another 28 years could look like, as well as a more granular, practical look at immediate needs and short-term goals. Board member Cecil Cahoon has overseen the Network's transition, still in progress.



Network board retreat Jan. 20 in Columbia.

"Rebuilding a plane that's already in the air is never easy," Cahoon said, "but that's the task we assigned ourselves when we initiated this transition process in 2021. Essential programs and qualities of the Network couldn't be put on hold while we re-imagined and planned for the Network's future, especially when those essential programs and qualities aren't provided by, or found in, any other organization in the state.

"So as we continue to negotiate and make the changes necessary to turn the South Carolina of the past into the South Carolina we want and need, Network directors are engaged in doing the same work internally: re-framing our mission, restructuring ourselves, and redoubling our efforts to accomplish great and greater things."

The stakes are high, but so are the opportunities. "These are the times we've been preparing for," Bursey said. "We are uniquely positioned to be a progressive force not just in Columbia, but statewide." 🌸

“Without community there is no liberation.” Audre Lorde

GROWing the arts, activism, and community

In 2019, we bought the building that would become the Network’s new home at the corner of Elmwood and Marion in Columbia, next to the Modjeska Simkins House, where we’d had offices for nearly a decade.



We decided to call our new headquarters **GROW** (Grass Roots Organizing Workshop), a nod to

the original GROW Cafe that was a hub of radical activism in Columbia from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. The first organizing meetings of the **SC Progressive Network** were held at GROW.

During the pandemic down time, we renovated the building, making it fully accessible, wiring it for hybrid meetings, and installing a full kitchen. Having a space that meets our needs is a game changer.

GROW 2.0 has come into its own. Like the original GROW, programing has been an organic and deliberate process, attracting a mix of people and groups who align with the Network’s core values.



Last year, GROW’s calendar sowed a variegated crowd: poets, musicians, educators, historians, labor organizers, and peace activists. Not only does that diversity lend our work vibrancy, it allows for the cross-pollination that happens when people gather together.

Over the summer, the **Union of Southern Service Workers** held trainings at GROW, and **Campus Workers United** hold their regular meetings there. The **American Association of University Women** held its annual statewide meeting at GROW, and will return this fall. An interfaith group also held a meeting with us, and plans to return.



GROW hosted two book launches, two birthday parties, three memorials to fallen comrades, and the first training for the relaunch of its **Missing Voter Project**. And we revived the Mutant Be-In, an old GROW Halloween tradition.

Every 1st and 3rd Thursday, GROW hosts a **Jazz Workshop**. The band welcomes anyone to join them, so the line-up is ever-changing but always talented. **Sara Williams**, a longtime Network ally and the originator of the workshop, said, “Jazz is revolutionary music, birthed in the African-American struggle. It is so great to play in a venue with an audience that appreciates those roots.”

The **Modjeska Simkins School** holds classes and public programs at GROW, taking advantage of the in-house cameras, microphones, and the wide screen to allow meaningful participation from afar.



On the last Thursday of each month, GROW has a public discussion group at lunchtime called **Food for Thought**. Topics reflect the Network’s strategic focus on state and local matters, and how SC players influence national politics.

This year, we will work on GROW’s outside space, resurfacing the parking area, adding planters and vegetation, and building a large covered patio that will double our capacity. We invite you to stop by and see our progress.

Bookmark the calendar at scpronet.com or sign up for our elist to get notices of programs at GROW.



To schedule an event at GROW, (group must align with our core mission) call 803-808-3384 or email becci@scpronet.com.



how it started...

GROW before renovation



...how it's going

GROW after renovation

Help seed and tend South Carolina's grass roots

Remarkably, we are entering 2024 with \$300,000 in hand, primarily money donated by individuals who believe in our work rather than by funders who want to direct our work.

That distinction has made the Network unique in South Carolina's social justice world. Since our founding, we have been supported primarily by our members and individual donors, meaning we are beholden to no outside entities or agendas. We have managed to thrive on shoe-string budgets because of the time and treasure of our volunteers.

The adage that it takes money to make money holds true for nonprofits, too. It's been a challenge, but through hard work, dedication, and maximizing every dollar, we are finally at the point where our budget makes us viable in new ways.

Having our own building that is fully equipped to hold hybrid meetings, classes, and trainings increases our ability to engage our members and allies, no matter where they live in South Carolina. We

have the tools we need to expand our capacity, and we have more to offer our members than ever before.

It's time to manifest the Network's full potential as a progressive force for good government, strong communities, and fairness in the workplace in South Carolina. We are uniquely positioned to do so, but we can't do it without you — and the ability to hire the staff to drive our work. We hope you will be inspired by the fresh energy that feels like the wind at our back.

We invite you to help make the Network a vibrant, powerful force for good, from the streets to the State House.

Please join or renew your dues. Or make a donation of any amount. See scpronet.com or scan the QR code. THANK YOU!



Money matters



On Feb. 6, the SC Progressive Network deposited \$250,000 at Optus, a Black-owned bank committed to social justice. Formerly Victory Savings, the bank that was started by the family of **Modjeska Monteith Simkins**. Speaking at a press conference in the bank lobby: (from right) **Dominik Mjartan**, Optus President; **Benita E. Lefft**, Optus Chief Operating Officer; **Brett Bursey**, outgoing Network Executive Director; and **Brandon Upson**, Network Interim Executive Director. Read more at the Network's blog, SCProgBlog.com.

July 12 rally at the SC State House in solidarity with the ILA.



SAVE THE DATES

April 13: SC Progressive Network Statewide Meeting, Columbia

Nov. 16–17: Fall Retreat Penn Center, Beaufort