

PROGRESS

A SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE ★ SPRING 2021

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IN APPRECIATION

When we sit down to decide on a cover story for PROGRESS magazine, we talk about the most impactful stories from the past six-to-12 months. Most often, we discuss business movers and shakers, people involved in athletics, politicians.

For this edition, there was very little discussion. Over the past year, the pandemic has influenced nearly every aspect of life, and our health care industry has constantly been on the front lines of the battle against the virus. We wanted to find a way to honor that work.

The idea of spending a day inside a hospital and documenting the wide range of services that make up “health care” kept coming up, but we were skeptical we would be able to get the access needed to effectively tell that story. Hospitals obviously must deal with privacy issues, but there’s also the fact that patients are often their most vulnerable when at the hospital. We needed to be sensitive to that.

We floated the idea by Baptist Memorial Hospital - Golden Triangle’s Megan Pratt, who told us to give her a little time to see if hospital administration was



open to the idea. We stressed we weren’t seeking to do a story on Baptist, per se, but rather telling their story as a way to honor all healthcare workers. Megan, a former Dispatch staffer, understood what we were after.

The story needed to be told visually, and a former Dispatch photojournalist suggested we consider Rory Doyle for the job. Doyle is based in Cleveland, Mississippi and has done photo projects for national and regional outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Bitter Southerner.

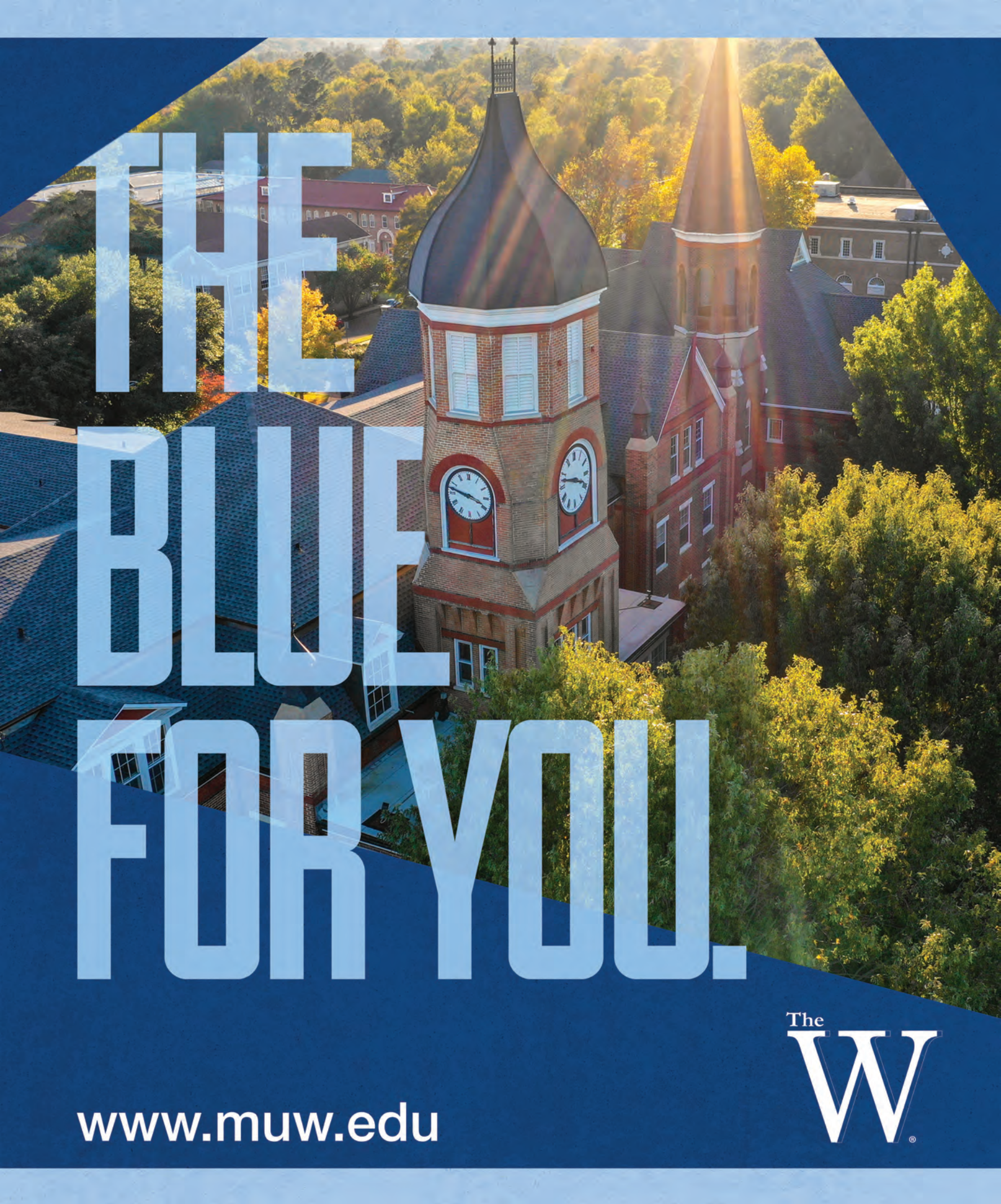
The images he captured at Baptist tell the story of a group of individuals who have quickly adapted to the pandemic. Their daily routines may have changed slightly, but the constant need for their professional services and human sensitivity have remained unchanged.

So while our cover story only technically covers a handful of people at one particular hospital, I encourage you to view it with the thought of — and appreciation for — all health care workers on your mind.

Thanks for reading.

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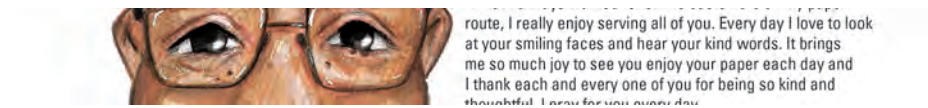
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MINT JULEP Recipe

According to Welty, *A collection of recipes from the South is no more complete than the South itself without that magic ingredient, the mint julep. In the fine old city of Columbus, in the northeastern part of the state, hospitality for many years is said to have reached its height in Whitehall (Circa, 1843), the home of Mr. and Mrs. T.C. Billups, now the home of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Boggess*



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- Have silver goblet thoroughly chilled
- Take 1/2 lump sugar and dissolve in tablespoon of water
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- Fill the silver goblet with crushed ice to capacity
- Add the tablespoon of mint and sugar water
- Pour in all the bourbon whiskey that the goblet will hold
- Add a sprig of mint in the top of goblet, for bouquet
- Let goblet stand until frosted
- Serve rapidly

As Eudora Welty said at the conclusion of her interview with Mrs. Billups: *Who could ask for anything more?*



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LOWNDES PROJECTS LOOK BEYOND PANDEMIC

IMPROVEMENTS AT PARK FACILITIES HIGHLIGHT SPRING AND SUMMER PLANS

If the experts are correct in their projections, the nation's long pandemic nightmare will be over soon, perhaps as early as summer. The ebb and flow and rhythms of normal life, so long interrupted by COVID-19, will resume. Much of that will include recreation and socializing, two areas of life greatly sacrificed during the public health crisis.

By happy coincidence, most of the projects in Lowndes County are related to those two diversions — everything from a parking lot to accommodate big crowds at the county's showcase Equestrian Pavilion west of the Tombigbee to a new community center in central Columbus to renovations and upgrades at parks throughout the city.

When "normal" returns for folks in Lowndes County, the county will be ready to greet them.

SIM SCOTT PARK WELCOMES NEW COMMUNITY CENTER

Normally, anniversaries of natural disasters are

more observed than celebrated. While the tornado that ripped through Columbus in February 2019 will be solemnly remembered, there was an event connected to the tornado that was cause for celebration.

On February 23, the city of Columbus officially opened its new community center at Sim Scott Park on the site of the original community center, which along with the parks' senior citizen center next door were destroyed two years ago to the day.

Construction on the 9,000 square foot structure began in 2020 with most of the funds for the \$800,000 project coming from insurance claims and FEMA.

About 60 percent of the space is devoted to the community center on the east side of the building. The community center portion features a large kitchen and is furnished with new tables and chairs. Restrooms divide the community center from the rest of the facility, which includes two classrooms for summer youth programs and



Sim Scott Park Community Center



Sim Scott Park Community Center

a 1,700 square foot senior citizens center, which has its own small kitchen area and unisex bathroom.

Although it is a metal building the senior citizen center portion was reinforced for use as a storm shelter and has its own entrance.

Mayor Robert Smith said that use of the center will be determined following the guidance of Governor Tate Reeves as long as the pandemic represents a threat to public safety.

PARKING LOT PUTS FINISHING TOUCHES ON EQUESTRIAN PARK COMPLEX

When Lowndes County supervisors began making plans for a multi-purpose horse park pavilion and office complex on a 22-acre site on Tom Rose Road, they did not neglect the need for the kind of parking needed to accommodate the large crowds they envisioned. For obvious reasons, the parking lot was not the first priority.

That area was part of a two-phase plan, which included a 5,000 square foot office complex that is home to the county's extensive service office and 4H Club, and 45,000 open area pavilions, large enough to host all kinds of events - everything from horse shows



MSU extension parking lot construction

and competitions to trade shows and private events.

When the pavilion opened in January, work on the parking lot had not been started, which turned out not to be much of a problem. A month after the Pavilion opened, the pandemic had arrived, putting all those big events on hold.

Construction on the complex started in early 2016. The \$2.6 million complex was funded by \$1.6 million in state funds and another \$1 million from the county's hospital trust fund dividends.

CITY PARKS SEE IMPROVEMENTS

While the most ambitious plans to renovate and refurbish the city's biggest park — Propst Park — are still on the horizon, residents will see some improvements in place by summer's end.

Although major work on the baseball fields at the park are still a ways off, visitors will note other improvements, including renovations at the parks' tennis building and large pavilion and walk-way renovations at the adult softball complex. All buildings on park property will be repainted as well.

The summer will see improvements at all of the city's other parks as well.

East Columbus will have a new playground and pavilion. Hank Aaron Park will have new swings and playground improvement as well as a resurfaced basketball court. Lee Park's playground equipment will be renovated while Townsend Park will feature a new pavilion. At Sandfield Park, there is new playground equipment, a new pavilion and new LED lighting.



Basketball court at Hank Aaron Park

All totaled, the parks renovations come to \$208,000, with \$200,000 of those funds coming from the county's annual park funding and the remaining \$8,000 from the city's capital improvement funds.

One city-owned project that isn't likely to occur by year's end is repairs to the Old Pedestrian Bridge, which was damaged by a barge in February. Repairs are pending a settlement agreement between the city and the company whose barge crashed into a large concrete pillar, forcing the city to close the pedestrian bridge.

Meanwhile, fencing on the east side of the Terry Brown Amphitheater will be completed by summer's end.

MONUMENT RELOCATION

By summer's end, the Confederate Monument that had occupied the southwest corner of the Lowndes County courthouse grounds since 1906 will have been removed, although it's not clear when exactly the monument will be placed in its new location at Friendship Cemetery.

The Lowndes County Board of Supervisors voted to relocate the monument in July and began taking bids on the project in January. Ultimately, the relocation was designed to be conducted in three phases - disassembly, site preparation/storage and reassembly. The first two stages have been contracted and the monument will be in storage until the reassembly phase contract has been awarded. Supervisors hope the entire project will be completed by year's end.

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**

OPENING PHOTO BY **CHRIS JENKINS/MUW**

UNIVERSITY RELATIONS

ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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Utility box on Lafayette in Starkville

CONTINUOUS GROWTH IN OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

From planned building and infrastructure projects throughout the city and county to potential upgrades in downtown Starkville, big dreams are coming to fruition and more are developing in Oktibbeha County

RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Adelaide neighborhood will add 46 houses to the existing 51 in the third and largest phase of the development in South Starkville, west of South Montgomery Street.

Some of the houses in the second phase are still under construction, but all 51 houses have either residents or contracts in place, and one-third of the lots in phase three already have option contracts, said Saunders Ramsey, whose family owns the land and is developing Adelaide. Construction of the third phase, to the west of the existing houses, will begin this year.

Meanwhile, in downtown Starkville, the former home of Mugshots Grill and Bar at the northwest corner of Main and Washington streets has a potential new tenant for the first time in years.

Spring Street Cigars, headquartered in Tupelo, hopes to open its fifth location in the Mugshots building. Starkville aldermen voted to grant cigar lounges an exception to the city's anti-smoking ordinance, which disallows smoking in most public spaces in the city.

The city also will allow brewpubs and small craft breweries that locate in the Leisure and Entertainment District downtown to sell beer, light wine and light spirits without having to also sell food. The rule change will allow Spring Street Cigars to locate in the old Mugshots restaurant building on the corner of Main Street and Douglas L. Conner Drive, where it plans to house a high-end cigar lounge upstairs and a brewpub to make and sell craft beer on the first floor.

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

The Parks and Recreation department conducted a survey in December asking residents how often they use the city's parks, sidewalks and bicycle paths, how accessible they are and what the city could do to improve them. The data from the survey will help city officials to create a master plan for future sidewalks, bike paths and



Adelaide



Old Mugshots Bar and Grill



Old West Point Road bridge

other pedestrian infrastructure.

Starkville received a grant of about \$50,000, part of the National Recreation and Park Association's 10-Minute Walk Grant program, in September 2019 to fund both the study and the master plan.

The city's goals for sidewalk and bike path improvements go hand-in-hand with its street maintenance and improvement goals. City Engineer Edward Kemp presented a street maintenance policy to the board in October, with the roads that receive the most traffic and are most vital to connecting the city — such as Main, Jackson and Montgomery streets — set to receive maintenance first.

The heavily traveled bridge on Old West Point Road just south of Garrard Road is old and eroding, with the guardrails too close to the intersection, so Starkville will build a new bridge just south of its current location, using \$1.34 million from the Emergency Road and Bridge Repair Fund within the Mississippi Department of Transportation. The city has until this summer to put forth a construction contract.

Meanwhile, the city and county agreed in the

fall of 2020 to work together to clear debris out of Skinner Creek just south of the city limits. The Oktibbeha County board of supervisors voted in May to join the Tombigbee River Valley Water Management District, a Tupelo-based state agency that does flood control, cleanup and repair projects on waterways of all sizes in northeast Mississippi.

In December, the supervisors appointed David Kennard, the water management district's former executive director, to represent the county on the agency's board.

UPGRADES AND IMPROVEMENTS IN STARKVILLE

Two months after suspending its recycling program, Starkville adopted a new one that officials expect to be more financially feasible.

In December, aldermen approved a contract with the Waste Pro USA office in Columbus to establish a drop-off site at the sanitation building on North Washington Street. The Waste Pro contract costs significantly less than the city's previous one with Waste Management, which involved hauling the recyclable materials to Tupelo



Starkville Public Library

rather than Columbus.

Aldermen decided in October to ask the state Legislature to consider funding a project to relocate the Starkville-Ok-tibbeha Public Library from its longtime location on University Drive to the stretch of Highway 182 that will be revamped in the next few years with federal grant money.

Library system director Phillip Carter said he would appreciate having more parking and the ability to tailor a new building's design to the library's needs, if the Legislature

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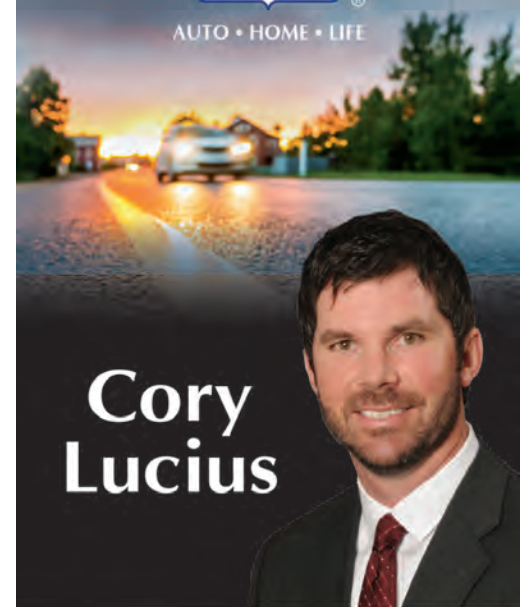
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agrees to fund it.

State Representative Rob Roberson (R-Starkville) encouraged the aldermen to request funding for a “big project,” saying that 2021 would be a good year to do so and that the city should make such requests annually to stay on the Legislature’s radar.

The board also will look into the options of bringing a YMCA to Starkville and extending Stark and Hospital roads to connect them to state highways on the west side of the city.

Additionally, downtown Starkville saw a new splash of color on the bridge on University Drive over the railroad tracks, just east of Old West Point Road. Bob Brzuszek, a landscape architecture professor at Mississippi State University, and two assistant artists, Anstacia Doughty and



Joseph MacGown, painted the bridge after the Starkville Area Arts Council approved the design.

Doughty also painted a utility box on Lafayette Street, and she has painted several in Columbus as well.

STORY BY **TESS VRBIN**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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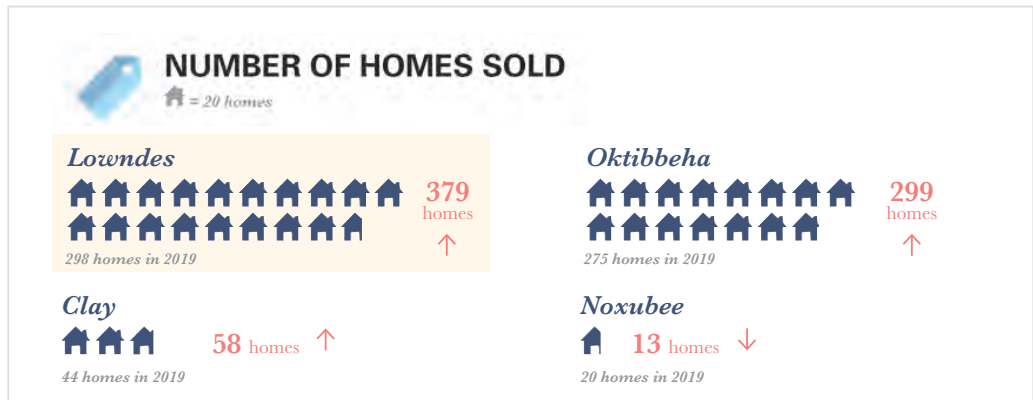
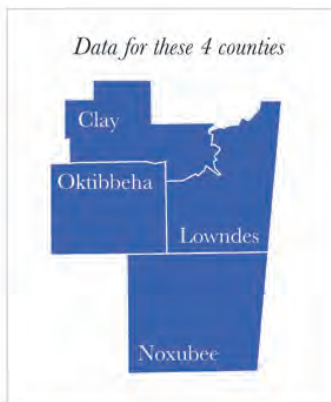


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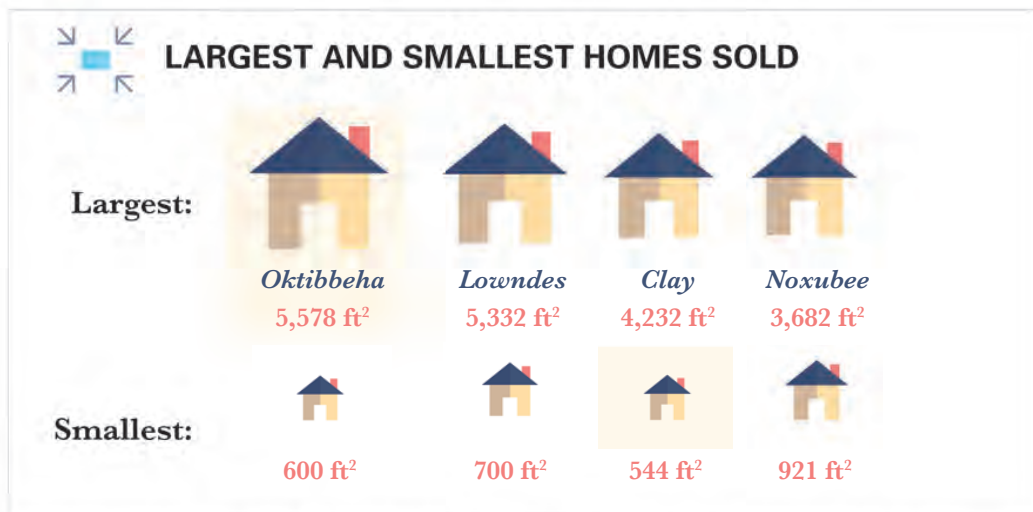
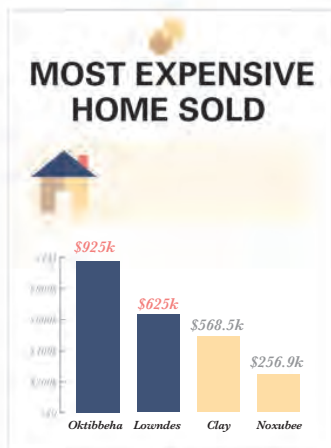
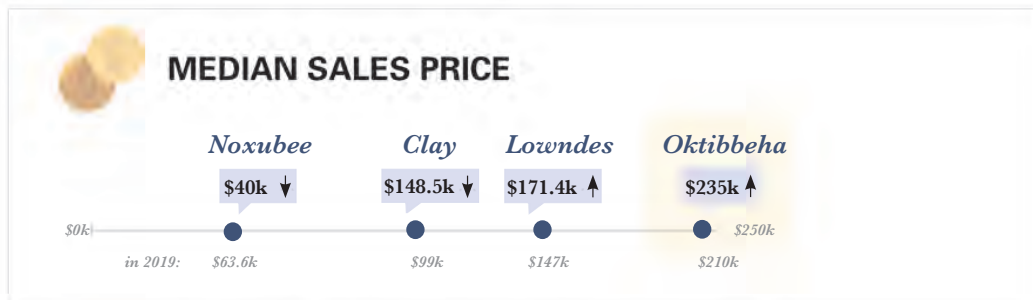
HOME SALE TRENDS

REAL ESTATE METRICS FROM JULY - DECEMBER 2020
 COMPARED TO THE SAME PERIOD IN 2019



TIME ON THE MARKET

County	Days	2019
Oktibbeha	106	132
Lowndes	114	105
Clay	216	176
Noxubee	237	141



Data courtesy of Greater Golden Triangle Association of Realtors®

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BUSINESS

A ‘COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE’

STARTING A BOOKSTORE IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC, EMILY LINER IS BUILDING HER BUSINESS BY LISTENING TO HER DIVERSE CUSTOMER BASE

Emily Liner was taking a photo of her staff outside the Friendly City Books storefront on Fifth Street in Columbus, when a woman driving by yelled out her lowered vehicle window, “Hey! Do you have ‘Just As I Am’?”

Sure enough, the store had it in stock. That’s the most recent drive-by customer Liner’s store has served since opening in November, but it wasn’t the first.

“We literally have word-of-mouth advertising,” Liner laughed. “I’ve met so many new people through this book store and through sharing the love of reading.”

Friendly City Books is open from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, with between 100 and 150 customers filtering through each week. Some, Liner said, come in and spend \$100. Others, whom Liner calls her “regulars”, may come in once a week and only buy a book or two each visit.

Christine Palmer is in the latter group.

The mother of two takes her daughters in turn for a “Wednesday treat” each week, starting with a trip to Coffee House on 5th then walking across the street to the bookstore.

“There is so much value to having a book of your own,” Christine said. “I feel like my children read so much more when they own the books.”

Liner sells new and used, hardback and paperback, with price-points ranging from the predictably expensive to as little as \$1 for some children’s books. Customers can also trade in up to three used books per visit for in-store credit.

“We’re trying to learn and be responsive to what the community likes,” Liner said.

Liner’s quiet, independent bookstore nestled in the Deep South is a long way from the Washington, D.C. beltway where she’s spent most of the last 15 years, but it’s exactly where she wants to be.





Customers browse the shelves at Friendly City Books

The Bay St. Louis native moved to Columbus in 2002 to attend the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. She graduated from Georgetown in 2008 and joined a political consulting firm. She later earned a business degree from The University of North Carolina and joined a “think tank” in D.C. focused on economic policy issues. While there researching entrepreneurship, specifically access to capital for startups, she kept seeing that Mississippi ranked at or near the bottom in the U.S. in those categories.

“I became frustrated looking at the statistics and why that was happening,” she said.

Soon she “started feeling the call to come back” to her home state. She taught three summers at Mississippi Governor’s School at the Mississippi University for Women. By the third summer, 2019, she was house hunting.

“There’s a lot of discussion about brain drain in Mississippi, and I was part of that,” Liner said. “It seemed like the best solution to help reverse it was to move back.”

The timing of opening a bookstore in 2020 was, to say the least, interesting. Other independent bookstores had tried and failed in Columbus. Books-A-Million, the only big-box bookstore in the city, had just shuttered at Leigh Mall. There was also the global COVID-19 pandemic.

“I felt like this was either the best idea I could have or the worst,” Liner said. “It’s really hard to formulate expectations in the middle of a pandemic. [...] I tried to make the best projections I could. I’m really happy with how it’s going.”

She started the store online on August 29 - Independent Bookstore Day — building her brand and some capital while trying to nail down a physical location. On November 28, she opened her shop in the former Mary Kay building.

After the pandemic passes, Liner is sure tourists will come and her bookstore will benefit from their dollars. Even so, local customers have gotten Friendly City Books off the ground, and Liner said they will always be integral to her store’s survival.

When a customer requests a book, Liner tries to get it. She responds to trends she sees in those requests, too, most recently starting to expand her religious section because of high demand.

“I want this to be a gathering place for the community, and I want our customers to feel like they have a say,” she said.

Liner also is trying to form a Community Reader Council made up of customers and local leaders as a sort of advisory panel for the store. She’s looking for representation from the Air Force Base and Mississippi University for Women, as well as the faith, minority and LGBTQ community so the council will reflect “the diversity of Columbus.” Part of this effort includes forming a special youth council, as well.

“If I’m here in 40 years, then I’ve done something right,” Liner said. “But to do that, we’ll have to be nimble, innovate and listen to what the community wants.”

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**

PHOTOS BY **LEDRICO ISAAC**

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COMMUNITY



WORTH THE WAIT

THE COMMUNITY SEES COVID-19 VACCINE AS A
WAY BACK TO A NORMAL LIFE



COVID-19 vaccine site at Fairview Baptist Church

It was a late February afternoon and the parking lot at Fairview Baptist Church in Columbus looked a bit like rush-hour on an L.A. freeway. A line of cars serpented through parking lot, wrapping around the large church complex in two lanes before filtering into a single lane to a lower level parking lot to a pair of large open-air tents where a team of state health department workers, with the aid of Mississippi National Guardsmen, conducted COVID-19 vaccinations.

Upon receiving the vaccine, drivers pulled into a parking space for the mandatory 15-minute waiting period, a precaution put in place to address any allergic reaction that might accompany the vaccination.

On this particular day, getting the vaccine was about a two-hour process. Even so, the mood was more or less genial.

While public health officials have been concerned about the reticence of some Americans to be vaccinated, there was no evidence of reluctance on this afternoon,

“I didn’t mind the wait at all,” said Vicki Williams, who along with her parents, Harold Long, 91, and Billie Long, 87, had just received their second dose of the vaccine. “Right now, all I’m feeling is relief, especially for my mom and dad. I feel like we’re a lot safer now. Maybe things can be a little more like normal now. We’ll still wear our masks and be careful, but I think I won’t be so worried about them as I have been.”

Those waiting in line entertained themselves by reading magazines, listening to the



Gail and Wade Ward



Harold Long, Billie Long and Vicki Williams

car radio or playing games on the tablets as they inched along the procession.

Wade and Gail Ward made a bit more productive use of their wait time, using the two hours to supervise the home-schooling assignments of their grandchildren, Madison and Evan Dunnam, in the back seat of the couple's SUV.

"We were told there would be a wait, so we put the time to good use," Wade Ward said.

At the time, COVID-19 vaccinations were restricted to those over the age of 65 or people with underlying medical conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to the virus. At that point, according to the state health department about a quarter of the roughly 1.2 million Mississippians are eligible.

The wait in the parking lot was nothing compared to the wait for most of the people who arrived for their vaccine appointment.

"I was on the website trying to get an appointment for me and my parents as soon as they were offered," Williams said. "There was never any hesitation. It took about two weeks. Really, getting the appointment was the hard part. The vaccination part was pretty easy."

Williams said getting the second dose of vaccination means she can start doing things she had

to put off.

"I was in my first year of retirement when the virus hit," she said. "I was ready to do all the things you do when you retire - travel, visit friends. All that had to be put on hold. Now, I can start doing some of those things. So I'm very excited to have both doses. I feel like I can enjoy my retirement now."

The Wards had a similar motivation to get the vaccine.

"Last fall we had a trip to Spain that was canceled because of COVID," Wade said. "We rescheduled the trip for this fall. I don't know what the situation will be like then, if that kind of travel will be allowed. But what we do know is that getting vaccination means we'll have done our part. So we feel good about that. We'll be ready to go."

Gail Ward had another reason to be encouraged, "It means we'll be able to go back to church again," she said. "We've missed that so much. I think getting the vaccine is really going to do so many of the things we did before that we didn't even think about. The past year, it makes you realize how blessed you've been."

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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A FAMILY PROJECT



Ruth Berry and her daughter Becky Scott

We occasionally revisit previous stories. In the fall 2018 issue of *PROGRESS*, we reported on the ongoing renovation at the former Lee High School. As the project nears completion we checked in for an update.

When Ruth Berry first stepped foot in the old Lee Middle School building, after her husband, Scott Berry, purchased the property in 2018, the building had been vandalized and was full of asbestos. Ruth was sure Scott's plans to replace the run-down classrooms with apartments and office spaces and the auditorium with an event venue would never work.

Nearly three years later, the first phases of

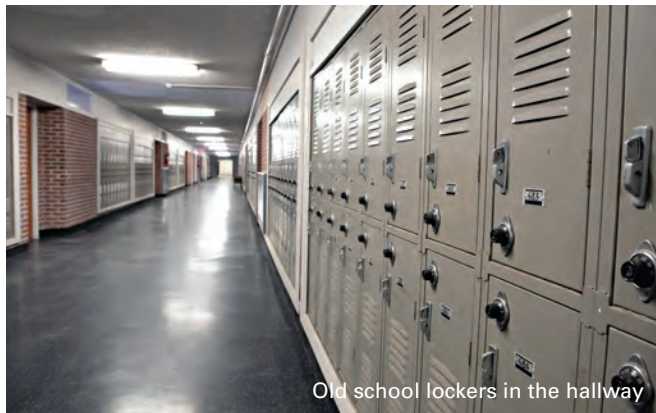
Scott's plans have neared completion, and Ruth and her daughters, Becky Scott and Julie Markle, have come together to finish them after Scott passed away in 2020, before he could fulfill his dream of turning the Lee property into a thriving business development.

Designated a historic landmark by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in 2018, the building was originally Lee High School in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. It saw the racial integration of Columbus schools and Scott himself graduated there in the 1970s.

"He loved this school, and it means a lot to us as a family to be able to (finish his project)," Ruth said.



The former library has been converted into a rentable suite



Old school lockers in the hallway



The new Lyceum at Lee space in the former auditorium

Phase 1, converting the classrooms on the second floor and north end of the first floor into studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments, was completed in October 2020 when residents began moving in. Becky said the apartment complex, now called Lofts at Lee, is about half-full, with more potential tenants calling to ask about residency every day.

The apartments come equipped with the usual closet space and kitchen appliances, but Scott preserved some of the aesthetics of the old school per MDAH’s requirements for historic buildings. The banisters on the stairwell are original to the school and the old school lockers have been left in the hallways or moved to apartments to be used as cupboards and storage space.

Phase 2, converting the auditorium into Lyceum at Lee, will hopefully be complete by the end of February. The event space will be available for rent for weddings, concerts, conventions and other events. Becky said local businesses have already reached out to her asking about renting the space for Christmas parties or charity galas.

Upstairs, the old library has been turned into a suite for rent with the Lyceum. With three bedrooms, three baths and kitchen space, Ruth and Becky say they imagine it could be a bridal suite for anyone who wants to hold a wedding at the lyceum.

Phase 3, which the family expects to be complete by the end of the summer, includes supporting spaces for the Lyceum, including a prep kitchen for catering, a dish room and storage space, all where the school’s music rooms used to be in the hallway off the auditorium.

Once those renovations are complete, Becky hopes to turn her attention to other parts of the building, including the cafeteria, which the family wants to transform into a restaurant, and the gymnasium.

“I just can’t wait to see what the community thinks of this space,” Becky said. “... It’s been a labor of love to pick it back up.”

STORY BY **ISABELLE ALTMAN**
PHOTOS BY **CHRIS JENKINS**



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DELIVERY DRIVERS

Civilizations have held couriers in high esteem dating at least as far back as the Persian Wars (500-449 B.C.) when Greek historian Herodotus paid tribute to the Persian couriers who delivered messages to and from the field of battle.

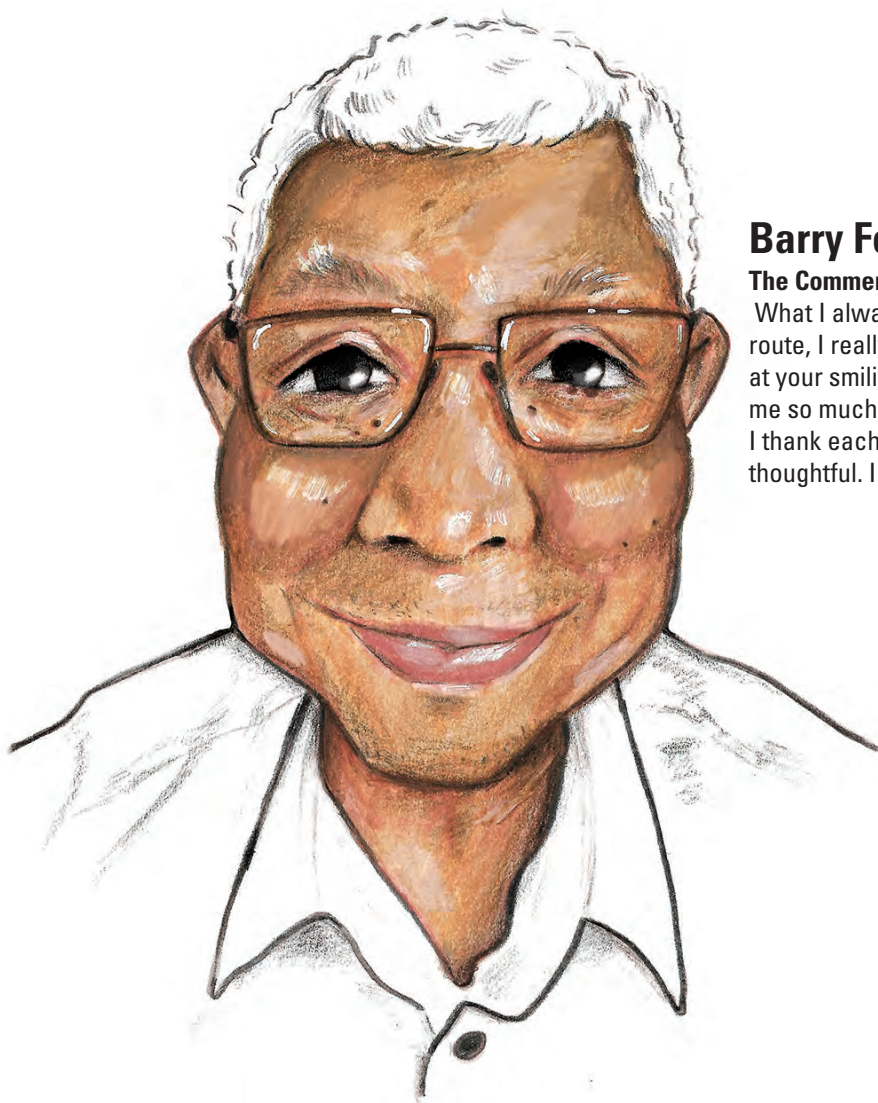
You do not have to be a lover of history to be familiar with one of Herodotus' tributes:

"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds," he wrote.

Although adopted as the unofficial motto of the United States Post Office almost a century ago, we believe, were Herodotus with us today he would include others who have delivered for us.

Almost a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have increasingly turned to delivery services for a wide variety of products that we used to procure for ourselves, especially meals. Many of these delivery services have added a new dimension to our dining experience, promoting not only public health but helping sustain the hard-hit restaurant industry.

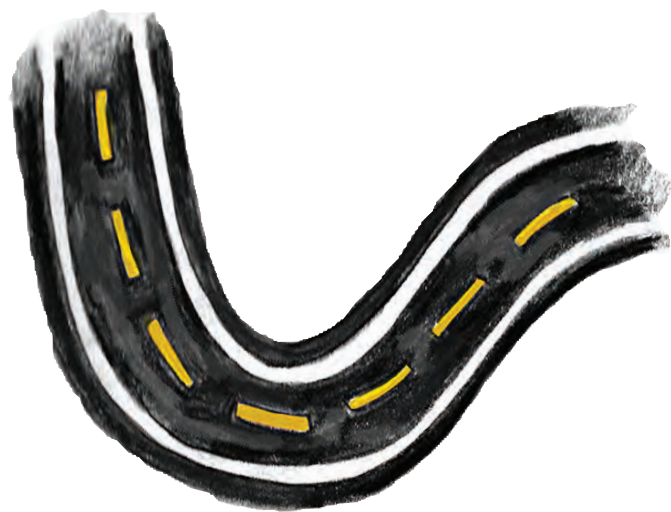
Herodotus would be proud.



Barry Ferrow

The Commercial Dispatch

What I always wanted to tell the customers on my paper route, I really enjoy serving all of you. Every day I love to look at your smiling faces and hear your kind words. It brings me so much joy to see you enjoy your paper each day and I thank each and every one of you for being so kind and thoughtful. I pray for you every day.





Marie Overstreet

DoorDash

The most interesting delivery request I have had was when a friend secretly ordered a pregnancy test to hide it from friends and family, not knowing I dash, only to find out it was no longer her secret after meeting me at the door with her delivery. We still laugh about the delivery. The one thing I would love to tell DoorDash orderers, please put numbers on your houses or mailboxes.



Doug Cockrell

Uber & Uber Eats

I once picked up two passengers, who passed out in the car and also put in the wrong address, so I took them to a police station. This one guy ordered a meal for me to deliver to his girlfriend and another guy was at her house. I want to tell my customers, when you order, leave a tip — we don't make a lot unless it's numerous runs all day.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MURPHY





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COVER STORY

HOPE INSIDE A HOSPITAL

A YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC,
PHOTOJOURNALIST RORY DOYLE
DOCUMENTS A DAY INSIDE A
HOSPITAL AS LIFE CARRIES ON,
ALBEIT WITH ADAPTIONS

The lobby at Baptist Memorial Hospital - Golden Triangle buzzes with traffic in the morning. After nearly a year of adjusting to COVID-19, patients, visitors, doctors, nurses and staff are all met with new routines upon entry — a body temperature screening and a complimentary facemask to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is the reality in 2021.

With all the challenges the pandemic presented last year,

daily life goes on at its steady pace inside the hospital. Mothers give birth to new life, doctors and nurses continue to heal and save, housekeepers make facilities shine, kitchen staff deliver the comfort of food, EMTs and paramedics remain constantly alert and the chaplain makes his rounds, bringing spiritual comfort.

For those employed by Baptist, each new shift reignites a call to service — a commitment to patient care, no matter what form

LEFT: Monica McGill, assistant pharmacy director, preps Pfizer Covid-19 vaccines to be administered at the hospital. **ON THE COVER:** Amanda Edwards, RN, poses for a portrait in personal protective equipment for a COVID-19 testing site at the hospital.



each day's unique challenges present.

"I think COVID-19 has humbled all of us, because this disease has shown us the worst of the worst," said pulmonologist Dr. Ana Bonetti. "It's made me think more about the value of life, especially in the last year, where so many people have lost family members. In a way, we become our patients' family because they can't have visitors now, and that's something we took for granted before."

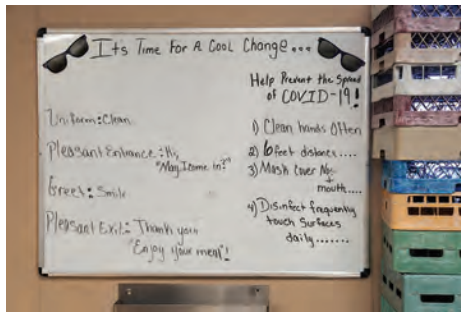
But in seeing the way the world has reacted to the pandemic has only served to reassure Bonetti.

"Another thing we've learned is that human beings are able to adapt, and that gives me hope," she added. "I'm hopeful this situation will

help us to be better humans in the future. And I'd ask the community to continue to trust members of the health care system. We are doing the best we can to take care of your loved ones."

The dedication toward patient wellbeing can be found universally across hospital departments. During her 31-year career, Shirley McGee has done her best to keep patients comfortable and fed. For the bulk of those years, she was a hostess, delivering meals directly to patients in their rooms. The pandemic caused a change of duties for her, now restricting her solely to the kitchen as a cook and prepper.

"I love meeting new people, so the biggest challenge is not being able to visit with them



OPPOSITE PAGE: Patient Marvin Singleton receives care inside the busy emergency room. **TOP:** Exercise physiologist Dexter Shelton leads a therapy session with Martin Beaver, left, and Toni Gunter, inside the cardiac rehab unit. **ABOVE:** A whiteboard sign offers words of encouragement for staff inside the kitchen at Baptist Memorial Hospital - Golden Triangle. **RIGHT:** Pulmonologist and intensivist Dr. Ana Bonetti poses for a portrait in the Critical Care Unit.



ABOVE: Shirley McGee, who has worked at the hospital for 31 years, used to be a hostess who delivered meals to patients, but due to the pandemic, her job is now restricted to the kitchen as a cook and prepper. **LEFT:** Complimentary face masks remain on a table inside a Covid-19 vaccination room at the hospital. **OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:** Brenda Porter, PCA, hugs patient Debbie Clark after brushing Clark's hair just before her departure from the hospital. **OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:** Shanika Frierson, left, and Ramona Sanders, sort laundry. The hospital is one of the few in the Southeast that carries out laundry services on site.





ABOVE: Patient Harvey Blaxton holds hands in prayer with Jonathan Blackburn, chaplain and director of pastoral care at the hospital. **LEFT:** Environmental Services employee Tyrone Pratt poses for a portrait while cleaning the room of a recently discharged patient in the Critical Care Unit. **OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:** Sandy Weseli, RN, administers a Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine to Wanda Brackin. **OPPOSITE PAGE MIDDLE:** COVID screener Tiffany Smith, right, takes the temperature of visitor Kayla Craig at the hospital entrance, standard protocol for everyone who enters the facility. **OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:** Wiley Rhodes puts a bow on his 5-day-old newborn, Arley, in the maternity ward, alongside mother, Bradley Rhodes, who also works as a nurse manager in the mother/baby department.

anymore,” said McGee. “I pray that things will get back to normal soon, and I would tell everyone to go ahead and get the vaccine for their safety. It’s going to get better. Put God and faith first and everything else will come.”

This faith, of course, is central to Baptist’s mission in keeping with the three-fold ministry of Christ — healing, preaching and teaching.

When the pandemic materialized in early 2020, the term “essential worker” emerged as a central talking point and helped develop a mainstream recognition of the hard-working people who maintain the operation of our country, particularly those on the front lines against the battle with the virus. It sparked a better understanding of dependency, and revealed the risks those working in health care are taking for the betterment of society.

“This has been a trying period for all of us,” said Jonathan Blackburn, chaplain and director of pastoral care, in between visits with patients. “We’ve had to pay extreme attention to the physical, spiritual and emotional health of our patients. This past year has reminded us just how much we really do need each other.”

PHOTOS AND STORY BY **RORY DOYLE**



3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

In every community, there are those among us who lead by quiet example. They seldom hold positions of power, nor do they have a title or any official designation that distinguishes them from their neighbors. Yet they are often the ones who, having found their own inspiration, serve to make us better people and a better community. The spark of imagination they ignite through the pursuit of their own dreams, passions and curiosity can spread down the street, through a neighborhood, across a community. Their stories are an inspiration and in the telling of their stories, others may be similarly inspired. In each edition, Progress tells the story of three of the “Inspired People” of our community.

PROFILES BY **SLIM SMITH**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



KATHY CADDEN

When health issues forced Kathy Cadden to leave her position at Mississippi University for Women in 2002, she didn't know what she would do with her time. One thing was certain though: "I knew I wasn't going to sit around watching TV or going out shopping every day," she said.

Inspired by a cousin's visit to the Ukraine and her story of a young girl she met living on the streets, begging for money to buy food, Cadden began collecting small amounts of clothing and personal items that she shipped to Ukraine. In almost 20 years, Cadden's modest effort to help a few kids in the Ukraine has evolved into a major humanitarian organization that has eased suffering on a broad scale to Eastern Europe ("all the 'Stans' countries", she says), Haiti, Africa and, closer to home, Texas and Louisiana, where hurricanes left people devastated.

"I started sending five-pound boxes to Ukraine," said Cadden, 67. "Now we're sending 15-to-20 ton cargo containers."

Operation Ukraine has provided millions of

dollars of food, clothing, medical supplies and education material to 27 countries since Cadden sent her first small "care package" to Ukraine.

Along the way, she's become a genius at logistics through her relationships with the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Air Force, which transports her donations as training opportunities for its cargo pilots. She's on speed-dial for charities throughout the country, cutting through the international bureaucracy to get needed supplies to desperate people when timing is of the essence.

Cadden said her motivation to help has been something she's had since she was a child growing up in Monroe County.

"There were always people at our house who needed to eat or even a place to stay," Cadden says. "My parents took in kids. I remember telling them they should be foster parents because they would be able to get some pay for taking children in. But they told me that they were just doing what Christians should do. The Bible says if you see somebody hungry, feed them. If they are naked, give them clothes. It's that simple."



SCOTT REED

As a business owner, Scott Reed has served on his share of boards since he opened his florist shop “Petal Pushers” in downtown West Point 22 years ago.

“Most people like me, when you are asked to serve on a board, you serve a term and look forward to rolling off when the term ends,” said Reed. “But that’s different with my position on the Sally Kate Winters Foundation board. I’ve been on their board for about 20 years now and there’s never been a time when I didn’t want to be involved with them. I will go on serving on that board as long as they want me.”

Reed first became aware of the important void the Sally Kate Winters Foundation fills as a child when his mom was working at the sheriff’s office.

“Back then, when there was a situation where a child had to be removed from a home, often in the middle of the night, they would bring them back to the jail because there was no place to take them until the next morning,” Reed said.

“At first, it was just an emergency shelter. Over the years, we have diversified our services.

Each Christmas, Reed designs a Sally Kate Winters T-shirt which has become the organization’s largest fund-raiser with orders coming in from all over the state.

In addition to his work with Sally Kate Winters, Reed has also served on the West Point Clay County Arts Council board.

“To me, the arts council is a lot more than just sponsoring shows and holding plays and other events,” he said. “It’s really something that ties a community together. I know for me personally, I’ve met some of my best friends through the arts council.”

His work with both organizations, while different in many respects, have a common denominator.

“It’s what small towns do best, come together for a common goal. It makes us a stronger, more connected community.”



MARYANN SHARP

Since Maryann Sharp and her husband, Matthew Sharp, arrived in Columbus in 2018, there hasn't been a sign-up sheet Maryann's name isn't on.

"If my name isn't on it, it's because I'm organizing it," she said. "Some people say I have a habit of doing it all."

Sharp said part of her motivation involves changing the perception of military spouses. "There's a reputation that military wives can be stuck-up and I wanted to break that perception," she said. "When my husband joined the military, we were a little older, so I think some of the people here kind of look at me as an aunt, or in some cases, even a second mom."

Through her role as president of the CAFB Spouse's Club, Sharp has not only helped make CAFB more welcoming to new military families but to the broader Columbus community as well.

Each holiday season, Sharp organizes a cookie program, providing mostly home-made cookies for single airmen who are away from their families. The Spouse's Club delivered around 8,000 cookies to the airmen around Christmas.

Maryann also organizes the Spouse's Club raffle to provide scholarships for military families. Outside the base, she solicits donations to area food pantries. This year, she started a program that solicits base personnel to donate household items — anything from kitchen supplies to bed linens, towels, even furniture — to the Golden Triangle Homeless Coalition, which uses the supplies to help stock short-term housing for homeless families.

She is often the first to greet new arrivals at the base, informing them of volunteer opportunities.

Sharp is not the typical bored housewife. In fact, she works full-time as a hair stylist at a Columbus salon.

"Sometimes, I take on more than I can handle and it takes me down if I'm not careful," said Sharp, 32. "But I get frustrated when I can't help."

"Honestly, I just want to help people," she said. "If I won the lottery, I'd give it all away. I really would. I've always been like that. It's just the way I am."



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Dena Bradford wasn't ready to go. For the first few weeks of first grade at Franklin Academy in the fall of 1970, Bradford — scared about leaving the company of her mother — sat on the steps outside the school and cried.

"Dena," Bradford's mom reassured her, "you have to go to school."

Reluctantly, Bradford went. In her first-grade class, teacher Allene Sanders soon took Bradford under her wing. Bradford got attached.

"From then on, I absolutely loved my six years here," Bradford said.

The experience she got from teachers like Sanders, third-grade teacher Ann Richardson and fourth-grade teacher Elizabeth Downer made Bradford realize, ultimately, what she wanted to do.

"I give them credit for what I am today," Bradford said. "I always wanted to be a teacher because I wanted to influence children the way they influenced me."

In her time in the Columbus Municipal School District, the Cleveland School District, Delta State University and the Aberdeen School District, Bradford has served in varying capacities. She has taught first through third grade, taught reading to seventh- and eighth-graders and served as a librarian. Now,

Thanks to
Representative Kalin Barnett
Senator Chas. "Cluck" Younger
Centennial Committee

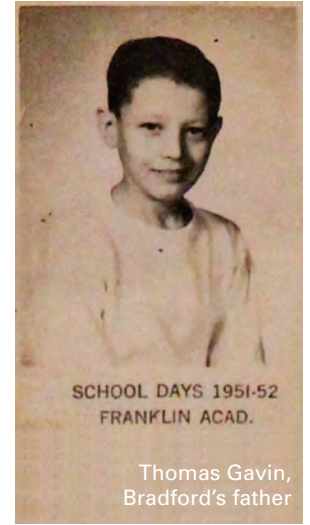


Dena Bradford attended Franklin from 1970 to 1976 and is in her fourth year as librarian at the school. Bradford's parents, her brother, sister, grandmother, great-uncle and uncle (Ward 6 Councilman Bill Gavin) all attended the school, too



SCHOOL DAYS 1951-52
FRANKLIN ACADEMY

Delena Gavin,
Bradford's mother



SCHOOL DAYS 1951-52
FRANKLIN ACAD.

Thomas Gavin,
Bradford's father

she's in her fourth year manning the library at Franklin, evoking old memories with every day she spends at the school.

"I started my school career here, and if the good Lord's willing, I will end my teaching career here," she said.

In the 200 years since Franklin — the first public school in Mississippi — was established, there are plenty of stories like Bradford's. The school held its bicentennial celebration on February 12, and alumni shared their remembrances of their time at what Bradford called a "pillar for education" in Columbus.

"It's still a beautiful school, I think," said Betty Thornbrough, who attended Franklin from 1939 to 1945. "To know that it has been here all those years, it's wonderful."

Like Bradford, Thornbrough did her best to avoid attending school at first. She "mysteriously" got sick time and time again, making her mother come pick her up and take her home. Eventually, Mom caught on.

"She swatted my rear end, put me out in front of the school and told me to go inside," Thornbrough said. "I never had that mysterious illness again."

She said she recalled square dancing in the auditorium upstairs, playing in the Magnolia Bowl during recess and getting jealous that her friend's first-grade class across the hall had instruments for a small band while hers didn't.

Emanuel Walden, who attended fifth and sixth grade at Franklin from 1974-76 (the same years as Bradford), credited the school for the academic benefits it gave him. He had previously gone to West Lowndes Elementary but found himself behind when he got to Franklin. When he went on to Motley afterward, Walden said he felt ahead of the game.

"It really set me up as far as the rest of my life because it was a really good school," he said.

IN THE CRADLE

Columbus Municipal School District Superintendent Cherie Labat said the experience Walden got at Franklin continues to be the ideal as Franklin Academy prepares for the 200 years to come.

"It's an institution we want to make sure the community is proud of, and we'll continue to focus on not only the structural but the academic achievement of Franklin Academy and the district as a whole," Labat said.

That means continuing with the capital improvement plan for the current Franklin building, which opened in 1939. Electrical repairs made by the Tennessee Valley Authority prior to the February 12 bicentennial event were part of maintaining and upgrading the grounds of the historic school.

"This is the cradle of public education," Labat said. "It's where it started."



Doughty and Jamison families who integrated Franklin Academy in 1965

A HISTORIC PAST

Originally, Franklin began as an unsealed 20-by-30-foot building completed in December 1821. In 1835, two buildings were erected with a wall between them — one structure for males, one for females.

Curriculum comprised spelling, reading, writing, English grammar, geography, arithmetic, Latin, Greek and mathematics. School ran from 7:30 a.m. to an hour before sunset with a two-hour lunch, and students got two weeks of vacation in July and two in December.

In 1877, Union Academy, a school for African American children created after the Civil War, became a branch of Franklin Academy. Labat noted that her education as a Black woman wouldn't have been the same as that of the students who attended Franklin prior to its integration in 1965.

“My experience as an African American would probably have been very different from another person’s experience 200 years ago,” she said. “Overall, the hope and aspiration of me becoming something better or more than what I wanted to be is the true essence of public education whether I was at Union Academy or I was at Franklin Academy.”

CENTURIES OF CHANGE

A lot else has changed in the past two centuries, Franklin’s alumni acknowledged.

When he was a student, Walden once spent hours drawing a tree in front of the school. The

other day, he drove by to realize the tree had been cut down.

The Magnolia Bowl, where he, Bradford and Thornbrough used to spend their recess period, is overgrown. The Columbus High School football team hasn’t played at the structure since 1998.

Still, Bradford can’t help but remember Franklin as it was when she attended. Walking past a classroom, she’ll think, “That’s the room where I fell in love with reading” or, “That’s the room I got in trouble for talking too much.”

“Memories flood my mind all the time,” Bradford said. “You walk in and you still remember being in that play or being in that talent show.”

Bradford is two years away from retirement, and there’s no question where she intends to spend them: in her library on the second floor of the school she once was scared to enter.

“What a perfect place for me to end my teaching career: a place that I love dearly,” Bradford said.

STORY BY THEO DEROSA

OLD SCHOOL PORTRAITS COURTESY OF DENA BRADFORD

DENA BRADFORD PHOTO BY THEO DEROSA

BICENTENNIAL PHOTOS BY CHRIS JENKINS



Franklin Academy's Bicentennial Celebration



The Hall of Fame display at The MAX



Downtown Meridian



An exhibit at The MAX



Mural in Meridian

A PLACE TO ESCAPE

FOR A WEEKEND TRIP TO MERIDIAN, EXPLORE TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' VISUAL ART IN A TOWN FULL OF HISTORY, SHOPPING AND MORE

Despite being the curator for The MAX, Mississippi's premiere arts and entertainment museum, Stacy Wilson had no idea the famous, Columbus-born playwright Tennessee Williams had tried his hand at painting as well.

Wilson came across Williams' art at a show in Saint Louis and knew she had to bring it back to Williams' birth state, at The MAX in downtown Meridian. Organized by the Key West Art and Historical Society, the exhibition "Tennessee Williams: The Painter and the Playwright" will be on display there through April 11.

Filling his canvas with images of actors, his lovers and characters from his plays, Williams traded writing lessons for art lessons from artistic friends, Wilson said. Like her, visitors to the exhibition largely have no idea the playwright famous for penning "A Streetcar Named Desire" also dabbled in visual arts.

"Everyone is surprised," she said. "They just never knew."

The MAX, which opened in 2018, celebrates famous artistic Mississippians, from William Faulkner to Oprah Winfrey — and including Golden Triangle natives like Eudora Welty, Howlin' Wolf and Williams.

From the "Hall of Fame," which adds five new Mississippians a year, to its upstairs exhibitions that showcase the importance of Mississippi's landscape and culture, The MAX also offers movie showings, live music and classes, depending on the day. Wilson said the museum wants to promote all of Mississippi and encourages visitors to explore other parts of the state.

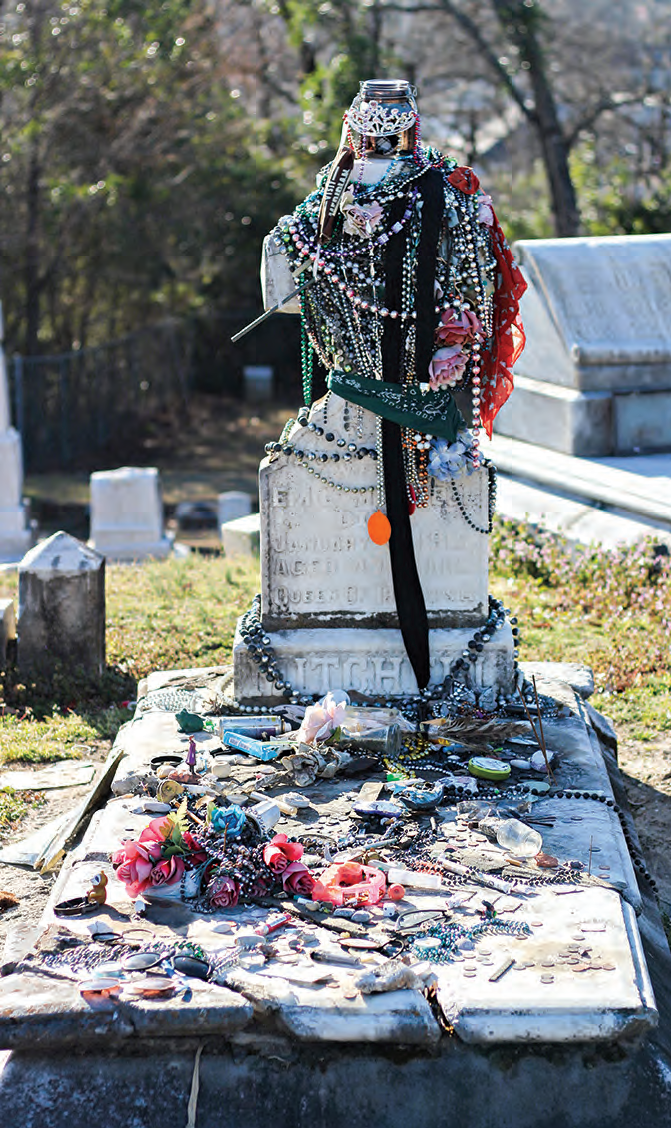
"We want people to see this as a place to escape," she said.

But The MAX and its temporary tribute to Williams is just one stop on the traveler's "escape" to Meridian, which features a plethora of boutiques, antique stores and flea markets for the savvy shoppers; Bonita Lakes Park for the outdoors-y types; and plenty of museums and historical sites for those wanting to experience



An exhibit at The MAX





Grave of Kelly Mitchell, “Queen of the Gypsies” and admired leader in the Romani community in the early 20th Century. Visitors leave coins, beads, bottled drinks and other knick knacks on her grave at Rose Hill Cemetery

Mississippi’s past.

Just down the street from The MAX is Visit Meridian Welcome Center, where guests can find recommendations for restaurants, lodging and attractions for “vintage junk lovers” or “girls getaways.” The center features guides for Meridian’s Civil Rights and Civil War trails, the Mississippi Industrial Heritage Museum and walking trails like the Around Town Carousels, which features more than carousel horses placed around the city.

Across from The MAX is Crooked Letter, a shop selling only Mississippi-made products, from food and cutlery to wood carvings to clothing and jewelry. Crooked Letter is just one shop in the easily-walkable downtown area, which also features elite dress shop Faulkenbery’s, Weidmann’s restaurant and the historic Temple Theatre and Ballroom.

Once you’ve explored downtown, drive across town to Bonita Lakes Park. Visitors can walk the track that circles one of the park’s lakes, or take in the site from a bench or gazebo while kids play on the park’s playground. Campers can also park their RVs at Bonita Lakes RV Park.

Other stays include the Lion and Harp Bed and Breakfast or Century House Bed and Breakfast, for special occasions.

For more information on Meridian’s attractions, go to www.VisitMeridian.com.

STORY BY **ISABELLE ALTMAN**

PHOTOS BY **TYLER JONES**

RECOMMENDED EATS:

Weidmann’s - This Meridian staple in easy walking distance of downtown attractions is famous for its atmosphere and delicious food. Try its World Famous Black Bottom Pie!

The Rustler - Though a little on the pricier side, this steakhouse on Old Highway 80 is consistently rated one of the top restaurants in Meridian.

Harvest Grill - Offering outdoor dining and an array of “cross country” menu items no matter your palette (or allergies), this downtown restaurant is within easy walking distance from the MAX, Visit Meridian Welcome Center and an array of boutiques, museums and other sights.

Brickhaus Bar and Grill - More bar than grill, “Brickhaus Brewtique” offers an array of beers and ales from all over the South, which guests can enjoy while listening to live music in its outdoor seating area.

Jean’s Restaurant - Also located in the walkable downtown, Jean’s offers a more Southern menu. If you don’t mind a drive, order to go and head to Bonita Lakes Park for a picnic if you don’t want to eat indoors during the pandemic.



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PROFILE



Name: Jimmy Woodruff

Age: 55

Position: Executive Director of the Columbus YMCA

Starting Date: February 17, 2020

Birthplace: Columbus, Mississippi

Hobbies: Golf, spending time with family and traveling

Spouse: Kim Woodruff

Children: Thomas and Katelyn

MEET JIMMY WOODRUFF

While Jimmy Woodruff has spent just over a year as the Executive Director of the Columbus YMCA, he's spent the better part of the past 12 months helping the organization remain operational while also mitigating pandemic. Woodruff spoke on the challenges of his tenure to date and what he sees as the vision of the YMCA in the future.

How would you describe the last 11-12 months and what effect has the COVID-19 pandemic had on how you run things?

I took this position and my first official day was February the 17th. So I came on board and started a second career coming from the retail world, and so not long after I started, just weeks after, we're in the beginnings of the pandemic and then we're shutting down for a couple of months. We really had to make tough decisions. So it's definitely been a challenge.

I will say that our people — and when I say our people, I mean our staff — just went above and beyond, did everything that they were asked to do and were brought into what we were doing for the last year. Everybody loves the Y and we want to do everything we can to make sure that we're going to be here for another 100 years.

What was the YMCA's process and timeline in terms of shutting down?

Well, we did shut down officially around March 20th or 21st for approximately two months. I think we opened back up in the second week of May. And we did have to furlough

some workers. We just had to do what we had to do there. It was not a pleasant thing to have to do, but, like I said, we're a business at the end of the day and we have to do things to make sure that we're gonna still be here.

But working from home on some things, I mean, we were still able to keep our feeding apparatus going, so we were able to actually not just keep that going, but actually grow that. You're going to see and hear more about our feeding program, and it was really born from COVID.

There was a lot of cleaning and sanitizing and just preparing for the reopening, because we knew we would be reopening at some point. Our number one goal, always, is for your safety. When you come here we want you to make sure you know you're safe and that we're going to be here to take care of everything for you.

How quickly or hesitant have members been about coming back into the fold given the ongoing pandemic?

Obviously you had people who are diehard workout people, so they were ready to come back from day one. But you have a lot of members that just weren't ready to come back. I mean, it's a setting where there's multiple people and working out in the same room and we're in close contact in some situations, so there was a lot of apprehension on the part of some people. I will say there's probably still about 40 percent of our membership that still just hasn't really come back yet. They're just not ready to. They want

the whole storm to clear before they come back. But our members have been great with whatever they've been asked to do, whether it's with masks and keeping their distance and keeping our room limits to where they are. They've been very open to doing whatever. Haven't had any issues there.

It's been really good, because there's just the understanding of what's going on in the environment and we understand that all these things are, it's not just the Y doing them. Everybody's having to do it no matter where you go. People just embrace it. But I think they're also ready for (the pandemic) to kind of start clearing up a little bit so they can just come back and just get in their normal routines and stuff.

What was the reasoning for closing the New Hope branch amid the pandemic?

That was strictly related to COVID and the operational costs of keeping it going. We just had to shut it down for that reason and that reason only. So it only had to do with the cost of operating it versus financially what we were dealing with at that time. It's closed indefinitely. We'll see what the long term is going to be for that branch, but we do have the other branch which is in Caledonia — it's doing good.

Obviously the YMCA is a gathering place for people, how do you see that role evolving moving forward?

The Y is a safe place. I mean, it's a safe place literally because we are for children, but we're just a safe place for everybody. We're a safe place for middle-aged (people), we're a safe place for older adults. The Y is a really unique place. You just come here and it's almost like you're insulated from the world and what's going on.

Everybody just gets along and everybody respects each other and everybody encourages others. It's a meeting spot and development place for a lot of things. But we serve so many needs and it really is just a magical place.

I think that pretty well covers it, but is there anything else you'd like to add or you think people should know about the YMCA?

One other thing I might mention is the tradition of the Y. The Y started in 1924, so we're almost 100 years old. And I'll tell you, that if you have lived in Columbus or Lowndes County for your life, this YMCA has influenced you at some point in your lifetime. Whether you took swim; maybe you played basketball; maybe you were a member when you were in high school, or college or something you came and hung out worked out; or maybe you just had a friend that you came in to watch play basketball, the Y has touched you in some way if you've lived in this community for any period of time. And so I think that's important, because the Y is an institution and it's an icon in Columbus. It's been here a long time and we're gonna make sure that it's here for another 100 years because there's a lot of things in the community that need help and need to be served and that's what we're here for.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length

STORY BY **BEN PORTNOY**
PHOTOS BY **LEDRIKO ISAAC**



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Mural in Clay County

NEW WELCOME SIGNS FOR CLAY COUNTY

CLAY COUNTY HOPES FOR TOURISM TAX REVENUE INCREASE

Tourism sales tax collections in West Point finished strong in 2020, leaving room for optimism that 2021 could be a banner year for that revenue.

Overall, the tourism tax revenue for 2020 (\$293,000) was down 5 percent from the year before (\$306,000), with COVID-19 restrictions and a spring shutdown of non-essential businesses serving as the main culprit, according to West Point-Clay Growth Alliance Director Lisa Klutts.

But as the shutdown ceased and restrictions loosened, tourism tax revenue surged. Additionally, West Point welcomed a Jack's and McAllister's restaurants.

The tourism tax revenue had increased each of the last five years before 2020, Klutts said.

NEW WELCOME SIGNS REQUESTED

Klutts said her biggest project she hopes to accomplish in 2021 is making major improvements to the city of West Point's welcome signs. According to Klutts, the city hasn't had new welcome signs since 2008, though she's unsure if she wants to scrap the two signs in place on Highway 45 and start fresh, but she says her project would definitely be more extravagant than just a re-painting. She said the need is there for new signs because the two that West Point has are faded in color. Klutts said new signs are vital because welcome signs can be a person's

first impression of a city and she would like for it to reflect the personality of West Point, which she believes is artsy and outdoorsy. The cost of new signs can range from elaborate to simple, Klutts said, but if the city uses the model from last time, the cost will be \$15,000 per sign.

ROAD WORK

The Clay County Board Of Supervisors hopes to finish road work in District 1 and District 3 by spring of 2021. Funds for both projects were authorized from a pair of \$500,000 bonds.

District 1 priorities will be West TVA Road, Lone Oak Road, Country Oak Road. Outside of that, remaining roads will be worked on as funds allow, District 1 Supervisor Lynn Horton said. He hopes construction on the roads can begin in April and the work can be completed within two months of the start date.

Meanwhile, District 3, which had its bond issued in the fall of 2020, will prioritize Mac Pate and Palestine roads, but improvements also could be made on Old Highway 10, Gates Road and Joe Myers Road.

Clay County operates differently than others in the Golden Triangle, as the county is organized using a beat system instead of a unit system.

Under a unit system, the county works as its own entity with a county administrator and a



Lone Oak Road

road manager that oversees all the roads in that county. They work under the guidance of the board of supervisors and county engineer to ensure all the roads are maintained. With the beat system, each supervisor is individually responsible for working with the county engineer to ensure the roads and bridges of the district they represent are maintained.

The City of West Point is borrowing \$2.1 million in Fiscal Year 2021 to fund paving/street improvement projects throughout the city. Per Mayor Robbie Robinson's recommendations, roughly \$1.045 million would cover repaving and repair work on sections of major downtown thoroughfares (Main, Broad, Commerce and North Division). Another \$429,000 would pay for engineering fees and other contingencies, while the remaining roughly \$682,000 would be split evenly among the city's five wards (about \$136,000 each) for work that selectmen earmark.

SEWER LINE INSTALLATION

Robinson told The Dispatch in late January the contract that would see sewer lines installed at 138 acres of the Prairie Belt Powersite remains on schedule.

In late September, the West Point Board of Selectmen approved the low bid of \$500,959 from DNA Construction LLC to lay sewer pipe to serve that portion of the industrial site south of Yokohama Boulevard. The work is hoped to be finished by spring of 2021.

Last fall, Development LINK CEO Joe Max

Higgins told The Dispatch in an email the site is currently a finalist for a large processor that is expected to decide where it will locate in the first or second quarter of 2021.

The city and county jointly own the Prairie Belt Powersite through the Clay-West Point Economic Development Group. With help from the Golden Triangle Planning and Development District, the group landed a \$500,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to assist in the project.

Stanley Spradling, the city's contracted engineer who designed the sewer project, told The Dispatch last fall the city and county will split the remaining roughly \$125,000 in related costs, which includes engineering fees.

A portion of the Prairie Belt Powersite is home to a Yokohama Tire Company plant, which was located there in 2015. Once the 138-acre tract south of Yokohama Road is outfitted with sewer infrastructure, it will leave 332 acres of the site north of the road undeveloped, Robinson said.

Robinson re-affirmed his confidence from the fall in late January that an industry will quickly occupy the developed portion and that the rest of the Powersite will one day be developed.

STORY BY **GARRICK HODGE**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



Prairie Belt Powersite

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West Point has all the charm you would hope to find in a small town, along with the unexpected. From Mossy Oak to Prairie Wildlife to Old Waverly Golf, antique shops, and lots of murals there is so much to discover downtown & aroundtown West Point, Mississippi. With annual events like the Prairie Arts Festival and the Black Prairie Blues Festival Labor Day weekend as well as points of interest that tell the story of West Point's history, we hope you will dine, shop and discover why we love where we live.




A MEMORIAL TO THE BLUES LEGEND
HOWLIN' WOLF
CHESTER A. BURNETT
JUNE 10 1910 — JAN 10 1976
NATIVE OF WHITE STATION, CLAY COUNTY, MS.
ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME, BRITAIN, ENGLAND
WEST POINT, MISSISSIPPI, MAY 28, 2000





West Point Growth Alliance
West Point Main Street
westpointlife.com



Crop duster on Prairie Point Road

EXPANSION AND ENHANCEMENT IN NOXUBEE COUNTY

NEW BUILDINGS, IMPROVED ROADS, BRIDGES
AND PLANNED INTERNET CONNECTIVITY ALL
SIGNIFY BOTH CURRENT AND FUTURE GROWTH
AND DEVELOPMENT

ONGOING INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Noxubee County received \$2.34 million from the Office of State Aid Road Construction within the Mississippi Department of Transportation for a countywide resealing project and will advertise for bids in the near future, District 4 Supervisor Eddie Coleman said.

The county started advertising at the end of January for the replacement of a bridge on Butler Road with \$2.9 million in Emergency Road and Bridge Replacement funds, which are authorized by the Mississippi Legislature and divided among counties in need of infrastructure repairs.

Another bridge replacement project, this one on Hopewell Road near Brooksville, is under contract with Laurel-based construction company Magco, Coleman said, and construction should begin by March.

Macon and the county are partnering to repair a bridge on North Street in the city, which will cost about \$400,000 and should start this summer, Coleman and Macon Mayor Bob Boykin both said.

Coleman also said some “major improvements” to Prairie Point Road, east of Macon, are to be expected.

Macon is still trying to secure \$400,000 in state aid funds to replace a bridge on Nate Wayne Drive, but Boykin said he is optimistic that the funding and the project will go forward.

NEW BUILDINGS AND BUSINESSES

Macon catfish processing plant Superior Catfish, which serves about 65 local farmers, is progressing well and should be finished and in use by August 1, general manager Fred Johnson said.

The \$17 million expansion, which broke ground in September 2019, will nearly double the size of the facility and is expected to add 25 jobs.

Meanwhile, construction of the Greater Meridian Medical Clinic on Miller’s Chapel Road off Highway 14 is nearing completion, Boykin said.

Mitchell Dental Clinic moved from the building it had occupied for 11 years in downtown Macon into the former home of Fred’s on Front-



Hopewell Road



Greater Meridian Medical Clinic

age Road, on the northern end of the city.

Lindy Hill, chief operating officer at Mitchell Dental, said purchasing the Fred's building and repurposing half of it was more efficient and financially feasible than building a completely new clinic. She said a good use of the other half of the building might be to rent out space for more medical offices, creating a medical complex.

Next door to the former Fred's, Nathaniel Miller of Brooksville is building 32 storage units with a business called Safe Space.

BROADBAND INTERNET EXPANSION

4-County Electric Power Association will lay about 200 miles of fiber optic cable from east to west across the northern portion of Noxubee County near Brooksville. This project, part of a pilot program that received partial funding from the state Legislature, will bring broadband internet to rural parts of the Golden Triangle currently without it. The Legislature in 2020 approved \$65 million from the federal CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act to aid electric cooperatives in providing broadband to rural communities.

Overall, 4-County received \$6 million in CARES funding and is combining that with \$7 million of their own money to lay just under 500 miles of fiber optic cable in rural parts of Noxubee, Clay and Choctaw counties.

Noxubee County will receive about 200 of

those miles of cable, public relations and marketing manager Jon Turner said, and a quarter of the project's targeted recipients live in that area, while a quarter live in Choctaw County and the remaining half live in Clay County.

4-County has not laid any cable in Noxubee County as of January, Turner said, because the plan is to work on Clay and Choctaw counties first, but the entire project has to be finished by June, he said.

STORY BY **TESS VRBIN**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



Superior Catfish

JUNIOR AUXILIARY OF COLUMBUS



Presents the

71st Junior Auxiliary of Columbus Charity Court 2021

Back Row L to R: Aiden Stanley, Graham Buxton, William Laws, Jackson Conn, Liam Sanders, Owen Riley, Nicholas Hairston, Second Row L to R: Blake Ward, Sally Stafford, Reagan Glenn, Evans Rhett, Kate McElhinney Third Row L to R: Hannah Hardy, McKenzie Rhett, Stephanie Madison, Emma Kate Griffin Bottom Row L to R: Anne Clark Shepherd, Emma Hardy, Anna Studdard, Mary Hassell Griffin
not pictured: Collier Hardy and Sam Hannon

OUR READERS

With each issue of Progress, we sit down with a handful of readers to learn a bit about them. These aren't always news-makers, but each has their own stories to share.

The questions are the same in each issue and are designed to gain insight into a handful of your neighbors. Some are at the beginning of their career and others already have a lifetime of colorful experiences. For the first time, we feature an Active Duty military couple, with the wife serving in the Army and the husband in the Air Force.

These five readers joined us in The Studio, a meeting space upstairs in The Commercial Dispatch building, in February right before a winter storm hit Mississippi.

We'd love to hear your story as well. If you're open to answering our five questions, let us know by emailing progress@cdispatch.com

INTERVIEWS BY **CLAUDI ARRINGTON**

PHOTOS BY **LEDRICO ISAAC**

STUART VANCE

RETIRED ENTREPRENEUR AND ROTARY DISTRICT GOVERNOR, STARKVILLE

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

Originally I went into furniture manufacturing after college, it was called Howard Furniture Manufacturing. Then the Herschede Clock Company, with that came MotorGuide Electric Fishing Motors. I started making wicker and rattan furniture for the condominiums on the coast and finally we opened a staffing business called Express Personnel. I think I followed a lot of the greens that came along and learned a lot from my peers. Took the opportunities that came along, like we saw the need for an airport. We pursued that, got support and put the airport together. That was a big deal, we needed it and it was one of the things that helped the community. That's really what I liked to do, help the community. I spent a lot of time at the Golden Triangle Regional Airport, I was one of the founding commissioners on the airport out there. I'm really proud of that, I spent 42 years on the board. The Rotary Club was a big part of my life as well, I was President of the Starkville Rotary Club and served as District Governor.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

I'd say by far, stay in school a lot longer and learn more. I'd probably go on and work on a masters degree, MBA.

What's the thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

I'm probably not as sweet as I make out to be. You'd find it difficult to believe, but I'm 90 years old and I have wit.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Well — women, I like women. [The room breaks out in laughter and we hear his girlfriend, sitting on the other side of the room, "Stop it!"] She's been too quiet over there.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

I gave up Clown Diving. I worked at a swimming pool and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons we used to dress up in funny clothes with hats pulled down, with slacks and blue jeans, one leg torn off and we'd go out and funny dive off the high board. This was years ago and I gave that up, but that was one thing. But honestly, I'd like to master more leisure.



REBECCA BOGAARD

ACTIVE GUARD RESERVE MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL GUARD, CALEDONIA



Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

Absolutely not. If you asked Becca ten years ago, 15 years ago, I would have never thought I'd join the Army. I just didn't see that in my future at all. I always thought I was going to be a teacher of some sort or even a librarian. I really wanted to be a librarian. It's really different now. I just ended up enlisting in the Army when I was 21, didn't really know about the direction. Someone told me that I couldn't do it, so I said I'm going to try and here I am eight years later and I made a career out of it.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

I would tell myself to do what I like and just not worry about what others think. Don't worry about other people, don't try to please other people, just do what I like and that's just going to make me happy.

What's the thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

Probably my sense of humor, because I can be really sarcastic and sometimes people can't tell when I'm serious. Sometimes it gets me in trouble.

What's your greatest extravagance?

My skin care routine is very elaborate and definitely my dogs. I use toner, I have three different types of lotions, night lotion, day lotion, sunscreen for the day and I always try to use sun block and then under eye cream. So that's definitely my greatest extravagance. I like to do face masks also. And my dogs - I like to take care of myself and I like to take care of them.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

That's a really good one — tap dance. I never got the chance to take dance when I was younger and I wish I could learn to tap dance, it looks so cool.

JON BOGAARD

ACTIVE DUTY U.S. AIR FORCE, CALEDONIA

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

I started playing basketball at a young age, so I was like, "oh I'm going to the NBA." Obviously it didn't take long to realize, I am not going to the NBA. I was always intrigued by the Air Force though, and my uncle is in the military, so that was always something I wanted to do. I am a Contracting Specialist now, and I started with Air Transportation. I didn't know what contracting was until I got in, but once I found out, I thought okay, that's where I want to take my career.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

I think it would be, just to apply myself more. When I was younger, I didn't always do the best in school. I don't know, I was always just so focused on sports and I think I would have branched out into other areas as well and just tried out new things more often, instead of just playing sports.

What's the thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

My quietness, because I'm definitely not quiet. Everybody thinks I'm super quiet, but that's definitely not the truth. Maybe around some people it takes me a while to warm up, but then I probably talk too much.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Food, without a doubt. We go out to eat way too much — and our dogs. We spend too much money on our dogs and food. We used to travel up to New York when we were still on the East Coast and go to restaurants there.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

Golf, because I play a lot of golf, but I still haven't mastered it. That's, I guess, one of my favorite things to do, so I'd like to master it. We'll see.



ESSIE DANTZLER

UNIT PROGRAM COORDINATOR, MACON



Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

Oh no, actually I wanted to design clothes. I started sewing at age 7 and by 12 I was making bridesmaids dresses. That's what I still do, I have an embroidery and sewing business in Macon, so once I retire I'll do that full time.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

I think to just be nice to everybody. Just treat everybody with respect, because when I was younger — you know. But as I've aged, I've learned to just be humble and just treat everybody with respect.

What's the thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

I'm kind of an open book. Everybody who knows me knows I'm kind of a people person, I really am, and a giving person. I joke around a lot, I'm really a comedian at heart. So, I don't think people misunderstand, because I am pretty clear about who I am.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I think — travel. I travel everywhere and I normally travel alone. My son lives in San Antonio, so I just drive non-stop. I don't stop — only for gas. I'm planning some international travel once the pandemic is over. I lived in the Philippines for three years, I went to school over there for dress making and pattern drafting. And then I lived in England for four and a half years and I did some designing there too. So when I was in England, I just drove across Europe.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

It's something people probably wouldn't expect — auto mechanic. If I could master that, I would.

WILLIAM REEVES

U.S. ARMY AND U.S. AIR FORCE VETERAN, COLUMBUS

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

When I was a younger kid I wanted to be on a PT boat in the Navy. That was my dream, but the days on the boat get lonely. I am 94 years old, going on 95. Looking back on it, I didn't want to be in the Navy as bad as I thought, because I got sea sick. When I was 18-19 years old, I thought I wanted to go to the Military, but after I got in, I wished I hadn't. After I got out of basic though, it was good. I was in Berlin, Germany, in 1946 for occupation duty in a torn up city. I landed in the heart of France and went across the country to Amberg, Germany. From there to Berlin I saw destruction, a lot of destruction. I was in Nurnberg when they had the war trials.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

I don't know, I'd just stay like I was. I don't have any regrets. I didn't complete college and I don't know if it would have been a lot better if I had. But I maybe would have, if I had to do it all over, but I wouldn't have a wife and the kids. We'll never know. I mean, I just let it go to Christ and have a healthy life. That's about all you can do, live one day to the next, but live a Christian life.

What's the thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

I guess they're not sure what it is I do. I joined the Army, then I had a very interesting career in the Air Force, started out as a clerk and cross-trained into missiles in Bitburg, Germany. I got into crypto-graphic equipment and retired out of that base as Communication Crypto-Graphic Superintendent, as Senior Master Sergeant. Then I went to the Reserve. So I just always did a lot.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Probably vehicles — I've always kept a pretty new one. You know from a Volkswagen to a Cadillac.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

I always wanted to be a pilot.



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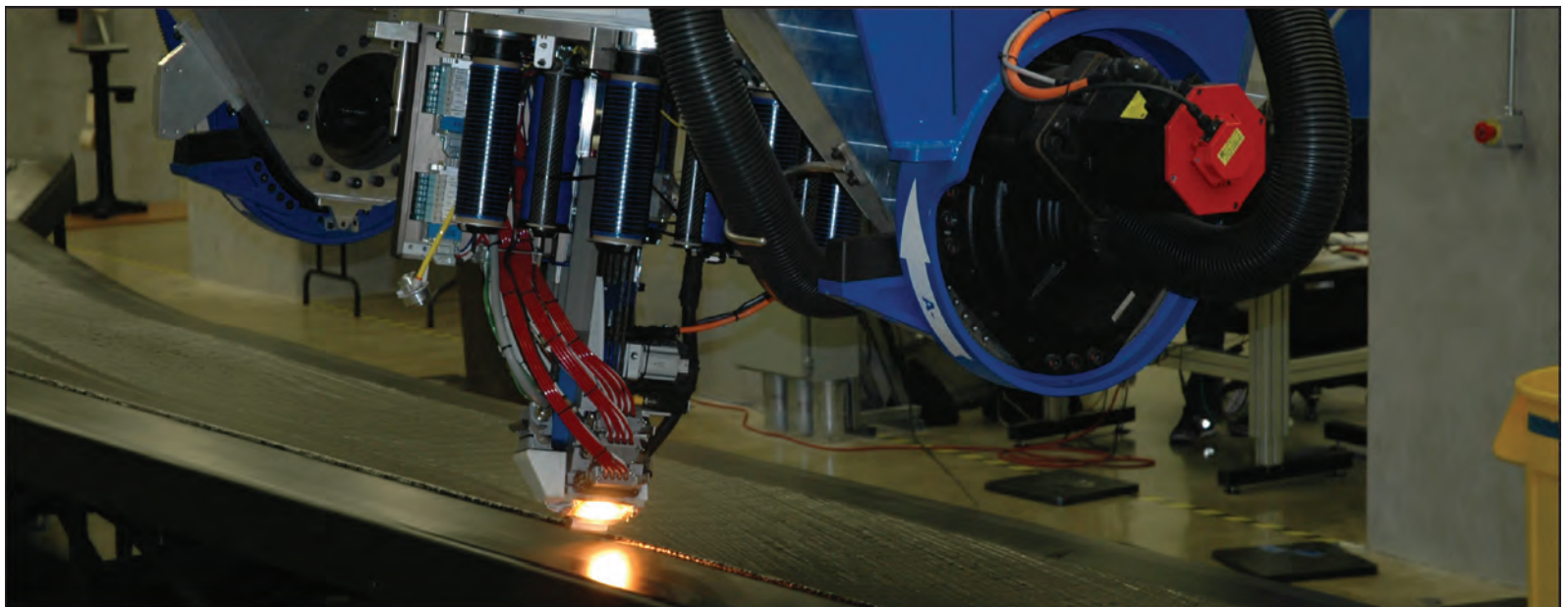
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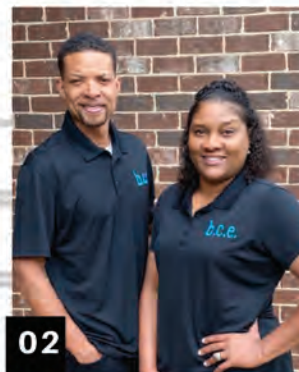
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