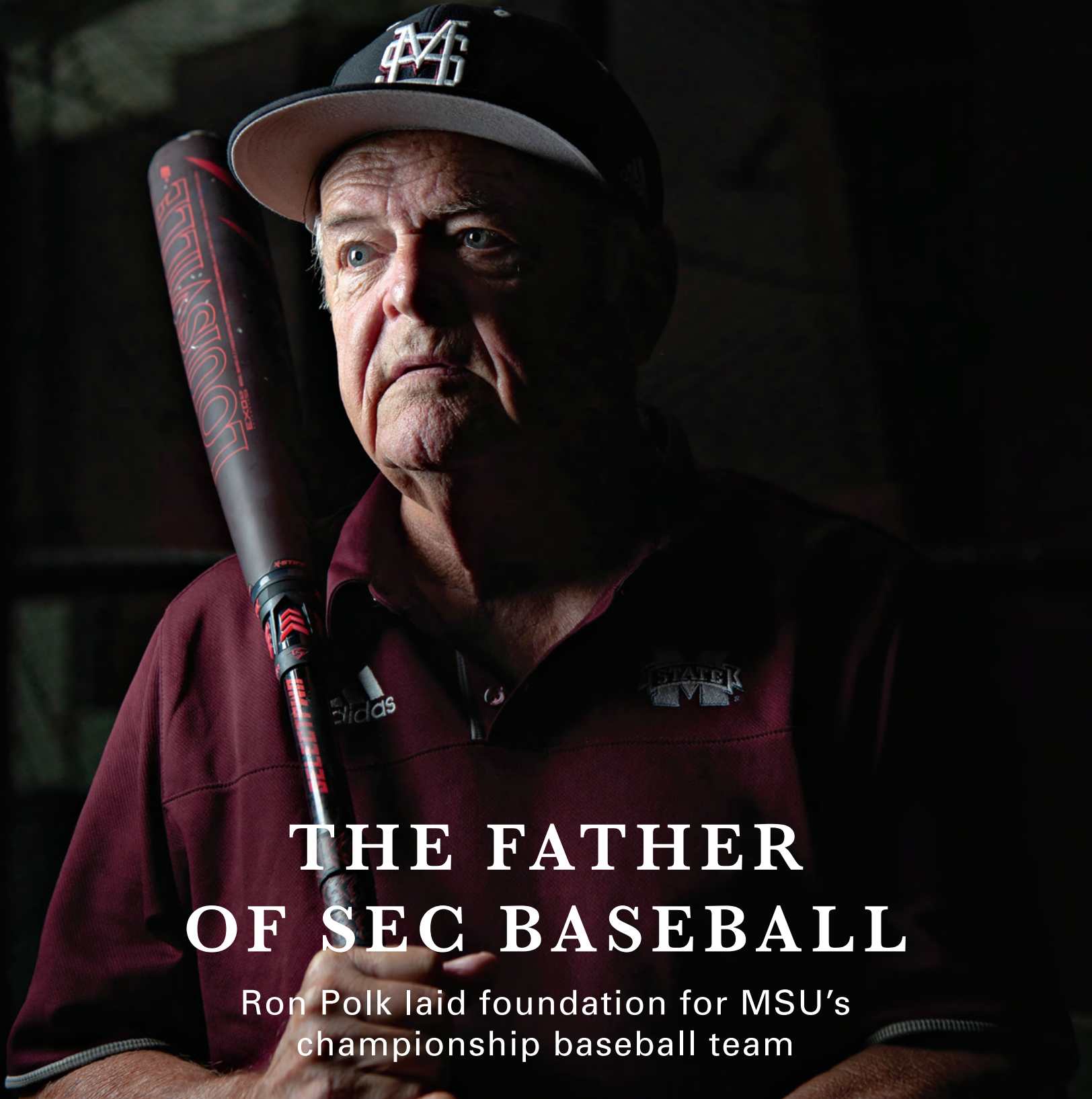


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FEDERAL COVID FUNDS STAND TO MAKE MAJOR IMPACT

COLUMBUS, LOWNDES TO RECEIVE COMBINED \$16.6 MILLION

Lowndes County and the city of Columbus will both wait another year before they receive all their American Rescue Plan Act funds for COVID-19 relief, but leaders for both entities are already making plans for how to spend it.

The county will be allocated \$11 million in ARPA funds and Columbus is due \$5.6 million. Each has received half the money with the other half coming by the end of 2022.

This fall, both the Lowndes board of supervisors and Columbus City Council began the process of hiring consulting firms to advise them on how to spend the funds effectively and in compliance with government regulations. The city has also earmarked up to \$1.3 million of its ARPA funds for one-time “premium pay” stipends for its employees.

Generally, local governments are allowed

to spend ARPA funds on water, sewer and broadband infrastructure and premium pay for employees, among other purposes.

ROAD PROJECTS

Work began this fall on a \$5 million plan for the county that will improve 58 miles on a total of 48 roads. The plan targets some of the county’s heaviest-traveled roads.

The county will borrow the money for the project and pay it back over five years with internet sales tax revenue — which is estimated to generate about \$1.2 million annually. Plans are for the road projects to be finished by the end of the year.

In Columbus, a \$6.5 million road resurfacing and sidewalk project is plugging along, slowly but surely. The project is meant to improve 142 streets and about two-thirds of the planned proj-



Market Street Festival

ects were completed by mid-September.

The city in 2020 issued bonds to fund the project, which will be repaid over the next 15 years.

INDUSTRY

Two solar farms will soon be under construction west of Lowndes County Industrial Park near Artesia.

Origis has a deal with The Tennessee Valley Authority to build the farms — a \$350 million total investment that will generate 350 megawatts with 100 megawatts of combined battery storage. The company has a contract with TVA to begin delivering power by 2023 to grids in the system that have reserved it.

The county is planning to fund \$620,000 in water treatment upgrades and another \$500,000

in water line upgrades at the industrial park, located off Highway 82 near Golden Triangle Regional Airport, to help recruit more industry to the area. It also completed a project to resurface Charleigh Ford Road that completed a loop — from the airport to Mims Road — that encompasses Steel Dynamics, Paccar, Airbus, Aurora Flight Sciences and other projects underway. The loop will make it easier for prospective companies during the site selection process, according to officials.

Speaking of “other projects underway,” The Golden Triangle Development LINK has been busy courting several industrial prospects. Though not yet formally announced, at least two are in the final phases of determining whether they are coming.



Charleigh Ford Road

Those include a \$100 million project at Lowndes County Port that could bring 100 jobs and a \$60 million project west of Columbus that could bring another 150 jobs.

BURNS BOTTOM

Columbus Redevelopment Authority is “close” to obtaining all the necessary properties in Burns Bottom to market the area for redevelopment. The acquisition phase of the effort could be complete by year’s end.

In 2015, CRA formed and zeroed in on revitalizing the Burns Bottom neighborhood — a Northside residential area between Third and Fourth streets and Second and Seventh avenues that has fallen into disrepair. Two years later, the city council committed \$3.2 million in ad valorem tax revenue to help CRA with acquiring more than 70 lots in the project zone, as well as demolition and site prep. The plan is to market the entire area for a mixed-use redevelopment of residential and commercial.

HORSE PARK, FITNESS TAIL

Lowndes County is soliciting bids to complete its horse park on Tom Rose Road.

Supervisors approved the roughly \$4 million, multi-phase project in 2018, and the arena is



Chase Larmour uses fitness equipment at the Lowndes County Soccer Complex.

already in use for recreational riding. The final piece of the project is adding concession stands and bathrooms, at an estimated cost of \$500,000, that will accommodate organized events and competitions at the facility.

The county is using a combination of bor-



Horse park on Tom Rose Road

rowed money and interest from its hospital trust fund to pay for the horse park.

At Lowndes County Soccer Complex, a fitness trail will be completed this fall.

The trail, paid for primarily through a \$140,000 grant from the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, will include 10

stationary workout stations.

CITY FACILITIES, EQUIPMENT

Columbus plans to reroof the municipal complex some time over the next 12 months, with the council including \$100,000 in its Fiscal Year 2022 budget.

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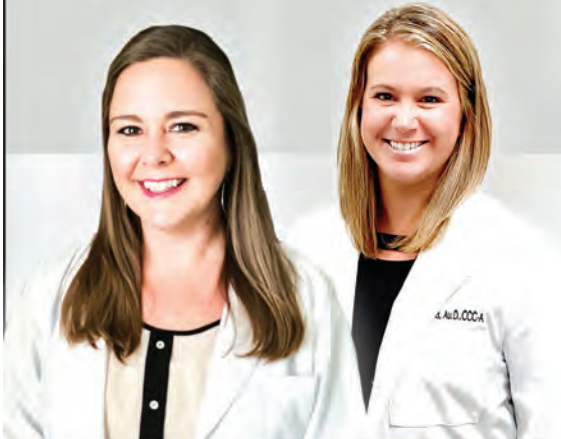
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Columbus Municipal Complex

A new community center at Sim Scott Park opened in May, more than two years after a February 2019 tornado destroyed the old building. The project was paid for by a combination of insurance and emergency relief funds.

The \$2.5 million fire station project on Airline Road was completed in April, five years after it broke ground. The station became the headquarters for Columbus Fire and Rescue. In August, CFR also received a Federal Emergency Management Agency Firefighters Assistance grant for a new fire truck. With the grant, the city will on have to pay \$150,000 in match for the \$860,000 truck.

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**

OPENING AND AERIAL PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**

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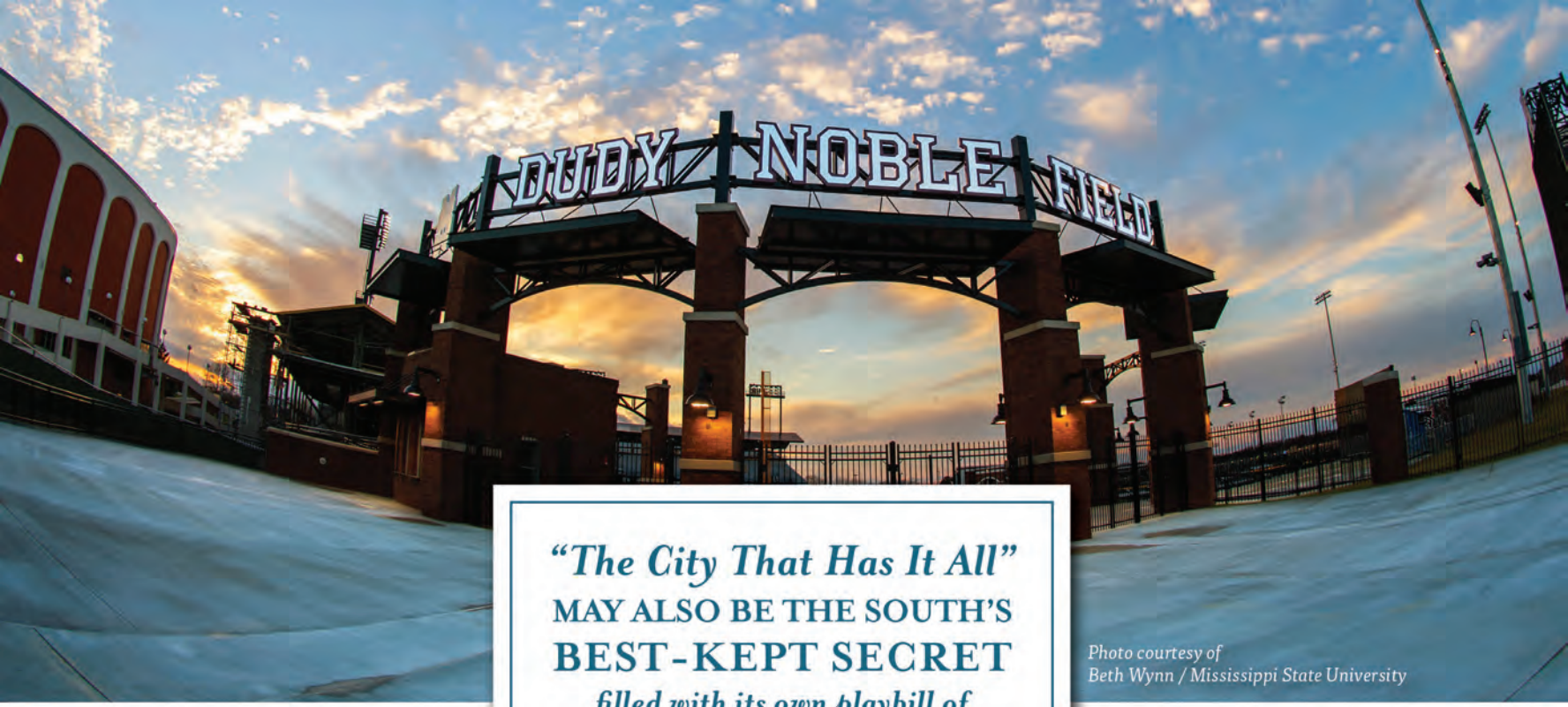


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OKTIBBEHA COUNTY



OKTIBBEHA SEEING INCREASE IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

STARKVILLE TAKES ACTION TO REDUCE CRIME

As mask mandates and COVID-19 precautions have decreased, Starkville and Oktibbeha County have seen an increase in sales, recreation and social interaction.

RETURN TO NORMALCY

The city of Starkville and Oktibbeha County both lifted their mask mandates and capacity limitations in spring 2020 after several months of requiring masks inside buildings. This allowed businesses and restaurants to fully open their doors to customers.

Mississippi State University lifted its capacities on sporting events in the spring allowing many fans to attend MSU baseball games. The university broke the postseason record on attendance at the June 12 Starkville Super Regional game,

becoming the fifth largest crowd in MSU history. Tailgating also returned to MSU this fall after a year off due to COVID-19.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Mississippi State University set another record in 2021, winning its first national championship at the College World Series in Omaha on June 30. The Diamond Dawgs returned to Starkville not only with a gold trophy, but a title representing the entire city of Starkville.

Along with excitement from fans near and far, business sales boomed in the city after the win. Several businesses began selling national championship programs and instantly had extreme increases in revenue the months following the championship.



Officer Gabriel Texidor displays a body camera

CRIME PREVENTION MEASURES

While Starkville saw an increase in crime throughout 2021, the city took action and instituted many preventive measures.

Starkville Police Department now uses innovative body cameras to ensure safety and accountability. These “BodyWorn” cameras use artificial intelligence to create situational awareness and community transparency. BodyWorn works by syncing to a police vehicle after driving more than 15 mph. These cameras are continuously “pre-event” recording, but not until a “trigger” occurs do they begin to actively record. After a video is finished recording, it automatically uploads into cloud storage within seconds, providing security of the video. SPD also added 14 new cars and a motorcycle to its fleet, which will phase out some of the department’s older vehicles.

The Starkville board of aldermen enacted a citywide juvenile curfew beginning in the summer. The intention of this curfew is to keep minors home during the late hours of the night to

mitigate juvenile crime. Starkville also negotiated an agreement with the Lowndes County Detention Center to reserve two beds full time from the complex for troubled Starkville city juveniles, providing them an opportunity to find improvement.

SOCSD GETS COVID RELIEF FUNDS

The Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District received nearly \$24 million in American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief funds since March. Much of the funding will be used for building upgrades across the district to help create a cleaner learning environment for students. The aid also is funding particular Elementary and Secondary Education Act programs, such as low-income assistance, teacher training and enhancement and gifted-student funding.

TRANSPORTATION AND PARK MANAGEMENT

Bird, an electric scooter ride-sharing service,

delivered a fleet of scooters to Starkville in early spring. After a few months, the board of aldermen and SPD began receiving complaints about misuse of the devices, such as riding them down highways and sidewalks and users operating them under the influence. The city ultimately approved a contractual agreement with Bird to follow the board's jurisdictional limits.

Blackjack Road in Oktibbeha County received its first layer of blacktop this summer. This construction project has been in the works for several years and is now nearing completion. After only having two lanes, this county road will not be a newly paved three-lane road with a turning lane in the middle.

Cornerstone Park in Starkville continues construction and finds new management under third-party construction company Sports Facility



Bird scooter

management. Cornerstone will be a tournament-based complex filled with softball and baseball fields. Starkville Parks and Recreation Department also recently partnered with SFM to help manage all parks across the city. This contractual agreement will improve the overall quality of Starkville's parks while offering programming, such as new sporting activities and juvenile crime reduction programs.

Starkville Parks and Rec also reopened the Moncrief Park pool for summer 2021. The department made major improvements to the pool through available money in the department's



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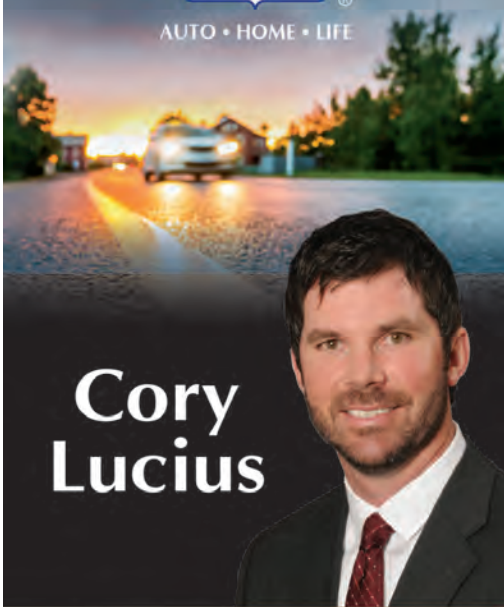
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Blackjack Road construction

budget. The upgrades include establishing new signage, painting the pool deck and putting pool chairs out for residents to use.

COUNTY PLANS NEW CONSOLIDATED BUILDING

The Oktibbeha County board of supervisors began discussing preliminary plans for a new consolidated county building. Oktibbeha County's eight buildings' average age is 58 years with a total replacement value of \$31 million. The county has been working closely with Columbus-based architectural firm Major Design

Studio for the planning process of deciding what needs will be met and how. No immediate decisions have been made yet regarding funding a new headquarters.

Oktibbeha County also issued \$10 million in bonds to fund capital projects throughout the county. These bonds would fund road projects and potentially redo the dam at the Oktibbeha County Lake.

STORY BY TYLER B. JONES

OPENING PHOTO BY

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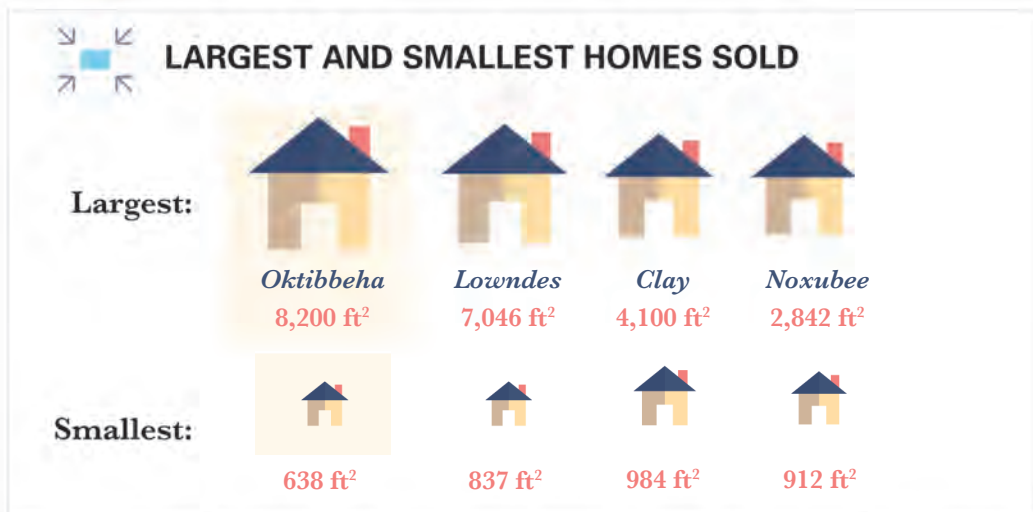
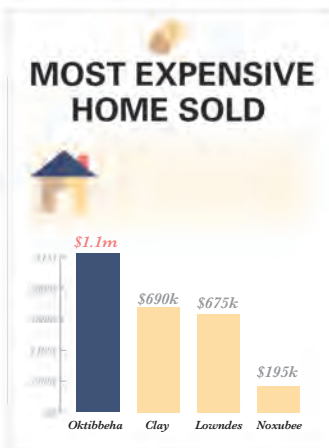
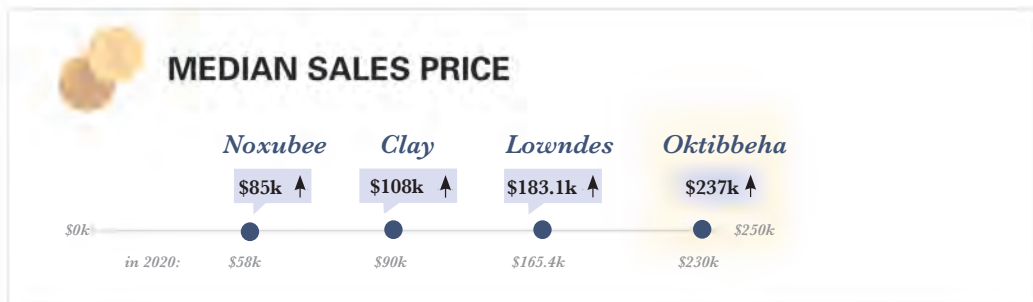
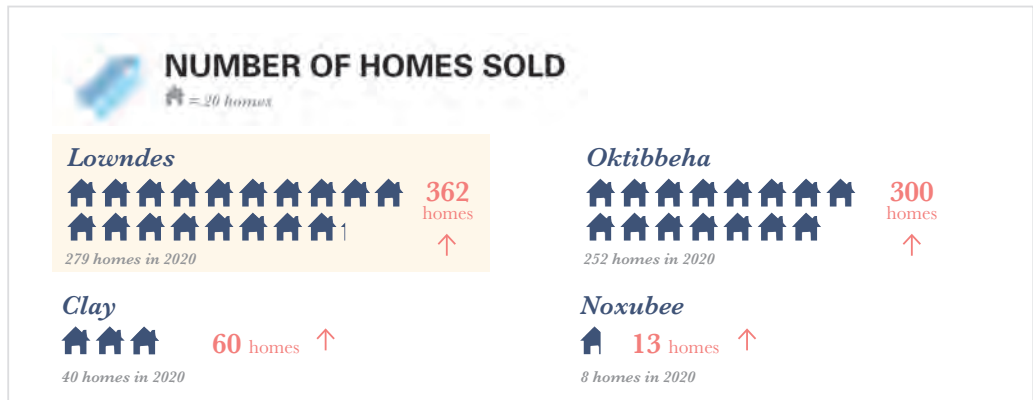
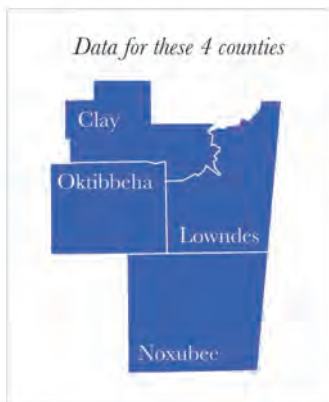
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BUSINESS



Reau Berry and Brooks Berry

MULTI-GENERATIONAL FURNITURE COMPANY GETS INNOVATIVE

JTB IN COLUMBUS STARTED RESIDENTIAL
FURNITURE LINE AMID PANDEMIC

Brooks Berry hardly goes anywhere anymore without his companion, Murphy. That includes Wednesday afternoon walks through the Johnston Tombigbee Furniture factory off Waterworks Road in Columbus that his family started nearly 90 years ago.

With Murphy — an Irish Doodle with a

“strong Irish name” — trotting loyally beside, Berry speaks to every employee he encounters by name as he purposefully moves through each section of the factory.

“The average tenure for someone working here is 25 years, if you can believe that,” Berry says.

“There are people here who remember seeing me walking through when I was this high,” he adds, placing one of his hands roughly three feet from the floor.

The smattering of busy workers represents a sample of the 99 now employed at JTB, a little more than half the furniture manufacturer’s manpower in early 2020, when shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic thwarted the global economy.

Toward the back of the plant, Berry walks into the “printing room” to check on his latest passion project — one he is sure will expand and diversify JTB’s operation. Inside are four Vanguard wide-format printers sitting ready to apply a smart veneer of high-resolution flat or textured digital images to any flat surface.

“Blend this with furniture making, and it creates some interesting opportunities,” Berry says.

THE LONG WAY HOME

Russell B. Johnston, Brooks’ great-great-grandfather, founded JTB Furniture in 1932. Reau Berry, Brooks’ father and third-generation owner, took over as company president in 2000.

Starting in the residential furniture market, JTB began also making furniture for hotels in 1980. By 2004, the company shifted to manufacturing solely for hospitality. Today, as one of only three large-scale hospitality furniture makers in the U.S., JTB boasts clients like Hilton, IHG and Wyndham, and its products outfit tens of thousands of hotel rooms across the country.

“If you’ve stayed in a Hampton Inn or Holiday Inn Express, chances are you’ve seen our furniture,” Brooks said.

For Brooks, the road to the family business was anything but direct. He graduated from

Columbus High School in 1999 and took off for Los Angeles to “find himself.”

As a model, he appeared in print ads, television commercials even a Hillary Duff music video. He also dabbled in music production.

“When it comes down to it, I’m a creator,” Brooks said. “I like making things.”

He came home in 2006, and Reau sent him straight to the factory floor to learn each step of the family business firsthand.

“Brooks has grown up in this business and he knows every facet of it,” Reau said. “And if you’re going to be successful, you have to know every facet.”

Brooks was promoted to vice president of retail sales roughly 18 months ago, just in time for COVID-19 to change everything.

RE-ENTERING THE RESIDENTIAL MARKET

People stopped traveling, meaning they stopped staying in hotels. Soon, hotels stopped buying furniture.

JTB sent nearly half its workforce home, and Reau said the factory operated just 165 days in 2020. The Berrys started looking for ways to



Murphy

reinvent the company. One possible strategy seemed pretty obvious.

“The residential retail sector was booming,” Brooks said. “Everybody’s at home (because of the pandemic), and they are looking around the house thinking, ‘We should change things up a bit.’”

Overseas shipping, especially from Asian furniture makers, stalled and the price skyrocketed. That has led to months-long wait times for customers that have not yet abated.

“We felt like it was a good time to re-enter the residential market,” Reau said. “We had the equipment to do either-or. It was just a matter of remarketing.”

Brooks, spearheading the company’s “pivot” back to residential, remembered his Uncle Duke Berry, JTB’s chief operating officer, talking about Vanguard printers he had seen years ago that could print images onto furniture. Brooks tracked down the equipment, bought one, then another, then two more.

Over the past eight months, those printers helped JTB design a line of about a dozen bedroom suits Brooks is now marketing to hundreds of retailers across the country.

“There’s nothing else like this that can be found on showroom floors because of this technology,” Brooks said. “We’re going after the big guys (for clients). That’s who we’re targeting.”

The printers can apply any high-resolution photo, graphic, pattern or text to flat surfaces in color photo quality — making it perfect for headboards, nightstands or cabinets. Their texturing capability introduces even more design possibilities.

For now, the bedroom line offers limited



A custom design is printed on a furniture panel



Samples of custom printed panels





Brooks Berry walks through JTB

designs, but JTB is offering chests and novelty items through Etsy.

It will take “a lot more infrastructure” to evolve to a direct-to-customer model with custom-made pieces, Brooks said. He hopes to move one day more in that direction.

“I have a vision of where I want this to go,” Brooks said. “We’ve just got to get some traction with it.”

COMING BACK ‘BIG TIME’

On the factory floor, dozens of cabinets roll down a conveyor belt in the factory waiting for finishing touches. They, too, wear accents of the smart veneer technology.

Reau points proudly to each, identifying their final destination: This one to a casino in Washington, that one to a hotel in Texas.

As people have begun traveling again, pent up demand has driven JTB’s hospitality orders upward.

“It’s coming back big time,” Brooks said. “We used to have to go out and pitch these hotel

companies. Now companies like Marriott and Wyndham are coming to us.”

Ideally, Brooks wants hospitality and residential manufacturing to each make up 50 percent of JTB’s business. Right now, though, the factory is understaffed and finding workers is as challenging as ever.

“Crazy times, I guess,” Brooks said.

To “add energy” to the factory environment, Brooks’ sister Frances, a Memphis-based artist, plans to paint murals on the now drab interior walls throughout the plant. Brooks also is pitching JTB as a good, creative place to work with a legacy to back that up.

“We want to create a fun environment for people to work in,” Brooks said. “We also know there are people out there who want to do something they can grow with. Those are the people we’re looking for.”

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**
PHOTOS BY **AUSTIN FRAYSER**



Spicy Thai Taco
Ingredients:
Marinated Beef
Cucumber
Sriracha
Lime Juice

Hawaiian Eari Taco
Ingredients:
Pork or Chicken
Banana
Pineapple
Tangy BBQ Sauce

Baby Got Back
Ingredients:
BBQ Meat
Baked Bean Puree
Tangy BBQ Sauce
Onion

Anthony Logan, Schmidt's and Jiggly's

FOOD TRUCKS: SMALL FOOTPRINTS AND BIG DREAMS

When Isabel Vanegas was a kid, she used to cook with her grandmother who dreamed of one day opening a restaurant in her native Mexico.

Although her grandmother has passed, Vanegas has fulfilled that dream by using her recipes in her family's food truck, Taco Amigo, which is based in Columbus.

Food trucks are mobile restaurants that offer a variety of options for adventurous taste buds.

GETTING OUT OF THE RAT RACE

Schmidt's and Jiggle's, based in Eupora and owned by Stephanie Logan, was among the first mobile food units in the Golden Triangle.

Stephanie was a nurse for 15 years before she thought about changing careers.

"I was working in corporate America and really couldn't help my patients like I wanted to. I felt stuck and needed a change," she said, as her husband, Anthony Logan, served up a few West Coast Tacos, filled with pulled pork and a crunchy slaw, at a Starkville Sunday Funday in late September.

One night, a little more than two-and-a-half years ago, while Stephanie served up street tacos during family dinner, her husband joked that she should open a taco truck. At the time she said she couldn't support the family with a food truck.

"I was kind of tired of the same food all the time," she said of the restaurant scene in Webster

County at the time.

The food truck offers what Stephanie refers to as multi-cultural cuisine ranging from tacos to hibachi to sandwiches.

FOLLOW THE CUSTOMERS

Larry and Jessica Gilbert own Get Rolled, a mobile food unit that offers rolled ice cream. While it is based in Eupora, the dessert-themed vehicle travels throughout the area, including Columbus, where it appeared at the United Way of Lowndes and Noxubee campaign kick-off in September.

"Rolled ice cream is different from traditional ice cream," said Larry Gilbert. "It's a heavy cream-based mix that is homemade."

The mixture is poured onto a flat surface, like a griddle, that is cooled to negative 20 degrees Fahrenheit. The Gilberts scrape the ice cream off the surface, creating a roll of ice cream that resembles a hollow jelly roll cake. They then top it with various things to make flavors like Pretty 'N Pink (strawberry and chocolate), strawberry shortcake or Campfire Delight (s'mores).

The kitchen is mobile, allowing owners to go where the money is, Gilbert said.

"Our only issue with a storefront or a brick-and-mortar is we can move around," he said. "If we have a slow day here tonight, we can pack up and go to a different town and sell again. We also have the opportunity to travel and meet people.

We also are able to kind of control what our revenue is.

“If we have a bad day in a store, then it’s just a bad day. If we have a bad morning here, we can go to another town that afternoon.”

The Gilberts said that the first few times Get Rolled went out, business was slow.

“People don’t know what you are,” Larry said. “Most times, they don’t even know you’re there. It just takes a couple of times for you to visit a town before (the food truck) catches on. Overall, it’s been great. My wife and I do this together full time. This is our livelihood.”

MORE THAN JUST A VEHICLE ON WHEELS

To supply items for Taco Amigo’s menu, Isabel and Randy Vanegas have a prep kitchen and pay rent and city licensing fees. All food trucks are required to adhere to the same fees and regulations, including a health certificate from the state, as a regular restaurant.

“You need to have a physical address for a food-delivery company to bring your products to,” said Isabel. “They can’t bring it to some weird address.”

In Taco Amigo’s kitchen, Isabel and her family members prepare food to get it ready for service. It’s then secured on the truck and driven to that day’s location.

HOW TO FIND A FOOD TRUCK

Finding local food trucks can seem like a mystery. Luckily, once you find a food truck, you’ll learn how to find them again.

Blue Plate Mafia, which opened in late August, and other mobile food units rely on social media to spread the news of where they’re heading and what’s on the menu. You can even contact a truck to have them cater a private event. Some food trucks have their social media and Internet information near the service window or menu.

Blue Plate Mafia is Starkville-based and is owned



Taco Amigo



Food trucks serve customers at a recent festival

by Chris Walker and David Wilkerson. The chefs have a combined 35 years of experience. Their menu ranges from loaded fries to meats to dessert.

Besides serving up food for the communities they visit, Walker recently was recognized for his pastry skills during the Sweetest Chefs of the South, an annual event held in Alabama. This year, he received Most Creative dessert for The Baked Alabama.

“It’s our twist on a Baked Alaska, we served a meringue cookie (painted to look like an oyster shell), topped with a passionfruit mousse and a Lane Cake crumble,” he said.

Walker has competed in the contest for four years and also received Best Presentation and Most Flavorful in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

STORY BY **NICOLE BOWMAN-LAYTON**
PHOTOS BY **NICOLE BOWMAN-LAYTON**
TACO AMIGO COURTESY PHOTO



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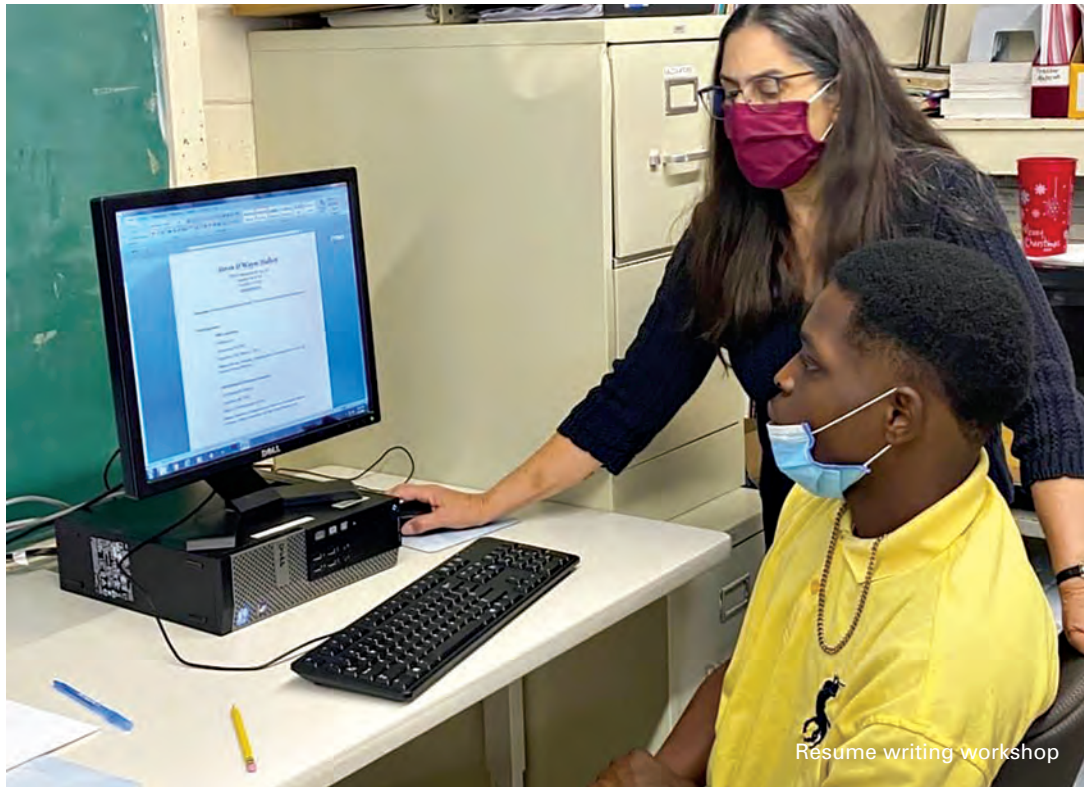


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SOCSD OFFERS A 'PERFECT WEB' OF FAMILY, COMMUNITY PROGRAMS



Brandi Burton knows there's a lot more to education than just school. As the director of educational enhancement and innovative research for the Starkville-Oktibbeha School District's Discovery Center, it's Burton's job to make sure students

and their loved ones are safe, happy and financially stable.

"You've got to work within the whole family," Burton said.

That's where the Discovery Center's family and community services come into play. Started

by the recently retired Joan Butler in the late 1990s, the district's grant programs all came under one roof in July at the Emerson Family School at 1160 Louisville St.

"When we all work together, we're able to provide services for the community that they need," said Vanessa Shaffer, project manager for Project HELP, which serves the families of homeless students or those with inconsistent living arrangements by providing school uniforms, school supplies, personal hygiene supplies and tutoring. "It's all just kind of like this perfect web of programs."

Burton said Discovery Center programs are free unless a specific certification or training that requires a fee is involved, such as a mid-September CPR class.

The services SOCSO provides are rare to Shaffer, who didn't experience them when she previously taught in Chicago.

"There's a lot of communities that don't have this, and they're really surprised when they come in," she said. "I think that our program is special in that way: We're here to help you and do what we can to support your family. People need these types of programs. There's so much going on in the world. This is a good way to just give back."

DISCOVERY CENTER

Emerson Family School

1160 Louisville Street
Starkville, MS 39759
Phone: 662-615-0033
Hours: 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday

Project CARE

■ Manager: Roy Ann Bell, rbell@starkvillesd.com.

■ Positive parenting Zoom class: Mondays, 2:30-3:30 p.m.

■ Active parenting conference call: Wednesdays, 11 a.m.-noon. — Phone number for conference call: 605-313-4100. Access code for conference call: 48672#

■ Active parenting in-person class: Thursdays, 10 a.m.-11 a.m., Discovery Center Resource Library

■ Community parenting support group: 11 a.m.-1 p.m., second and fourth Saturday of

each Monday, Peter's Rock Family Worship Center

Project PEACE

■ Manager: Elizabeth Williams, elwilliams@starkvillesd.com.

■ Hours: 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday

Project HELP

■ Manager: Vanessa Shaffer, vshaffer@starkvillesd.com, 662-324-2551

■ Enroll online: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/discoverycenter/project-help>

Families Strengthening Families

■ Manager: Barbara Culberson, bculber-son@starkvillesd.com

■ Parent café (Zoom): 2 p.m. Tuesday

Parenting class: 6 p.m. Thursday



First aid class

Another program the district offers is Project CARE, which offers a resource library for parents, including free diapers and educational materials children may need for school. Project manager Roy Ann Bell said “parenting is the job of a lifetime,” and she hopes to help parents strengthen their natural skills.

“We’re not here trying to tell anybody they don’t know how to be parents,” Bell said. “We’re just here trying to add to what they have.”

That includes a Zoom parenting class on Monday afternoons, a conference call on Wednesday mornings and a community parenting class every second and fourth Saturday at Peter’s Rock Family Worship Center. On Sept. 23, Project CARE held the “Raid Our Closet” giveaway, handing out donated clothes outside the Emerson School.

“There’s always something going on so they can give back to the community,” Burton said.

Another family-centered program, Project PEACE, has a dual focus, according to project manager Elizabeth Williams.

As well as emphasizing family and relationships, Project PEACE, open to adults 18-59, promotes advancement in employment and higher education. The district has partnered with the city of Starkville for paid internships and offers tuition assistance for residents to take workforce classes through East Mississippi Community College and the Millsaps Career and Technical Center.

“We have to be able to offer opportunities to enrich the parents’ lives and the family’s lives and the caregivers,” Williams said.

Families Strengthening Families, a project managed by Barbara Culberson, serves as a



Summer program

support group for parents, future parents or anyone in a caregiving role. Funded by the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, the program offers parenting classes on Thursday nights as well as “parent cafés” via Zoom on Tuesdays.

The cafés are guided conversations about parenting that often lead to so much discussion they barely seem guided at all, Culberson said. They allow those who feel alone in a parenting issue to realize others are going through similar things.

“What we do is create an environment for everybody to feel safe talking because everything is confidential,” Culberson said.

STORY BY **THEO DEROSA**
PHOTOS BY **STARKVILLE-OKTIBBEHA COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

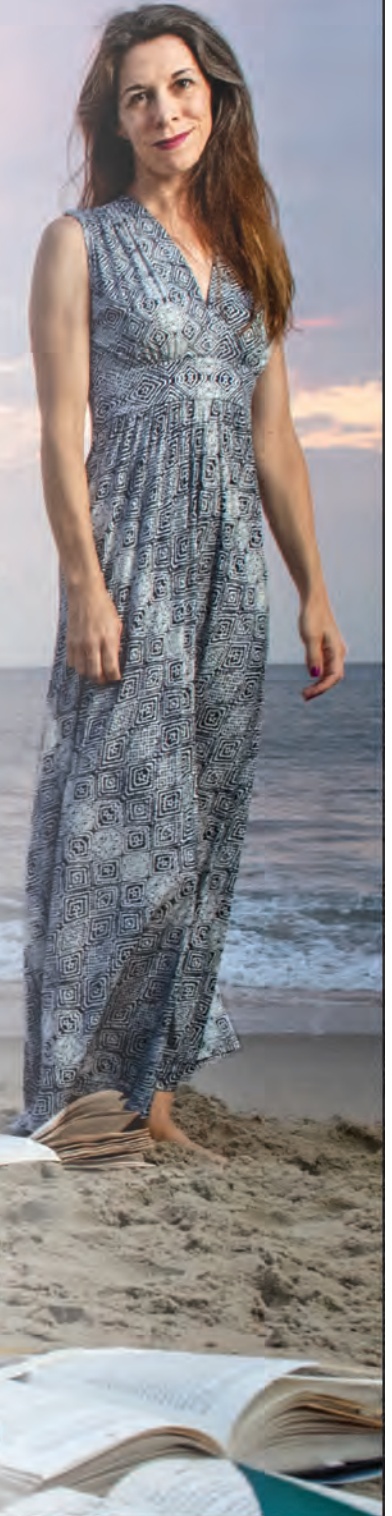
WORDS RING TRUE FOR MISSISSIPPI'S NEWEST POET LAUREATE

At Mississippi State University, we believe our state's rich literary landscape is a magnificent work in progress. That's why we're thrilled that one of our own – College of Arts & Sciences English Professor Catherine Pierce – is the new Poet Laureate of Mississippi.

Recently named to a four-year term, Catherine is already connecting with people across the state, engaging them in the many ways poetry can be an active and enriching part of their lives. It's the same passion she's shared with her poetry and creative writing students at MSU since 2007.

Congratulations, Catherine, on this outstanding honor. We look forward to the many amazing things you will do in the days ahead as Poet Laureate.

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WE RING TRUE



FIRST CAUSE

RON POLK LAID FOUNDATION FOR MISSISSIPPI STATE'S NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP BASEBALL PROGRAM

In explaining the natural world, Aristotle introduced the idea of first cause, which maintains that things in nature are caused by a chain of events stretching back in time. What is now owes its existence to something that came before.

The argument has been debated throughout the centuries, most often in philosophy and theology.

Yet the first cause has also been applied to explain other things.

Even baseball.

On the evening of July 2, two days after Mississippi State captured its first national championship with a win over Vanderbilt in the finals of the College World Series, an estimated capacity crowd of 15,000 fans flocked to MSU's Polk-De-dement Stadium/Dudy Noble Field to celebrate, roaring with applause as the players, both past and present, coaches and athletic department officials were introduced. Some were greeted with standing ovations, including coach Chris Lemonis, who delivered a long-awaited national championship in just his second full season in Starkville.

Ron Polk, 77, was not at the ballpark that night. As he has been for close to a decade now, he was coaching baseball in the Cape Cod League. Yet when Polk's name was announced at the ballpark,

MSU fans stood as one, a standing ovation in absentia.

Bulldog fans know a first cause when they see one.

In truth, Mississippi's journey to the 2021 National Championship did not begin when the season started, nor even with Lemonis' arrival in Starkville.

It began 45 years earlier, when Polk took the MSU coaching job. For 29 years, in two separate stints as the Bulldogs' coach, Polk not only built the Bulldogs into a national contender (he led MSU to six of its 12 trips to the CWS and 20 NCAA Regional appearances with just one losing season), but transformed SEC from a conference whose success in baseball was best described as sporadic into the dominant baseball conference in the nation, earning the title "Father of SEC Baseball."

"Some would say Godfather," Polk says when asked about the title, a sly allusion to his advocacy for conference rules changes needed to make the SEC competitive and his long-running — and to date, unsuccessful — fight with the NCAA over baseball scholarship limits.

"I was the bad guy with the NCAA, the guy who gave all the other coaches cover. Everybody knew



the scholarship limits were ridiculous. I was just the guy who said it out loud,” Polk says.

THE ROAD TO MSU

If Polk is a first cause for MSU baseball, he has a couple of first causes of his own — his mom’s respiratory illness and Ron Fraser’s decision not to take a job with the Chicago White Sox.

Polk was born in Massachusetts, then lived in Buffalo, New York, before his mother’s respiratory problems led the family to move to Phoenix, Arizona, where the dry air was considered helpful for those with breathing issues.

“If we don’t move to Phoenix, maybe none of this happens,” Polk says.

It was in Phoenix that he fell in love with baseball. Polk was a middle infielder at Grand Canyon College, a small Southern Baptist college located in southwest Phoenix. After graduation, Polk spent a year as a graduate assistant at Arizona and another year as an assistant at New Mexico before moving east for an assistant’s job at Miami-Dade Junior College.

After four years in talent-rich south Florida, Polk took his first head coaching job at Georgia Southern, which was transitioning to Division I.

In 35 years as a college head coach at Georgia Southern, MSU and Georgia, Polk amassed a record of 1,373-702-2, guiding all three teams to the College World

Series — including six CWS trips by MSU in two separate tenures there over a combined 29 seasons. His teams played in 23 NCAA regionals. He coached Team USA, the nation's international team, for seven years, including Olympic Games in 1988 and 1992. He has been inducted into no fewer than six halls of fame.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

To understand Polk's place in college baseball history, you have to go beyond the numbers and that story starts in Statesboro, Georgia, where a young first-time head coach would do on a small scale what he would accomplish on a far greater scale in the years to come.

With no staff, little money, even less fan support and terrible facilities, Polk poured himself into the new job, working endless hours, building a program from scratch.

The first year, the Eagles posted a respectable 31-19 record. Remarkably, in his second year, Georgia Southern rolled into the 1973 NCAA Tournament, winning the Starkville Regional to make it to the CWS.

Georgia Southern returned again to Starkville Regional the next year.

In four years at Georgia Southern, Polk's teams posted a 155-64 record, but it was more than just winning games for Polk. It was about building a program, including facilities.

"We had to do something about the facilities," Polk said. "I went to the home-builders association, civic clubs, everywhere I could think of trying to raise money."

The funds Polk collected were placed in an account managed at the university president's office.

"I went by there to see how much money we had, hoping we could put a roof on the dugout

or something," he said. "They told me that there had been a crisis and unfortunately the money had been spent on something else."

Polk resigned at the season's end but was out of a job only briefly.

Ron Fraser, who would become a legend at the University of Miami, offered Polk a job as his assistant. Polk's Georgia Southern team had beaten Fraser and the Hurricanes in the 1973 Starkville Regional.

Polk worked under Fraser that fall, but the landscape was beginning to shift.

MSU coach Jimmy Bragan left after the 1975 season to join the coaching staff for the Milwaukee Brewers.

No doubt influenced by Polk's success at the two Starkville regionals, MSU offered Polk the job.

In the meantime, Fraser was considering a front office job with the Chicago White Sox. The Miami Athletic Director told Polk the job was his if Fraser left.

Fraser decided to stay at Miami, where he became a legend. Polk headed to Starkville.

"If Fraser goes to the White Sox, none of this happens," Polk says.



FROM COWS TO CONDOS

Today, Mississippi State plays its games at Polk-Dement Stadium Dudy Noble Field, broadly considered one of the nation's finest college baseball facility, the result of a \$60-million renovation/expansion completed in 2019.

Beyond the left field fence, towers the Left Field Lofts — 12 two-bedroom apartments with balconies overlooking the field.

When Ron Polk arrived at MSU near the end of 1975, he saw something different at that location.

“Cows,” he said. “Everything beyond the fences was part of the university’s farm.”

Even so, it was in baseball that MSU had carved out a niche for itself in a sport long neglected by the Southeastern Conference.

As a small school with a small budget in a big conference, Mississippi State always played catch-up in most sports. Not so in baseball. The Bulldogs built what was then considered a solid fan base under previous coaches, including Dudy Noble and Paul Gregory. Its facilities were as good, if not a little better than the other SEC schools.

But Polk had far more ambitious plans.

“I just couldn’t figure out why the SEC wasn’t a baseball conference,” Polk said. “You’ve got the weather. You’ve got Florida, Georgia. In football, it’s Alabama. In basketball, it’s Kentucky, Baseball was just an afterthought. I always wondered why. Everything is here.”

Polk set out to change that.

“When I got here, I was the only baseball coach in the conference who didn’t have another job in the athletic department,” Polk said. “So there was a commitment.”

Everything else, it seemed, was up to Polk.

As he had at Georgia Southern, Polk quietly

began stringing together winning seasons. Soon, fans were backing their cars and pickups along the left field fence. Goodbye cows.

In 1979, Polk took the first of his six Bulldog teams to the College World Series. Baseball was big-time at MSU — and others were watching.

Polk raised money for additions and renovations, constantly improving the facilities and watching his teams break attendance records along the way.

“The SEC is the dominant conference in baseball now and a lot of that is because of the success we had,” he said. “When we got a tarp, everybody had to get a tarp. When we got lights, everybody got lights. People watched what we were doing and they started thinking, ‘Maybe we can start making money in baseball.’”

From the time Polk arrived at MSU, it’s been the rest of the conference that has been playing catch-up.

“I think the best way to describe it is that Ron Polk awakened a sleeping giant,” said MSU Athletics Director John Cohen, one of Polk’s former Bulldog players. “The SEC is pretty good in everything, but when it came to baseball, it was kind of a hobby in the league. Coach Polk made baseball relevant here and he made it relevant at Mississippi State, he made it relevant for everybody else.”

In 1997, after leading MSU to 15 NCAA regionals and five College World Series appearances in 22 seasons, Polk retired, albeit briefly.

“I was just tired, overworked, getting into the office early in the morning and working until 11, 12 at night, doing what it took to build the program and fighting the NCAA tooth and nail,” Polk said.

Two years later, he was coaxed out of retirement to become baseball coach at Georgia. As



Baseball player Brad Cumbest talks with Ron Polk

he has at Georgia Southern 28 years earlier, Polk had Georgia in the College World Series in his second season (2001).

When Pat McMahon, Polk's assistant at MSU, resigned as the Bulldog coach to take the job at Florida, Polk again returned to State in 2002, picking up five more NCAA regional appearances and his sixth and final berth in the College World Series (2007) before retiring again in 2008.

His departure did not go well, leading to a 12-year estrangement caused when MSU chose Cohen rather than Tommy Raffo, Polk's hand-picked choice as his successor.

For the next 12 years, Polk served as an unpaid assistant under another former player, Brian Shoop, at Alabama-Birmingham and coached in Cape Cope.

In 2020, when Shoop retired and Polk freed of his commitment to his former player, Cohen announced that Polk would return "home" to MSU as a special assistant to the AD.

"I just felt like it was important to get Coach Polk back in the Athletics Department," Cohen said. "There's no question what he means to the community and our athletic department."

THE PROMISED LAND

Because of his coaching commitment in the Cape Cod League, Polk didn't attend MSU's first four games in the 2021 College World Series. He arrived in Omaha when MSU advanced to the best-of-three finals against Vanderbilt.

For the first two games, Polk was tucked into a seat behind the Bulldogs' dugout.

But when he arrived for the deciding Game 3, Polk was ushered to the President's Suite and a seat providing clear sight lines for the ESPN cameras, who wanted to be sure to capture Polk's reaction as Mississippi State claimed the elusive national championship.

Six times as the Bulldogs coach, Polk had reached the CWS, the pinnacle of College baseball without reaching The Promised Land, a championship.

On June 30, as MSU ran away with a 9-0 win to claim the university's first ever team championship, the ESPN cameras captured Polk's reaction.

ESPN knew a first cause when it saw one, too.

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**

PHOTOS 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 **RORY DOYLE**



NANCY SCOTT

Act your age?
Never, says Nancy Scott.
“I’m 80 years old now,” says the Columbus artist, poet and soon-to-be novelist. “I’m still alive and active and doing things. Is there life after youth? I’m a testament to that. The answer is yes.”

Scott, a California native, is a relatively recent arrival to Columbus. She moved here from Tucson, Arizona, about six years ago to be near family (her brother, John Almond, had moved to Columbus a few years earlier) as her husband, Larry, was going through the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease.

Even so, Scott has quickly become a fixture in the Columbus arts scene. As was the case in her previous places of residency — New Hampshire, Colorado and Arizona — her work was featured in area galleries, most recently at the Rosenzweig Arts Center

Not bad for someone who didn’t take up painting until she was in her mid-30s.

“I had a bad car accident and couldn’t do anything,” Scott said. “A friend brought me

paints and brushes and water-color paper and said, ‘Here, paint.’ I said, ‘I don’t know how to paint. I failed art in high school.’ But like I said, I couldn’t do anything else. So I started painting.”

Scott learned more than just painting from that experience.

“What I figured out was just to say ‘get over yourself.’ So what if you don’t know how to do something? Give it a shot. What is the worst that can happen?”

Her painting is based on contemporary themes, especially social issues, subjects you might expect of a fiery young activist.

To expand on the stories behind her painting, Scott published her first book — *Mixed Messages* — a collection of her work, in which each painting is accompanied by an original poem.

And, no, she had never written poetry, either.

Now, she’s working on a novel, again a new adventure.

“If there is something you always wanted to do, do it,” Scott says. “The right time is right now, especially if you are older. What are you waiting for?”



KENTRELL ANDERS

Conversations with Kentrell Anders rarely include the word “I.”

This is particularly true when the conversation involves Goal Chasers, an amateur track team which competes on a national level, founded three years ago in Starkville.

“I grew up in New Orleans where there was a strong AAU organization,” said Anders, 29, a wire technician for AT&T. “It’s not just about sports. Our kids are going to be the doctors and engineers and lawyers and business owners of the future. It’s a track team but it’s more than sports.”

To be a member of Goal Chasers — an affiliate of a national organization founded in 1888 which includes 700,000 athletes — kids must maintain a 3.2 grade point average, as well as participate in the club’s community service projects.

With only a few volunteers, no funds and no real history of AAU track in the area, starting a team — the first in Mississippi — was daunting.

“We started in 2019 with eight kids and all

eight of them left after one year,” Anders said.

“We had to start all over. Even with COVID, we were able to get 22 kids that second year and they’ve stuck it out. We call them the Fantastic 22.”

This year, the team has grown to 32.

Seven-year-old Kaleb Lewis is a two-time All-American in the triathlon. Anders’ 5-year-old son is a national champion in both the 200-meters and 400-meters.

But the greatest successes, Anders said, are the unlikely champions, such as Bella Mickens, the 5-year-old All-American long jumper.

“She hated track at first,” Anders said. “She didn’t want to get hot. But she stuck with it. She’s the kind of story that makes it all worthwhile.”

The biggest challenge continues to be funding. Anders, along with volunteer coaches — Brittney Covington, DeCorey Goss, Jaleesa Jones and Letitia Asford — spend thousands of dollars of their own money to take their athletes to meets.

For more information about Goal Chasers, including donations, call Anders at 504-495-8895.



PAM DAWKINS

Officer Walker left Scooba for Massachusetts about a week ago, his work in Scooba complete. A new, better life waited for him.

Officer Walker is only 14 weeks old.

Pam Dawkins, who lives in Brooksville and teaches at Lower Elementary School in Scooba, has been an integral part of more than a thousand stories like Officer Walker's. The homeless kitten was discovered by students on the school playground.

"Officer Walker (the name given to the cat by a vote of her class in honor of a much-loved resource officer at the school) was a great learning opportunity for the children," Dawkins said. "It was a chance to teach them about animal rescue and the importance of spaying and neutering your pets.

"I've always been an animal lover," she said. "Now, it's my passion."

Seven years ago, Dawkins approached Jeannette Unruh to ask how she could help. In Noxubee County, a county with no humane society or animal shelter, Unruh had become a one-woman

humane society.

Unruh told Dawkins there was a mother dog with a litter of six puppies that were scheduled to be euthanized in Meridian unless a foster home could be found for them.

Dawkins volunteered.

Since then, they have fostered and placed more than 3,000 cats and dogs in "fur-ever homes," most of them in Massachusetts through a nonprofit pet adoption group called Sweet Paws. Through a partnership with Mississippi State's Veterinary Science Department, they also arrange free spay/neuter services throughout the county.

Dawkins said the frustration caused by the reluctance of so many people to have their pets spayed and neutered, along with the demands on her time, is balanced by the good outcomes she sees.

"It's so good to see these (adopted) pets living good lives," she said. "When I see those photos, this work for me is like being in the mafia: You can't get out. I hate to imagine what it would be like if we weren't doing this."

Officer Walker would agree.

ORIGIN STORIES OF MISSISSIPPI TAMALES DIFFER,
BUT MULTIPLE VARIETIES OF THIS DELTA STAPLE
ARE AVAILABLE THROUGHOUT STATE



While many people think of cotton or fried chicken as staple items of Mississippi, tamales have proven over the years to be just as prominent across the state.

Tamales began thousands of years ago in Mesoamerica and have continuously spread across the world, landing in Mississippi around the turn of the 20th century. Tamales are steamed bundles filled with meat, fruit or other ingredients.

Mississippi tamales have become extremely prevalent in the Mississippi Delta over time, with these tamales typically being made of cornmeal and filled with some type of meat, but many cities and towns across the state fill their restaurants with tamales.

The original tamales were made from a mash of masa and seasoned meat wrapped in corn husks and steamed in coffee cans, Greater Greenville CEO Deanne New said. New said many believe tamales were a necessity in the diet of 20th century Mexican migrant field workers because they were an inexpensive dish that was easy to transport to the field. The African American workers saw the dish and added their spin to the recipe with different seasonings and the use of corn meal.

“As the meal gained popularity, it began appearing on menus and has transformed into a must-try Delta delicacy,” New said.

David Gammill, owner of Fat Mama’s Tamales in Natchez, said other Mississippi residents have another theory of how tamales became so successful across the state. These people, including him, believe tamales originated from Native American

heritage because Native Americans traditionally used corn for many different meals.

“Many towns along the Mississippi River have embraced tamales — Natchez, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Vicksburg — for as long as people can remember,” Gammill said. “I believe these tamales came from Native Americans, who got their inspiration from Mexico and South American countries.”

As tamales grew in popularity, Visit Mississippi and the Southern Foodways Alliance created the Mississippi Hot Tamale Trail of iconic restaurants that serve tamales across the state, many of which located in the Mississippi Delta.

With restaurants, backdoor kitchens, shacks and food trucks, tamales can be found all across the Delta. Greenville especially has become a hotbed of hot tamales, New said, and tamales have continued to grow in popularity because of their ability to morph into any flavor. They can be seasoned and filled with nearly any meat, wild game, fruit or vegetable, making the possibilities endless.

“While there are many varieties, the traditional beef or pork tamale remains a staple in the Delta because they are just flat out delicious,” New said.

Some of the “must try” tamale restaurants across Mississippi include White Front Café in Rosedale, Delta Fast Food in Cleveland, Walker’s Drive-In in Jackson, Serio’s in Greenwood and Ajax Diner in Oxford, according to Visit Mississippi.

Another place to try Mississippi hot tamales is the Delta Hot Tamale Festival which takes place every fall in Greenville. Dozens of vendors bring their tamales for customers to try, New said, where people can try any and all types of tamales. This year’s festival was held Oct. 14-16.

“We have seen everything from traditional beef to crawfish, venison, spinach and more,” New said. “The masa or ‘crust’ is a traditional mash of maize dough that usually comes from ground corn. The filling can be anything you dream up!”

Eugene Hicks, owner of Hick’s Tamales and BBQ Shop in Clarksdale, another restaurant



Rosedale, Mississippi



Natchez, Mississippi

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- Col. Doug Gosney
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along the tamale trail, said he grew up learning how to make tamales from his family members and has been making tamales for 65 years. He said his restaurant has become known for its tamales and

"I have many years experience making tamales," Hicks said. "I've perfected my recipe and just love when customers come in to try my tamales.

<https://visitmississippi.org/things-to-do/point-of-interest/type/tamale-trail/>

<https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/hot-tamale-trail-map/>

STORY BY **TYLER B. JONES**

ILLUSTRATION BY **ANNE MURPHY**

COURTESY PHOTOS



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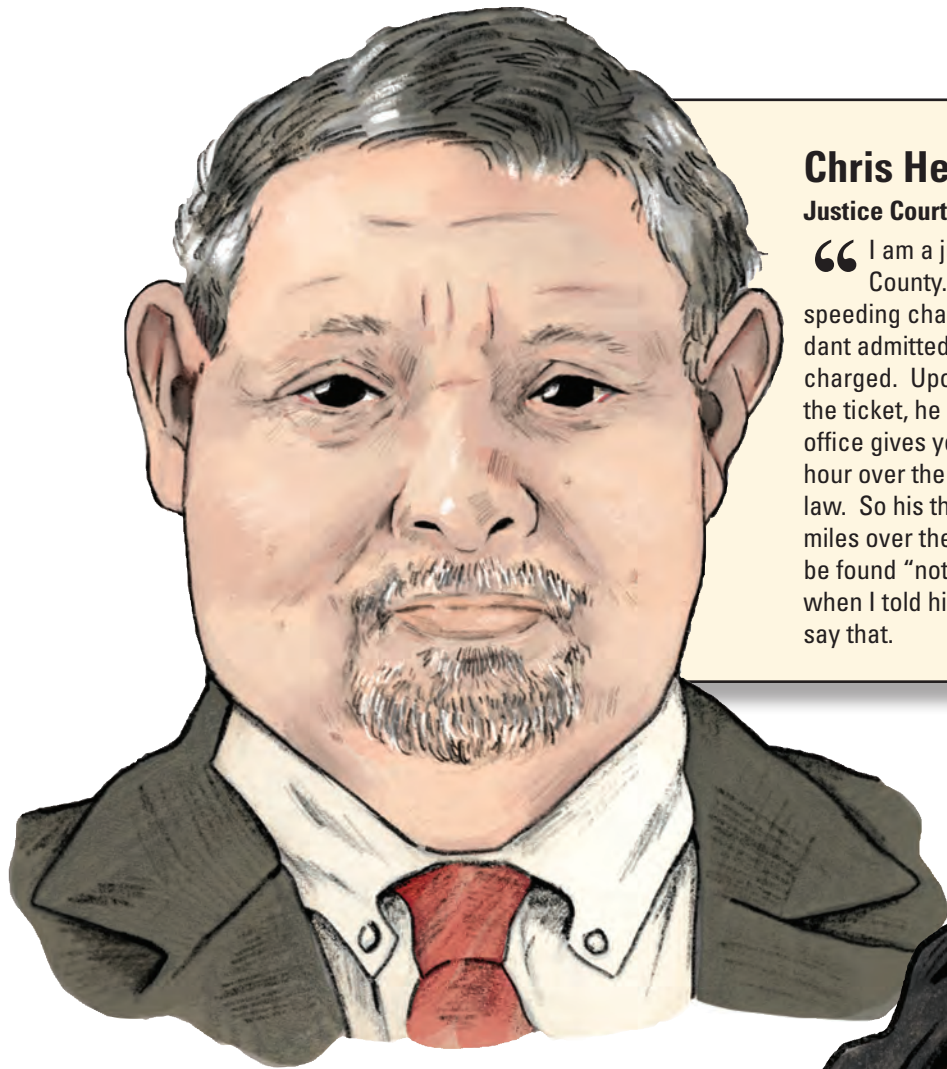
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MURPHY



Linder Doris Cannon-Erby

Lowndes County Justice Court Administrator

“ During court a deputy was on the witness stand testifying concerning a D.U.I. charge. The prosecutor asked him what were some of the circumstances that made him decide to charge the defendant with a D.U.I. The deputy told the prosecutor, “She tried to straighten out a curve in the road, but she ended up in someone’s front yard!”



Chris Hemphill

Justice Court judge, Lowndes County

“ I am a justice court judge here in Lowndes County. I once was conducting a trial on a speeding charge. Once on the stand, the defendant admitted going the speed with which he was charged. Upon being asked why he was contesting the ticket, he said the book that the Driver’s License office gives you to study says you can go 5 miles an hour over the speed limit and it is not breaking the law. So his theory is he was really only going 2-3 miles over the speed limit instead of 7-8 and should be found “not guilty.” He truly seemed surprised when I told him that I was certain the book did not say that.

Freda D. Phillips

Circuit Clerk of Noxubee County

“ My most interesting moment in the courtroom was one day, this guy was being sentenced for burglary and larceny of a store. He was telling his story about how he broke into the store and was sitting on the counter waiting for police to arrive to pick him up. After the judge sentenced him, he looked around and said, “Bye-bye Mrs. Freda.” As he was walking out of the courtroom, he looked back and waved and smiled at me. It really hurts sometimes when you see the defendants leaving in handcuffs.





A view from the top of Waverley's octagonal rotunda

CULTURE

FOR THE LOVE OF WAVERLEY

COUPLE WORKS TO RESTORE 1852 MANSION IN WEST POINT FOR A 21ST CENTURY FAMILY

If the cliché “labor of love” didn’t already exist, it would have to be invented for Charlie Stephenson.

Stephenson and his wife, Dana, purchased Waverley Mansion in West Point nearly three years ago, but the renovations designed to make

it livable for their family and guests are still months from completion.

“We’ve upgraded the electrical and converted some of the small closets on the second level into bathrooms so our guests have a place to freshen up,” Stephenson said while waiting for a

inside the house — we've put in a geothermal heat and air system. The house has never had any heat and air before, so that should help preserve the plaster and prevent some of the cracking and mildew problems.”

But despite all of the additions, changes and modern conveniences, the house will continue to look mostly as it did when Col. George Young's home was completed in 1852. The lawyer and former Georgia legislator purchased land on the west bank of the Tombigbee River in 1835, and his family and their 25 slaves lived there during the mansion's construction.

By the time the building was finished, Young had amassed more than 2,000 acres of land and roughly 120 slaves. Col. Young would send cotton down the Tombigbee River to Mobile to market, waiting for the right time of year for navigation in the days before the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Slave cabins were located east of the mansion. Most slaves stayed on after the Civil War, tearing down the cabins and building small homes across the road.

The plantation included gardens, orchards and livestock and maintained a kiln, cotton gin, ice house and pool with a bathhouse. In addition, there was a carriage house, a barn and a guesthouse, as well as woolen, lumber, flour and grist mills. But most of the buildings are long gone, and the surrounding fields have long since been taken over by woods, making the house somewhat tricky to find. But when Stephenson saw it ... it was, to use another cliché, love at first sight.

“We started out looking for a home in Starkville, and the Realtor said, ‘Not sure if you'll like this or not, but there's a house coming up for sale in West Point,’” said Stephenson, a resident of Tulsa but a Mississippi native who still has family in Meridian. “I knew of Waverley of

course, growing up in Mississippi, but we came over, looked at it and fell in love with it. And made a deal to purchase it from the estate of Mr. Snow.”

That would be Robert Snow, who basically rescued Waverley from 50 years of neglect. After Col. Young died, two of his brothers — Val and Billy — lived in the house, according to tour guide-turned-gardener Jimmy Denning. Val was into fox hunting and had a kennel with 50 dogs where the pond now is, while Billy was a gambler who would use the main hall for poker games and conducted cockfights in the front yard.

Billy's death in 1913 left the house vacant.

“By the 1930s, it had become a hangout spot for kids,” Denning said. “High school boys would bring their girlfriends out on dates; college boys from Mississippi State would have fraternity initiations. Thousands of names and initials were carved in the plaster walls.”

Surprisingly, much of the mansion was in





Two workers restore window sashes



Roof decking from an original portion of the house was used for a custom ceiling in an addition



The view from the front door. Plaster has been restored throughout the house.

landscaper on a recent afternoon. “We added a master bathroom and closets off to the side that connect to the original master bedroom.”

That’s just the beginning. Turning an architectural gem built for another era into a home for a 21st-century family, while maintaining the character of the place requires careful planning and even more careful execution.

The house has two floors of living space off of a main hall that soars four stories, topped by a cupola with 16 windows. The first floor is home to a parlor, dining room, master bedroom and library, while the second floor includes four bedrooms. The third floor is an attic.

“We’re going to keep the original house very

true to its nature,” he said. “We’re going to continue to have a formal dining room, the library, the parlor, the master bedroom downstairs and the bedrooms up. Rather than turn one of those into a den, a place to watch a ball game or kind of relax, we elected to tear off the kitchen that had been added in the 1930s — it wasn’t original to the house — and replace it with a larger structure that has a den, kitchen area and outdoor living area so that there’s a place for the grandkids to come and watch TV and enjoy some family time.

“Then on this side of the house — you have to remember when the house was built, there was no running water, so there were no bathrooms



The ceiling medallion at the top of Waverley's octagonal rotunda

good condition when Snow and his wife, Donna, purchased it in 1962, buying it, like Stephenson, quickly after seeing it.

“A traveling salesman walked into their antique shop (the Snows were from Philadelphia, Mississippi) and told them about this beautiful house in the woods,” as Denning tells the story. “Mr. Snow was so curious he decided to take the next day off of work and drove up here 90 miles looking for it.

“One look at the balconies and staircases in the hall, and he said he just had to buy the place. ... The Snows moved in and began a 27-year restoration, and he lived there until March 2017 when he died at 91. I worked for him for over 10 years. He was a sweet old man.”

Denning now works for Stephenson, who said the long restoration project has not dimmed his enthusiasm for Waverley.

“I can promise you that,” he said. “I think everything has worked out in a very positive way.”

Much of the work has been completed.

“Right now the inside of the house, all of the plaster work has been refurbished,” Stephenson said. “That took over a year. The wiring has been upgraded.”

While the bulk of the work is behind them —

Darwin Holliman Construction of Columbus is the general contractor — much of what visitors actually will see remains a work in progress.

“Each individual window sash is now being restored; we’ll finish that by the end of October,” Stephenson said. “Refinishing all of the floors, a lot of painting left to do, a lot of trim work left to do.”

All of that has brought plenty of workers to Waverley, with Holliman having a crew of six or seven along with subcontractors for specific jobs that often brought 20 or 30 more workers to the site.

But when all of them are done, Waverley will be home to the Stephensons. And make no mistake, despite living for 30 years in Oklahoma, Mississippi is home.

“We grew up in Mississippi, in Meridian,” he said. “I have become more involved with Mississippi State. We planned to retire in Oklahoma, but as we’ve spent more and more time here, we enjoy participating in things at State, and we just decided to retire back here instead of Oklahoma.”

His father’s side of the family is from Columbus, and Stephenson said it’s been good to get reacquainted with some of them. And his mom?

“Mother served as a hostess at the Waverley 50 or 60 years ago, whenever it was,” he said. “We actually still have the Pilgrimage dress that she used at that time.”

The mansion has seen a lot in 170 years. It didn’t suffer during the Civil War, although Col. Young’s six sons served in the rebel army.

“Sure, we’ll have tours,” Stephenson said. “We look forward to sharing it with other people. We’ve got a following of almost 3,000 people on the ‘Memories of Waverley Mansion’ Facebook page. I think it was half that when we bought the house.”

Around that time, the landscaping — the final piece of the restoration puzzle — will be done. The grounds include an enormous magnolia tree estimated to be more than 250 years old. The walkway from the front gate to the porch takes visitors right past the tree and one of its presumed offspring. But the grounds offer just a hint of the 19th-century grandeur behind the door, and Stephenson is eager to show it off.

“They’ve had events here in the past,” he said. “First thing we want to do is move in and get settled, and that will be the first quarter of next year.”

For safety reasons, Waverley is not currently open to visitors. It is expected to reopen early in 2022. For information, visit the Waverley Plantation Mansion or Memories of Waverley Mansion Facebook pages or call 662-494-1399.

STORY BY **TOM RYSINSKI**
PHOTOS BY **AUSTIN FRAYSER**
STEPHENSONS **COURTESY PHOTO**



The view along a roofline



Bathroom fixtures



Detail of a scroll on one of Waverley’s central staircases



PROFILE

Name: Angela Jones

Age: 49

Position: Executive Assistant to the Mayor and Action Center Clerk

Starting Date: July 15, 2021

Birthplace: Columbus, but grew up in Steens

Hobbies: Working out, spending time with family, watching TV

Spouse: Terrell Jones

Children: Morgan and Kyle Jones, and a grandpup named Shiloh

MEET ANGELA JONES

FOR THE MAYOR'S ASSISTANT, CONNECTING WITH THE PUBLIC AND GREAT CO-WORKERS MAKE FOR A FULFILLING JOB

Former Dispatch news editor Miles Layton sat down with Angela Jones just two weeks after she was hired as newly-elected Columbus Mayor Keith Gaskin's executive assistant and Action Center clerk for the city.

You started two weeks ago. Are you enjoying the job?

I'm enjoying it! I did not expect this. I expected, as ugly as it sounds, I expected a little more negativity. I didn't know how I would be received, but it has been, it's been like a dream. People have been very welcoming, extremely welcoming.

On my very first day, I asked Yolanda Smith if she could take the phone calls for about two hours so I could get my space to where I could be productive in it. She said, "Take all the time you need," and that was huge for me. So it was really, really small gestures. The "take your time," "we're here for you," "you doing okay?" That has meant more to me than they will ever know. I think you have to adjust accordingly because you never know what's gonna pop in or pop up, but I'm taking it all in stride.

What is (Mayor Keith Gaskin) like to work with? Is he a good guy?

He's ok. [laughs] No, Mayor Keith Gaskin — which I have to remember to call him "mayor"

because that is his title — he's awesome to work for. He is extremely welcoming and wants to be a part of everything that is going on in the community. My concern is that he may burn out because he genuinely wants to be a part of everything and wants to meet everybody.

And we know that's just not humanly possible. So I'm just trying to reel him in and make sure he's using his time wisely. But the way he responds to the community and the people, it's amazing. It was my second day and I got a call and a lady was upset with what was going on in her neighborhood. And he was like, "Do I need to go over there?" And I was like, I don't know if you need to go there or not, or you may want to get somebody to go with you, but he was like, "I'll tell my nine o'clock I'll be a few minutes late. I need to go check on her." And he did that. He doesn't take lightly any phone call, any visit, any comment. He's here to serve and that's exactly what I have witnessed since I started working here.

What's your typical day like?

A lot of phone calls on phone calls and unexpected visits.

Lots of phone calls, scheduling and visits. I try to put my best foot forward and smile and have a friendly face because a lot of times they just want somebody to listen.

What do you like to do? What are your hobbies?

I like working out, going to fitness classes. I went back to yoga yesterday for the first time in a couple of weeks. I like the spin classes, walking, exercise and being out in nature. And I've been married for almost 24 years to Terrell Jones, and I have a 21-year-old daughter, Morgan, who recently graduated from the W in April with a degree in marketing. And I have a 15-year-old son, Kyle, who just received his driver's permit last week. He's a sophomore at Columbus High School.

You went to the W, right?

Yes, I graduated from the W in '93 with a degree in journalism, public relations.

Did you ever see yourself working for the mayor's office or city?

No, never, never. When I graduated from the W in '93, I worked in public affairs there for maybe two years. Then I left and took several other jobs before going back to the W in October 2002. I was going to retire from the W. That was it, that's where I was going to be, and that's where I was for almost 19 years. But no, never, never saw any of this. Never.

How did you and the mayor meet?

When I first worked in public affairs at the W, I was a secretary. Keith was a photographer, so we were coworkers. So I've known Keith — excuse me, Mayor Gaskin — 38 years.

Do you think you're making a difference?

Yes, I feel like in my short time here the people in the community have really just been so

supportive. And when I get the phone calls back, when they say, "thank you"... That's it. Yes, I made a difference.

Something I consider simple but is a big thing to citizens, is making sure the debris at the end of the driveway are picked up in a timely manner. It can be something as small as that. Or it could be something that's dealing with the pavement. I had a call last week in which a business owner was not too pleased with how the repaving was going. I got in contact with the city engineer and his staff who jumped right on it. And the man called back the next day and said, "I just wanted to say they were so attentive and they handled it so quickly. So I just wanted to say, thank you."

I'm not familiar with the Action Center. It's new to me.

It's new to me as well, and I was scared. I thought I would get probably 50 calls a day for the Action Center. But it's not 50 calls a day, it's more like 50 calls a week.

When I miss a call Tabatha in public works may get it, or Greg in IT may get it. So when I say there is a great team here, there's a great team here, and I'm never alone. The support is awesome.

You grew up here, right?

I grew up in Steens, out in the country.

What does it feel like to serve your community?

I always felt I was serving my community in some capacity, whether that was going to the schools to volunteer my time or mentoring high school students at Columbus High for the Lowndes Young Leaders program. So I always felt like I was doing something, but this is a new level. So

this is same mindset, bigger platform.

Where did you go to high school?

New Hope High School.

What year did you graduate?

1989

What did you do in high school?

I was a bat girl, member of Beta Club, student council, homecoming court, reporter for my school newspaper, just stuff like that.

You seem very acquainted with this. I think you'll do very well here.

Well thank you, I appreciate that. I don't think either of us imagined this. Every now and then I'll just go to Mayor Gaskin's office, and he'll say, "Did you think all those years ago that we would end up here together?" and we're both like, "No, not this."

I just can't say enough about the city of Columbus employees. They're a good group of people who are working together for the betterment of the city. My coworkers, they rock.

INTERVIEW BY **MILES LAYTON**
PHOTO BY **AUSTIN FRAYSER**



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CLAY COUNTY, WEST POINT SEE RETURN OF OLD TRADITIONS, NEW ECONOMIC BOOST

NEW MAYOR SAYS ONLY WAY FOR CITY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IS IF EVERYONE WORKS TOGETHER

Clay County and the city of West Point have taken large strides to improve economically and socially.

WEST POINT'S FIRST BLACK MAYOR

The city of West Point elected its first Black mayor, Rod Bobo. This historical moment proved to be a win for the small Mississippi city. Bobo is a West Point native, living here his entire life except for his college years at Jackson State University and Mississippi State University. Bobo ran a campaign that focused heavily on economic development, as he previously had a career in sales. He worked as a State Farm insurance agent before being elected. He said that although West Point has much work to do to progress as a city, he said his election is a great stride as it relates to race relations. While Bobo is the city's first Black mayor, he said he strives to be a mayor for all residents of West Point, not just the Black community. He said he believes the only way for West Point to be successful is if the entire city works together.



Mayor Rod Bobo



Prairie Arts Festival 5K run

RETURN OF PRAIRIE ARTS FESTIVAL

As COVID-19 cancelled many events over the last year, one that returned in 2021 was West Point's Prairie Arts festival after a year off. Several hundred people visited the 250-vendor event, bringing a bit of normalcy back to the city. The festival still had COVID-19 precautions, such as limited hours and placing several hand sanitizing and hand-washing stations throughout the festival site. Main Street and Tourism for West Point Director Lisa Kluttz said holding the event this year was an act of continuing tradition. Organizers will begin planning for the 2022 festival in April.

SOLAR FARM COMING IN 2023

The Golden Triangle Development



Solar farm future site near the Yokohama tire plant.

LINK approved a deal with Origis Energy in April to build a solar farm in Clay County. Built on agricultural land to the east and south of the Yokohama tire plant, the solar farm will include 200 megawatts of battery storage. The facility is expected to be complete in 2023. It will be used as part of Tennessee Valley Authority's Green Invest program, where utilities in the TVA coverage area, including parts of northern Mississippi, can contract with the power provider to bring solar energy into their grids. Origis will invest between \$200 million and \$300 million for the Clay County project, LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins told The Dispatch.

STORY BY **TYLER B. JONES**
 OPENING PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**
 RACE PHOTO BY **NICOLE BOWMAN-LAYTON**
 SOLAR FARM PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**
 BOBO PHOTO **COURTESY PHOTO**

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Greetings from
WEST POINT

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.

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Macon, Mississippi

OLD BUSINESSES EXPAND WHILE OTHERS PLANT ROOTS IN NOXUBEE

22-MILE ROAD RESEAL PROJECT AMONG INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS IN COUNTY

Noxubee County saw the arrival of several new infrastructure projects and businesses throughout the past few months. While the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a difficult period for several people across the county, Noxubee County residents found ways to preserve through and carry out their plans and goals.

ROAD AND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Noxubee County completed a 22-mile road reseal project over various county roads throughout the last few months. Road resealing is one of the most economical ways to redo road pavement and expand the road's quality. Noxubee County Board of Supervisors' President Eddie Coleman said the county received all of the funding for this project through the Office of State Aid Road Construction within the Mississippi Department of Transportation — \$2.34 million. By overlaying the roads with asphalt and sealed with limestone, he said this is the biggest project the county will complete this year.

Noxubee County also purchased two box

culverts for Butler and Hopewell roads. Box culverts help keep underpasses of roads and bridges stable and reliable. The county began advertising at the end of January for the replacement of the Butler Road bridge. Coleman said many workers hauling timber and coal drive on these two roads and their bridges, and these culverts will ensure the safety of the workers and their products. The \$2.9 million in funding for the culverts also came from state aid money through the Emergency Road and Bridge Repair Fund.

SUPERIOR CATFISH PRODUCTS EXPANSION

Superior Catfish Products, a catfish processing plant in Macon, recently completed its \$17 million expansion. Superior Catfish serves about 65 local farmers. Expansion construction began in September 2019. Superior Catfish General Manager Fred Johnson said this completion is long awaited. The new building will serve as the production facility for the processing and packaging, while nearly doubling the plant's existing space. The new building is complete, however, the facility is not yet being used due to

supply chain issues with needed equipment. Johnson said he hopes workers can move in around December, and in turn, the existing building will be converted into a storage unit. This expansion will create new job opportunities and meet the necessary demands of the growing catfish industry.

NEW BUSINESSES

While Connor's Sweet in Macon opened its doors in December 2020, business over the past few months has been booming. Owner Naquetta Roby first started this bakery in her home in 2019, but in the midst of the pandemic, she knew she wanted to expand her business to a store. She said the store has been thriving over the past few months due to tremendous customer support. This full-time bakery sells many different types of baked goods, as well as daily lunches, ranging anywhere from cookies and strawberries to chicken salad and frito chili pies. Connor's Sweets also caters weddings and parties. Roby said she is thrilled to have her business in Macon because Noxubee County residents can enjoy having somewhere new to go for lunch and get their sweet fix.

Another new business, Faith & Nutrition Studio in Macon opened in August 2021. This shop, located on KFC Road, sells loaded teas, shakes and meal replacements. Customers can come for breakfast or lunch to get their energy fix.

STORY BY **TYLER B. JONES**
OPENING PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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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.

These five readers joined us in The Studio, a meeting space upstairs in The Commercial Dispatch building, in September.

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 **PETER IMES**
PHOTOS BY **AUSTIN FRAYSER**

CLINTON MCFARLAND

PHOTOGRAPHER & ENTREPRENEUR, STARKVILLE

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

No, [laughs], at first I wanted to be a chef. I pursued that. I worked at a couple of restaurants, but it just didn't fit me. I wanted to do the Le Cordon Bleu, the whole nine yards. I just always had an opinion, a voice that I wanted to use to write about. Eventually that led to me picking up a camera. That was just really, "Okay, so what can I do with this camera? What can I do with this drone in order to paint what I want the person to see from me."

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

Don't rush things. Try to appreciate the moment, to look at the positive things as much as possible. I'm more of the "I've got to do it now" type person. For example, I want to be a reporter. I might be thinking, "How can I take a shortcut to get to a full time reporting position?" So I just have to be patient and learn to appreciate the moment.

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

The biggest thing that people misunderstand is how passionate I am about a lot of things. If someone is really in my inner circle, then they understand like how passionate I am about the things that I do. Even if I just started, I want to learn everything about that subject. It becomes an obsession. I think that's the artist or the technical side of me.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Me being confident about my abilities, even if I don't know what I'm doing. I'm confident in myself, even when maybe I shouldn't be. Someone will tell me I'll do great at something, and I agree in public but then when I'm by myself, I'm like, "How am I going to do this?"

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

The one skill I would like to master the most is presentation. It's a very underrated skill, but I see the role it can play in a lot of things. For example, a chef has to present food. The food might be good but if it's just a mess, like it's sloppy, no one is going to want it. Presentation is everything. It's the same with my photography and editing. So I want to be able to master the art of presentation. I want my presentations to be eloquent enough to where it flows like butter.



LEE ROY LOLLAR, JR.

RETIRED FROM SALES, COLUMBUS



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

I wanted to be a mechanic! I was too dumb and too slow though. I even did that when I got out of active duty for a time at Fitzner Pontiac. Then I got a real job. I've been in real estate, I've built houses... for the last 30 years before I retired, I was in sales.

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

The only thing that I have learned is that when you change jobs, if you don't make more money, don't make the change. I went from a union job to a non-union job and it took me forever to make it up. So if you're not bettering yourself, don't change.

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

I guess, based on my opinions, people think I'm pretty opinionated. You know, everyone has an opinion. I'm not extreme on either (side of politics), but I'm not a middle of the fence guy either.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I'll tell ya, a man can't have too many tools. I have tools that I haven't used. My boys said, "What are you going to do with all that stuff in the shop, daddy?" And I said, "I ain't doing a thing with them." But I love tools. It used to be clothes when I was younger. What I've always wanted, though, is a 1958 Corvette.

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

Public speaking. I'm to the point in life where my wheels don't turn quite as fast. That's why I write. I have a hard time expressing myself. If I say something, sometimes I think of something different later. I also would have studied more in school.

IRMA DICKERSON

RETIRED BANKER, COLUMBUS

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

Well I always wanted to work at a department store. And I got a chance to work at Sears. I was the manager of the children's department, and we would take Winnie the Pooh to all the schools to talk to the children. I love selling. During a period of high inflation, Sears had a lay-off, and I went to work at First Columbus National Bank. And I enjoyed working there, opening new accounts and stuff like that.

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

Take one day at a time. Don't try to do everything in one day.

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

I like to give, and people wonder why I give. I found it more pleasing for me to give than receive. During the pandemic, we've had people who have needed paper towels, toilet tissue, that kind of stuff, and if I had some, I would give it to them.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I think being able to love everybody — family and friends — and treat them the best I know how.

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

I guess to not take things that people say to me personally.



DANNY AVERY

SEMI-RETIRED MINISTER, COLUMBUS



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

Well, I went to Franklin Academy, and I was a crossing guard. At that time the police station was still there on Sixth Street. So like many children, I wanted to be a police officer. But I grew up here in Columbus in a family owned business. My parents had a business on what's now the Island, and it was a predecessor to what is now the convenience store. I always thought I would have my own business, and I did as an HR consultant. I did think I would be in the military, and I was.

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

The advice that my father gave me very often: Pay attention to what you're doing and listen.

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

That I am a very, very, very serious person.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I don't really consider myself to be extravagant about anything, but I like chocolate a lot. I am a choc-o-holic. When my wife asks me what kind of cake I want for my birthday, I usually say a decadent fudge cake with five types of chocolate in it.

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

One of my virtual mentors has been Jim Rohn, and he always said he would always be a student of his profession. So I would one day like to master the art of speaking. I don't think I'm bad at it not. I would encourage anyone who has any type of speaking to join Toastmasters.

ERLE CHENNEY

MSU COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE, STARKVILLE

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

It really has nothing to do with what I happened to get a degree in. I have a degree in educational psychology, and I was working for ... well I was an EMT, and then I worked for a surgeon in Starkville but he retired. I needed a job so I just applied for a position and got the job. That was 31 years ago. I wanted to be a doctor when I was a child though.

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

Save your money.

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

They think I'm quiet and laid back, but I can be outspoken if I need to be. The older I get, the more opinionated I am.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I probably have a problem with Amazon, especially after being cooped up the past few months. And I probably eat too much. Also, I have a daughter who is 31 years old and I'm still spoiling her.

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

When I was growing up, for some reason I found myself being in the position to stop conflicts between friends and try to get everybody to get along and forget it. We never could remember what we were arguing about in the first place. I guess you could call me The Mediator. Don't ask me why, I've just never liked conflict. As I've grown older it seems like I have forgotten this, and I find myself having less and less patience with people and things going on in this country right now. I seem to get drawn to conflict because I feel so passionate about what this country is going through. If I had the skill, I think I would go back and instead of arguing, I would try to just let things go. We have very little time being here, so I don't waste it. Try to talk to people and see what they think about things because at the end of the day we are all in the same leaky boat. Also, if I had the power, I would fix it to where all our pets lived as long as people do. There's so little time, make it count. This goes for our lives in general.



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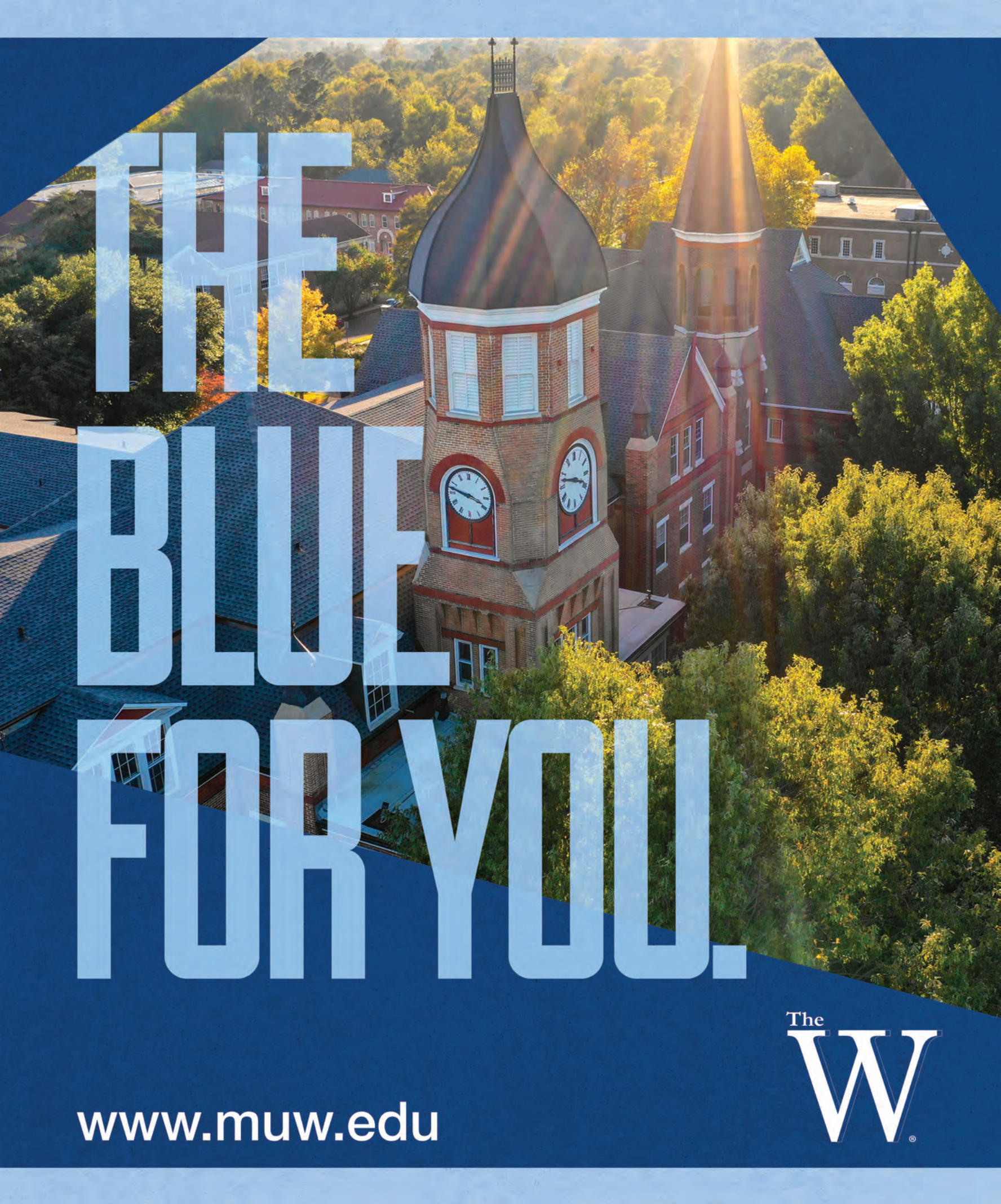
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