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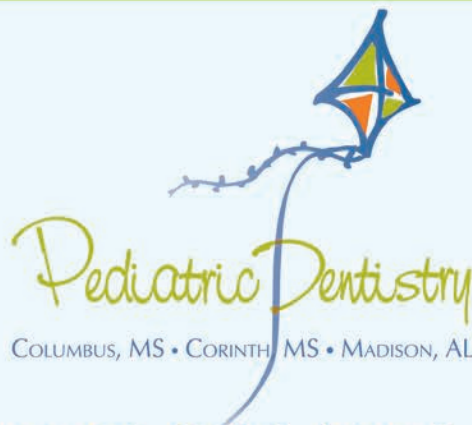
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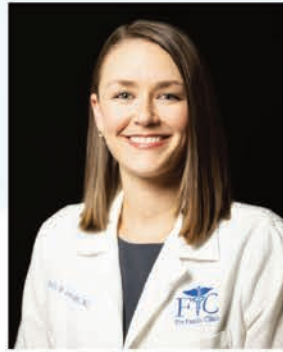


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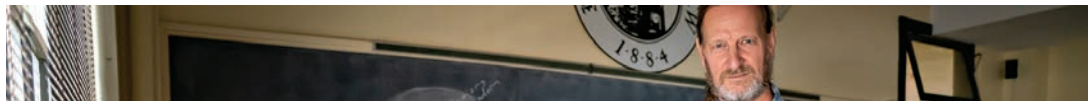
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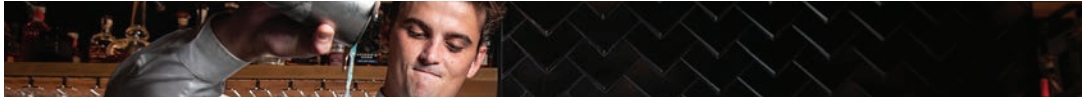
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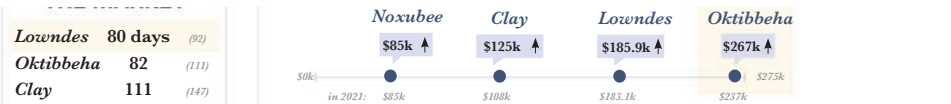
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GROWLING ARTISTS

CEDARHILL'S RESIDENT LIONS MAKE ART FOR FUNDRAISER

Sharon Dickerson is on her knees, squirting paint onto squares of canvas, while a lion paces a few feet away.

It's a muggy, early August evening. Thunder rumbles occasionally in the distance, a precursor for heavy rains that would move through hours later. The lion, a female named Nombi, eventually flops down, pressed up against the chain link fence separating her from the woman and her paints.

She still watches, though, tail flopping impatiently.

Eventually the six 11-by-17-inch canvases, held to the floor of the pen by bright green tape, are splattered with paint, swirls in all kinds of colors. Dickerson – a board member at Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary – and Dawn Brock, the general manager, who has been helping her set up, spray the canvases with lavender scent and retreat.

The lioness, joined by Tafari, a big male, gets much more interested as the smell spreads. They begin pushing and shoving, each jockeying for position to get inside. When Brock opens the door, it's Nombi that scabbles in.

Tafari and his other sister, Jala, eventually enter their own enclosures. The big cats roll around

on the canvases, claw them, swish them with their tails. Eventually they get bored and Brock lets them out and back into the fenced pasture where they live.

The bright splashes of color on the cats, while striking, don't last long. The non-toxic paint comes off easily when the cats bathe, or in the rain, Dickerson explains.

Dickerson and Brock carefully pull up the remaining canvases, which range from clouds of violently colliding pigments to what would probably happen if Jackson Pollock got into Asian calligraphy. All in all, a pretty good evening.

Strange? Sure. But, according to Dickerson, enrichment activities like painting are vital for the big cats.

"It's art therapy," Dickerson said. "A lot of the exotics were abused, and working with a caretaker every day helps them to heal stress from the humans who hurt them."

ABOUT CEDARHILL

Cedarhill, one of the oldest sanctuaries in the nation, sits on about 25 acres near Caledonia and houses nearly 200 animals. In addition to its three lions, five tigers, four bobcats and a cougar, it also houses dogs, cats, horses and even birds



and pigs. All of the “exotics” get enrichment activities of various sorts.

According to Cedarhill Executive Director Nancy Gschwendtner, “probably 98 percent of them” were abused. All of the animals have to be housed and fed and sent to the vet. There are also about 15 employees who need to be paid. All of that adds up to about \$60,000 a month right now. Like seemingly everything else, expenses have gone up over the past couple of years.

“Before the pandemic, it was maybe \$50,000 a month,” she said. “That’s a lot of money to come up with every single month. It’s getting tougher and tougher.”

“As a nonprofit, you have to look for ways to

make money,” she said. “We get no grants from the government. Nothing. It’s people like you and me who are giving those donations.”

The sanctuary is not open to the public, and it doesn’t adopt animals out, both of which makes it harder to fundraise.

RAISING FUNDS WITH THE ART

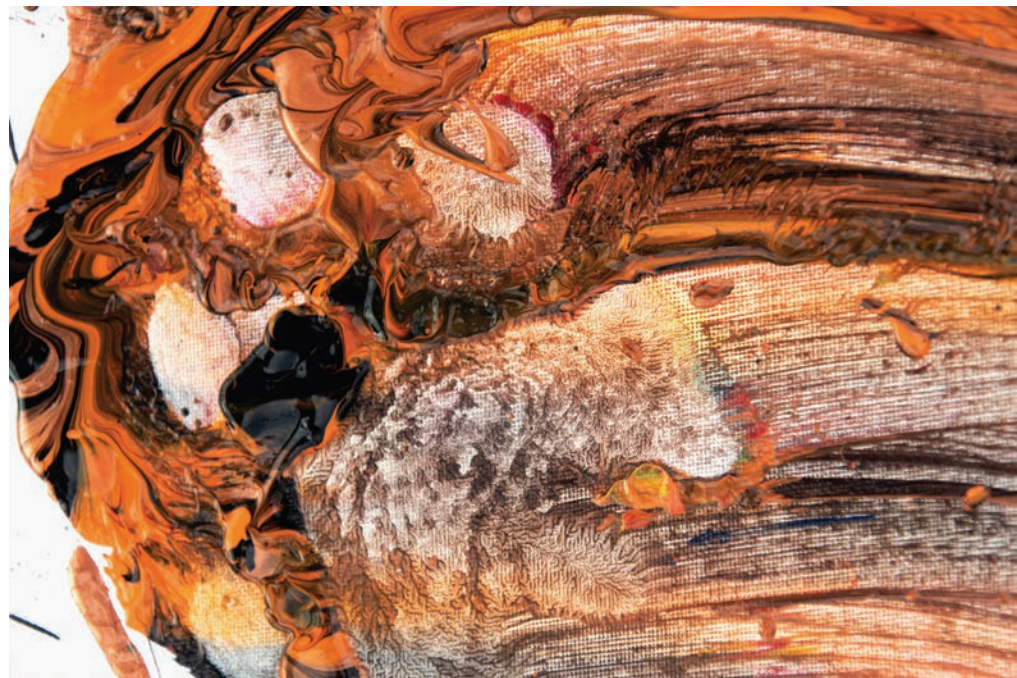
While painting enrichment is common at animal sanctuaries, this year Cedarhill is planning on doing something new. In December, about 75 of the big cats’ paintings – some small, some large – will be up for sale in a gallery showing at the Rosenzweig Arts Center in downtown Columbus.



Sharon Dickerson prepares canvases.

The animals will be treated like artists at any other gallery opening, with pictures and biographies, Dickerson said. The exhibit will be as inclusive as possible, including recordings of voice actors – volunteers from Golden Triangle Community Theater – reading the biographies in-character.

The hope is the show will bring more exposure to Cedarhill, said Gschwendtner. Dickerson said next year she



hopes to expand the show to other museums around the state to cast the net wider and, hopefully, create a reliable revenue stream.

She hopes the fundraiser will net enough money to expand the enrichment activities for the big cats.

“There’s a lot of equipment out there they can play with,” she said. “It’s like buying playground equipment for big cats, and it would be really

nice if we were able to have extra funds to put towards that. And of course there’s always the need to have funding beyond that.”

If paintings aren’t your thing, there are other ways to help.

“You can donate straight from our Facebook page,” Gschwendtner said. “You can also get on our mailing list. We’re not going to send you 15 letters saying, ‘Oh, my God, we’re dying if you



don't help us.' We send out a newsletter every other month to keep you up to date with what's going on. It has a donation card in the middle. You either use it or you don't."

The exhibit opens Dec. 1 with a reception from 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Rosenzweig Arts Center, 501 Main St.

"I hope this is our 15 minutes of fame," Gschwendtner said. "If that's all we get, I'm fine with that."

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**
PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**



Sharon Dickerson and General Manager Dawn Brock



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WRITING THE FUTURE

MUW'S MFA ATTRACTS RISING STARS TO THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Nearly a century ago, a young Eudora Welty came to Columbus to attend what was then Mississippi State College for Women. She would go on to become known around the world as a master of crafting short stories.

Today, a new generation of writers carries on Welty's legacy in Mississippi University for Women's growing graduate program for creative writing.

Since the low-residency Master of Fine Arts in creative writing launched in 2015, it has ranked at or near the top of the best online programs by bestmasterdegrees.com, collegechoice.net, [\[gent.com\]\(http://gent.com\) and \[nonprofitcollegesonline.com\]\(http://nonprofitcollegesonline.com\).](http://intelli-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Kendall Dunkelberg, the chair of MUW's Department of Languages, Literature and Philosophy, has been the driving force behind the MFA's development. According to Dunkelberg, the MFA was a natural outgrowth following the department's expansion of undergraduate creative writing classes — with a twist.

While multiple universities in Mississippi offer traditional MFA and MA programs in creative writing, MUW has the only low-residency MFA in the state. This unique format allows students to take online classes in conjunction with a series of one- to two-week residency sessions in person

in Columbus. Class sizes are intentionally small, with five to eight students at most per class, to facilitate hands-on mentorship and peer feedback.

Students have the flexibility to take classes at their own pace to complete the 48-hour program. While some have finished the degree in two years, others take one or two classes at a time.

The residencies ensure that students meet with each other and their instructors face-to-face throughout their MFA experience, no matter where they live. MUW doesn't charge out-of-state tuition, so the program attracts a diverse set of students. With students hailing from 17 states beyond Mississippi, the trip to the Golden Triangle is often memorable.

"I chose to study creative writing at the Mississippi University for Women because I had never been to Mississippi," graduate Kyla Hanington wrote in an essay published by the Bitter Southerner last year. Originally from Canada, Hanington currently lives in Maryland. "To go to Mississippi is to fall in love with it."

"The program certainly provides a very positive image of both Mississippi and the city of Columbus," said former MUW provost Tom Richardson. "The students like coming here. The students like being here when they're here. They certainly leave with a much more favorable impression of who we are than they might have had before they came to Mississippi."

Indeed, several Mississippians have taken advantage of MUW's MFA to advance their careers. Jackson native Beth Kander, one of the program's first graduates in 2017, released the three-book science fiction series "Original Syn" shortly after earning her degree.

Additionally, MUW has produced two winners of writing awards from the Mississippi Institute

of Arts and Letters. In 2020, C.T. Salazar won in the poetry category for his chapbook "This Might Have Meant Fire," while this year, current student Teresa Nicholas earned the award for life writing for her memoir "The Mama Chronicles."

"From the beginning, the students were remarkably talented," Bridget Pieschel, the former chair of MUW's Department of Languages, Literature and Philosophy, said. "Among the first graduates up until those who graduated just this summer, the MFA program has produced a remarkable number of published and prizewinning professionals."

"There's a group of writers like a second family to me—my cohort, my professors, the cohorts after mine," Salazar said of the community around the program. "In workshop, in residency, just before or just after the thesis defense, I picture all of us together when I'm asked to say something genuine about how I became a writer."

Some classes include the opportunity to work on MUW's two literary journals, "Poetry South" and "Ponder Review." To finish the degree, students must submit a thesis consisting of a full-length work, which often lays the groundwork for future publications.



“We’re not just looking for writers who are already publishing books,” Dunkelberg said. “We are looking for writers who are willing to grow and who have definite goals for their MFA.”

That was the case for Exodus Brownlow, who applied to MUW’s MFA program at the recommendation of her professor John Zheng at Mississippi Valley State University.

“I wanted to strengthen and develop my writing, to deepen my natural talents and further season my skills,” Brownlow said. After being

published in a number of literary journals, Brownlow will make her full-length debut next year with an essay collection.

Thus far, the MFA has attracted writers across genres in the ranks of both faculty and students. Two of its founding faculty members are poet and playwright T.K. Lee and acclaimed novelist Mary Miller. Lee also teaches in MUW’s MFA in theatre education, which launched shortly after the creative writing program.

According to Lee, the MUW community stands out because stakeholders on campus and beyond are eager to work together. Lee spearheads the 10:4:TENN playwriting competition, which is presented during the annual Tennessee Williams Tribute in Columbus. It is jointly sponsored by the departments over the two MFA programs.

“It is a wonderful thing to discover you’ve landed a career alongside a group of professional peers who go beyond simply saying, ‘That’s a great idea,’ to ‘How can I help make that idea a reality?’” Lee said.

Area residents have the opportunity to interact with faculty, students and alumni from the MFA program during the Eudora Welty Writers’ Symposium, which has been held annually at The W since 1989. This year’s convening will be held Oct. 27-29 and features Mississippi author Steve Yarborough as the keynote speaker.

The next application deadline for MUW’s MFA in Creative Writing is Dec. 1, 2022, for Spring 2023 enrollment.

STORY BY **EMILY LINER**
C.T. SALAZAR PHOTO BY **CHRIS JENKINS, MUW PUBLIC RELATIONS**
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C.T. Salazar



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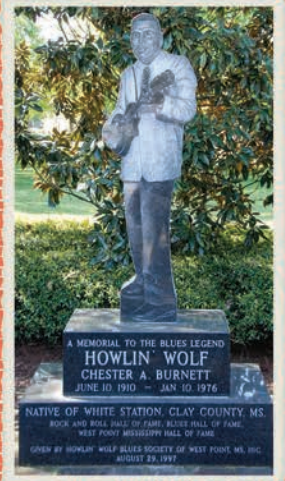
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A ROUNDUP OF PROGRESS AROUND THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

If there's one word that characterizes much of the Golden Triangle in the past six months, that word is "recreation." Starkville, Columbus and Lowndes County are all working on major park projects, either building new facilities or expanding offerings at venerable ones.

In Starkville, the Cornerstone Park project is about 80 percent complete. The project, which

got underway in 2020, has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, inclement weather and problems getting materials due to supply chain issues.

The project is expected to be complete by March 2023, and is scheduled to host its first tournaments that same month.

The tournament-based park will consist of



Lowndes County baseball complex

three different four-field “quads,” amounting to 12 baseball and softball fields. Each quad will have its own restrooms. The infields are synthetic turf, and the outfields natural grass.

Meanwhile, construction got underway earlier this year at Lowndes County’s planned complex, located west of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway on North Frontage Road, off of Highway 82. The first phase will include eight baseball/softball fields, as well as a playground and multi-purpose building.

The estimated completion date for the first phase is August 2023.

The county is trying to get funding via the Department of Defense to build a second phase that would center around a gymnasium and

multi-purpose building that would double as a community storm shelter. There is currently not a public storm shelter west of the river.

Columbus is in the early stages of a plan that would add four new youth baseball fields at Propst Park. The plan would complete the five-field “wheel” begun with the construction of the Field of Dreams.

Columbus City Council voted in September to put the project back out for bids again, after only one bid – which exceeded the estimate for the work – was received. The city will also reconsider lighting options, and will likely ask Columbus Light and Water to install at least some of the lighting, in an effort to cut costs.



Main Street Starkville

STARKVILLE

Starkville officially grew by 2.3 miles back in April, with the approval of an annexation plan. It gained about 1,600 residents in an area northeast of Mississippi State University and Highway 82, and south of Highway 182, which includes Clayton Village and University Hills.

The annexation brings the total population up to about 25,960.

The city is also working to raise funds for a redevelopment project looking at Main Street. Starkville has about \$4.7 million set aside for the estimated \$9.5 million project, and is hoping to get more funds from the Mississippi Legislature during its next session.

The plan aims to both slow down traffic through the downtown area, to convert angled parking to parallel parking and to convert Lafay-

ette Street from two-way to one-way. Narrowing streets and adding sidewalk space will make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

The city got about \$6.2 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding, the majority of which is earmarked for sewer, stormwater and water line improvements.

OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

In Oktibbeha County, the board of supervisors is seeking a brownfields grant via the Golden Triangle Planning and Development District to help identify and mitigate any hazardous materials that may be on the site of the Felix Long Memorial Hospital building. The site was home to the county's Extension Service office, the Oktibbeha County Department of Human Services, Child Protective Services and some Starkville-Oktibbeha County School District offices, all of which have been relocated to a building on Lynn Lane.

If the grant application is successful, hazardous materials will be identified and removed, and then the building will be demolished. The county intends to build a new administrative building on the site.

The board of supervisors has also received a confirmation from the United States Department



Felix Long Memorial Hospital building

of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service that it will get grant money to repair the stricken dam at Oktibbeha County Lake. The amount of the grant has yet to be determined.

Oktibbeha County is splitting its \$9.6 million ARPA designation between three projects: sewer infrastructure, repairs to the dam and paving on Sturgis-Maben Road.

LOWNDES COUNTY

In Lowndes County, two new investments are underway at the industrial park near Golden Triangle Regional Airport.

The first, Terberg-Taylor, is a joint venture between Taylor Group of Louisville and Royal Terberg, which is based in the Netherlands. The companies are investing \$16 million in a facility to manufacture terminal tractors, which are used

to pull semi-truck trailers to and from loading docks. The facility will be about 50,000 square feet and will create about 90 jobs.

Altex Tube has broken ground on a \$108 million facility adjacent to Steel Dynamics, directly across from GTRA. It will house a manufacturing plant and corporate offices, and is expected to provide about 58 jobs.

Construction is underway, and operations are set to start in mid-2023.

Supply chain issues are delaying construction of two planned solar farms in western Lowndes County. Origis Energy had planned to start operating the first of those plants in October, with the second coming on-line in October 2023. Construction has yet to start at either site, but Origis is hopeful both will be up and running sometimes next year.





File photo of flooding on College Street in Columbus

Lowndes received about \$11 million in ARPA funding, the majority of which is allocated to water and sewer improvements at rural water associations, as well as in the towns of Caledonia, Artesia and Crawford. It is also supporting some tourism and non-profit organizations, and paying out premium pay for its employees.

COLUMBUS

After a long lull, work is expected to get underway soon on re-inventing Leigh Mall. Earlier this year Columbus and Lowndes County agreed to \$3 million in incentives for the Hull Group, which bought the mall in 2019 at auction.

Engineering and re-roofing work is going on now, and the developer plans to flip the current structure “inside out” to make it an outward-facing complex rather than the traditional indoor mall, which dates back to the 1970s.

Also at Leigh Mall, construction is underway on a location for Five Below at the north end of the mall property. Five Below is a chain discount store with most products costing \$5 or less. It is expected to open later this year.

The city also began replacing an old, outdated culvert at the intersection of Second Street and 10th Avenue South. The stormwater culvert is far too small for the amount of water it carries, and sits on top of a major water line that serves much of the city. If the culvert had collapsed, it

could have interrupted water service. The city is spending about \$400,000 of its ARPA allotment on the work.

Other ARPA allocations include stormwater and drainage improvements, as well as funding a blight remediation program and premium pay for city employees.

CLAY COUNTY AND WEST POINT

In Clay County, the board of supervisors is working towards a renovation project for the Clay County Courthouse. The county is putting about \$1.2 million of its \$3.7 million ARPA allotment towards the project, which has an estimated price tag of \$2.5 million to \$3 million.

The county is looking to supplement the ARPA money by getting the courthouse designated a landmark via the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, which will open the door for grant money. It is also working with the GTPDD to get Community Development Block Grant money to make the courthouse more compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Eventually the courthouse will expand to the north and south, adding office and courtroom space. Plans include a drive-through lane for people coming to renew or purchase car tags.

The remainder of Clay’s ARPA allocation is going towards road improvement and premium pay.



West Point Pizza Hut under construction


The city of West Point is welcoming new retail developments. A new dine-in Pizza Hut is being built on Highway 45, next to the Relax Inn. The old Fred's location in downtown West Point has also been bought by Dollar Tree, which is in the process of renovating it.

West Plans to spend its \$2.6 million ARPA money on infrastructure, especially replacing old sewer and stormwater systems.

NOXUBEE COUNTY AND MACON

In Noxubee County, a bridge on Honey Lake Road is being replaced. Culverts under the bridge had become rotten, and it was closed for about three months for repairs. The repairs are being funded by the State Aid road and bridge program.

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Blue Truck Coffee in Macon

The county is also working on some old buildings. A state appropriation of \$25,000 is going towards roof repairs on the veteran's services building, and, thanks to a federal grant, the county is planning on building a new 911 office. The current building is too small, and not strong enough to withstand high winds.

The county got \$2 million in ARPA funds, and, while nothing has been committed, it will likely be spent on renovations to county buildings, including the MSU Extension office and the

county health department.

In Macon, longtime drug store City Drug is finishing up a new building on Jefferson Street, and hopes to be open by Thanksgiving. Blue Truck Coffee has also expanded their business, moving into the historic Scott's Service Station building downtown. BankFirst is also remodeling the drive-through at their branch on Jefferson Street.

The city got \$595,000 in ARPA funds, and intends to spend it upgrading water tanks and for sewer improvements.

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**

MAIN STREET STARKVILLE PHOTO BY

RORY DOYLE

TAMPICO BAY **COURTESY PHOTO**

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“It’s great to know
that when she takes
a step, it’s not going
to hurt.”

Dan Curran

Janice Curran’s knee hurt so badly that she could barely stand or walk. “She was in pain all the time,” her husband, Dan, explained.

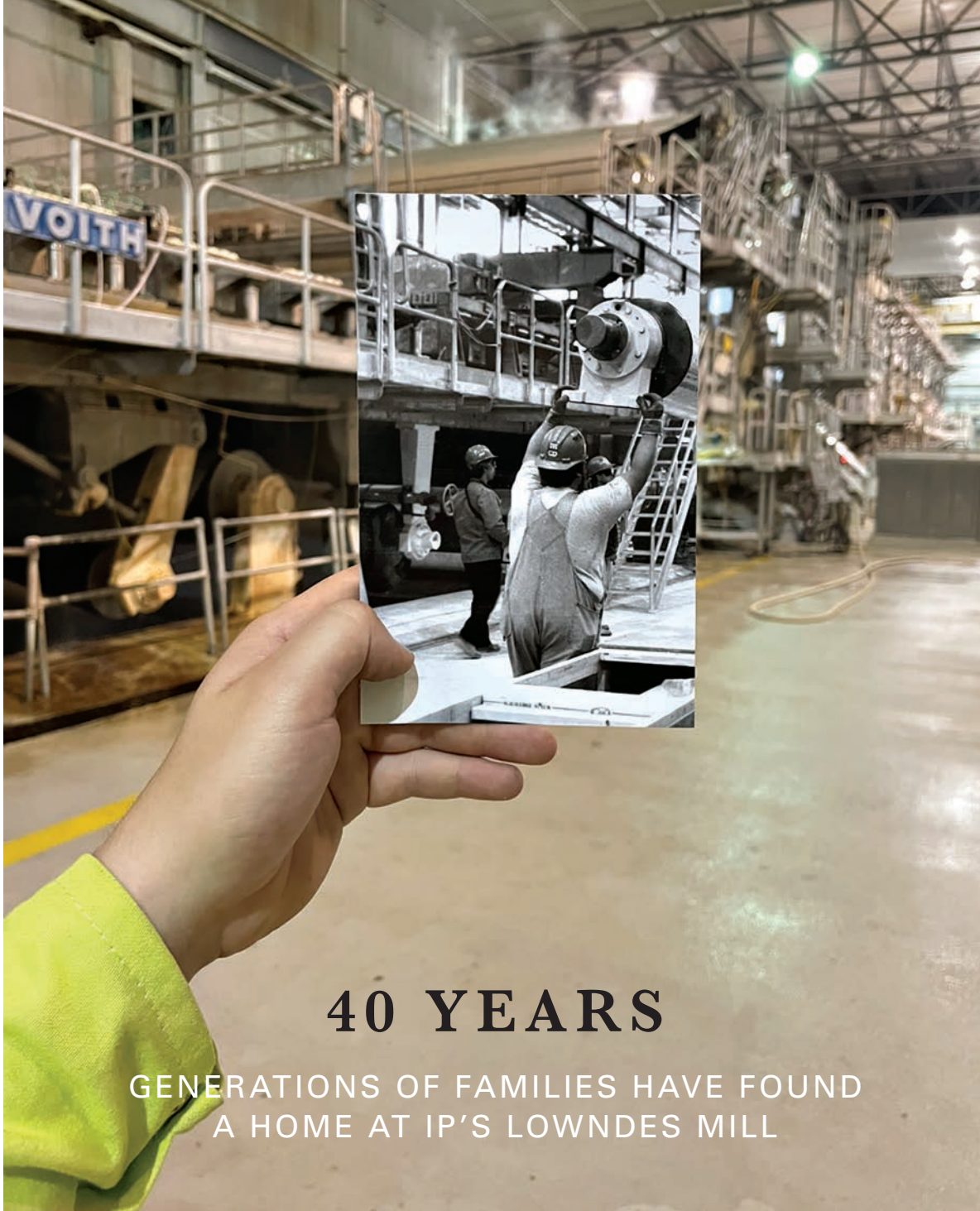
The Currans went to see Dr. Jordan Ferguson at the OCH Orthopedic Center. He recommended a total knee replacement surgery.

The results far exceeded their expectations. After just one month, Janice was able to walk pain-free. Dan said, “She’s doing great. Her mobility is awesome.”

“They’re top quality, the best you’ll find anywhere,” Janice said about the OCH team. “We’d recommend OCH and Dr. Ferguson to anyone.”

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40 YEARS

GENERATIONS OF FAMILIES HAVE FOUND
A HOME AT IP'S LOWNDES MILL

More than 40 years ago, Roger Coan helped his father farm soybeans on 450 acres in southern Lowndes County, off Carson Road. He still works out there, but he doesn't work row crops any more. Now he is the mill pump machine business unit manager at International Paper's Columbus

location.

"My dad was a farmer in the area and rented part of the land where the mill sits now," Coan said. "So I always tell people I was about the first one here."

In 1980 the land Coan helped farm was purchased by Weyerhaeuser and developed into

“Facility One,” which made glossy paper for magazines and newspapers.

In 2016 the most of Weyerhaeuser’s local operations were purchased by International Paper, and this year IP celebrated the mill’s 40th year of operation.

Those 40 years have established the IP mill as one of the mainstays of manufacturing in the area, providing not only jobs, but a place for growth and change. It’s also become a family business of sorts, employing multiple generations of many families.

Over time, the mill would add to “Facility One.” A following facility produced absorbent material.

“So you’ve got Procter and Gamble and Kimberly Clark that does diapers and handy wipes and then there are all these other companies that do third party diapers; that absorber product is where almost all of our product goes,” Coan

explained.

When Coan came to work for Weyerhaeuser in 1992, he started as a project engineer and worked up to a facility manager where the magazine and newsprint paper was made. That mill would undergo a \$25 million rebuild of the paper machine just seven years later for faster and more efficient output; it would later sell to Domtar in 2007 before closing in 2010. Coan recalls that in those days, the mill was the best job anyone could ask for.

“Back when I first started here, if you were a person that wanted to make the most money or have a good career with all the benefits, this was like the most sought-after place to go to work,” Coan said.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The mill has been a good corporate citizen too. Columbus Mill Communications Manager Kellum Hawk said IP interacts with the Golden Triangle community in a number of ways. Since 2016, IP has allocated \$70,000 via its IP Foundations to different agencies across the area such as United Way of Lowndes and Noxubee, YMCA, the MSU Center for Entrepreneurship and Outreach, among others.

IP also volunteers at local schools to show students the pulp it makes and provides a portion of the funding to support West Lowndes Elementary School’s STEM program.

“We focus our efforts around (the community),” Hawk said. “We call it a signature cause. Signature causes are going to be education and literacy, health and wellness, hunger and critical



Roger Coan

community needs.”

Additionally, IP pays approximately \$3.2 million annually in county and school taxes, according to the Lowndes County Tax Assessor’s office.

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

Especially in the past 15 years, several major companies have come to call Lowndes County home. Companies like Steel Dynamics, PAC-CAR and Yokohama have all created competition in the hiring pool.

“We used to be the lead dog in town,” Coan said. “To find new ways to compete, we’ve had to make changes in our pay structures and what we offer benefits-wise.”

The company also fosters advancement from within with an emphasis on education.

“The entry-level tier has a few jobs that you get to certify on when you start out and you get a little bit of money and then the next ones,” Coan said. “It takes a little longer to learn it, a little more responsibly along with it, but it pays more each time.”

IP also offers internships called co-ops, where college students can come to work at the mill as project engineers, getting real world experience and helping to shape updates to the mill’s infrastructure and machinery.

Kay McCrary graduated from the University of Mississippi in May and came to work at IP after finishing three co-op programs at its Columbus mill. She believed the company was the perfect fit for her after watching her father, Michael Soule, work here for more than 15 years as a fiber line operator.



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Kay McCrary and Michael Soule

“I started in January 2019,” McCrary said. “I liked the process, and I knew that if it were good enough for my dad to choose to work here, it would be good enough for me.”

“Growing up, you ain’t always got something

to tell your kids about,” Soule said. But now that she’s a little older, we have something in common. We got something to talk about; a reason to stay close.”

Other than his daughter, Soule has spent the



A photo of IP's Columbus mill under construction is laid over a present day photo.

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last 15 years building the work family he sees every day on shift.

“Our team is a small team, and we are like a family,” Soule said. Most of the time we eat together. We like to joke around.”

Working with her dad wasn’t the only thing new for McCrary. On one of her internships at the mill, she met Bo McCrary, who would soon also come to work at the mill. They would marry in May 2022 and both now work full-time at the mill.

“We had no idea that each other existed until October of 2020,” McCrary said.” I had no idea who our family members were and how intertwined our lives were because his grandfather worked out here too.”

STORY BY **GRANT MCLAUGHLIN**
ALL PHOTOS **COURTESY PHOTOS**





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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**

MELINDA LOWE PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**

JILKIAH BRYANT PHOTO BY **HG BIGGS**

BRANDI HERRINGTON PHOTO BY **BRIAN WILLIAMS**



MELINDA LOWE

Of all the people who work in the field of education in the Golden Triangle, no one has the range of involvement that Melinda Lowe has exhibited. From pre-K to post-graduate and into the critical early years of teaching, Lowe is actively involved at every level, either through her job as Director of Outreach and Innovation at Mississippi University for Women or independently as the director of Lowndes Young Leaders and Mississippi Governor's School.

"One of the best things about my job is that it allows me to be involved with so many programs and opportunities," said Lowe, who spent 16 years in the Columbus school district as a teacher and administrator before moving to The W in 2013. "I've always had a passion for teaching and teachers, especially young teachers. Statistics show that up to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within their first three years of teaching. That was true for me, too. But I had some wonderful teachers that wouldn't let me give up and helped me. I've always remembered how

important that was."

Lowe also works with the county's Excel by 5 organization as it pursues national certification for pre-K education.

Her focus is not limited to teachers and teaching, however.

"For the past 11 years, I've been the coordinator for Lowndes Young Leaders, a program run by the (Columbus Lowndes) Chamber that brings high school sophomores from all of the schools in the county and home-schoolers," Lowe said. "I've worked with more than 250 of these future leaders and I've heard from so many of these students how important that experience was for them."

Of all her many duties, Lowe said what she likes best is hosting conferences for teachers. "I love being able to provide support and development opportunities for teachers," she said. "I love being able to bring them here to campus, treat them well, love on them, give them a nice meal and tell them 'Y'all are making a difference.'"



JILKIAH BRYANT

“It was the hardest transition of my life,” says Jilkiah Bryant of her decision to leave her Noxubee County High School classmates to attend Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. “Being uprooted from home and being in a new environment – an extremely challenging one – was hard. My learning curve was so steep. I was always in my teachers’ offices trying to keep up my work.”

Now a senior at Ole Miss, Bryant, 21, was chosen for a prestigious Truman Scholarship in the spring and spent her summer working on Wall Street as an intern for Fitch Ratings, one of the “Big 3” credit rating agencies.

Despite her success since leaving Noxubee County, thoughts of home are never far away. “Every single weekend when I was at MSMS, my grandmother would come and I’d spend weekends in Macon and Shuqualak,” she said. “A big part of that was the responsibility to my community and my family who were supporting me. I want to model and show that what I’m doing is

possible if you grab the opportunity.”

As a junior at MSMS, she founded Project Powerful, which engages teens to volunteer for community service programs and organizations. At Ole Miss, she established Project Powerful as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

After initially planning to study medicine, Bryant will now use the Truman Scholarship, which provides up to \$30,000 for post-graduate studies, to continue her education.

“I’ll either go to graduate school and study public health policy or possibly law school, since so much of health policy starts in the legal field.”

As one of five children raised by a single mom, Bryant understands the challenges low-income families face, especially health care.

“After coming to college I decided I wanted to be more on the prevention side of health care instead of practicing medicine. I know what can happen to impoverished communities when it comes to having the resources they need, especially with health care.



BRANDI HERRINGTON

When insurance broker Jimmy Redd founded Starkville Strong in 2020, he envisioned a platform to support local businesses who were reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, Starkville Strong still fills that role, with almost 14,000 members on its Facebook page where visitors can inquire about goods and services in their community.

Yet it was the arrival of a former teacher and new business owner that broadened the scope of Starkville Strong to meet the sometimes desperate needs of the city's most vulnerable residents. "A lot of people see us as a connection site, which we are," said Brandi Herrington, who took over as executive director for the nonprofit two months after it was founded. "We were founded to help small businesses, which were overwhelmed at the time. But when I came in, I just felt we needed to change our mission to focus on the whole community and not just businesses."

Today, Starkville Strong provides food pantries, supports other community charitable groups and meets needs as they emerge in ways big

and small. It might be someone who needs help obtaining a driver's license or paying a utility bill. It could be a larger effort, such as working with the city to strengthen code requirements for landlords to provide safe, affordable housing as it did last year when 70 residents were evicted from the Catherine Street apartment complex.

"We call ourselves the gap fillers. A lot of the most vulnerable people don't have a support system. If they indeed \$20 to buy some gas so they can get to work or need help making ends meet until they get their first paycheck, they don't have anyone. That's where we come in. We've got some great, faithful donors and support of businesses that allow us to meet those needs."

Herrington, 43, left teaching three years ago and is now the owner of Dunkington Art and Jewelry.

"When I quit teaching, I had a void, like I had lost my purpose," Herrington said. "I have my own business, but I missed being able to connect with people on a deeper level. That's what Starkville Strong has done for me. It's given me back my passion."

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A DECADE OF AS

BAPTIST MEMORIAL HOSPITAL-GT'S FOCUS ON PATIENT SAFETY EARNS IT 10 STRAIGHT YEARS OF RECOGNITION

Something was wrong. The patient's vital signs looked OK on the monitors, but the nurse in Baptist Memorial Hospital-Golden Triangle's Critical Care Unit was unconvinced they told the whole story.

"Call it nurse's instinct," said CCU nurse manager Ashley Chism. "This particular nurse had taken care of this patient for about four days in a row. Even though the patient was sick, she knew the 'sick normal' and this wasn't it."

In afternoon rounds, a physician led a team from multiple hospital disciplines – among them

a nurse practitioner, pharmacist and case manager – to the patient's bed, where the nurse relayed her concerns.

"Together, the nurse and the physician found out the patient was in the early stage of an infection," Chism recalled. "The fever hadn't spiked yet. The blood pressure hadn't bottomed-out yet. When all of that starts happening, that's actually severe sepsis."

Severe sepsis could have been fatal, and it hadn't been on the team's radar prior to those rounds.

“That wasn’t the direction they had been going with that patient,” she said. “That patient wasn’t here because of an infection. That’s one of those saves that collaboration with the whole team can accomplish.”

That is just one of many “saves” the CCU’s daily multidisciplinary rounds has produced over the years, precipitously dropping the unit’s mortality rate. It’s also one of many measures that has made BMH-GT one of the safest hospitals in the country.

BMH has maintained an A rating for each of the last 10 years from The Leapfrog Group, which uses myriad data to issue safety ratings twice a year to roughly 3,000 hospitals. The Columbus hospital is one of only 22 in the U.S. to achieve 10 straight years of A ratings and the only one in Mississippi.

“It’s just our culture,” said Belinda Sanderson, BMH’s director of quality. “It’s about having everyone engaged in doing the right thing for the patients.”

All critical care physicians at BMH are triple-board certified in adult, intensive and pulmonary medicine. They rotate in weeklong shifts, Chism said, and focus only on the CCU when on shift. Among the Leapfrog standards, each

CCU physician on call must respond within five minutes of being contacted by a nurse.

Hospital-wide, technology is helping in other areas. Mobile, computerized medical carts allow nurses to scan patients and their medicines and issue “hard stop” visual warnings if the medicine doesn’t match the doctor’s order. Similarly, an IV integration system will automatically stop unordered drips from entering a patient.

Another key piece of improving patient safety is standardized training – everyone learning to do their jobs the same way every time – something BMH vigilantly emphasizes.

“Health care is a lot of processes, and when you standardize stuff, it decreases your errors,” infection prevention manager Betty Cunningham said. “It’s muscle memory. If you do it so many times the exact same way, you don’t even have to think about it.”



In 11 years as a specialty nurse leading infection prevention at BMH, Cunningham has always felt she had the right personality for her role.

Never was that clearer than at the onset of





COVID-19.

She immediately started thinking through safety plans and procedures for the hospital and was involved in Baptist systemwide conversations about how protocols could best fit the local facility.

Then she implemented signage and monitoring, made sure all staff members had the supplies they needed and were using personal protection equipment correctly.

As part of her more general role, Cunningham works with nurses on how to properly start and maintain IVs, central lines and Foley (urethra) catheters, as well as preventing the use of such invasive devices if patients don't meet certain criteria. Because of that, central line infections are down, and the hospital hasn't seen a Foley catheter-caused infection in more than a year.

But Cunningham also generals a battle line against a much more common foe for infections entering the hospital: germs on hands.

"We do a lot of education on hand hygiene," she said. "It's the simplest, most effective and one of the cheapest ways to prevent the spread of infection."

Alcohol-based sanitizer stations are placed in hallways, by elevators, in restrooms and in every patient room throughout BMH, and some

hospital staff train as "designated observers" to monitor hand hygiene protocols and input compliance data.

"If they observe someone not exercising proper hand hygiene, they are given the authority to approach that person," she said. "That helps us hold each other accountable and keep a high percentage of compliance with hand hygiene standards."

The job is intense. But then again, so is Cunningham.

"I am. I'm not going to lie," she said. "I have a passion for this job. ... I'm curious. I like to know the answer. Sometimes you have to work through things and be the problem solver."



Ashley Bobbitt of Columbus had already lost a baby two years earlier when she was admitted to BMH In April 2021 for an emergency C-section to deliver her daughter only 32 weeks and six days into her pregnancy.

Bobbitt had high blood pressure, kidney disease and gestational diabetes. She was also considered "advanced maternal age."

Kinsley Rae weighed 3 pounds, 2 ounces at birth. But after three weeks in the Newborn

Intensive Care Unit, she went home a pound heavier and seemingly no worse for the wear.

“She’s bounced through everything like a champ,” Bobbitt said. “She’s our little fighter.”

Bobbitt largely credits Baptist for the safe deliveries of Kinsley and her son, Jaxon Neon, born July 25 of this year.

Those are the stories Bradley Rhodes, BMH director for Women’s Services, likes to hear.

The hospital’s labor and delivery unit, which sees upward of 900 babies born annually, is part of the Mississippi Perinatal Quality Collaborative implementing initiatives focused on reducing obstetrical hemorrhaging, effectively treating severe maternal hypertension and is a pilot hospital in the state for reducing the the rate of first-time moms who deliver by C-section – which has dropped by as much as 15 percent there since last year.

BMH also is recognized as a Blue Distinction Maternity Center by Blue Cross Blue Shield. One metric considered for this designation is monitoring and reducing episiotomy rates in vaginal deliveries, which lowers the risk of infection and allows the mother to be more mobile sooner after delivery. BMH has reduced the rate of episiotomies by 5 percent in the last four months, Rhodes said.

Bobbitt was thankful for Baptist’s “well-oiled machine” during both her successful deliveries. There was something else she noticed even more.

“They have a great team,” she said. “Even when you’re scared, they talk to you, comfort you and treat you like more than just a patient.”

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**

PHOTOS BY **CHRIS JENKINS**

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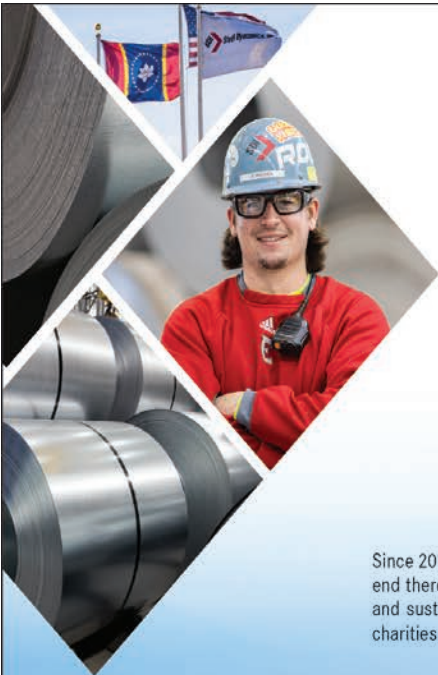
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MURPHY



Lucy Bryant

Oak Hill Academy

“ For snack today I’m eating
Granny Cement apples.
They help keep the doctor away
so I will eat one everyday.



Heather Ford

Annunciation Catholic School

“ I had a boy write me a
note that said he loves
me more than Hooters.



Brittany Godfrey

New Hope Elementary

“ We were learning about skeletons
and bones during a week in October.
As an opener to my lesson, I asked the
class, ‘What do you think is the smallest
bone in the body?’ I had one boy raise his
hand and say, ‘I know! The penis.’



A TASTE FOR CLASSICS, WITH A TWIST

TASTE ITALIAN KITCHEN BARTENDER J.D. HULL
SHARES SOME OF HIS FAVORITE COCKTAILS

John “J.D.” Hull stands tall behind the bar at TASTE Italian Kitchen, making drinks with surgical precision, and one would be forgiven for thinking he had been there for ages with the confidence he displays in his trade.

However, Hull, a student at Mississippi State University, is relatively new at bartending, having decided to take a chance one day and enter the restaurant. He hasn’t looked back.

“I saw this place was open so I went for it,” he said. “It’s done good for me. I’ve become a good bartender.”

He enjoys making all kinds of drinks, but one type stands out above the rest.

“My favorite cocktails to make are classic cocktails,” he said. “...I like to throw a little twist of mine on some of them like a Strawberry 76, Strawberry 75, those are some of my favorite things to do, put a little spin on a classic cocktail. There’s thousands of classic cocktails, and I think the best cocktails have already been invented.

“The craziest drink I’ve ever made would probably be Gin Fizz, it takes about 15 minutes to make and also a New York Sour, I thought it was pretty crazy. It’s a whiskey sour with a Merlot floater on top. It took a lot of time.”

TASTE Italian Kitchen is located at 208 Lincoln Green in Starkville.

STORY BY **ROBERT SCOTT**

PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**

SALT AIR TOO

This twist on a lime margarita takes its blue color from Blue Curacao, a liquor flavored from the peel of an orange, which is substituted for the more traditional Triple-Sec. A salty foam tops the drink.

2 oz. Blanco Tequila
1 oz. lime juice
.5 oz. Giffard Curacao Bleu
.75 oz. Spiced agave

SALT AIR FOAM

4 oz. lime juice
1 Tbsp Sucrose esters
1 tsp Himalayan salt
1 Cup hot water

Step 1: Combine all drink ingredients in a shaker, fill shaker with ice and shake vigorously. Strain drink into a coupe glass.

Step 2: Combine all Salt Air Foam ingredients in a small bowl and blend with an immersion blender until foamy. Spoon foam on top of the drink.

Notes: TASTE Italian Kitchen uses agave syrup infused with cinnamon and orange peel. Agave syrup, available at most supermarkets, may be substituted. Sucrose esters help create airy foam and can be purchased on Amazon.com.



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Name: Catherine Pierce

Position: Professor of English at Mississippi State University and Poet Laureate of Mississippi

Years in current occupation: 15 years at MSU

Birthplace: Wilmington, Delaware

Hobbies: Walking in the woods, taking pictures of interesting leaves/bugs/flowers, reading

Spouse: Michael Kardos

Children: Sam (11) and Wyatt (8)

MEET CATHERINE PIERCE

Catherine Pierce is co-director of Mississippi State University’s creative writing program and teaches classes in creative writing and American literature. She has authored multiple books of poetry and currently serves as Mississippi’s Poet Laureate.

You were named the Poet Laureate of the state of Mississippi in 2021. What does this position mean to you?

It is this really amazing chance to do the work that I’ve been trying to do in my classroom on a larger scale, which is to try to help people connect with poetry and increase their own facility with poetry.

I’m trying to bring poetry into all corners of the state so that all ages and people have access to it. That’s at the root of what I’m doing: This idea that poetry is for everybody and trying to find ways to put that into practice.

I’ve been hosting the Mississippi Poetry Podcast, which is a podcast featuring poems from and conversations with Mississippi poets. Each 15-minute episode of the podcast is paired with a supplemental resource that I’ve come up with for educators and community groups.

Another project is I’m writing a monthly column called “Poetry Break” that’s designed to help readers of all ages and experiences write poems of their own. The idea is that a couple sitting there on a Sunday afternoon with their coffee might do this for fun, or a parent who really needs an activity for their first grader, or a

teenager who needs to find an outlet.

What else have you been doing since you took on this role?

I received a Poet Laureate fellowship from the Academy of American Poets for a specific civic project, and that project is going to be the Mississippi Young Writers Poetry Festival and statewide poetry-writing initiative. I’m launching it this fall with help from the Mississippi Center for the Book.

Our hope is that students will write poems in response to a particular prompt. By Dec. 1, each participating school will select three winning poems per grade, and then those poems will be sent on to a statewide competition. All the schoolwide winners are going to be invited to attend the Mississippi Young Writers Poetry Festival, which will be held in April 2023 on Mississippi State’s campus.

What drew you to becoming a poet?

It all began when I was a kid. I was just a kid who loved to read. I was a kid who loved books — all books. I didn’t get in trouble very much as a kid, but the one time that my parents got a call home from a teacher about me, it was because I was reading too much.

I loved poems. I had anthologies of poems for kids that I loved. I had all the Shel Silverstein books, “Where the Sidewalk Ends” and “A Light in the Attic.” I loved funny poems. I loved serious poems. I loved poems that I didn’t

understand, which I think is crucially important. It was important for me to read things I didn't understand.

I always loved reading poems, and I liked writing poems, too. I wrote poems from when I was as young as second grade — I remember writing a haiku about a purple pansy.

I was just always writing, and I was writing because it was fun for me. As I got older, I wrote because it was a release for me. It was a source of comfort for me. It was a way to connect with other people, friends who are also writing, and to form community.

How would you describe a great poem?

I think that's such a hard question, because there's no one definition of what makes a poem great, right? The perception is going to change from person to person, which is one of the things I love so much about poetry, the fact that it is a subjective art.

That said, for me, a great poem is one that surprises me. And one that thrills me with its language, that makes me feel really excited about the words that are in it. And honestly, a poem that kind of makes me say, "Whew!" after reading. Sometimes you just have this really strong visceral reaction to a poem, and that's a great poem to me.

Emily Dickinson has this great quote. She said, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry," and I love how thrilling and strange that definition is. It feels exactly right to me. Not to piggyback too much off of Emily Dickinson, but I think she said it best.

How has living in Mississippi influenced your writing?

My third book "The Tornado is the World"

is 100 percent a Mississippi book. I wrote that book following the tornado outbreak of 2011 that devastated so much of the South. I wanted to explore my own fear of tornadoes and my own experiences, having had a very close call with one during that outbreak. That's a book that just could not have been written without living in Mississippi.

The landscape of Mississippi shows up in so many of my poems. It's such a lush landscape, and all that natural imagery just shows up all the time. I have to limit the number of crepe myrtles that I put in poems, because I love crepe myrtles so much and I love the words "crepe myrtle."

Very importantly, Mississippi has the best and most supportive literary community that I've ever seen. The talent in Mississippi is amazing, and so is the camaraderie. I feel very lucky to be part of the Mississippi literary community. It's just an incredible community of people.

INTERVIEW BY **EMILY LINER**

PHOTO **BRIAN WILLIAMS**

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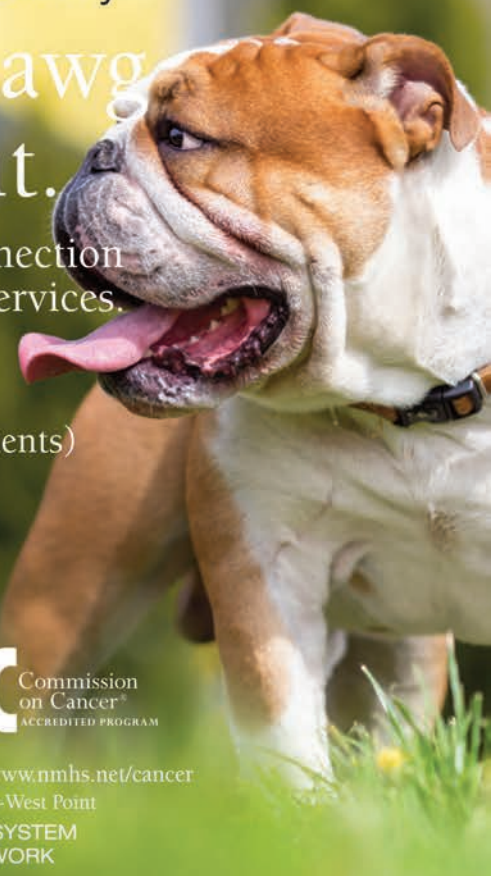


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STEER WRESTLING

WEST POINT NATIVE DEFENDS NATIONAL
RODEO CHAMPIONSHIP, EYES WORLD
CHAMPIONSHIP

Mississippi has more than its share of famous athletes, and while Will Lummus may not be a household name outside of the world of professional rodeo, the West Point native is a bona fide star...and he has the sandwich to prove it.

Diners at Clancy's Cafe in Red Banks, near Lummus' home in Byhalia, can select the "Will Lummus" from the menu, a burger made with a ground beef patty, bacon, ham, pimento cheese, and Comeback Sauce. Lummus may be the first steer wrestler to have a sandwich named after him.

“Yeah, that’s pretty cool,” Lummus said. “Clancy’s is about 15 minutes from my house and I used to order what they called the Country Boy burger. One day, I came in and saw they had changed the name from Country Boy to Will Lummus. I took a picture of the menu and put it on social media and it just kind of blew up.”

His career is blowing up, too.

Since joining the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association, the world’s most prestigious rodeo circuit, fulltime in 2017, Lummus quickly established himself as a force to be reckoned with in steer wrestling.

Each year, the top 15 money-winners in each event qualify for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo (NFR), held in December in Las Vegas, which is considered the Super Bowl of rodeo where both national championships and world championships are determined.

In 2018, his second full year on the circuit, Lummus qualified for the NFR. He’s qualified every year since. Last December, he broke through to claim his first national championship based on his aggregate time on 10 “go-rounds.” He narrowly missed claiming the world championship, which is determined by the combined season-long and NFR earnings. Tyler Waguespack held off Lummus to claim his third world title.

The two are on a collision course heading into this year’s NFR with Waguespack and Lummus ranking 1-2 in earnings as the season ends.

PROUD TO REPRESENT MISSISSIPPI

When you think of rodeo, you generally think of the American West. Most rodeo events evolved from the daily activities common to the ranching that once dominated western state economies. The PRCA is still dominated by cow-

boys from those states, which is why Lummus takes pride in representing Mississippi on the biggest rodeo stage of them all.

“At the start of the National Finals Rodeo, they introduce you by your state. Texas will have 35 cowboys competing. When they introduce Mississippi, it’s just me and I’m honored to be able to represent my home state,” Lummus said.

Lummus may not be a westerner, but he is not without a pedigree of his own.

His father, Luke, and uncles Dave and Bob were local and regional rodeo legends.

“We all grew up on the family farm and all three of us loved to rope and ride,” said Bob Lummus, who at 56 is the youngest of the brothers. “We grew up on a farm and on the weekends way back in the day, people would come to the house and want to know what we were going to do. All of us liked to rope and ride. Luke and Dave started riding bulls and they went all over the Southeast dominating bull-riding. I was a chubby little boy, so I went to steer wrestling. You need to be a big boy for that and I weigh 287 pounds.”

LEARNING THE ROPES FROM UNCLE BOB

Like his nephew, Bob Lummus qualified for the NFR four times back in the early 90s. He is also the person Will credits for introducing him to steer wrestling.

“I started out calf roping and I still like to rope,” Will said. “My dad is 5-foot-9 and I doubt he’s ever seen 200 pounds. Me, I’m 6-foot-2 and 250. You don’t see guys my size ride bulls, so I decided to wrestle steers and I had a great teacher in my Uncle Bob. He gave me the tools. My dad was very important, too.”

Bob said he could tell Will had the makings of

a steer wrestler when his nephew was in his early teens.

“You have to be careful, though,” Bob said. “It’s a dangerous deal and you have to be careful with a young boy whose body is still developing. But I sort of knew that was the direction (Will) should take. I used to tell him, ‘You got a big man’s body and a little man’s reflexes.’ That’s a great combination. You don’t see that every day. I think that’s what makes him special. Like his dad, he takes it serious and works hard. That’ll get you pretty far because when you cross that ditch (the Mississippi River), you’re playing with the big boys. Will knows that.”

Will dominated the high school rodeo circuit, and after graduating from Oak Hill Academy in

2010, he wanted to turn pro.

“My parents and Uncle Bob wouldn’t let me,” Will said. “They wanted me to get my education first. Really, I’m glad they did that. It made me hungrier.”

Will graduated from Tennessee-Martin in 2016 with a degree in exercise science and wellness, finally joining the PRCA full time a year later.

“We’re proud of him,” said his father, Luke, a rancher and Clay County supervisor for 28 years. “He’s worked hard to get where he is now.”

A PEEK INTO THE FUTURE

Much has changed for Will both on the





professional and personal level since 2017. He married his wife, Jenna, in 2018 and bought 80 acres of property in Byhalia, a half-hour from Jenna's hometown of Hernando. They've moved into the house they built on the property last year.

"It's close to the Memphis airport and to Jenna's folks, so it seemed to make sense to live in the area, but I'll never stay away from West Point for very long," Will said. "It's just a two-hour drive, so it works out all-around."

At 30, Will is in his prime as a steer wrestler, but he's already given some thought to life after rodeo.

"I don't think it will end anytime soon,"

he said. "I've been pretty healthy, which is a big factor, so I've been blessed that way. The steers we wrestle go from 400 to 600 pounds. A lot of bad things can happen."

Will said there's no fixed career span for a steer wrestler.

"Some of the guys I compete with are in their 40s and some of them have kids," Will said. "I don't think I'd want to do that. It's hard enough to be away from home so long as it is. There are some other things I want to do, too, so I know this won't last forever. But right now, this is where I want to be, doing what I love. I'm blessed. I really am. I don't take it for granted."

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**
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FROM NATURE INTO ART

SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST HAS TRANSFORMED HIS
SMITH LAKE HILLSIDE INTO A PLACE OF WONDER

During the three years he worked on boats in the Gulf of Mexico and the North Sea, Barry Methvin estimates he read more than 1,000 books. Among them, “War and Peace,” he read twice.

“That was before the internet,” he said. “All

you had to do was read.”

Methvin’s reading program evidences a restless energy, a thirst for knowledge and an auto-didactic bent, all of which have been constants in his life.

“I was too fidgety,” he says about a foray into





higher education.

In 1996 when he was working as a purchasing agent for his uncle's manufacturing company in Cold Springs, Alabama, and running four chicken houses of his own, Methvin decided to build a house on Smith Lake.

The site, a rock ledge 30 feet above the lake, presented uncommon challenges.

Having worked as a Memphis zookeeper, an oil company seismologist, a sorter for Federal Express and traveled the country, living out of a van, Methvin is not one to shirk challenges. He taught himself to rappel.

He built the platform for the house, at times installing one board at a time while dangling

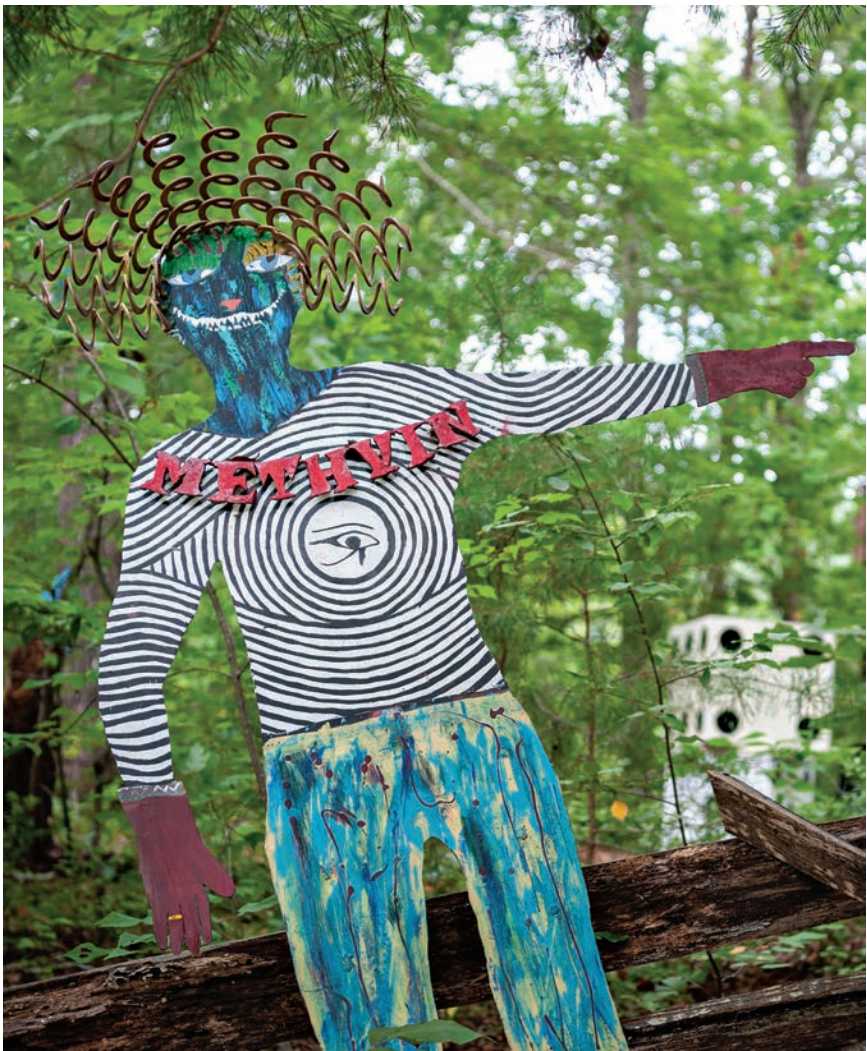
from a rock face, and then hired framing carpenters to finish out the 800-square-foot structure he and his wife, Connie, call home.

The porch, with its 180-degree view of the lake and its cooling breezes, offers an incomparable setting for a meal, a drink or simply a place to sit and revel in the all-encompassing natural beauty.

Methvin still relies on his mountaineering skills from time to time to trim the front hedges.

The house was the first of a scattering of six buildings he built on this thickly wooded ridge overlooking the lake.

The most distinctive of these is a two-story glass-fronted box that serves as a guest house and gallery for Barry and Connie's art.



Forty feet up, cantilevered six feet out from a stone bank from which it appears to be precariously balanced, the structure has evoked surprise, admiration and slack-jawed wonder from more than one passing boater.

Methvin scavenged wood for the house's untreated oak siding from fallen trees on family land. He cut and planed the boards in his sawmill.

The result would do a Swedish architect proud.

In reality the glass house began as a break-dancing platform for Alex, Connie and Barry's only child. (Barry and Connie were high-school sweethearts while growing up in Memphis. Alex is a snowboard instructor in Breckenridge, Colorado.)

After the break-dancing craze ran its course, Barry said, "Why don't we throw up some walls and see what happens."

"A lot of times I visualize things. I can almost build it in my mind," he said.

When he's not creating architectural tours de force, Methvin makes art.

Often his art has as its genesis offerings from

the natural world.

Take a recent example, the pine tree.

"There was this big-ass pine tree over Connie's studio that tilted a little more each year," said Barry. You better do something, Connie kept telling him.

Finally Barry put a steel cable around the tree. That very night the tree fell. The cable restrained the tree, causing it to land across the shallow gully behind their home.

That was a year ago. Since then, Methvin has stripped the bark from the tree, painted it, creating a horizontal totem pole now swathed with strings of LED lights.

Barry Methvin began making art in earnest while fabricating agricultural equipment for his uncle's company. He bought a cutting torch and made faces with discarded scraps of metal.

Ten years ago when he retired, he began converting the detritus of nature and his fellow humans into objects of whimsy.

He and Connie comprise what is essentially a two-person artist colony.

They have converted their hillside into a sprawling art installation.





“Speak Friend and Enter,” the admonition from J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Fellowship of the Rings,” greets visitors to the Methvin compound.

Buddhist prayer flags flap overhead. A 12-foot-tall dragonfly dangles from a tree. An oversized rhinoceros beetle carved of poplar crouches next to the driveway. Smiling automatons cloaked in mirrors greet passing visitors. Ever-expanding rock gardens line the pathways.

Connie has created mosaic walkways from scraps of china found on scavenging expeditions. Her arrangement of metal ironing boards of varying colors spans the gulf between the roadsides of rural Alabama and conceptual work seen in far-off galleries.

This is art that smiles.

A year ago about 25 neighbors showed up to help erect a 10-foot fish totem, one of the two that stand sentinel at the entrance to the Methvins’ driveway.

The event had all the good cheer and spirit of a barn raising.

At night the hillside takes on an otherworldly aura.

Walkways lined with colored lights float through the woods; a Barry-created brook gurgles down the hillside; shards of mirror and colored glass hanging in the trees glimmer in the darkness.

You wonder what fuels the impulse, that restless, day-to-day need to make things of beauty.

“I get up at 7 in the morning,” says Barry Methvin. He turned 73 in August. “I work 10 or 11 hours a day. ... Reality is what you make of it”

Barry Methvin’s email address is barrymethvin@gmail.com.

STORY BY **BIRNEY IMES**
PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**



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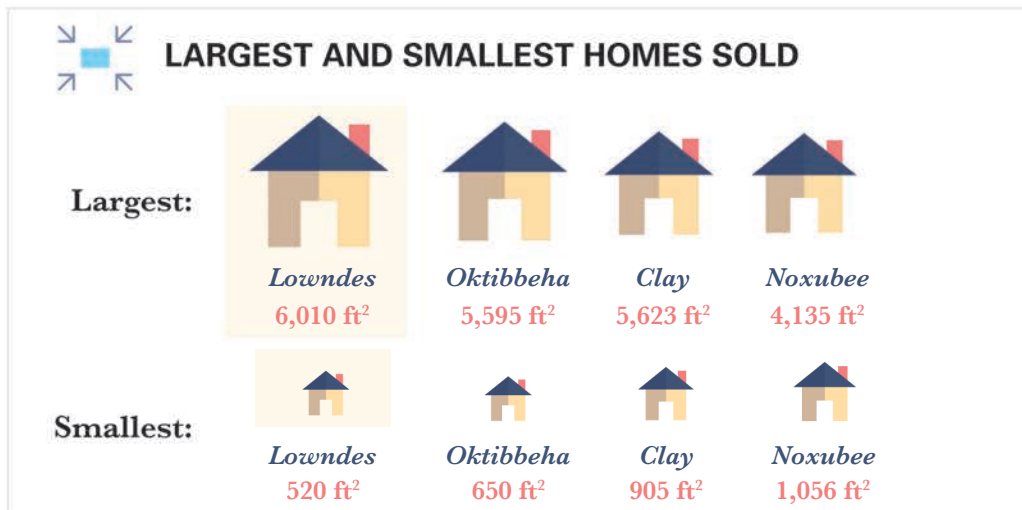
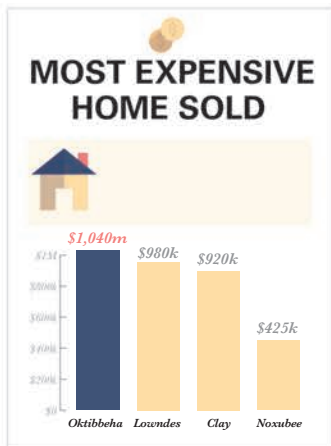
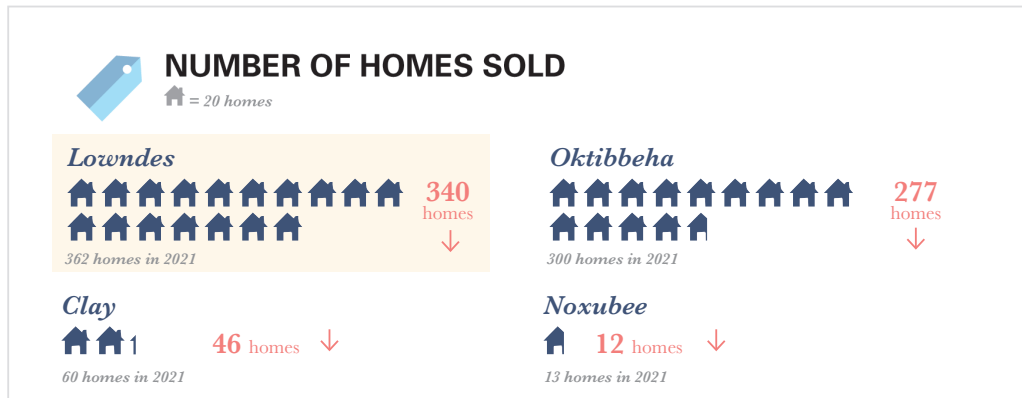
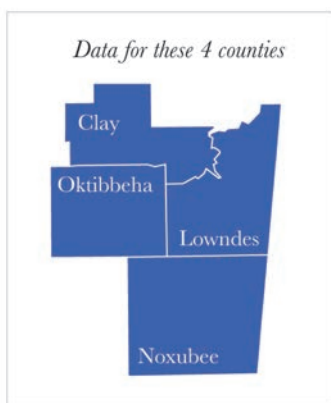
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GOLF DOMINANCE

OAK HILL ACADEMY DRIVING FOR ITS SEVENTH STATE TITLE

When V.J. Trolio took over the Oak Hill Academy golf program a decade ago, the Raiders struggled against the perennial powers of the state.

Against schools like Jackson Prep and Jackson Academy — two of the better golf programs in Mississippi — the Raiders had their fair share of struggles.

You wouldn't recognize the struggle now.

In the last six or seven years, the program has produced multiple NCAA Division 1 golfers and

has won, so far, six straight state championships.

The success starts with Trolio, who initially focused on building a foundation for the program.

“I initially got involved with the program because of some of the kids I was coaching,” Trolio said. “In North Mississippi, high school golf was not a very big deal, so they were playing small matches. I thought that I could build them out a better schedule.”

The program was in good hands with Trolio, rated as the top golf instructor in Mississippi in

recent years and a top-100 instructor nationwide by Golf Digest.

Once the foundation for the future of the program was laid, the turning point for Oak Hill was that first state championship in 2016 — Hunter Atkins' junior year with the Raiders.

Atkins is a significant name in Oak Hill's recent history. He was the first player under Trolio to commit and play Division I golf, going to Southern Miss.

"When my dad first started coaching the team, we were horrible," senior Collins Trolio said. "I wasn't even on the team at that point, but we were all coming up."

Atkins was the first domino to fall for Oak Hill. After him came Cohen Trolio, who is now playing at LSU; Wells Williams, who has continued his golf career at Vanderbilt; and the Raiders' current team, including Collins Trolio, an Ole Miss commit, and two future expected Division I commits in Jacob Blanton and Grayson Seth Lockhart.

Once success started coming to Oak Hill, it trickled down from the upperclassmen to the younger golfers on the roster.

"When (the younger kids on the team now) saw the success and what was transpiring with Oak Hill, they buckled down," V.J. Trolio said.



Morgan Dabbs, Eliza Yelverton, Natalie Blanton, Lucy Cook, and Ana Collins Coker

“We have some girls and boys that are coming in now that are keeping the program strong.”

The winning tradition goes beyond the boys team. The Raiders’ girls team has shared equal success, winning nearly all of its matches last season and sending several individual golfers to participate in amateur tournaments on the boys side.

Those coming into the program are buying into Trolio’s philosophy, and as they look up to the older golfers who have their sights set on continuing golf into college and beyond, they know that they can reach that point, too.

“All of us younger kids looked up to (Atkins) and wanted to be him,” Blanton said. “At the same time, we all got better, and everybody’s continuing to get better. That’s really the biggest thing.”

Oak Hill enters the 2022-23 academic year as

the heavy favorite once again to win what would be its seventh consecutive state title, a mark that not many Mississippi high school sports programs have achieved in any sport.

Looking back at the last six seasons, seeing the consistent greatness the Raiders have accomplished is a cool thing to look back on, but it only gives them more motivation to repeat that feat.


“We definitely think it’s really cool what we’re doing, but none of us are sitting on it and getting comfortable with that,” Collins Trolio said.

“There’s a lot of good golfers out there and it’s competitive. If you don’t keep going, then you’re going to get beat.”

STORY BY **ALEX MURPHY**
TEAM PHOTO **COURTESY OF OAK HILL ACADEMY BOYS GOLF TEAM**
OTHER PHOTOS BY **KAT COOK**



Wells Williams, Seth Lockhart, George Bryan, Collins Trolio, Jackson Cook, Jacob Blanton



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One evening five years ago, three hunters gathered around an Oklahoma farmhouse table with pizza and beer as a business idea took form.

Earlier in the day, Nick Charney, Jared Lewis and Jason Lonsberry were on their first ever hunt

together. Lewis and Lonsberry noticed Charney's shots were hitting a tighter pattern and getting a better result.

"You could definitely tell the difference of us shooting regular commercial ball loads versus what (Charney) was shooting," Lewis said. "We

got Nick to start telling us more about it.”

Today, Apex Ammunition offers a unique tungsten super shot shotgun shell with a tighter shot grouping, similar to the ones Charney used in Oklahoma five years ago. The shells are hand-loaded in a warehouse on Lewis’ dad’s property in New Hope.

“Tungsten isn’t cheap,” Lewis, the company’s COO, said of the relatively rare element. “We knew coming in that this wasn’t going to be your traditional shotgun shell. If we’re going to offer a premium product, we need all the premium stuff to come with it: the customer service, taking care of folks,

making sure the product is going to do as advertised. We load our powder down to the 0.1 grain. We load our shells down to the pellet.”

Walking into the warehouse where employees load ammunition by hand and prepare orders for shipping, two American flags hang proudly on the walls. One flag is a large re-stitched flag from Golden Triangle Regional Airport, and the other flag is a standard-size flag that Lewis flew in Syria when he was deployed.

Military roots run deep in this company.

All three of their wives are pilots in the U.S. Air Force, and both Lewis and Charney

have also served in the military.

Lewis is an Army National Guard combat veteran, and the company values hiring veterans and those with military ties. Veterans from nearly all branches of the military work at Apex’s New Hope headquarters.

“We’ve been there,” Lewis said. “We’ve seen what these guys go through, and you know when it’s time to fire that motor up, they will.”

While the company’s headquarters and manufacturing operations are in New Hope, Lonsberry – the company’s CEO – is remote since his wife gets reassigned to various bases periodically.

“As a military spouse, it’s kind of tough to have a career where you’re working with somebody else,” Lonsberry said. “A lot of that is because of the lack of stability of location, so a lot of employers don’t want to hire military spouses. So you can stay home, go to school or try to pick up part-time jobs in places you go. In some places, though, there’s not a lot of opportunity, period, so your other choice is to build your own business.”

And their business is certainly building.

On the first day Apex





launched its online store in 2017, the ammunition company sold \$10,000 worth of products in the first 13 minutes, Lewis said. In addition to their website, their ammunition is sold primarily in outdoor stores nationwide, though most locations are in the southeast.

The company's first year ended in the red. Lonsberry said all of the revenue was turned right back into working capital in that first year. Since then, it's been steady growth.

"We went from year one to year two with about a 300 percent growth," Lonsberry said. "From year two to year three, it was about a 350 percent growth, and each year after that is just about double."

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target,” Lewis said while sitting in his New Hope office in August. “It makes a lot of your sub-gauges more deadly, so there’s been a huge shift. People are starting to move away from the large 12-gauge loads and drop down to 20-gauges and 28-gauges because you can be just as deadly. It’s getting more kids and women outdoors.”

Customers send Apex pictures of their children or grandchildren’s first kills that were made possible because of the ammunition the company sells. Hearing those stories is one of the founders’ favorite perks of the business.

“We’re in the business of mak-

ing an experience,” Lonsberry said. “What’s really neat is when we’re at conventions, the shows, or when we get emails, just the overwhelming support people pour in saying, ‘Man, you guys are awesome. We love working with you. We love shooting your shells. Here’s photos of my kid’s first bird.’ They show us their family photos of their success. It’s those things that people feel OK to come talk to us about is really what really keeps us pumped up and moving forward all the time.”

STORY BY **JESSICA LINDSEY**

PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**

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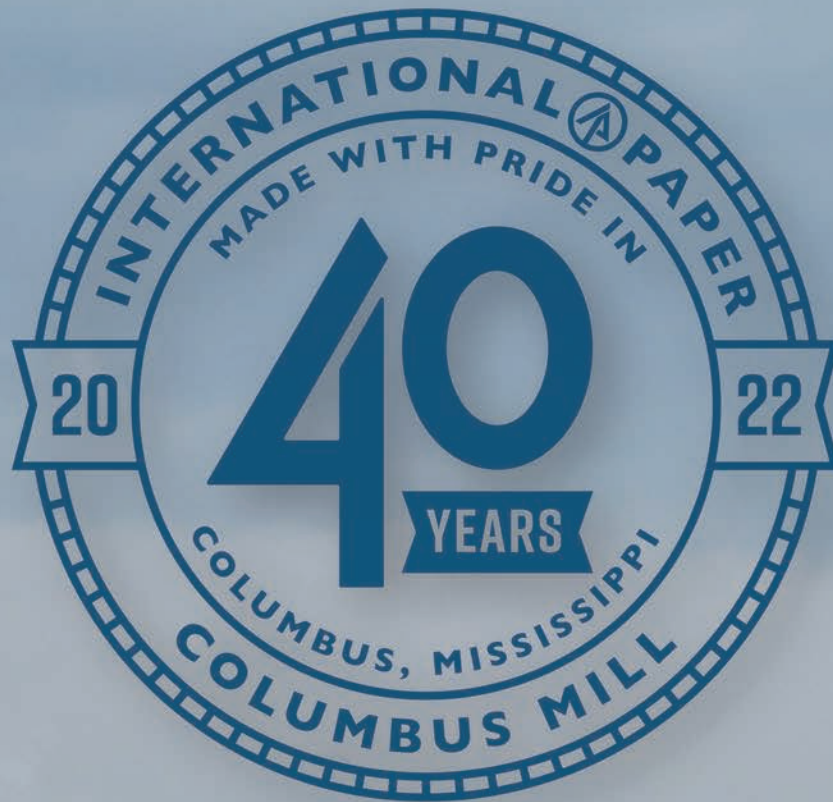


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