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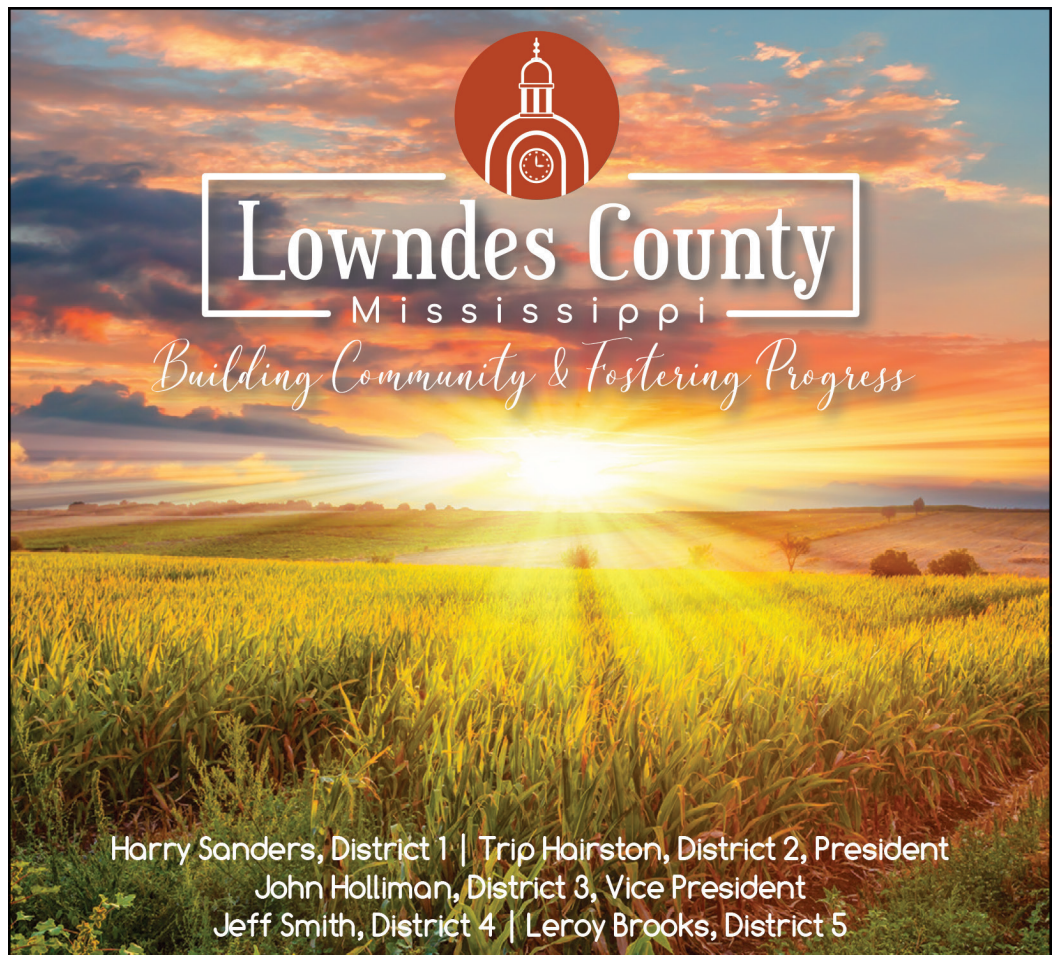
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CULTURE

# BIG PLANS FOR ELM LAKE

GOLF COURSE LURES  
SOUTH KOREAN NATIVE  
TO INVEST IN AREA

**W**hen Myung Lee purchased Elm Lake Golf Course in August, he had plans to hold off on key renovations and updates to the course until 2024, while he familiarized himself with his staff.

Just two months later, after having had that chance, Lee is now working on plans to renovate parts of the clubhouse into a restaurant and sports bar in November.

“We think that will be a good time to do that project here,” Lee said. “We are shooting to open in January or February. Winter time here will be slow, so that will be a good time to make some of those renovations. In the spring, we will also focus on making some landscaping upgrades as well as we get busier.”

Lee purchased the course after an eight-month-



Aerial photo of Elm Lake Golf Course.

long negotiation with previous owners Fred Hall and Elm Lake Golf Course Inc., who were looking to retire from the business.

“Golf has always been a hobby of mine,” Lee said. “Plus, the Golden Triangle area is growing so much with new businesses and manufacturing coming into the area, and I think that growth is good for both the area and for my business.”

Lee said he began in 2022 looking for a golf course to own and operate. While he could not find any near his home in Texas, he fell in love

with Elm Lake just five days after the course went up for sale in October 2022.

After touring the property and the Golden Triangle early this year, Lee said he was as good as sold to start his golfing business there and put down roots in the adjacent Elm Lake Subdivision.

“This area is a lot like my own hometown in South Korea,” Lee said. “I was looking for a golf course at other places, but when I saw Elm Lake, I thought the course was in great condition and

it had a good price compared to other places I had been looking.”

Elm Lake Golf Course originally opened in the mid-1990s under the ownership of Hall and Elm Lake Golf Course Inc. The property was listed for sale at \$1,295,000 by Columbus Realtor Doris Hardy. Lee declined to disclose the final price for the deal, but he said he still plans to invest about \$1 million into the property.

Some of that money will be set aside for site upgrades to turn the property into a country club, including a gym and an indoor simulated green for patrons to practice on. He also plans to rename the course but has not decided on a name yet. Those changes will begin to be implemented in 2024.

Lee also plans to add a recreational area to the property but no longer plans to build a pool area and waterpark for children. He will reserve about 30 acres on the property separate from the course for further additions.

“We thought a bit more about it and decided that the pool would be too distracting for players on the course,” he said. “We want to make upgrades that improve the experience here.”

Lowndes County Tax Assessor Greg Andrews said the course and clubhouse combined are appraised for tax purposes at \$944,250 as they sit. Adding other facilities to the 148-acre property could increase its appraisal to \$1.9 million once those additions generate revenue, he said.

STORY BY **GRANT MCLAUGHLIN**

OPENING PHOTO BY **GRANT MCLAUGHLIN**

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## 3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

**I**n 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. We highlight three on the following pages.

PROFILES BY **SLIM SMITH**  
PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**





# ELIZABETH HOWARD

To suggest that Elizabeth Howard is “confined to a wheelchair” draws a knowing chuckle from those who know her.

While it’s true that cerebral palsy keeps her wheelchair-bound for most of her waking hours, “confinement” for the 23-year-old from Columbus is a poor description of her state.

“I’m working out a lot and I love to travel and play with my dogs,” Howard says. “I love to be with kids. Sometimes I’ll read to them or tutor them, which is something I did every day when I was a senior at Heritage (Academy).”

She also loves music and is busy planning a trip to Colorado where she and her best friend, Lila, have tickets to see Pink in concert.

Elizabeth has also enjoyed other activities you don’t normally expect someone in a wheelchair could experience. She’s been snow skiing in Colorado, surfing in California.

Where there is a will, there is Elizabeth, working out a way.

“I don’t do well just sitting there being like, ‘Well, this is my situation.’” she said. “What am I going to do? Sulk? No. I’m going to figure it out.”

Often, those small accomplishments are her biggest sources of pride.

“I have always had a hard time buckling myself into my car. ... I have to have someone to help me,” she said. “One day I was sitting in the car and I was like, ‘I’m going to unbuckle my seatbelt and then buckle it again. I’m going to do it.’ It was hard. I had myself on video because I was determined I was going to do this. And I did.”

Elizabeth said she realized she was different from other kids at an early age. It awakened in her not so much a feeling of envy, but a deter-

mination to have a normal life.

“It took me some time, but I realized that I’m the way I am and that’s OK,” she said. “But sometimes even now, it’s still hard. I mean, I see my friends. They have their own lives. Maybe it’s time for me to have a life of my own and not have to rely on my parents.”

Elizabeth’s big goal is to move to Colorado and live with Lila.

“It’s hard on us because we live so far away from each other,” Elizabeth said. “She’s in a wheelchair, too, but she was able-bodied before. But she’s working really hard and I am, too. ... I have a lot of people in my corner helping me try to figure that out. It takes a lot of logistics for that to happen.”

One of those logistics meant confronting a fear that haunted her for years. As it is with all people with cerebral palsy, Elizabeth’s ability to live independently relies heavily on mobility. Half of people with cerebral palsy can learn to walk to some degree, often with the use of a cane or walker.

When she was 14, Elizabeth was using her specially equipped walker when her hand slipped and she fell.

“It knocked out a tooth and it was very bad,” she said. “So after that, I didn’t want to do anything with my walker. I was scared to death it would happen again.”

Walking, in and of itself, is not the goal. Rather, it is a step in attaining her goal, living the independent life all young women aspire to.

“About a year-and-a-half ago, I started working out at Fitness Factor with a trainer, Sarah Harlley. She’s gotten me to where I’m walking without the walker and taking big steps and big strides. I’m getting more independent in walking.”



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## RALPH SHAW

The day after Ralph Shaw graduated high school in May 1963, he went to work for a local plumbing company near his hometown of Ethelsville, Alabama.

He admits he didn't know the first thing about plumbing at the time, but had some skills that were of use.

"We were all farmers, so I didn't have any idea whatsoever what plumbing was all about," Shaw said. "But I did know how to dig ditches and tote pipe. I caught on pretty quick, though. In about a year-and-a-half I was plumbing houses."

Shaw is still a plumber, although he confesses that his son and business partner, Robbie, does most of the work. Shaw, 77, uses the excavator and does all the estimates on new jobs.

It's been a good life, Shaw says. His son seemed to think so, too. When Robbie graduated high school Ralph told him he wanted him to go to college. But after graduating with a business degree, Robbie asked his father if he could work for him.

"He's been with me since he graduated in 1990," Shaw said. Two of his grandsons work for him, too.

Sixty years of plumbing, including 52 years as owner of Ralph Shaw Plumbing, produces a reputation.

"I've got about 10 or 12 contractors I've worked with for years," Shaw said. "They call me for a job and don't even ask for an estimate. They know I'll give them a fair price and do good work."

He's also developed another reputation.

A reputation for kindness, one that began not long after he started his own company.

"I've always kind of had a soft spot for elderly

people, widows, people that really need help but maybe can't afford it," Shaw said. "I've never kept track of it, but I've helped out a lot of folks, going back years. To me, it just feels like the right thing to do sometimes."

While helping those in need comes naturally to Shaw, he learned years ago that not everyone sees it that way.

"Way back, I had this fellow from Kankakee, Illinois, who came to work for me," Shaw said. "We went out to this house where three elderly women were living. They had a faucet that was leaking pretty bad. So I got a faucet and put it in, made sure it was working right. When I started to leave, one of them got her purse and asked me how much she needed to pay. I told her not a penny. I was happy to do it."

"As we were driving down the road a while later, this fellow asked, 'Why did you do that?' I didn't know what he was talking about. I said, 'Do what?' He said, 'Put in that faucet for free.'

He said he couldn't believe it, that where he was from, people didn't do that. I just told him, 'Well, you're in the South now.'"

In recent years, Shaw has found another way to help.

"I've been working with the Habitat for Humanity there in Columbus," he said. "I've done the plumbing on their last two builds, over by the old Hunt High School. I really enjoy it. They're good people, fun to work with."

Shaw said helping others is his way of acknowledging his good fortune.

"When you know you've had it pretty good, it just seems natural to me that you help other folks who are in a bad way," Shaw said. "I've always believed that."



# ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

**E**lizabeth Williams is a veteran actor with Starkville Community Theater, having played her first role at age 8 in the play, “Jake’s Women.”

But when Williams, 44, stepped on the stage for the SCT’s production of “Every Brilliant Thing,” in August, the emotion she felt went beyond opening-night jitters.

“Terrified,” Williams said. “I was absolutely terrified.”

This role was like none of her previous characters. It wasn’t just that Williams held the stage alone in a one-woman performance, it was that the play also involved improvisation, with her character responding to queues solicited from the audience. There was also the serious theme of the play — mental health and suicide.

Daunting as it may have been, Williams realized she was drawn to the role.

“Sometimes a role just speaks to you,” she said. “That’s what happened when I read this script. Even though I was scared, it had a message that spoke to me.”

Williams played the role of a daughter trying to counsel her suicidal mother by making a list of all the things worth living for, a list the daughter begins in childhood and continues to expand into her adulthood.

Williams played the role for three performances to enthusiastic audiences. She hopes the message of the play resonated with the audience.

“It’s a really good message to present to peo-

ple,” Williams said. “There’s sadness, of course, but there is a lot about hope and growth. It’s a serious topic, but it’s something very good to talk about. So many people are affected by mental health issues and suicidal thoughts — friends, family members, even themselves. I was really happy about the conversations that came from it. I had people come up and say it was really good to hear this.”

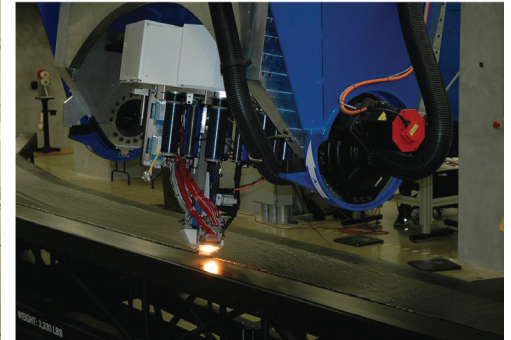
Williams is a program director of the Starkville Oktibbeha County School District’s Discovery Center, which provides an array of programs to help students and families overcome challenges.

She said her day job has made her a better actor.

“I think one of the things about my job is the diverse groups of people you meet and learning about their stories,” Williams said. “It helps me have better insight into the characters I play.”

Williams hopes her work with the SCT inspires others in another way.

“I think anybody that has any kind of interest in theater should give it a try,” she said. “There are a lot of back stage things you can do if you want to get familiar with theater before you jump into a role, but you don’t have to be experienced. This is what community theater is all about, really. If there is a play or part you are interested in, it’s definitely worth giving it a try. But even if you don’t want to be a part of a production, you can help by attending shows and supporting the theater that way.”



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Front row, from left, are Abbie Brownlee, Taneisha Malone, Kendal Klostermann and Missy Holliday; back row, from left, are Ann Marie Higgins, Rita Gregory, Teresa Barksdale, Jennifer Williams and Christy Jackson.

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Joe MacGown

## AN ARTIST IN RESIDENCY

ARTISTS TRAVEL TO STARKVILLE FOR INSPIRATION, ART SHOWS AND MORE

Just outside of Starkville, artist and entomologist Joe MacGown creates brightly colored and heavily detailed surrealist paintings focused on what he calls “subconscious meanderings.” When he creates art, he tends to follow what is natural, including insects, plants and the fossils under his feet.

But following what is natural goes beyond the studio for MacGown. A little over a year ago, he started a paid private artist in residence program at the MacGown Art Retreat and Studio. To him, it just made sense.

“Why are we doing it?” MacGown said. “I have no idea, ultimately. I just think it’s really cool to work with other artists. ... We’ve got the place. We’ve got some time. Why not? I think it’s cool, why not share it?”

Since August 2022, MacGown and his son Joseph – who also lives on site – have hosted five artists in a cabin on his property, each coming to stay in Starkville for two to four weeks. Each artist has worked in a different medium, from watercolor to cyanotypes to mural painting to poetry and acrylics.



Artist in residence Amy Webb paints at the MacGown Art Retreat and Studio in October.

The goal is for artists to be inspired by nature, push their creativity and learn about the business side of being an artist.

MacGown said the residency intentionally selects artists working with different mediums, but also in various stages in their careers. Some are more established, while others are newer to the business of art and have never had their own show.

“Everybody’s different,” MacGown said. “We want to bring in some people who will inspire others, and then we want others that we can inspire, potentially, and help out.”

Joseph Garland, the first artist in residence for the program, said staying with the MacGowns

for a few weeks in their “art garden” helped to open him up to going with the flow when it comes to artistic inspiration.

“That was when I started getting in touch with... stillness and nature,” Garland said. “Being out there was a wonderful opportunity. The whole challenge of being an artist is wanting to be alone but also wanting to be surrounded by like minded people, and that place felt like a meeting of the two.”

Following Garland’s stay, MacGown also hosted artists Karina Rovira, Julia Reyes, Zoe Ishee and Amy Webb.

Ishee, who is also a Mississippi State University student, said when she arrived at the residency



Joseph Garland paints at the MacGown Art Retreat and Studio.



Zoe Ishee paints at the MacGown Art Retreat and Studio.



Former artist in residence Julia Reyes painted a portion of the art gallery building on MacGown's property.

program, her art style was filled with influences from her work in graphic design. But her time at MARS opened her up to new mediums, including the magazines and collage materials that appear in her work today.

“I was apprehensive at first,” Ishee said. “... But after, it was the best experience I could ask for. I would encourage other artists to take up the offer, and the community to support the artists that are there. It’s a great opportunity for artists to make weird stuff.”

Besides encouraging the artists, MacGown

said the program also encourages art in the city through public receptions, live art demonstrations, workshops and other events. Artists also leave their mark on the city by leaving a piece of original artwork at MARS, with the goal to eventually fill the property with pieces to inspire future visitors and artists in residence.

MacGown said the residency is one of the only paid private residency programs in the state, which is only possible due to funding from the Del Rendon Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports music and art in the Golden

Triangle.

Andrew Rendon, one of the founders of the Del Rendon Foundation, said supporting the artist in residency program felt like the “next natural step” of the foundation’s evolution.

“The MacGowns are constantly trying to do things to raise the level of interest and activity and passion regarding art in this community,” Rendon said. “He saw it as an opportunity, we saw it as an opportunity, and we jumped on it as a perfect marriage.”

Rendon said the foundation also applied for a Mississippi Arts Commission Grant for about \$5,000 specifically dedicated to the program, which will go toward the artist in residency program to keep bringing more artists to the area over the next two years.

STORY BY **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**  
JOSEPH GARLAND **COURTESY PHOTO**  
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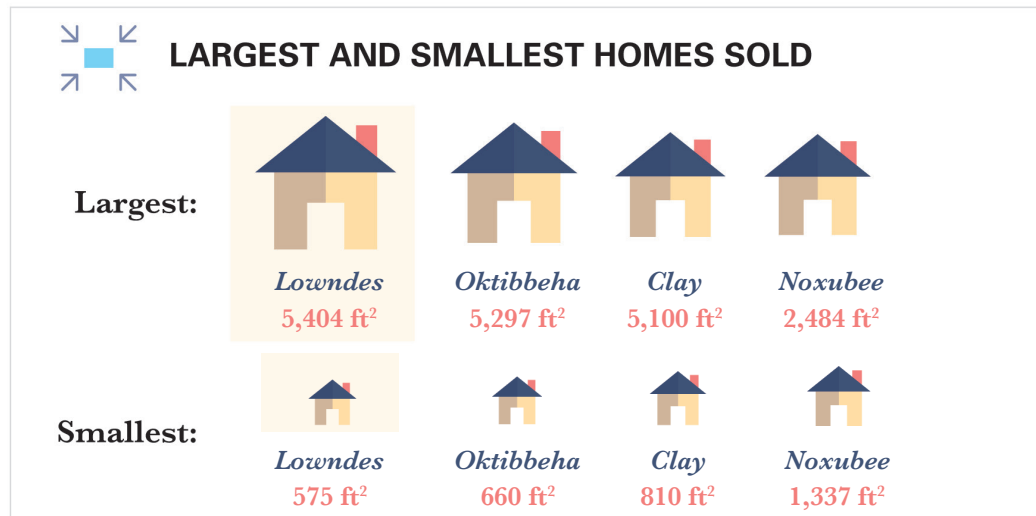
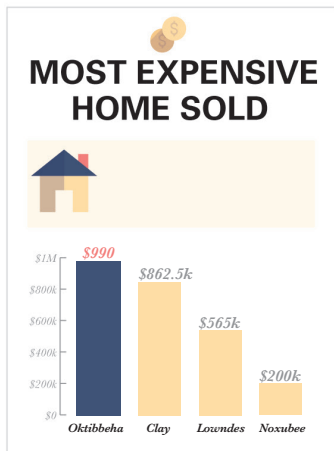
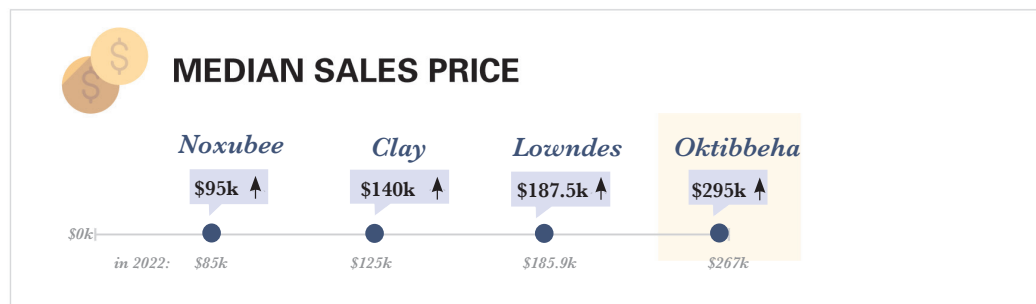
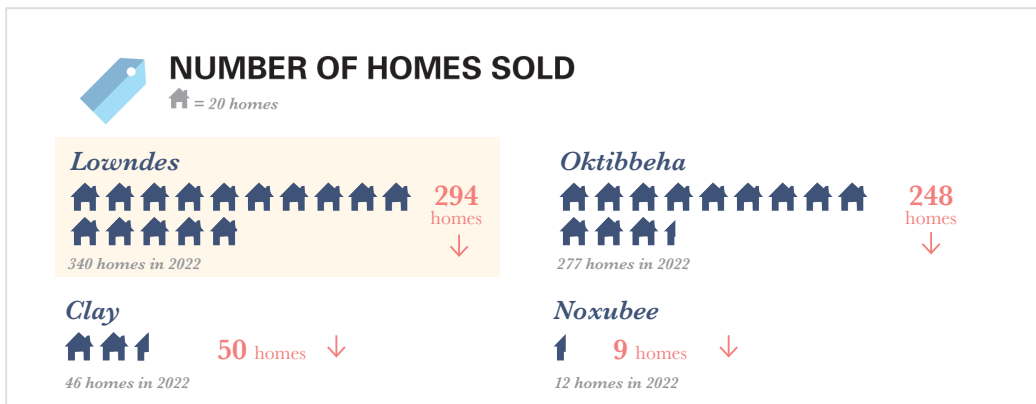
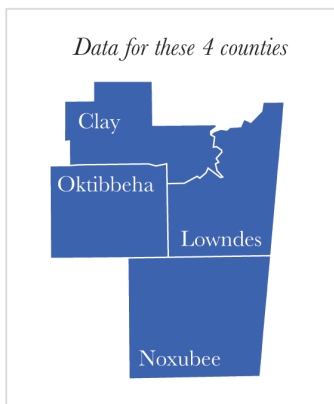
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# PLAYING WITH FLAVORS

STATE THEATRE BARTENDER KRISTEN GARRARD  
LIKES EXPERIMENTING WITH FLAVORS

In the middle of a rush at the bar at State Theatre, Kristen Garrard works from pure muscle memory. Garrard has been a bartender for the past three years, and prefers to work without measuring utensils as she makes her concoctions. The fun comes in the experimentation.

"I enjoy it, simply because it pushes me. It makes me ask, 'Can you do it?'" Garrard said. "I challenge myself. Somebody came in one day and asked if we have something banana and strawberry. And thankfully, thankfully, we carried Parrot Bay strawberry... and banana liqueur. So the banana liqueur and the strawberry, you can put that with sprite or lemonade and make variations on it. And that's what excites me. You never know what somebody actually likes."

Garrard said she loves all kinds of drinks, regardless of the liquor used.

"I love it," Garrard said. "It brings me joy. When I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do for my favorite drink... This guy walked in to check out the bar, and I asked him if I could make him something random. And I just started running with it and playing with it and making all kinds of different things.

"That's what makes me happy about this job. There are some nights where everybody wants a vodka and sprite or a vodka and cranberry, and then sometimes you get to go crazy and make things that are unique. ... It's so fun to see those reactions, because you never know what someone is going to like."

State Theatre is located at 213 E. Main Street in Starkville.

STORY BY **ABIIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**  
PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**

## Peach Blueberry Lemon Drop Martini

This twist on a Lemon Drop Martini adds light fruity flavors to the typical drink without creating an overly sweet or syrupy aftertaste, letting drinkers of any age enjoy a familiar lemon flavor. It is served in a chilled martini glass with a half sugar rim, with a blueberry and peach skewer on top.

1 oz. peach vodka (Western Sun)

1 oz. blueberry vodka (Western Sun)

½ oz. triple sec

¼ oz. simple syrup

2 oz. lemon juice

For skewer:

Blueberries

Peach slices

**Step 1:** Run a lemon over one half of the edge of a chilled martini glass. Dip in sugar, creating a rim.

**Step 2:** Combine all ingredients in a shaker. Fill shaker with ice and shake vigorously. Strain drink into martini glass.

**Step 3:** Skewer together two blueberries and a slice of peach. Lay across the edge of the glass and serve.

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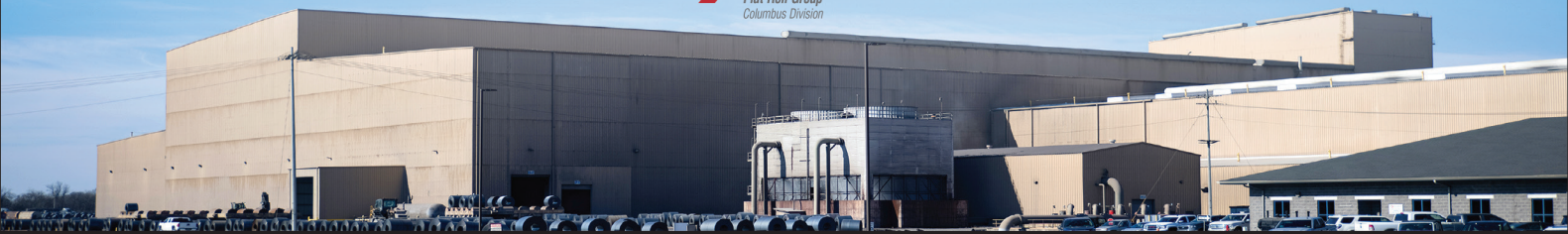
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# SETTING THE TABLE FOR SUCCESS

MUW'S CULINARY ARTS INSTITUTE  
OPENS NEW BUILDING

“**E**xperience is the best teacher.”  
“Move in the direction of your  
dreams.”

These fortunes weren't the kind third- and fourth-year W culinary students found when they cracked open their fortune cookies this semester in their World Cuisine class, although they certainly applied.

Instead, what the students found printed on slips of paper inside each cookie was a region of the world. “Italy,” one said. “France,” read another.

The fortunes were class assignments: Each small group was charged with the challenge of both teaching classmates about their assigned region and selecting and demonstrating three dishes from it, said Chef Instructor Mary Helen Hawkins.

The fortune cookies came at the end of a

meal prepared by W alum Nichole Cancellare, Hawkins said, a meal featuring traditional Japanese dishes. After learning about the culture and traditions of the region and watching Cancellare demonstrate techniques common to the region, students ate their meal together and discussed the details of its preparation. They perched atop tall stools surrounding a table centered in one of the two expansive prep kitchens housed in the new Culinary Arts building.

It's the kind of learning and teaching that has been more than a decade in the works.

## **SETTING THE TABLE**

Today, entering the new \$18 million Culinary Arts building on the campus of The W feels a bit like stepping into the foyer of a beautiful old home, albeit one with state-of-the-art furnishings and technology – not to mention 50,000 square



feet.

“This is our grand Southern staircase,” Culinary Arts Institute Director Tracee Watkins laughed as she climbed the open staircase leading from the foyer to the office space above.

The staircase isn’t the only thing grand about the new building, which opened to students this fall semester. It boasts two prep kitchens, each of which include expansive work stations, eight commercial ranges, a fryer, and a pasta cooker. In addition to these, the building offers both traditional and modular classrooms, a locker room for culinary arts students, a dining space that seats 100, walk-in refrigerators and freezers, a loading dock for fresh ingredients, and its own laundry facilities.

But one of its most-beloved features is a tiered demonstration kitchen.

“In our [former demonstration] kitchen in Shattuck [Hall], only about 20 students could watch the process, and only a few of those really could see up close,” remembered Chef Hawkins. “Now, the new kitchen seats 100, and all of them can see close-ups of what’s going on.”

The increased visibility of the demonstration comes courtesy of three large television screens, two mounted at the front of the room and one at the back. A collection of cameras allows students sitting on the top tier of the auditorium to view the food preparation just as well as those sitting on the front row.

“Some cameras focus in on the food preparation spaces and some on the entire kitchen,” said Watkins. “Chefs can control which cameras to use depending on what they need to show.”





Chef Instructor Mary Helen Hawkins stands in the Culinary Institute's demonstration kitchen.

After viewing a demonstration, students frequently put into practice what they have seen in labs, using one of the two prep kitchens or the baking kitchen.

“The bakery is completely self-contained,” Watkins said.

A fryer and refrigerator in the bakery supplement walk-in refrigerators and freezers located in the hallway. Spanning one wall are two commercial wall ovens with warming drawers in addition to three ovens that reach temperatures high enough for pizza and other specialty items.

To prep all that dough, a commercial stand mixer sits in one corner, a dough hook centered inside a bowl with a rim the circumference of a hula-hoop.

“It even has its own dish pit,” Watkins said. “There’s no reason to leave.”

Visible through a glass wall in the bakery sits the chocolate room. The room is temperature- and humidity-controlled for chocolate work but

does not yet have the tools necessary for it.

“It all comes down to being good stewards of the state’s money,” Watkins said. “We realized we couldn’t afford the equipment, but we have a space ready for it when a donor arrives.”

### **PREPARING THE MEAL**

These new spaces continue the mission that began in 1996 when The W became the first culinary arts program in Mississippi. The program remains the only one like it in the state.

Columbus native Rachel Harris says the program makes possible one of her lifelong dreams.

“My mom found a journal I had when I was in first grade,” she remembered. “In it, I’d written I wanted to be either a pilot or a chef. By the next year, I’d written only ‘chef’ as an option.”

Harris already has five years of catering experience and her own cake-making side hustle she named Rae-Rae’s Apron.

“In January of 2021, I opened an Instagram



Culinary Arts Institute Director Dr. Tracee Watkins stands in one of the school’s new instruction rooms.

page and posted photos of a bunch of baked goods I'd made," she said. "Then I posted videos showing how to do things. Now, I don't do videos, but I post photos of finished cakes I've made for customers."

The culinary program at The W made it possible for Harris to stay close to home but also pursue her degree. She also kept working for Harding Catering throughout college, a job she started as an internship through Lowndes Young Leaders while she was still a student at Caledonia High.

"I went to the demonstration kitchen in Shattuck and watched Chef Hawkins demonstrate [to Young Leaders] how much sugar is in different drinks," she said. "A few years later, I took a class from Chef Hawkins, and I sat in that same seat."

Harris will graduate with her B.S. in culinary arts in December, making her the first member of her family to earn a college degree.

### INVITING THE GUESTS

As students and staff alike settle into the new building, they look forward to hosting guests in the new space, as they did in Shattuck before.

"We are working toward having community events next spring," Watkins said. "We want our guests to be proud of what they see when they come here."

September's Town & Tower event – a quarterly meeting of MUW stakeholders – was held in the building so community members could see the facilities. That event was catered, as staff members are "working the kinks out of a very complex facility," said Watkins.





Students and members of the public attend a Hispanic Heritage Month event at the school in September.

In early October, the facility played host to an interdisciplinary group of students who presented information about chocolate as part of a campus-wide celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. Hawkins prepared chocolate tasting mats featuring chocolates with six different concentrations of cacao. Culinary arts student Erik Vazquez-Diaz presented each type of chocolate and its cacao percentage, Hawkins said.

Up next is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of The W's nursing program scheduled for November. For that event, Chef Hawkins and her students will provide desserts for more than 100 guests.

"They are in the recipe testing and planning stages now," said Watkins. "We have seats for 100 in our events space, so our guests may spill

out into the hallways as well."

And, of course, Watkins and other institute staff members continue to seek students who would thrive in the program.

"We are the only 4-year culinary arts degree in the state, but we get a lot of students from other states because the W does not charge out-of-state tuition," Watkins said.

"We believe in a high quality, low cost education...and that doesn't stop at a state line."

**STORY BY AMELIA PLAIR**

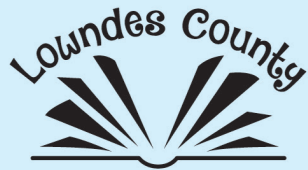
**HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH PHOTO**

**BY CHRIS JENKINS**

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**COVER PHOTO OF RACHEL HARRIS BY**

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**Name:** Stanley Ellis  
**Position:** Superintendent of Columbus Municipal School District  
**Years in education:** 22  
**Birthplace:** Shelby, Mississippi  
**Hobbies:** Spending time with family, reading, target practice, advocating for education

# MEET STANLEY ELLIS

**D**r. Stanley Ellis was hired as the superintendent of Columbus Municipal School District in May and started work in mid-June. Ellis sat down with Peter Imes for an interview in early October.

## **Tell me about where you grew up.**

I was originally born in the Mississippi Delta in Bolivar County. There was a little small hospital in Shelby, Mississippi. But I grew up in a place called Mound Bayou, Mississippi – Mound Bayou and Laurel, Mississippi is where I grew up. It was an agricultural type of environment. My grandparents – dad’s father and my mother’s father – were farmers, and my parents were educators, both. My grandparents just basically instilled the importance of getting a quality education.

## **What drew you to Columbus and Columbus Municipal School District in particular?**

I’ve been eyeing Columbus for probably nine or 10 years. I know that Columbus is a good place, a place that has potential. I’ve kind of been tracking superintendents that have been here since Del Phillips left. And since that time, it seems that it’s been a little unstable. When the job became available last year, I felt that I had the requisite skills, the background and the ability to move the district forward. So I did not apply for any other jobs this past year. This was the job

that was the best fit for me. Columbus has similar demographics to where I came from in Tunica – similar challenges academically – and I felt that this would be a good fit for me and my skill set.

## **How do you measure success in a school district?**

Well, success is measured with a lot of different data points. The state’s accountability rating is one of the major things that we measure, but I believe in measuring success over time. And here in our district, as far as academic success, we have four and a half week assessments and the nine weeks assessments. You have to look at a lot of different things, you have to look at the human capital that you have, you have to look at the teacher retention, that is a major issue that we’ve had. We’ve got a teacher mentoring program that we have that we are implementing. The mentors will get a stipend, and they have a certain amount of teachers that they’re able to mentor. And that is going to be on our board agenda for the October meeting.

I found that we have a revolving door with teacher retention. When you don’t have people to stay – just like with a leader or superintendent – then you’re not going to have any stability. So what we’re working on is making sure that we have stability. We met with all of the new teachers and employees to do a check in with them to see if there’s anything that we need to do better. As a leader, I don’t believe in bringing somebody



somewhere and not supporting them and checking in to make sure that they have the things that they need to be successful.

**The district maintained its C rating with the state accountability scores. How much of a focus is there – in the classroom – on those grades?**

Myself, as well as my assistant superintendents and the principals, make sure that we put a laser-like focus on accountability and understanding the strategies of utilizing the accountability system to get the points. An example: Some of

our students don't do well in ELA, lots of times, it's because we don't do well in writing. So that's a lot of points that are left on the table. And so we have those types of conversations with our principals. And principals have conversations with the teachers to make sure that they understand the strategies that are needed to do well on the state tests. But the most important thing is making sure that the students understand the data points. If the students don't understand what the goal is, then they're not going to do well.

**You're very near your first 100 days as superintendent of CMSD. How's it going so far?**

I am very satisfied with the progress that we've made. Of course, I've been getting acclimated to the community, meeting the movers and shakers in the community, those individuals that are gonna help to push the agenda to make CMSD greater than what it currently is. So the first 100 days has been good, I've been able to connect with a lot of the business and philanthropic community, the superintendent's roundtable with the students with the teachers, with the community has allowed me to connect in many ways, and to kind of spread out and touch some resources that I may not have been privy to. And so I'm understanding the culture and the climate of Columbus. I'm feeling a whole lot more comfortable than I did on day one.

**I think there is a desire in the broader community to help CMSD succeed. How can the broader public get involved in CMSD?**

We don't publicize the things that we do well, and so when you do those things, you show people that you are a worthy partner, and when people see that you are moving in the right direction, that you're reaching out. Part of what we're doing is rebranding our district, making sure that people know about the good things that we're doing. And when people see those types of things, I believe that that's going to open the door, and people are going to see that we are moving in the right direction, and that people are going to want to come in to work with us.

Otherwise, I've already reached out to EMCC, working to rebuild some of the relation-

ships that we've had with them in the past. I'm looking forward to building those relationships. I've been working with the president of the W several times, and we're working on some things to collaborate. As recently as last week, we've got a student that's going to be interning with Bill Russell Ford. Another thing is that we have a vocational program that we need to capitalize on. I know that the county is opening up a cosmetology program. So I'm going to be talking with them to see how we can collaborate, to blend some of those types of things that they have to extend to some of our students' options.

**I know you're busy running the district, but what do you like to do in your spare time? What are your hobbies?**

I like to spend time with my wife because she's not in Columbus. She's here maybe two days a week, working from home, and then she comes back on the weekends. But I like to spend time with my wife, my family. I've got a farm. So I like to spend time on the farm riding horses. I don't hunt, but I do a lot of target shooting with still targets. Flying my drone, reading, going out volunteering, helping other people. Those are some of the things that I really love to do. I'm looking for a church home here. I love my job. I feel like I am a professional football or baseball player. They just happen to get paid for something that they love. I never dread coming here each and every day. So I look forward to being here. I told him when I came I didn't plan on leaving, and I'm not. When I leave here, I'm going home to retire.

INTERVIEW BY **PETER IMES**  
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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# CASTING BULLDOGS

## STARKVILLE COMPANY FINDS DEMAND AMONG MSU FANS FOR CONCRETE STATUES

When Chris Pollan started Mississippi Decorative Concrete in 2014 to complement his promotional company, Pollan Promos, he wasn't sure which concrete statue would sell the most.

But he quickly discovered that out of every item on his shelves, the ones resembling the Mississippi State University mascot, Bully the Bulldog, became the most popular.

"We used to have bird baths and planters and all types of different variations of decorative concrete," Pollan said. "Eventually, we got to the point that a lot of it wasn't selling, and we noticed the Bulldogs were the number one seller."

Pollan said since he started the business, he and his team have easily sold thousands of bulldog statues, ranging from paw prints and 10-pound dog statues to 1,000-pound and even 5,000-pound bulldogs.

"We'd like to say that we can meet everybody's budget, but the prices really range from \$10 for the small dogs and up to \$6,000 for the 5,000-pound dog," Pollan said.

When the company started, Pollan said he used third-party concrete casters to make the dogs, ship them to his office at 506 Academy Road, and sell them there. In 2018, though, he decided to begin casting them himself.

The latex molds for the concrete are purchased from other vendors. Pollan turns the molds upside down and pours the concrete before placing the molds into a cast to settle.

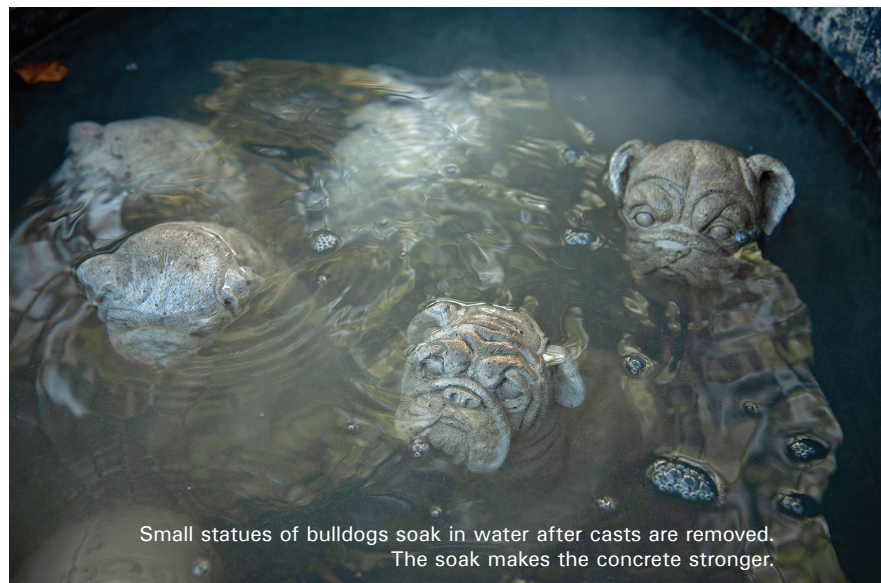
After 30 days of curing, the mold is peeled off the concrete, and – after a soak in a tub of water to help harden – the statue is ready to sell.

Pollan said most of his customers have been MSU fans and alumni looking to have their own bulldog at their homes and businesses. The statues can be seen all over Starkville, including Brewskis, Rosey Baby and Walk-On's Sports Bistreaux.

But Pollan's statues have made it much farther than Starkville city limits, and customers have come from several other states, such as Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee and Texas. Though Pollan does not ship the statues, he does allow out-of-state customers to order and pick them up at an agreed date.

"I mean, literally, we've had people from all around the world stop here," he said.

Over the years, Pollan said there have also been several interesting customers coming through the door. One MSU alumni bought several bulldogs for friends who let him stay at their



Small statues of bulldogs soak in water after casts are removed. The soak makes the concrete stronger.





A Mississippi State fan poses with a concrete statue of Bully outside of Walk-On's Sports Bistreaux.

house as he and his family traveled throughout the Southeast.

“As they were visiting with their classmates and friends and family, a lot of them wanted them to spend the night at their houses rather than being in a hotel,” he said. “When they left, they wrote a card and put a ribbon on the Bulldogs and left them with each person’s house that they stayed at.”

Pollan said there have also been several customers who have brought their pet’s ashes to be encased into a mold of the famous bulldog.

“We call those the memorial dogs,” he said. “Every bulldog owner that I’ve talked to over the years that saw that mold of the dog laying on the floor said their bulldog layed exactly like that. So some of the die-hard Bulldog owners, as the dogs have passed away over the years, they brought

the ashes to us. We’ve probably placed the ashes and maybe about six or eight dogs now.”

STORY BY **GRANT MCLAUGHLIN**

PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**



Chris Pollan removes a mold from a concrete statue.

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Cornerstone Park in Starkville.

#### AROUND THE TRIANGLE

## PLAY BALL!

### PARKS AND ROADS SEE PROGRESS

**I**t's a good time to be a baseball or softball fan in the Golden Triangle, with two long-awaited sports complexes coming to fruition. In Starkville, it's time to play ball at Cor-

nerstone Park. The facility boasts 12 baseball/softball fields arranged into three "quads," with each quad having its own restroom facilities. The project got underway in 2020, but was delayed

by the COVID-19 pandemic, inclement weather and supply chain problems.

Cornerstone hosted its first tournament in October.

In Lowndes County, county supervisors took the keys for the new eight-field complex on North Frontage Road, off of Highway 82, in the western end of the county. The first phase also includes a playground, picnic tables and restroom/concession stands.

The county has twice tried to get Department of Defense grants for a second phase that would include a multi-purpose building that incorporates a storm shelter, but was unsuccessful. Efforts are continuing to come up with a funding source.

## COLUMBUS AND LOWNDES COUNTY

In non-recreation developments, Columbus and Lowndes County are collaborating on two grants affecting the Central Business District.

Firstly, the board of supervisors applied on the city's behalf for a state grant to improve Fifth Street North between Fifth Avenue North and the Highway 82 interchange at Ninth Avenue North. The roadway will be upgraded to make it more pedestrian friendly, including adding islands in the middle of the road and sidewalks.

Secondly, the county ponied up about a third of the matching money needed to help the city pursue a Mississippi Main Street grant that would add both better wayfinding downtown and change traffic flow at the Fifth and Main intersection. It also includes pedestrian-friendly upgrades to sidewalks and curbs at Fifth and Main and Fifth and Second Avenue North.

Lowndes County Coroner Greg Merchant's office completed its move into its new home over the summer. After spending years under a leaky



Playground and field at Lowndes County Sportsplex



Softball fields at Propst Park

roof at the former Maxxim Medical building off of Yorkville Park Square, the office is now in one of the former Ecolab buildings on Lehmborg Road.

On the economic development front, Lowndes

des County is in the early stages of establishing another megasite. Due diligence work is underway to acquire 1,500 acres north of Highway 82 near Elm Lake for industrial development. The Golden Triangle already has four megasites, which are home to Steel Dynamics, Aluminum Dynamics and Paccar in Lowndes County and Yokohama Tire in Clay County.

### **STARKVILLE AND OKTIBBEHA COUNTY**

In Starkville one of the most visible pieces of development is the torn-up pavement downtown. Work is underway on a project to upgrade water and sewer on Main Street. Starkville Utilities is replacing 4-, 6- and 10-inch water lines with 12-inch lines, and work is progressing on or even a little ahead of schedule. Work should be com-

plete in February, at which point sidewalks and lighting upgrades will begin.

The city is working to get state funding to improve pedestrian access and add bike lanes to an area of Spring Street, from Highway 12 to Russell Street.

Officials are also waiting to hear if a portion of Highway 182 will be deeded to the city. The city wants about a mile of the state highway between Old West Point Road and Beattie Street so it can install water, sewer and drainage infrastructure underneath the roadway, which state highway guidelines do not allow. The move would save the city millions on a planned revitalization project.

Meanwhile, Oktibbeha County is closing out major road projects on Oktoc Road and Ma-ben-Sturgis Road that were funded with state



Freshly patched Main Street from utility work.



Cornerstone Park playground and field in Starkville.

appropriations.

The supervisors are also working to get matching funds for about \$3 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to extend sewer service to unincorporated communities in the southern part of the county.

Also in Starkville, the Needmore Community Center in George Evans Park has been torn down. The dilapidated building will be replaced with a 3,000-square-foot enclosed pavilion designed to be used as an event space. Construction time is estimated at between 12 and 18 months.



Construction at Needmore Community Center in Starkville.

## **WEST POINT AND CLAY COUNTY**

Clay County has been awarded a federal grant to make the courthouse more compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Some of the money will go towards improving bathrooms, door entrances and service counters, but the lion's share of the money will add a drive-through lane. It will be located on the south side of the building, where Courtroom #2 is now.

The county is also working to secure funding for a new emergency operations center to be located in a building on West Church Hill Road. Formerly owned by the city of West Point, the supervisors swapped a county-owned building at 1252 East Broad Street for it.

In other city/county cooperation news, both entities pitched in \$250,000 towards matching

funds for an Appalachian Regional Commission grant that will expand sewer service in the area of the old Sara Lee facility, where Peco Foods is currently located.

West Point is seeing a spurt of economic development, with ground broken on a new Zaxby's on Highway 45. A T-Mobile store is also set to locate nearby, and the Love's Truck Stop has acquired several acres behind the Burger King for a planned expansion.

Finally, West Point Main Street is using a state grant to tear down and rebuild the old gazebo in Sally Kate Winters Park. The original structure was built in the 1980s and is in poor repair. It will be rebuilt with a more durable structure, and drainage issues that plague the site will be corrected as part of the project.



Gazebo at Sally Kate Winters Memorial Park in West Point

## **MACON AND NOXUBEE COUNTY**

North Carolina-based Huber Engineered Woods, which manufactures wood panels, is investing over \$400 million to build a mill in Noxubee County. It will be located on 551 acres north of Shuqualak, off of Highway 45 North. Construction is slated to start in the third quarter of 2023 and end in late 2025.

It will create about 160 jobs.

The city of Macon has landed several state and federal grants to build a new hangar at Ma-

con Municipal Airport. It has an estimated price tag of \$1 million, and will consider of a single structure that includes four T-hangars. Construction is expected to get underway next year.

Macon also received an Appalachian Regional Commission grant to improve sewer lines on the east side of town. It will affect sewer lines along the entire east side of town.

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



Jason Schrock takes off from Macon Municipal Airport.



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