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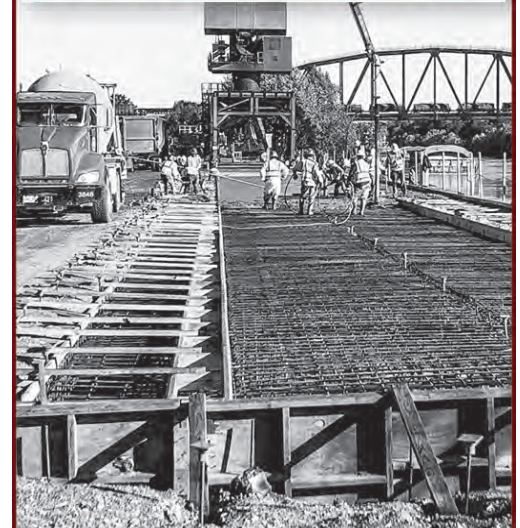
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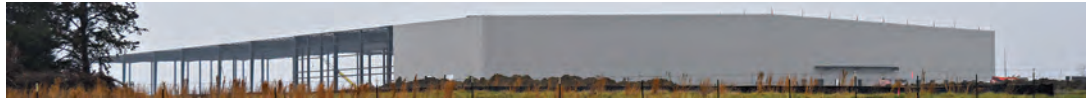
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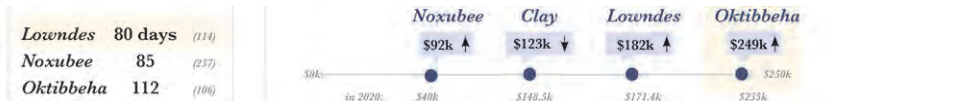
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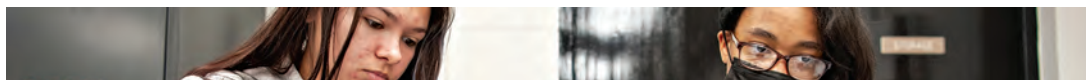
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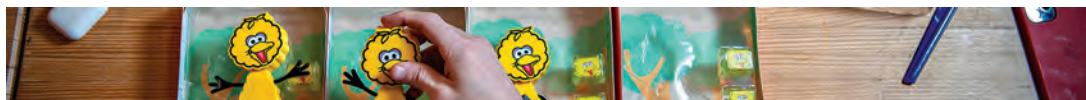
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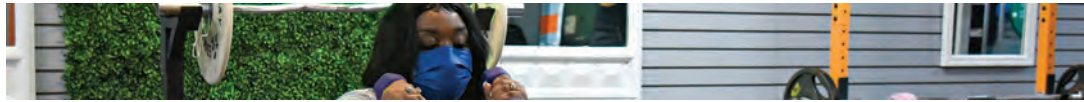
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# MULTIPLE MAJOR RECREATION PROJECTS ON THE TABLE

## ROADS AND INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS COMPLETED, PLANNED THROUGH COUNTY

Infrastructure, especially water and sewer, are emerging as the top priorities for Lowndes County and the City of Columbus as they assess how best to spend the millions of dollars in federal pandemic relief funds they have received. Thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act, Lowndes County got about \$11 million and Columbus received about \$5 million.

The Lowndes County Board of Supervisors has partnered with the Horne Group to oversee spending, and has been receiving proposals from rural water associations, among other entities, asking for a piece of the pie. “Hard infrastructure” projects will be prioritized, because the state legislature has said it will match those costs dollar-for-dollar.

Outside water and sewer, county leaders will do an assessment of county buildings to see what needs they have. About a quarter of the money

may be spent on “soft” projects, as well, but no decisions have been made.

The city, which has partnered with Waggoner Engineering, is looking to spend a large part of its money on addressing drainage, water and sewer issues throughout the city, as well as remediating the backlog of blighted property. Waggoner also has proposed a far-ranging plan that would address social inequality, access to transportation and law enforcement issues.

About \$1.3 million of the city’s funding has been earmarked for premium pay for city employees.

Money must be obligated by the end of 2024 and spent by the end of 2026.

### **ROAD WORK**

The county is in the midst of a \$5 million road plan targeting its most heavily traveled roads.

When all is said and done, about 58 miles of roads will be improved. Work for the project was bid out and some work done last year, but then was put on hold due to unfavorable winter weather conditions. Paving to complete the project is already underway.

The bond will be repaid with the county's allotment of state use tax proceeds.

The city, on the other hand, recently finished its own \$5 million paving plan. The paving and striping is done, and the final boxes are being checked to complete the project. The city had a few hundred thousand dollars left over, and planning is underway to put those unexpended funds to use.

#### **FACELIFT FOR FIFTH STREET**

The city has received a Mississippi Depart-

ment of Transportation Transportation Alternatives Program grant to give the stretch of Fifth Street between the Magnolia Bowl and the bypass a facelift. The intent is to make it more friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as slowing the traffic flow.

Lanes will be added for bikes and pedestrians, and islands will be installed in the middle of the road, so that walkers will only have to cross one lane at a time.

The project has an estimated cost of around \$1.4 million, with the city's contribution coming to around \$300,000 once matching funds and design are accounted for. Planning and design will likely take about a year, with the project hopefully going to bid in about a year.

MDOT has told the city the grant may be in jeopardy due to the city's late audit report.

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## RECREATION

Both city and county are working through plans to revitalize recreation offerings. For the city, this means a study looking at Propst Park. The 100-acre site in East Columbus currently offers baseball, softball and T-ball fields, as well as disc golf and the Field of Dreams for special needs children. A draft proposal would add more ball fields, access to the Luxapalila Creek, reroute roads to eliminate speeding and walking/jogging tracks, as well as pickleball.

The county has bought a parcel of land west of the river that it hopes to build a sports complex on. Although original concept drawings had a hefty \$20 million price tag, the board of supervisors is looking at spending in the \$7 million range. Some



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A new FedEx distribution center is currently under construction.

pieces may be put out to bid soon to get a better idea of the price.

The end is also in sight for construction of the equestrian park on Tom Rose Road. A concession area and bathrooms is the last outstanding piece of the project, and bids are being reviewed by the board of supervisors. The multi-part project was greenlit in 2018, and an arena and space for the Mississippi State Extension Service and the county's 4H program have all been completed.

#### **INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT**

On the industry front, ground was recent-

ly broken for a FedEx distribution center on Charleigh Ford Drive. The 217,000-square-foot facility is expected to generate nearly \$500,000 in tax revenue yearly and provide close to 200 jobs.

The Golden Triangle Development Link said that although record-high construction costs have shot down a number of potential projects, there continues to be strong interest in the area for solar farms and data centers, due largely to the vast amount of electrical infrastructure present in the Golden Triangle.

One area of heightened interest is medical marijuana grow houses, processing plants and dispensaries. However, it is still not clear if the



2018 Wings Over Columbus Air Show

Tennessee Valley Authority will allow power cooperatives and municipal utilities to serve power to the industry.

#### **COLUMBUS AIR FORCE BASE**

As of press time CAFB planned to hold the Wings Over Columbus Air Show and STEM Expo March 26-27, with an appearance by the United States Air Force Thunderbirds. The Thunderbirds last performed at CAFB in 2018, and this year's appearance honored the 75th anniversary of the Air Force and the Thunderbirds' 69th year in service.

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**

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# \$30 MILLION RETAIL PROJECT AIMS TO BE COMPLETED IN FALL

## SCHOOL SYSTEM ADDRESSES STUDENTS' OVERALL WELL-BEING

**E**conomic development is well underway in the city of Starkville. Oktibbeha County is taking the next steps in improving the Oktibbeha County Lake Dam, while Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District has implemented changes to help the overall well-being of its students.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN STARKVILLE**

A new shopping center is underway in Starkville. Triangle Crossing, a 95,000-square-foot retail and grocery center, is being developed by Tennessee-based Rise Partners and Starkville developer Mark Castleberry of Castle Properties at the old Garan Manufacturing site, at the intersection of Highway 12 and Industrial Park Road. Construction began in October with expected completion being fall 2022.

Stores within Triangle Crossing will include Marshalls, Ulta Beauty Supply, Five Below, Rack Room Shoes, PetSmart, Sport Clips, Aspen Dental and Aldi Grocery. The project will cost \$30 million to construct. Construction has generated 120 construction jobs. The shopping center will employ approximately 200 people, generating an estimated \$35 million in annual retail sales.

The city of Starkville is moving forward with the redevelopment of Main Street in downtown. The Starkville Board of Aldermen approved a contract with North Carolina-based engineering consulting firm Kimley Horn to redesign Main Street to become more pedestrian friendly. The redesign will include eliminating the streets' turning lanes, while extending the side walks to give the street more outdoor seating and allowing businesses to expand.

The redevelopment is in its early stages with



Kimley Horn recently beginning the first stages of planning. After the firm completes a traffic study and survey and compares Starkville to other cities that have created similar streetscapes, it will work with the board on how to move forward with construction.

### **COUNTY INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS**

Poor House Road could see repavement in the coming months. Oktibbeha County has discussed repaving Poor House Road for several years. The Board of Supervisors accepted a bid in February for \$1,595,441.79 to redo this road. While no timeline has officially been set, construction could begin in the coming months.

The board of supervisors is also moving forward with improvements to the Oktibbeha County Lake Dam. After several decades of issues, the dam purportedly fell into imminent failure in January 2020. The lake was drained and has sat virtually empty since.

The board hired Flowood-based Pickering Firm, a member of the Mississippi Engineering Group, in summer 2021 to complete an evaluation on the status of the dam. The study consisted of a geotechnical study, looking at different areas throughout the dam's core. The county is

awaiting final results of the evaluation.

### **AMERICAN RESCUE ACT PLAN**

The city of Starkville received \$6.3 million in American Rescue Act Plan funds, an economic stimulus package funded by the federal government to aid local governments in COVID-19 relief.

The city allocated the majority of its funds in September to dedicate \$5.5 million to improvements to all city parks and two additional baseball fields to Cornerstone Park, the city's new baseball/softball recreation complex. The Mississippi legislature is in the process of creating a matching program for ARPA dollars for projects involving water, sewer, infrastructure and broadband. Due to this, Mayor Lynn Spruill said she wants the city to receive as much funding for projects as possible, prompting the Starkville board of aldermen to reconsider its project allocation.

The board approved an expansion of allowable expenditures for various projects throughout the city. Some of these projects include the redesign of Main Street and the city's BUILD grant Highway 182 infrastructure development, a project which would make the highway more pedestrian-friendly, while increasing broadband

access and improving infrastructure and storm-water drainage through a \$12.66 million federal grant funded by U.S. Department of Transportation's Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development Transportation Discretionary Grant program.

The Oktibbeha County Board of Supervisors voted to allocate its roughly \$9 million in ARPA funds to the improvement of the Oktibbeha County lake dam. While an official estimated cost of improvements has not yet been given, the board voted to allocate its funds to fix the dam, whether that be \$2 million or \$10 million. If any ARPA money remains after the cost estimate, the county will discuss other projects to fund.

### **COUNTY COURT**

Due to Oktibbeha County having a popula-

tion of over 50,000 people according to the 2020 census, it must create a new court system. Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves approved the creation of a county court in Oktibbeha County in January. County court is a midway court between justice and circuit courts with a jurisdiction of \$200,000.

Three candidates have qualified to run for county court judge, and the general election will be in November. Once a judge is chosen, Circuit Clerk Tony Rook said he sees the county court officially starting in the months following.

### **SOCSD UPDATES**

The Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District is officially moving to a modified calendar, beginning for the 2022-2023 school year. This decision came after nearly a year of discussion and one attempt to make the switch.



SOCSD administration worked with stakeholders and community members to make the calendar happen.

The proposed schedule includes a shorter summer break but longer breaks during the fall, winter and spring. Along with break changes, the modified calendar will offer intersession courses to interested students. These courses range from culinary arts to robotics to aviation, allowing students the opportunity to learn skills that are not necessarily taught in the classroom.

The SOCSD board of trustees has a new member. Cassandra Palmer, a former executive PTO president, beat incumbent John Brown in November for the county-elected position on the board. Palmer assumed her role in January as one of the two board members chosen by voters

who live outside the Starkville city limits.

The Ward Building at Henderson Ward Elementary School is receiving improvements throughout the entire facility. Through the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District's facility revocation campaign, Building for Excellence, the district plans to make improvements to every school districtwide, beginning with HWS. Renovations include new roofing and HVAC systems, LED lights throughout the building, acoustical ceilings, energy efficient thermal windows with new flooring and new technology.

STORY BY **TYLER B. JONES**

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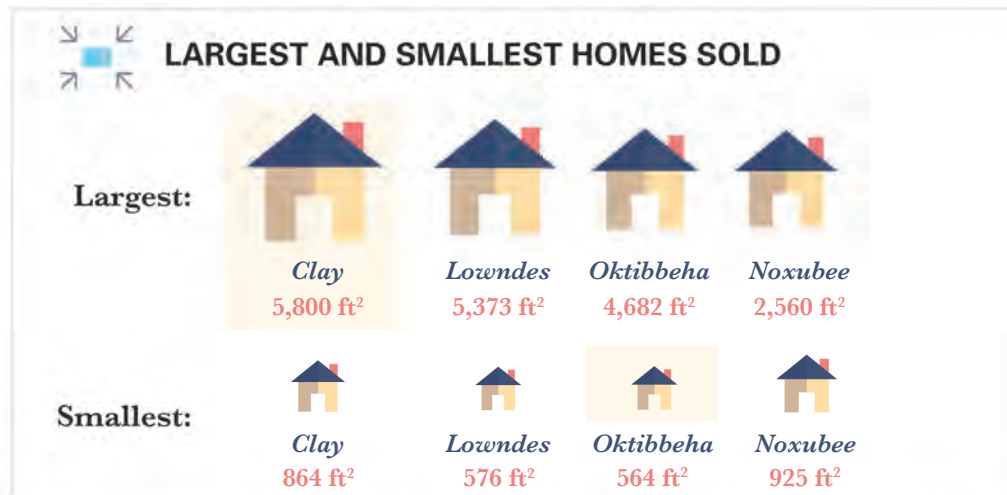
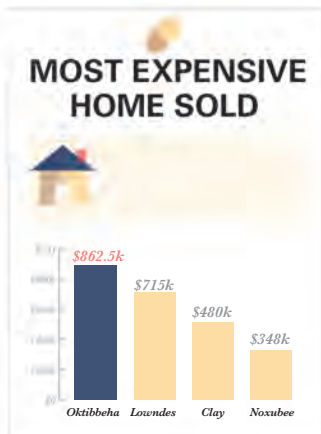
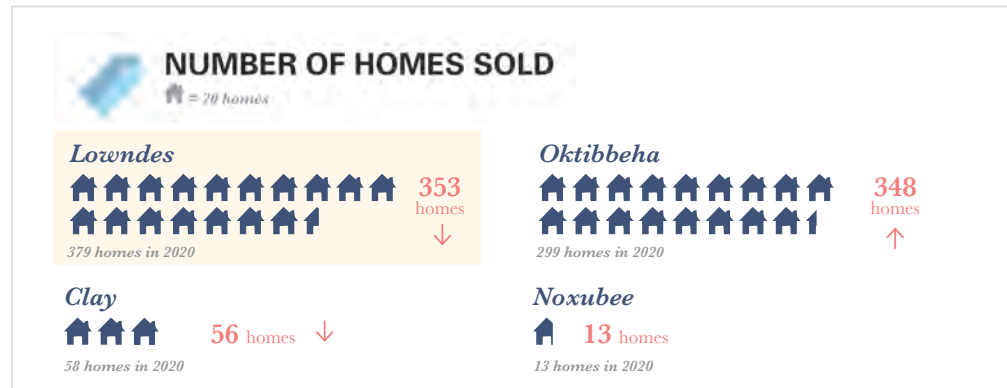
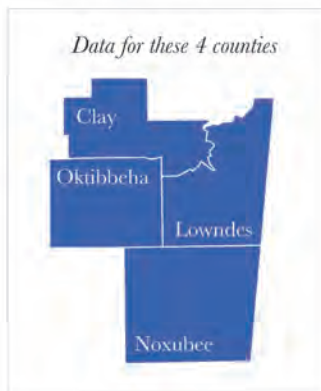


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Owner Doug Pellum stands behind the bar at Zachary's.

## STICKING IT OUT

DESPITE FIRE, PANDEMIC, RESTAURANT OWNER EXPANDS FOOD, EVENT SERVICES

Sometimes, a man fits his time and place. At the right moment, he brings to the fore his most necessary qualities.

In a time of great challenges, Doug Pellum, owner of Zachary's, located at 205 Fifth St. N., saw his business destroyed by fire and closed by COVID-19 within a year. Through it all, he has not just persevered, but prospered and expanded.

His business empire now includes the original restaurant, the former Elbow Room and, soon, the old Rollins-Crigler location directly behind and down the Second Avenue hill from Zachary's.

Pellum also made a name for himself as a tireless fundraiser for good causes, whether helping the Humane Society or helping people in need

pay for funeral expenses.

### **ZACHARY'S BEGINNING**

It very nearly didn't happen that way, though. Zachary's opened 21 years ago in the shopping complex at 507 18th Ave. N., in the space where CJ's Pizza is now.

"We opened in May," Pellum said. "You remember what happened in September. That day we didn't have a single customer. Everybody started saving their money. There were gas lines. People weren't going out to eat. It was really tough."

After a very challenging first year, Pellum relocated to the corner of Fifth Street and Second Avenue. He wasn't the first restaurant owner to give that location a try — previous establishments include Roy's Kitchen, Michael Boland's and Chucky's Diner.

"When we started out, we would run maybe four people at lunch," he said. "Now we run 26."

Zachary's became a downtown staple, developing a reputation not just for food and a bar but also for charity work, hosting benefits for everyone from the Humane Society to high school

robotics teams.

Then Zachary's burned.

### **RISING FROM THE ASHES**

On Apr. 28, 2019, Pellum was at home and got a strange phone call.

"A lady called and said she'd just been by (Zachary's) and asked if I was the owner," he said. "I don't know how she even got my number. Then Rhonda Sanders (at that time an officer with the Columbus Police Department) called me and told me I needed to get up here. It was bad."

The cord for an air conditioning wall unit in the kitchen started the fire. The building was a total loss.

"The only thing left was the outside brick walls," he said. "The fire never made it out of the kitchen, but there was smoke and water damage everywhere."

Zachary's would be closed for nearly five months. Pellum kept his employees — 50 or so at that time — on payroll while the restaurant was rebuilt.

"Our employees had been our backbone for



Rollins-Crigler Building

18 years,” he said. “We couldn’t open without them. If I didn’t keep them on payroll, they would end up at other restaurants and, as good as they were, they might not come back.”

Pellum used his staff both to help with the building and to continue the restaurant’s mission of charity work.

“We went out and did community service everywhere from the Dream Center to the YMCA to Loaves and Fishes and the Humane Society,” he said. “They also helped as part of the demolition, pulling stuff out and cleaning what we could save. They did everything they could to help get it back going again.”

In the end, the vast majority of the employees — Pellum estimated 80 percent — stuck it out.

The community also turned out in droves to help. Local restaurants fed Pellum’s crew. Long-time customers showed up with their grills to cook. Charging stations for workers’ cell phones were donated. A benefit, held at the Trotter Convention Center, raised enough money to cover payroll for about three weeks.

“You never want to be on the receiving end (of charity), you never want to be in that situation,” Pellum said. “It was a blessing to see how much the community cared. It was just totally different. Everybody jumped in ... it was crazy.”

### **TURNING TRAGEDY TO OPPORTUNITY**

Pellum turned the tragedy into opportunity, expanding the restaurant to add kitchen space and more seating, eventually adding about 1,500 square feet to the original 4,000 or so. He also built a deck on the Second Avenue side of the building to serve as a smoking section.

Shortly before reopening, Pellum bought the Elbow Room. The dive bar, located at 418 Sec-

ond Ave. N., became an event space.

“I was turning down parties every week just because I didn’t have space for 25-30 people,” he said. “I decided to use (the Elbow Room) as an event tavern, rent-your-own bar. It was booked five or nights a week. It was booming. At least until COVID-19 hit.”

### **REINVENTING DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Zachary’s was one of the first restaurants to close at the outset of the pandemic, shutting its doors even before then-Mayor Robert Smith’s shutdown order. This time Pellum was unable to keep paying his people.

“We just couldn’t do it,” he said. “We didn’t know how long we would be closed, if we would be shut down forever. Nobody knew anything.”

Zachary’s reopened June 6, 2020, on a to-go basis. Pellum tried everything from to-go daiquiris to ice cream and cotton candy to keep the doors open. And it worked — the Zachary’s daiquiri became a ubiquitous sight during that first pandemic summer.

The restaurant soon was able to open at 50 percent capacity, but the closure was a shot in the arm for the to-go business, so much so that Pellum built a dedicated to-go window on the north side of the building.

“We would have loved to have a drive-through, but there was just no place to put it,” he said.

The Elbow Room’s brief life as an event space was over, though, crippled by COVID-19. Pellum is reinventing it again, this time as a speakeasy.

“I wanted to get a liquor license, because we were letting people bring their own in, so I was losing money there,” he said. “I put a kitchen in,



Zachary's, pictured from Second Avenue North.

did all the necessary things to get a liquor license and a food license.”

The space will be reservation only, serving curated dinners and higher-end liquor and wine with a capacity of about 40 people.

“I see it as a special occasion type thing, you come in and you’re there for several hours,” he said. “It’s the total opposite of (Zachary’s), so I won’t be competing with myself.”

Pellum said there is no firm timeline for opening.

“I’m just taking it day-by-day,” he said. “It’s not a situation where I’ve got to open to pay my bills, and if I’m going to do it, I want to do it right.”

### **ONGOING EXPANSION**

With business “better than ever” and setting records at Zachary’s, Pellum is again looking to expand, this time into the old Rollins-Crigler building. Owned by the city since 2013, it has sat largely unused.

Pellum said while he has concrete plans in mind for the building, he didn’t want to talk about them.

“We want to make it a surprise,” he said.

### **CONTINUING CHARITY WORK**

In the meantime, Pellum continues his charity work alongside running the restaurant.

“Without a doubt we’re having more people come to us since COVID,” he said. “We’re seeing people who can’t pay their medical bills and rent; people who can’t afford funeral expenses. It’s made us reform our thinking on what events we’re going to do and who we’re going to help.”

In 2019, Pellum’s fundraisers were all for organizations: a robotics team, the Humane Society, a baseball team, the Columbus Arts Council and Main Street Columbus. In 2021, it’s a different story.

“We did six last year,” he said. “One was for Fish and Blues, which burned. The other five were medical or for families of people who had died. It’s hard to say yes or no to this particular event, but we try our best to put medical and funeral requests first.

“It’s just the right thing to do,” he said. “People bless you, so you turn around and help them.”

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**

PHOTOS BY **NICOLE BOWMAN-LAYTON**



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From 2005 to 2008, he was a physician at West Point Medical Clinic. From 2008 to 2021, Dr. Story cared for students, athletes, faculty and staff as part of University Health Services at Mississippi State. He rejoined North Mississippi Health Services in 2022 to establish the Starkville Medical Clinic.

He is a native of Slidell, Louisiana, and has three children. Early in his career, Story served as a missionary in Colombia and Costa Rica. He enjoys singing, writing original music, sports, hunting and golfing.

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HAIRSTYLISTS SHARE SOME OF THE FUNNIER  
REQUESTS THEY'VE RECEIVED

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MURPHY

**Amber Scott****Amber Scott Styles, Columbus**

“ A new client came in with super dark brown (almost black) virgin hair. They wanted to go platinum blonde. That’s my specialty, so no problem. I can do it.

They said they wanted a cut too, but wasn’t sure what they wanted. They requested that I color it first. Their hair was shoulder length with an undercut (shaved underneath — common for people with thick hair). I spent hours and almost an entire container of lightener, to get their hair white blonde. It was beautiful; we were both very pleased.

Then it was time for the cut. They wanted a super short pixie cut. Not only did they have me spend hours bleaching it out, but at the time, I also charged a \$150 base price, plus \$20 per extra bowl of product needed to accommodate their hair. I used at least four extra bowls of product. They paid me \$200+ for a service that could have taken less than half the time and product to achieve.

They still come to me, two years later.



## Laisha Neal

She-She's Hair Salon, Columbus

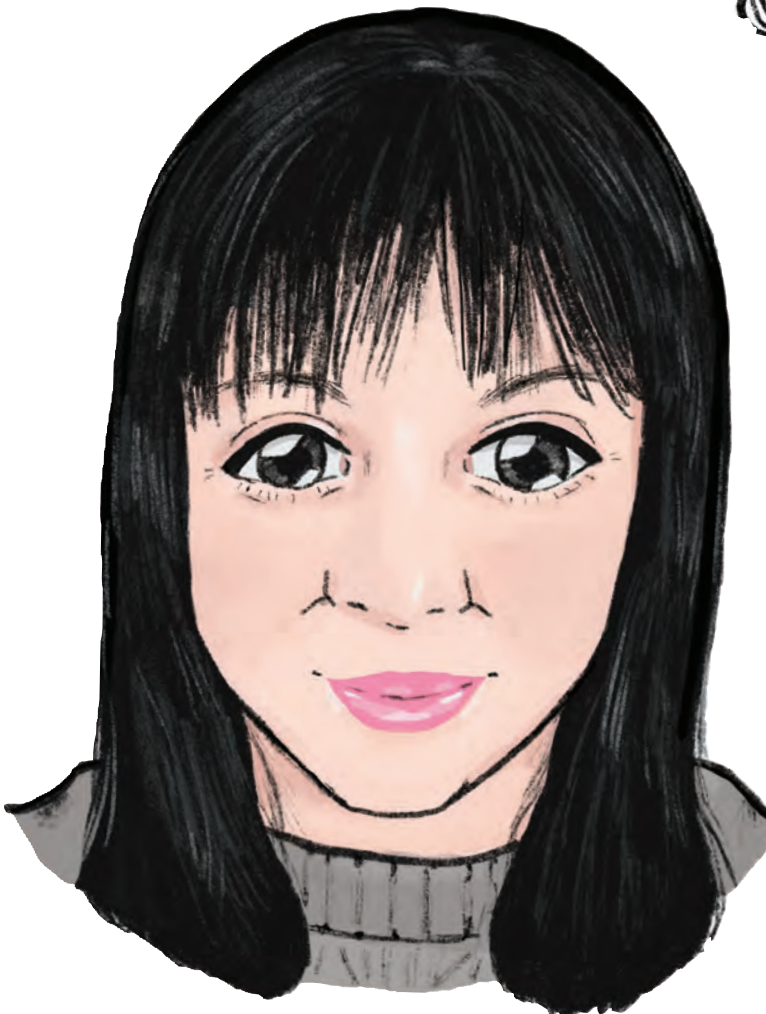
“ I have two stories. A client once requested that I use a flat iron to smooth out her Maltese puppy's wavy hair. I told her I couldn't do it. Another time, a husband called and requested that his wife's hair be styled like his girlfriend's. He sent me a text message with a picture of the girlfriend's hairstyle. I styled it the way the wife wanted it.

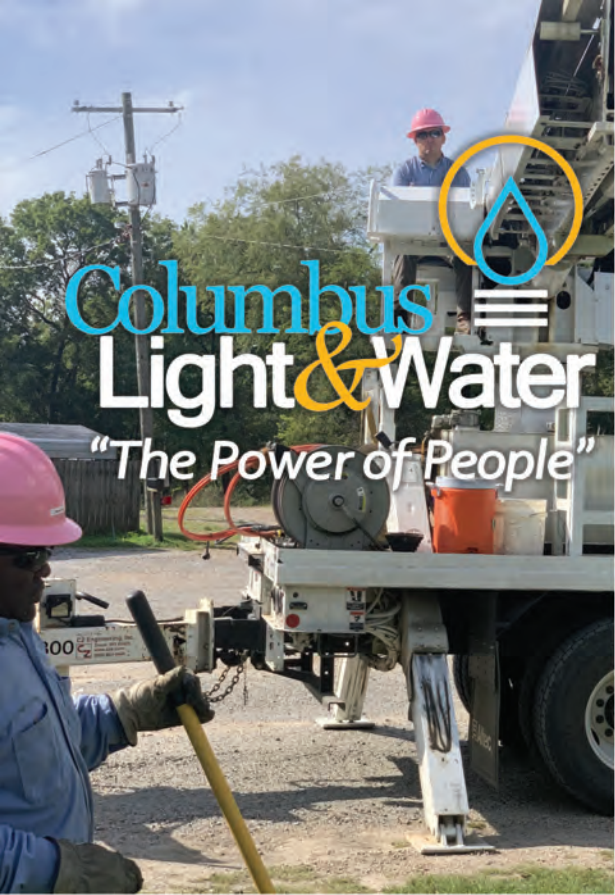


## Angie Carnathan

Tokros Salon in Starkville

“ Once, I had a college-aged guy who came in and requested I give him a terrible mullet. He wanted it to look as awful as possible so he could play a trick on his girlfriend. His hair was pretty long, and he had me cut it super short on the top and sides and leave the back long. Typically I would never willingly give someone a terrible haircut! I made him promise me he would come back and get it fixed as soon as the joke was over and to tell NO ONE that I cut it like that! The joke was on him though. His girlfriend was one step ahead of him and pretended to love it! He did as I asked, though, and showed up to let me give him a good cut a few days later. Thank goodness!







## Junior Auxiliary

of Columbus was founded on the principles of helping children, with a strong emphasis on ensuring their basic human needs are being met. JA of Columbus is proud to offer several projects that center around this core mission, as well as many others that focus on healthy lifestyles, anti-bullying and empowering children with disabilities. It is through the donations and support of our local community that JA of Columbus is able to provide these projects year after year in service to the children of Lowndes County.




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## SEVEN YEARS IN, GTECHS OFFERS UNIQUE HYBRID LEARNING

HOUSED AT EMCC, THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH  
SCHOOL ALLOWS STUDENTS TO EARN  
ASSOCIATE DEGREES

Three freshmen sit around a table, each with a petri dish in front of them. Clear liquid with blue markings fills the dishes. To an outsider, it could have been an art class.

“This is something we’re learning in biology right now,” said Landry Dean of West Point. “DNA fingerprint stuff.”

“We’re learning how crime scene stuff is being analyzed, like matching blood types,” Alaila Randle added.

Looking over them, a banner on the wall spreads messages of inclusion and acceptance — “Science is Real, Black Lives Matter, No Human is Illegal, Love is Love, Women’s Rights are Human Rights and Kindness is Everything.” That might as well be the collective motto of their school, Golden Triangle Early College High School.

GTECHS, in its seventh year on the Golden Triangle Campus of East Mississippi Community College, allows students to earn a high school diploma and an associate’s degree at the same time.

Class sizes of 15 to 20 students make for personal attention, and a small staff — four full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, a counselor, a secretary and the principal — means everyone really does know everyone else.

EMCC instructors teach college-level courses. During the first two years, they come to GTECHS classrooms to teach. During the third and fourth years, GTECHS students take classes with EMCC students.

The first three classes to go through GTECHS included 110 students who earned associate’s degrees, and 42 percent of students in its first five classes were first-generation college students.

“I think sometimes people think our students all have high test scores and they all have phenomenal grades before they came here, and they all



Principal Jill Savely has been at the school since it opened in 2015.



A freshman at GTECHS works with a petri dish during a class.

have these perfect discipline records and attendance records, and for some of our kids that is true,” said principal Jill Savely, who has been with the school since it opened for the 2015-16 school year.

“But our students are pretty representative of students that you would find anywhere in this area,” she added

Savely goes further with that point, noting that you can’t always assume a student will succeed or fail based on what you see on paper.

“You could look at a million data points on a student and not be able to tell whether they will be successful here or not,” she said. “What matters is do they want to come here, are they motivated or brave enough to step out of their comfort zone and try something new.”

“The environment here is so welcoming,” said Trinity Robertson, a junior from West Point. “It’s friendly, and you get to be yourself without

judgment. And that’s the best thing.”

That is on purpose, Savely said.

“Unless we have to have a rule about something, we don’t,” she said. “We don’t care what color your hair is; we don’t care if your nose is pierced. Just come to school.”

But it’s not just the warm-and-fuzzies that attract students.

“I came here because of the opportunity and diversity,” said Kevin Scales, who gets to school via a 30-to-45 minutes bus ride from Macon daily.

Over the school’s first five classes, students were 63 percent black and 33 percent white, and females outnumbered males 209-92. One way in which the school is less diverse than when it opened is geographic: In the beginning, the school was available to students from the West Point Consolidated, Columbus Municipal, Noxubee County, Starkville-Oktibbeha County Con-

solidated and Lowndes County school districts.

Three districts pulled out, leaving only the West Point and Noxubee County districts sending students to GTECHS. Of the loss of participating districts, Savely said that in some cases, notably Starkville, there are now “incredible programs” for their students that did not exist when GTECHS was founded.

“We use a lottery system,” she said of the student selection process. “It truly is a random lottery. We typically get more applications than we have seats.”



One of the attractions was, and is, pragmatic. The opportunity to get a high school diploma and an associate’s degree simultaneously can save time and money.

“It was the opportunity to get your associate’s degree and finish school a little bit earlier,” junior Jada Ivy of West Point said about the attraction of GTECHS. “I’m very interested in the medical field, and that takes a long time. I was interested in making it shorter.”

“I knew it would give me a major head start in

my career and in my life,” echoed Kaylee Bauer, a junior from West Point who came to GTECHS from Oak Hill Academy. “I can graduate with people older than me and get into the job field quicker.”

“Our staff works for EMCC,” Savely said. “They are our physical agent. We’re housed here; we’re part of the EMCC umbrella. July 1 is when we actually became part of the physical management of EMCC.

“What that does is it allows our students to remain enrolled in their home schools so they can play sports. They can be on the debate team. If there was an activity that they wanted to do at their home school they could do that if it doesn’t interfere too much with what we do here.”



“I show that I’m working hard for my grades,” aspiring physical therapist Zyiah Lane said. “I actually earned them.”

Freshmen take one college course at a time; their older peers’ schedules are dominated by college courses, such as algebra, world civilization II and general psychology.







Bauer's love for math developed after she arrived at GTECHS.

"When I came here, I figured out that I like math a lot more," she said. "The teachers are very helpful here and have taught me good, innovative ways to do math problems, so I actually enjoy it now."

That's music to Savely's ears.

"Relationships are huge," she said. "The relationships that we build with each other as a group of adults here, the relationships that are built between students and teachers, kind of creating a safe space where children can say, I don't know, I don't understand, can I do it a different way?"



GTECHS itself is the product of doing it a different way. With about 200 early college high schools number throughout the country, GTECHS was the first in Mississippi.

"It's always been different," said Brandy Burnett, a teacher who, like Savely, has been at GTECHS from the beginning. "We had a vision we believed in from day one, and we have stayed with it."

Burnett teaches biology along with anatomy and physiology and a course called "Freshman Focus."

"A lot of people would call it a study hall," she said. But it includes "writing in planners — with actual pens — time management, peer tutoring ... they have freedom to work on what they need

to work on."

That combination of supposedly disparate things — freedom and academic rigor, a high level of achievement with a relaxed atmosphere — is what stands out at GTECHS. And it explains why students answer the way they do when they are asked if they miss anything about going to school in their home districts.

"For me, no," Dean said. "You can be yourself, and it's more hands-on."

"Not. At. All," Randle said. "I had to think about it, but it was the best decision I ever made."

Inevitably, the word "family" comes up.

"A community, like a family," is how Ivy and several others describe their school.

"I feel like we create such a bond with each other, and I don't think I was expecting that," Ivy said. "We look forward to going to school."

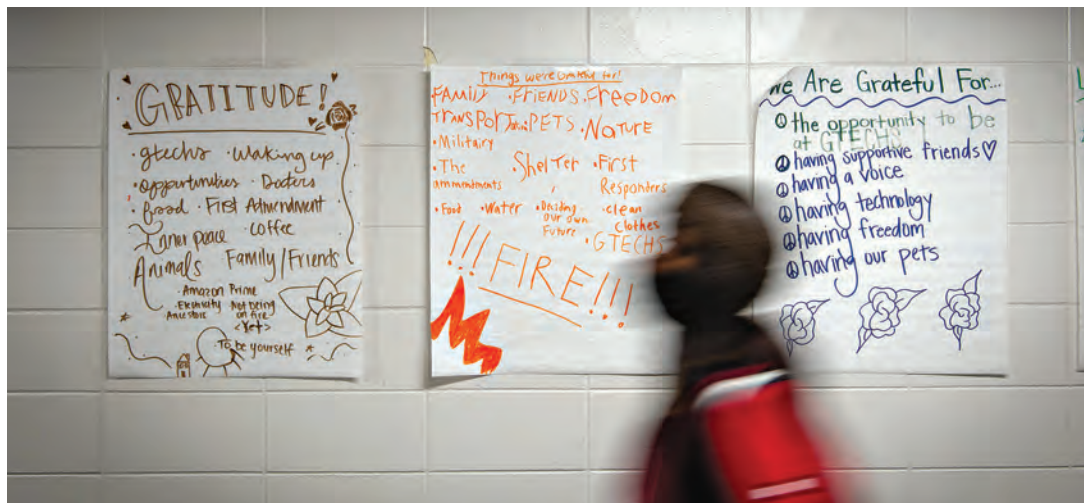


"A lot of pressure was put on us before we came here to talk about state tests all the time and to get ready for state tests all the time, and that first year was kind of a scary feeling," Savely said, her smile growing as she continued. "But man, when those scores started rolling in, and we knew we weren't talking about it a whole lot ... We were just teaching kids, and it works.

"It works."

STORY BY **TOM RYSINSKI**

PHOTOS BY **RORY DOYLE**



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COVER STORY

# FROM MAIN STREET TO SESAME STREET

STARKVILLE STARTUP GLO GOES  
GLOBAL WITH LIGHT-UP TOYS

Seven years ago, Hagan Walker was on a path for a career as an engineer with Tesla.

Now he can walk from the restored former grocery store in Starkville where he lives to his own business downtown, located in an old theater that hasn't shown a movie since the 1960s. Instead of helping engineer the latest electric car models, Walker and his team at Glo design and sell children's toys. Lots of them.

"It's a different route than I thought I

would take," Walker said. "That's for sure."

Glo sprang from a class project at Mississippi State into a drink light company in 2015. Two years later, it expanded by introducing Glo Pals toys that used the same liquid-activated light-up cube technology.

The company now ships its products to 40 countries, boasts a licensing deal with Sesame Street and is finalizing a fundraising round of nearly \$1.7 million that sets Glo's most recent valuation at \$17 million.

That success recently earned the compa-

ny Industry of the Year honors from the Greater Starkville Development Partnership.

At the center of Glo is the one-two punch of Walker, the CEO, and company vice president Anna Barker — both still south of 30 — leading a team of roughly 25 employees on a journey that never seems to take the same route two days in a row.

“I tell people all the time, ‘The day I get bored or keep doing the same thing over and over again is the day I don’t want to do this anymore,’” Walker said. “Every day here is different.”



Underneath The Rex’s original chandelier and between the exposed antique brick walls is a warehouse with boxes full of Glo Pals and Glo Cubes ready for shipment. Some will go to places

like Macy’s, Nordstrom and other retailers, large and small. Others will head to Sesame Place theme parks and Sea World.

“We do all our fulfillment here,” Walker said. “When we moved in, we thought, ‘Wow, we’re going to have space forever.’ We’re already basically out of space. We’ve been very fortunate but it’s just been hard to plan because things have grown so quickly.”

COVID-19, and the supply chain issues that came with it, delayed Glo’s move-in date until March 2021, Walker said, forcing the company to operate for about nine months in an old candy store on Lafayette Street.

Now nearly a year into The Rex, the modern glass-walled office space in the middle of the building departs from the otherwise truly “historic” aesthetic. But Walker and Barker specially requested that touch as a tribute to the company’s own history.



Hagan Walker and Anna Barker



“We’re paying homage to the E-Center,” Barker said.

As a student, Walker and his then-business partner Kaylie Mitchell took their fledgling Glo-Cube to MSU’s Center for Entrepreneurship and Outreach, commonly referred to as the E-Center, in the College of Business. There, they found the advice and resources he needed to build a startup with his drink light marketed primarily to bars and restaurants.

Barker, also a student at the time of Glo’s founding, was trying to develop her own startup through the E-Center. Ultimately, she teamed up with Walker after Mitchell’s departure from the company.

“I would say Glo is the hero story of entrepreneurship out of MSU,” said Eric Hill, entrepreneurship director for the E-Center. “Glo permeates every story we tell because it shows what’s possible.”

Both Walker and Barker sit on the E-Center’s advisory board and evaluate pitches from aspiring entrepreneurs. They also host classes and camps for the center.

“They’re as much a part of the E-Center as anyone else,” Hill said.



Pippa is into science, technology, math and engineering. She loves to read, but she’s a little shy. Lumi is more artistic. She enjoys painting and dancing.

Alex is kind of old-school. He loves handwritten letters.

These three, along with Blair and Sammy, are the original Glo Pals. Each is a different color. All have a hand drawn, abstract look.

“It looks really intentional now, but when we

first got started it was just Hagan and I,” Barker said. “We had no designers. ... We drew them.”

The doodled characters, each equipped with Glo’s liquid-activated light, were born from a conversation with a mother of a special needs child who used Glo Cubes in the water to calm her child during bath time.

Today, Walker said, the Glo Pals make up 90 percent of the company’s business.

The Glo Pals, and the story of why they were made, got Sesame Street’s attention. By 2020, Glo inked a licensing deal with Sesame Street to add Julia — a character with autism — and Elmo to the Glo Pals lineup. This spring, Glo will release three more Sesame Street-themed pals — Big Bird, Cookie Monster and Abby Cadabby.

Glo’s relationship with Sesame Street has been “wonderful.”

“It’s pretty awesome,” Walker said. “Even though they are much bigger than we are, they act like a very small company.”

“They loved that we were smaller,” Barker added. “They loved that every time they called us, they were talking to Hagan and me. After our first conversation, I rented the books and watched the shows. Then I sent them to Hagan and made him read the books and watch the shows.”

The Sesame Street characters have been a hit with customers so far, but Walker said they haven’t tempered sales for the original Glo Pals.

That gave the duo another idea.

“We’re moving more toward creating more products that create experiences, so the community we have can be actively involved in the Glo Pals World,” Barker said.

Part of that “world” includes developing characters’ personalities, likes and dislikes, even mannerisms and how the characters interact with







one another. Another key element is free online resources on Glo's website — from learning colors in French to letter-writing kits and other downloadable activities — focused on early childhood development during playtime.

“That’s how they work in a way that’s more than just a product,” Barker said.

Walker said his team also is developing accessories that will interact with each Glo Pal differently. He even hinted at there one day being a “Glo Pals show.”

“We’re trying to bring Glo Pals to life,” Walker said. “It’s kind of a cyclical process. We can do media stuff that’s free content, but it drives the brand value for Glo Pals where you want to go out and buy something. The other side of that is you can go out and buy a physical product and we can promote free educational resources from that.”

The true lesson for Glo Pals is diversifying and adapting, Walker said. While Glo Cubes still sell, orders dried up when government mandates forced restaurants closed during the pandemic. By then, in no small part because of a desperate mom’s bathtime trick for her child, the drink lights had already become a minor contributor to Glo’s top line.

“We made it this far because we listened to our customers,” Walker said.



Consequences of the pandemic still trickle through, few more jarring than the bill to ship their products from China over Christmas. In 2020, it cost \$5,000. A year later: \$32,000.

New York Times global economic correspondent Peter S. Goodman, covering worldwide supply chain issues, connected with Walker and learned of Glo’s issue. This summer Goodman may travel with Walker and Barker through other areas of Southeast Asia as they search for a site for a second factory.

Glo manufactures its products at a factory in China. Adding another factory elsewhere should help diversify the company’s manufacturing and shipping options and hopefully keep costs down.

Walker said he looked for domestic options and was even willing to pay more to make Glo products in the U.S. It didn’t pan out.

“People ask us pretty consistently why we don’t make more here,” Walker said. “Our response is we do everything we can possibly do here. It would be way easier for us to get rid of half our team and have everything produced and packaged in China. ... I don’t know if people realize how much of our production ability we have shipped overseas. It’s kind of a scary thought.”



Though the products are manufactured in China, packaging and graphic design is done in Starkville.



If you walk into Glo's downtown building, you'll likely see dogs, the friendly greeters and morale agents of the office so ingrained in the company's culture that two of their names and photos — Reese, "director for hooman resources" and Canelo, in charge of "paw-blic relations" — are listed as staff on its website.

Employees' pets or children frequent Glo's office, Barker said, and the company allows flexible schedules to help promote a healthy work-life balance and provide a welcoming environment.

Even The Rex's downtown location plays into Glo's strategy of worker recruitment and retention, especially now that the company is adding new talent across its departments.

"Starkville is really ahead of the rest of the state on creating long-term solutions to combat (the export of talent from Mississippi)," Barker said. "There are certain things that are out of our control. We can't, for example, turn Starkville into Nashville or Birmingham or New Orleans or Atlanta. But there are certain things that are within our control that young people, or people who might be looking at those bigger towns, are going to want.

"That's having an office space downtown that feels modern and interesting, where they can bring their kids or pets," she added. "Something dynamic and cool and where people wanted to go to work every day. We would have saved a ton of money just going and getting a metal building on Airport Road. There's no way to compete with bigger cities once you do that."

Most of Glo's human staff are recent college graduates. An outlier to the pattern is Bernice Lile, 72, one of three full-time members

of the fulfillment team. She's also one of the longest-tenured employees, joining Glo as a part-timer in 2015.

"I lived behind Hagan's mom in Columbus," Lile said. "I was out of a job at the time, and she told Hagan about me. I'm grateful he gave me a chance."

Processing 150 to 200 orders a day on average keeps her team busy. Sometimes it requires late nights.

"We do whatever we have to do to get it done," Lile said. "Over time, the products have gotten a little different, the orders have gotten a little bigger and the demand is more. When we have to work nights, Hagan and Anna are right here working with us."



Outside Glo's office, on the Washington Street side, sits a 1928 phone booth with a rotary phone inside. Despite its appearance, it's a fairly new addition to the streetside.

Walker found it in some tiny community between Starkville and his native Hattiesburg — he can't exactly remember where. He restored it to pristine condition and programmed the phone to where each number dialed will give the listener a different tidbit of Starkville history.

The booth fits well with the juxtaposition of Glo's historic aesthetic and the young, vibrant, innovative business buzzing inside. Walker thinks both ends of that juxtaposition are equally valuable.

"It's acknowledging the past while shining light on the future," he said.

**STORY BY ZACK PLAIR**  
**PHOTOS BY RORY DOYLE**

*Conflict disclosure: Individuals involved in the publication of this magazine are investors in Glo's parent company.*

## 3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

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

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



## ANGELLA BAKER

Angella Baker draws a salary from Mississippi State, where she serves as assistant undergraduate coordinator for the Department of Computer Science and Engineering.

But most evenings and weekends, she's doing work for which she is paid in a different kind of currency: smiles.

Those smiles come from a variety of people: the young women she helps earn scholarships through the Miss Mississippi Organization; the smiles of the hungry people she helps feed through United We Feed or Casserole Kitchen; the smiles of all those served through her work at various boards, including the Starkville Area Arts Council and the United Way of North Central Mississippi.

"You know, I've always been a service-oriented person," Baker says. "I just love giving back to the community in any way I can. When you see the smiles on people's faces when you're giving them something they need ... it's hard to top that."

Baker is particularly well-known for her work with the Magnolia Film Festival. In 1999, a co-worker at MSU approached her and asked if she would like to meet Ron Tibbet, the Chicago

filmmaker who founded The Mag three years earlier.

"Once I met Ron, I was hooked."

Baker worked at the box office that first year and began acquiring new jobs over the years. She moved to Georgia in 2006, but returned in 2010.

"I was on the arts council board of directors and one of the first things we had to deal with was The Mag since we were responsible for organizing it back then," she said. "Since I had previous experience, they asked me to take the reins as director."

Baker served as the Mag director from 2014-2019.

"At the time, we really needed somebody who could give it some new energy. I was busy with so many things that I knew I couldn't do it. We are able to have a paid director now and the festival has really taken off."

Baker remains an integral part of the festival, which was held in February this year.

"I'm the treasurer and also the hospitality chair and the transportation chair," she said. "I'm there for pretty much everything they need."



## CHRIS CHAIN

In 1986, two years out of Florida State, Chris Chain returned to his hometown of Columbus and began thinking about what he could do to revitalize downtown.

“Everywhere you looked, there were second floors that were vacant or used for storage,” Chain noticed. “It was never going to be used for retail, so what’s the best use of these spaces?”

The answer? Loft apartments.

His first project, three apartments in the old Booth Diamond Shop on Main Street, was in 1988. Since then, Chain has lost track of the number of loft apartments he’s added to those forgotten spaces in mostly historic downtown buildings.

“Probably 60 apartments in 30 buildings,” he estimated.

Chain has taken his passion for historic restoration to other cities, including Vicksburg, New Orleans and, most recently, Pascagoula, where he is in the process of adding 45 to 50 apartments as part of the city’s ambitious downtown redevelopment plan.

Most recently, he has taken on Columbus’ old Stone Hotel on the 200 block of Fifth Street South with retail space on the first floor and apartments on the second floor.

Chain’s specialty of revitalizing downtown buildings throughout the state has not gone unrecognized. Last year, he was elected as president of Mississippi Main Street.

But particularly in Columbus, it has been a labor of love as much as a business model.



## DOROTHY RYLAND

**T**he saying goes, find something you love to do and you'll never work a day in your life. If that's true, it also means you never retire, which is something Dorothy Ryland learned last spring.

Ryland, a lifelong West Point resident, retired in April after 16 years as the city's deputy city clerk and housing coordinator.

In addition to her regular duties, over the years Ryland became a resource for those who called city hall asking for help — everything from paying a phone or utility bill to a rent payment, even medicines they could not afford during a temporary crisis. Over time, Ryland built relationships with churches, civic groups and agencies such as The United Way that had funds to help those facing a short-term crisis.

"After a while, the word got out: 'If you're having trouble, call Dorothy,'" Ryland said with a chuckle.

So, although she officially retired in April, helping people find help in times of financial

trouble wasn't something she was prepared to give up.

"So I just kept on going," she said.

Now, the city of West Point is hiring her part-time and setting up an office for her.

Ryland says her network provides assistance to 20 to 30 residents a month. Residents can get assistance just once a calendar year.

Ryland is a facilitator, but there is one thing she personally provides.

There's an old German proverb that goes, "Charity sees the need, not the cause." Ryland lives out that proverb in her encounters with those who need help. She knows that asking for help can be a humiliating experience.

"When you run out of money and don't have anywhere to turn, what are you going to do?" Ryland said. "It's hard to ask for help. What I do is I listen to people. I tell them, 'You don't have to tell me how you got into your situation. I don't care. Just tell me what you need, how we can help you. I'll never judge you.'"



Pho (Beef Rice Noodle Soup) is a popular menu item at restaurants and the Lunar New Year Festival at Vietnamese Martyrs Church in Biloxi.



# ‘WE PRESERVE OUR CULTURE THROUGH OUR FOOD’

## VIETNAMESE REFUGEES THRIVE IN BILOXI

It was the second weekend of February, Super Bowl Sunday, followed by Valentine’s Day.

But at the Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church on Oak Street in Biloxi, another celebration took center stage, the three-day Lunar New Year celebration known as Tết Nguyên Đán, or, simply, Tết.

For almost five decades, Biloxi has been the epicenter of a vibrant Vietnamese community of expatriate South Vietnamese, who were among an estimated 120,000 Vietnamese people relocated across the United States after the fall of Saigon (now Phnom Penh) that signaled the end of the Vietnam War.

At a picnic table under a large tent on the church grounds, Vietnamese music blaring from speakers, Vanessa Ngyuen Roark sits with her husband, younger sister and cousin. She left Vietnam at age 4 in 1976 with her parents, eventually settling in Biloxi, where the city’s seafood industry attracted a few thousand Vietnam refugees — a familiar occupation in an otherwise strange new land.

Biloxi’s Tết celebration includes many of the traditions common in all Asian nations that celebrate the Lunar New Year — fireworks, dragon dances, games, music and colorful traditional outfits.

But for the Vietnamese, the focal point is the food.

Inside the sprawling kitchen, dozens of people

— most of them employed at the 20-plus Vietnamese restaurants located along the Mississippi Coast — worked as line cooks, chefs, wait staff and busboys — producing and serving an endless array of traditional Vietnamese foods.

“We preserve our culture through our food,” says Roark. “Basic Vietnamese foods are pretty simple — usually just four or five main ingredients. But everyone has their own idea about how they should be put together. You see that in the restaurants. They all have their own following, based on what people believe is real Vietnamese food. But even then, the joke is that if you ask a Vietnamese person where they can get the best Vietnamese food, they always say, ‘Mom.’”

### WHAT IS TRADITIONAL?

One of the problems you encounter in describing Vietnamese food is the term traditional.

Vietnamese entrees are “bowl food” — rice and rice noodles presented in broths with shrimp, pork, chicken, or thin cuts of beef, often accompanied by spring rolls or egg rolls.

But Vietnamese food, like the country itself, is a story of adaptation.

Throughout its history, Vietnam has been subject to conquest — the Chinese, the French, the Japanese and, to a far lesser degree, Americans. The food reflects those influences, too. In fact, two of the staples of Vietnamese food found in any Vietnamese restaurant. Phở (pronounced “fun” without the “n”) and Banh Mi have the



Hoa Nguyen enjoys a beef noodle soup at the Lunar New Year Festival at Vietnamese Martyrs Church in Biloxi.

distinct influence of 100 years of French colonial rule.

The French loved their beef and bread. Each found its way into what is now considered two traditional Vietnamese foods.

Phở often incorporates thin slices of beef in a beef bone broth. Banh Mi incorporates French baguettes and is the signature sandwich of Vietnamese cuisine.

#### **OAK STREET ENCAPSULATES VIETNAMESE CULTURE**

Oak Street, just minutes from Biloxi's "Casino Row" is a study of the Vietnamese people and their cuisine condensed into a few blocks. Next door to the Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church (Catholicism being another French influence) is the Buddhist Temple Congregation (the

ancestral religion of Vietnam).

Just to the south of the places of worship is Vung Tau Vietnamese Cuisine (156 Oak St.) is a favorite of the older Vietnamese population where the focus is strictly on the food and ambiance is an afterthought. Located in a nondescript strip mall, Vung Tau is small — a dozen tables — but has built a following and not only among Vietnamese customers.

"Everything I love about Vietnamese food is right in front of me," says Casey Crosby, a Vung Tau regular from Gulfport, as she points to the Phở in front of her. "The smell of it, the flavors, the texture, everything. I keep thinking I'll try some of the other (Vietnamese) restaurants because I've heard there are some good ones, but I always wind up right back here. It has exactly what I want."



**TOP OF PAGE:** Lau De (Goat Hotpot) is a popular menu item. **ABOVE:** Meatball Banh Mi (Vietnamese Po Boy) is a popular item at Le Bakery restaurant in Biloxi. **RIGHT:** Pork chops are fried in the cooking area at Vietnamese Martyrs Church during the Lunar New Year Festival in Biloxi.



Banh Uot (steamed rice flour) is made in the cooking area at the lunar festival at Vietnamese Martyrs Church in Biloxi.



A father and son watch dragon dances at the February Lunar Festival.

At the opposite end of Oak Street, near the Back Bay of Biloxi, LeBakery (280 Oak St.) offers the typical bakery offerings — breads, pastries, cakes and pies. In February, the bakery is slammed with King Cake orders as Mardi Gras season approaches, but around lunch time, customers begin filing in for LeBakery’s unique offering — Banh Mi made with its hot-from-the-oven French bread rolls and stuffed with a meats and the pickled vegetables that give the sandwich its distinctly Vietnamese flavor profile.

LeBakery offers 16 different Banh Mi combinations.

“The meatball is my favorite, but I’ve never had a bad sandwich here,” said Bob Collins of Biloxi. “It’s a different twist on po-boys that people around here have been eating forever. If you want Banh Mi, this is the place to get it.”

#### **KATRINA CHANGES DINING LANDSCAPE**

LeBakery opened shortly before Hurricane Katrina swept through the Coast in 2005, a hurricane that not only altered the landscape, but created a shift in the Vietnamese population of Biloxi. Prior to Katrina, most of the Vietnamese residents lived in east Biloxi. But the

hurricane's impact led to decline in the seafood processing industry that many Vietnamese people relied on for jobs.

Since Katrina, the Vietnamese population has dispersed to other parts of the county, mainly Ocean Springs, Gautier and D'Iberville. The restaurants have followed.

Kien Giang (10598 Diberville Blvd.) is one example. Unlike many of the older Vietnamese restaurants, Kien Giang features a modern fine-dining decor that complements its combination of Vietnamese and Thai food. Its fried noodle dishes are a featured menu item, but the menu is diverse.

Hurricane Katrina also had an impact on the restaurants that remained in downtown Biloxi. Kim Long (832 Division St.), which along with Vung Tang, is among the most popular of the Vietnamese restaurants on the Coast, opened the late 1980s, making it the oldest Vietnamese restaurant on the Coast. Katrina leveled the restaurant. Almost two years later, Kim Long re-opened, this time with an eye on enhancing the dining experience. Its art-deco dining room, featuring sleek chrome and glass tables, gives the restaurant a modern feel, but there's no mistaking Kim Long's greatest appeal — a wide array of traditional Vietnamese and Thai dishes. The restaurant is not entirely bound to traditional fare. Off-the-menu items, featuring non-traditional ingredients — goat, for example — are available upon inquiry.

The Coast will always be known for its seafood, but for almost 50 years, the presence of the Vietnamese community has not only influenced the melting-pot culture the Coast has been known for, but also its food.

Vietnamese food, faithfully executed by a people as an expression of their culture, adds flavorful alternatives to the Coast's dining experience.

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**  
PHOTOS BY **TIM ISBELL**

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# LOCAL HISTORY SHARED THROUGH BLUES MUSEUM

BLACK PRAIRIE BLUES MUSEUM IN WEST POINT STILL WORK IN PROGRESS BUT GOOD PLACE TO LEARN ABOUT MUSIC GENRE

**B**eside an old building with Bank of West Point etched in gray stone sits an oversized guitar beside a pair of boarded up windows covered in a brightly colored poster.

“Coming soon” one window reads in yellow. “Black Prairie Blues Museum” the other reads.

The museum is the home of the collection of blue artifacts. Efforts are underway to create a unique experience for both lovers of the music genre and those who want to know more about the Mississippi-born creation that helped form rock ‘n’ roll and many other American music forms.

The Black Prairie part of the museum’s name

## **BLACK PRAIRIE BLUES MUSEUM**

**WHERE:** 640 Commerce St. W., West Point

**PHONE:** 662-275-7819

**WEBSITE:** [blackprairiebluesmuseum.com](http://blackprairiebluesmuseum.com)

**NOTES:** Open by appointment only. Event schedule available on Facebook and Instagram.

is a region of Mississippi that is known for its dark, fertile soil. The museum hopes to focus on blues musicians from the region — Howlin’ Wolf, Eddy Clarwater, Carey Bell, Willie King, Big Joe Williams and Jesse Fortune.

At the moment, the museum is open for private tours, which can be arranged by calling the museum. You'll be led by curator Jeremy Klutts, who also is a board member and volunteer.

The museum got its start when Milton Sundbeck, president of the Black Prairie Blues Foundation, purchased the building in 2014 specifically for the museum.

"He paid to have it renovated to the point where we could have fundraisers," said Deborah Mansfield, a board member and volunteer who also serves as the museum's director. "When that work was complete, he handed it over to the foundation. ...

"I'm the toilet cleaner. I'm the fund raiser, everything," she said with a laugh.

The renovations included new windows, HVAC, plumbing and electrical. Wooden studs line the museum's interior walls, showing off past finishes as well as electrical wiring linking various light fixtures to their switches.

Recently, the board and other volunteers moved all the artifacts from the Howlin' Wolf Blues Museum site to the current museum at 640 Commerce St. The pieces are stored upstairs, where they will be organized and recorded.

"So that we'll be handicap accessible, we'll video all the artifacts up there and have the recording available for people to view downstairs," Mansfield said. "Since we're an old building and we can't afford to put in an elevator, we'll do what we can so everyone can see what we have."

### **PIECES COMING TOGETHER**

After spending several years working on a mission statement, design plan and informational materials to give to prospective donors, the museum now is at the point where it can start applying for grants and seeking corporate sponsors,

Mansfield said.

The board hired Dallas-Texas based firm Museum Art several years ago to design a conceptual plan for the museum's interior. The displays will be on wheels so they can be moved for functions. A back room will look like a recording studio and host exhibits about current music acts from the region, such as Blind Melon.

"We need about \$2 million to see this through," Mansfield said. "We had to get all our ducks in a row to put it in a brochure. Now we're set and we're going to be able to go out and ask foundations for grants and seek private investors."

While the board got everything in order, the museum has hosted fundraisers and other events.

"We try to hold one event every month to raise money just to keep the lights on, and buy things and equipment that we need here in the museum," Mansfield said.

Besides hosting fundraisers, the museum also hosts free events throughout the year. Last year, the Mississippi State University Opera Department sang the blues in an outdoor concert.

"It was free and it was amazing. We had Bernie Imes' Juke Joint images shown on the front of the building while the singers performed," Mansfield said. "And he had his Juke Joint photographs here in the museum showing."

### **KEEPING THE GENRE ALIVE**

Klutts grew up in West Point. He has been a fan of the blues since childhood. He recalls a time when the Clay County community more readily celebrated its blues heritage.

"I've had a love of the blues since I was a kid," he said. "I used to go to blues festivals here. We had many here when I was growing up, mostly on the 4th of July. They would have one out at

the Oasis in town and every year, I'd go to it. Then Anthony's ... I can remember as a kid when it was a regular grocery store.

"I was probably 13, 14. I remember going there and eating. ... In the back of the grocery store they had a kitchen, but it was more like a little market to go in there and buy your sandwich meats. They had mayonnaise, ketchup and anything to make a sandwich out of. And then it shut down. It was just dormant for two or three years.

"Then this gentleman out of the Delta came in and opened it as Anthony's," Klutts continued. "It was a Louisiana-themed restaurant. They'd have a blues night every Friday night. I probably wasn't old enough to be there, but I was there. I was roughly about 15 years old at that time."

After graduating from West Point High School, Klutts joined the Navy and left the area for about 10 years before returning. He has been involved with the museum and its blue festival ever since.

As an adult, part of what Klutts loves about the blues is that it's the basis of rock 'n' roll and other genres. Someone may sing about something personal, but those feelings, that music, are something people can relate to and experience together, he said.

### **BLUES' POPULARITY AROUND THE WORLD**

Klutts noted that blues has received more attention from people from overseas than Americans.

"One thing about the museum is it's followed by people from around the world," he said. "Most blues fans are international."

Mansfield echoed that statement saying that every time she travels somewhere, when someone

finds out she's from Mississippi they automatically ask her about the blues.

One antidote of the blues' reach is from a few years ago when the Grammy Museum opened in Cleveland. Two tourists from England asked Klutts if they ever tried contacting anyone famous to get donations.

"I told her the whole storyline, and what we're trying to do with everything," he said, noting he told her about a guitar signed by Pete Townshend. "She says, 'Well, when I leave here, I'm going to give you that address to one of my good friends, he's the personal secretary of Paul McCartney. We'll give you his address and I want you to write a letter and stating what you guys are trying to do here. And Paul may be willing to help you guys out.'"

The tourists left and a few weeks later, one of the then-board members Kenny Dill, met Klutts at a restaurant.

"He had a picture of this woman and says 'Do you have any idea who this woman was? She came a couple of weeks ago.' I said no, I don't have any idea. She never said who she was.

"That was one of John Lennon's half sisters. Apparently she went to the Grammy Museum all the time because they have a big Beatles section there."

Klutts said he hasn't reached out to McCartney or anyone else yet. He wanted the museum to be at the point where it was ready to have something concrete — a design, plan, mission, etc. — to show prospective investors and donors.

"We had none of the designs, none of our literature, our mission statement or a business plan," he said. "You know, all those things you have to have together before you go and start asking for corporate sponsorship.

"I just want to make sure we have our ducks in



a row,” Klutts said. “We’re getting to that point that we can solicit for corporate money and artist contributions. It’s taken a long time to get to this point; a lot of money to get to this point.”

### HOW TO HELP

The museum’s website, [black-prairiebluesmuseum.com](http://black-prairiebluesmuseum.com), is under construction, so most information about events and programming can be found on the museum’s Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Almost everyone who is involved in the museum is a volunteer. They recently hired their first employee, Mansfield said. Marion Sansing, who serves as “everybody’s assistant,” works part-time at the museum. Sansing is helping update the website, helping promote events and helps run them, Mansfield said.

For those who want to help the museum, besides monetary donations, the museum could use help with its events in terms of getting things set up and taken down and helping get the word out.

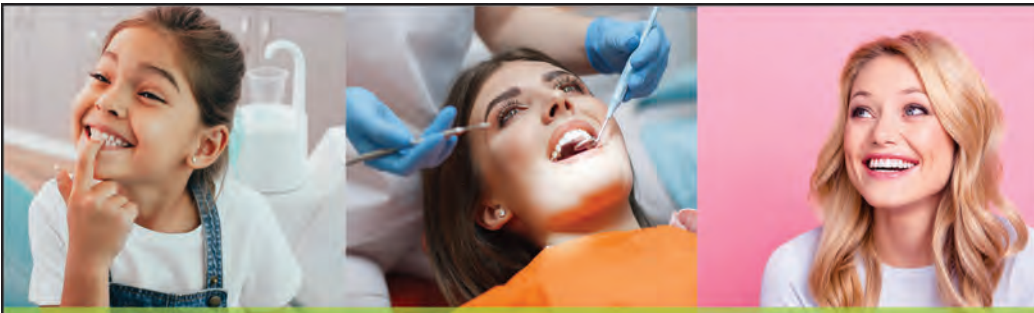
“We’ll take in-kind donations as well,” Mansfield said.

“The biggest thing is to come check us out and spread the word,” she said. “People are really surprised when they come in here, because it’s a pretty special place.”

STORY BY **NICOLE  
BOWMAN-LAYTON**  
COURTESY PHOTOS



Events at Black Prairie Blues Museum include concerts, Mississippi State University opera students singing the blues and art exhibits.



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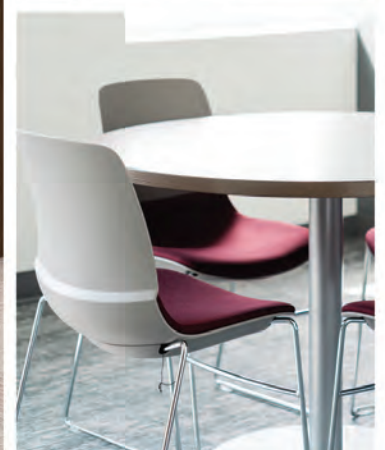
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PROFILE



# MEET SAMANTHA RICKETTS

IN HER THIRD YEAR AS THE HEAD SOFTBALL COACH AT MISSISSIPPI STATE, SAMANTHA RICKETTS REMAINS FOCUSED ON MOVING THE BULLDOGS' PROGRAM FORWARD

**D**ispatch sports reporter Theo DeRosa sat down with Ricketts shortly after the Bulldogs' 2022 season began.

**The team talks about “the Ricketts effect” a lot. To you, what is “the Ricketts effect,” and what impact do you hope to leave on this program here at MSU?**

My biggest goal is just that we're using softball to teach these girls lessons to set them up for success when they leave here. It's so much bigger than softball. It's, 'Can I be a positive influence in their lives and help teach them the skills that they're going to need to go off and be successful outside of the sport?' That's really what drives me: being able to be that presence for them and help teach them how to stand on their own two feet and using the game of softball to teach those lessons. It changes every year. Every team's dynamic is different. We're just finding ways to reach them and let them know that they have people in their corner. We've got kids from all types of backgrounds — some with much tougher stories than others. To bring them all together every year, it's just truly caring about your players and making sure they know that they're loved and they have people in their corner and

let them flourish at the same time while doing so.

**It's your third season here as the head coach at Mississippi State. How would you evaluate your job so far — in on-field results and as a leader of these players?**

I think we're on track with what our goals are. I think a big part of what our staff is doing starts with recruiting, and recruiting is really half of our job: getting the right kids here. I feel really good about that, about the players we have coming in the next few years. I know the staff has really worked hard at that. We've learned a lot of lessons. I think that's what I'm most proud of, that we don't stay stagnant or do things because that's how they've always been done. We're going to push the envelope. We're going to use more of the technology and evaluate ourselves to make sure what we're doing is actually beneficial — testing what we're doing in the weight room at practice, getting some objective data. I think we're on the right track, and I think we're building a culture of kids who want to leave a mark. They want to take Mississippi State softball to a level it's never been before. They're now starting to kind of speak that language, too, which is really the hope — that it's not just coming out of

my mouth but out of theirs. I think I'm starting to hear a shift in their leadership as well, which makes me feel like we're on the right track, and I'm excited to see what we can do in the next couple of years.

**You're playing in a tough league in the SEC. How long might it take to get to that point — to help make Mississippi State one of the SEC's top teams and a perennial NCAA Regional host like you guys are hoping to do?**

I don't know if I could put a timeline on it. It could be this year; it could be the next; it could be a couple years. It just really depends on the schedule that you draw, especially when it comes to conference. We've got another tough draw this season. For us right now, obviously the goal is always going in to compete and win the SEC, but we're trying to move up the ladder, move up the ranks and find our way to the top half right now. I think that's the focus — and understanding that we can reach our goals. Even if we don't host a regional this year doesn't mean that you can't win a regional game. Just getting them to understand that the season doesn't come down to one game, but it's the process and the work it takes to get there. If we're working with the intent to host a regional every year and we fall short of that but we feel good about our work ethic, then we can evaluate ourselves that way. That's really the big thing: getting them to shift that focus to not just the one game at the end of the year that makes or breaks our season but, 'What are you doing in January and February to set yourself up to be successful when you do reach May?'

**You had such a great career at Oklahoma. What was it like playing for a pro-**

**gram with that kind of historical success and softball tradition?**

It was an honor. My path to get to Oklahoma wasn't the typical recruiting story, and that helped me really just be thankful for the opportunity. I ended up at OU because another catcher didn't make grades. I got in there, I was not a highly recruited player, and I wanted to prove myself. I think that's kind of been how I've gone through my softball career and coaching career ever since — working harder and proving that I belong to prove people wrong. I think it's the same with the Mississippi State way: It's just blue collar, and people are going to count you out. That's always kind of been the way that I've been through this. To just be able to play for such a legendary coach like Coach (Patty) Gasso and to have her in my corner and really kind of show me the ropes — even before I got into coaching, as a player, she just started to teach me what the other side of it looked like. I'm very grateful for that and the fact that she's someone I can still call. She's such a great mentor and spiritual leader and somebody who's really helped raise me and then brought in my sister (Keilani). The big family atmosphere there is something that we try to instill here as well.

**How did you get hired at Mississippi State in 2014, and what was it like taking over as head coach in 2019?**

I stayed (at Oklahoma) for two years as a graduate assistant, so I got to help out on the coaching staff while my sister played. From there, I got my first coaching job at Wichita State. I spent three years at Wichita State. It was about two hours north of Norman, so still pretty close. And then I got the phone call from (head coach) Vann (Stuedeman) to come down and be her hitting

coach at Mississippi State. Again, it was another opportunity to challenge myself. It was the SEC, and you get to go against the best of the best every weekend. It was just such a great opportunity that I couldn't pass up on it. The goal was always to be a head coach. I just didn't expect it to work out the way it did. When the opportunity arose and I got to interview for the head coaching job, again, I had Coach Gasso in my corner. I had the right people leading me and preparing me for this path. To get the start of my head coaching career in the SEC is obviously a huge undertaking. I just look at it as such a huge blessing and something to be grateful for every single day and really go out there and just continue to approach it the way I did as a player: go prove people wrong and work hard with kind of a chip-on-your-shoulder, blue-collar approach.

**How important is it to grow softball and women's sports at Mississippi State, and what barriers stand in your way when it comes to doing that?**

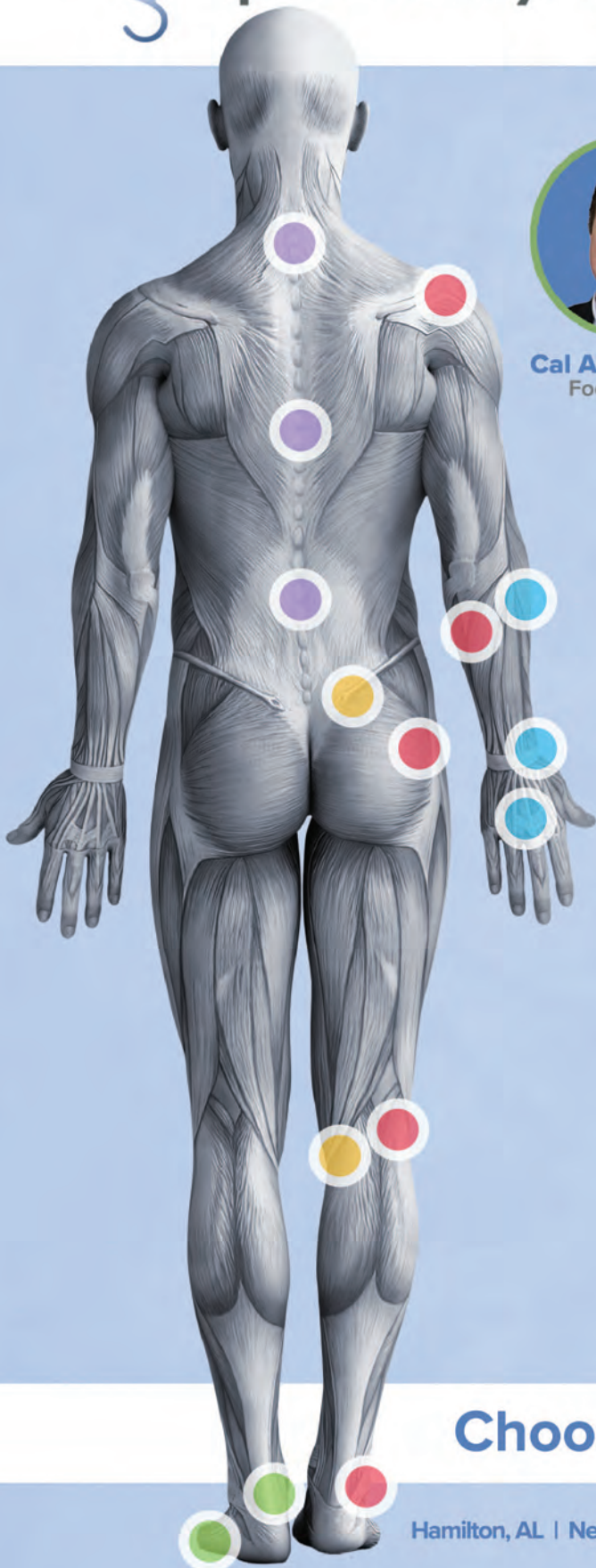
I think there is a big interest in and support for women's athletics. I think everybody saw what Vic Schaefer and women's basketball have done

at Mississippi State. The Bulldogs fans, they want to support athletics, and they want to support the women. Really, it's just putting out a consistent product and giving them something to be excited about. I think a big part is they want that family feel. It's hard to explain to people until they actually get here and experience it. I think it's just the small-town feel. It's something (athletic director) John Cohen talks about a lot: The smaller the town, the bigger your circle. You know everyone, and it's hard not to bump into people you know. They want to come out. They want to support. They feel like you're part of the community, all the players. They see my girls out at a restaurant or out at the grocery store. I think that's what really makes it special: just the community and the support they've all been through with every sport. For us, it's just continuing to get people in the stands. The approach we're taking is we want our girls to get to know the fans. We want them to build that relationship so that we can continue to get that support at the games and help grow the fanbase by interacting with them.

INTERVIEW BY **THEO DEROSA**  
PHOTO **COURTESY MSU ATHLETICS**

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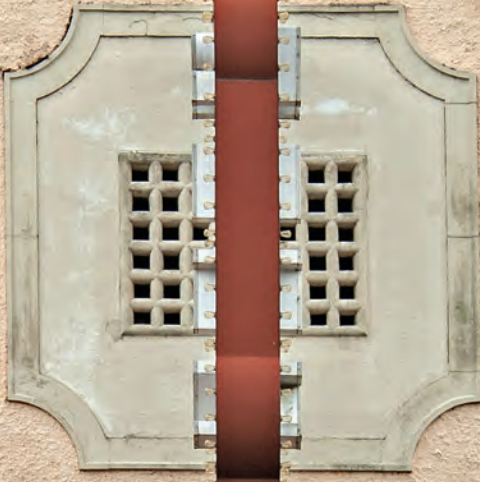
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# MULTIPLE BUSINESSES EXPANDING

## DOWNTOWN CHRISTMAS TRADITION GETS EXTENDED WITH NEW TREE

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

### **ARPA**

Clay County and the city of West Point are both in the process of deciding how to spend federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars.

West Point received \$2.5 million, and, like Columbus, is working with Waggoner Engineering to decide how to spend it. The primary focus seems to be infrastructure, especially water, sewer and stormwater needs. Public meetings are planned to allow citizens a voice in how the money will be spent.

Clay County, meanwhile, received \$3.2 million, the bulk of which will be put toward roads and bridges across all five districts. The county is also considering improvements to voting precincts and volunteer fire stations.

### **FESTIVALS AND CHRISTMAS TREES**

The Prairie Arts Festival, which was canceled altogether in 2020 and held in a smaller form in 2021, will be back to normal for 2022. Planning for 2022 is in its early stages.

A festival focusing on Black history is also in the works. Organizers hope to launch a new annual festival centered on historic Cottrell Street during the Mother's Day weekend. The three-day festival will include music and arts and crafts offerings, culminating in a Mother's Day-themed gospel concert on the holiday itself.

An old city tradition is also turning over a new leaf. For the past 30 years, citizens have gathered at the park by City Hall to decorate a Christmas tree. The cedar, which was transplanted there 30 years ago, was dying and had to be cut down. A new green giant arborvitae — which looks much more like a Christmas tree — will replace it and will see the tradition survive for future generations.



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## INDUSTRY NEWS

Peco Foods, which operates a chicken processing facility in West Point located in the old Americold building on West Church Hill Road, has continually expanded operations since they first opened. It has nearly tripled the initial anticipated investment of \$40 million, and has created 700-plus jobs on a promise of creating around 300. Plum Creek Environmental has also invested \$3 million in expanding its business. It acquired the old 60,000-square-foot Better Brands building, which it will use in addition to its current space. The business makes waste and recycling containers, and the expansion is expected to create about 50 jobs.

Solar projects have continued to be strong, with three projects announced in



the Golden Triangle. One of those is a 200-watt farm coming to Clay County built by Origis. The site is built on land located near the Yokohama Tire plant just outside of West Point, and has an estimated completion date of 2023.

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**  
 OPENING PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**  
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# NOXUBEE COUNTY TO WORK ON INFRASTRUCTURE

## IMPROVING MACON BRIDGE AMONG UPCOMING PROJECTS

**B**oth Noxubee County and the city of Macon have construction projects well underway. As the time approaches for the Mississippi legislature to decide on its American Rescue Act Plan matching program, both the county and city are waiting to allocate their funds until a program has been established.

### CONSTRUCTION

Noxubee County recently completed construction on road projects and various roads throughout the county. This project, funded by the Office of State Aid Road Construction within the Mississippi Department of Transportation, encompassed over 22 miles throughout the county. Noxubee County Board of Supervisors President Eddie Coleman said county residents have enjoyed the completion of these improvements.

The county will also install a new box culvert on Honey Lake Road in the coming months. Coleman said the supervisors plan to put the culvert out for bid in March. Box culverts help with underpasses of roads and bridges to keep them stable and reliable.

The city of Macon implemented a plan to refurbish all of the town's water towers, Mayor Buzz McGuire said. The city completed the first

tower at the corner of Main Street and Fourth Street in West Macon. Macon also will connect a new transformer at the city's substation in the coming months. McGuire said it will improve uninterrupted access to electricity for the entire city.

Macon has discussed improving the Nate Wayne Bridge since early 2019 when flash floods caused damage to the bridge. After completion of an engineering survey on the bridge, McGuire said the design of the bridge will follow. After receiving the design, the city plans to put the project out for bid and begin construction in the coming months. According to engineers, the construction phase should only take around three months to complete.

### ARPA

Noxubee County has not yet decided how it will allocate its American Rescue Plan Act funds, an economic stimulus package funded by the federal government to aid local governments in COVID-19 relief.

Noxubee County received a little over \$2 million in ARPA, Coleman said, and is waiting to see how the Mississippi legislature will determine its ARPA matching program. This program



Shantel Stewart works out at The Sweat Studio in downtown Macon. "My goal is to come four times a week," Stewart said.



Bryan Boese and Forrest Ensz enjoy a caramel frappe and frozen lemonade at Blue Truck Coffee in downtown Macon.

could potentially give local governments more funds for particular projects, especially those involving water, sewer or infrastructure. Coleman said some potential ideas for ARPA include making improvements to the Noxubee County Courthouse or doing more road work.

The city of Macon is in the process of developing plans for its ARPA funds. Macon received approximately \$600,000 in ARPA funds, and just like the county, McGuire said the city is waiting to decide how to allocate its funds until after the legislature has officially created its matching program.

### **BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The city of Macon has seen recent business

development in the recent months. Connor's Sweets, an existing bakery, breakfast and lunch spot, moved to a new downtown location on Jefferson Street. Safe Space Storage, a new mini storage facility, opened on Frontage Road. Blooms and Balloons has opened on Lawrence Street, directly behind Connor's Sweets. A new gym called The Sweat Studio will open soon downtown. A new coffee shop, Blue Truck Coffee, recently opened as well, located in the old Scott Service Station building downtown

### **ORDINANCE AND BUILDING COLLAPSE**

The Macon Board of Aldermen recently passed a Nuisance Gathering Ordinance, which addresses problem gatherings accompanied by illegal and nuisance activity, McGuire said.

Heavy rain caused an abandoned building, the old B&O Drugs, on Main Street to collapse in mid-February. The collapse caused damage to the City Drug Store and caused the city to close the Macon Electric Office for a few days until debris was cleared out. McGuire said in light of this event, the board has added language to its existing demolition permit, intended to immediately help protect life and property, particularly in Macon's downtown commercial district.

STORY BY **TYLER B. JONES**  
 OPENING PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**  
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