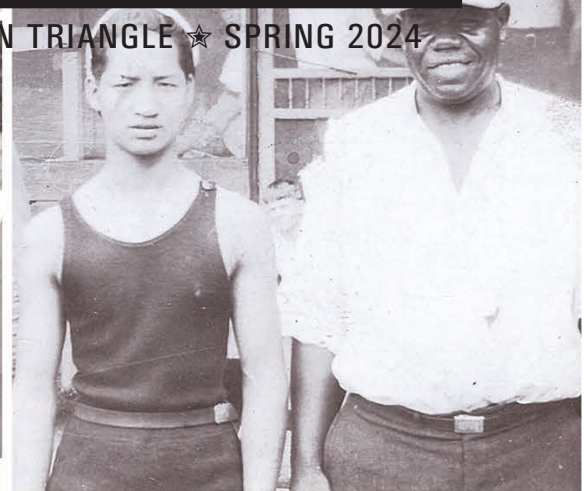
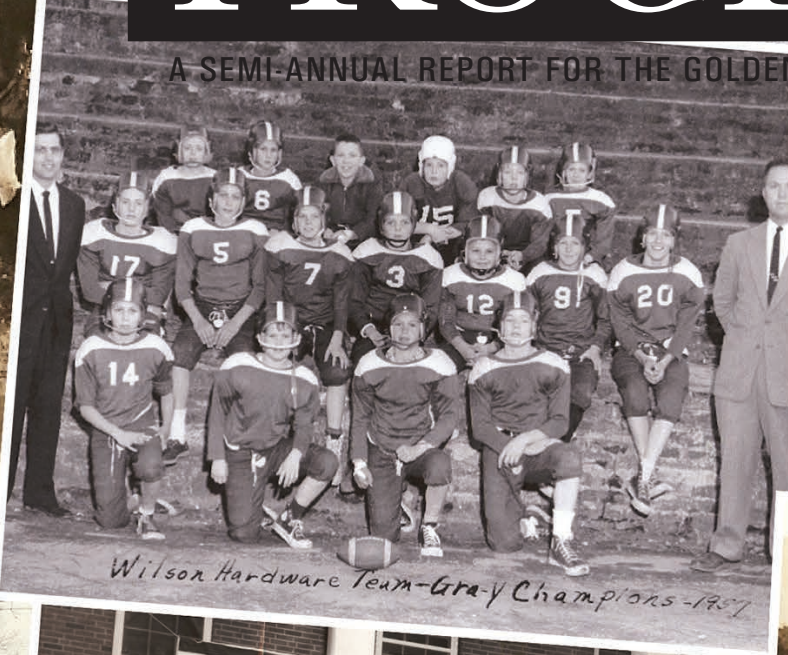


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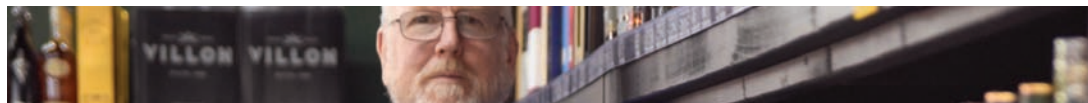
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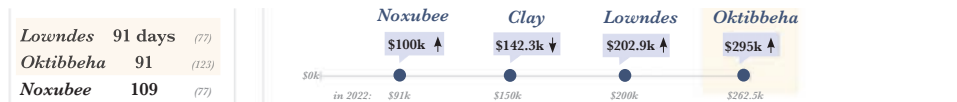
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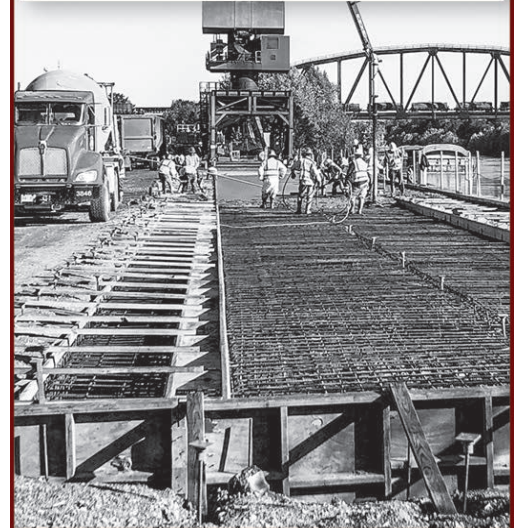
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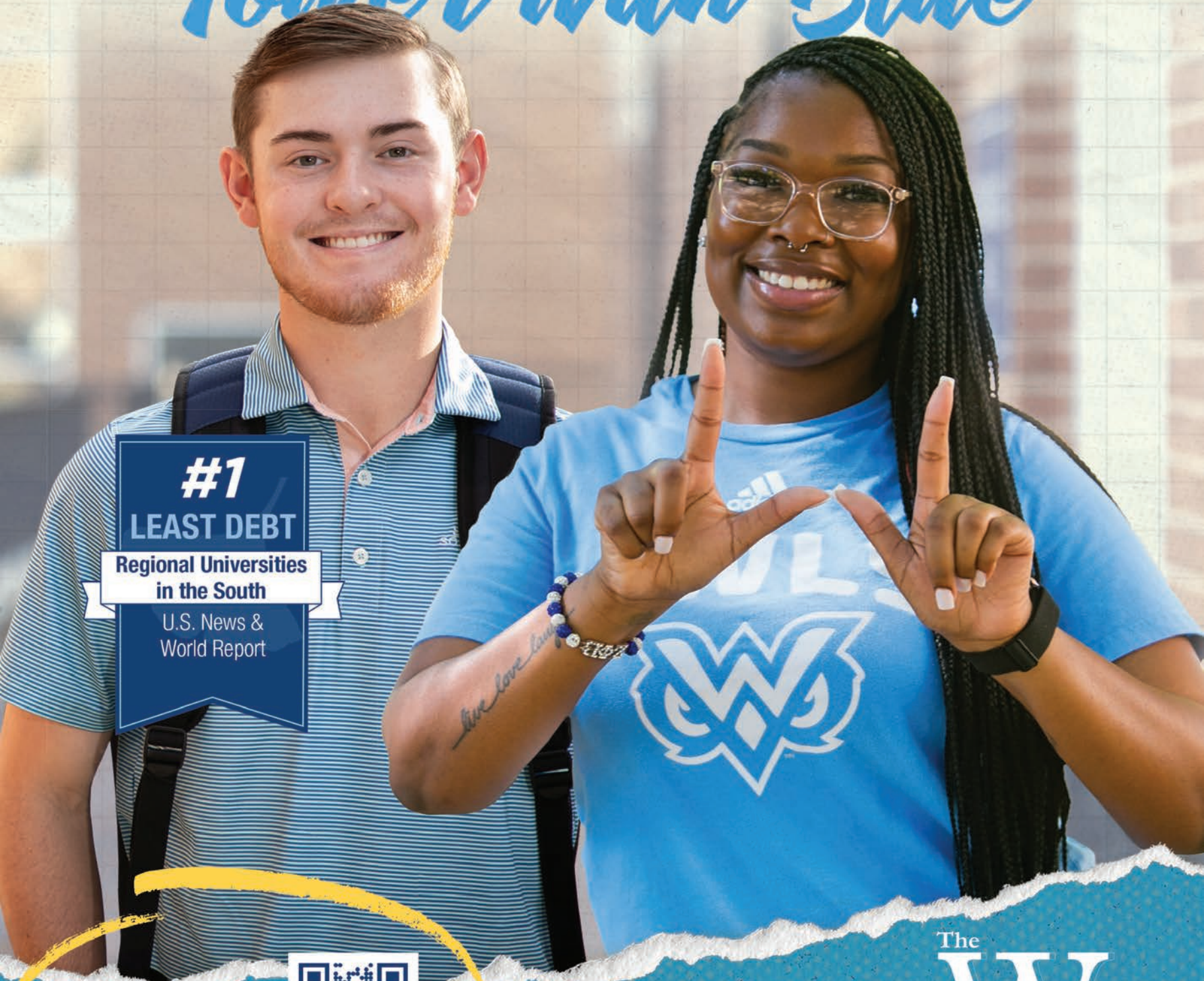
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CULTURE

A LOVELY EVENING

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The Stephen D. Lee Foundation is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the Stephen D. Lee Home & Museum, a pre-Civil War home on Seventh Street North, which served as the final home of S.D. Lee, who was the first president of Mississippi State University.

The Lee home is a showplace for both its architecture and furnishings and is available to rent for events. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.







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CRAFTING SUCCESS

JAMES ERVIN NEVER TURNS DOWN A CHALLENGE

If there is something James Ervin can't make, he has not thought of it yet.

On any given day, he is in the back of an office duplex on Highway 45 in Columbus. In the front is Mike's Fine Wine and Liquors. The back unit is where he combines his passion for tackling new challenges with hands-on craftsmanship to transform ideas into creations for his second business, Fast Dog Print Co.

For Ervin, his satisfaction as a multi-business owner lies in turning his customers' ideas into products.

"My reward is being able to produce something that somebody wants," he said. "If somebody gives me an idea, I can turn it into what they expected. That's my challenge and really what the whole business is."

Ervin spent his early childhood in southern California, growing up near the Mojave Desert before moving to Mississippi with his parents in 1968. But if anyone asks, he doesn't hesitate to say he is from Mississippi.

Even as a child, Ervin was compelled by the need to know how things work.

"I took apart a lot of stuff I couldn't put back together," he joked.

The childhood habit would be an asset as Ervin grew up. He pursued an aeronautical engineering degree in college before leaving after the first year to enter the workforce. He worked as a manager at Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation in Aberdeen for the next 25 years before taking on his own entrepreneurial aspirations.

The opportunity to buy Mike's Fine Wine and Liquors presented itself in 2014. The purchase opened the door for Ervin to begin working for himself. He would take his business ventures a step further two years later after his daughter, Kelly, asked if he would be interested in starting a T-shirt printing business.

"I've always wanted to work for myself," he said. "My daughter actually gave me the opportunity. I probably wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for her. We started out just making t-shirts out of our home bedroom, and we just expanded from there."

Fast Dog Print Co. was born. Motivated by the potential of a good challenge, he quickly



ABOVE: A selection of custom laser-engraved wood blocks and clocks, as well as a 3D-printed dragon egg and dragon tails sit on a work surface in Ervin's Columbus workshop. RIGHT: An aluminum tumbler receives a custom printed image.

mastered t-shirt printing and moved on to other print products.

T-shirts turned into banners and banners turned into laser engraved liquor bottles and handcrafted canvas frames. Soon enough, Fast Dog Print Co. became a one-stop shop for whatever printed products Ervin's customers could think up.

"Our thing is specialty," he said. "You give me an idea, (and) we'll figure out how to do it."

Ervin said research and testing are two of the primary steps that go into creating a new product.

He was asked once if he could engrave designs

on stainless steel tumblers. Ervin began researching, bought the equipment he needed and eventually, after a stack of test cups had accumulated in the corner of the shop, he finally had it figured out.

When American Idol finalist Colin Stough once stopped by the shop, he asked Ervin if he could engrave one of his guitars.

"I (told him) I've never done it, but we'll give it a shot," Ervin remembers.

He had Stough sign a piece of paper, uploaded a digital copy to the laser printer, masked off the rest of the guitar and went for it. The result was a perfect engraving featuring Stough's signature

and a set of three playing cards. The guitar still hangs in Stough's home.

"My motto is if somebody made it, I can make it," Ervin said. "I'm going to teach myself how to do it just because that's what I like to do."

In 2018, Ervin faced a challenge he was not prepared for. He was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neurological disorder in which the immune system mistakenly attacks the nervous system. He was intubated in the hospital for 21 days, unable to breathe and essentially paralyzed.

Though he recovered, Ervin is still dealing with residual symptoms from the illness. His hands are numb due to nerve damage, making it more difficult to work with smaller parts.

"It hasn't slowed me down," he said. "I'm still trying to do everything I can do. ... I don't give up. I tell somebody that I'll do my best and get it done. ... I just love the challenge of making stuff."

He applies the same philosophy in his work

at the liquor store, using his passions for wood-working and printing to create an enjoyable experience for the customers who shop there. He hand-built all of the shelving in the store, crafted the custom stone-coat countertops and printed all of the store's signage. Sometimes customers bring bottles they bought in the store back to be engraved.

Despite not advertising Fast Dog, Ervin stays busy. He said the endless amount of new projects and products keeps the work interesting.

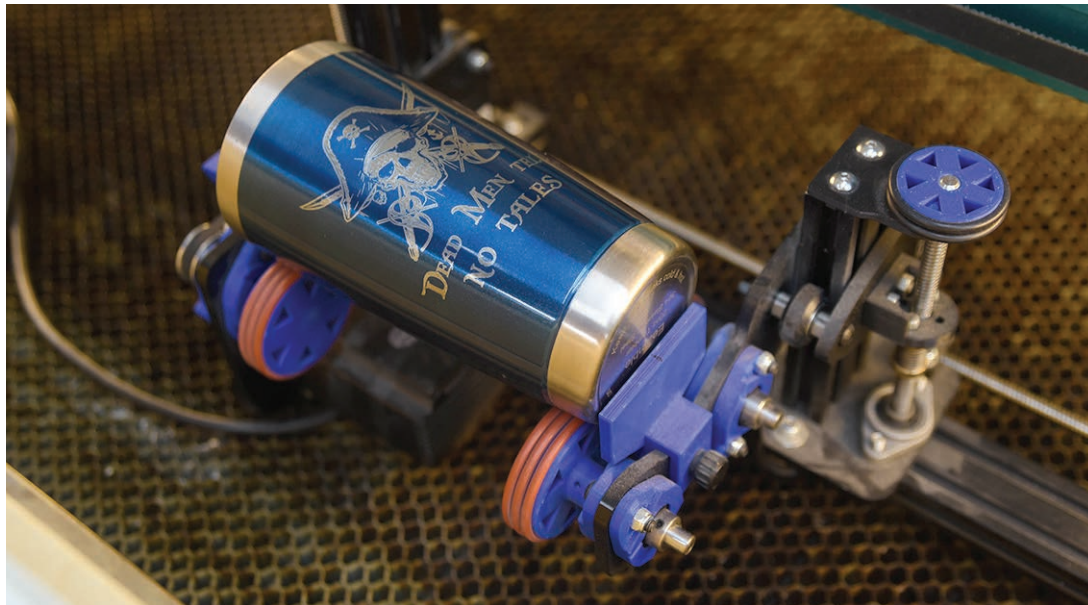
"That's what motivates me," he said. "I don't like doing the same thing over and over again."

As for what Ervin will create next, he said there is no limit. It all depends on what ideas his customers bring to him. Whatever that may be, he's sure he will be able rise to the challenge.

"Somebody wants something done? Let me figure it out."

STORY BY EMMA MCRAE

PHOTOS BY DEANNA ROBINSON



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3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

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

PROFILES BY **SLIM SMITH**
RUFF & GRAVES PHOTOS BY **J.C. LONG**
SPEARS PHOTO BY **GADE CHAMBLEE**



PAIGE SPEARS

It would have been easy enough for Paige Spears to have turned her attention to raising her three boys and helping with her husband, Jason's, financial planning business after her six-year active membership in the Columbus Junior Auxiliary chapter ended in 2016.

That is not what happened, though.

After a year on the sidelines, Spears returned to an active role, this time on the national level, serving in a variety of capacities. This year, she is serving as the national Junior Auxiliary president, an organization with 15,000 members in 92 chapters in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, Florida and Missouri.

Spears attributes her continued service through Junior Auxiliary to a boy she worked with as a part of the Junior Auxiliary Mentoring program (JAM) which is just one of the major service projects JA performs annually.

Even so, there was a time when Spears felt a little fatigued by the work.

It was about that time that Spears was paired with a boy at Cook Elementary School.

"He didn't have the best home life," Spears said. "He was incredibly shy and just didn't talk. I worked with him on a reading fair project and by the end of the year, you could tell his confidence was up, that he had embraced that time we had together."

It was at the year-end school awards ceremony that Spears recognized she had lost her enthusiasm.

"I wasn't getting what I wanted out of the experience because I had made it about me," she said. "I wasn't as invested as I should have been. I went to the awards ceremony, but I had a bad

attitude about it. I thought, 'He doesn't talk to me and doesn't care whether I'm here or not.' The auditorium was packed with family members and the ceremony dragged on. Finally, it ended and I went down to congratulate him and get out of there."

What the boy said stopped her cold.

"He said, 'Mrs. Paige, will you take a picture with me?' I realized there was no one there for him. It was just me. That really turned me around and refocused me."

It is a story Spears shares when she senses fatigue may be setting.

"A lot of people think Junior Auxiliary is just a bunch of bored housewives getting together for lunch," she said. "But it's a real commitment. Our local chapter performed 1,000 hours of service and those hours aren't meeting hours or training hours for members. At some point, it's easy to show up with half an effort or wonder if it's worth getting a babysitter for your own children to go help someone else's child. Then I think of that little boy."

As her service with JA nears its end, Spears said she and her husband hope to serve the community through a program that provides used sports equipment to kids who cannot afford it.

With all three of their sons – Barrett (12), Pearson, (10) and Henry (7) – involved in sports, the Spears know how costly equipping kids for sports programs can be.

"We saw a program that did that in Slidell and thought it was pretty cool," she said. "Jason and I have been quietly collecting and distributing equipment. We look forward to doing it on a larger scale."



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SNAPSHOTS

PAUL RUFF

Paul Ruff's performance in April's final production of Starkville Community Theater's 2023-24 season is best described as corpse-like.

That's no critique of his acting, though.

Ruff and his wife, Cindy, played the roles of a murder victims in the comedy/mystery production "Clue On Stage."

"We were basically props," Ruff said. "With all the stuff we have going on, sometimes it's nice to play a small role."

Consider that an outlier. Ruff's association with Starkville Community Theater has been anything but a small role. April's performance marked his 45th SCT production, an association that goes back to 1991 when he became the first Mississippi State student allowed to perform for the theater group.

"Back then, the thinking was Mississippi State had its own theater program and students weren't allowed to be a part of the community theater," said Ruff, a pediatrician by occupation. "But Cindy and I got married my junior year. I was married and lived in town, so they allowed me to be in the SCT. ... That opened the door for a lot of college students to be involved in Starkville Community Theater, which has been a great thing for us."

Ruff has proved to be far more than a footnote in SCT's history, which was founded in 1978.

After graduating from MSU in 1992, Ruff left Starkville to pursue his medical training. He returned to Starkville seven years later to open his own practice, Starkville Pediatric Clinic.

Since then, Ruff has served in almost every imaginable position with SCT: assistant director, director, board member on multiple occasions,

vice president and president. Starkville Pediatric Clinic sponsors SCT's summer children's program.

Three times, Ruff has been the recipient of the Mississippi Theater Association Best Performance By An Actor Award. In 2009, he was one of three nominees for Best Actor in the American Association of Community Theatre annual festival in Tacoma, Washington, for his performance in the SCT production of "Catfish Moon."

"We are a community theater and while it is a hobby, it's also serious. It's competitive theater and (SCT) has won numerous awards and prizes," Ruff said. "We're one of the most awarded community theaters in the Southeast."

It is that competitive element that drew Ruff into SCT.

Ruff and Cindy, his high school sweetheart, didn't have access to theater in their hometown of Long Beach, Mississippi. The school did have an excellent choral program, though.

"Cindy and I were both singers," Ruff said. "We had a really good choral program that competed in competitions all over the state. I think that's where we developed our love of performing and being in competitions."

For Ruff, the theater is serious, fun business.

The emphasis is on the fun part, he says.

"The big picture is that community theater is a way for people who are new to the community to get involved in something that is kind of low pressure," Ruff said. "It's a way to meet people from all walks of life who share a similar interest. It doesn't matter what your skills are, even if you can't hammer a nail, we'll find something you like to do and help you learn how to do it."

"We are super inclusive."



Micah Graves

MICAH GRAVES

To best understand how Micah Graves went from a part-time dishwasher at a local restaurant to executive sous chef for Mississippi State Athletics, you can turn to 19th Century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward,” Kierkegaard observed.

“I loved to entertain people, especially my friends,” Graves said of his teenage years. “My father would always call me Mr. Entertainment because I would constantly invite people over to our house and grill out for everybody while we swam. Just seeing the pure joy on all my friends’ faces was the sure sign that I would end up in the hospitality industry.”

That may have been a sign, but it wasn’t one Graves would recognize right away.

In the fall of 2013, Graves enrolled at Mississippi State and joined a fraternity where he again felt the urge to entertain his fraternity brothers through food.

“To keep the entertainment going, I needed a part-time job,” Graves said. “I heard from a friend that BIN612 was hiring kitchen staff. I had never worked in a kitchen before, so I was eager to try something new.”

“After a couple years, I had learned from the previous Head Chefs/Sous Chefs that ran the kitchen,” Graves said. “I found out that we also took part in multiple food competitions. We won numerous trophies in numerous categories.”

Those competitions appealed to Graves’ competitive nature.

“I wanted to be a part of food competitions to showcase my creativity and love for the art of food. After I helped win an award, that fueled me to

compete and win more. Over the next few years, I attended nine food festivals and three competitions, winning two of those with best tasting dish.”

Graves progressed quickly, becoming the restaurant’s sous chef in 2019 and head chef in 2020.

During his six years at BIN612, Graves learned the art of cooking. Learning the science of cooking came next.

“The new job opportunity fell into my lap,” Graves said. “I was happy at BIN612, but I knew I had more to learn and grow. In October of 2023, a friend messaged me asking if I knew anyone who would be interested in being the chef for MSU Athletics, and without hesitation I said ‘me.’”

One of the perks in the new job was that it allowed Graves to attend MSU sporting events on weekends, something he was never able to do at BIN612 where weekends meant all hands on deck.

Graves, 29, soon realized there were far greater benefits in the new position as he worked with MSU dieticians to provide Bulldogs athletes with a diet designed to enhance their performance.

“Working with the athletes has changed me as a chef for sure,” Graves said. “I now pay more attention to detail as to what all exactly is in each ingredient that makes up a particular dish. I have to be knowledgeable on all dietary restrictions/allergens. The main challenge to being successful is understanding that not everybody sees food the same way as me, but I am also not preparing food for myself. The main focus is fueling the athletes.”

That doesn’t mean sacrificing flavor, though.

“I put my heart and soul into what I create,” Graves said. “Just seeing anyone who enjoys my food always puts a smile on my face.”



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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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ELENA ROMERO PUTS A TWIST ON THE CLASSICS

Behind the bar at No Way Jose, Elena Romero pours a lot of shots of Patron and margaritas. Most of the time, she is very carefully listening to customers and following their lead.

“Someone older, like a guy, may just want whiskey and water or something like that,” Romero said. “But then like, you get some girls that are here on their lunch break and they want a cute little drink to take Instagram pictures, and they want something sweet.”

Romero said that she started working at the restaurant four years ago, though she moved behind the bar around two years ago. Over the years, Romero has gotten to know more and more people working behind the bar – her favorite part of the job.

Now, she has a few regulars who have gotten more comfortable with her, asking her to get more creative and mix it up. When she gets a chance to experiment, she often puts her own spin on classic drinks.

“Sometimes, it stumps me,” she said. “I don’t want to give them something bad or something that they don’t like. ... But I’ll try something out, and a lot of times I’ll do remixes of drinks in there that I think may taste better.”

Recently, she said, she has been experimenting more and more with passion fruit flavor in her drinks, substituting it in here and there to see what it will taste like. When asked to share a recipe for a drink of her own, her first instinct was to reach for the passion fruit and tequila.

No Way Jose is located at 125 MS-12 in Starkville.

MARGARITA PASSION PUNCH

This combination of margarita and passion fruit flavor makes for an absolutely delicious afternoon drink. The fresh lime juice pops through, lightening up the drink and making it one of a kind. It is served in a glass with a salt rim and a slice of lime.

- 1 oz. Casamigos reposado (Romero’s favorite tequila)
- ½ oz. orange liqueur
- 1 lime (and juice)
- 1 oz. passion fruit syrup
- 1 oz. margarita mix

Step 1: Prepare glass with salt rim. Cut slice off of lime for garnish. Then, juice the rest of the lime into a shaker.

Step 2: Combine all ingredients in a shaker. Fill shaker with ice and shake vigorously. Pour drink into prepared glass.

Step 3: Add slice of lime to rim of glass. Serve and enjoy!

STORY BY **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**

PHOTO BY **J.C. LONG**

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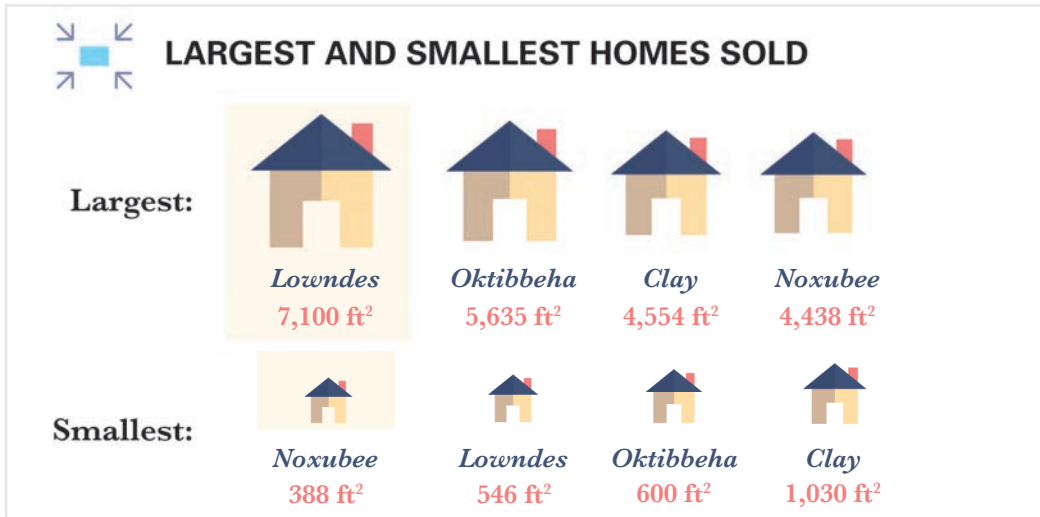
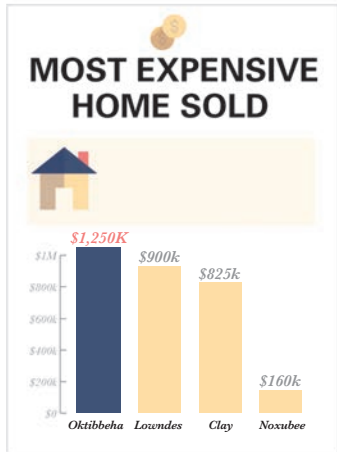
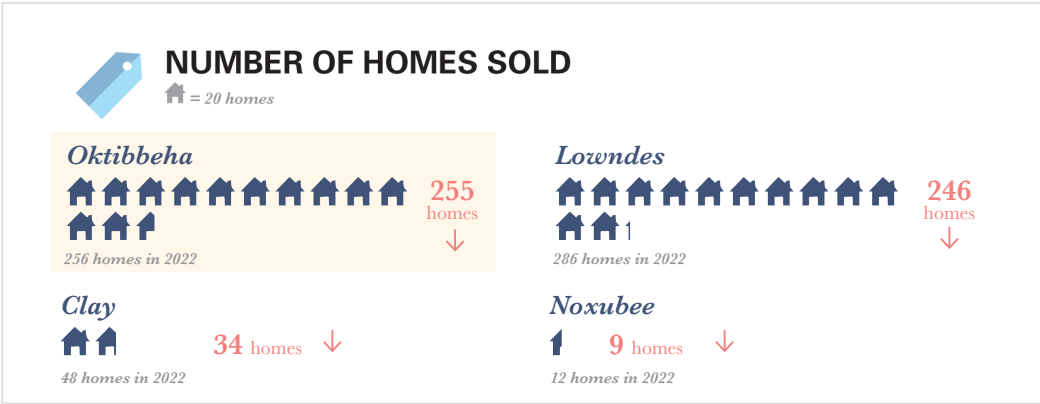
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Enduring Dedication: Dr. Ski's 40-Year Journey in Pediatric Care



With four decades under his belt, Dr. Jacob Skiwski's legacy at the Children's Health Center of Columbus speaks volumes. Since its inception on March 30, 1984, "Dr. Ski" has been a beacon of unwavering commitment to pediatric healthcare. Though 2023 saw him sidelined due to medical leave, his dedication remained steadfast, a testament to his enduring passion for his profession.

After graduating medical school at Loma Linda University in California, Dr. Ski spent 3 years in Biloxi, Mississippi as a resident. After completing 8 years in the Air Force, Dr. Ski settled in Columbus, MS in 1978. Dr. Ski briefly worked with Dr. Buckley before opening his own clinic in 1984.

"A lot has changed over 40 years; the landscape of healthcare entirely has but my roots and values have not. That's why I'm still here 40 years later. I help kids and I love what I do. We don't pick and choose patients based on what color insurance card mom or dad have in their wallet - give me a break. We help everyone - it's our duty." When asked what has changed in the landscape of Healthcare these past 40 years, Dr. Ski said something shocking:

"I'd say the most disturbing change has been watching healthcare turn corporate. The largest employer of Pediatricians is an insurance company...and insurance companies are largely trying to practice medicine without a license with how they operate. Private Equity firms seem to be buying up practices nonstop and the data shows that patient quality of care suffers from this. Deaths skyrocket when private equity firms get involved. The problem is corporations diversify into anything that'll make them money, and they have jumped into healthcare but forgot to bring their hearts with them."

When asked what else has changed, Dr. Ski laughed and said, "Computers - they can't stand me and I can't stand them. My daughter Sabrina keeps me up to date with technology - I just want to take care of patients."





Despite the changing healthcare landscape, Dr. Ski remains committed to his patients and his community. He prioritizes inclusivity and over the years, the fundamental needs of my patients have remained constant, yet there has been a significant uptick in anxiety, depression, and obesity, particularly since the onset of the Covid pandemic.

In response to these challenges, Dr. Ski enlisted the expertise of Dr. Calvin French, who joined the practice in 2010, to dedicate an entire day to addressing weight-related issues and metabolic disorders in children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recognized the serious impact of childhood obesity on the lives of 14.4 million children and teenagers. In 2023, they released their first set of guidelines for pediatricians and other healthcare providers on how to effectively and safely manage overweight and obesity in young people. These guidelines, known as clinical practice guidelines (CPG), are based on solid evidence and aim for a comprehensive approach to treating obesity in children and adolescents.

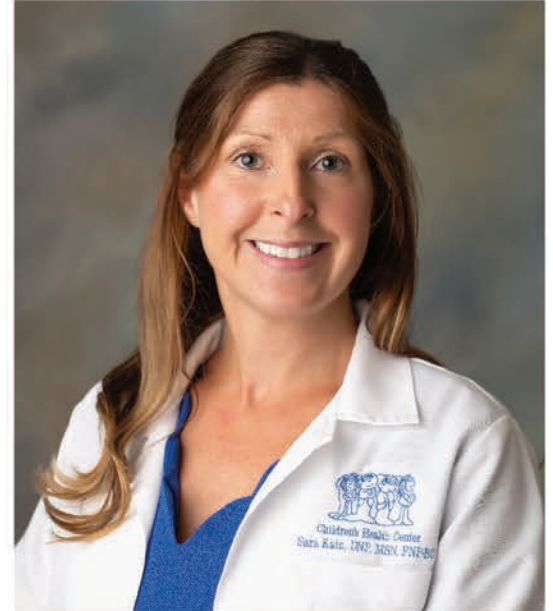
The guidelines emphasize looking at the whole child and address various factors that can contribute to excessive weight gain.

“I get asked so often, “What causes Obesity? Is it Genetics? Lifestyle? Depression? Hormones? The answer is yes! All of the above! The ideal obesity treatment plan involves a comprehensive, patient-centered, evidence-based approach which involves the four pillars: nutrition, physical activity, behavior, and education. These tools when used simultaneously can improve positive outcomes in the lives of patients dealing with obesity and we’re seeing that this works. -Dr. Calvin French. Dr. Calvin shares Dr. Ski’s values.

Furthermore, to tackle the surge in anxiety and depression cases, Dr. Ski brought onboard Dr. Sara Kain, a specialist in Behavioral Disorders.

Not only since Covid have we seen a rise in anxiety and depression but add in the pressures of social media. Too often social media is heavily weighing on our pediatric population with what the social norms should be by the standards set forth on these platforms. - Dr. Sara Kain

Dr Ski: “We measure our success in patient care and satisfaction. It’s the secret ingredient that has sustained us for four decades. Retirement isn’t on my radar yet; perhaps in another forty years.”



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Frank P. Phillips Memorial YMCA



Just about everybody in Lowndes County has a Y story.

Whether at the Frank P. Phillips YMCA downtown, its Caledonia branch, the now shuttered branches at New Hope and Sim Scott, or summer camps at Camp Pratt, those stories have been built over a century.

Jimmy Woodruff's story took a formative turn on the pool's high-dive platform when he was 9.

"I climbed up there and walked over to the edge," Woodruff said. "I remember looking down ... and my friends were down there yelling, 'Jump! Jump!' For a 9-year-old, it looked like a 20-story building. I was too scared to jump."

He turned around and climbed down. Days later, he summoned the nerve to try once more.

This time, he took the plunge. It wouldn't be the last time he faced down a scary situation at the Y.

Woodruff retired from a 37-year career with Kroger and became the YMCA's executive director in February 2020. A month later, the COVID-19 pandemic closed the facility. It reopened later that year under the strain of mask mandates, social distancing and plummeting membership numbers.

Woodruff and his staff met the moment.

"Whatever we had to do, we did," he said. "We're a small town, so we got through this whole thing together."

Membership and program participation has returned to pre-COVID levels, and this year, the



ABOVE: Columbus Y Director Jimmy Woodruff, center, and staff members plan the organization's centennial celebration. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: A celebration of 100 years of YMCA in America, circa 1951. OPPOSITE PAGE MIDDLE: A 1957 YMCA league football team. OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: An image of the YMCA lobby from the mid-1900s.

Columbus Y is celebrating the centennial of its founding. The broader YMCA organization was founded in London, England in 1844.



The Columbus Young Men's Christian Association was organized April 22, 1924, during a dinner at First Methodist Church. A year later, the organization's first board president and eventual namesake offered an endowment of \$100,000 for the project. Phillips left another \$100,000 to the Y upon his death in 1942.

In 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Pratt deeded the organization property in south Lowndes County that became Camp Pratt, and the downtown Y formally opened April 24, 1931.

The downtown building has undergone renovations and expansions through the years, even surviving a fire in 1998.

A segregated Sim Scott YMCA built for African Americans in 1964 remained open until 1985. A New Hope branch built in 2001 closed in 2020, three years after The YMCA sold Camp Pratt. The Caledonia branch was built in 2003.

Today, the YMCA offers its more than 5,000 members a swimming pool, gymnasium and 24-hour fitness center, as well as youth sports and adult fitness programs. Its Rock Steady boxing class – an adaptive fitness class where Parkinson's patients practice boxing drills – was the first certified program of its kind in the state.

But for George Irby, who joined the Y in the late 1980s and served two terms on the board, the C in the name matters – whether its conspicuous Bible verses posted throughout the facility, faith-based programs or just an understood behavior code that keeps the place “wholesome.”





Youth, in particular, notice.

“You don’t bring the park to the YMCA,” Irby said, referring to language and behavior to which kids might be more prone in a less controlled environment.



Penny Bowen sifts through an old dormitory on the third floor of the downtown Y. It’s late March, and she has about a month to complete a “memorabilia room” as part of a block party and open house to celebrate the centennial.

She has plenty of memorabilia to work with. An old record player. Old photos of Camp



ABOVE: Collin Adair works out at the Y in April. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: This photo, courtesy of Pam Brownlee, shows the “high dive” and “low dive” at the Y pool, before it was enclosed and the diving boards removed. OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: A fitness class from the mid-1900s.



Locals attend the 1978 groundbreaking of Reece Gym, which is now the Y's basketball gym.

Pratt. Swimming trophies from as far back as the 1950s. Decades-old props from a drama club production. A box full of inline skates once used for an indoor hockey league. Training manuals on everything from how to teach diving to how to become a pastor.

"The Y has done so many things over the years, it's mind-boggling," said Bowen, an interior designer who serves on the YMCA board.

She "became a believer" in the YMCA 14 years ago. Her father had just passed away, and her mother "was floundering."

"She came to a little exercise class at the Caledonia branch," Bowen said. "She just blossomed. ... Now she's a (fitness) instructor there."

Between her work and her own four-day-a-week workout regimen at the Y, Bowen volunteered to set up the memorabilia room, as well as set up one of the old dorms just like the young men who once lived there would have found it.

Young men looking for work who needed a place to stay could rent one of seven rooms on the third floor for \$1 a day until as recently as 30 or so years ago. Each room came with an iron-frame twin bed, a desk, chair, dresser and Bible.

Tenants were issued a washcloth and bar of soap and had access to a community shower.

Charlie Box claims James Trotter, who later served as mayor, once lived on the Y's third floor, but "not a lot of people realize that." Most folks know Box lived there for a few months, though.

Entering his sophomore year in high school, he moved from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, ahead of his family so he could join Lee High's football team for summer practice. His father had gotten a job in Columbus but couldn't move until the fall.

"It was kind of scary, but I wanted to play football here," Box said.

He found acceptance and help at the Y, he said. When he became the Y's executive director in 1996, he worked for 13 years to pay that forward.

"The mission of the Y is taking care of young people," he said. "When I went up there, it was with the attitude of doing that."

During his tenure, the Y bolstered its women's ministry, arts offerings and programs for members with disabilities.

The “most important thing we did” came after a child’s accidental drowning in Columbus made local headlines. With no other public pool available to youth, Box arranged for Columbus Municipal School District elementary students to be bussed in a class at a time for swimming lessons.

“We found out a lot of those kids had never been in water any deeper than a bathtub, and they just had a great fear of the water. ... They may not have learned how to swim, but they

overcame their fear of the water.”



Frank Griffin first got his first YMCA membership at age 3. At 86, you can still find him there some days.

“You might say I grew up at the YMCA,” Griffin said. “... Other than the church and my house, the YMCA is probably the most treasured institution in my life.”



Boys stand on a dock at Camp Pratt in the early 1900s.

As a 5-year-old student at Franklin Academy, he walked to the downtown Y after school each day and stayed there until his parents picked him up at 5:30.

As a fifth- and sixth-grader, Griffin's peewee basketball teams traveled to play at the Selma, Alabama, YMCA.

Griffin, a retired banker, spent decades on the YMCA board, many of them as treasurer. One of his first rites of passage at the Y, though, came as a high school freshman earning his spot on "the bench" that once sat outside the front of the building.

"When you got to sit on that bench, you knew you had arrived," Griffin said. "They didn't let any young boys sit there. When you got into high school, you could sit on the bench."

As a junior in high school, Griffin was a counselor at Camp Pratt. He came into town one day to wash his clothes and swung by the Y to visit with friends at the pool. Margaret Burgess, one of his classmates, was also swimming that day.

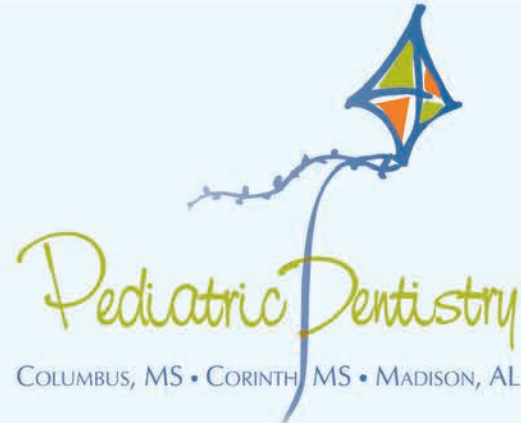
"We had never really spoken to each other," he said. "I don't know, to this day, what possessed me, but I walked up to her and asked, 'Do you want to go to the picture show?' ... She said, 'I guess so.'"

Frank and Margaret dated the next three years. They've been married the past 66.

STORY BY ZACK PLAIR

**PHOTOS BY DEANNA ROBINSON
AND YMCA ARCHIVES**

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From left are Deputy Clerks Tia Rushing,
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and Chancery Clerk Cindy Goode.



Name: Ben Carver

Age: 43

Birthplace: Clinton, MS

Spouse: Jamie Carver

Children: Hayes and Delta Kayte

Hobbies: Coaching baseball, spending time outdoors, mentoring youth with hunting and fishing, spending time with his family

MEET BEN CARVER

After four terms as Ward 1 Starkville alderman, Ben Carver threw his hat in for District 1 Oktibbeha County Supervisor in 2023. He won the seat in a runoff election and is now in the unique position of having served in both city and county elected positions. Reporter Abigail Sipe Rochester talked to Carver in late March.

What drew you into politics?

I started off my career playing baseball at Delta State, and then I got an offer on the Mississippi State campus, so I was a governmental training specialist for the Center for Governmental Training Technology (with the Mississippi State Extension Service). And I worked with a gentleman named P.C. McLaurin, who was a former alderman and a gentleman who was also a former alderman named Sumner Davis.

So, I just sat around and learned from those guys and the center for governmental training and technology was in the Mississippi State Extension Service. I (completed contract work) for the office of Homeland Security, and I just traveled. My claim to fame is that I've traveled to all 297 municipalities and towns in the state of Mississippi conducting Homeland Security training, emergency management, and I just fell in love with elected officials and what they do and how they contribute to society.

You recently moved from the Board of

Aldermen to the Board of Supervisors. What was the appeal of the county seat over staying as an alderman?

When I obtained my master's of public policy and administration, I had a county government basis. I've always been drawn to that through my previous work with all the 82 counties. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed being around those individuals I saw statewide, and just learning from them how every county differentiates their style.

In Mississippi, you've got 44 counties that operate under the unit system. That's basically a road manager and delegating authority that way. And then 38 are on a beat system. And I'm really drawn to the unit system and how we operate here in Oktibbeha County. I think it's efficient and effective.

I feel like my work was done with the city. I had a very successful 14 years. Got a lot of good things done. I think Kim Moreland will just pick up the baton and run with it. Some of those things we have to restructure. I was consistent for four terms.

Were there any skills you learned in your time as an alderman that you hope helps you as a supervisor now?

Absolutely. One was just delegation of authority, being able to trust your department heads and managers. Giving them the ability to have some flexibility. It's a professional level career, and sometimes, especially in our form of county gov-

ernment, it's being able to task and to move on and stay at policy level instead of getting down in the weeds every day.

Second was just budgeting. How to look long term and see where we want to be as a county. And then obviously, my kind of role on the board now is also making those relationships with the statewide elected officials – your state reps and your state senators. We're trying to find funding sources and there's lots of federal money and state money out there. I'm just trying to ... get some of that here in Oktibbeha County.

What barriers do you see for the county right now and how do you plan to overcome those?

Most of it's funding. ... Just last week, we delegated most of our ARPA funds, which is the American Rescue Plan Act for COVID funds. That was huge because we got a lot of equipment needs that the county has been needing for two or three years, which is probably our most pressing thing. We got motor graders bought, the rollers and sweepers, all the things that maintain the county roads, we've got all those purchased. So, over the next couple years, you should see improvements in road conditions out in the county.

Next is staffing. In my personal opinion, we need an HR person, a manager. Right now, our county administrator and her staff kind of just handle the onboard process when somebody comes on. But I think it's time. The county's growing. We need an HR person. I think we really need a designated IT person. At the current time, the (Golden Triangle) Planning and Development District handles all of our telecommunications, all of our video conferencing, all our

recording of the meetings and things like that. And I'd rather have an internal person I could speak to on a daily basis in the office.

Lastly, looking at some type of animal control person or ordinance. When I was campaigning, I ran across four or five vicious dogs. And really, that's something that since I've been in the seat, I've realized how much of a problem sometimes the feral dogs are out in the county.

How do you measure success for yourself as a public representative?

Getting re-elected. (He laughed.) It's very hard for a Republican sometimes to get elected in this county. It's a blue county in all your presidential elections, so majority Democrat. However, you have something they call political baggage, due to the nature of the executive level decision making that we make on a daily basis, you're going to make somebody mad, whether it be a zoning issue or a regulation or something like that. I'm OK with that.

But people know for the most part that if I've made a decision, I've reached out and gotten a lot of counsel and gotten other people's opinions, and I'm just trying to do the right thing for the county or the city. So I've had people from both political parties over the years say, 'Man, you know, you're pretty consistent in how you vote and how you think.' And I try to vote on my faith and my family and my convictions. You put those three together and you get a pretty consistent voting record.

INTERVIEW BY **ABIGAIL SIPE**
ROCHESTER
PHOTO BY **GADE CHAMBLEE**



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FROM NIGERIA TO STARKVILLE

MSU ASSISTANT PROFESSOR TALKS POETRY BOOK, WORKING THROUGH GRIEF

Growing up in Minna, in Niger State, Nigeria, Saddiq Dzukogi remembers loving to play soccer. He loved table tennis. He loved picking fresh mangos and fruit off of the trees with his friends.

And for as long as he can remember, he also loved writing.

While he never imagined he could make it into a career when he was younger, today Dzukogi works as an assistant professor in the Mississippi State University English department, sharing his passion with others.

He also shares something else through his book “Your Crib, My Qibla” – the story of the daughter he lost.

“The book was as a result of trying to wrestle with what that means, losing a child, and trying to understand the grief of that moment. And trying to understand what it means to continue in the world without that beautiful angel that adds so much meaning to your life.”

Dzukogi came to the United States in 2018. But he grew up going to Nigerian schools, where

he met his wife, Saadatu. The pair met in the equivalent of middle school in 2002, but stayed friends until after high school, when Saadatu called Dzukogi and told him she was in love with him.

“I was like, ‘really?’” He said. “I was being such a boy. It just made sense. It was like someone had turned on the light. Because why else does the wind sing when this person is close to me? Why does my heart flutter when they’re close to me?”

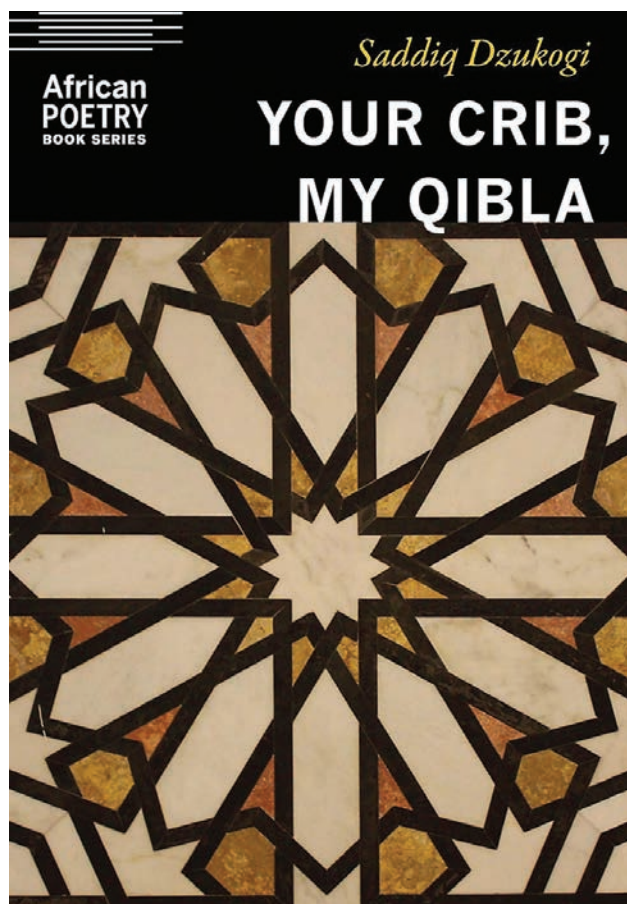
Dzukogi started pursuing higher education, getting a bachelor’s in mass communication at Ahmadu Bello University, before marrying his wife in 2013. A year later, their oldest son Rahan was born. By 2016, their daughter, Bahrah, was born.

When Bahrah was born, Dzukogi was working an office job doing development work in Nigeria. His daughter’s birth spurred him to pursue even more education to continue building his career for a better life for his daughter. He started applying to creative writing programs in America,

including the PhD program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

But two days after he submitted his application, Bahrah passed away unexpectedly. She was 21 days past her first birthday.

“She was the reason why I wanted to come,” he said. “I wanted to be better for her, to be a father that can protect her in this world. And I figured the best way I can do that is to build myself up. So when she passed, it was difficult to come, because she was the spur of that decision. But ultimately, I decided to come, even if she wasn’t here, because I felt that maybe that was the whole purpose of her coming into this world, to hand me this light to be more and be better than I am.”



Dzukogi started a daily ritual of writing journal entries about his grief and his daughter while still living in Nigeria for seven months. He briefly paused the ritual to move to Nebraska, and then resumed for another few months once he was state-side in 2018.

These journal entries eventually became the poems in “Your Crib, My Qibla.” Working with Ghanaian poet Kwame Dawes as his editor, he went through a difficult revision process to create the book as it exists today. By 2021, the book was published by University of Nebraska Press.

The Arabic word “qibla” literally translates to the word “direction.” Dzukogi called his daughter a powerful energy and a light in his life.

“Ultimately, the purpose is to immortalize her in the world, and to give the world the opportunity to meet her,” he said. “When the original poems were published in journals, it was difficult. But that was just the price to pay to keep her bounded in this physical world in some form.”

He spent four years working in the PhD program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and he and his wife had two more children, Farid and Ilhan.

In 2022, Dzukogi was offered a job as a faculty member in the Mississippi State English Department. He said he has always felt “drawn” to Mississippi, and he was excited to take the job.

Dzukogi said he loves the natural world in Mississippi, and he takes daily walks around the city, through the MSU campus or at the Memorial Rose Garden. Those walks feed his writing. He always carries a notebook in hand, in case he comes up with a line or two of poetry to write.

His family, he said, has adjusted well to living in the South, though their kitchen, music and



other entertainment is still “pretty Nigerian,” as he hopes to pass along aspects of Nigerian culture to his children.

“America and Nigeria share the same boundary in my household,” he said. “That’s just wild, because Nigeria is like 7,000 miles away across the sea. But that doesn’t make any difference

because there’s a real proximity and a familial proximity in my household between Nigeria and America.”

STORY BY ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER
PHOTOS BY J.C. LONG



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Construction dominates developments in the four-county area over the past six months, whether industrial sites, bridges or sewer improvements.

COLUMBUS AND LOWNDES COUNTY

In Lowndes County, economic development news continues to dominate, with several large projects underway.

Construction is progressing in leaps and bounds for Aluminum Dynamics at both its main campus, located near Golden Triangle Regional



Aluminum Dynamics is shown under construction in this March 2024 photo.

Airport, and its biochar plant. Numbers of construction workers in the area for both projects are expected to roughly double by this summer.

The first of several solar farms located in western Lowndes County are also expected to be complete soon, relieving the pressure on county roads from the long procession of logging trucks and equipment in and out of the area.

Due diligence work on the planned Cinco megasite is also progressing, with surveyors assessing the 1,000-plus acres north of Highway 82, also in western Lowndes County. The county and the Golden Triangle Development LINK are

working with the Tennessee Valley Authority on scoping to meet the energy needs of any future development.

In the city, work is getting underway on the first phase of a watershed project funded by a bit over \$6 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding. Engineering work got started in March. Work is expected to involve cleaning out ditches, replacing some aging drainage infrastructure and building a detention pond.

The city is also moving forward with an annexation proposal that would take in two areas on the city's eastern fringes. The council passed

an annexation ordinance in March, and will soon file a petition with Lowndes County Chancery Court to officially take in the new areas.

Repair work continues on the pedestrian bridge, located at Riverside Park. The bridge has been closed ever since it was hit by a barge back in 2020. Malouf Construction is now on site, affecting repairs. The work is expected to wrap up this summer.

STARKVILLE AND OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

While detour signs and road work have been a fixture in Downtown Starkville for most of the past year, that time is coming to an end.

In May of last year Starkville Utilities started replacing old, undersized sewer lines under East Main, Lampkin, Washington and Jackson streets with new pipes. Streets were temporarily patched

after the replacements were complete, and now the area has been overlaid with fresh paving.

Starkville Utilities is asking for a little help from Oktibbeha County when it comes to wastewater. The city of Starkville, Mississippi State University and a good bit of the county outside the city limits are served by a single wastewater plant. Built in 1979, it is at the edge of its capacity.

The city has pledged \$1.24 million from its ARPA allotment for upgrades, but that falls far short of the estimated \$7 million to \$8 million cost. The city has asked the supervisors to commit some of its own ARPA money towards that cost, but no decision has been made.

The Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District is weighing whether to build a new high school. The board has approved an authorization to raise up to \$87 million through

Downtown Starkville



bonds, but to date has only pulled down \$1 million. That money will fund a facilities study to assess necessary upgrades and whether or not to build the new high school.

WEST POINT/CLAY COUNTY

West Point has continued to see retail development. A new Zaxby's and Connie's Chicken have both opened in recent months. Owl's Head Alloy, which does aluminum recycling, bought the old Blazon Tube building on Industrial Access Road. Once operational, it will employ between 50 and 60 workers.

The city and Clay County were awarded an Appalachian Regional Commission grant to expand sewer service to the Peco Foods location. Both pitched in for matching funds, and the state provided some funding as well. The project is currently in the design phase.

Meanwhile, plans to replace the old gazebo downtown are moving along. The Growth Alliance has about \$100,000 in place, and is pursuing additional funding through Mississippi Main Street to address drainage issues at the site.

Clay County also received about \$175,000 in federal grant money to buy computers for vehicles at the sheriff's office. The computers will allow deputies to run tags and driver's licenses on site, as well as write tickets from their patrol vehicles.

MACON/NOXUBEE COUNTY

Clearing and site preparation work is underway at the Huber Engineered Woods site near Shuqualak. Huber, which is based in North Carolina, is investing over \$400 million in a mill located on 551 acres off of Highway 45. Construction is due to end in late 2025. The



New restaurants in West Point



Huber construction site

mill will eventually employ about 160 people.

The city of Macon is working on replacing the old North Street bridge with money from the Mississippi Department of Transportation's Emergency Road and Bridge Repair program. The city received permission from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History to tear down the old structure, which had to be closed after it became unsafe

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for traffic.

Engineering work is underway on a replacement structure.

The city is also in a holding pattern on a new hangar at Macon Municipal Airport. A metal building containing four T-hangars has been ordered, but delivery has been delayed due to supply issues.

STORY BY **BRIAN JONES**
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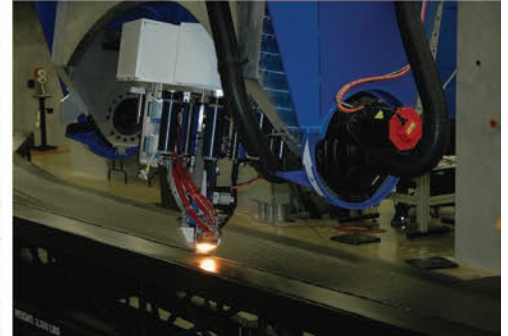
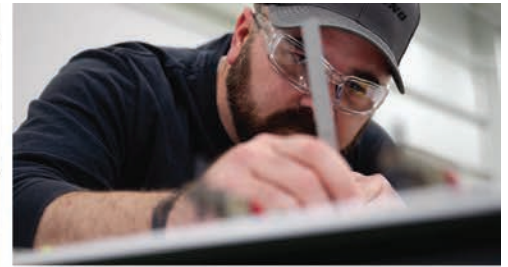
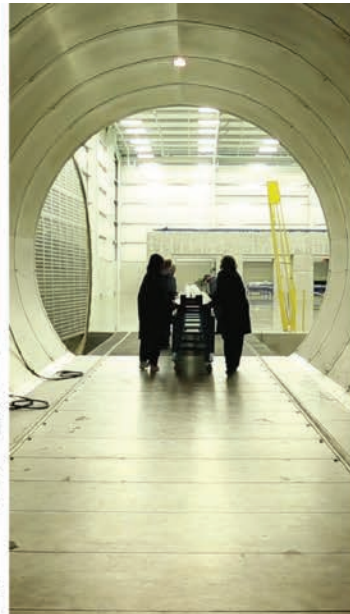
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