PROGRESS

PROGRESS

A SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE ★ FALL 2024

GRASS FED

A handful of farmers are making local raised beef within reach

THE COMMERCIAL DISPATCH

FALL 2024

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THE COMMERCIAL DISPATCH

Savannah McGhee and Liam Sanchez, 10, pick out books during the Possumtown Book Fest.

Elijah Lewellen, 9, and Jarvier Walls, 9, take a look at Dog Man books during the Possumtown Book Fest.

EDUCATION

A VEHICLE TO SHARE STORIES

FIRST BOOK FESTIVAL IS A CULMINATION OF BOOK STORE'S COMMUNITY ENRICHMENT GOALS

When Emily Liner opened Friendly City Books in 2020, she thought she was just opening a "quaint little small town bookstore."


Liner

Liner couldn't have guessed that just four years later, she and her team would put on the city's first book festival. Even more than that, she never guessed the Possumtown Book Fest would draw about 1,000 attendees downtown.

"I honestly feel honored that that many people wanted to come see what we were doing," Liner said. "It was really special. I was really touched by how many people came out. And all the authors who came, too."

While Friendly City Books initially opened during the COVID-19 pandemic, Liner said, she always wanted it to be a place that brought people together over the love of reading.

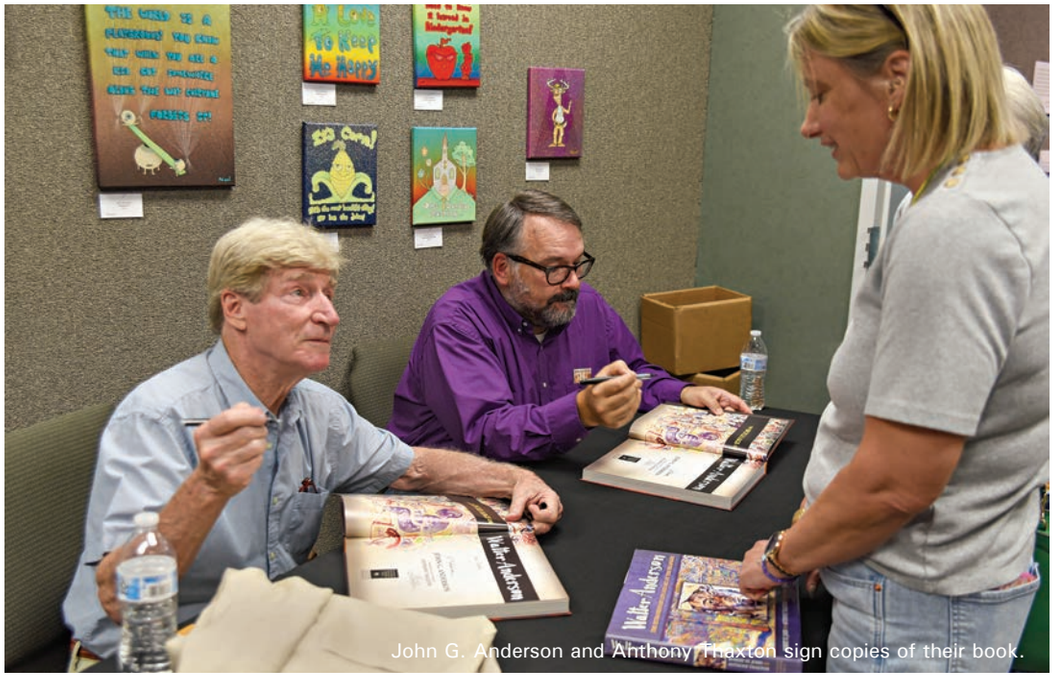
"Books are a vehicle to share stories," Liner said. "People thrive on being able to tell their story to someone else, and what I hope to do through the bookstore is also create a venue where people can receive stories from someone else, and learn from someone's life that may not be the same as theirs."

Over the years, Liner has worked to increase community outreach from the store, working with the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library System and Mississippi University for Women to produce reading programs and events in the city. The bookstore has also hosted more than 100 authors as a part of these smaller events, she said.

But last year supporters wanted to be able to help with growing the programs even further, beyond what the bookstore could do as a business, Liner said. A nonprofit soon took shape – the Friendly City Books Community Connection, a special project of the CREATE Foundation.

With the help of the CREATE Foundation, the nonprofit was able to start taking tax free donations, which allowed the bookstore's mission to reach even more people. Particularly, Liner said, the Community Connection has allowed her to bring authors to local schools, sometimes giving away free books to whole grades.

"Starting the nonprofit basically helped us to



John G. Anderson and Anthony Thaxton sign copies of their book.


Sarah Frances Hardy reads to children during the Possumtown Book Fest.

do the community programs we were already doing at a much bigger scale," Liner said. "There was only so much that we could do as Friendly City Books, Inc."

With donations and support from groups like the Mississippi Humanities Council, the Mississippi Book Festival, Visit Columbus and the Columbus Arts Council, a larger event like the Possumtown Book Fest became possible, and Liner and her team started dreaming of what it could be like. They worked behind the scenes to arrange visits from authors, panels, a kids morning program, a local author showcase, an adult book fair and more.

On Aug. 24, from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., all that hard work came to fruition. The Rosenzweig Arts Center was filled with books, books and more books. With the crowds coming and going throughout the day, the building practically buzzed with excitement.

Throughout the day, visiting authors discussed everything from cozy mysteries to historical fiction to the art of Walter Anderson upstairs in the Omnova Theatre.

John Grinstead Anderson and Anthony Thaxton came to the festival to share their new book, "The Bicycle Logs of Walter Anderson." The book includes John Anderson's written account of his father's life side-by-side with pages designed with his art as a way to share his story in a way it has never been told before.

Anderson and Thaxton both have Columbus ties, but the "successful first festival" gave them a chance to come back and share the book.

"We're proud of the book, but also, we're proud that Emily has started this festival," Thaxton said. "What a great thing for Columbus. And we're proud that the Columbus Arts Council has invested in this, and everyone has come together."

Even with positive feedback from authors and so much excitement from the crowds, Liner said putting on a second festival would be a hefty undertaking. Still, with enough help and support, she said she is considering it.

"It really energizes me to keep it going," Liner said. "We've had people ask will there be another? And I feel like it's a strong possibility."

STORY BY **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**


A line forms for the kids program of the Possumtown Book Fest at Friendly City Books.

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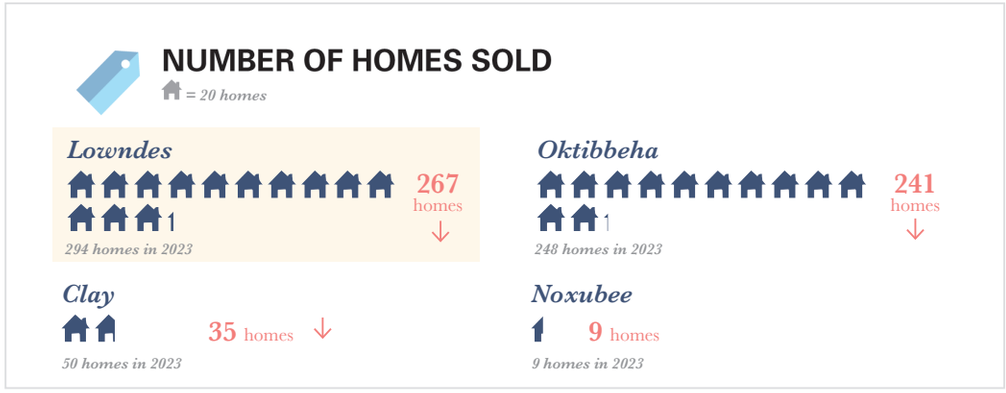
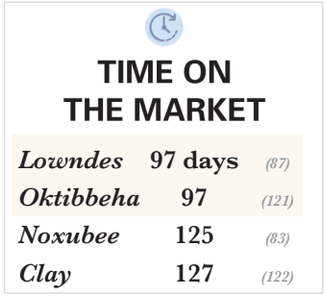
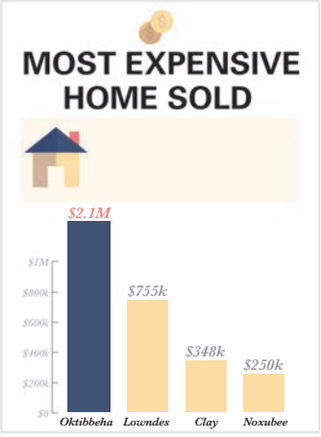
HOME SALE TRENDS

REAL ESTATE METRICS FROM JANUARY - JUNE 2024 COMPARED TO THE SAME PERIOD IN 2023







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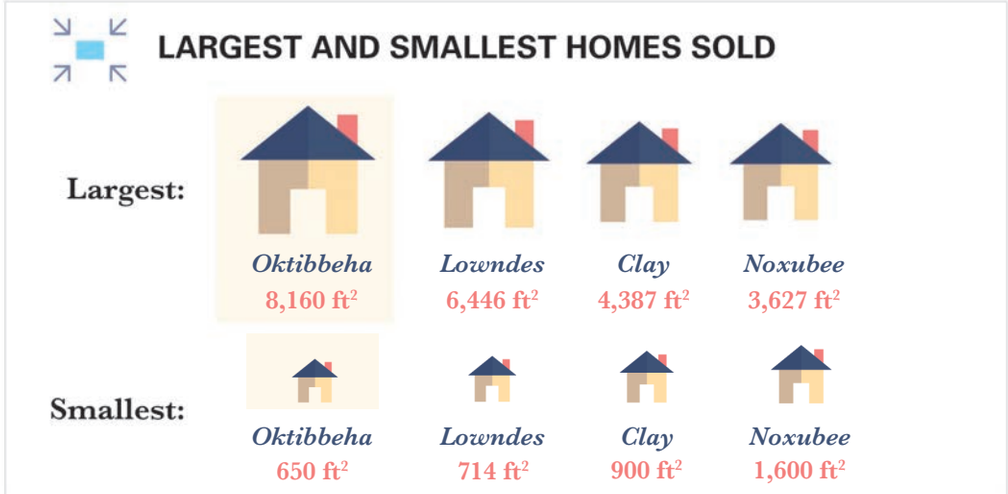

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Name: Carrie Martin
Age: 42
Birthplace: Columbus
Spouse: Bobby Martin
Children: Coleman and Lucy Ann
Hobbies: Reading, baking and taking her dogs Rosie and Winnie to the dog park

MEET CARRIE MARTIN

Born in Columbus, Carrie Martin returned to the Golden Triangle in 2012 and was hired as the president of the Columbus-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce earlier this year. A diverse career background, people skills and ties to the community are all key to her approach in leading The Chamber.

Tell me about your connections to Lowndes County.

"When I was 8, we moved to Ocean Springs, and I graduated there. But all throughout my childhood, I remember coming up to (Lowndes County) to go out on the boat. I was very close with my aunts and uncles here, so I've been part of Columbus my whole life basically. It was nostalgic (coming back), especially going by the water and everything. I was very lucky to have family around, and still do."

You started the job in June. How have the first few months gone so far?

"It's good! It's a little bit challenging in that your Monday through Friday never looks the same. We have a luncheon coming up in December, and I've never coordinated the luncheon before, so that's going to be something new and exciting. And then regional after hours, I've never coordinated regional after hours. I have the day by day stuff, but that's such a little part of this role. It's the events, and it's the meetings."

You've worked in several fields before starting this job, from waiting tables to managing a food plant to working for a nonprofit. How do you feel those experiences prepared you for this role?

"I've been working my whole life. Waiting tables, even being a manager at a food plant, in all of it you have to be able to talk to people. You have to be able to talk to all different types of people. I think that was the one thing I carried with me. Asking the CEO for a sponsorship is very different from trying to motivate an 18-year-old entry level laborer to hit their production numbers. You have to have a strategy. I had been waiting tables until I got my job out of college, and then I was supervising people. But either way, it was just more practice for getting to know people, knowing how to talk to people. So that's the one thing I would say, it's just communication and just being around different types of people throughout my career."

What is The Chamber's role in Lowndes County?

"The networking. I think that's a big deal, especially in Columbus. I consider us a smaller community. Some of us are very old fashioned, and we want that face-to-face time. We will have at least one event a month to give our members that face-to-face time. It's all about the networking. … Also bridging the gap between the (Columbus Air Force Base) and the community. We have a military affairs committee, and every three weeks we welcome the new student

pilots. … And then on top of that, we do a lot of education. I didn't know (before starting the job) how big of a program Educators are Essential is. That's another great way for a Chamber member to contribute."

What are the biggest opportunities for growth for The Chamber?

"Obviously the large businesses benefit from The Chamber, but I think these smaller businesses really kind of depend on us to get the word out. They have to do their part too with the networking, sending us ads, having an open house, stuff like that. I think The Chamber is a good resource for businesses to use for whatever they need. I think for some people The Chamber is kind of an untapped resource that they could be using, especially the small businesses."

INTERVIEW BY **EMMA MCRAE**
OPENING PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**
ADDITIONAL PHOTO BY **EMMA MCRAE**

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 **GADE CHAMBLEE**

MONA VANCE-ALI

It's no small irony that while the history of most communities details the experiences of men, for men and by men, the history of Lowndes County has been remarkably preserved and expanded by two women.

From the 1960s until the early 2000s, Chebie Bateman archived county history for the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library. For the past two decades, CLPL's archivist Mona Vance-Ail has built Bateman's work to more than 1,500 collections (and growing), all preserved in a state-of-the-art climate controlled vault in the Library's Local History room.

Those efforts have produced a volume of history rarely seen in a community its size.

"If you are researching the history of anything connected to Lowndes County and Columbus, this should be your first stop," Vance-Ali said. "We have 1,200 visitors come through here every year."

It's been a labor of love for Vance-Ali.

"To me, it's like putting a puzzle together every day," Vance-Ali said. "It's fun to see (people) realize that history is about the bigger picture and how history relates to their own lives."

Vance-Ali studied journalism at Mississippi University for Women, graduating with a degree in communications.

"I realized that my heart wasn't really in journalism," she said. "What I loved was history, but I didn't want to teach. ... So I went to UNC-Wilmington to get a master's degree in history. At first, I thought I'd wind up in a museum setting, but when I got the internship in Columbus, I gravitated toward archives because of the visionary work of Chebie Bateman that I found there."

Her enthusiasm for her work is evident in her open-door policy for people who aren't sure if their family histories have historical significance.

Her answer is often, yes they do.

"I always encourage people to come in and show me what they have," she said.

The work of an archivist can often be tedious, serious work focusing on collecting, analyzing and categorizing information. It can also be loads of fun, Vance-Ali said.

"What you discover in those records are that humans have always been human – court cases that deal with divorces, libel, people shouting derogatory terms in the street, people shooting at each other, paternity cases, really any kind of human drama you can think of," she said. "I call these my Jerry Springer court cases."

At any given time, Vance-Ali is working with several grant-funded research projects, some involving years of work, that address more serious aspects of history.

Vance-Ali said one her most memorable discoveries as an archivist was an event that she realized had national relevance.

"A lot of people are familiar with the movie '12 Years a Slave,'" she said. "That was the story of a freed Black man who had been captured and illegally sold into slavery. Well, we had something very similar here that was really shocking. It involved a woman named Catherine Adkins, who sued a local man who was holding her in bondage in 1856. Documents showed a white man testified on her behalf, describing a birthmark she had on her leg as proof that he knew her and telling the court that he had paid her money for work she had done for him. That transaction was proof that she had been free and could earn her own money, and she won the case."

Stories like that, she said, are "priceless."

The other good thing about being an archivist, she said, is that you never run out of material.

"History isn't just what happened 200 years ago," she said. "What you did this morning is history. Every passing moment is history."

MARION SANSING

For the past several years, Marion Sansing has worked, mainly as a volunteer, for the Black Prairie Blues Museum in West Point.

Long before that, she had established a reputation in the Golden Triangle as a chef and educator.

As you listen to Sansing talk about those two interests, you may not immediately see the common thread that unites them – Sansing doesn't overtly make the connection.

"My whole philosophy of cooking is how to nourish the body," Sansing says. "I teach people the basics and why it's important. A lot of it goes back to who we were originally, hunters/gatherers, and what we need and how it should be prepared."

Although she says she is not a "music person," what draws her to the blues is not unlike what inspires her in the kitchen.

"The Blues is so raw. It has so much energy," Sansing says. "It's very basic, but somehow it stirs your soul."

Sansing was born and raised in Munich, Germany.

She was first exposed to the Blues when John Lee Hooker came to her city.

It was a cultural and musical revelation for Sansing.

"The music was very different from anything we were used to," she said. "There were very few Black people in Germany outside of the military bases, so for most of us, it was a new thing, something we had not been exposed to. When I heard John Lee Hooker, I was smitten. What he was doing was not like any other genre I knew. There was kind of a quietness, a stillness around it."

She had no way of knowing then that she would someday live in the area that introduced Blues music to the world.

She arrived in the U.S. in 1992 after marrying a Columbus native. The couple lived in Florida for 10 years, then Oklahoma for three years before arriving in Starkville in 2005.

Sansing had no formal culinary training. Her passion for cooking was ignited by nostalgia and necessity.

"When you move to another country, other than missing your family and where you lived, what a lot of people miss most is the food," she said.

"In Germany, there are so many great bakeries and butcher shops, each having their own specialties using recipes they've had for generations. So there's no point in trying to emulate what they do. But when you leave, you miss all that and you try your best to make those foods. That's how I started, teaching myself how to make anything and everything from scratch."

The stripped-down, back-to-the-basics approach to food is not unlike the Blues, in that respect.

The impulse to take on new challenges also emerged with her involvement with the Black Prairie Blues Museum.

"My involvement in the museum was really more about the bond I developed with Deborah Mansfield (the museum director) than the music," Sansing said. "I met her at an event I catered in West Point and we got to talking. Later, I went to the museum and saw her again. We kind of hit it off. She has done so very much for West Point in so many areas, but at the time, she really didn't have anyone helping her with the work at the museum.

"I never got a job description, but I've always been into arts and graphic design, so my role kind of falls into that area, designing posters, brochures, social media headers, whatever there is to do in that area. I also help a lot with event planning, setting up the shows and exhibits. I also cook a lot of food for events."

Between cooking and teaching others how to cook and supporting the arts through her work with the museum, Sansing has made a home for herself.

"I have citizenship here, and I do consider myself as an American," she said. "But I'm also German. ... I guess it depends on what I'm thinking about at the moment. It's nice to have roots in both places."

LORI IRVIN

Lori Irvin has always had a passion for helping people as her 25 years as a social worker clearly indicates.

But when she felt it was time for a change, she turned to another passion she has had since childhood.

"I wasn't born in a barn, but I got there as soon as I could," Irvin said.

As director of the Mississippi State University Extension Services' Equine Assisted Services program, Irvin's current job complements her previous one and uses horses to provide therapy for children and veterans scratches an old itch.

"My parents weren't animal people," Irvin said. "They didn't have the horse gene, but I sure did. If you have it, you know it. After I graduated, the first thing I did when I got my first paycheck was buy a horse."

MSU Equine Services features two main programs – a Therapeutic Riding program for children with a variety of disabilities, both physical and cognitive and the Veterans Horsemanship program, which helps both active duty and those no longer in the service to transition back to civilian life, by helping develop bonds and build relationships with the aid of horses, whose gentle nature and trusting nature create a non-judgment opportunity for growth. Some of the veterans may suffer from PTSD or face other challenges in returning to civilian life.

Irvin has certifications in teaching through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship and is also certified as an Eagala (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) mental health provider and equine specialist.

In addition to therapy, she also mentors though would want to attain Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor certification.

Irvin didn't arrive at MSU intent on making a career in horse therapy.

"I started as a volunteer in 2004, while I was working on my master's degree," Irvin said. "Along the way, I got my certifications and in 2013, they created a job for me in the program as volunteer coordinator.

Irvin has been in charge of the program for two years now.

It is an exciting time for the program, which recently moved its programs to the Mississippi Horse Park in Starkville from its previous location in West Point. In addition to having a top-rate facility in its own backyard, it has also opened up a new avenue for attracting volunteers who regularly used the horse park.

The Veterans Horsemanship program caters to roughly 20 veterans, who not only benefit from the therapy working with horses provides, but help train the horses for the therapy riding program, which has slots for 12 children.

Sessions are held Tuesday through Thursday.

Although MSU has its own herd of about a dozen horses, the horses used for these programs are leased from area horse-owners. There are currently three therapy horses in the program – Magic, a half-Arabian, half quarter horse, Tweet, a quarter horse mare with a background in rodeo, and Dixie, another mare quarter horse.

The lease arrangements benefit both the equine program and the horse owners.

"For whatever reason, the owners aren't able to ride them regularly and they don't want them wasting in a pasture," Irvin said. "Horses like to work. It keeps them fit and sharp. So it works out great for everyone."

Irwin says she still has time to ride, mostly trail riding, which is its own therapy. As for the job, she said, she can't imagine doing anything else after 20 years of working with MSU's equine services.

"It's the most fulfilling job I've ever had," she said. "Helping people is all I've ever wanted to do. Being able to do that with horses? What could be better than that?"

Anyone who would like more information, either as a participant or volunteer, can reach Irvin via email at lirvin@humansci.msstate.edu.


SOL Y LUNA

THE BAR BRINGS LOPEZ OUT OF HIS SHELL

Patrons to Sol Y Luna, the newly opened Mexican restaurant located on 18th Avenue North in Columbus, are sure to find three things inside: good food, good drinks and a sympathetic ear behind the bar.

Balmore Lopez wears many hats at the restaurant, including manager. His favorite hat, though, is that of bartender.

"I like the atmosphere and the fast pace of bartending," Lopez said. "It helps me interact and get to know customers. It brought me out of my shell a little bit. It also helped me with my English."

A shy person by nature, Lopez takes on a new persona behind the bar. He is more outgoing and talks to the customers as if they are family.

"The personal side of bartending is you get to meet and know customers individually," Lopez said. "There are a lot of people that have given me life advice. … We connect on a certain level and I love that. I have regulars that come in now, and we have gotten close."

Equally important are the drinks the customers order.

Lopez's three years of experience is evident as he flows through the drink-making process with relative ease.

His specialty? Margaritas.

That said, he does not shoehorn himself into a corner with classic cocktails.

While the classics are comfortable, Lopez is not afraid to try some of the new drinks coming onto the scene. Ultimately, he wants his customers to be happy.

"It's great to learn the new drinks and flavors, and people always seem to jump at the 'new' stuff," Lopez said.

So, whether one is craving a classic margarita or a new, fancy drink, be sure to visit Lopez at the bar. He'll enjoy the company.

MANGONADA MARGARITA

(Modified to accommodate ingredients found locally.)

This frozen drink requires hunting down a couple of ingredients you probably don't already have in your pantry, but it's worth it. Makes 2 servings.

3 cups frozen mango
3 ounces tequila blanco or reposado
1 ounce orange liqueur such as Cointreau
½ cup coconut water
2 limes juiced
1 ½ tablespoons simple syrup or agave
Chamoy (Mexican markets or online)
Tajín (seasoning available at groceries)

Step 1: Pour chamoy onto a small plate and rim two glasses with it. Pour Tajín onto another small plate and coat each with it. Set aside.

Step 2: Add all other ingredients to blender and puree until smooth.

Step 3: Alternately pour the blended mixture and chamoy into your glass to make a layered frozen drink.

Step 4: Optionally top with more Tajin or pieces of frozen mango.

STORY BY **ROBERT SCOTT**
PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

Celebrating 40 Years of Care:

Elevating Pediatric Health

Supporting Our Community's Mental Health: A New Resource for Kids & Young Adults

In the wake of COVID-19, many families are noticing more behavioral and mental health challenges in children and young adults. Increased anxiety, depression, and behavioral struggles have become more common. With the lasting impact of COVID, rising costs, and the uncertainty of today's world events, it's no surprise that many are feeling overwhelmed.

To meet these growing needs, we're excited to share that our clinic has added a child psychiatrist to our team! Dr. Touchstone will be working with children, teens, and young adults (ages 4-26) to help tackle the unique issues they face. He will play a vital role in supporting our community by providing comprehensive evaluations, diagnoses, and helping children receive the additional services they need to thrive in both school and everyday life.

We're here to help our community navigate these challenging times and make sure our young people feel supported, understood, and empowered. If your family is struggling or just looking for a little extra help, reach out to us—we're here for you. Text "Dr. T" to 662-329-2955 or call us for an appointment.

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Mississippi State students work on ways to help power companies grow and thrive under the direction of David Wallace.

COMMUNITY

PREPARING FOR THE WORST

MSU'S HIGH VOLTAGE LAB PREPARES POWER COMPANIES FOR EXTREME WEATHER

Mississippi State's Paul B. Jacob High Voltage Laboratory simulates falling trees, thunderstorms, solar radiation, high salt concentrations, natural disasters and other likely scenarios plaguing electrical companies — like the catastrophic damage from Hurricane Helene, which left more than a million people without power.

David Wallace, lab manager and MSU assistant clinical professor of electrical and computer engineering, and his students can recreate a variety of real-world scenarios inside the lab. With these capabilities and the largest university-operated high voltage lab in North America, MSU helps power companies prepare for any likely threat to power lines.

"We can recreate what the equipment will see in nature to see how it reacts and then ask, 'What do we need to change to make it work in these scenarios?'" Wallace said.

One major focus of the lab's research is insulators, which keep electricity inside power line wires. Insulators also prevent electricity from reaching poles, towers and the ground.

"All power lines are supported by insulators," Wallace said. "We have to ensure that if an earthquake comes, they don't snap off — and if a fire comes, they don't melt and allow the wires to touch."

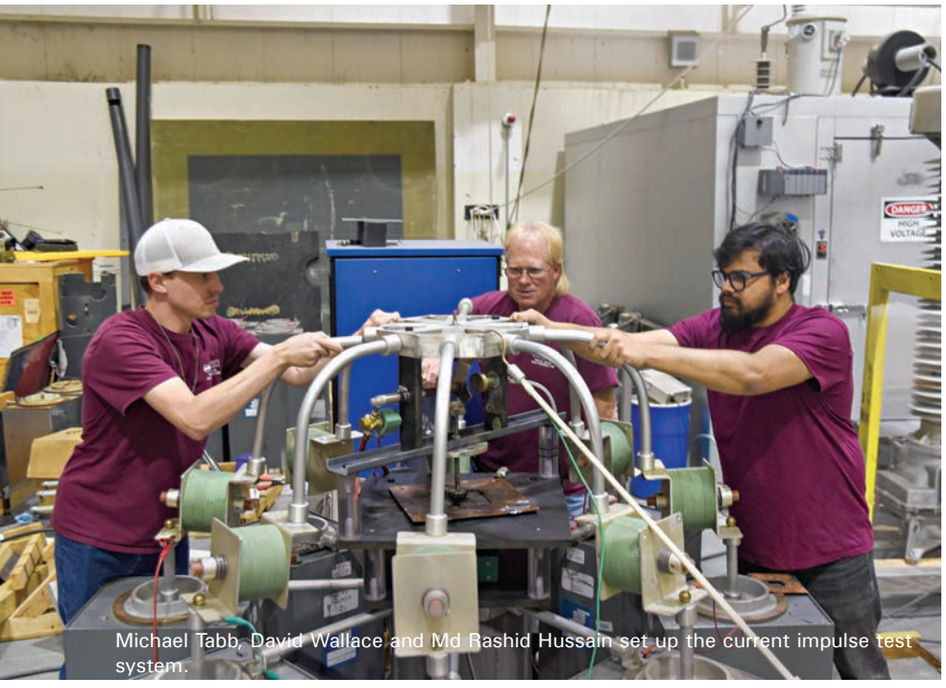
MSU is testing ceramic insulating materials, which can last for nearly 70 years. Wallace said because of ceramic's fragility and weight, the industry also has created polymer, or plastic, insulators which are lighter but have a shorter shelf life.

Since ceramic and polymer insulators have individual issues, he said the lab is testing various insulating materials, as well as cables and transformers, and how they will work and react in the field.

"It's the whole picture from the end product, to everything that goes into it and to the end user," Wallace said. "I'm testing for all these different sections."

He said this essential research isn't only helping companies in Mississippi but the entire U.S., including the Department of Defense.

"Electrical power is the lifeblood of the world. If you take electricity out, we're in the dark ages. We've got to ensure we can go forward," Wal-



Michael Tabb, David Wallace and Md Rashid Hussain set up the current impulse test system.


Michael Tabb works on the three million volt lightening tower.

lace said. “With changes happening, the bigger demand on electricity and the debate on fossil fuels, how are we going to generate new energy sources? That’s what we study.”

Wallace also stressed the importance of bringing in more power engineers to continue essential research. He said power engineering began to die when the computer was introduced and integrated, creating the need for more people to enter the field.

“All the old power engineers are retiring. I’ve been in this field since 1988, working on committees and serving as chair of various standards,” Wallace said. “At 58, I’m the young guy. We are in a desperate drought. We need engineers.”

Since joining the lab in 2016, Wallace has worked to build the power program at MSU, doubling the number of students in his time at the university.

At the lab, students receive hands-on experience in helping power companies grow and thrive. They also benefit from networking opportunities as they interact with industry leaders who work with the lab.

“This field is a great opportunity, and I love it. We’re the ones that make the world run. We provide the electricity,” Wallace said. “This is the time to be getting involved.”

STORY BY **MSU OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**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COVER

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR BEEF COMES FROM?

A HANDFUL OF AREA FARMERS MAKES IT EASIER TO FIND LOCAL GRASS-FED BEEF

Most days, you can find Gail Thompson right where she started – on 120 acres of Clay County farmland off Decker Road. The farm is in the flight path of Columbus Air Force Base's training exercises, so if Thompson times it right, she can look up and see reminders of the many other places she has been.

It's hard sometimes for her to believe she once wanted nothing to do with the place.

"When I graduated high school, I couldn't get out of West Point, Mississippi, fast enough," Thompson said.

But after going to college and spending 25 years in the Air Force, Thompson returned to the Golden Triangle in 2016 and inherited the family farm after her father, Bobby Thompson, passed away in 2020.

"I discovered I really like being on the peace and quiet of this hill," she said.

About a year ago Thompson's son, Marcus Swentkofske, returned home from a job with a public relations firm in Washington, D.C., and the pair operate Shady Acres Farm, one of a few grass-fed beef operations in the region that sells directly to consumers.

These outfits don't breed cattle. They buy young steers and heifers from other farms, feed them until they weigh between 1,000 and 1,400 pounds – which can take one to two years – then send them for processing.

Customers can spring for a quarter, half or whole cow, and choose how they want it cut.

Places like Shady Acres and Shaded Grove Farm in Macon also offer hamburger and individual cuts for retail. Both use USDA-certified processors, so they can ship meat across the county.

If you live in the Golden Triangle, Shady Acres will deliver the meat to your doorstep.

No antibiotics. No hormones. No steroids.

"We have plenty of clean water around here.

High Hope Farms

Plenty of shade. Plenty of room. No mud. Low stress," Thompson said. "I think we're providing a really high quality product, and it's all local. The demand is there. We've just got to get noticed."

Getting noticed means Swentkofske selling meat at farmers' markets and Shady Acres using social media platforms like TikTok to give customers a glimpse of life on the farm. In addition to delivery, Swentkofske also is offering subscription boxes on the farm's website.

"Steaks are definitely our most popular item," he said. "I don't think there's been a week where I haven't sold out or nearly sold out of the steaks I've brought to market."

Other parts, like the oxtail, tongue, heart, liver, soup bones and fat, are a little harder to move, he said.

Shaded Grove owner Craig Schmidt can attest, and he is thinking about moving away from retailing individual cuts to just offering bulk orders. That will make inventory easier to manage, he said.

Schmidt started his grass-fed cattle operation in 2018 on 700 acres of family farmland, purchasing cattle from his father's and brother-in-law's cow-calf enterprise. He processes 30 to 40 head per year, either delivering pre-ordered

Marcus Swentkofske

meat to drop-off locations throughout the region or selling at a farm store on site.

"During COVID, we saw a big jump because everybody was freaked out and wanted to fill their freezers," Schmidt said. "It's slowed since then, but it's starting to pick up again."

Johnny Wray started High Hope Farm in Cedar Bluff around 2010, processing three animals his first year before growing to 30 annually.

He only offers cow shares, from a quarter to whole, and hamburger shares (minimum 20 pounds) and uses a state-licensed processor in Maben, meaning he can only sell his meat in Mississippi.

But he's seen demand increase in recent years, and he believes as more people learn about the availability and health benefits of local grass-fed beef, that trend will continue.

"Why wouldn't you want to buy meat from your local farmers? (From the grocery store), not only do you not know where it came from, you don't know what's in it. You can buy a package of hamburger, and it can have meat from as many as 30 different cows in it," Wray said, noting a cow share locally means your meat all comes from the same animal.

"The health benefits of grass-fed beef are much higher than conventionally fed beef," he added. "It's better for you in fighting cancer, in your own digestive system. It's better for you nu-

Johnny Wray

tritionally and much better for the environment."

Among Wray's growing list of loyal customers are Ted and Kelsey Dickel, Starkville residents who learned about High Hope Farm through a Facebook group about four years ago and have bought beef from there ever since.

"We love it," Kelsey said. "I think there's a big 'shopping local' component that we feel really good about. It feels much better to know you got it from a cow that was well-loved and less than an hour away. … It's so important that we know the people who make our food."

Wray welcomes more farmers to the market, as well. He views them as colleagues, not competitors. When his prospective customers are looking for retail cuts, or they need a beef share before he can have one ready, he refers them to other local farms. He even invites people wanting to get into the game to tour his farm.

"You can make a darn good life with this kind of farming," Wray said.

Thompson, though with a small sample size so far, agrees. Shady Acres is on pace to process 20 cows its first year, but she believes her property can handle as many as 50.

"When (the demand) really hits, there will be more than we can all get to," she said.

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**


Warming Tent
Cullman Christkindlmarkt

FROHE WEIHNACHTEN!

FOR A TASTE OF GERMANY THIS CHRISTMAS, MAKE YOUR WAY OVER TO CULLMAN

Halfway between Birmingham and Huntsville, Alabama, the smell of bratwurst, roasted nuts and candied apples drift through the air over a bustling crowd. Shoppers move between wooden stalls selling treats, crafts and holiday gifts. A string band plays "The First Noel" beneath a massive Christmas tree, lighting up the whole park.

And a Weihnachtspyramide, a more than 45-foot-tall hand-crafted German Christmas pyramid with a spinning rotor on top, stretches up into the night sky.

While these sights may seem to be straight out of Germany, or better yet, a Hallmark movie, they are actually from Cullman, Alabama's Christkindlmarkt, a festive tradition that has been growing in the town since it began as a weekend market in 2019.

"The German influences you see at the Cullman Christkindlmarkt have deep historical roots in our city," Executive Director with Cullman Parks, Recreations and Sports Tourism Nathan Anderson wrote. "Cullman was founded by a German immigrant and has a rich history of German settlement."

In 2023 the market expanded from tents to wooden stalls and attractions taking over Depot Park for the entire holiday season. The expanded market includes the German Christmas pyramid, which contains a bar at its base selling hot chocolate, apple cider and Christkindlmarkt Witbier and Dunkelberg beers.

Other market attractions included an ice rink, a carousel, train rides, 16-foot-tall Nutcrackers and more than 40 vendors, bringing holiday gifts, apparel and all kinds of unique sweet and savory German cuisine to the park night after night.

"It's an enchanting atmosphere that leaves everyone with a sense of magic," Anderson wrote. During the 2023 market, Ted Wolfson was bouncing between the hand-rolled pretzel stand, where pretzels were getting doused in sugar and garlic butter, a bratwurst stand, where thick sausages were being served on fluffy rolls, and the schnitzel stand, where he handed out

schnitzels and spiral cut chips still slightly sizzling from the deep fryer.

All three were run by his company, Woodstock Pretzel Company, which he and his family started as a food truck about 8 years ago. Eventually, they expanded to make schnitzels, potato pancakes and other German foods, bringing them to markets around the Atlanta, Georgia area.

When he stepped out from behind the deep fryer, Wolfson said his recipes were learned from German populations in Texas and Oklahoma.

"We weren't going to do any more Christmas markets," Wolfson said. "We just didn't need to. We were just doing Oktoberfests. But we came over here to visit, and how can you say no? It's so nice, it's so professional. It will be the best one in the whole country. … I know it will. It's phenomenal."

While the Christmas market was a way for Wolfson to share his recipes with others, he also saw the market as a way to celebrate his own German heritage, as his grandmother is from Germany. He said the market felt extremely "authentic."

But food is not the only part of the market striving to be authentic. Ryne Ashley, owner of Ashley Mercantile, a general store located just outside of Depot Park in Cullman's Warehouse District, filled his stall with his store's gifts, can-


Around Europe

dles, and decor, along with something special: cuckoo clocks.

"We told (the Cullman Parks and Recreation Department) we were going to bring our store to the market, but after we did our research, we also brought things that would be appropriate," Ashley said. "Cuckoo clocks, especially German ones from the Black Forest, which is where ours are from, and other things imported from Europe, help people to get a taste of what we do.

"We want people to be wowed. We want people to be in awe. And I think that has been the case, just with the way that the people here in town and people around the southeast have responded to it. People just can't believe what they see."

Anderson estimated that "hundreds of thousands" attended the Cullman Christkindlmarkt in 2023, a huge impact on the growing city of 19,000.

The Cullman Christkindlmarkt is expected to return from November 21 through December 23, 2024. Visitors are encouraged to follow the event on Facebook, Instagram, or check out the website at CullmanChristkindlmarkt.com.

STORY **BY ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**
PHOTOS COURTESY OF **VISIT CULLMAN**

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ROADS, RETAIL AND PARKS

LONG-AWAITED INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS WELL UNDERWAY AND RETAIL COMPANIES EYE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Wherever you look in the four-county area, you see road crews working, park improvements and retail development.

COLUMBUS/LOWNDES COUNTY

The Highway 45 corridor in Columbus is showing signs of a retail revival.

"Outdoor superstore" Rural King announced in October it plans to purchase the old Kmart property, which has been vacant since November 2018. The Illinois-based national home and farm retailer will renovate 90,000 square feet for its own store – the first Rural King in Mississippi –

and renovate the remaining 20,000 to lease to a second retailer.

Construction should begin next year, with the stores opening in 2026. The development is expected to create up to 70 jobs and an annual payroll of $1 million.

Old Kmart building in Columbus

Fred McClung and Greg Stewart work on landscaping at Propst Park in Columbus

Meanwhile, Columbus Place on Highway 45 continues to turn the old Leigh Mall inside out and is preparing for growth. The city in July ceded the right-of-way of a portion of Old Aberdeen Road – between Lowndes County Radial Tire and Donut Factory – to Hull Group, which owns the shopping center. Hull has since cleared the area near the road, demolished an old building and cut down hardwood trees to accommodate new outparcels.

Burford Electric Service, on Cooper Road in East Columbus, announced a $2.5 million expansion in August that will add 15 jobs. The company, founded in 1959, services large industries like Steel Dynamics, Weyerhaeuser and Southern Corporation, and the expansion will aid Burford's remanufacturing and processing capabilities.

Public spaces are getting some long-awaited love, as well.

Progress continues on the $4.4 million parks plan. At Propst Park, the site of most of the upgrades, the old softball fields have been converted to baseball fields and turfed, while work on a concrete concourse for those fields, the t-ball fields and the Field of Dreams is substantially complete. Next comes new lighting for all fields, upgrading two of the park's tennis courts and converting the other two into six pickleball courts, along with converting the old baseball fields to accommodate softball. All those projects should be complete by spring.

The city's parks plan also includes a splash pad at Propst, parking lot paving at Sandfield and North Haven Woods parks, a new floor and resurfaced walking track at East Columbus Gym and several playground improvements across the

parks system.

Elsewhere, the pedestrian bridge at the Riverwalk is open again following $4.1 million in repairs that took more than four years to complete. The bridge was struck by a runaway barge in February 2020 and reopened with a ribbon-cutting in October.

A more than $300,000 renovation to the Tennessee Williams Home and Welcome Center is near completion, as well, and the city has begun a $6.9 million street paving program, which should be done next year, that will upgrade portions of 119 streets.

STARKVILLE/OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

Work has begun on the $45 million Highway 182 Revitalization Project that will transform one mile of the roadway between Old West Point Road and Long Street in Starkville.

Highway 182 roadwork in Starkville

Redesign plans call for reducing the road to two lanes divided by landscaped medians, adding pedestrian/bike lanes to flank each side of the street and installing new underground utilities, among other things. Along with beautification and improved drainage, it aims to spur economic development in the corridor.


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The project is expected to take up to 2 1/2 years to complete and is funded by federal grants and American Rescue Plan Act funds.

Downtown, the city plans to break ground in February on the first phase of a Main Street redesign. The plan includes expanding sidewalks and adding trees to the edge of Main Street, eliminating the right turn lane onto Montgomery Street and stringing lights above the road. Some slanted parking spaces will also be converted to parallel parking.

The first phase, estimated at $8.5 million, will run from City Hall to Jackson Street and also include the Montgomery intersection. Work on the second phase, between Jackson to Montgomery streets, will depend on available funding.

Starkville also is continuing work on its $40 million parks master plan, funded through tourism sales taxes.

A new $2.3 million Needmore Center is complete, along with a mural paying homage to the neighborhood's history. Sidewalks and lighting have also been added to the adjacent George Evans Park.

Improvements at J.L. King Park should be finished by November. Those include new lights for the football field, expanding the splash pad, building a new bathroom, adding seating, shade structures and a new pavilion and plaza.

The city broke ground in September on $6.7 million in improvements at McKee Park, where the spot where baseball fields once sat will be converted to age-appropriate play areas, a natural play area and a dog park. That work should be done by fall 2025.

In Oktibbeha County, Atlanta-based real estate firm Forest Street Partners announced plans in October to build 150 homes on 98 acres off

Highway 182 east of Starkville, next to Golden Triangle Drywall. Once complete, the gated neighborhood will have swimming and recreation areas as well.

Supervisors are mulling three options for how to address the long-closed county lake. In September, the WSP USA engineering firm presented the board with $5.4 million and $11.2 million plans for rehabilitating the levy – with costs depending on the level of flood control the lake would provide – as well as an $8.1 million plan to decommission the lake.

The board will decide among those options by the end of 2024, and federal funds will support the project.

WEST POINT/CLAY

The Old Waverly Club and Mossy Oak golf course have changed hands.

A group of golf investors, The Golf Clubs of Mississippi LLC, announced in October it had bought properties. Boyce Adams Sr. is listed as the manager for the limited liability company.

The late George Bryan Sr. founded the Old Waverly course in 1986


Old Walmart building in West Point

and it has hosted several golf championships over the years, including the 1999 U.S. Women's Open Championship.

Mossy Oak, designed by golf architect Gil Hanse, opened in 2016. In addition to the renowned golf course, it hosts the practice facilities for Mississippi State men's and women's golf teams.

In West Point, two grocery stores are slated to open this fall.

A Fresh Value is coming to the old Save A Lot, while a Hometown Grocery will bring a grocery, pharmacy and hardware store to the old Walmart building on the north side of the city.

MACON/NOXUBEE COUNTY

As construction continues on the $400 million Huber Engineered Woods plant in Shuqualak, the company is already starting to fill its staff.

Hiring has begun for management positions, while other positions will come open next year. All told, the company plans to have about 160 employees hired by the time it begins commercial production at the plant in the first quarter of 2026. To see job openings as they become available, visit huberwood.com/careers.

In Macon, Rubye Kat's Antiques, Gifts and More recently opened on Frontage Road off Highway 45. The city also recently received a new $310,000 fire truck.

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**
OLD WAVERLY FILE PHOTO BY **RORY DOYLE**
ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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