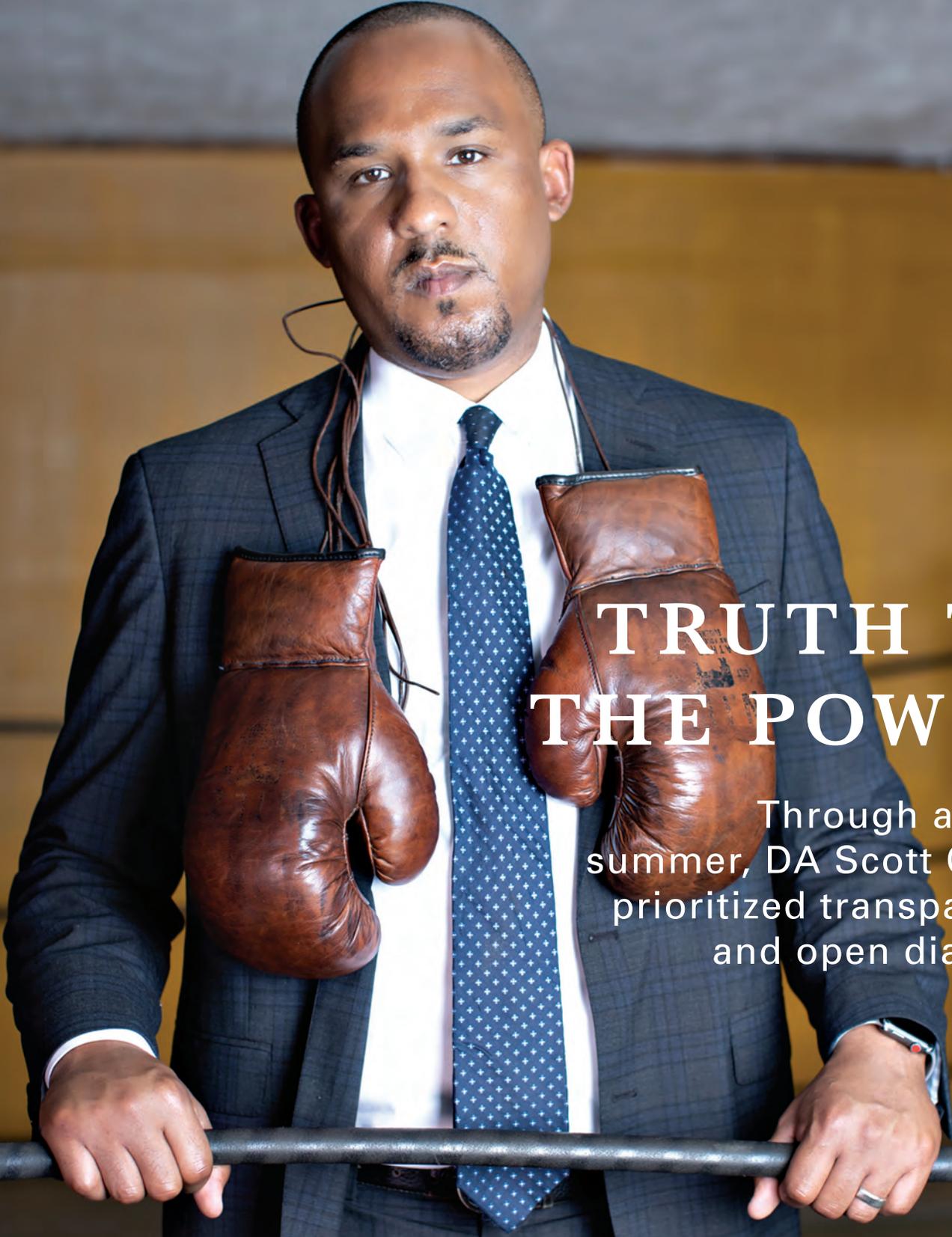


PROGRESS

A SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE ★ FALL 2020



THE COMMERCIAL DISPATCH

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Through a tense summer, DA Scott Colom prioritized transparency and open dialogue

FALL 2020



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A FASCINATING SIX MONTHS

PROGRESS magazine has bookended two critical times this year. The Spring 2020 issue went to press just before the country started quarantine, and I'm sitting down to write this piece just as the Governor lifts the state-wide mask mandate.

With complete reverence for the staggering death toll as a result of COVID-19 and the economic shutdown that followed, I must say the past six months have been fascinating.

Particularly, I've been interested to see how businesses have adapted to the pandemic. Of course, we hear about large corporations like Amazon and Zoom who have thrived, but I'm talking specifically about local companies.

The print and online edition of The Dispatch has done a great job profiling the struggles and successes of Golden Triangle businesses. We've seen some businesses expand, some shift gears and others close for good.

For obvious reasons, I've paid special attention to other community newspapers, which were already



struggling to find a new business model as more and more readers shift online. In the past six months, nearly every daily paper in the state has either cut staff or reduced the number of days they print a newspaper. In fact, we've expanded our coverage to include more Clay County news.

Who knows what the next six months hold, but I'm proud to report that through a combination of a supportive community and an incredible staff, The Dispatch has been able to maintain our employees and has not had to cut production days.

A healthy newspaper that isn't afraid to hold public officials accountable is crucial for a healthy community, and The Dispatch remains committed to the Golden Triangle.

With each issue of PROGRESS, we aim to highlight some of the best aspects of the area. I encourage you to explore the magazine cover-to-cover. If you know of someone doing something amazing, please let us know by emailing news@cdispatch.com. Thanks for reading.

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AD DESIGN **JACKIE TAYLOR / KELLY ERVIN**



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MOVING FORWARD IN LOWNDES COUNTY

Multiple construction projects in Columbus and Lowndes County near completion amid the pandemic, and — following weeks of protest — century-old Confederate monument is to be relocated

Despite the impact of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, lots of construction projects — such as traffic improvements, community center renovations and a yearslong fire station construction — are nearing or have reached completion in Columbus and Lowndes County.

A century-old Confederate monument outside Lowndes County Courthouse will be relocated following outcry from local communities demanding the structure be moved. After weeks of local protests against racial injustice in light of a series of national and local movements, county supervisors unanimously voted to relocate the structure to Friendship Cemetery, where both Union and Confederate soldiers are buried.

CRAWFORD GYM REOPENS AMID THE PANDEMIC

After months of renovation, the Crawford Elementary School gym was finally reopened to the public in July as a multi-purpose community center. The facility was destroyed by the tornado that swept through the area in February 2019.

The renovation project started in January and was finished by the end of May. It cost a total of \$375,000 - \$350,000 of which came from a state Legislature-approved bond package last year. Lowndes County shouldered the rest of the cost.

The renovation replaced nearly everything inside the gym, including the damaged roof, walls, lights and the scoreboard for basketball games. A concession room was also added in the front of the facility. The gym now features new aluminum bleachers and a multipurpose hardwood-like floor. A playground and a pavilion for outdoor activities, which were both completed in



Crawford Community Center playground



Crews work on the mini-roundabout located at the intersection of Second and Main streets near Harvey's restaurant

June, have also been added outside the gym.

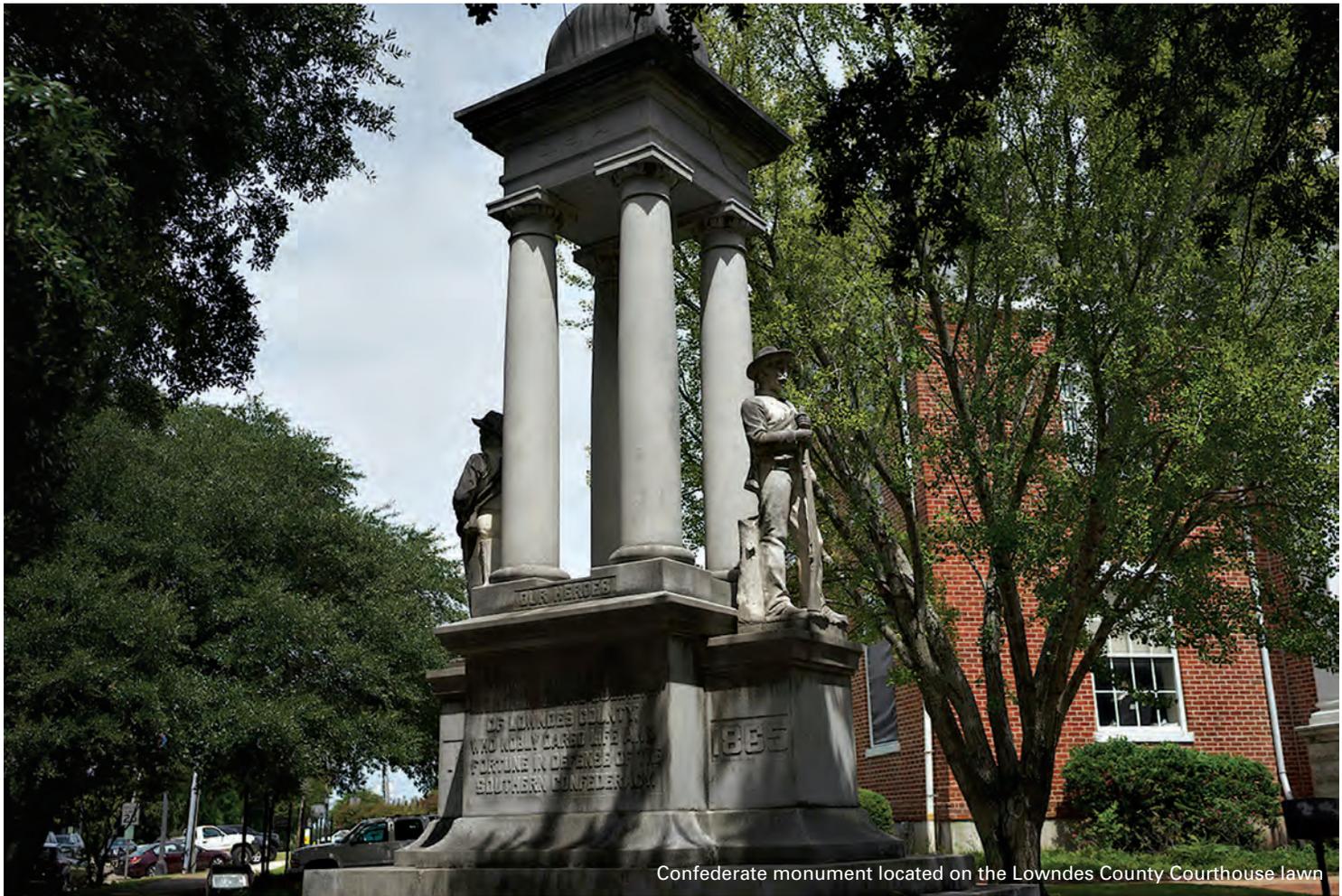
During the pandemic, the number of gym users is capped at 75, with different schedules set for younger children, teenagers and adults. Children between ages of 8 and 16 can use the gym between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., and those older can use it between 5 and 8 p.m. The facility is also disinfected twice a day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon between gym usage.

DOWNTOWN COLUMBUS' FIRST MINI-ROUNDBABOUT UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Downtown Columbus may see its first mini-roundabout by the end of the year, as construction of the roundabout started in July and is expected to reach completion by November. The project, planned at the intersection of Second

and Main streets near Harvey's restaurant, is part of a \$5 million traffic improvement project along the downtown corridor that connects Main Street to Highways 82 and 182. The roundabout is aimed to slow down those who travel in and out of town at a high speed. Crosswalks will be built in all four directions at the intersection for pedestrians. To the east of the intersection, the four-lane roadway on Main Street will be reduced to three lanes, with a central turn lane.

The construction of the roundabout was approved in April and will cost a total of \$761,000. An additional \$100,000 will be paid to Neel-Schaffer Engineering, which will conduct inspections and testing on the site. The Mississippi Department of Transportation will shoulder 80 percent of the cost while the city bears the rest.



Confederate monument located on the Lowndes County Courthouse lawn

CONFEDERATE MONUMENT TO BE RELOCATED TO FRIENDSHIP CEMETERY

The Confederate monument that has sat outside Lowndes County Courthouse for more than a century will be relocated to Friendship Cemetery, where both Union and Confederate soldiers are buried, following a unanimous vote from the county board of supervisors in July. The vote followed weeks of local protests against racial injustice and police brutality following a series of events, including the police killing of Minnesota man George Floyd, the dismissal of the case of police killing of Columbus resident Ricky Ball and District 1 Supervisor Harry Sanders' racist remarks against Black Americans.

The monument, established in 1912, aims to commemorate Confederate soldiers who fought

in the South during the Civil War. The inscription on the monument labels the history as a "sacred heritage" and describes the war as a "noble cause." A stone statue of a soldier holding a flag in his left arm stands atop the monument.

Supervisors have picked a location within the city-owned Friendship Cemetery as the new home to the monument. The 32-foot tall, 16-foot wide monument will be set on a parcel near Confederate soldiers' graves — a spot the city yielded to county ownership to facilitate the relocation. The county will submit several materials to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History for the agency's approval. The materials include a legal description and photos of the new site, assessment of the cracks and damages the monument suffered and a plan on how to relocate the structure.



New Fire Station #4 located on Airline Road

FIRE STATION ON AIRLINE ROAD NEAR COMPLETION

City officials expect the new building for Fire Station 4 on Airline Road to reach completion by Oct. 1 after the construction began four years ago. The project is estimated to be between \$1.8 million and \$2 million. The city will fund the project with a \$700,000 capital improvement loan from the Mississippi Development Authority, \$500,000 of insurance rebate funds and pay roughly \$653,000 out of city funds. About \$150,000 worth of work is done by firefighters of the station as in-kind donations, which reduces the financial burden on the city.

As of late August, the construction crew was working on the exterior of the building, pouring concrete and installing an acoustic ceiling, and electricians will install the air conditioning systems as well as the lights.

11 STORM SHELTERS PLANNED ACROSS FIRE STATIONS IN COLUMBUS

The city is waiting for approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to build 11 storm shelters across the five fire stations

in Columbus after it applied for a \$60,000 grant from the federal agency. The agency will shoulder 75 percent of the grant, and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency and the city will each have to match 12.5 percent of the grant.

The 11 storm shelters, aimed to ensure the safety of emergency responders, will each house roughly 15 people. The main fire station will have three shelters and the four other stations will each have two. The shelters are estimated to cost \$5,000 each, with a life expectancy of 30 to 50 years. Meanwhile, the city is prepared to enter a new round of grant applications to build more storm shelters.

'RED HORSE' UNIT HELPS REPAIR DAMAGED ROAD ON CAFB

A group of engineers associated with the U.S. Air Force's heavy construction unit — Rapid Engineer Deployable Heavy Operational Repair Squadron Engineers (RED HORSE) — are assisting the repairs of a 1.8-mile section of Perimeter Road at Columbus Air Force Base. The route, which is used for patrol and recreational purposes, was identified in a recent survey as having deteriorated, with potholes in the ground. The estimated cost of the repairs is roughly \$1.4 million. The engineers are assigned to the project as part of their troop training. The project, which lasted two and a half months, was estimated to have reach completion by Sept. 1.

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MODERNIZING TO MEET THE MOMENT IN OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has slowed life down but hasn't stopped it in Starkville and Oktibbeha County, where education, infrastructure, recreation and activism are all seeing upgrades and forward movement.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL OPENS

After years of delays, the Partnership School for grades 6-7 in the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District opened for the 2020-2021 academic year. The school on the Mississippi State University campus is the result of a partnership between the city, county and university.

It serves as a training lab for MSU's College of Education, allowing MSU students to observe classroom teaching and having university faculty as resource for SOCS D teachers and administrators. The middle school classrooms have desks outside where MSU students sit and observe and teachers can block the younger students' view of their observers if need be.

The addition of the Partnership School re-configured some of the grade levels in SOCS D.

Armstrong Middle School became Armstrong Junior High School, home of grades 8-9, and Starkville High School now has grades 10-12 instead of 9-12.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Another collaboration between Starkville and Oktibbeha County coming to fruition is the North Star Industrial Park near the interchange of Highways 82 and 389. Work on the new Garan Manufacturing building, relocating from Highway 12, is ahead of schedule despite the pandemic and construction of a 500,000-gallon water tank near the park's entrance began in August.

Community leaders broke ground in August at Cornerstone Park, which will include a major tournament-ready park and recreation facility, just off Highway 25. Starkville hired a new Parks and Recreation Director, Brandon Doherty, in July.

In an effort to boost downtown business and recreation, aldermen in July approved the Sreatery, an outdoor seating and dining space



Construction crews finish replacing water and sewer lines in the Pleasant Acres neighborhood

that would temporarily occupy nine Main Street parking spaces. The Streatery faces a challenge in court from a lawyer whose office on Main Street sits behind the project's planned location on the south side of the street.

In the meantime, the city decided to strive for the same goal by stringing 900 LED lights across South Lafayette Street between Main and Lampkin streets in early September with the full support of businesses and tenants along the block. The "Lights at Lafayette" is a collaboration among the city, which provided in-kind services to erect the lights, the Greater Starkville Development Partnership and its affiliates, Mississippi State's Carl Small Town Center and local businesses.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The city also set aside more than \$3 million in its Fiscal Year 2021 budget to match the \$12.66 million federal grant it received in 2019 to vi-

talize about a mile of Highway 182, making it more pedestrian-friendly and wheelchair accessible, increasing broadband access and improving infrastructure and stormwater drainage. The project will be completely designed and go out for bids in September 2021.

Another ongoing infrastructure project is the replacement of aging water and sewer pipes throughout the city, planned since 2018. The water and sewer systems in Pleasant Acres, Green Oaks and Rolling Hills date back to the 1950s and 1960s. The city finished replacing the metal pipes in Pleasant Acres this year and expects to finish the northern half of the Green Oaks project next year.

A new and improved electric substation planned for the past eight years in southwest Starkville is nearly complete, Starkville Utilities General Manager Terry Kemp said. It will be at the end of Azalea Lane and near the water tower behind the Starkville Sportsplex and it will



Crews work on the new electric substation

replace the oldest substation in the city on Industrial Park Road, about 500 yards west.

Outside the city, 35.69 miles of 53 county roads will be upgraded by 2023, thanks to Oktibbeha County's \$3.16 million four-year road plan, approved in June. The projects range from resurfacing or removing debris to completely converting some roads from gravel to pavement.

Some roads in residential areas will be redone, specifically Cannon Road in District 2 and the Sunset neighborhood southwest of Starkville in District 1. Harrell Road in District 3 and Jeff Peay Road in District 1 are gravel roads that will be built from the base as paved roads.

The county hopes to also modernize communication and operations in all departments by hiring an information technology director, which board of supervisors president John Montgomery said would bring the county "into the 21st century."

STARKVILLE STAND UP

Also in the vein of meeting the moment, activists in Starkville formed the racial justice advocacy group Starkville Stand Up in late May and early June in response to the national resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Thousands turned out for the march on June 6, which started downtown at Unity Park, head-

ed east on Main Street and University Drive, across Highway 12 into the Mississippi State University campus, past several Greek fraternity houses. The protest culminated in a rally at the MSU Amphitheatre in which students, city leaders and state officials spread a message of urgency and unity to combat systemic racism and the killings of Black Americans by police nationwide.

Starkville Stand Up's goals include creating a citizen-led police review board and cultural sensitivity training for all employees of the city and the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District.

In response to the protest happening within a week's notice and without insurance or a special event permit from the city, Starkville aldermen voted to allow freedom of assembly, a right protected by the First Amendment, to happen on short notice without any procedural roadblocks if it is "in response to spontaneous events," according to the policy approved in June.

STORY BY **TESS VRBIN**

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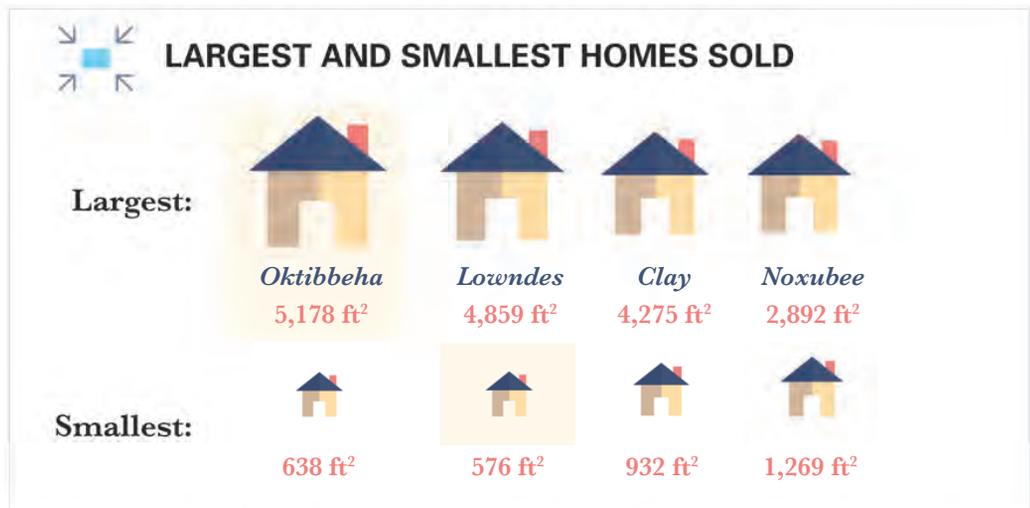
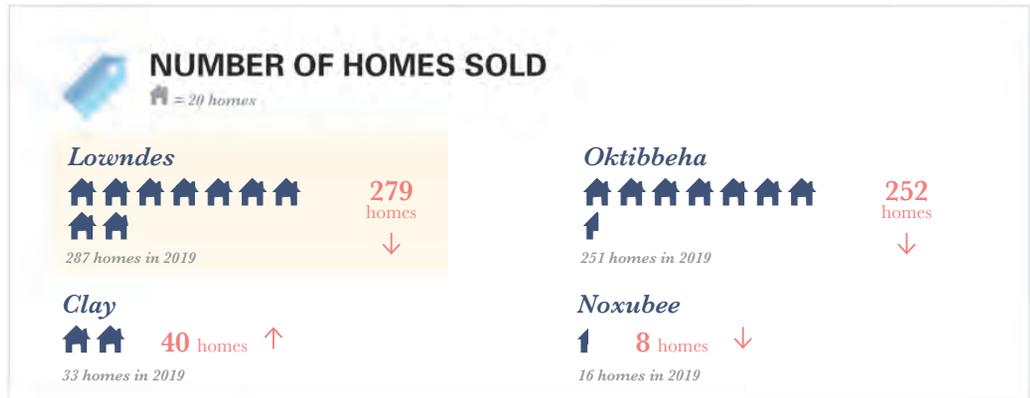
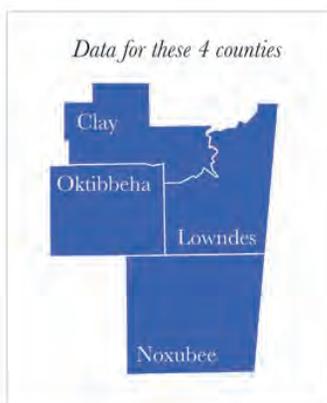
The new Partnership Middle School, a collaboration between Mississippi State University and the Starkville Oktibbeha School District, is a one-of-a-kind, innovative model that's capturing the attention of educators across the country. Serving 6th and 7th graders in Oktibbeha County and located on the MSU campus, the state-of-the-art school also is a university research site for discovering exciting improvements to education.



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Lisa Halverson

‘WE’RE STILL GROWING’

NEW BUSINESSES, INCLUDING BOOKSTORE AND HAIR SALON, HAVE SPRUNG UP IN AREA

When Lisa Halverson told her friends she wanted to open her own business in Columbus this summer, many of them had the same reaction: “Are you crazy?”

Sometimes, Halverson said, she began to wonder the same thing. Was starting up during the COVID-19 pandemic worth it? But she stuck with it and ever since she opened Mudd Dobbers Vintage Shop in Holly Hills Plaza on Highway 45 in August, the community reaction has been beyond what Halverson even could have thought.

As of early September, she has 13 vendors — including sellers from Smithville and Vernon, Alabama — for her store, which sells refurbished furniture, home decor, antiques, handmade items and more. Customers have flocked from as far as New Albany to shop at Mudd Dobbers.

“I never expected this,” Halverson said. “I really didn’t.”

Hers is one of several new local businesses in the Golden Triangle that have found success despite the pandemic — a welcome sight for Halverson, Mudd Dobbers and the entrepre-

neurial spirit in the area.

“Mississippi stands tall,” Halverson said. “We’re still growing.”

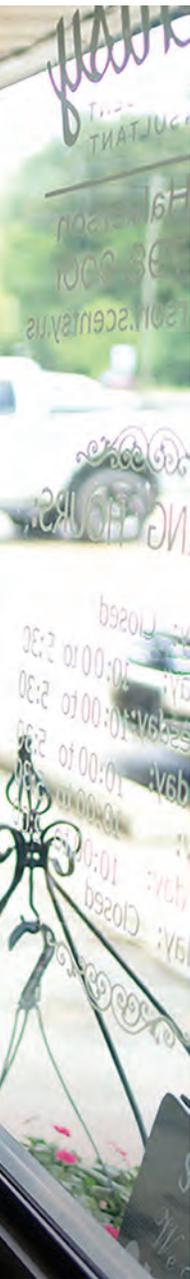
COMING TOGETHER

Emily Liner arrived in Columbus with her beagle, Scarlet, and a moving truck full of books and furnishings for her new house. The 2004 Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science graduate returned from Washington, D.C., where she lived for almost 16 years, to establish a new bookstore, Friendly City Books, in the city following the closure of Books-A-Million earlier this year.

“I think every town and every city deserves to have a bookstore, so I felt that Columbus shouldn’t be left out,” Liner said.

She opened her online store Oct. 1 and said she plans to open a brick-and-mortar business downtown — ideally near the corner of Fifth and Main streets — soon afterward.

Liner said her choice to open the online store first was one of the ways she’s had to innovate because of the pandemic.





Mudd Dobbers



Mudd Dobbers

“The big, scary thing about COVID for a potential entrepreneur is going into an industry that is rooted in face-to-face customer interaction,” she said.

Of course, not every new business owner has had the same experience. Sarah Dempsey of Starkville found herself at home with her two kids when Legends Hair Salon, where she worked, was shut down this spring. Dempsey said the pandemic gave her the time she needed to explore starting her own business. She opened Magnolia Hair Studio on Aug. 6.

“If I was working all day, every day, I would have never had time to open this,” Dempsey said.

She said she fell in love with the first place she looked at: the former Jones Shoe Shop building on south Lafayette Street.

“It just kind of fell in my lap,” Dempsey said.

A GATHERING PLACE

Mudd Dobbers’ success couldn’t have been accomplished without support from the community, Halverson said. And she’s seen a lot of it: people “junking” on Saturdays stopping by; customers finding her business on Facebook and looking for something to take home. Mudd Dobbers has even become a hot topic of conversation. Halverson said a customer once told her,

“We talked about you over lunch, and we just had to come see your store.”

That’s just what Halverson hoped for, she said.

“I want people to say, ‘Have you been to Mudd Dobbers?’ and they’ll go, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve been in there!’” she said. “That’s what I want.”

Liner, too, said she wants her store to become a community gathering place, especially for people who wouldn’t typically run into each other. College students at Mississippi University for Women and Columbus Air Force Base personnel are two groups Liner hopes to cater to with the store, hoping to give back to a community that has been extra supportive of small businesses during the pandemic.

Halverson, who’s seen that in action more than she ever expected, said she appreciates the support she’s gotten from the community and just hopes to keep it going. And she’s proud of her choice to open a new business in the face of so many questions.

“Sometimes I did wonder if we were crazy, but I think we made the right decision, and I think we’ll be successful,” Halverson said.

STORY BY **THEO DEROSA**

PHOTOS BY **ATRANIK TAVITIAN**



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IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN MUSIC

A FAMILY OF VIOLINISTS PLAYS AND
PERFORMS AT CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY
EVENTS THROUGHOUT THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

It's hard to know for certain how many violinists there are in Noxubee County. When the Dickson Family gets together for performances, there are at least five. Managed, nurtured and sometimes cajoled by their grandmother — retired school superintendent, music teacher and state representative Reecy Dickson — the group of teens has been performing at churches and community events.

"I like playing mostly, but I like performing, too," says 17-year-old Ron Dickson Jr., the eldest of a group that includes his two brothers — Cordell (14) and Lamar (13) along with first cousins Dirk Dickson Jr. and Todd Lee Dickson. "Not a lot of people play the violin or even see somebody playing it, so that's kind of cool to give people a little taste of it."

Ron was 12 when his uncle suggested he pick up the violin. He liked it from the start, even though eliciting anything beyond the screech you would associate with an alley cat in pain proved elusive.

"It is hard at first," Ron says. "But once you get a feel for it, it's such an elegant sound. It's not like the guitar or the piano or any other instrument. It's elegant. That's the best way I can describe it."

When Reecy Dickson heard Ron had picked up the violin, she saw it as an opportunity to introduce some of her other grandchildren to the instrument.

"We're a musical family," she said. "Their grandfather, my husband, Billie, was band director in Macon, Aliceville (Alabama) and Columbus for close to 30 years. I have a masters in music from Mississippi State and taught music for 12 years (in Noxubee County) before becoming school superintendent there."

The love of music, she was sure, had been passed along the generations.

"If they are going to be around us, they have to do something," she said. "So when I found out there was a violin teacher in Louisville. I bought all of them violins and started taking them to lessons."

That was about four years ago. By last year, the boys had progressed to the point where they were soon being asked to perform.

"They get multiple invitations from all over," Reecy Dickson says. "They've played at the Dancing Rabbit Festival (in Macon), Juneteenth (Starkville) and a lot of churches and community events."

It's a sweltering Saturday afternoon as the Dicksons take a make-shift stage in front of the J.L. King Community Center to play before a crowd of several hundred people at the Starkville chapter NAACP's "Juneteenth" Celebration. The teens breeze confidently through a short set, four violins, with one of the cousins accompanying on the keyboard. (Four of the five play keyboard as well as the violin). With only a single





microphone and one small amp, the teens play and the crowd goes quiet, leaning forward in lawn chairs to hear the music. They do not address the crowd, instead moving from one number to the next. After finishing the last tune, the boys quietly leave the stage area to a generous applause. Reecy Dickson takes the microphone.

“We need to appreciate the talent of our children,” she says, which draws a smattering of affirmations from the crowd — “Tell it!” and “That’s right!” and “Preach.”

She pauses.

“But we also need to tell our children about hard work.”

The crowd nods and claps and shouts in approval.

The way Reecy Dickson sees it, her boys make music, but it’s not all about music.

“My point is that they have to have objectives and goals and a determination to reach them,” she says. “I served on the Corrections Committee in the Legislature for 23 years. I got to see what can happen when young people don’t have goals. [...] So I’m making sure my grandchildren grasp on to something they can be proud of.”

She preaches hard work, above all else.

“They know what is expected of them,” she said. “They must read. They must practice. They must make good grades. It’s all about establishing a work ethic. You don’t get anywhere without that.”

For the Dickson kids that message is reflected in the music they make.

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**

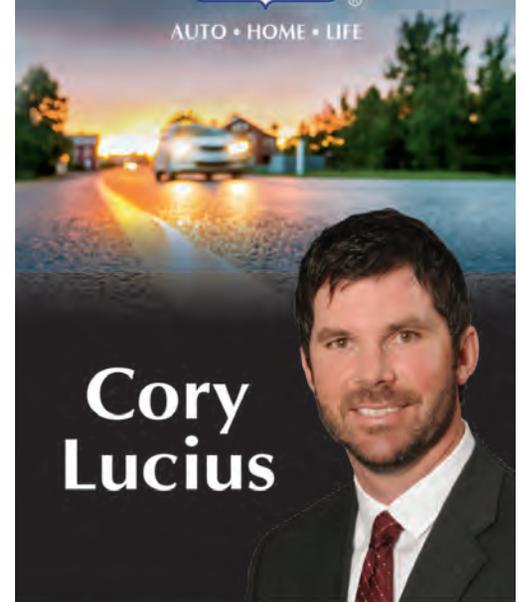
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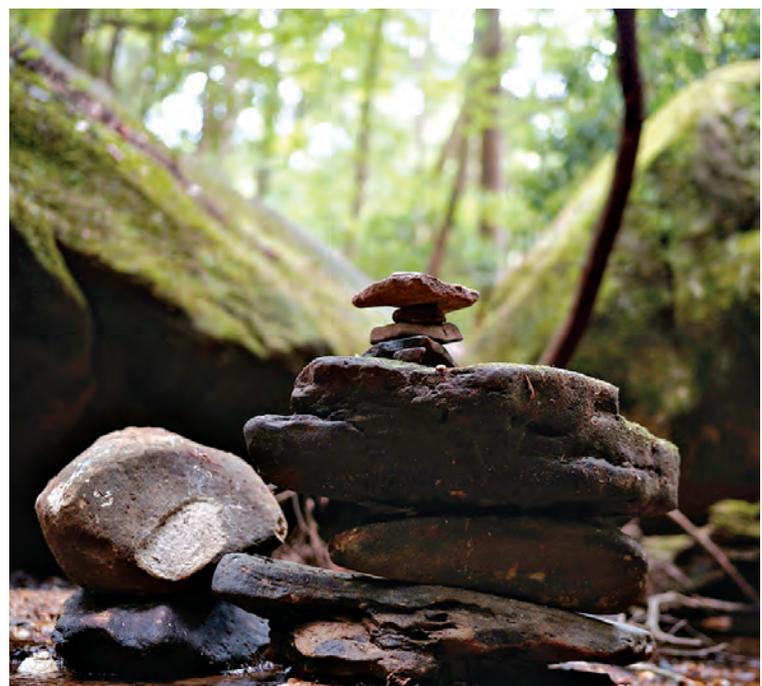
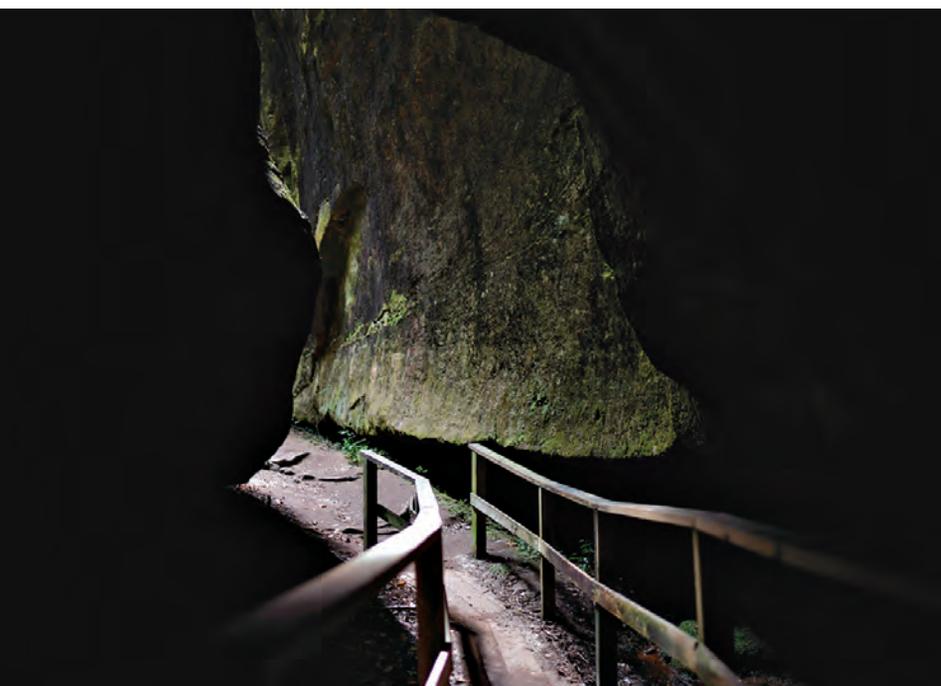
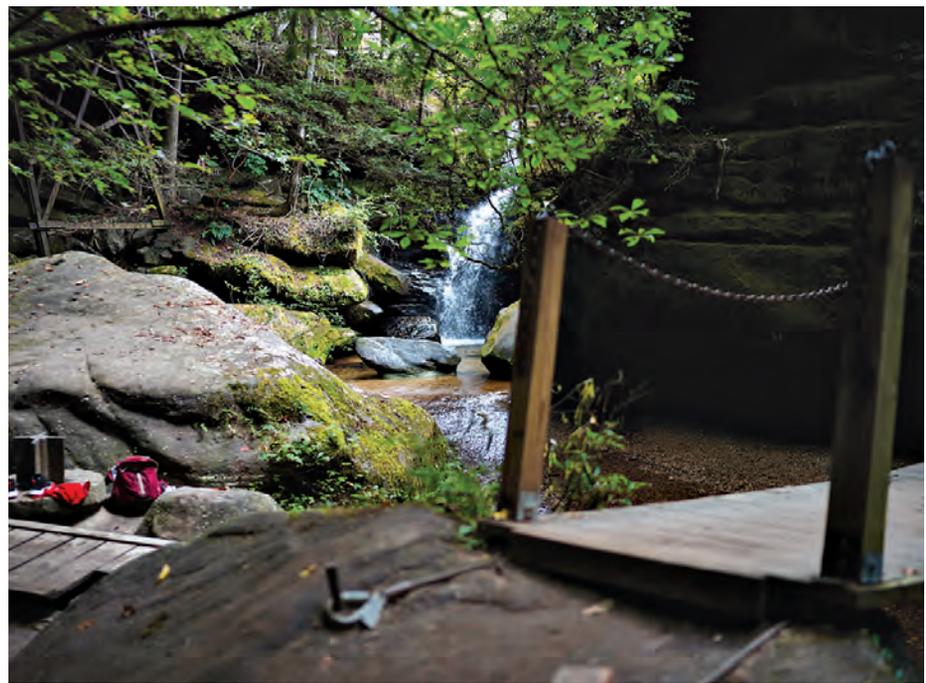
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‘JUMP IN THE CAR AND GO’

FROM PRIMEVAL FORESTS ON CANYON FLOORS
TO MAN-MADE LAKES, NORTHWEST ALABAMA
IS HOME TO RUGGED NATURAL WONDERS

Walls of moss-covered rocks tower above the trail where Mike Bauer and his rescue dog Willow step between twisted tree roots and around stone slabs, following the path of a burbling stream on the floor of Dismals Canyon one morning in late summer. At the north end of the trail ahead of them, a family of four swims beneath one of the canyon’s two waterfalls and other visitors pad the mile-and-a-half trail to take in one of the country’s oldest primeval forests east of the Mississippi River.

There are rocks to clamber over and holes to peer into for kids or kids-at-heart and the dismalities — the inch-long bioluminescent “glow worms” from which the canyon gets its name — are just one of the bug species hikers will see as they squeeze between rocky passages or dip their toes in the stream. On the canyon floor, it’s easy to let the centuries fall away and imagine you’re walking through the Alabama of 200 years ago. The rock walls block sounds from nearby Highway 43 and even voices from the Country Store, where visitors purchase tickets and a trail map, three flights of wooden stairs above.

Aiding that feeling of being lost in time are the stories of the canyon itself. Carved into the earth by geologic events and draining waters over millions of years, it was home to Paleoamericans 10,000 years ago. Native Americans from the Chickasaw and Cherokee tribes lived there

before white settlers moved into the area in the 1800s. A trail map provided to visitors tells stories of a 19th-Century outlaw who made the canyon his hideout and of religious rituals performed by Chickasaw Indians in the better-hidden parts of the forest floor.

For Bauer, a native of Panama City, Florida, an area still recovering from Hurricane Michael in 2018, the slice of nature in north Alabama’s woods provides a few days of much-needed respite.

“I just wanted to set up here and relax and recharge,” he said.

‘A RUGGED NATURAL AREA’

Bauer made reservations at the company’s campsite and is using it as a base to explore this forested area of north Alabama, long a destination for nature enthusiasts. A few miles south along Highway 43 is Bear Creek Canoe Run, which on weekends rents kayaks and canoes for an eight-mile trip along the creek. Just over the county line in Winston County is the 148-foot long Natural Bridge, the longest natural bridge east of the Rockies. A little farther east is the Sipsey Wilderness, part of the Bankhead National Forest and home to dozens of hiking trails and waterfalls.

The wilderness and nearby Smith Lake — a 21,000-acre series of man made waterways that zig-zags through Winston, Walker and Cullman



Bear Creek Canoe Run



Smith Lake

counties — have become the stomping grounds of plenty of Golden Triangle residents looking for a good place to vacation or retire. While some have bought their own vacation homes, others rent cabins or find hotels and marinas near the lake, which has around 500 miles of shoreline over the three counties.

“It’s a very beautiful natural area, just a rugged natural area” said Columbus native Joe Boggess.

He and his wife Carol have a house on the lake in Winston County. By car, it’s a 25-minute drive to visit their friends Anne and Terry Freeze, who live on the other side of the lake in Walker County. By boat, Terry and Anne say, it’s only 10 minutes.

“They dammed up part of the Sipsey River and backed water up into all those little creeks,” Terry says as Anne dangles her feet in the water to demonstrate how the water is clear “almost like a swimming pool.”

“A lot of those fingers (that make up the lake) are just creeks.”

The water there is about 60 feet deep — it’s more than 200 in other parts — and their teenage granddaughter from Starkville can’t get enough of swimming and skiing in it, Anne says.

Like Joe and Carol, Anne and Terry are from

Columbus and bought the lake house as a vacation home. It’s only about two hours from their home in Columbus, though they now live on the lake permanently, hosting visitors who come for the swimming, the boating and the fishing.

“One big thing for us when we were talking about getting a vacation home was [...] the decision for most people in the Columbus area, ‘Do we get a place on the beach on the gulf, or do we get something else?’” Anne said. “When you go to the beach, you have to kind of plan in advance.[...] We decided we wanted a place you can just jump in the car and go to.”

That part of Alabama — particularly the Sipsey Wilderness where he and Willow can take more walks through the woods — is what Bauer had his eye on for the remainder of his trip. For him, the region’s natural beauty is the place to go when he needs to get away.

“You just think, ‘Whoa, God made this,’ he said. “It’s amazing.”

STORY BY **ISABELLE ALTMAN**

PHOTOS BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**

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PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF COLUMBUS

SPRING PILGRIMAGE — AN EVENT TO TELL
'THE FULL AMERICAN STORY'



We occasionally revisit previous stories for updates. In the Fall 2019 issue of *Progress*, we reported the formation of the Preservation Society of Columbus and their efforts to reimagine the long-standing Spring Pilgrimage. Now a year later, we check back in with board member Kathy Novotny to see how things are going as the group makes plans for the 2021 Pilgrimage.

In years past, the emphasis during Pilgrimage has been on the historical structures themselves; however, the Preservation Society's mission envisions a more holistic approach moving forward. Next year Novotny says the event will emphasize the untold stories of those who resided in the historic spaces to "humanize" the stories.

Dr. Erin Kempker, from the Mississippi University for Women's Department of History, along with student interns, will compile the history of those who lived and those who were enslaved in the area's homes and sites on tour. The research is expected to take five years to complete and will form the foundation of future tours. Additionally, the results of that research will be archived at the Colum-

bus-Lowndes Public Library.

New additions to the tours will give a voice to those silent too long. “We are focusing on telling the stories of all of those who lived here,” Novotny emphasized. Local historian and Preservation board member Susie Shelton has also been active in collecting those stories.

Next year’s Pilgrimage will include African American tours, Jewish tours and the history of Native Americans. Of course, Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science will host Tales from the Crypt at Friendship Cemetery.

In some cases the event will offer a hands-on experience for participants. Helen Karriem, owner of Helen’s Kitchen, for example, will showcase biscuit-making skills and share her experience as a female business owner at Temple Heights.

The Columbus Spring Pilgrimage will take place between March and April, and the group is expected to announce details of the tours and events in November.

STORY BY **YUE STELLA YU**

PHOTOS BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**



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TEACHERS

IN THIS MOST UNIQUE OF SCHOOL YEARS, WE ASK AREA TEACHERS TO COMMENT ON THINGS THAT HAVE SURPRISED THEM SO FAR



Teaching drama via video can be challenging. In between classes I make lots of noises to remind me of what it once felt like to have a school of kids! While we were going over the syllabus some kid had a question. I was like, “yes?” They then said, “we actually got work in this class? Yuck.” Another time I told a student I was quarantining because I went to Atlanta, but I’d be supporting him on the football field and he responded, “long as you support from your house!”

DANYSHA LIGON
NOXUBEE HIGH SCHOOL, DRAMA

I think the most surprising thing I’ve seen is how well the children have adapted to all of the new procedures that we have set in place. All of the hand washing, wearing face masks all day long, scheduled restroom breaks, and staying in the classroom all day is hard on kindergarteners. They don’t get a nap, but they have been real troopers! They’ve done better than the adults.

VIVIAN SPEARS
SUDDUTH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,
KINDERGARTEN





This school year has been a unique one for sure. We often think about how class would look if we had smaller class sizes, but now that we do, all we can think about is how we'd love to be able to have all students here with us. Teaching both hybrid and virtual students has allowed me the chance to see things from both perspectives. I appreciate the parents for being right there with us to help make this transition as smooth as possible.

MARILYN CHANDLER
SALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, 2ND GRADE

Although I'm not surprised because our faculty always rises to the occasion, I am excited and proud to see how everyone has met each challenge this school year presents with positivity. The flexibility to adapt all aspects of teaching and the determination to ensure every student receives the best education possible are truly inspiring.

LINDSAY PRICE
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6TH GRADE MATH



I must admit, I would have never imagined starting my first year as a new teacher doing distance learning. It is a shock to me that teaching while wearing a mask has become the new normal.

ALEXIS SMITH
WEST POINT HIGH SCHOOL, SCIENCE



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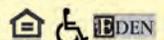
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TRUTH TO POWER

THROUGH A TENSE SUMMER, DA SCOTT COLOM
PRIORITIZED TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN DIALOGUE



Scott Colom's mother doesn't want him boxing competitively. If not for that, and strenuous work obligations, the 38-year-old district attorney for Mississippi's 16th circuit court district would have no problem climbing in the ring to try his skills against local talent.

"My mom won't let me actually box," said Colom, now almost a year into his second term as DA. "I don't mind getting knocked down. It's one of those things that I could say, 'I did it.'"

Dorothy Colom is well aware of her son's toughness and willingness to fight. She even thinks he might do pretty well. But mothers are mothers, after all.

"I enjoy boxing. I watched it with my father growing up. But I don't want to see anyone physically beat up on my son," laughed Dorothy.

Scott generally trains with one of his assistant district attorneys, Marc Amos, at Oliver Miller's gym on College Street. Sparring sessions between the two lawyers, "friendly" as they may be, are a handful for Scott – he gives up close to six inches and 100 pounds to the 6-foot-2, 265-pound Amos.

Both admit Amos holds back – a little.

"I'm not sure you want to hit your boss with everything you've got," Amos laughed. "There are weight classes for a reason. I can't move as fast as he can, and I'm not sure he can hit as hard as me."

In Scott's office downtown, a pair of

leather boxing gloves hanging on the wall behind his desk represent his fighting spirit, although they are not for use at Miller's gym. They were a gift from Scott's twin brother, Andrew, that came with a reminder of how to look at life.

"Don't be afraid to fight," Scott recalled his brother saying. "Also, know how to duck a punch."

Hanging beside the gloves is a framed photo of Levon Brooks and Kennedy Brewer – Noxubee County men wrongfully convicted of murder in the 1990s who both served nearly two decades in prison before DNA evidence finally cleared their names.

Scott was a pre-teen when those men were sentenced, but their experience with the justice system helps guide how he prosecutes.

"I keep that there to remind myself that the stakes are very high," he said. "In my decision-making, I can never forget that."



It's May 28.

The officer-involved killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis three days before



Scott Colom talks with attorney Warren Conway

freshly resonates with many Americans, Scott included, as do the demonstrations across the country protesting police brutality against African Americans. Some of those demonstrations have become violent.

Scott's cell phone rings.

A representative with the office of Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch tells Scott the state is dropping the manslaughter charge against Canyon Boykin – a white former police officer who fatally shot 26-year-old Ricky Ball, a Black man, following a traffic stop in Columbus in October 2015.

It is the first communication Scott has received about the case since Fitch took office in January.

“I was pretty shocked by it,” Scott said. “I immediately thought, ‘That’s going to be a huge problem.’”

He asks for an explanation, but gets little more than “lack of evidence” in response.

“I told them they really needed to reconsider

how they were going to do it,” he recalled. “I said if there was any way, they should hold off and do it in a way where you could have a hearing, explain your reasoning and give the public an opportunity to observe what’s going on, even provide some evidence.”

Fitch’s employee tells Scott the decision has been made and the judge has the order. This, she tells Scott, is just “a courtesy call.”

Afterward, Scott starts thinking of what he can do to tamp down the prospect of violence erupting in his hometown. Ball’s killing sparked rumors and unanswered questions for nearly five years.

“If you saw what happened around the country, that (following) weekend was the worst weekend,” he said. “There were protests in every major city. There was some destruction of property, clashes with police. It doesn’t take much for one or two people to take it to that level here.”

The next day, Scott holds a press conference

at Lowndes County Courthouse, similar to the one he held in 2016 when he announced he was turning over the Boykin case to then AG Jim Hood's office rather than handling it himself.

At this press conference, though, he says he will fight to get the case file and make it public.

That Saturday, he sees on Facebook where a peaceful demonstration will gather in the Leigh Mall parking lot. Scott goes, eager to show the protesters someone in the legal system is willing to listen. He ends up speaking, doubling down on his commitment to make the case file public.

City leaders, including the mayor and police chief, are there. Scott said they monitored the situation but "gave protesters their space."

"Even they made very clear that they didn't believe this was handled in a way that was appropriate," he said.

Over the weekend and in the following weeks, other local protests emerge. All are peaceful.

"The fact that it did not get violent in Columbus goes to the people who were leading the protests," Scott notes. "They were leading in a way that called for action (getting the file, asking the judge to reverse the order). ... So my thing was let's focus on what we can control, instead of having people frustrated and wondering if there was something we could do.

"It was an important moment in the history of Columbus where the people showed what type of community we have," he added.

David Horton, a Columbus native who organized not only the Leigh Mall demonstration but has continued to be an activist locally for racial justice, knew people could no longer be complacent with the status quo.

"We knew that if we didn't do something, somebody would," said Horton, who lives in Atlanta but visits family back home frequently. "We

wanted to provide an opportunity for people to express their feelings, but we didn't want those feelings to manifest in a way that would hurt the city."

Having a bridge, a mediator, from the legal system, he said, made that task much easier.

Fitch's decision, alone, could easily have sparked the social unrest many cities were seeing on a nightly basis. But even as more reasons for tension continued to build — and fewer people were willing to be silent in their displeasure — peace persisted. As did Scott.

Scott continued to speak out through the summer as the debate about relocating Confederate monuments displayed on public spaces came to a head. He spoke out against a Lowndes county official who, while explaining his reasons for wanting to keep a monument on the courthouse lawn, made blatantly racist comments against Blacks. He organized community forums in Columbus with panels of public officials, business and civic leaders — Black and white — aimed at engendering more mutual understanding and empathy.

"When you have someone in the legal system who not only wants to hear the people's desires and feelings but will also clearly explain how the system works, that puts people in a better position to see things from more than just their own perspective," Horton said. "It gives you the chance to have a conversation where the two sides are listening to one another instead of screaming at each other."



Scott was "born on third base."

His father, Wil, has practiced law in Columbus for 43 years. Dorothy served 24 years as the

district's first African-American chancery judge, retiring from the bench in 2019.

But as prominent as law was in his home, Scott was a long way from a law career when he was suspended from Columbus Middle School as a seventh grader for fighting at a football game. He and his brother spent the next two years at boarding school. When he returned to Columbus for high school, the star point guard for the Falcons spent his time thinking about "girls and basketball."

When it came time to apply to colleges, Scott had narrowed his choices to two: Louisiana State University, the nation's top "party school" that year; or Millsaps College in Jackson, where he could play basketball. His mother nudged him toward Millsaps.

Double-majoring in English and history, Scott

eventually started turning away from basketball and toward the family craft. By his senior year, though dubbed a starter, he left the basketball team to focus on his studies. After graduation, he spent 18 months teaching English in Guyana, what he calls the most impactful thing he's ever done.

His parents agree.

"It was a remote village with no running water, and only two hours a day of electricity by generator," Wil said. "When he got there, it was a shock to him. After he came back, he was quite different."

Scott went to law school at the University of Wisconsin, graduating cum laude. He had offers to work at law firms in New York, Chicago, other larger cities. Instead, he chose to come home to Mississippi, and later home to Columbus





where he worked with his father and also served as Justice Court judge.

“We’re the most underrated state in the country,” he said. “We have so much promise, so much potential. I feel like there’s a camaraderie here among the people trying to push the state forward that you don’t have other places.”

In 2015, with his family fully supporting his run, he defeated 26-year incumbent Forrest Allgood by a 54 to 46 percent margin, becoming the first ever Black district attorney elected in a majority white district in Mississippi. He was re-elected unopposed four years later.

“I try to remember with my job that my start

is unique to most people,” he said. “Even with that start, I made a lot of bad decisions. So imagine, without that start, what kind of decisions I would have made.”



It took Fitch’s office less than a week to turn over the Boykin file, and Scott’s office publicly released body camera footage, witness statements, medical examiner’s reports and other evidence by mid-June.

Releasing the file did not replace a trial, which Scott believes should have happened. Getting



Scott Colom holds daughter Luci

a conviction on that evidence, however, would have been difficult, he admits.

“The vast majority of the community would have been satisfied (with a trial),” he said “... If the jury didn’t convict, I think you would have had some people upset, but (most) would understand that at least (the family) got a chance to let the jury decide it.”

Even so, Amos notes, releasing the file offered clarity he believes curtailed possible unrest.

“You didn’t see a lot of protests after we put that out. If you create a void of information, people will fill it with conspiracy theories,” Amos said. “What Scott did was fill the void with facts. I think the public appreciated it.”

The Boykin case also brought a policy change to Scott’s office. Part of his platform in his first DA election campaign in 2015 held that he would turn over officer-involved shooting cases in the district to the AG’s office. Independent prosecutors don’t work as closely with local law

enforcement, he thought, so they were less likely to be perceived as “hanging the public out to dry.”

In the four years Hood’s office worked the Boykin case, he didn’t regret his decision to hand it over.

Now, he’s vowed to take those cases himself moving forward.

“I saw the potential risk and harm from a person not being accountable to the decision,” he said.



At home with his two daughters – Luci, 4; and Brooklyn Madison, 2 – Scott has something of a soft side.

“They definitely bring out the more patient and calm side of him,” said his wife, Nadia, a West Point native whom he married in 2014.

What they represent is a generation Scott

hopes will drive Mississippi's, and the nation's, social progress even further.

Scott said he wants to be a good example of a Black leader, but he looks for a more racially integrated society to, over time, take the wind out of systemic racism – especially in the criminal justice system.

Part of that process is speaking truth to power.

“I don't have a problem saying George Floyd was murdered,” he said. “I don't have a problem saying that there are many examples of police brutality across the country that are on video that are not things we can tolerate in America. I always just follow the truth.”

Another part is looking at the future with optimism, even in Mississippi.

“We have so much potential because of the nature of our diversity,” Scott said. “Slowly and slowly, we're breaking down those stereotypes, those prejudices and those biases. Once people see that another person isn't different from them based on their race, I just feel like the sky is the limit.”

Wherever the Coloms' children end up, Nadia said there's value in their growing up here.

“This is home,” she said. “We have a stake here and in whether it gets better.”

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**

STORY PHOTOS BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**

COVER AND OPENING PHOTO BY

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Nadia Colom walks through the door holding daughter Brooklyn.

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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**

PHOTO OF SYLVIA GRAHAM BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**

PHOTO OF BERT MONTGOMERY

AND NORMA JONES BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



SYLVIA GRAHAM

Sylvia Graham knows how hard life can be on the Columbus Northside, in an area called “The Blocks.”

“I grew up there and came from those streets,” says Graham. “We were poor and we didn’t have role models. With the way I grew up, there were so many chances to give up.”

There is something else she knows: “You don’t have to live in poverty because of how you grow up,” she says. “I know that from my own life. We have doctors and lawyers and people who travel the world and do great things who came up on these same streets.”

From her impoverished beginnings, Graham has spent 48 years working on the Northside. She grew up down the street from Skeets Hot Dogs on 14th Avenue North, pestering the owner, Selvin “Skeets” Wells, until he gave the teen

a job. Working there, along with several retail jobs where she rose from low-level employee to manager. In 2008, she bought Skeets. Two years ago, she bought Rex’s Direct Foods on Alabama Street. Today she’s considered one of the most successful Black business owners in the city.

“I was determined to find a way,” says Graham. “All those years, I worked and saved and told myself someday I was going to own my own business. I’m thankful to have a willing mind and body.”

She has a simple message for young Black women: “Girls, we are not in chains anymore,” she says. “No matter your situation, keep thinking about the power you do have. I’m a firm believer in the law of attraction. You have to try to stay positive. I’m a living witness to what that can do.”



BERT MONTGOMERY

Bert Montgomery is something of a paradox. He is a Southern Baptist who isn't a Southern Baptist and, although his congregation is small, he's one of the most visible pastors in Starkville.

Affable by nature yet resolute in support of those on the margins, people who may feel alienated from mainstream Christianity as practiced in the South, Montgomery occupies an unconventional role in the Starkville faith community.

Whether it's speaking in defense of the LGBTQ community at city hall meetings or standing alongside Blacks in a protest or march, Montgomery has preached his message of inclusion and understanding since his arrival as pastor at University Baptist Church 12 years ago.

"I don't know," he said. "Sometimes I think I've done too much, not that I don't believe in what I'm doing. I'm a straight white guy. I do

leverage my privilege on behalf of those who don't have it. But, especially now, we are seeing people who can speak for themselves, so maybe I need to be there more as an ally. I'm happy to do that."

Montgomery, 52 and married with two adult sons, is conventional in many respects. He grew up in the New Orleans area, studied briefly at MSU and attended seminary in Kentucky. He teaches sociology and religion as an adjunct professor at Mississippi State and pastors a church with an attendance of about 40, many of them college students, some of whom are LGBTQ and many of whom are Black.

"Mississippi State brings people into the community from all over the world, racially diverse and diverse in religion and other ways," Montgomery said. "I like to think our church is a reflection of that diversity."



NORMA JONES

When Norma Jones moved to Columbus in 2002, she was shocked that there were few resources and no support groups for families with special needs children. She knew from frightening experience how much it was needed.

“When Peter was born, the doctor came in with a worried look on his face,” Jones recalled. “I couldn’t figure it out. Then the doctor said he might have Down Syndrome. It sounded like a death sentence for us. My husband and I cried and cried. It was like we lost a child. We didn’t know anything about Down Syndrome. We were asking, ‘How do you fix it?’”

By the time the Joneses moved to Columbus, fear and grief had turned to acceptance and hope, thanks mainly to the resources and support they received from other families with special needs children.

Jones was determined to address that need

in her new home. Together with other special parents she formed Special Needs-Special Spirit Columbus with Jones serving as president, a position she held for 16 years.

“We started having workshops, working with the school districts and the state,” she said. “Before long, we started to branch out. We started a bowling league in 2004. Now, we’re up to about 32 bowlers.”

Jones said the group’s monthly programs provide a critical need among special needs families.

“Most of the kids need more socialization,” Jones said. “People with special needs don’t naturally have friends. Lots of times, they aren’t invited to social events. And when they go somewhere, they are different from everyone else. [...] With our program, they’re not the ones who are different. They fit in. They make friends. It’s wonderful to see.”

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL IS A WIN-WIN-WIN SITUATION

MSU, SOCSO EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS WILL BENEFIT FROM UNIQUE COLLABORATION AT STATE-OF-THE-ART SCHOOL.



On July 31, Mississippi State University President Mark Keenum took a tour of Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District's Partnership School, with SOCSO Superintendent Eddie Peasant serving as tour guide.

The \$30-million, 123,000 square-foot school,

tucked away on the northeast corner of MSU's sprawling campus, now serves roughly 600 sixth- and-seventh grade students. It is a collaboration between the university and the school district.

After an hour, during which Peasant pointed out feature after feature of the new state-of-the-art school, including a pod system designed to



Eddie Peasant, Ms. Ashley Allen and Mark Keenum

accommodate 100 student “tribes” as they move from each of five classrooms around a common area like spokes in a wheel, Keenum was clearly impressed.

“This is a fabulous, fabulous school,” Keenum said as the tour ended. “I go to schools all over Mississippi to visit with students and I have never seen a school nicer than this. This is the highest tech, most modern school, I think, in the whole state of Mississippi.”

Yet for all of its new features, latest technology and innovative design, the most impressive feature of the new school had yet to arrive at the time of Keenum’s tour.

Long after the “new wears off,” the unique learning environment that brings MSU education students into close, daily contact with the schoolchildren will continue to grow and evolve,



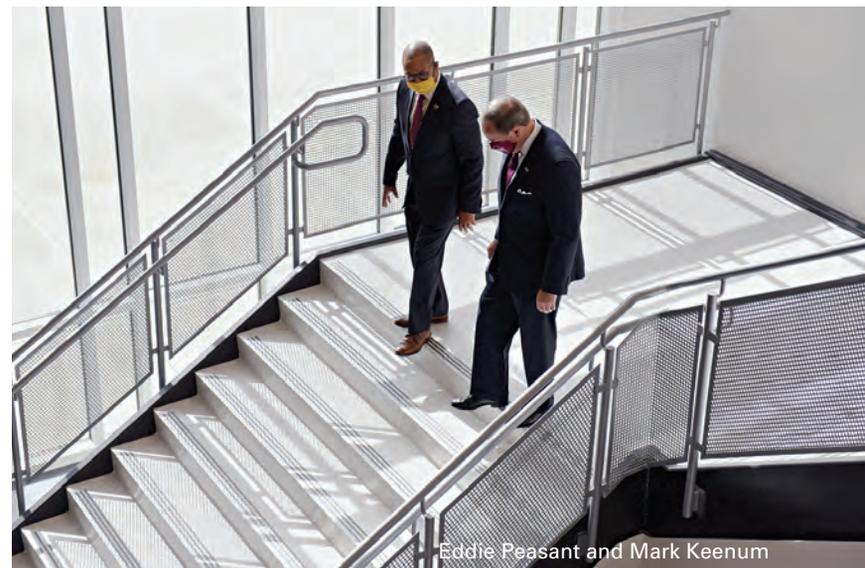
a true partnership in education.

Although MSU education students have long visited area schools to observe and learn in real-time settings, The Partnership School will allow more teachers-in-training to spend more time and become more familiar with the students they’ll see on a daily basis.

“In a normal school year, we’ll have somewhere between 150 and 175 students taking classes at the school,” said Terry Jayroe, associate dean at MSU’s College of Education. “It will be invaluable to our students.”

In addition to the eight, five-classroom pods for SOCS D students, the facility has designated space for six classrooms and 10 office spaces for MSU students and administrators.

“We’ll be right here in the heart of the school, which will be great,” said MSU instructor Kim



Eddie Peasant and Mark Keenum

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Smith, who will teach literacy and math to MSU’s future teachers. “It’s one thing to tell our teachers how things are and another thing to show them. That’s what we’ll be doing here.”

While The Partnership School will provide MSU students hands-on opportunities like never before, the collaboration provides SOCS D with unprecedented benefits as well.

“It’s going to be great for the student teachers, but it’s going to be great for us, too,” said sixth-grade science teacher Ashley Allen, who’s been with SOCS D for six years.

“They’ll open my eyes to ideas that maybe I haven’t thought about,” she said. “We can bounce ideas off each other, see what works best.”

Allen said the arrangements will mean students are more likely to get more one-on-one or small group assistance.

“It’s an extra hand if a child needs help,” she said. “Eventually when she starts teaching, we can swap places and I’ll be the one to do the one-on-one or small-group assistance. The student will have the best of both worlds. With two teachers, a student knows he or she can get help if they don’t understand something.”

For some, the learning began far before the school began classes. That’s particularly true for Devon Brenner, assistant vice president for research and development of MSU, who acted as a liaison between the university and the school district since its inception five years ago.

“It’s been a unique experience,” Brenner said. “The building is on university land, but it belongs to the school district. Throughout the process, there have been a lot of changes – a new school board and new superintendent, construction delays, changing costs, COVID-19. [...] I think I still have Partnership School mud on my shoes from the start of construction. Now that it’s finished, it’s such an honor to have been a part of it. It’s such a beautiful building and facility.”

Jayroe said the school is a testament to what can be achieved through teamwork.

“Our faculty and students are excited for the opportunity the school represents,” Jayroe said. “I’m sure the same is true for the school district. But for both of us, the ultimate goal is to impact student learning.”

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**
PHOTOS BY **CLAIRE HASSLER**



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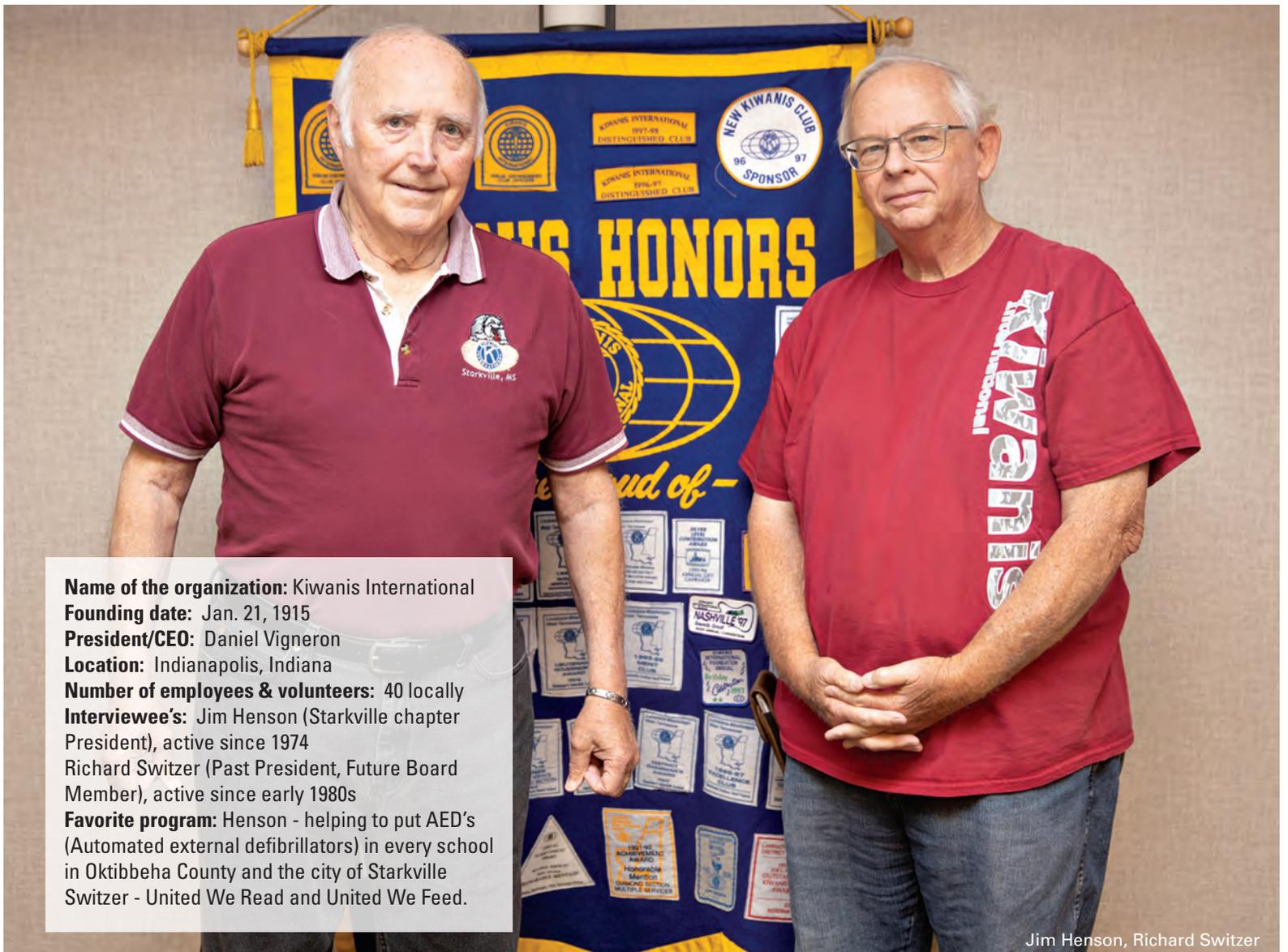
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MEET KIWANIS

MANY ARE AWARE OF THE 105-YEAR-OLD CIVIC CLUB BUT MAY NOT UNDERSTAND THE GROUP'S MISSION. WE INTERVIEWED THE STARKVILLE CHAPTER PRESIDENT AND A LONG-TERM MEMBER FOR MORE INSIGHT



Name of the organization: Kiwanis International

Founding date: Jan. 21, 1915

President/CEO: Daniel Vigneron

Location: Indianapolis, Indiana

Number of employees & volunteers: 40 locally

Interviewee's: Jim Henson (Starkville chapter President), active since 1974

Richard Switzer (Past President, Future Board Member), active since early 1980s

Favorite program: Henson - helping to put AED's (Automated external defibrillators) in every school in Oktibbeha County and the city of Starkville
Switzer - United We Read and United We Feed.

Jim Henson, Richard Switzer

How did you first get involved with Kiwanis International's Starkville branch?

Richard Switzer (past president): Well, actually, it was through playing golf. I was playing golf with one of the members at that time, and he just invited me to one of their meetings. At that time, there were about 100 members in the club and one of the ways that they're fundraising was, they ran a concession stand at Humphrey Coliseum at (Mississippi State). At the time I wasn't doing any real volunteer work, so I thought that would be interesting. The one thing I asked him is do I have to sell anything door to door because I didn't want to do that. He told me about the concession stand and invited me to the Coliseum for one of their basketball games. So I went and worked with them and met a lot of people and some of them I knew from work already, so I just decided to become a member.

Jim Henson (chapter president): Oh just a friend from the bank invited me to go to lunch with him one day to his visit to Kiwanis Club and I stayed for 40 years, I guess, so far.

I know this year has been kind of crazy with everything going on, including the COVID-19 pandemic, but what have you all been up to the past few months?

Jim Henson: Oh my goodness, we've been involved in international projects over the years. And we've done books for grammar schools before and we're doing a book for 4-year-olds, every 4-year-old in Starkville and Oktibbeha County, right now. They're purchased and waiting on a delivery and setting them up so we can hand them out."

Richard Switzer: We have kind of two sides. One is our service projects. About five years ago, when I was president, we started partnering



with the United Way of North Central Mississippi here in Starkville and the first thing we did with them was a big food drive. They have a program called United We Feed where they put big cardboard boxes in grocery stores and have volunteers handing out slips of paper, and people donate food into those boxes. And they were looking for somebody who could haul all that food to a central storage place and sort it. So the Kiwanis ended up doing that.

We've been partnering with the United Way for five years now. The big food drive used to be in November, when we would have boxes at Walmart, Vowell's and Kroger, and we'd collect 20-30 tons of food. But this year then with the COVID, we found out that a lot of the food banks were running out of food because so many people were laid off. So starting in early May, every two weeks we did a food drive and have food giveaways to the food banks. We started out donating to 10 food banks, but the last food giveaway we had we did 15 food banks here in Starkville. The first four of them we did one every two weeks, and then the food bank started getting food from other organizations and things. So now we're doing a food drive every month, and so that's our big service project.

We also partner with (United Way) in April on a book drive and giveaway. It's called United We Read. This past April, we collected maybe 5,000

books. There's an event here in Starkville called 'Touch-a-truck,' and so last year at that, we set up about 10 - 12 tables and laid out books for all groups, all ages, all subjects, and let people come by and pick up as many books as they wanted. But this year, by the time we were ready to do that, COVID shut everything down. So once the community market opened up, we went there every Saturday morning from about 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and set up half a dozen tables for our kids books, adult books of all subjects.

You mention the United We Read program being affected some by the COVID-19 pandemic. How have you all adjusted within this 'new normal?'

Richard Switzer: Well normally what we do is we meet every Tuesday at the Hilton Garden Inn, where we have lunch and have a program. We pay \$57 a month in dues, and \$11 of that goes to administration and then \$46 pays for our meals. But once COVID hit, we stopped meeting, and what the members decided to do instead of canceling that \$46, they donated that to the United Way Food Drive. So for April, May and June we ended up donating about \$4,500 to buy non-perishable food items as part of that food drive I was telling you about. And then we had some individual members who donated just on their own as well. We had one couple who donated — you know, we got those \$1,200 checks from the government — and they donated both of their checks to that food drive. So, all total the Kiwanis Club has put about \$8,000 - \$9,000 into that food drive.

Jim Henson: When COVID started out, the meetings were all called off for several months now. A few weeks ago, we decided we could meet so the hotel set the dining room up for us so

we can have people all spread out and (socially distanced). The distance thing has worked really well for us and the serving of the food is taken care of and nobody gets close to that. It has worked out really well for us the last few weeks. It gets really boring when you just sit at home. I've been retired for 20 years now, and when you just sit at home with nothing to do for weeks on end, it gets really boring."

With that, what's next on the docket for Kiwanis in the coming weeks and heading into the tail end of the year?

Jim Henson: Every year is a separate year. Our year ends starting in October, so we're coming up on the end of our Kiwanis year. Every president and every board is independent of whatever we've done before so it will be up to that president and board of directors as to what we will do in the coming year.

Richard Switzer: We'll do a food drive probably in September ... And then once the community market starts up again in the fall, we'll do the book giveaways there. We've got our golf tournament, hopefully, if everything works out in October, and then October is when we have the new officers come in and take over in the Kiwanis Club again. So we'll do that, and then we'll keep partnering with the United Way on various projects that benefit the community.

If interested in joining Kiwanis International, contact Richard Switzer at 662-312-6025

This interview has been edited for clarity and flow.

STORY BY **BEN PORTNOY**
PHOTOS BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**

CELEBRATING THE BLUES

A SHOWCASE IN THE MAKING

Designs? Done. Marketing brochures? In production. All wheels are turning to put a must-see attraction right in downtown West Point. When finished, the Black Prairie Blues Museum will celebrate late legendary Clay County native Howlin' Wolf and other blues pioneers who called the Black Belt Prairie region home. The ambitious project expected to draw music fans from around the country and beyond has long been a dream of the Prairie Belt Blues Foundation.

"We're in an exciting phase right now," said Foundation board member Deborah Mansfield of West Point. She has worked closely with Museum Arts of Dallas, Texas, on maximizing the entertainment and educational impact for future museum visitors.

Through interactive displays, touchscreens, dioramas and immersive exhibits — including a juke joint experience — museum guests will follow Wolf's journey from his Mississippi roots to milestones including an explosive 1965 appearance with The Rolling Stones on TV's "Shindig." A 1960s-style mini studio will even invite visitors to try their hand at recording one of Wolf's famous tunes as a keepsake.

The museum, the former Bank of West Point at 640 Commerce St., has already received a new roof as well as structural and air handling upgrades, thanks in large part to the generosity of former Foundation member Milton Sundbeck. The next fundraising phase is underway in earnest, with hopes of completing the museum within the next two years.

"We're going to need about \$2 million," said Mansfield.



Blues Society board members Jeremy Klutts and Deborah Mansfield

The goal is big, but benefits are, too — preservation of a legacy, outreach, education and a magnet bringing devotees to northeast Mississippi, where blues history-making stories began.

Learn more at blackprairiebluesmuseum.com.

STORY BY **JAN SWOOPE**

PHOTOS BY **ANTRANIK TAVITIAN**



BUILDING A LEGACY

ONE STARKVILLE FAMILY EXPANDS ON THEIR DAD'S CAREER IN BEEF

Beef has been a buzzword in and around Starkville lately — more so since David Sanders' family decided to continue a legacy. The late patriarch formed Sanders Cattle Co. in 1987 and was an order buyer for more than 30 years. When he passed away in March 2019, three of his children — Scott, Leslie and Will — stepped in, not only maintaining but expanding what their dad began. It may have been inevitable; they grew up steeped in the cattle business.

“My dad was one of those people that if he was awake, he was working in some form or fashion,” said Scott. “So whenever you were with him you just picked up on the language and learned things all the time.”

Today, Welcome Home Beef prides itself on providing premium cuts of beef, and not only to wholesale markets. The Sanders siblings opened a retail space at 329 University Boulevard in Starkville in February 2020. No one knew then, of course, that a global pandemic loomed just around the corner. In spite of the resulting stress on small businesses, the Sanders' family-owned enterprise found traction.

“We were able to stay open and actually

grow,” said Leslie, whose focus is wholesale sales and marketing.

As some grocery stores experienced meat shortages due to COVID-19 disruption, shoppers discovered Welcome Home Beef, where they could purchase everything from rib eye, T-bone and sirloin steaks to burgers, beef kabob tips, ribs and chuck roast.

The Sanders' business model revolves around quality. It all starts with locally-sourced cattle, predominantly Angus, purchased within a 120-mile radius of Starkville.

“We ship the cattle to Mid-America in Nebraska where they're grain-finished, no hormones, no extra additives,” said Will, who works primarily in the retail store. “That makes a difference.”

In Nebraska, emphasis is on a feed program to produce superior beef. The USDA-inspected meat comes back to Mississippi in tender, moist cuts. Additional custom cuts can be done at the University Drive location.

Scott handles procurement of cattle and inventory.

“What we believe is three different things,” he said. “You need good genetics, you need good



From left, Will Sanders, Linda Sanders, Leslie Sanders and Scott Sanders

marbling, and you need age to make good beef.”

As the reputation for that beef spreads, restaurants locally and statewide have become wholesale customers, like Two Brothers in Starkville, who use the meat from Welcome Home Beef for their specials. In August, Piggly Wiggly supermarket in Collinsville began carrying Welcome Home Beef products.

“That was our first grocery store,” said Leslie.

Scott added, “We hope to be in 10 grocery stores by spring.”

A gleaming silver food trailer made its appearance in mid-August outside the retail store, a visible testament to the Sanders’ commitment to expansion. The food truck, open Thursdays through Saturdays for lunch and supper, offers prepared steaks, burgers, tacos, short rib sandwiches, sides and desserts.

Job titles aren’t so important at Welcome Home Beef. Everyone has their area of expertise and pulls together.

“We all have pretty distinct roles,” said Scott. “It definitely takes all three of us.”

Make that four. Linda Sanders, the siblings’ mom, is much more than moral support.

“She is a huge part of the business,” Scott added. “She definitely is a big partner with us, that’s for sure. She’s the glue that binds.”

“I’m so proud of my children; they have worked so hard,” Linda said. “We just really feel like the good Lord has given us this opportunity and that it has helped us all heal and move forward in a new direction, to honor my husband’s memory and to have a new business.”

STORY BY **JAN SWOOPE**
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CLAY COUNTY STILL SEEING SOME GROWTH AMIDST PANDEMIC

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, West Point and Clay County saw its tourism tax revenue decline for a couple of months. Some events that are mainstays in Clay County have been postponed to 2021, such as the Prairie Arts Festival and the Black Prairie Blues festival are scheduled around Labor Day. Both are huge tourism tax generators and make huge economic impacts. Despite the postponements, tourism tax revenues have finally started to level off, according to West Point Growth Alliance Director Lisa Klutts. In some areas around the county, there still has been growth, including a couple of new restaurants on Highway-45 Alternate.

BUSINESS UPDATES

McAlister's Deli opened on Highway 45 Alternate in July and Klutts said McAllister's has been a huge presence on the Highway, not only for local residents but for people traveling through the north part of the state to the coast. Business

could also pick up if spectators stop in West Point before going to Mississippi State football games this fall.

Meanwhile, Jack's also opened on Highway 45 Alternate. The fast food restaurant hasn't been in the community long, as it made its grand opening on Aug. 19.

While some retail stores have struggled, others have found ways to offer better service to its customers. Klutts said in the last few months some of Clay County's retail stores shut down temporarily, but some businesses used that time to reinvent themselves or sell things in a different way. Klutts said it's been a time of creativity in how retailers do business.

In addition, Peco Foods could provide 300 jobs by 2022 once the addition of a par-fry facility is complete. The Peco Foods chicken processing plant is still new to the Golden Triangle, as construction began in 2018 and full operations started in June 2019. The \$40 million investment included \$3 million in state funding.





ROAD WORK

The Clay County Board of Supervisors decided in June to authorize issuing a \$500,000 road and bridge bond to be used for repairs in District 3. The county will repay the debt over a maximum term of 15 years.

District 3 Supervisor R.B. Davis said his top street priorities for road work with the allotted funds were Mac Pate and Palestine roads, but he also hoped to see improvements on Old Highway 10, Gates Road and Joe Myers Road. While he said his roads are in dire need of repairs, he acknowledged the \$500,000 likely wouldn't cover all construction needed.

Clay County operates differently than others in the Golden Triangle, as the county is organized using a beat system instead of a unit system. Under a unit system, the county works as its own entity with a county administrator and a road manager that oversees all the roads in that county. They work under the guidance of the board of supervisors and county engineer to ensure all the roads are maintained. With the beat system, each supervisor is individually responsible for working with the county engineer to ensure the roads and bridges of the district they represent are maintained.

District 3, the lone recipient of the \$500,000 road and bridge bond in June, had a 20-year outstanding bond totaling \$500,000 issued in 2000 that was paid off on Aug. 1, Clay County Chancery Clerk Amy Berry said.

Each of the county's other districts has one outstanding bond out for \$500,000, with the exception of District 4, which has two outstanding \$500,000 bonds dating back to 2008 and 2013.

In May, the West Point Board of Selectmen authorized issuing \$2.25 million in general obligation bonds to improve and pave streets. The city will repay the debt semi-annually over a maximum of 15 years. Each of the board's five selectmen turned in their highest priorities of roads that need work done to West Point Mayor Robbie Robinson in June. Ward 5 Selectman Jasper Pittman said the funds would be distributed equally among the five wards. Robinson pointed to West Point's Main and Broad streets as the areas most in need of repairs.

This will be the city's second bond used for road construction in the last three years and the third outstanding bond overall. Robinson said in 2017 the city borrowed \$1.4 million for street paving, a bond that also has a life of 15 years. The 2017 bond stretched across roughly eight miles in the city limits.

MUSEUM UPDATE

Plans for the upcoming Black Prairie Blues Museum are still moving along, albeit slowly, Klutts said. Discussions are ongoing with museum's designers, Museum Arts based in Texas, about conceptual plans. Klutts said the museum is at the point where it needs to raise money to take the project to the next phase. The initial budget for the project was \$175,000 and \$20,000 was raised at a fundraiser last October, but any future fundraisers are on hold at the moment. A timetable for an opening is unknown to this point. When completed, Clay County residents will have an opportunity to see an interactive museum featuring the lives and music of musicians from Mississippi's Black Prairie.

STORY BY **GARRICK HODGE**
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 West Point Life



The William Henry Scales House in Macon

GROWTH IN NOXUBEE COUNTY

From road and bridge projects to fiber optic cable, infrastructure improvements are on the horizon for rural Noxubee County.

As officials search for funds for road and bridge projects, 4-County Electric Power Association is making plans to expand broadband internet for the county's small, primarily agricultural communities and local catfish processing plant Superior Catfish continues its multi-million dollar expansion.

REPAIRS TO ROADS AND BRIDGES

Noxubee County has completed a number of bridge and road projects thanks in part to Emergency Road and Bridge Replacement funds authorized by the Mississippi Legislature and divided among counties in need of infrastructure repairs.

The county replaced three separate bridges on Jack Spann Road south of Highway 14, county engineer Steve Miller said. Laurel-based Tanner Construction completed the bulk of the \$1.7 million project by August. The remainder of ERBR funds — which for Noxubee County were \$2.9 million total — will go to replacing a bridge on Butler Road. Miller said he has not done a final estimate on the cost yet, but hopes the county will be able to begin advertising bids this fall for construction in 2021.

The county is also eyeing a bridge replacement project on Hopewell Road, which Miller said could cost about \$170,000 in Local System Bridge Project money from the Legislature. County supervisors are slated to advertise and

award the bid for that project this fall.

County officials are also awaiting state approval for a \$2.34 million countywide road repair project, but Miller said the status of the project is “fluid” and depends on whether the county receives funding from State Aid Road Construction.

The city of Macon is also applying for \$400,000 in state aid funds to replace a bridge on Nate Wayne Drive, Mayor Bob Boykin said. The bridge was washed out in a storm a couple of years ago, and the city has had to close part of the road. Boykin says he hopes to hear by the end of the year whether the city will receive the money.

North of Macon, the town of Brooksville received a \$150,000 Small Municipalities grant to pave a loop of road through downtown, Mayor David Boswell said. The project will repair about 7/10 of a mile of road that loops from Main Street to Post Office Street to Depot Street, and Boswell expects it to only take a couple of weeks.

BROADBAND PROJECT

More internet options could also be on the way to Noxubee County. The rural parts of the county near Brooksville in District 5 will be one of the sites where 4-County Electric Power Association plans to use CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act funds to lay fiber optic cables. The Legislature earlier this year approved \$65 million in CARES funding to aid electric cooperatives in providing broadband to rural communities. 4-County received \$6 mil-



Fred Johnson at the expansion site for Superior Catfish

lion from the funding and is combining that with \$7 million of their own money to lay just under 500 miles of fiber optic cable in rural parts of Noxubee, Clay and Choctaw counties, though officials do not yet know how much of that will be in Noxubee County alone.

Public relations and marketing manager Jon Turner said the co-op is pleased that their first foray into broadband will serve the communities with the least internet access, rather than focusing on areas that already have options. While the project is still in its early stages, Turner said the goal is for work to begin this fall and be completed within a year.

Boswell and District 5 Supervisor Bruce Brooks said they are excited at the prospect of constituents in their most rural communities receiving internet, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the need for children to have access to virtual learning options. Turner added the project will also benefit local farmers, whose agricultural lifestyle is becoming more and more technical.

EXPANDING BUSINESSES, RELOCATING MONUMENTS

Macon catfish processing plant Superior Catfish, which serves about 65 local farmers, is about a year into completion of its \$17 million expansion, which will nearly double the size of the facility and is expected to add 25 jobs. The new

building will house the plant's production facility and is slated for completion in 2021.

Macon is also getting upgrades in local medical facilities and clinics, Boykin said, including a new office from Greater Meridian Medical Clinic on Miller's Chapel Road off Highway 14. Construction just began on the project.

Local officials also have plans in the works to move two Confederate monuments — one across from the mayor's office in Brooksville and one in front of the Noxubee County Courthouse in downtown Macon — to private property, as part of a nationwide movement to remove controversial statues. Brooks said the statue in front of the courthouse will likely be relocated to the city cemetery off Highway 14, though supervisors do not yet know when.

For both statues, private individuals have offered to shoulder the costs of relocation.

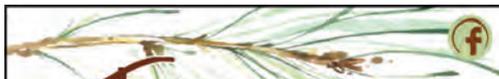
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Monument in Brooksville



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OUR READERS

With each issue of Progress, we sit down with a handful of readers to learn a bit about them. These aren't always news-makers, but each has their own stories to share.

The questions are the same in each issue and are designed to gain insight into a handful of your neighbors. Some were nervous; others were relaxed. For the first time, we feature a husband and wife. We initially asked Jack Jameson to sit down with us, and his wife was so excited, we invited her too.

These five readers joined us in The Studio, a meeting space upstairs in The Commercial Dispatch building, in September.

We'd love to hear your story as well. If you're open to answering our five questions, let us know by emailing progress@cdispatch.com

INTERVIEWS BY **CLAUDI ARRINGTON**
PHOTOS BY **LEDRICO ISAAC**

IVAN LUCKETT

CONTRACTING OFFICER, VETERAN, COLUMBUS

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

I don't think when I was a kid I actually knew what I wanted to be. The only thing I cared about was playing football. But then I guess in my senior year in high school, that's when it really took a toll in my head and the whole thing was I can't live the way I was living at the time, because I am actually from the projects. So I just decided to go to the military. I went to the Army and did over 16 years.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

Pick the same friends that I have right now and the ones that I lost, don't pick them, because they're not here for a reason. I would give myself advice on some of the decisions that I know I wouldn't have made later. I am big on family, so I think I would have allowed more family in and gotten closer to them before I didn't have the time.

What's the one thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

My skin color, my beard, my body build. Almost immediately a lot of people are intimidated by me, because I might have a smug look or whatever, but once I start communicating everybody laughs with me.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I've got about five cars and a motorcycle, but my biggest extravagance is my son. My son lives in Colorado with his Mum, but the way things are right now we can't move like we want to. So once this COVID-19 is over, it's going to be the traveling part. I want to take him to all the games and museums. I want to take him to the beach and just show him a whole bunch of stuff.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

Man I don't want to put this in the book, but it's the truth: manipulation. Not all manipulation is bad, not all of it is good, but you can sway things to where they should be and where they need to be, where it can work for the greater good. There might be another word for it than manipulation.



JOANNA JAMESON

SPEECH THERAPIST, WEST POINT



Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

I feel like growing up I had a lot of skills and talents that I knew I wanted to apply to the job that I would have. I wanted to do something with creativity and I knew I wanted to work with people and help them, so with that in mind I never really wanted to put myself in a box. Who knows where the road is going to take me, but the job that I have now is checking all the boxes.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

In college if someone asked me to come and do something, my response was always, "Oh no, I need to stay in and clean or something." My mom always told me to be careful with that, because you're not going to remember that in 10 years, you're going to remember going to dinner with all your friends and having a great time. That's something I had to learn to do, and I wish I had told myself that a long time ago.

What's the one thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

When I was younger I heard someone describe me as shy and quiet, and I just took a step back, because I thought that's not me. I kind of thought about it, and I realized they're right. I don't really apply myself or stand up and do things in front of people. So I thought let's change that, because that's not who I am. I started to be more myself, step up and be more outgoing.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I would have to say experiences in general, whether that's traveling or eating at really nice restaurants. Life is short, so I just feel like I never want to say no to anything and miss out.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

I wish I knew how to sew. My grandmother is a great seamstress and I always have relied on her to hem my clothes or sew me cute Halloween costumes. She's tried to teach me before, but I probably have to learn a little more patience, but that's something I wish I could do.

JACK JAMESON

CO-BUSINESS OWNER (ADVENTURE ATV), WEST POINT

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

No, it isn't. I always thought I'd be a farmer. I majored in agribusiness at MSU, and my dad has been a farmer his whole life. I just assumed after college that's what I would do and then in 2000 he opened the dealership.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

Probably to be open to more opportunities. I kind of always regretted not studying abroad and being more involved with different group activities. I think that's really important for my job now, like dealing with the public on a daily basis. I've been there for seven years and I'm still learning, but that would have been a good head start for my communication skills.

What's the one thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

I'm trying to be pretty straight forward, but I think people think the younger generation doesn't necessarily have the work ethic that the older generations do. In my experience our generation has some of the hardest working people and I've seen it from both sides, working on the farm where I was physically drained and working at the ATV dealership where I'm mentally drained. But you sleep just as good. People can just automatically look at you, the way you dress, your age and just think that you don't possess a work ethic.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Definitely traveling. My wife and I, we just traveled from Orange Beach to visiting friends from Boston. We've taken some trips to Scotland, London, and we've gone to Italy. Any chance we get, we try to go. So, like now, we'd love to have gone somewhere, so I'm glad we were able the last couple of years to just go. That's where we probably spend more than we should.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

Carpentry, I've just always thought it's the prettiest art. I know some carpenters and I've got some carpenters in my family. It's just amazing what somebody that's really passionate about it can do. I've always just loved how complex or simple carpentry can be. It's really available to anybody, you don't have to have tens of thousands dollar tools.



TRESSA SANDERS

CITY CLERK, ARTESIA



Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

No, I actually wanted to be a teacher when I first started out, but then I changed my mind. I wanted to teach history, but the kids changed my mind and I decided to go another route.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

To be more patient and to listen more. Always seek advice from other people, because you don't know it all.

What's the one thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

People seem to think that I'm mean. It takes some time for me to warm up and really get to know you and it takes some time to really get to know me. I'm not a talkative person sometimes, but once I know you and warmed up to you, I can adjust to you. I am kind of a very much guarded person.

What's your greatest extravagance?

The greatest thing was building a house. Me and my husband watching it go up and building on it each day was one of the greatest things and accomplishments that we had. Building a house from the bottom up, it took almost a year.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

I would love for my communication skills to be better. Sometimes I can get frustrated very easily and I want to be more communicative with people and talk to people more.

PAT CHISM

RETIRED VICE-PRESIDENT (CHISM ELECTRIC), COLUMBUS

Is what you're doing right now what you wanted to do when you grew up?

Not really. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but it worked out fine. I've really been blessed. I learned a lot working at the bank and made a lot of wonderful friends. Then I got to work for 16 years with my husband at Chism Electric Service.

If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

There are several things. One would probably be continuing my education and wait a little bit longer to get married. I got married right out of high school. One thing I've been thinking about lately is ask questions. My parents are deceased, my dad was a prisoner of war in Germany and I never really talked to him about that. I wish I had asked more questions growing up about our family.

What's the one thing people tend to misunderstand about you?

That's the tough one. Probably, when I first meet someone I am not really outgoing to carry on a conversation. Some people might also think that I'm kind of bossy and they would probably think that because of how my husband and I pick at each other all the time, but we have a wonderful relationship and we just do it for fun. We've been married 52 years.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Traveling. We've been blessed immeasurably and we've been all through the United States, both coasts. We've been overseas and on several cruises. We've just been blessed with those opportunities. And then of course our grandkids. We have two daughters and each one of them has a son, so our two grandsons.

If you could master one skill, what would it be?

Actually, there's two. I love to sing, I sing in the choir at church, but I haven't mastered singing yet. Then I would love to be able to play the piano. I took some lessons while I was working at the bank, but working, taking banking classes and taking piano classes was just too much.





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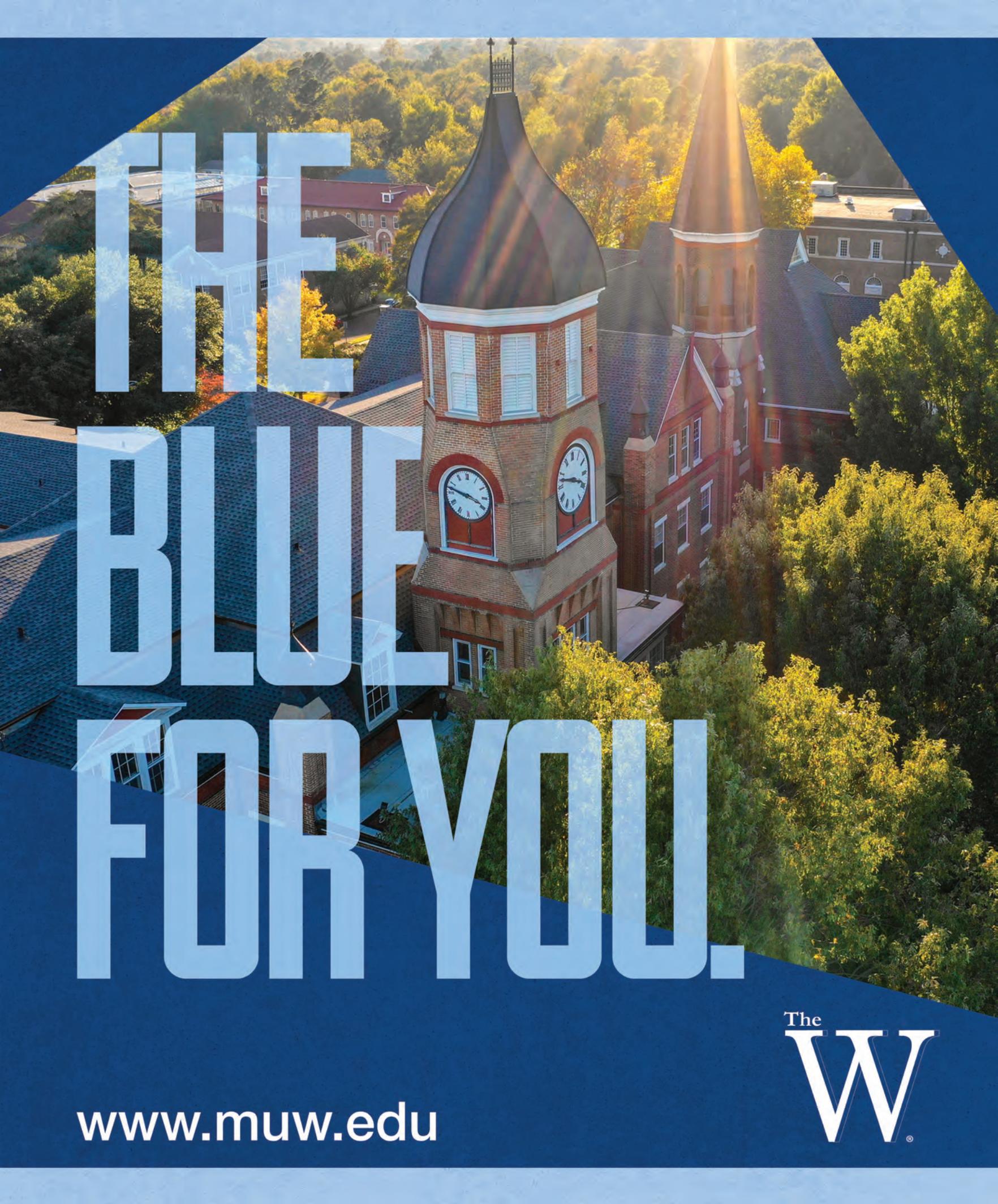
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