

PROGRESS

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

THE COMMERCIAL DISPATCH



TAKING FLIGHT

GTRA Executive Director
Mike Hainsey reflects on his
time as an Air Force pilot

SPRING 2020

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MONEY MANAGEMENT PAYS OFF

Financial problems for several area schools and governments were revealed last year. In the spring, a consultant cautioned the city of Columbus that it could run out of money by October. Declining enrollment and deficit athletic spending caused East Mississippi Community College to burn through \$10 million of its fund balance in 10 years. Lowndes County School District spent \$7 million more than it took in for the previous three years.

In the meantime, Columbus Municipal School District – a district that had been plagued by a revolving door of superintendents and faltering test performance – was getting its financial house in order. Debt was restructured and realistic budgets were adhered to.

An improved financial situation for the district led to the school board in 2018 passing a resolution to create a teacher incentive plan. The state also provides incentives to teachers whose students improve,



but CMSD's plan would be on top of state incentives. Additionally, the local plan would give cash bonuses to both the faculty and staff of improving schools, not just teachers. If a school's performance ranking rose, everyone, from the principal to the janitor, would receive a bonus.

At the end of last December, at a celebration at Joe Cook Elementary, more than \$370,000 was handed out to district employees.

Mississippi teachers are underpaid, and years of under-funding by the state have caused a financial crunch for many districts, leaving most in poor shape to give raises. But here we have an excellent example of the benefits a prudent fiscal policy can produce. Not only has it put money in the pockets of district personnel, but it has also surely improved morale and teacher retention.

Let's hope others take note.

You can read more about CMSD's Teacher Incentive Pay Plan on page 28.

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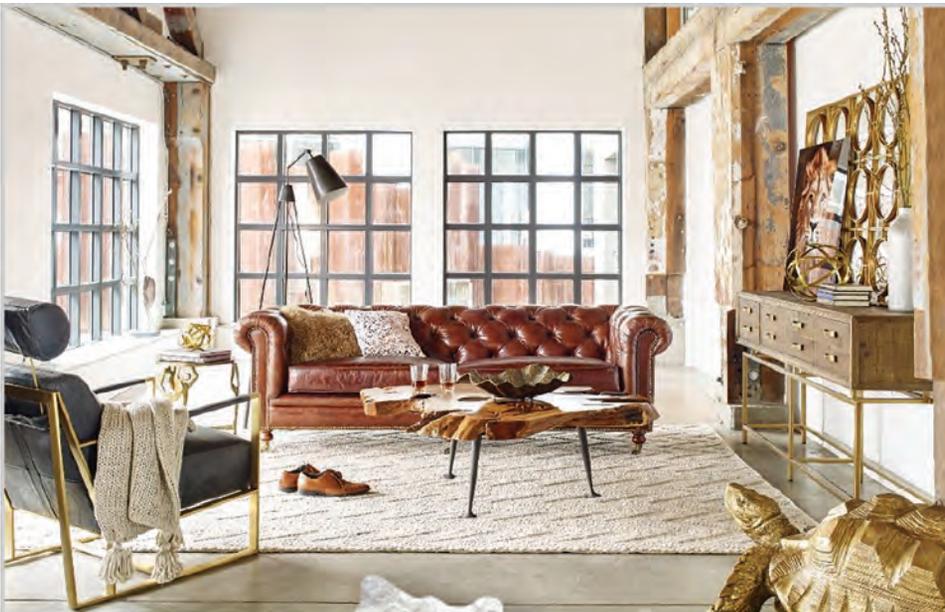
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his plants. My goal is to do a better job than Adam and Eve. There is no serpent in my garden!

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COLUMBUS



REKINDLING THE CITY WITH NEW LIGHT

Downtown Columbus could soon look much different from what it does now, due to a \$4.5 million project that would add a series of roundabouts along Main Street from Highway 82 into downtown. The roundabouts are designed to slow down traffic.

The first roundabout of four, located at the intersection of Second and Main streets, is expected to be up and running by the end of this year. The construction starts in June. The \$900,000 project already received \$800,000 from the Mississippi Department of Transportation and the city will cover the rest.

More roundabouts are also planned at the Island Road as well as the Third and Fourth Street intersections, with crosswalks added to each. The current traffic signal at the intersection of Fifth and Main Street will remain as is, due to a larger amount of traffic. The city is seeking funding for the rest of the project.

TRAFFIC IMPROVEMENT ALONG MILITARY ROAD

The downtown roundabouts aren't the only ones Columbus residents will soon be able to see. Two "semi-roundabouts" are under construction

at Highway 82 and Military Road as part of a \$5 million contract between MDOT and Gregory Construction. In semi-roundabouts, drivers are not allowed to take a full circle around the island; instead those who took the wrong exits have to make a u-turn to get back into the circle. The roundabouts will be lit and the road between the two will be reduced to one lane each way.

The package also includes a series of traffic improvements along 18th Avenue from Highway 45 to North Seventh Street, including traffic signal upgrades, ramp improvements and realignments. Traffic lights will be installed at the intersection of the eastbound ramp of Highway 82 and 18th Avenue. Westbound as well as eastbound ramps connecting the road with Highway 82 will be widened.

The two-part project started last summer and is expected to reach completion by May. The recent heavy rainfall may have slowed the process.

"WINGS OVER COLUMBUS" AIR SHOW

Thunderbirds are returning to Columbus in spring, during the Columbus Air Force Base air show between April 25 and 26.

The show will feature 15 performing acts,



including the Para-Commandos parachute jump team, a jet-powered fire truck and exhibition of different types of jets on the ground. There will be 23 planes flying during the show, including the Air Force's T-1, T-6 and T-38 jets.

One of the last two flying T-37s will also fly over Columbus at the air show. T-37s, most of which are now retired permanently, were used as aircraft trainers in the Air Force from 1955 to 2005.

The public will also get to experience the virtual reality program the Air Force uses to train its student pilots.

Attendees are not permitted to bring water, food and coolers, but may bring wagons and camp chairs. The free event will be open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. both days.

TERRY BROWN AMPHITHEATER

The city of Columbus received \$500,000 last December from state lawmakers to pay for the ornamental fence, the front entry wall and the seating at the Terry Brown Amphitheater. So far the city has received a total of \$3.7 million of state funding. To complete the amphitheater project, the city may need another \$1.5 million

to \$2 million from other sources to pay for the interior designs, Mayor Robert Smith said. Revenue from the recently-restored 2-percent restaurant sales tax, which brings an annual \$400,000 to the city, may help pay for the project as well.

Located west of the Tombigbee River and across from the Columbus Riverwalk, the amphitheater is a multi-year project that was expected to be open for free events in May, just in time for the Market Street Festival. However, the stage of the amphitheater was underwater due to a mid-February flood, which delayed construction. City officials said the amphitheater suffered no permanent damage and the city will wash off the mud and silt stacked on the stage after the water recedes.

The most recent funding was used to pay for the \$309,360 brick wall on the north side of the venue as well as the \$86,300 for the fencing facing the river. The construction of the wall and fence started in mid-February.





Sim Scott Park Community Center

SIM SCOTT PARK COMMUNITY CENTER

Sim Scott Park, the city’s most used community center destroyed by the February tornado last year, is being rebuilt and is expected to reopen in early summer. A new pavilion has been built to replace the old one destroyed by the tornado.

The new 9,000-square-foot building, which will include a large room for activities, two classrooms and a senior center, will combine the old community center and the senior center into one.

The city and Lowndes County workers started removing dirt from the site last summer. As of early February, the construction crew has poured 60 percent of the concrete slab. The community center will cost about \$800,000, which is covered by insurance and funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

LED LIGHTS INSTALLMENT

More than 4,300 street lights in Columbus will be replaced with brighter energy-saving LED lights within the next few months. The installment of new lights and replacement of broken

lights began in late January. The first new lights were installed on College Street and are expected to last about 22 years. The lights come in different levels of brightness, with dimmer lights in residential areas and brighter ones commercial areas.

The \$3.2 million project, which the city issued



a 15-year bond to pay for, is expected to save money for the city in the long run. The city bought the lights from Columbus Light and Water, which would no longer require the city to pay a maintenance fee. The LED lights are also expected to save the city \$33,000 a month on utilities.

CRAWFORD GYM

The Crawford Elementary School gym is undergoing a five-phase renovation and is scheduled to open for public use in May. The roofs and outside walls will be revamped and the renovation of the concession room, lobby, front entrance, restrooms and basketball court will follow. Aluminum bleachers will be put in place

instead of the old wooden ones and some of the lights above the old balcony, which will be torn down during the renovation, will be replaced with the same ones the county installed two years ago.

The county received \$350,000 in early January as part of a bond package the state Legislature approved last year. The renovation is estimated to cost \$300,000.

STORY BY **YUE STELLA YU**

AIRSHOW PHOTO BY **LUISA PORTER**

ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



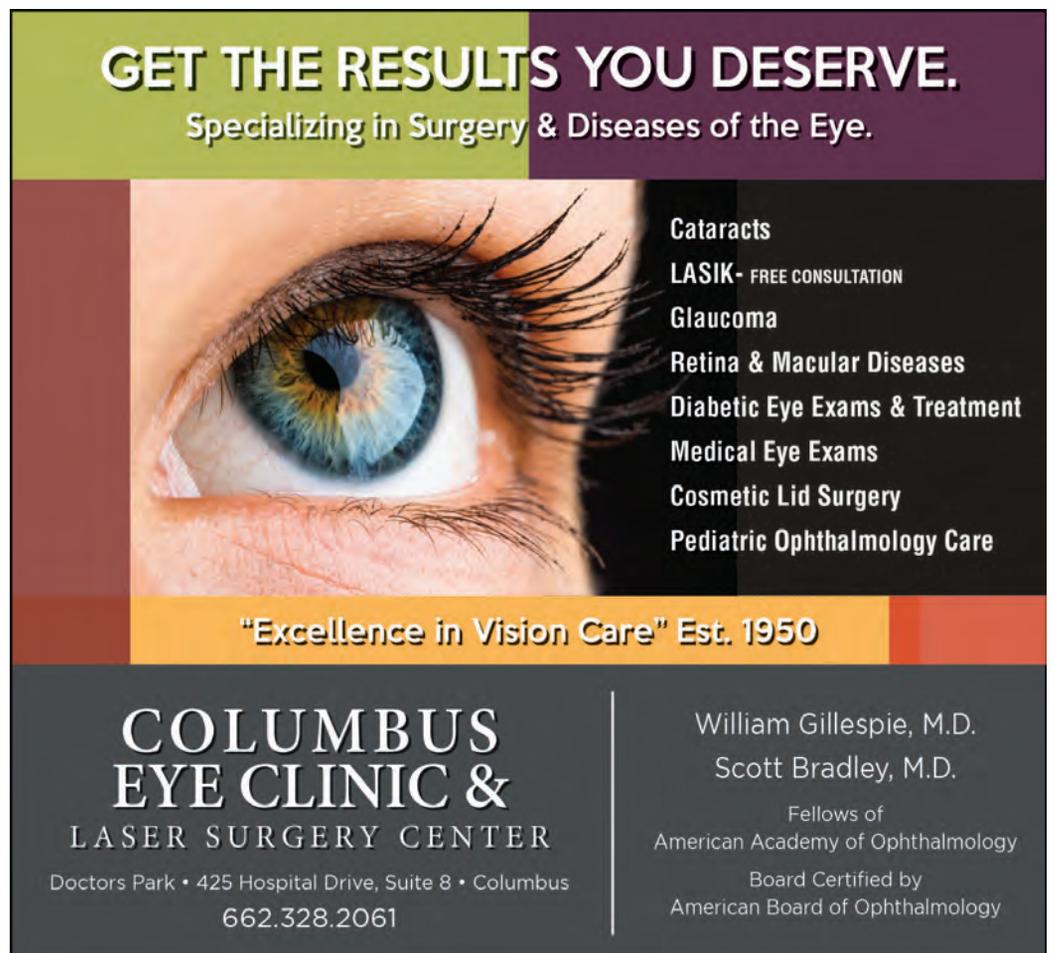
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PAVING THE WAY FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Starkville received a \$12.66 million federal grant in November to make one mile of Highway 182 more pedestrian-friendly and wheelchair-accessible, to increase broadband access, improve infrastructure and stormwater drainage.

The city applied three years in a row for a U.S. Department of Transportation grant which funds “projects that have a significant local or regional impact.” Activity to put the grant to use has begun in earnest, though construction will not start until 2021. “We’ve had meetings (and) we’ve gotten some proposals, so now we have to select a prime contractor,” Mayor Lynn Spruill said.

The land can be designated commercial, industrial, conservation or traditional neighborhood, and developers will not have to go through the costly rezoning process.

CHANGES TO CITY DEPARTMENTS

The aldermen unanimously chose Mark Ballard, previously an administrative captain, as Starkville’s new police chief in November. Ballard took over Dec. 31 for Frank Nichols, who retired after 27 years with the Starkville Police

Department and five as its chief.

Ballard restructured the police department in December with the goal of increasing retention, addressing an increased number of calls and reducing overtime hours. He added and eliminated some positions to create “a clarity of chain of command,” that the department previously lacked, he said at the time.

The engineering and streets department also underwent a restructure in November to make it more efficient and responsive. In addition to reorganizing positions and responsibilities, the department implemented a mobile work order system Jan. 1 that was already in place in the utilities department. The system tracks time and location as well as notifies customers as soon as the assignment is finished.

INDUSTRIAL AND RECREATIONAL PARKS

The North Star Industrial Park under construction near the interchange of Highways 82 and 389 might get a \$1 billion capital investment from a development codenamed Project Trinity, which will create 100 to 150 jobs for six-figure wages, LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins told city



Construction equipment at North Star Industrial Park

and county leaders in January.

The Golden Triangle Development LINK has plans for 230 of the park's 360 acres, including a 50,000 square-foot "speculative building," or an empty building with the goal of attracting a new business. Another planned occupant, Project Royal, would create 200 jobs in the textiles and advanced manufacturing industry.

District 1 Supervisor and Board President John Montgomery said he is excited to see industry grow in the county.

"The park is doing what it's intended to do: create jobs and put Oktibbeha County where we haven't been in decades," he said. "People have always asked why we haven't had industrial growth in this county. It's because we haven't had an industrial park."

Spruill said Project Trinity "would be a gamechanger."

Meanwhile, officials broke ground for the construction of a new, 25,000 square-foot U.S. Army Reserve Center at Cornerstone Park in January. The current center has been at the intersection of Willow Road and Highway 12 since 1958. The city will consider adding to its plans to renovate Moncrief Park in order to give it an aesthetic update. The park is already set

to have new restrooms, a pool deck and pool house, and the possible additions include a more ADA-accessible pavilion, pergolas for shade, a concessions area and more open space for seating and socializing.

The first phase of long-planned improvements at Fire Station Park is underway and expected to be finished in August, Starkville Main Street Association vice chair Hagan Walker said. The first change will be the transfer of the pavilion at the intersection of Jackson and Lampkin streets to the southwest corner of the park, in time for the annual King Cotton Crawfish Boil to take place at the park for the first time in April.

The Greater Starkville Development Partnership, Starkville's chief economic development and tourism group, chose a new CEO after the position was open for almost 18 months. Mike Tagert is also associate director for corporate engagement and economic development in the Research and Economic Development office at



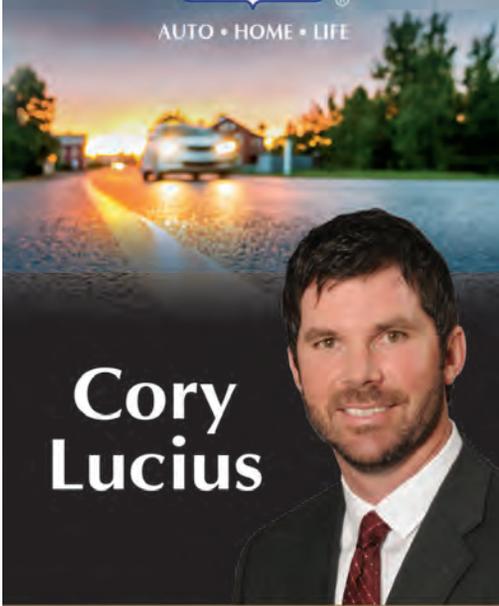
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Mississippi State University, a new dual role for the Partnership CEO.

Tagert was the Northern District Commissioner for the Mississippi Department of Transportation from 2011 to 2019 and chose not to run for reelection.

ROADWAYS AND FOOTPATHS

The county's plans to rebuild and expand a portion of Blackjack Road from Bardwell Street west to Stone Boulevard have been in the works for years, but the county needed the right-of-way on four properties before starting the project. It obtained the right-of-way through the courts in November via "quick take" legal action, similar to eminent domain.

The supervisors unanimously voted in February to accept a bid of \$8 million from Columbus-based Burns Dirt Construction to move forward with the project: widening the road, making drainage improvements, repaving and laying the groundwork for future improvements such as lighting and sidewalks. Construction on Longview Road to replace culverts and widen the road so it can handle heavy amounts of traffic is still set to finish later this year, Montgomery said.

"I'm excited for both sides of the county because both projects are very vital to (our) continued growth and success," he said. "We'll be able to handle more

traffic, more people, more growth.”

In November, Starkville started adding 14 sections of sidewalks to fill in gaps on Highway 12, from Stark Road to just east of Spring Street, to make the road safer for its frequent pedestrian traffic.

The city and county began discussions in October to turn the railroad that runs southwest to northeast through the county, from Ackerman to West Point, into a walking and biking trail. The trail would be part of the national network created by the nonprofit Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the nation’s largest trail organization, according to its website.

The railroad has not been used in years but still brings in about \$80,000 in property tax-

es that the county splits with the city and the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. Area residents already use the railroad as a recreational path.

Kansas City Southern, the company that owns the railroad, has stalled conversations for now, but Spruill said she will not give up on it.

“From my perspective, they don’t use that area, so why hang onto something that costs you money?” she said. “Let us do something with it that will enhance this area, which includes Choctaw, Oktibbeha and Clay counties and all the cities that would be a part of that trail.”

STORY BY **TESS VRBIN**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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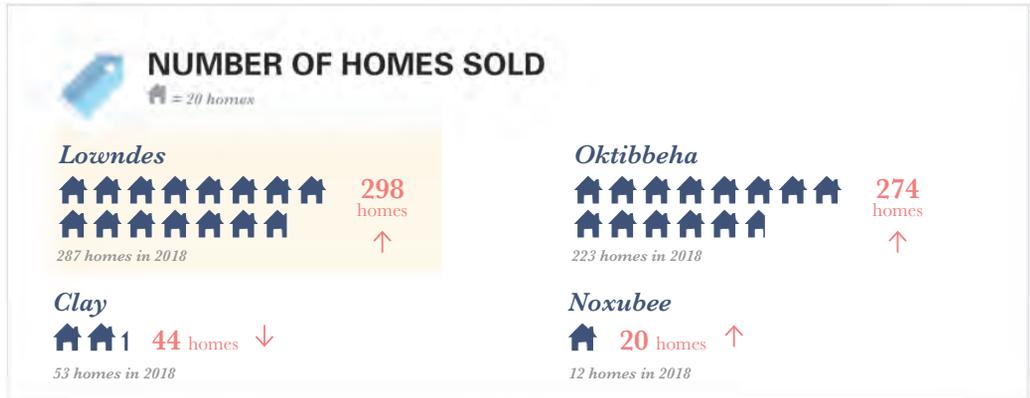
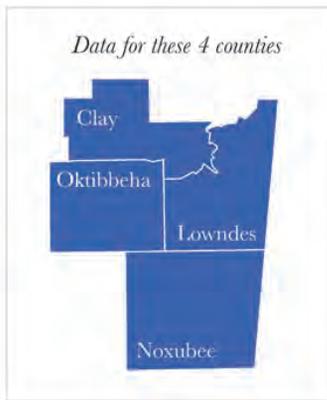
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The back rooms of the Idea Shop smell like coffee, wood and cotton candy. The cotton candy smell comes from the eight 3-D printers lined up along a wall, said Ethan Welford, a junior at Mississippi State University and an Idea Shop maker specialist. The wood

smell is a combination of pine and two kinds of cedar, the types most commonly used for woodworking at the shop. And the third scent comes from the in-house roaster that creates the Jitterbean coffee for sale in the shop's retail space, Welford said.

The laser engraver at the front of the workshop intensifies the overall smell as it burns wood. It was already up and running, emblazoning the Starkville city logo on a slab of wood, when the Idea Shop opened at 11 a.m. on Feb. 8. The shop's arsenal of tools also includes a kiln, several kinds of wood saws, sewing machines and computers with design software.

"Obviously all this equipment is intended for members, so I can only use this when I don't have a member here who wants to use it," said Idea Shop manager Michael Lane, who planned to make 80 of the wooden signs for local businesses.

The Idea Shop opened in March 2019, but the Maker Space has existed since 2016. Lane started it through MSU's Center for Entrepreneurship and Outreach, commonly referred to as the E-Center, when he was an engineering undergraduate.

The 2,000-square-foot area on Main Street includes Turner A. Wingo Maker Studio and the MSU Retail Product Accelerator. It was funded both by private support and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Business Development Grant program, and it is operated by the MSU College of Business and School of Human Sciences.

The store sells a wide variety of locally made products — t-shirts and crocheted hats, hand-made soaps and jewelry, wooden vases and bread boards, paintings and postcards. There's a rotating rack of keychains, magnets and buttons decorated with pop culture references, specifically from Harry Potter, "The Lord of the Rings" and "Stranger Things."

Lane compares the shop to a gym membership: students can use the Maker Space, retail space or both for \$40 per semester, or \$10 per



Liz Hardgrave

month, and non-students can for \$25 per month. He said the shop has about 80 members at the moment.

The shop isn't just for those who want to make a career out of their creations. Welford helped Liz Hardgrave, a senior biological sciences major at MSU, measure and saw wood for some side tables she's building. Hardgrave developed an interest in woodworking when she was looking for a new kitchen table a couple years ago and decided to build one instead of buying one, she said. She also enjoys laser engraving and other wood-burning techniques.

"I just don't like to stay still and be bored," Hardgrave said.

Meanwhile, Katelyn Jenkins, an interior design student at MSU, repainted the walls in the front display case. Jenkins is in charge of the seasonal design of the walls, previously blue for winter and now gold and coral for spring.

Jenkins and Sarah Ashley Bealor, an MSU graduate student, work together on the presentation of the products in the shop. Bealor is the



Katelyn Jenkins



Ethan Welford

retail coordinator and Jenkins is the retail specialist, and they are responsible for displaying each product in a way that will best “carry on their branding,” Bealor said. One example is the handmade soaps by Renee Smith on display in a small wooden box with fake flowers to give the product “a garden feel,” she said. Another is the neon accents on the display of Creep Crochet products including scrunchies, earrings and coffee cozies. The presentation ideas come from meetings with the vendors, Bealor said.

“We sit down with them and talk to them about their product, and (we) get a feel for the inspiration behind their product and who they are and how we can tell an interesting story to the customer, and we develop a display around that,” she said.

Foot traffic from Main Street came in and out of the store throughout the late morning and afternoon. Lane explained to a few visitors how the shop works, and Jenkins showed a family of five around the workshop.

It was one of the few times Welford hasn't

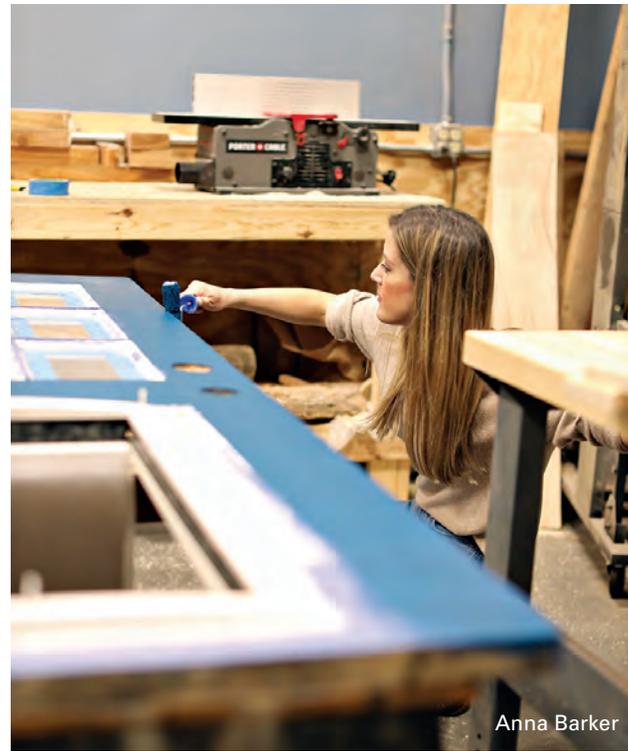
led a tour, he said, though his job description is mostly prototyping. He worked on what he said was probably the 25th revision of a design for a lead acid hydrogen generator, and he helped Bealor use the 3-D printers to create decorations out of cotton filament for the retail space.

The shop just implemented an online order system for 3-D printing, and Welford said he and Lane would like to be able to automate the printing system remotely.

“If we could get one of these machines started from our houses over the internet, that would be really cool,” Welford said.

The shop is an example of how Starkville supports its tight-knit arts community, said Gracie Conn, a senior ceramics major at MSU who stopped by while showing her visiting sister around downtown. Conn said she will consider becoming involved with the Idea Shop after she graduates as the next step into the professional arts world.

“It’s really cool that they offer a platform for people who may not be able to take out their



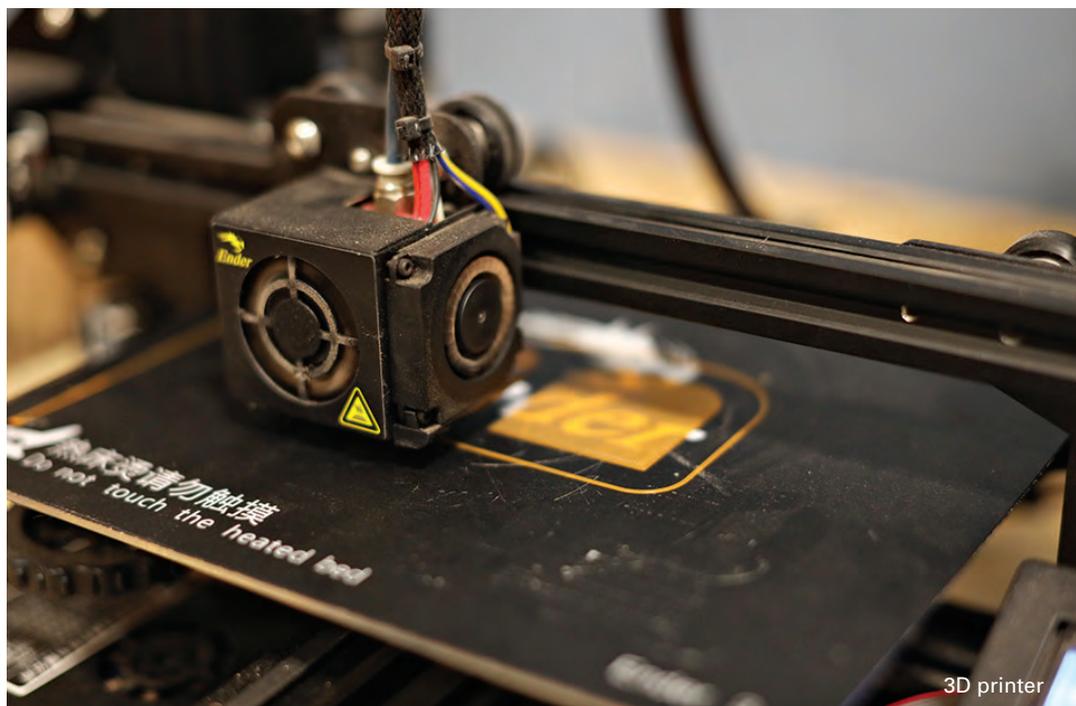
Anna Barker

own space,” Conn’s sister, Catie Robb, said. “I was asking Gracie when she took me to the studio today at school, ‘Where are you going to go when you’re done?’ (Students) have all these resources now, but after the fact, it’s kind of cool that they give you that transition.”

See more photos from A Day at Maker Space online at progressmag.com

STORY BY **TESS VRBIN**

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COLUMBUS SCHOOL DISTRICT TAKES TEACHER
AND STAFF INCENTIVES INTO ITS OWN HANDS

For Marissa Hackler, a 27-year-old Spanish teacher at Columbus High School, the month between December and January is what she calls “the death period.”

“We get paid on the last (work) day in December,” Hackler said, “and we don’t get paid again until the end of January. It’s a really hard time for people like teachers.”

But just before last Christmas, Hackler received a bonus pay of \$1,500 from Columbus Municipal School District as a result of the Teachers Incentives Pay Plan, a program the board implemented in 2018 to reward employees at high-performing schools.

The TIPP program awards extra pay to all staff at schools that have improved or maintained their accountability ratings, a performance measuring mechanism of the Mississippi Department of Education. A total of 156 employees at CHS and Stokes Beard Elementary School received \$181,354.40 in incentives, said CMSD Superintendent Cherie Labat. The incentives are an

investment in those on the front lines of public education, to boost morale and retain some of the best employees. The state is short in funds for those kinds of incentives, but the board wants to show that they value the teachers achievements.

Last year, CHS’s rating improved from the level of C to B. That meant \$1,500 more for each full-time teacher, \$750 for each assistant teacher and \$250 for every member of the support staff. Teachers will each receive \$2,000 if the school’s rating improves to A.

Hackler invested part of the money she received back into her classroom, buying readers, decorative stickers and other school supplies for her students.

“I love teaching, I love seeing my kids succeed,” Hackler said. “(It) is really rewarding to see them use it.” She also bought new books for the 15-minute silent reading session she designed for her class and the students are thrilled about them.

Josie Moore, a math teacher in special ed-





Courtney Cribb, Regina Wash, Bianca Jamison, Tanesha Jennings, Tracey Hood



Josie Moore, Marissa Hackler, Tiffany Jefferson

ucation, invested that money differently. She bought gifts for her first great-grandson, who was born two days after she received the incentives. Any bonus she received went mostly toward her grandchildren, Moore said. And for some of them, she said, she feels the need to invest in their education. “Education means a lot,” Moore said. “To know that we were receiving an incentive for something that I enjoy doing, that I could help people that I love, it meant a whole lot.”

Teachers from Stokes Beard Elementary School saw the school’s accountability rating jump from F to B last year. As a result, 23 certified teachers at the school received incentives in addition to other staff, said Stokes Beard Principal Tanesha Jennings. It took a whole team of teachers to accomplish that goal, said Regina Wash, a third-grade teacher at the school. “Last year...(it was) all hands on deck,” Wash said. “There was no ‘This is my class, this is your class,’ It was everybody’s class. Everybody worked with the students,” she said. “They became the whole school’s students.”

Wash said she worked hard to communicate with students and helped third-graders to score a level 3 in reading in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. The school set up one-on-one to one-on-five sessions for students to learn about their deficits and how to improve their grades.

The school also had literacy nights for parents, who received sample test questions given by the state Department of Education. Upon receiving the incentives, Wash said that was “honest mon-

ey ... that we worked hard for.” She used some of that money to buy her son a Nintendo Switch. “I didn’t spend a dime (of that) on myself,” she said.

The program is a great gesture on the CMSD’s part, Jennings said, to let the teachers know how much they are appreciated. Eyeing the end of this year, Jennings said the goal is to improve the grade to A, “That’s what we strive for every day.”

Principal Craig Chapman set the same goal for CHS. At the very least, the school needs to maintain the current rating. He credited the earning of the incentives to the team effort of all employees. “I just want a team,” Chapman said. “Everybody is going to play a part.”

Labat said the first year of the TIPP program has been a success. “The TIPP program incentivizes all employees to promote student achievements and do what’s in the best interest of the students.”

STORY BY **YUE STELLA YU**
PHOTOS BY **LEDTRICO ISAAC**



From top left, Joe Garrett, Aaron Lee, Marissa Hackler, Tiffany Jefferson, Dana McConnel, Natasha Morris, Josie Moore, Mary Rush, Freda Dismuke, Craig Chapman.



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A QUIET HISTORY

CROWDED BY GIANT TREES AND VISITED BY GHOSTS AND MONSTERS ALIKE, SKY LAKE IS WHAT EVERY FAIRY TALE IS MADE OF

Sarah Costa thinks there might be some ghosts at Sky Lake.

Or so the Oxford resident teasingly tells her toddler son, Brady Tait, as he wanders up and down the Sky Lake Boardwalk one sunny Sunday afternoon in February, telling his mother and her friend Brad Hayden, also of Oxford, that there could be a swamp monster in the water. Costa brushes grass off her jeans, adjusts the small bouquet of violet flowers she picked and follows Tait and Hayden as they head for the edge of the lake. She nods toward the woods where the boardwalk disappears, like the path in a fairy tale.

“There’s some ghosts for sure in here,” she says.

Ghosts or not, there’s certainly history at Sky Lake, off the Mississippi River in the heart of the Delta. Just two hours from the Golden Triangle and alive with insects, alligators and everything in between, the area is less than two miles from American Indian mounds and home to some

of the world’s oldest cypress trees — what one informational sign at the Sky Lake park entrance calls “living dinosaurs of the Delta.”

Jason May, a biologist with nonprofit Wildlife Mississippi, which helped establish the boardwalk in 2011, says that history is one of the things that makes Sky Lake special.

“It’s just a unique place,” he said. “There’s not very many areas left that have some of this old grove cypress — some of the oldest and largest trees in the world. They’re kind of like our local version of the giant redwoods.”

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks set aside the park as a wildlife management area and built the 1,700 foot boardwalk in 2011. It now sees between 3,000 and 5,000 visitors a year, May said, from international tourists to locals on their morning jog.

At the park entrance is a small stone amphitheater and four hollowed-out cypress trunks, along with a small picnic area for events or meals. Visitors can learn more about Sky Lake

and the ancient trees by reading informational signs around the park entrance.

A walk across the boardwalk takes you about 12 feet over the lake bed. In the winter, May said, you can see wood ducks, songbirds, snakes, turtles and, when the water's clear, fish.

But the "hot item" is the cypress trees, May said. Tree ring biologists, cutting core samples from some of the trees that haven't become hollow over the centuries, have put some of Sky Lake's cypress between 800 and 1,000 years old. The hollow ones, May said, may be closer to 2,000. The largest cypress — which measures 46 feet and nine inches in circumference and about 15 feet in diameter — waits at the end of the boardwalk.

"Somehow — it's a miracle — it's still alive," May said.

The more water savvy visitor, equipped with a canoe or kayak, can take one of the parks' three loops on the lake's 2.6-mile paddling trail, which Wildlife Mississippi recommends doing from late fall to early summer, when the water level is highest. One of the loops, May said, takes boats through the shallower waters of the swamp,

another takes them out into the open part of the lake and the third meanders more or less along the same route as the boardwalk.

"It gives you a little bit better perspective of how large some of these trees are because you can get right up next to them and paddle amongst all of them," he said. "It's pretty neat."

On this trail, a paddler can glide silently through the water under a canopy of trees, listening to the songbirds and insects and, if lucky, catching a glimpse of a fish or even an alligator at home in the swamp.

For May, it's just another part of what makes Sky Lake a unique place, full of quiet natural history.

"You get to wondering, if you have time to go out there and sit," May said. "You think, 'What have these trees seen in their 1,000 - 2,000 years?'"

PHOTOS OF FOREST AND ALLIGATOR
COURTESY OF **MISSISSIPPI FISH AND
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STORY AND OTHER PHOTOS BY
ISABELLE ALTMAN



JAKETOWN MOUNDS

Just down the road from the boardwalk, about halfway to Belzoni, drivers can park at a small pull-off area for a look at the Jaketown Mounds.

One of the earliest Native American earthworks in the state, Jaketown dates to between 1500 and 1350 B.C., when Americans were constructing mounds all over the Southeast. According to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, these mounds mark centers of social and political authority.

Archaeologists at Jaketown have determined hunter-gatherer tribes in the Late Archaic Poverty Point Period built 18 mounds, three of which you can still see. Visitors can see artifacts uncovered at the site at the Jaketown Museum in downtown Belzoni.

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TAKING FLIGHT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE REGIONAL AIRPORT MIKE HAINSEY REFLECTS ON HIS TIME AS A PILOT IN THE AIR FORCE AND THE IMPACT IT HAS ON HIS CURRENT ENDEAVORS



Mike Hainsey can't tell you how many landings he made during his 22 years with the U.S. Air Force. Whatever that number might be, it's one fewer than the number of takeoffs. Hainsey used that fact during training flights with student pilots, the kind of ice-breaker sure to get his student's attention. "We'd be up there, and I'd casually say, 'Did I ever tell you about the time I was doing this same training flight and the wing fell off?'"





This year marks Hainsey's 15th year as Executive Director of the Golden Triangle Regional Airport. He had served as deputy director under another retired Air Force vet, former Columbus Air Force Base Wing Commander Nick Ardillo, for almost two years before ascending to the job upon Ardillo's retirement.

Arriving at a time when GTR was facing an existential crisis — Northwest Airlines had shut down its service at the airport, instantly cutting the small regional airport's revenue by a third — Hainsey has overseen a period of remarkable growth and expansion. Today, at a time when only three regional airports in the state are financially self-sustaining and small regional airports throughout the country are in a precarious position, GTR hasn't simply survived, it has thrived as two expansions, a run-way extension, an added flight to Atlanta and the dogged pursuit of a westbound flight to Dallas clearly indicates.

Overall, passenger traffic has increased by almost 60 percent in the last 15 years. Suffice to say, GTR is lucky to have Hainsey.

Hainsey, an Air Force Academy graduate, received his pilot training at Columbus Air Force

Base in 1977, training to fly B-52s. For the next 10 years, he flew a variety of assignments, eventually becoming a flight trainer for student pilots at CAFB.

"It was back in 1986," Hainsey recalled. "I was out flying acrobatics, teaching one of the students in a T-38. The wing broke off in the middle of acrobatics." In a matter of seconds, the plane plummeted to earth in a chaotic series of tumbles and rolls. "The student got out fairly early, but his parachute got tangled. He was able to get untangled at about 1,000 feet. Because of my position in the plane, I had more trouble. I had a hard time getting to the ejection levers with the G-forces being what they were. About two seconds before the plane crashed, I was able to get to the levers. I was probably about 500 feet." Hainsey smashed head-first into a tree just feet above the ground. "I was knocked out cold," he said.

It might be an exercise in overstatement to attribute much of what happened during that few seconds of terror from something that happened 34 years ago to Hainsey's subsequent success, both in the Air Force and now as GTR's executive director, but how Hainsey

responded to that horrific event does speak to a quality that has persisted throughout his career: Resilience.

Six months after the near fatal crash, Hainsey was back in the cockpit, cracking his “Did I ever tell you about the time?” ice-breaker on student pilots. Hainsey went on to serve another 13 years in the Air Force before retiring with the rank of lieutenant colonel as the Deputy Director of Flying Operations at CAFB in 1999.

Four years later, after serving as a simulator instructor at CAFB, Ardillo made Hainsey his hand-picked successor, showing him the ropes for two years before retiring. “Mike and I had worked together in Texas and here at Columbus Air Force Base,” Ardillo said. “When I was wing commander here, Mike was my chief of safety. One of the first things we did together here at the airport were disaster services. Mike was at CAFB as a sim-instructor, but he was also head of the Civil Air Patrol at the time. It was very obvious that during the exercises, Mike was the one who had the best handle of how things should be done. I knew then he would be great at the airport and that’s proven true. I can’t say enough good things about what Mike has done as the director.”

Hainsey’s ties to the Air Force continued a tradition for the GTR director. Prior to Ardillo’s arrival, Gene Smith, another Air Force vet who survived a long stint as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, was the director for close to 20 years.

Hainsey said the Air Force experience served him well in the job. “In the Air Force I learned leadership and management,” Hainsey said. “I also got to be very good about watching how you spend, being frugal and managing what you have properly.”



MASTERING NEW CHALLENGES

However, there was a skill the Air Force didn’t prepare Hainsey for. “I didn’t learn anything about how to raise money,” he said. “That’s something I had to find out on my own.” He had to learn it quickly, too. In his first year, the loss of Northwest Airlines’ service to GTR resulted in a \$150,000 deficit on a \$1 million budget. Most regional airlines rely on federal subsidies to survive so budget deficits are the norm, but for Hainsey it was alarming. He set out to make sure GTR could stand on its own.

“I learned very quickly where to find grants and funding,” Hainsey said. “That’s a huge part of the job. It still is.”

One of the first responses to the loss of Northwest was to convert airport-owned property to commercial use. That opportunity arrived almost immediately when American Eurocopter announced its intention to build a plant in Mississippi. GTR seized the chance, building an 85,000 square-foot facility it leased to Eurocopter (now Airbus). Today, GTR leases 300,000 square feet of facilities used by Airbus, Aurora Flight Sciences and Stark Aerospace.

Hainsey said GTR's connection to the area industry is a big part of the airport's success. "About 80 percent of our business is business travel," Hainsey said. "And about 10 percent of that is international travel, about twice as much as you'll find at most regional airports. Mike Boyd, one of the top consultants in the business, will tell you, 'It's not about getting Mom and Dad to Disneyland. It's about getting the CEO of Yokohama to West Point.'"

Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins, who arrived in Columbus about a year before Hainsey came to GTR, said Hainsey has been a key figure in the area's economic development efforts. "Mike is one of the first people we introduce when we bring in a prospect," Higgins said. "He's helped us in so



many of the things we've done here. He's very hands-on and he's always working to expand and improve the airport. Everything he does out there makes our area more appealing to companies looking to move or expand."

Likewise, CAFB remains an essential part of GTR's mission.

"About 62% of the traffic is from the Air Force base," Hainsey said. "The Air Force is in a



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position where they need more pilots, which means more training flights. They can't do it all at the base, but we're just 12 air miles away. They can make up flight hours that may have been lost due to weather or repairs at the base. They don't fly on the weekends at the base, so if they need to make up flight hours, they fly in and out of here on the weekends.

"It's good financially, but I could give you about 20 reasons why having that relationship with the Columbus Air Force base is good for us," he added.

LOOKING AHEAD

Some things never change. That's especially true at airports. "There's always a need you need to address," said Hainsey. "Beyond regular maintenance, paving is always something you are either doing or planning to do. Spending comes within about \$5,000 of my budget even though our revenues are increasing. That money goes to things we know we need to do."

"To give you an example, this year we bought a pick-up (truck) for our maintenance. We hadn't been able to do that for years." The next big project is replacing the run way lights, which is no small expense. "In this business, there is always some big need just around the corner," Hainsey said. "You have to plan and prepare for that."

For the past four years, Hainsey has been working to bring a west-bound flight to GTR, a difficult goal in an era when major airlines are reducing, not adding flights. He's hopeful GTR's track record will help make his case.

"When Delta added their fourth flight, after two-and-a-half months, we were running the same occupancy rate on all four flights," Hainsey said. "That shows any other airline that we don't have enough capacity. We can fill those seats. I think that helps them realize that if they come here, there's a really good chance they're going to be profitable. I'm still optimistic that we'll get west-bound air service. I think we have a lot to offer."

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**

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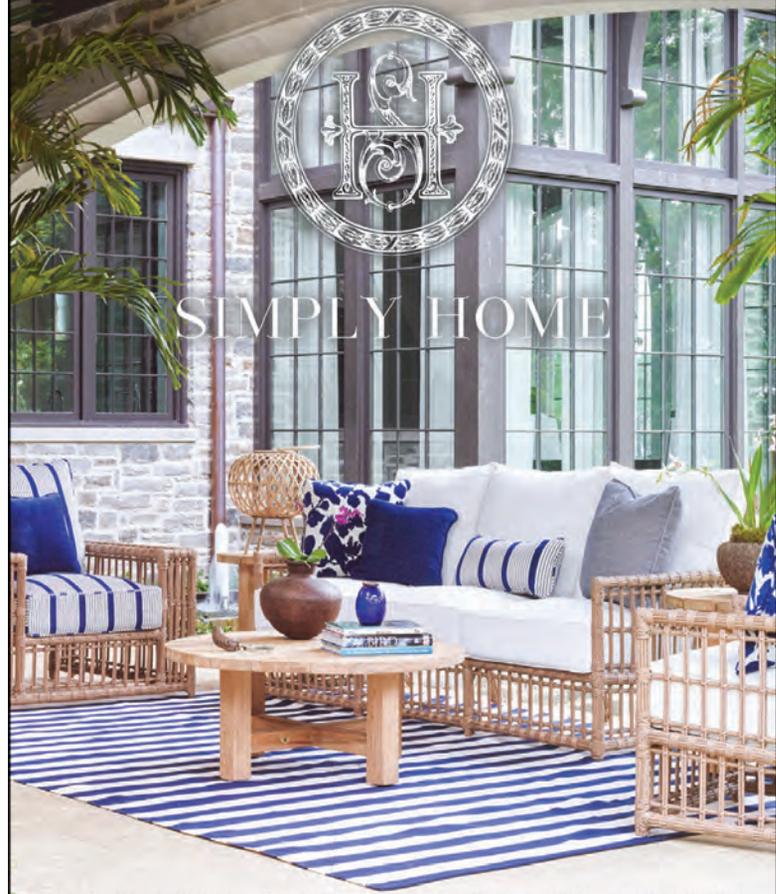
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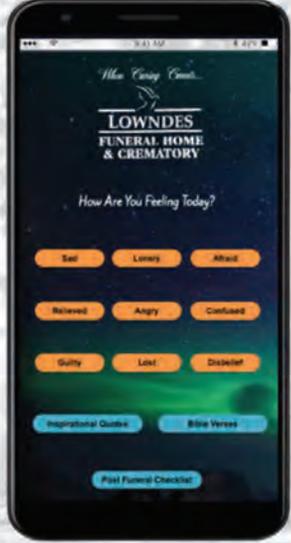
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3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

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**
PHOTOS BY **CARL RUTHERFORD**



STEPHANIE HALBERT

Stephanie Halbert does not measure the success of her debut book by sales, but by tales.

“The best part is when someone comes to me and shares their stories, how the book has helped them,” said Halbert. “I’ve had very positive feedback.”

For Halbert, who has worked with the city of Starkville for 10 years (the last two as the city’s assistant human relations director), her 2018 book, “No Longer Trapped: Pushing Forward,” was not the fulfillment of a long-held dream as much as it was a response to the challenges of life.

Drawing from her own experiences and those of others, Halbert’s book focuses on a faith-based approach to circumstances that can be overwhelming.

“I wanted to share with people that there is a way out,” said Halbert, 42. “It’s pretty easy to get to the point where you start to think things won’t get better. I wanted to encourage people through real-life examples.”

The first, most important step is one of faith.

“It’s trusting that Jesus is with you and nothing is impossible for Him,” she said. “You can get so side-tracked by what’s going on that you lose your peace. But if we keep our minds on Jesus, we’ll know perfect peace. You have to have peace to move forward to better things.”

Although she never aspired to be a writer, Halbert says she’s pretty sure she’ll be writing another book, although she doesn’t yet know the topic.

“I’ll know it when it comes to me,” she said.



JESSICA JEREMIAH

Since it opened three years ago, PediaTrust, a daycare center for children with serious disabilities, has been a godsend to dozens of parents and children, but few of those clients were as enthused at the center's arrival in Columbus as Jessica Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's interest in the arrival of the clinic was both professional and personal. As an instructor in pediatric nursing at Mississippi University for Women, Jeremiah felt the center would be a great clinical study opportunity for her students. Personally, the clinic's presence meant even more – her own daughter, then 11 years old, was in need of the unique services provided by the center.

With a staff of six pediatric nurses and five certified nurse practitioners, PediaTrust is equipped

to provide care for children from newborn to age 21 with the skilled care needed for those with severe physical and cognitive disabilities. The center, the only one of its kind in the Golden Triangle, is funded through Medicaid at no cost to the families it serves.

Jeremiah reached out to PediaTrust officials before the center opened. One thing led to another. When the clinic opened in June 2017, Jeremiah, now in her 34th year in nursing, had accepted the role of director of nursing for the center.

"I see all these kids as my children," Jeremiah said. "I work every day to get for them what I want my child to have. All of the children can progress. We want them to have the best life they can have."



ANN SPARKMAN

Ann Sparkman rarely worked outside the home. Instead, she was a stay-at-home mom and homemaker, which turned out to be pretty good work training for the position she now holds.

“I only worked a little bit,” said Sparkman, 77. “Mainly, I was the mom that volunteered for everything, Girl Scouts, clubs, always running back and forth somewhere.”

Now, as co-president (with Nancy Smith) of Loaves and Fishes of Lowndes County, Sparkman finds herself in a very similar routine.

“Mainly, it’s my job to keep everything going right, so I have a hand in pretty much everything we do,” she said.

Founded in 2008 as part of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, the nonprofit was established to

serve hot meals to poor and homeless people of the community. Over the past 12 years, the organization has expanded to 25 groups, mostly area churches, growing to twice-a-week meal services to hot lunches five days per week.

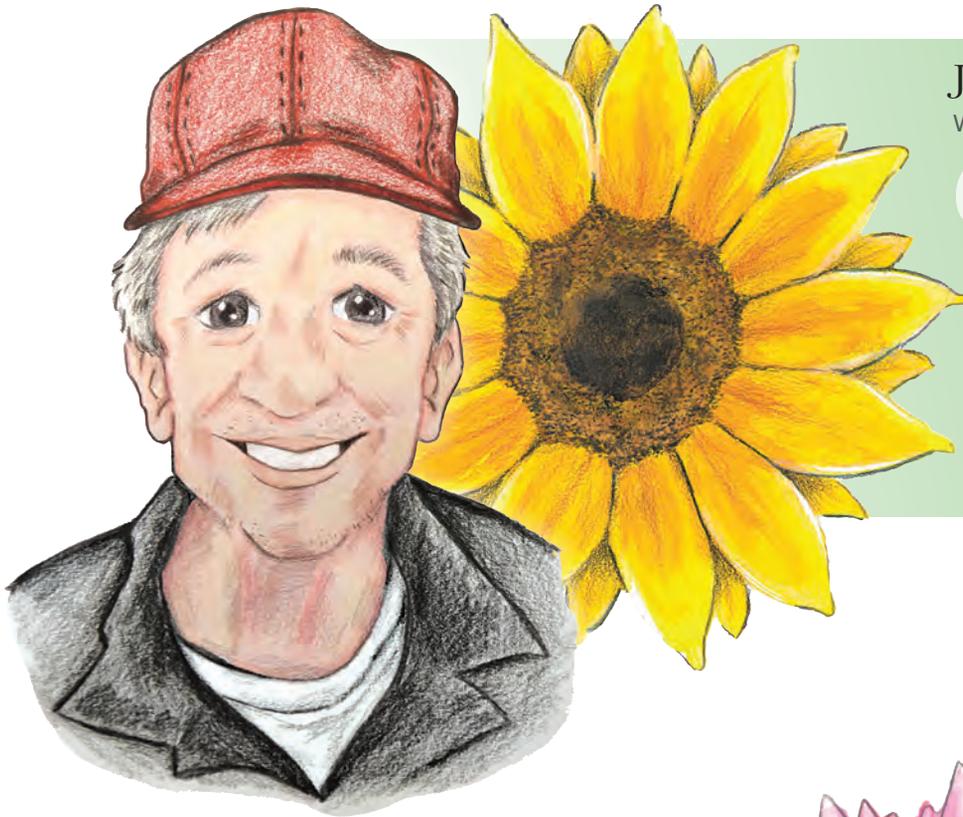
“It takes about 10 people to serve a meal, so with 25 organizations, that’s 250 people,” Sparkman said. “That means a lot of coordinating, a lot of phone calls. You don’t know if you’ll need to serve one day or two or more. The weather dictates that.”

Sparkman said the work is something she’s naturally drawn to do.

“I just knew there was a need out here,” she said. “When you see what I’ve seen over the years, you know the work you are doing is important. That’s what motivates me.”

NURSERY OWNERS SHARE THEIR LOVE OF GARDENING

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MURPHY



JIMMY BALLARD

WEST POINT PLANT FARM

“I am blessed for the opportunity to maintain God’s garden and watch over his plants. My goal is to do a better job than Adam and Eve. There is no serpent in my garden!”

Planting tip: “This is God’s gift of beauty for you to enjoy. Be sure not to plant them upside down!”

BECKY WALTON

WALTON’S GREENHOUSE

“Gardening is an amazing art form. It amazes me when planting a seed, what God creates. Everything from food and flowers to giant trees.

Planting tip : “Always remember an expert was once a beginner too.”





DEBBIE LAWRENCE

BLOOMERS

“My grandmother’s porch was surrounded by blue hydrangeas. Every time I smell their scent, I am back on her porch in a swing.”

Planting tip: “Mophead hydrangeas bloom on previous year’s growth so be careful when pruning.”

KATHY HANCOCK

HANCOCK HARDWARE & GARDEN CENTER

“Gardening is a great outlet for stress and just relaxes me. I love the Daffodil especially when my husband picks them out from our farm and brings them home to me.”

Planting tip: “My grandmother always told me if you talk to the flowers, they grow better.”



KODY & KANDIACE BROWN

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“Our biggest inspiration for gardening was our grandparents and parents who gave us a love for the outdoors and gardening.”

Planting tip: “Put your own twist on your space and don’t be afraid of the unusual!”



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ENVIRONMENT

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A LEASE AGREEMENT BETWEEN SOLAR ENERGY COMPANY ORIGIS AND EIGHT LOWNDES COUNTY FARM OWNERS WAS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS REVOLUTIONIZING ENERGY IN LOWNDES COUNTY



Origis' solar plant near Hattiesburg, Mississippi

According to BloombergNEF, which collects and analyzes technology throughout the world, a third of all of the world's electricity will be generated by solar power by 2050.

If that estimate is accurate, the future of energy first arrived in the Golden Triangle on February 12, 2020, when the Tennessee Valley

Authority approved a contract with solar-energy provider Origis Energy to construct the area's first large-scale solar power plant on farmland located in west Lowndes County. Plans for the solar plant will produce 200 megawatts of solar energy — enough to power more than 42,000 homes. To put that figure in perspective, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the total num-

ber of housing units in Lowndes County at 24,789 as of 2018. The project has potential to increase production to 350 megawatts (to provide electricity to every home in the Golden Triangle) on roughly 4,000 acres of land leased to Origis by a group of eight land-owners. The lease runs for 35 years. By

that time, the role of solar energy will have been established and if the reality is anywhere near the estimates, the agreement between TVA and Origis will be a significant milestone in the area's history.

Solar power production on any sizable scale actually arrived in the Golden Triangle in 2012 when Starkville-based Synergetics first began producing solar power from 1,000 small solar panels located on the roof of its building. There are currently five "solar farms" in the Golden Triangle, including two owned by Tennessee-based Silicon Ranch Energy in Lowndes County. All are small operations, less than an acre, and none produce more than one megawatt of electricity. All together, the five farms produce enough electricity to power about 350 homes.

Fast forward to a spring day in 2018, to a long-time Lowndes County farmer's casual conversation with a friend during a round of golf.

For 43 years both properties owned by his family, going back to the early 1800s and property he acquired over the years, Charlie Pilkinton made his living mostly through soybeans and corn, but during that round of golf, a new use of his land first emerged.

"I was playing golf with a friend of mine, Richard Reed," Pilkinton recalled. "It turns out he had a friend who was the attorney for Origis and had worked with them on a solar

project down in Hattiesburg. He asked me where there was some land in Lowndes County. (Origis) had found out that TVA was interested in doing some solar energy in the area. As it turned out, my farm was right there in a prime location because it was next to TVA's new substation."

Pilkinton said he began talking with Origis executive Johan Vanhee and began discussing the possi-



ble use of his land. Those talks included a visit to Sumrall, near Hattiesburg, where Origis had two solar plants in operation.

“I had seen the smaller ones we have here in Lowndes County, but nothing like what I saw there,” Pilkinton said. “The ones in Hattiesburg were really big by comparison, 600 to 800 acres. I got really excited about it. Seeing what they were doing there, it gave me a lot of confidence.”

Later, Vanhee contacted Pilkinton, adding a new wrinkle.

“Johan came back with a bigger project in mind,” Pilkinton said. “To do it, he would need more land. He asked if I would talk to other property owners in the area.”

Vanhee’s plan called for a solar plant capable of producing 350 megawatts on 4,000-acres of land owned by Pilkinton and seven others.

Pilkinton went to work, talking to his neighboring land-owners, who Pilkinton said were neither overly optimistic nor prohibitively skeptical of what Vanhee was proposing.

“They are all pretty good business people and interested in the opportunity if it would mean putting them in a better situation,” Pilkinton said. “I know they all looked at it pretty hard to make sure it was something they wanted to do.”

Securing the land was the first essential step.

“I asked them to step with me onto a journey that must have seemed like a futuristic project,” Vanhee recalled. At the beginning it was designed specifically for TVA with no guarantee that TVA would ever be interested.

After months talking to TVA and completing engineering work, TVA announced on February 11 that Origis’ project would be one of five solar energy projects approved for construction, but the negotiations altered the plan, at least for the time being. TVA’s contract allows for only a

200 megawatt facility. Vanhee said he still hopes to someday expand the facility to the full 350 megawatts.

“What I said to TVA was, ‘If you are ever interested in the additional 150 (megawatts) let me know,’” Vanhee said. “They were very frank and said, ‘Yes, we are interested.’ Again, there was no guarantee, but TVA did express interest, so we will continue to develop plans for the remaining 150 megawatts.”

For Pilkinton, the idea of converting farmland into a solar plant isn’t as big a departure as you might think. After all, he said, all farmers are in the “sunshine business.”

“Whatever you grow, you have to have sunshine,” he said. “We’ll see where it all goes. Technology changes so fast, I wouldn’t even guess where it all will be in 35 years when our leases end. But I think it’s going to turn out being a good investment and a good use of the land.”

STORY BY **SLIM SMITH**
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MEET RON THORNTON

THE NEW PRESIDENT OF THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB IS READY TO SERVE THE COMMUNITY

An interview with the new President and CEO of the Golden Triangle Boys and Girls Club.

What brought you to Columbus?

Back in August I had this potential job opening at the Boys and Girls Club, and I've been through every level of the organization. My last tenure was five years as the VP of Operations for the Central Mississippi Boys and Girls Club. I also feel that Columbus, West Point and Starkville are areas where we can really make a great impact on the youth.

I'm looking at the data that surrounds this community — poverty level, crime rate with youth and juvenile system. And that's near and dear to my heart because I believe in working with the youth and mentoring them. You can't save everybody, but some.

How do you like the communities so far?

All three communities have been receptive so far. I'm just trying to get them to buy in and get a true understanding of what Boys and Girls Club is. I feel that the communities know our name, but the understanding is lacking in a sense of what programs we offer. We are not a swimming gym, we are not a school and we are not a day care. We are an out-of-school program and a summer full-time youth development agency. We are geared toward the whole child model. We not only treat the child, we treat the family as well. We have programs for parents. We collaborate with a lot of organizations. I think the more the community understands that, the buy-in will be greater, whether it's financial or in-kind resources. We can partner together. Because we serve the same kids.



Name: Ron Thornton

Age: 35

Position: President and CEO of the Golden Triangle Boys and Girls Club

Starting date: December 30, 2019

Birthplace: Kosciusko, Mississippi

Hobbies: Spending time with family, fishing, cooking

Spouse: Contessa Thornton

Children: Christian (7), Trinity (5) and Ava (9-months-old)

What part of your personal experience better connects you with your role at the Boys and Girls Club?

I come from a large family. There were eight of us. My older brother going to Ole Miss had a car wreck that made me numb for several years. The realization hadn't ever set in. When I lost him, I was going to leave my life and go after his dreams. I was going to go to the law school at Ole Miss, but I missed about one point twice. That was a life-changing detour for me, which added to a bad car accident that happened to me, which put me in rehab for over three years.

The Boys and Girls Club stepped in and made an impressionable moment in my life. It allowed me the opportunity to continue school and get my education. It also allowed me to mentor youth.

In your new position, what progress have you made?

For the first few months, I've been analyzing the system and setup we have in place and thinking of ways to improve it. We've been processing our internal data to make sure the technology is advanced and upgraded.

We've gotten permits to serve hot meals during the summer in West Point and Starkville, on top of the Columbus location. We're establishing meetings with universities and colleges to collaborate with us. The East Mississippi Community College offers workforce development training, but a lot of parents don't take advantage of the dual enrollment system, so the kids still go without. We want our kids to at least have a certificate or a two-year degree out of high school, which would allow them to enter the workforce and start making money without acquiring a lot of debt. We will host a "Lunch and Learn" in

every community at the end of March.

In rural areas, there aren't a lot of corporations, so we are also reaching out to nonprofits for resources and help them understand that, for sustainability, we need your help. And it's not about if you have a large or small pocket book. It's wherever you can fit to help us stay in the loop.

What are some of the values you hope to implement while serving as the CEO of the Boys and Girls Club?

Our club and team members should display integrity at all times and be good stewards of donors' dollars. We do need dollars to operate, but we believe that the greatest gift that you can give is of time. When a child comes up to you, you may be too consumed by what you are doing at the moment and can't get to the child. But at that very moment it could be something precious to the child that they want to tell you. We try to train our members to pause and listen. We teach children that pattern that it's okay to express yourself and whatever you have to say does matter.

The club should also be a safe haven. Earn the community's trust that the Boys and Girls Club is a place where you can leave your child, your grandchild, your niece and nephew.

In the future, what do you hope the Boys and Girls Club will become to the community? What sort of cooperation do you want to see with the community?

I envision that our kids have state-of-the-art facilities with the help of the community. What you desire for your own child is what I want the community to desire for the kids we serve. I want a diverse population of the members at the club.

It's not for one race; it's for all races. We want to make sure that's understood across the demographics.

We serve all youths, regardless of poverty levels or financial stability. The community should understand that we are open to all members. Membership for the club is free, and we just expect the communities to buy into it, whether in dollars or in-kind gives.

I also envision that the churches provide more support for the Boys and Girls Club. I believe that a picture of them tied into out-of-school cares could help sustain the club. The churches are a pillar of the community as well as the club.

I want the community to understand what a change agent is. Everybody in the community is exactly that. They are a difference maker for youth, and I hope they'll be willing to do whatever it takes to make sure these kids are safe, comfortable, educated and prepared for secondary plans in their life.

STORY BY **YUE STELLA YU**
PHOTOS BY **LEDRICO ISAAC**

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DRAWING FROM LIFE

ARTIST CINDY BUOB SHARES HER STORIES
ON CANVAS, INSPIRED BY LIFE ITSELF

Sometimes an obstacle in life can be a catalyst. For artist Cindy Buob of Columbus, the obstacle was a diagnosis of breast cancer in October 2018.

“I decided I was going to really get back into the studio and give it much more effort. I thought, ‘This is what I want to do,’” she said. “It seemed like from that moment, I got more done than I have in years.”

Drawing and painting through that stressful period of treatment and recovery was, and still is, restorative for Buob, who has been a full-time instructor of art at the East Mississippi Community College Golden Triangle campus for six years. She is also a former adjunct art instructor at both Mississippi State University and

Mississippi University for Women. The Illinois native who holds a Master of Fine Arts from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville has lived in Scotland and Belarus. Since 1997, however, her home has been Columbus, where her husband, Tom Velek, teaches at MUW. The couple has two grown sons.

Buob’s passion for painting and drawing the human figure has been enduring. From the first day she tried it as a freshman in college, she knew it would become important in her life.

“I really just loved figure drawing, and the minute I started doing that I knew it was done — there was no question about it,” she said.

Working from live models, photos or



elaborations of an individual's life history, Buob creates canvases that marry human stories with the human form. Her narrative works are inspired by stories told to her.

"The story behind them can only be imagined. I like to recreate the thought that the image brings out," she said. "In these paintings I can create the story. It's visual storytelling."

In her second-story studio in downtown Columbus, Buob often listens to music as she indulges in two of her distinct interests — the painting of human flesh, and drawing, an art form she values for its immediacy.

One painting in her body of work has great personal significance. Its title: "The Thief."

"It's a self-portrait about my diagnosis and journey through breast cancer," the artist explained. "The actual notes from the phone call informing me of the diagnosis are visible in the painting. The moment you hear the news you realize you must decide how you will take the journey. What will this journey look like for you and those around you? Will you be hopeful? Hope is the most powerful weapon you have."

Buob, now cancer-free, has come a long way from being the doubting high school student who was encouraged by an art teacher to develop her talents. In March 2019, her oil painting entry in the Meridian Museum of Art Annual Bi-State Competition won Best of Show.

"And from that, I got a one-person show at the Meridian Museum of Art this past fall," she said. In January and February, her compelling work was featured in the juried exhibition *The Art of Hope* at MSU's Cullis-Wade Depot as well as the University of North Carolina Asheville's juried international show, *Drawing Discourse*.

"Feeling successful keeps you going," Buob said. "I get fed by that continually. ... For me, I feel like art is very therapeutic. I have to make it. It keeps me very happy when I'm in the studio. It keeps me positive."



STORY BY **JAN SWOOPE**

PHOTOS BY **LAURA DANIELS**



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BLUES AND BUSINESS IN CLAY COUNTY

After an economic slump in the mid-2000s, business is steadily increasing in West Point and Clay County. The area has seen incoming retail and fast food chains as well as long-term investments by major companies like Peco Foods and Navistar Defense. City and county officials now look to make the West Point area a better place to live and work with road improvement projects and the promise of a museum honoring the region's greatest musicians, the legendary blues singers who trace their roots to Clay County and the Black Prairie.

BLACK PRAIRIE BLUES MUSEUM

The Prairie Belt Blues Foundation, known primarily for putting on the annual Black Prairie Blues Festival in September, is designing an interactive museum featuring the music and lives of musicians from Mississippi's Black Prairie, most notably West Point's own Howlin' Wolf.

The organization purchased the old bank building on Commerce Street for about \$50,000 two years ago, said Jeremy Klutts, curator of the current museum on Westbrook Road. West



Point artist Deborah Mansfield is working with Dallas, Texas-based firm Museum Arts to design the museum's interior and exhibits.

The building will allow for about 1,500 square feet of space for movable exhibits and is already equipped with a stage and a back room which Klutts said he'd like to model like a juke joint. Exhibits will tell the stories of musicians like Big Joe Williams, Lucille Bogan, Bukka White and of course Howlin' Wolf.

The budget for the project is \$175,000, Klutts said. The foundation already raised \$20,000 at a fundraiser in October. Another fundraiser is scheduled for March 27. The museum is in the design phase right now, but Klutts said he hopes the museum will be ready to open within a year or 18 months.



ROAD PROJECTS

Clay County and the City of West Point have combined forces on a \$1 million project to pave 1.66 miles of West Churchill Road, which runs between the new Peco Foods facility and Prestage Farms. The city and county signed an interlocal agreement making the county the lead agency, meaning it will issue bids to contractors and otherwise oversee the project. The agreement has been sent to the Mississippi Attorney General's Office for approval, West Point Mayor Robbie Robinson said.

About half of the project's funding, \$500,000, came from state appropriations, said Robinson, with another \$240,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and a \$150,000 Small Municipalities grant. The remainder of the project's funding will be split evenly between the city and county, Robinson said.

In November, West Point's board of selectmen also approved \$2.5 million in general obligation bonds for street projects within the city limits. The city has two years to spend the GO bond money and Robinson said the projects will likely begin this summer or early fall once the city issues bids to construction companies. The project will not require a millage increase. Robinson said they will start with major thoroughfares Main Street, Broad Street and North Eshman Avenue. Once those projects are completed, city officials will look at paving neighborhood streets, starting with those most in need of resurfacing. Robinson said the city's last such major paving project was four years ago.

The city also just wrapped up a \$580,000 project to refurbish its north water plant, which is now set to pump 3.5 million gallons of water per day.



BUSINESS UPDATES

Peco Foods, which opened a chicken processing facility in the old Bryan Foods building off West Churchill Road, is slated to complete construction on a 150,000 square foot par fry facility on the property. The building is slated for opening in May, said plant manager Jordan Townsend, allowing for Peco to begin the process of hiring 300 employees over the next five years.

In January, Navistar Defense announced it had purchased its West Point assembly plant from Babcock and Wilcox, according to a Navistar press release. The company had leased the 562,000 square foot facility from B&W since 2006. The building, located on 161 acres off East Half Mile Street, is Navistar's primary manufacturing site, producing tens of thousands of vehicles since 2006, according to the press release. Robinson said the purchase showed Navistar's long-term commitment to West Point.

Retail also continues to develop along the city's busy Highway 45 Alternate, with both a Jack's fast food restaurant and a McAllister's Deli under construction along that road. Robinson said it's an area that has been growing quickly over the last four to five years, coinciding with the arrival of major industries such as Yokohama, which broke ground in 2015.

STORY BY **ISABELLE ALTMAN**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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 West Point Life



BROOKSVILLE

GRANTS PAVING WAY FOR PROJECTS IN NOXUBEE

In 2015, when Renee Sanders was still volunteer coordinator for United Way of Lowndes County, the organization received a grant from Volunteer Mississippi that allowed it to work with nonprofits in Noxubee County. Nearly five years later, Sanders — now executive director — officially added Noxubee County as a full member of the Columbus-based chapter. A ribbon-cutting ceremony and announcement in February formally christened the United Way of Lowndes and Noxubee Counties and while the chapter's only physical presence remains in Columbus, coming under the umbrella of United Way means nonprofits in Noxubee County can now benefit from the full slate of grants and resources the organization provides.

Most of United Way's fundraising comes through employee pledge campaigns at area businesses. BankFirst and Noxubee County Hospital have already started such campaigns and Noxubee County residents who work in Lowndes County can pledge to United Way and specify they want their contributions used in their home county.

The United Way chapter supports dozens of organizations in its coverage area through grants focused on education, financial stability, health and disaster relief. Notable nonprofit partners include such agencies as Salvation Army, Sally Kate Winters and 4-H, among others. Interested nonprofits can contact Sanders at United Way to apply for grants.



MACON LOOKS FOR ROAD PROJECT FUNDS, SCORES MULTIPLE GRANTS FOR EQUIPMENT

Last year, when heavy rains washed out Nate Wayne Road in Macon to the point it was



impassable, it took nearly \$50,000 of city funds to build a temporary detour route. For a more permanent solution, Mayor Bob Boykin is applying for a \$320,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Mississippi Development Authority for culverts, resurfacing and other infrastructure to repair the washout.

There's no word yet on approval for that award, but other grant funding has already proven vital to the small Noxubee County seat over the past six months.

The United States Department of Agriculture has provided about \$101,000 through its Rural Development grant program, including \$49,000 toward a backhoe for the city's utility department; \$40,000 for pagers, turnout gear and a new air compressor for the fire department; and \$12,000 for new computers at City Hall. For each grant, the city provided a 25-percent match.

Brooksville improving sewer system and streets.

The town of Brooksville is using a \$450,000 Community Development Block grant to upgrade its 40-year-old sewer system. Brooksville

was awarded the grant in 2018, and though above-average rainfall in recent months has delayed the work, Mayor David Boswell said he expects the project to be completed by March or April. Most of the work has centered on repairing holes that had either worn in the sewer lines or been caused by tree roots over time.

The town has recently been approved for a \$150,000 grant through the Mississippi Municipal League to resurface parts of East Depot, South Post Office and Main streets. Town leaders are also seeking up to \$300,000 in loans to fund more street projects and have requested proposals from financial institutions to that end.

USDA bolstered Brooksville's equipment inventory through the Rural Development grants program as well, providing roughly \$85,000 toward a vehicle for the police department along with a Dodge Ram pickup, tractor and bush hog for public works.

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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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. One had an answer on their tongue before we finished the question and the other had to dig a little deeper.

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

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**
AND PETER IMES
PHOTOS BY **LEDRICO ISAAC**

PATTY PENNINGTON

HOME HEALTH SPECIALIST, RETIRED TEACHER, LAMAR CO. (AL)

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

I never even knew of that when I grew up. I don't really know what I thought I wanted to be. I kind of settled on teaching because of my kids. It was something I could do while having the kids. It would work with their schedule, but it turned out to be something that I really loved.

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

To not do all the things that I did, which landed me where I am now healthwise. I didn't pay any attention to what I ate or what I put on me. I worked in the school where we jokingly said there was asbestos in the building, but it probably wasn't a joke.

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

I think they don't know that I'm as deep as I am. On the surface I look like I don't do much thinking, but I really do. Of course my accent, one of my friends tries to compliment me and I know what she means, but she tells people I am a lot smarter than I sound. That's something I've not known what to do about, because it's just my accent and I'm a bit more pronounced with it than most. I guess that's it, there is more to me than meets the eye.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Right now I would say eating out. We had a lake house on Smith Lake, we kept it from 2009 until 2015. I spent my summers there when I was a teacher. When I retired I couldn't find anyone to go with me, because now my daughter has kids and my husband works a lot. We couldn't justify keeping it, as we weren't using it. Other than that I am pretty simple.

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

When I was at the lake, I always wanted to swim correctly. I can swim, but I swim with my head out. Nobody ever taught me correctly and I didn't have swimming lessons, so I'd love to be able to swim correctly and swim for exercise.



EDDIE LONGSTREET

PASTOR, MUNICIPAL TAX COLLECTOR, WEST POINT



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

I always knew I would be in business. I went to Mississippi State University after high school and graduated there twice. I always knew I was going to be in the service industry of helping people. I've known that from, I guess, 7 years old. I enjoy helping people and I'm trying to be a difference maker.

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

Put God first in your life. Set goals that are obtainable and reachable and follow your dream.

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

I would say that I am a very observant person, thoughtful and methodical in my steps. My motto is, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. I don't do anything off the cuff or haphazard. I am methodical and have processes in place. I think people misunderstand that about me.

What's your greatest extravagance?

From the third grade I always wanted to go to Italy, because it's shaped like a boot. I had the privilege and opportunity to go on a trip with a group of ministers, which focused on the topic "stress". I went to Italy and saw the wine press, both traditional and modern. We went to the Vatican and the catacombs, saw the Sistine Chapel, went to Florence and Venice, all along Tuscany. That was probably the most extravagant thing other than going to Jerusalem, the Holy City. That was wonderful.

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

Typing 200 words a minute. In high school it was about 90 words a minute and of course it goes along with every habit, if you don't use it you lose it.

HUNTER PERRIGIN

CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE, COLUMBUS

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

I wouldn't have thought any of this would be what I'm doing now. My plan was to major in business, maybe go into teaching at The W or MSU. Life throws you curveballs, but now I'm a curveball expert.

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

I'm not that old, but if I could, always be open to advice, because you're not always right. Even if what you think you know is right, you can always expand on it. Be appreciative of what other people tell you.

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

Because I had a couple of odd jobs, a lot of people think I get bored easily with life. I did 1.5 semesters in college, I got my GED, so I never graduated high school. A lot of people think I am just a high school and college drop out, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I mean if you look at what I'm doing, I got this job and I am writing a book on the history of the First United Methodist Church and I am the business manager for an up and coming local play called "God Specializes in the Impossible."

What's your greatest extravagance?

I guess buying for other people. Any time I had more than \$20, I would always say, 'Grandma let's get in the car,' and get her a bag of Lindor chocolates. It would always be treating other people and that's another thing I would tell my younger self, treat yourself, it's not a crime.

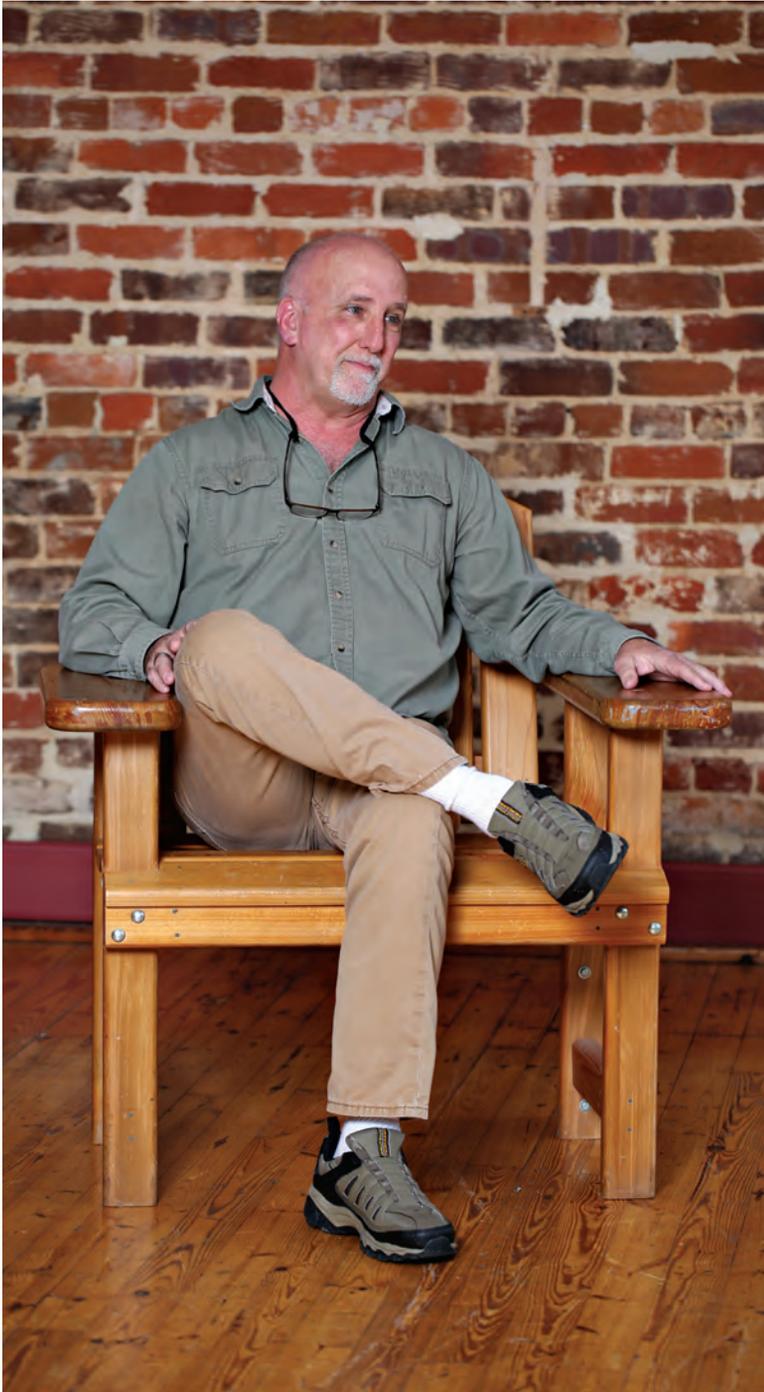
If you could master one skill, what would it be?

I would love to be able to learn how to play the piano and to have the ability to sing. I've always had a special connection to music.



RICE GLOVER

NAVY VETERAN, OFFICE MANAGER, COLUMBUS



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

I never really had a clear cut view of what I was going to do. I dropped out of high school in my senior year and ended up joining the Navy about six months later. I got my GED almost right away, the Navy sort of pushed me to do that. So, a clear cut vision of what I wanted to do, no I didn't have.

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

I would say, get a goal and quite frankly don't party so much. I have to say it like it is. I lived a pretty rambunctious young life, like a lot of people my age did.

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

They still think I live like I used to. If they haven't seen me in a while, they would go, oh I remember you. A lot of them are really surprised I didn't end up in jail and they also don't understand my walk with God, because I do have one. I have a great love for people with special needs and get very involved. People that know me from younger days just didn't expect me to become who I am today.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Playing golf at Lion Hills, and I've played Waverly. I don't get to play as often as I used to, because I take care of my brother now. He goes with me, but it's just not as much time. And of course my grandkids, I have a lot of grandkids.

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

Playing a musical instrument. I would love to play the piano.

ALECIA RANDLE

ADMINISTRATIVE CHURCH ASSISTANT, RETIRED, WEST POINT

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

I wanted to be a teacher. I worked as a Teacher's Assistant from 1971 to 1973 and it was then, that I decided I don't want to be a teacher. The kids were not what I expected them to be and I pray for all the teachers we have now. I realized that I had to do something else. This was not my calling.

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

How to invest more for the future. You know, when you're young you think you have life ahead of you and you have all of this time to do everything, but when you really get to the point where life matters, you decide 'I wish I had done it differently.' That's one of the biggest things I would have taught my young self, to invest and save more, especially how to invest wisely.

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

People sometimes think that I am not a friendly person, because I keep to myself a lot and I have always done that. I just taught myself to do things alone and I've learned that you keep out of trouble, because if you don't run in groups you don't have peer pressure. However, I am one of the friendliest people you could ever run into. I give everybody a smile when I see them. My mother taught me if you smile, the whole world smiles with you and she did that. She always spoke to everybody, she always had a smile.

What's your greatest extravagance?

I love to shop. I love to buy things on sale, I love clothes, I love shoes, I love purses. That is my greatest extravagance, shopping.

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

If I could master one thing, it would be playing the piano. I took piano lessons when I was younger, in my teenage years and then I decided that being in love was more important than piano lessons. Music is a passion of mine and it is very soothing. I actually have a piano and can play little things on it, but I would like to be better.





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