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from the publisher



As we look ahead to 2020 and reflect back on 2019, I would like to thank everyone – readers, advertisers, vendors and our very talented *Front Porch* team – for an incredible year.

The many months of long hours of dreaming and planning this new magazine venture has proven to be an amazing ride. We never imagined how we would be blown away with everyone's support and rave reviews.

One of the things I enjoy most about this newspaper/magazine life of mine is being able to inform local citizens of what is happening in their corner of the world. With the

launch of *The Front Porch* magazine, not only do we give our hometown readers insight into their community, but we are now telling stories to seven other surrounding counties, as well. Not only do our readers learn about fascinating people in their own town, but now learn about other extraordinary folks in their neighboring towns.

With that same love and passion, I can say I have the pleasure to bring you Volume 1, Issue 3 of *The Front Porch* magazine ... where the tea is sweet and the talks are long.

It is our goal to share with you heartwarming stories as well as important business and economic affairs around our neck of the woods. So, in this newest issue you will find stories on eight influential people in North Florida and South Georgia, the history of square dancing in the region, the Wildlife Conservation Center in Jefferson County, Howard Hsu and the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra and much, much more.

So, come on up on our front porch, sip on some sweet tea and sit a spell. Let's bring in the new year together while reading some fascinating stories about some of our incredible neighbors.

Emerald Greene Parsons, Publisher



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from the editor



I used to pray for snow as a child. Year after year, I would dream of waking up, looking out my window and seeing a landscape covered in powdery magic. Bing Crosby's famous lyrics, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," echoed through my mind all year as I eagerly anticipated a miracle.

Being North Florida-born and raised, it wasn't until my senior trip to Colorado in 2009 that I experienced what a true winter wonderland is like. Beautiful doesn't describe the sight. Upon catching a glimpse of the white, wintery scenery, I couldn't wait to build a snowman, make snow angels and throw snowballs at my classmates.

The time soon came for me to live my lifelong dream. My friends and I walked through the wonderland, taking in the scenery. We were bundled from head to toe and I felt perfectly shielded from the cold. We had plans to play in the precipitation and these plans were kicked-off when a friend playfully pushed me into what looked like a shallow layer of snow. I fell backwards and, to my surprise, continued to fall backwards, into what was actually four to five feet of snow. Before I knew it, I was deep within the pile, staring up at a me-shaped opening feet above—quite like a Looney Tunes episode.

I had made it—I was finally lying in my lifelong dream. And, to be frank, I was terrified. The frosty cave became my worst nightmare, seeping through my clothes and chilling me to the bone. I couldn't move, as the snow was packed tightly around me. The icy substance was lodged in my scarf and down my jacket and stung like a thousand knives as it pressed against my skin. I began to panic and tried my best to dig my way out of Jack Frost's clutches. I finally came up for air, fired a few choice words at my friend and quickly began to shake the snow from my clothes.

The rest of my week spent in the snow-capped mountains of Colorado was a pleasant experience. Before long, we got the hang of it and learned to weather the cold and enjoy the snow. For instance, I wasn't the best on snow skis, but I had a blast surfing the slopes on a tube. I didn't enjoy the feeling of snow compacted in my scarf, but there was something magical about the way snowflakes fell from the sky, dusted my hair and kissed my cheeks.

Much like my childhood expectations of snow, we tend to romanticize our dreams. We think, 'If I could just make X amount of dollars, I will be set' or 'once I buy the two-story house, I'll have finally made it.' We feel like if we don't accomplish our dreams we're failures and, when we do fulfill a lifelong dream, like my trip to Colorado, it isn't everything we thought it would be.

As you make goals for the new year or continue your journey to accomplish an old dream, don't become disheartened if it doesn't turn out the way you've pictured it. We can't predict where life is headed and it's impossible to control our circumstances. It is, however, possible to enjoy the ride; to make positive choices; to learn from our mistakes; to learn from those who have paved the way; and to discover the small yet magical moments that make up each day.

And that's my hope for you, our reader, as you begin your 2020 journey. Dare to dream. Dare to learn. But, don't you dare lose hope when your path leads to the unexpected—it may be better than you imagined.

Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

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A Stroke of Genius

Howard Hsu and his orchestra break barriers

Story and photos by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

A stroke of genius: the definition of every swish, flick and wave of the baton wielded by Howard Hsu, Conductor of the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra and Director of Orchestra Studies at

Howard Hsu, Conductor of the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra and Director of Orchestra Studies at Valdosta State University has been an asset to the college's fine arts program and the greater Valdosta community.

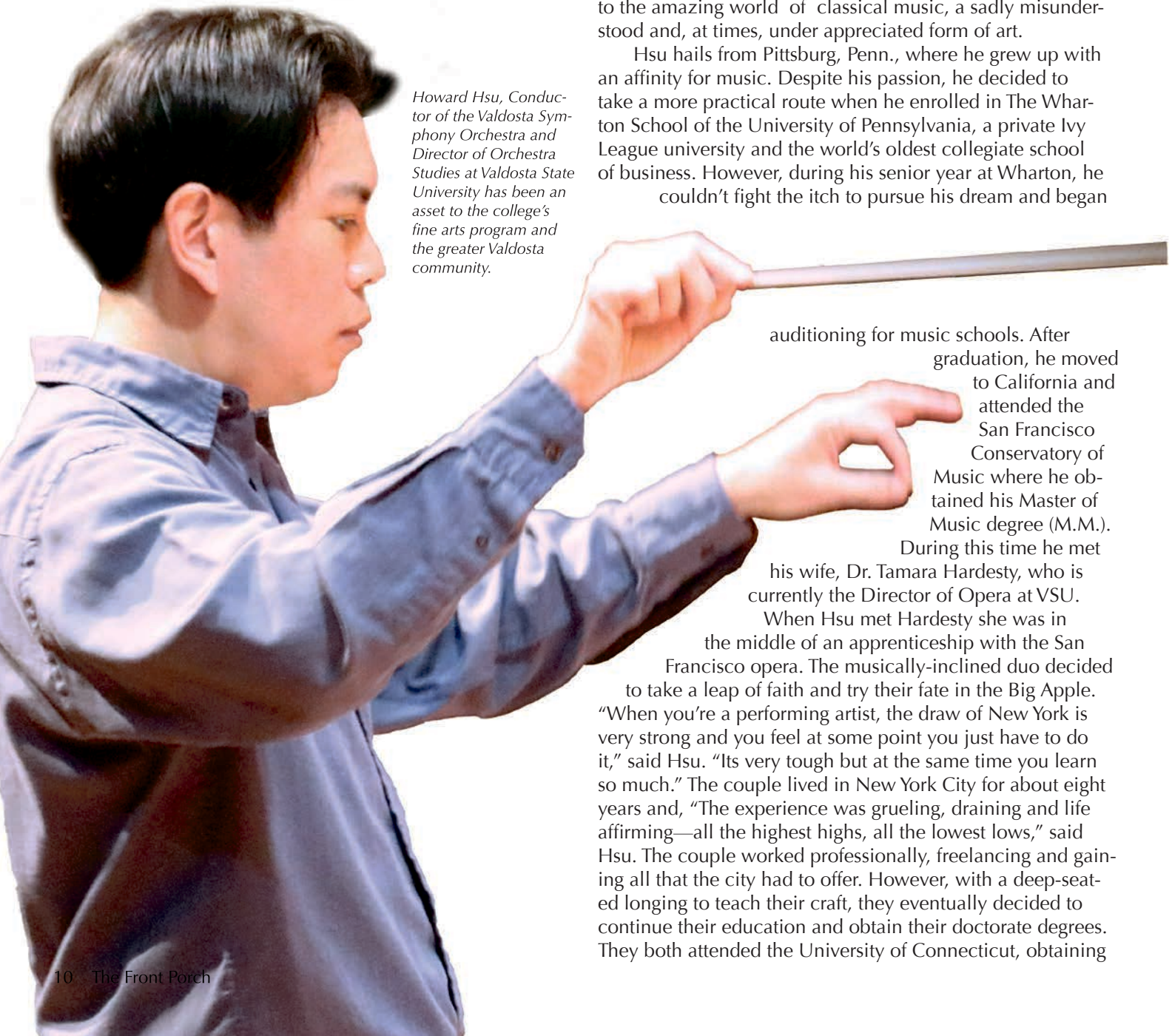
Valdosta State University (VSU). Hsu and his hybrid team of students and professionals have made a crater-sized positive impact on Valdosta's fine arts community and the surrounding area. With performances that feature world-renowned soloists, pristine notes and bucketfuls of emotion, all ages of the Valdosta community and beyond are being exposed to the amazing world of classical music, a sadly misunderstood and, at times, under appreciated form of art.

Hsu hails from Pittsburg, Penn., where he grew up with an affinity for music. Despite his passion, he decided to take a more practical route when he enrolled in The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, a private Ivy League university and the world's oldest collegiate school of business. However, during his senior year at Wharton, he couldn't fight the itch to pursue his dream and began

auditioning for music schools. After graduation, he moved to California and attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where he obtained his Master of Music degree (M.M.).

During this time he met his wife, Dr. Tamara Hardesty, who is currently the Director of Opera at VSU.

When Hsu met Hardesty she was in the middle of an apprenticeship with the San Francisco opera. The musically-inclined duo decided to take a leap of faith and try their fate in the Big Apple. "When you're a performing artist, the draw of New York is very strong and you feel at some point you just have to do it," said Hsu. "Its very tough but at the same time you learn so much." The couple lived in New York City for about eight years and, "The experience was grueling, draining and life affirming—all the highest highs, all the lowest lows," said Hsu. The couple worked professionally, freelancing and gaining all that the city had to offer. However, with a deep-seated longing to teach their craft, they eventually decided to continue their education and obtain their doctorate degrees. They both attended the University of Connecticut, obtaining



their Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A). Not long after, Hsu was offered his current position at VSU.

Hsu and Hardesty were embraced by VSU and the Valdosta community. They knew very little about the area and were surprised by the welcoming atmosphere and support for the arts. Hsu was introduced to VSU's Valdosta Symphony Orchestra, a hybrid orchestra consisting of students and professionals, which was in need of a conductor. "One of the things I was surprised about ... when I came down, there was this great orchestra and I clicked with both the professionals and the students and I also saw this community that had incredible support for the orchestra and the university. It's a really unique model and the fact that the university had the vision and courage to say, 'we are going to support this,' and the community partnered with them and made this happen. [The orchestra] has such a strong foundation and such a strong backing. There are very few institutions like it anywhere in the country."

Hsu has greatly enjoyed his tenure with VSU and the orchestra and, despite his modesty, has helped to grow the program by leaps and bounds. "I was so happy to be able to do this here, where I still get to teach all the time but I also get to work with these great professional musicians who are my colleagues ... and so it's just a wonderful environment to teach but to also learn and grow as well."

Hsu is celebrating a 10 year tenure with VSU and the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra as well as the orchestra's 30th anniversary season. With much to be thankful for, the orchestra is better than ever and music lovers of all ages have much still to look forward to this season. The orchestra is busy making preparations for their spring performances after a successful wrap-up of Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker" in December of 2019—Valdosta's most anticipated annual Christmas production and one of the few places onlookers can experience a live orchestra during a performance, thanks to the partnership between the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra and Dance Arts Valdosta. "You can feel a difference," said Hsu. "With a recording, it feels dead, no matter how high you turn it up. [With a live orchestra] the dancers have said they can feel the music coming up through the floor, so they really love it too." If the orchestra's spectacular performance of "The Nutcracker" is any indication, symphony enthusiasts and newcomers, alike, can expect nothing but the best this spring as the orchestra's 30th season comes to a close.

"We've always strived to put on really enriching, fascinating, electrifying, entertaining concerts and we've been doing that this season," said Hsu. Saturday, Feb. 15, will feature a more light-hearted and fun performance. The orchestra will team up with internationally-acclaimed internet sensations, The Melodica Men, who are known for playing intricate musical selections with toy instruments. The duo, Tristan Clarke and Joe Buono, first went viral in 2016 with their video of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," which gained 1.5 million views in a day. In three years, the musicians, graduates of the Juilliard School and Peabody Conservatory, have gathered over 800,000 followers across social media and over 100 million views worldwide for their fun melodica videos. The Melodica Men have been featured with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and also on ABC's "The Gong Show" and now they will





bring their talent to Valdosta for a special performance with The Valdosta Symphony Orchestra, as part of the Casual Classics series.

Saturday, March 28, will bring a completely different performance and is one that cannot be missed. The Valdosta Symphony Orchestra will be performing the Verdi Requiem, composed by Giuseppe Verdi for four soloists, a double choir and orchestra in memory of Alessandro Manzoni, an Italian poet and novelist whom Verdi admired. The somber yet beautiful work of art is noted as the most frequently performed major choral work since Mozart's Requiem. "We've invited a group who performs a special version of this piece," said Hsu. This group will perform "Defiant Requiem: Verdi At Terezín" which will tell the story of the Nazi concentration camp, Terezin, and the imprisoned conductor Rafael Schachter, who led the inmates to fight back through art and music. His most awe-inspiring act was the recruitment of 150 prisoners, who he taught to perform Verdi's Requiem for high-ranking SS Officers from Berlin as an act of defiance. The Nazi regime, instead, used their performance to support the charade that the prisoners were flourishing. This sobering yet beautiful performance is certain to educate and amaze onlookers and Hsu urges the community to attend.

The Valdosta Symphony Orchestra's final concert of their 30th season will feature performances of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde and Ride of the Valkyries as well as Stravinsky's Rite of Spring—a beautiful and popular piece that has been featured in many films, including Walt Disney's "Fantasia."



"There's nothing bigger than getting to do 'Rite of Spring,'" said Hsu, eagerly.

Above all, Hsu wants the public to know that the orchestra isn't something to stray away from—it's something to embrace. "I encourage everyone to give us a chance," said Hsu. "I think, especially today, there are a lot of barriers—some real and some just perceived—as to why people don't come to an orchestra concert. It's something they're not familiar with or they just assume it's boring ... but there is nothing like live music and it's something that I preach often and keep saying because it's true. It's like a sporting event—you can watch it on a huge television with a nice sound system and it still is not the same as attending the sporting event. Being there, seeing it, being surrounded by others and having that shared experience is something that is so rewarding and not everybody has the opportunity to do. We're so fortunate in this area that we have this wonderful orchestra here."

Hsu's words could not be more accurate. What began as the hopes and dreams of a young man in Pennsylvania, has grown and flourished into a heartfelt passion that has ignited the spirit of music in the North Florida-South Georgia region. If you haven't experienced the talent of Howard Hsu and the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra, you are encouraged to come as you are and how you are most comfortable. Dress up or wear your favorite pair of denim—the orchestra has something to offer everyone and it is guaranteed you will enjoy your visit. For tickets, a schedule of events or more information, visit valdostasympphony.org or call (229) 333-2150.



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Photo by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

Elesta Pritchett stands next to a statue of Ray Charles, legendary musician and Pritchett's childhood friend. The bronze work of art sits in Haffye Hays Park, in Greenville, Fla., where Charles grew up.

89 Years of Elesta

A look back on a lifetime of service

Story by Mickey Starling, Staff Writer

Although her steps may be a bit slower and more carefully measured, 89-year-old Elesta Pritchett has no intention of stopping in her service to her beloved hometown of Greenville.

She has fond memories of growing up in the quaint little town, especially the weekly trips to downtown in a rela-

tive's Model A Ford. The roof of the car had several holes in it, making for a good drenching on a rainy day. However, the family often escaped the rain by seeking shelter under a watermelon shed that was nearby. "It was a booming town," said Pritchett. "We would walk the streets and meet up with our friends while shopping. We had a great time."

One particular weekend, Pritchett recalls staying home to watch her younger siblings. "A bad storm came up, with lightning strikes that created explosive thunder," said Pritchett. "My younger brother and sister were outside, raking the yard, so I ran out to check on them. My sister had been struck by lightning through both heels. My brother said, 'the moon fell on us.'" When Pritchett's mother got home, she took her to the doctor, where they received news Elesta's sister would be fine. "He told us to soak her feet in sweet milk and he gave her some ointment."

Pritchett learned early to carefully look after her younger

siblings. Her father, Berton Clemons, passed on some of the rules he was brought up under. For instance, Clemons was held responsible for, and punished, for anything that went wrong with the kids in his care. Pritchett was under the same rule, so she was very careful to keep everyone safe. "It worked out good for me," said Pritchett. "None of my kids ever had to go to the hospital and they never ended up in jail. They grew up to be great citizens."

During Pritchett's childhood, Greenville was home to at least five or six saw mills of various types. Pritchett's mother, Mary, worked in a crate mill that manufactured orange crates which were sent to South Florida. Her father worked in a press mill that produced boards. Her family's work ethic, combined with the wisdom of some of her teachers, helped shaped Pritchett's determination to always make better of herself when she had the chance.

Pritchett's fifth grade teacher used to tell her class that "when opportunity comes, it will present itself as a bald-headed man with one lock of hair on top of his head. You have to grab him by that lock of hair, for he won't come that way again." This simple story encouraged Pritchett to always be on the look-out for opportunities.

It only took a few years before Pritchett had to put that lesson to the test. She fell in love while very young and was married by age 17. She married a young man from Delray Beach who often visited family in Madison, Fla. and moved there upon marrying Pritchett. After their second child was born, the young father moved back home, with the promise of providing a home



Elesta Pritchett stands at the Ray Charles Childhood Home on Dec. 14, 2019 after an inspection to ensure recent repairs were completed successfully.

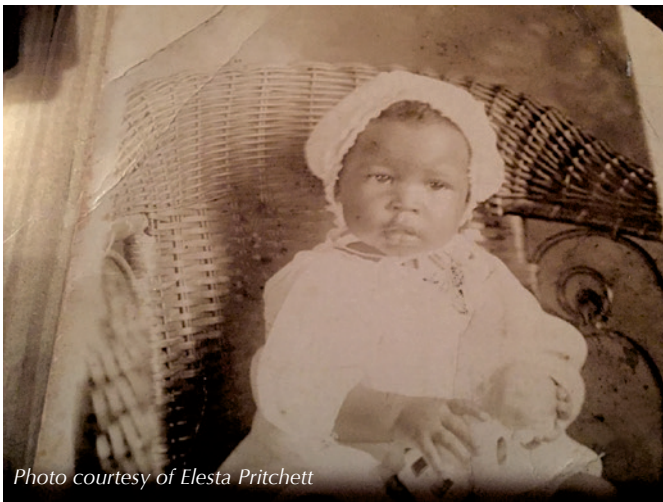


Photo courtesy of Elesta Pritchett

Elesta Pritchett was born on August 31, 1930, to Berton and Mary Clemons.



Photo courtesy of Elesta Pritchett

The home of Ray Charles and mother, Aretha Robinson, was dilapidated after many years of abandonment. In 2008, Pritchett and the Greenville Heritage Committee had the building completely renovated and returned to its original state.



Photo courtesy of Justina Cone

Elesta Pritchett serving as Mayor of Greenville in 2008.

for his growing family. Pritchett soon followed her husband, only to be shocked that her husband was living with his mother, who already had a house full of kids.

Finding that there had been no attempt to prepare a home for Pritchett and the children, she began hoping for an opportunity to remedy the situation. A plan began to form in Pritchett's mind when her grandmother sent her bus tickets back to Madison. Pritchett hid the tickets and waited for the right time to make a move. That moment came when her husband set out on a fishing trip that Pritchett was supposed to attend, but she covered herself in Vick's salve so that she would appear sick. "That stuff was burning me up," said Pritchett, who was determined to give her kids a better life. The ruse worked and Pritchett and her children headed to the bus station when the coast was clear. Early the next morning, the Greyhound bus rolled into town and Pritchett has called Madison County her home ever since.

Since Pritchett started her family at 17 years-old, family life took precedence over education for a long time. However, the day-to-day grind could not diminish her hope to one day obtain a college degree. Though she took what she describes as "a 14-year detour," Pritchett continued to dream about going to college. "I kept thinking, 'why am I dreaming about college when I don't even know what the inside of one looks like?'" said Pritchett. Yet, the message of those dreams rang loud and clear for Pritchett, who obtained her GED and a graduation certificate from Greenville Training School in 1961.

She continued her education at Suwannee River Junior College and went on to graduate from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) in 1965. This journey was made more remarkable by the fact that Pritchett had to ride a Greyhound Bus three days a week to get to Tallahassee and then catch a city bus to the campus.

For all of the difficulty involved in making this happen, Pritchett only missed one night away from her children due to academic responsibilities. She soon applied for a teaching position at Greenville Elementary School, but after not hearing back from Principal Frank Merritt, she found herself again awaiting a bus to go to a job interview in Blountstown, Fla.

To Pritchett's surprise, she spotted Merritt while awaiting the bus and he offered her the job on the spot. She kept her interview in Blountstown and was offered a job there, as well. But, home was always where her heart was, so the Greenville position was an easy choice for Pritchett.

She continued her studies, earning her Master's degree in education from FAMU on the same day her son, Johnny Brown, received his Bachelor's degree from the same university.

Brown credits the example of his mother's hard work for the successful career he has enjoyed. "I went back to school because of my children," said Pritchett, whose example and service have no doubt inspired decades of young men and women to become good role models and citizens.

Today, Pritchett is best known for her public service—it's in her blood. She taught at Greenville Elementary School for almost four decades and was selected as Teacher of the Year on five different occasions. Retirement hasn't slowed her efforts to promote education, either. Pritchett is currently responsible for providing guest speakers for the Madison branch of the Florida Retired Educators Association and is a past recipient of the Leroy Collins Award from the Florida Association of Community



Photo courtesy of Justina Cone

Elista Pritchett at her 80th birthday celebration at Divine Events, in Madison, Fla.



Photo courtesy of Justina Cone

Elista Pritchett's work towards the erection of a statue of Ray Charles in downtown Greenville was reported in the January 2008 issue of Southern Living Magazine.

Colleges. Pritchett also serves as the chairperson of the scholarship committee for the North Florida College Foundation Board.

In addition to her promotion of education, Pritchett works diligently within the church scene. She grew up attending New Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, just outside of town. While there, her Sunday School teacher, Minnie Conoway, stressed the importance of honoring your father and mother. This concept is repeated in scripture in numerous places and promises the potential for long life. Conoway made a lasting impression on Pritchett. "I didn't want to die early," said Pritchett. "I have always treated my parents and others with respect, and see, I'm still here."

That respect for others followed Pritchett to her new church when the family moved into town. She has attended New Zion Missionary Baptist Church since the 1970s. Over the years, her leadership role has grown, especially with the women of the church. Pritchett is the past president of the Home Mission Society and she presently serves as the chairperson of the Deaconess Board, which helps to train women for leadership roles in the church.

Pritchett has also served as the women's president of the Madison County Training Union for 18 years, retiring in July of 2018. Pritchett's church work extends far beyond the local church. She has served as the women's president and vice-president in the First Bethlehem Baptist Association and

“He led me back to school and He leads me through every day.”

the Florida General Baptist Convention. When it comes to attending church, Pritchett smiles, saying, "I'm pretty much there when the door opens." The women of the Florida General Baptist Convention are so accustomed to seeing her at their meetings, that when she walks in the door, they are often heard saying, "We can start the meeting now because Elesta is here."

Pritchett appreciated the spiritual dedication and guidance she received from her mother while growing up in church. "I learned to listen to the Holy Spirit," said Pritchett. "He led me back to school and He leads me through every day."

In addition to her service to the church and the Madison County school system, Pritchett has remained active in local government. She never sought to be involved, but the citizens of Greenville had other ideas. Many years ago, long-time Greenville pastor, Thad Entsminger, sent Robin Burnett to Pritchett's door, requesting that she serve on the Greenville Town Council. "I'll give it a try," said Pritchett. That "try"



Photo courtesy of Justina Cone

Elesta Pritchett, Greenville's Mayor Emeritus, leads the ribbon cutting at the newly-renovated Ray Charles childhood home. It was a happy day for the Greenville Heritage Committee, townsfolk, family, friends and dignitaries in attendance.

turned into 23 years of service, at least 12 of which were spent as mayor. She has been active in government throughout Madison County for many years and is the current Vice Chair for the Madison County Chamber of Commerce.

However, one of Pritchett's largest feats is preserving the memory of legendary musician and former Greenville resident, Ray Charles. When the singer passed away in 2004, Pritchett, who was a childhood friend of Charles, intervened against Albany, Ga.'s claim that he was from Albany. Charles was born there but only lived there for about a month. Much of his childhood was spent in Greenville, where he learned how to play the piano at Wylie Pittman's Red Wing Cafe. Some of Charles' entertainment came in the form of practical jokes. Though he was blind, Charles had impeccable timing and once pulled a chair out from under Pritchett as she returned from running an errand for her mother. "It made me mad at the time and he got a switching for it," said Pritchett. "Later, I stopped to realize how thankful I should be that I had great eyesight and he was just being a normal boy." Pritchett also credits Charles, who she called R.C., with teaching her how to play "strip poker." "We never took anything off," said Pritchett with a chuckle.

Pritchett worked diligently to preserve the memory of Ray Charles for two years and, eventually, her efforts were rewarded. In February of 2006, a bronze statue of Charles was revealed in the city park and his daughter, Sheila Raye Charles, sang his rendition of "America the Beautiful" to honor the occasion. In addition, the efforts of Pritchett and the Greenville Heritage Committee brought forth the renova-

tion of Charles' childhood home in 2008, which can now be toured by visitors from near and far.

"People know Greenville now," said Pritchett at the time. "This has put our town on the map." And she is correct—her efforts have been documented by WCTV Eyewitness News, Roadside America, Visit Florida and Southern Living Magazine, among many other publications. However, Pritchett's efforts were not motivated by a quest for recognition. She wanted to inspire the youth of Greenville and anyone who might be struggling to make it. "If a blind person from Greenville can make something of himself and overcome such an obstacle, they can also do that," said Pritchett.

Though her steps have slowed over the years, Pritchett's sense of purpose and passion for serving others have not, and her independent spirit is alive and well. Her daughter recently asked her if she needed some help. "No, no, no," was her reply. "It's not time for all of that. I like taking care of myself. You need to get up and keep moving."

Elesta Pritchett has led a blessed life, though it has not been without difficulty and heartbreak. Living through two failed marriages were painful experiences, but they were not enough to break Pritchett's spirit nor her reliance upon God to see her through. "I missed out on finding someone to love me as much as I loved them," said Pritchett. "In spite of that, I wore out four Cadillacs driving all over the state to love and serve others. My philosophy is simple: I pray that when I leave this earth, I will have left it a little better than I found it." All it takes is to spend a few moments with this special lady to know that her prayers have already been answered.

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A modern kitchen with white cabinetry, a granite island, and stainless steel appliances. The kitchen features a large island with a granite countertop and white cabinetry. The main kitchen area has white upper and lower cabinets with black handles. A stainless steel oven is built into the cabinetry, and a microwave is mounted above the stove. The floor is a light-colored wood-look laminate. Three black pendant lights hang over the island. The ceiling has recessed lighting.

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Our Story

ChrisMill Homes began in 2001 when Bill Gaskins and Ernie Norton partnered up to build custom homes in the South Georgia-North Florida area. In 2007-2008, the economy crashed and the building industry took a devastating hit. ChrisMill Homes was only able to survive by the grace of God and the great people of Florida. Loyal customers in the North Florida community referred enough business to allow ChrisMill Homes to stay afloat. Since that time, ChrisMill Homes has been divided into two separate companies with two separate owners. Ernie Norton began ChrisMill Homes Florida in April of 2019. It was important to Ernie to maintain this side of the business and work to show the immense gratitude he feels to the people of Florida. While we still operate with many of the same basic principles, Ernie has taken considerable action to ensure ChrisMill Homes Florida thrives in success.

Our team has really enjoyed the process of "re-vamping" a long-standing company into something newsworthy. ChrisMill Homes Florida began with just two homes under construction and with relentless effort, the right people in place and a new eye for the custom home building business, we have increased our business for the year by 95 percent, with no signs of slowing down. Ernie has led this company and our team to a level of achievement we could only dream of. ChrisMill Homes Florida now has a division, with a person appointed, for each part of the building process.

ChrisMill Homes Florida is a family that is devoted to walking with our customers side by side in the process of building their dream while making an impact on the communities in which we are present. We have no interest in becoming a huge corporate-run business. By honoring our customers and the communities that we serve, and performing each day with strong, faithful character, ChrisMill Homes Florida's interest is simply to become better.



Dusk to Dawn in Suwannee County

Shane Mathews is Colorado-born and South Florida-raised. Growing up, he was always into the arts. His interest developed into a successful career as an award-winning oil painter, photographer, graphic designer and engineer. Shane is currently the lead designer at Greene Publishing, Inc. He also owns and operates a photography studio, Shane Mathews Photography, and an engineering business. When he's not working, he enjoys spending time with his four children and wife of 13 years.

14mm
30.0 sec
f / 3.2
ISO 50



The following shots were taken in Suwannee County, Fla., a photographer's playground, brimming with natural beauty and historic treasures. "I enjoy taking photos during the serenity of night, while everyone is asleep," says Mathews. "I also take pleasure in sharing my craft, so with each photo, I've provided the settings I used on my Nikon Z6."

As you travel from dusk to dawn, you will find the careful attention to detail Mathews is known for. His knack for capturing light and movement is one-of-a-kind and his photos tell a story that catapults the viewer into the still of the night in Suwannee County.

14mm
30.0 sec
f / 9.0
ISO 50



14mm
25.0 sec
f / 2.8
ISO 500



14mm
30.0 sec
f / 2.8
ISO 250



14mm
30.0 sec
f / 2.8
ISO 200





24mm
1/125 sec
f/ 4.0
ISO 1800



THE GREAT

EIGHT
influencers. **EIGHT**
stories. **EIGHT**
reasons to pursue
a dream.

Curated by Savannah
Reams, Editor-in-Chief

With the new year underway, there's no better moment to start grinding and achieving those goals you've been putting off—the start of a bigger, bolder, better-than-ever decade calls for 2020 vision! Many will put pen to paper and make goals and resolutions to strive toward in the new year and, just the same, many will fall off the wagon. Sometimes it's hard to see the bigger picture and envision what life could be like with a bit of hard work, risk-taking and grit. We all have goals. We all have dreams. But anything worth achieving requires focus, tons of effort and, above all, heart. With this notion in mind, we have provided you with a list of eight influencers in the North Florida-South Georgia region who have made big, boss moves in their field. Their accomplishments come with a story and, perhaps, their stories will inspire you, our reader, on your 2020 journey.



Photo courtesy of Leneah Willis



Kristen White | Lafayette County, Florida

Kristen White is a Jacksonville-based photographer who is known throughout the area for her unique perspective, distinctive style and penchant for spontaneity. In November of 2019, White took her passion for the business to the next level and launched The Well, a retreat for self-starting photographers with a passion for their art and a desire to grow their business through sharpening their skills, developing marketing strategies and building their brand. White knew she wanted to educate others in the form of a retreat, but she kept holding herself back due to fear. “The thought of teaching other people was so intimidating to me and then the fear set in,” said White. “I thought, ‘maybe one day I’ll be brave enough to do something like that.’ But, look at the designers of Apple and the iPhone—they weren’t scared to take a step and do something. It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done but having the opportunity to pour into people and help them figure out their ‘why?’ was an accomplishment in itself.”

White reminded herself that she is no stranger to risk taking. She grew up in the small town of Mayo, Fla. and discovered her knack for photography when her grandmother would ask her to take pictures at various family functions. White’s mother also enjoyed photography and took photos at local weddings. White remembers tagging along with her mother during a photoshoot. “Mom was struggling to get a good shot, so I took control and helped pose the family.”

White’s mother knew immediately she had an eye for quality photos and a take-control, upbeat attitude that made way for a smooth photoshoot. White convinced herself, however, that photography wasn’t practical. “I was doing everything under the sun but photography,” said White. “I went to massage school, I worked at the bank, I worked in the food industry and I’m like, ‘I love people but this isn’t setting my heart on fire.’” She finally decided to go all in and her husband, Spencer, who she credits as her biggest support system, purchased her first camera.

The rest is history. With White’s talent, individuality and knack for capturing unique and stunning shots, her business grew into what it is today. K.White Photography is a thriving Jacksonville-based business with a growing clientele. With the addition of The Well, White’s path has diverted and she is now pouring into the lives of other up and coming photographers. “I’m the secretary, the receptionist, the photographer, the editor, the marketer, the social media manager; I’m everything and it’s so amazing but it is hard work and I just wish I had a retreat like [The Well] when I was growing and doing,” says White. For more information and a taste of Kristen’s unique style and enchanting personality, visit kwhitephotographs.com. -Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

SSION

For the past 25 months, Greenville Town Manager Edward Dean has been focused on achieving goals; not those set by himself, but those of the community leaders, stakeholders and citizens of the rural western Madison County town.

Known for being the childhood home of piano great Ray Charles, Greenville has experienced economic hardships in the past. However, citizens are beginning to hope again. Thanks to the efforts of Dean, construction of a new senior/youth center dives into its second phase, approximately one week ahead of schedule.

Dean began his tenure with the Town of Greenville in the fall of 2017, with a background on Capital Hill and an understanding of how government works. While his previous experience proved to be worthy, he wanted to step into his new role with a true understanding of what the people of Greenville needed. A consultant was hired to assist Dean in gaining an understanding of how to effectively improve Greenville and, following a study, he quickly understood that building a center for the town's youth and elderly would be life changing for the community, though many years had passed since Greenville had any new construction.

With degrees in social work and African-American studies, Dean considers being able to work in a town like Greenville a spiritual blessing. "I was kind of led to those degrees because I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. Looking at it now, I'm kind of doing exactly what my degrees would've had me to do," Dean stated. "To get things done here in Greenville, you're going to need a strong, go-get-them personality. This is a unique culture. Even as I had to push these projects through last year, there was still a great deal of skepticism."

But, through the skepticism, sixty-five loads of rubble from the site of the former Greenville Senior Center were cleared on Wednesday, Sept. 11. The demolition was an in-kind service donated by the Madison County Board of County Commissioners.

The new senior/youth community center, which was designed by Hoy Stark Hagan Architects of Tallahassee, will include a youth fitness and senior wellness center, as well as a banquet hall. Additionally, access to a computer lab will be made available and hours of operation will be set once the time comes. A tentative completion date is scheduled for the spring of 2020. The entire project has been funded through a Florida Small Cities Community Development Block Grant, worth \$600,000, which was received in December 2018.

While the senior/youth center is considered a huge victory for the Town of Greenville, Dean is working to secure the last portions of funding to bring a grocery store to the town, something of which the residents haven't had the convenience in years. Construction is slated to begin by the fall of 2020. -John Willoughby, Staff Writer

Strength



Photo by John Willoughby, Staff Writer



In the eyes of Everfan's Scott Chastain, everyone has the potential to become a superhero. Since 2011, Chastain has headed the initiative to bring empowerment, wonder and happiness to those, not just in South Georgia, but around the nation.

Starting out as an idea upon moving back

to his hometown of Thomasville for the first time in a decade, his online business has grown to extreme heights due to his humble beginnings as an alum and fan of Auburn University, and his creative and entrepreneur-like mindset. "I was like, 'man it'd be fun if there was a superhero costume that one could wear with college logos,'" Chastain stated. From this idea, came the birth of Everfan after months of trial and error, and gaining collegiate licenses for five universities.

Around 2015 to 2016, however, the business took a turn to shape into what it's known as today. Chastain and Everfan phased out of collegiate products as requests for special events and bulk orders for custom products grew. It was the dawn of a new day for Captain Stretch, as Chastain is referred to, as the business slowly developed and expanded its product line.

Today, Everfan offers a variety of products to make anybody feel super. With capes, eyemasks, power bands, cloaks, tiaras, crowns and other products, Everfan is essentially a favorite, not just among the regulars, but hospitals and non-profit organizations where Chastain has seen the most impact.

"With everything we make ... when we do get feedback ... I want everybody and all of us to hear it," Chastain stated. "What we've found is we'll have people call us, saying they're about to go into cancer treatments and they'll want to wear the capes to sym-

bolize power and help them get through it."

Specifically, Everfan partners with Heart Heroes, an organization who orders capes monthly for children with congenital heart disease. "When we get the feedback from them, about the impact it has as they're going through treatments, [we find out] the parents, brothers and sisters of the kid end up getting capes too and it's pretty impactful," said Chastain. "It's neat to see the kind of effect that it can have and it adds value to what we do."

Locally, Everfan has honored National Superhero Day annually on April 28. The company allows people in the Thomasville community to order a package and designate the gift to go to their superhero, whether it be a teacher, nurse or other special person in their life. For more information about Everfan, visit www.everfan.com.

-John Willoughby, Staff Writer



Photo courtesy of Scott Chastain

empowerment

Despite Hamilton County's prime location, sitting at the crossroads of I-75 and I-10, easily accessed from Jacksonville, Gainesville or Tallahassee, they have struggled attracting economic growth over the years. However, no one wants to see success for this underestimated area as much as District 1 Hamilton County Commissioner Beth Burnam.

Burnam has been making waves in Hamilton County since Nov. 6, 2012, when she became the first female to ever hold a seat on the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners. "Coming from education, there are females everywhere," said Burnam. "You go to meetings all over the state and it's women in charge—women running the workshops, the conferences, so, to me, the thought of a woman doing the job was not a foreign thought. When I won ... I felt like the first few months these men looked at me in meetings like 'what are we going to do with her?' And that was odd to me because I never thought of it in those terms." However, Burnam has more than proved her worth and has no plans of stopping any time soon, with intent to run for the District 1 seat again in November.

The 33-year resident of Hamilton County worked in the Hamilton County School District as a school counselor, also serving as the district's parent liaison, homeless liaison and worked closely with the migrant liaison. This experience submerged Burnam in Hamilton County's communities, giving her first-hand exposure to issues that needed addressing. "I was in the houses a lot and I was in the communities a lot and I saw the needs and I had a close relationship with so many of the people, particularly in my district," said Burnam. Upon retirement, Burnam knew she didn't want to stop working. She knew the needs of her county and she began to consider running for office. "I had spent so many years seeing the needs in the community and I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity to serve them in a different capacity."

Burnam wants economic growth for Hamilton County and has taken every opportunity to strive toward this goal. "There has been a decline and that's something we are trying to reverse," said Burnam. In fact, the county is currently without a Chamber of Commerce director and during this absence, Burnam has stepped in to ensure small, day to day operations are taken care of while the county searches for someone to fill the vital role.

Burnam served on the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council for six years and currently sits on the The Middle and Lower Suwannee River and Withlacoochee River Task Force, a committee of Florida county commissioners



Photo
by Savannah
Reams,
Editor-in-Chief

who have come together to help put an end to pollution in the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers, which have been plagued by the City of Valdosta's sewage spills over the years. Both rivers run alongside Hamilton County and Burnam and the rest of the council have strived to promote economic growth through bringing tourists to the shores of their North Florida rivers. However, tourism has declined due to the negative publicity which has stemmed from Valdosta's spills. Through partnering with the City of Valdosta in an effort to keep these waterways clean, the council is hopeful for the future. "We want a good relationship with them," said Burnam. "By meeting with [Valdosta] on a quarterly basis, we have ensured a cooperative working relationship ... the meetings started as a gesture of goodwill, that something has to be done about this and we are willing to work with you. We are not coming at you from an adversarial point of view, we are coming to you for suggestions of ways we can help you and, in return, this is what we would like from you."

Burnam serves as the Chair of Hamilton County's Tourist Development Council and as a board member for the Suwannee Valley Transit Authority, an organization which provides transportation for Hamilton, Suwannee and Columbia Counties. She also serves locally on the board for Transportation Disadvantaged, a program that teams up with Suwannee Valley Transit to provide transportation for those who are disadvantaged.

While the thought of running for office was certainly intimidating, Burnam, the first woman to serve as a Hamilton County Commissioner, has faced every challenge without flinching. "Before I made the decision to run, Oprah had made the comment, 'Find that thing which scares you the most and run toward it,' or something to that effect, and that stuck with me," said Burnam. "To put yourself out there you always run the risk of being totally embarrassed at the polls. You really don't know. I thought about how it is daunting to put yourself out there for public approval ... but I told my husband, I said, 'You know, I'm going to do it. If I don't win, that's okay. The sun will still come up the next day, I'll get up that next morning and I'll decide what I want to do next.'" But Burnam didn't fail, and with every passing day she serves her people with her whole heart. Should her term come to an end with the election's results in November, it is evident her work for the citizens of Hamilton County will not cease. -Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

Ronnie Mathis | Lowndes County, Georgia

Jesus once told his disciples a story about the importance of helping others. He told his followers, "When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me." Dr. Ronnie Mathis and his staff and supporters at the South Georgia Partnership to End Homelessness (SGPEH) have taken those instructions to heart and are taking the lead in addressing the problem of homelessness in the Azalea City, and beyond.

Dr. Mathis was born in Macon County, Ga., but moved to Valdosta, Ga., in November of 1993, in order to take over as Pastor of Crossing Jordan Baptist Church. Since coming to Valdosta, Dr. Mathis has served as the Chaplain for the Valdosta Police Department and the Valdosta Fire Department and was appointed by former Gov. Roy Barnes to serve as the Regional Director for the Governor's Office of Highway Safety. In this capacity, Dr. Mathis was instrumental in distributing 800 car and booster seats to needy families throughout Lowndes County. Dr. Mathis went on to organize the Greater Lowndes Coalition of Highway Safety, where he currently serves as Executive Director to the Board of Advisors.

The SGPEH was established in 1995 with the goal of

supporting and strengthening the community by providing housing and support services to people who are, or are at risk of being homeless and to advocate for collaborative, driven solutions to end homelessness. In his position as Executive Director of the SGPEH, Dr. Mathis oversees a staff of six, strictly on a volunteer basis. However, he knows that in order to conquer this epidemic, it will take more than his group of volunteers. "Overcoming homelessness, I believe, has nothing to do with an individual thing," said Dr. Mathis, in an

interview with the Valdosta Daily Times. "It's a corporate thing, wherein everybody plays a part. Not just the person that's homeless. The community plays a part. We all at some point have needed a hand. We have to be willing to help our brother that's beside us, if he's willing to be helped."

Dr. Mathis holds a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science from the University of Tennessee. Afterward, he studied Theology at the Turner Theological Seminary, in Macon, Ga. He earned a Master's Degree in Church Administration from Gulf Coast Seminary, in Panama City, Fla. and his Doctorate in Divinity from the Interdenominational Theological Center at the Moorehouse School of Religion, in Atlanta, Ga. *-Rick Patrick, Staff Writer*



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Mathis

selflessness

Deidra Newman | Taylor County, Florida



Photo courtesy of Deidra Newman

Deidra Newman is not a native of Perry, Fla., but she proudly calls the Forest Capital home. On any given Sunday in the fall, you can usually find Deidra, or "DeeDee" as she is known to her friends, cheering for her native Dallas Cowboys.

The Dallas, Texas native moved to Perry at a young age, graduating from Taylor County High School in 1990. After serving as an air traffic controller in the U.S. Air Force for two years, she started a magazine dedicated to military spouses. This prompted Newman to begin a speaking tour across the country. "I spoke at every military base in the country," said Newman. Newman's dedication to those in uniform didn't stop with military spouses. She has also worked diligently with programs aimed at helping veterans find employment after their service to the country is finished. In recent years, Newman has moved away from traveling so much, citing a desire to remain closer to family.

Newman has been involved with both the Perry and Tallahassee Rotary Clubs, serving as the Regional Youth Exchange Coordinator for the area. More recently, Newman has begun teaching science and reading at Taylor County Middle School. "I absolutely love teaching," said Newman, who also works with an after-school program for the Boys and Girls Club in

Shady Grove, Fla.

On top of that, for the past 24 years, Newman has led the efforts for the annual "Breakfast with Santa" program. This past year, 300 youngsters and their parents enjoyed the opportunity to share a meal with "Jolly St. Nick." "Breakfast with Santa is something we started when I was in Hawaii," said Newman. "It has sort of followed me around after that."

Whether it's helping vets, teaching and mentoring young people, or feeding breakfast to Santa, the people of Perry should be very thankful for DeeDee Newman. *-Rick Patrick, Staff Writer*

Judee Mundy's lifelong dream was to plant a botanical garden that could be accessed by the public for free—where people young and old could come and find peace, tranquility and learn about their natural environment. Today, Mundy's dream, called Hearthstone Gardens, is a reality and is expanding with each passing day.

Mundy was born in Massachusetts and spent the majority of her life in Pennsylvania, where she lived on a 40 acre farm. She enjoyed the rolling countryside and the lush landscape she was used to in her home state. However, when she married, she moved to Florida and was greeted with an entirely different environment. The flat, sandy terrain and hot, humid atmosphere proved to be much different than back home. Regardless, Mundy dove into the gardening scene, as it had always been her passion. She discovered a master gardener class in the local newspaper and signed up. Determined to make her dream a reality, Mundy educated herself about the types of plants that are native to Florida or grow well in Florida's climate and she claims she is still learning daily.

In September of 2015, Mundy purchased 35 acres of North Florida wetlands in Suwannee County—11 of which were a forest and the remaining acreage an overgrown field. Mundy knew that wetlands would give her an advantage—most native plants prefer wet, acidic soil. She quickly got to work, and the site began to turn into something truly beautiful. "We went on burning and clearing and, by clearing, I mean the weeds," said Mundy. "Part of my thinking is that I want to preserve the natural state of what we have. We do create paths where people can walk through but if we come up to a large tree, the path goes around the tree—we do not take that tree down. We want to preserve what we have, for the wildlife, for us, because it's pristine and I don't want to mess that up."

Mundy's passion for preservation led to the creation of remarkable gardens. An interesting aspect of the gardens is that there are no straight lines—everything is on a curve. "I think curves help a person feel

peaceful, relaxed—you just stroll, rather than a straight line where you want to go from point A to point B," said Mundy. "A curve is gentle. Also, when you are on a curve you cannot see around the corner, so it's a motivator to see what is coming next." Hearthstone Gardens is a non profit botanical garden in North Florida that is free to the public.

Mundy and volunteers are dedicated to preserving the natural environment and her vision has finally become a reality. The gardens showcase Florida-friendly and native plants through various sections throughout the property. There is a butterfly mound, rose garden and interesting exhibits such as the "white patch" filled with flowering and non-flowering plants that are the shade of white. Guests can enjoy the greenhouse, tropical gardens, bird sanctuary as well as the Children's Garden, which features fun and familiar-sounding plants such as elephant ear, scorpion tail and asparagus fern.

Through the grit and determination of a woman on a mission, Hearthstone Gardens is a reality, brimming with even more possibilities. Mundy isn't finished with her project and plans for the addition of a Japanese garden and much more. Hearthstone Gardens is located at 3300 134th Place, in Wellborn, Fla, located off US 90 West. Admission to the gardens is free. For more information, visit hearthstonegardens.org. If you would like to become a part of this growing endeavor, email hearthstonegardens@gmail.com or call (386) 438-3102.

-Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief



Photo by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

determination

Jack Carswell | Jefferson County, Florida

Jack Carswell's family roots in Jefferson County grow deep. In fact, Carswell says his family came to Jefferson County 200 years ago, along with Andrew Jackson. Although much of Carswell's professional life has been spent in California, where he and his wife began their own business, he considers North Florida, and especially Jefferson County, his "real home." Carswell continues to keep his deep Jefferson County roots active. Carswell has restored an old, historic building in downtown Monticello and has been active in the Monticello community for many years. "It's the way we were raised," said Carswell. "It's important to give back to the community."

One big way in which Carswell gives back to the community is through his work with the Aucilla Research Institute. According to Carswell, one of the goals of the Institute is to "add to the body of knowledge of natural and cultural history," especially of the North Florida area. One way the Institute accomplishes this is through educational enrichment classes for area high school students. The Institute also works with educators to promote scientific and historical education through partnerships with school districts and other educational institutions. Research conducted by the Institute has expanded knowledge of the natural world and even the origins of early man on the North American continent. Archeologists from the Institute have found mastodon remains in nearby Wakulla Springs, have researched possible

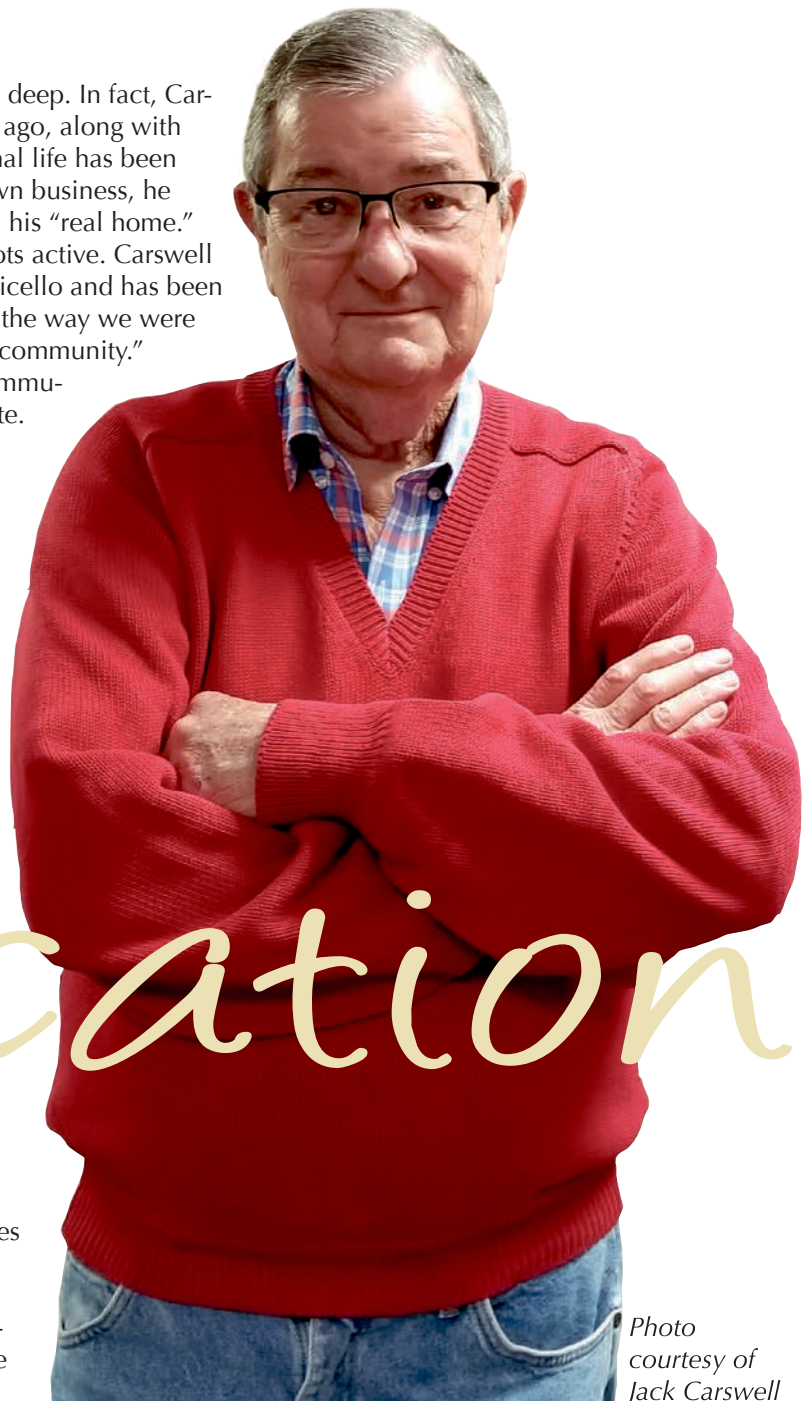


Photo courtesy of Jack Carswell

education

pre-historic human activity near modern Tallahassee that could date back as far as 15,000 years and many more research projects.

Aside from the accomplishments of the Aucilla Research Institute, Carswell is quick to speak of the attributes that comes from a greater sense of community found in small towns, compared to large cities. "There are good points about both small towns and large cities," said Carswell. "There is a great deal of contentment in places like Monticello." -Rick Patrick, Staff Writer



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1-800-963-5337

Eligibility is household income based. Submission of application does not guarantee payment.



Madison RV & Golf Resort

Father and son duo brings promising future to rural area

Story by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief
 Photos by Shane Mathews Photography

The Madison Golf and Country Club was founded in 1953 and is surrounded by a rich and fascinating history. Locals throughout North Florida, South Georgia and beyond have enjoyed the course and its amenities for many years and, in 2013, the facility began to grow and flourish more than ever before when it was purchased by Frank “Bump” Faircloth, Taylor County native and entrepreneur.

Since Faircloth’s purchase of the Golf and Country Club, the last six years have been spent improving the facility and grounds in order to provide a better experience for members and guests, alike. His knack for business began early in life. Faircloth attended Taylor County High School, where he was active in athletics and held the seat of student body president. After graduation, he attended the University of Florida



Brian Faircloth envisioned what Madison’s local country club could become and, through hard work and strong leadership, has led a team of professionals to design and build Madison RV & Golf Resort.



Frank “Bump” Faircloth, longtime businessman, has owned and operated companies in Taylor and Dixie Counties and, in 2013, purchased the Madison Golf & Country Club in Madison County.

where he graduated with an accounting and business management degree. Faircloth then attended law school, during which he was drafted into the United States Army for two years of active duty. He was discharged honorably as a First Lieutenant and remained in the reserve unit for four years where he was over the 273rd Ordnance Company.

Faircloth had plans to return to law school after his service in the military, however he was presented with a big opportunity: Perry’s growing need for a Ford dealership. He took a leap of faith and, at the age of 26, the young businessman launched Faircloth Ford. Many years later, in 1992, Faircloth assumed ownership of a struggling sawmill in Cross City and began building the company into a successful business that, at its peak, had over 400 employees. Faircloth’s knack for business stems from his strong management skills—he stresses the importance of training employees according to their strengths and allowing them to grow and develop their skills. “My main focus is finding good people and training them and empowering them to be able to run the business,” Bump says. “We had excellent people [at the sawmill] because we had excellent training.”

In November of 2013, Faircloth purchased the Madison Golf and Country Club, which was suffering from financial hardships at the time. The club gained stability and began

to thrive, however, as time went on, Faircloth knew that golf wouldn't sustain the business, alone. Soon, Bump's son, Brian, came up with an idea to convert the grounds into a resort, not only accommodating guests with access to the golf and country club, but also with a beautiful RV Park among many other amenities. From this father and son exchange, came Madison RV & Golf Resort. Construction began in 2019 and the resort is now open for business.

With 2020 in full swing, so is Madison RV & Golf Resort. The resort features 95 spacious RV sites that are big-rig friendly, and include back-in, pull-through and waterfront options. All lots are spacious, concrete and 80' long by 37' wide with beautiful landscaping for privacy and hookups for water, sewer and electricity. Each site will also include a fire pit for bonding with friends or family. There is a brand new pickle ball court, basketball courts, a fishing dock for on-site catch and release fishing and the summer of 2020 will bring a beautifully-designed and reconstructed swimming pool. Other amenities and services will include mobile RV repair for minor issues, RV supplies, RV wash and wax detail services, a woodworking shop, golf lessons, pickle ball lessons, WiFi and a bath house, which is projected to be complete in April of 2020. This will all add to the already-established appeal of the club and golf course, which is considered one of the best in the area. "I believe we have one of, if not the, nicest 9-hole golf courses in the State of Florida," Brian says. "We are friendly. The course is challenging. And we are proud to host numerous events throughout the year, open to any and all."

Brian has been the mastermind of this operation and, with his leadership, has developed a beautiful, sustainable



Casson and his partner, Ashton Sheffield, of Casson Timber and Sitework Inc., have worked hard to construct the resort's beautiful, new facilities.



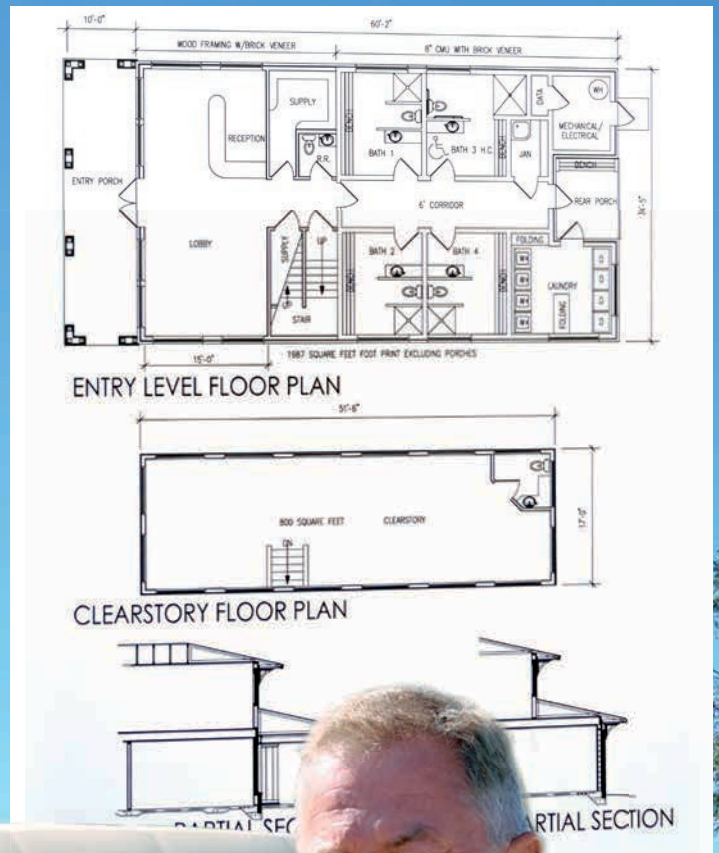
resort that will serve Madison County and the greater North Florida-South Georgia area for many years. "I've been an avid RV-er for the last 15 years and I fell in love with the industry and the joy that people get out of it," Brian says. "It's a very family-oriented business and you find that your camping friends become your family. When we were discussing the future of the golf course, we spent about two years doing research, collecting data, traveling around the southeast, looking at different RV resorts and we settled on a plan and began the process of getting it built."

Brian assembled a top-notch team to assist with construction. B.J. Casson and his partner, Ashton Sheffield, of Casson Timber and Sitework Inc., have worked hard to construct the resort's beautiful, new facilities. Brian also teamed up with Don Holley, former owner of the Quitman Country Club, in Quitman, Ga. He currently owns a small corporation that specializes in managing and maintaining golf courses and his handiwork and vision can be seen throughout the resort's pristine grounds and landscaping.

Through teaming up with North Florida-South Georgia professionals who are competent in their field, Brian has

▼ Don Holley specializes in maintaining and managing golf courses and is responsible for the top-notch appearance of Madison RV & Golf Resort.

▶ The resort's bath house is projected for completion in April of 2020.





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successfully established a family-friendly environment for area golfers, RV-ers and visitors of all kinds. Above all, he is certain of the positive economic impact the facility will make. "We look forward to the economic growth of the City of Madison and Madison County," Brian adds. "We expect this to be a substantial economic push for the businesses in Madison County and we are extremely proud of that effort."

Bump is proud of his son's work and vehemently agrees that the resort will bring economic prosperity. "We hope that this will be an asset that Madison County will be proud of," he says. "It will benefit all the citizens because it adds to the tax base. The people will spend money locally, so we're looking forward to it ... I'm hoping that some of the people who come [to the resort] will see something about the [Madison] community and say 'I'll stay here or I'll bring my business here.' You know, these communities in North Florida, they really are stagnant, and some people like it that way and others know it's not going to work staying that way. We don't want to see the quality of life go away but at the same time we would like to see a few more amenities and things that make it pleasurable for the people and, above all, jobs for the people."

With movers and shakers like the Faircloth family who, over the years, have contributed to economic growth and sustainability in Taylor County, Madison County, Dixie County and the greater North Florida area, it appears the future is bright. 2020 is bringing sunshine to the North Florida-South Georgia region and, when the sun's out, there's no better time to tee-off.

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What's happenin'?

JANUARY

28: "Once" The Tony award-winning musical "Once" will be performed live at the Mathis City Auditorium located at 2300 N. Ashley Street, in Valdosta. Adult admission is \$60 and tickets may be purchased by calling (229) 247-2787.

FEBRUARY

6: The 3rd Annual Valdosta Food & Wine Classic, presented by Valdosta's Center for the Arts Guild, will be held on Thursday, Feb. 6, from 6-9 p.m. at the Turner Center for the Arts, located at 527 North Patterson Street, in Valdosta. For more information, call (229) 247-2787.

6: Rock-A-Bye Bennu is a can't-miss show being featured as part of Valdosta State University's planetarium shows and observatory open houses. The show will begin at 7 p.m., 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 6, and seating is limited to 47 visitors per show. Admission is first come, first served. Shows are suitable for ages five and up. The planetarium is located in NH3004 on the third floor of Nevins Hall. For further information, contact the Department of Physics, Astronomy and Geosciences at (229) 333-5752.

6-8: Brainquility Music Festival 2020 will not be one to miss.

Brainquility is more than just a music festival, it is a fully immersive experience. With more than 30 up and coming live artists, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park, in Live Oak, Fla., presents a large scale festival production with an intimate festival vibe. Stroll around and look at the artwork community on-site or participate and join in! Relax with yoga, learn to paint in a water-painting class, and blow your own glass pendants as a keepsake. If you are feeling more adventurous try playing disc golf with musical artists, go on a scavenger hunt across the park with your family, see the bats take over the sky at dusk, and wander through the lighted trees at night. Visit brainquilityfest.com for more details and to purchase tickets.



7-8: How I Became a Pirate is a must-see musical excursion! When a band of comical pirates lands at North Beach, Braid Beard and his mates enlist young Jeremy Jacob as they try to find the perfect spot to bury their treasure. See the performance live in the Sawyer Theatre, located at the Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building at 204 W. Brookwood Dr. Call (229) 333-5973 for more information. Admission is \$10 for everyone. Performances will be held on Friday, Feb. 7, and Saturday, Feb. 8, from 7:30 p.m. until 9:30 p.m. each night.

8: The City of Thomasville's Annual Black History Month Parade and Celebration will be held on Saturday, Feb. 8. The parade will begin at 10 a.m., at the intersection of Broad Street and Washington Street (between Thomasville National Bank and the First Baptist Church parking lot). For additional information, contact Madison Eaton at (229) 227-4136.

27-1: The 31st Annual Thomasville Antiques Show will be held from Thursday, Feb. 27, until Sunday, March 1. During this event, some of the country's most prestigious dealers will showcase antique furniture, paintings, rugs, jewelry, tableware, accessories and collectibles to suit the taste of the casual and the serious collector. A black tie gala will kick-off the event on Thursday, Feb. 27. This benefactors' preview gives patrons the earliest opportunity to view and shop dealer booths for gifts and personal treasures while enjoying an elegant seated gourmet dinner. For more information, a schedule of events or to purchase tickets, visit thomasvilleantiquesshow.com or call (229) 236-8273.

MARCH

6-8: The South Georgia Film Festival will be held from Friday, March 6, until Sunday, March 8, from 12 p.m. until 10 p.m., daily. The 2020 festival looks to celebrate the art and industry of film across the region. During the three day festival, filmmakers showcase original productions and documentaries. The three-day event will be held at Valdosta State University, located at 1500 N. Patterson St., in Valdosta, Ga. Call (229) 219-1298 for details.

12: Jersey Boys will be performed live at the Mathis City Auditorium on Thursday, March 12, beginning at 7:30 p.m. They were just four guys from Jersey who had a sound nobody had every heard before. But while the harmonies were perfect on state, off stage it was a very different story. From the streets of New Jersey to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, this is the musical that's just too good to be true. Admission is \$60. To purchase tickets, call (229) 247-2787. Mathis City Auditorium is located at 2300 N. Ashley St., in Valdosta.

13: Gene Watson, country music great, will perform live in concert on Friday, March 13, at the Rainwater Conference Center, located at 1 Meeting Place, in Valdosta. The show begins at 6:30 p.m. Come hear all his greatest hits, including

1975's "Love in the Hot Afternoon," 1981's No. 1 single "Fourteen Carat Mind" and his signature 1979 tune "Farewell Party." Tickets may be purchased by visiting <https://www.itickets.com/events/438145> or calling (229) 242-4513.

21: The Burger Battle & Craft Beer Festival will be held on Saturday, March 21, from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. Inspired by a love of food, beer and charity, somebody will walk away with the title Burger Master. The name says it all - burgers and beer - plus there are pro and amateur competitions with cooking heats throughout the day. It's all held in the midst of attractive downtown amenities and shops. The event will take place in downtown Valdosta, Ga., near 110 N. Lee St. Admission is free.



21: The Wild Azalea Festival is held the third Saturday in March annually in White Springs, Fla. Celebrate the blooming of Florida's wild azaleas with music and dance by Florida entertainers, arts and crafts and regional foods, contests and other outdoor activities. Festival goers can purchase azaleas and other local plants to take home. For more info contact the Town of White Springs at (386) 397-2310.

APRIL

25: The 2020 Down Home Days Festival & Parade, Madison, Florida's annual community celebration, will be held on Saturday, April 25. For more information, including parade and vendor applications, visit madisonfl.org or call (850) 973-2788.





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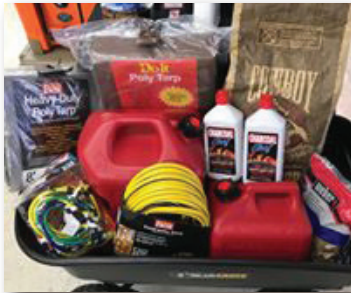
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saving the species

North Florida conservation center provides a home to exotic, endangered animals

Ryan David Reines, the owner and director at the Wildlife Conservation Center in Jefferson County, has a close bond with many of the animals at his center.

Story and photos by Ashley Hunter, Staff Writer

A short drive south of Monticello, Fla., is the Wildlife Conservation Center, a nonprofit organization that has brought the exotic world of birds and lemurs to rural Jefferson County. Owned and operated by Ryan David Reines, a Florida State University graduate who studied biology, the 10-acre center is mostly uncleared forest land, but will eventually be home to birds and mammals from all over the world.

The center isn't a zoo and it isn't a rehabilitation center – it's a sanctuary for endangered species of lemurs and birds and a voice that speaks on conservation efforts both locally and around the globe.

The center recently moved to Jefferson County after being established in a Tallahassee neighborhood.

Reines, a self-described bird-enthusiast, began acquiring exotic birds and housing them at his home in Tallahassee.

What began as a personal passion, however, quickly became something meaningful for both Reines and those who heard about his growing assemblage of exotic birds. As more birds came under his care, Reines says that his operation "outgrew someone's sole passion for birds." His organi-

zation continued to grow, and he and his crew of volunteers realized that their Tallahassee location would not be able to house the growing operation for much longer.

The search for a new property to sustain the flourishing conservation center brought Reines and his group to Jefferson County, where they found a 10-acre plot of land that was for sale. The purchase was made, Reines' birds were transported across the county line, and the newly-named Wildlife Conservation Center (WCC) was planted within Jefferson County in October of 2019.

Since October, the facility has expanded and welcomed new additions to the center.

Some of the birds and lemurs may be more recogniz-

able – such as the center's rescued Brown Pelicans (which are native to Florida) or the pair of emus that greet guests alongside the center's driveway – but many of the birds or mammals at the center come from critically endangered or at-risk species. Perhaps one of the most impressive species at the WCC is the



The ever-expanding facilities at the Wildlife Conservation Center is a safe abode for many exotic and endangered species of birds and mammals.

center's Black-Casqued Wattled Hornbills. The center houses seven of the big-beaked birds, and Reines notes that there are only 11 birds of the species within the United States. The hornbills will be part of the center's future breeding program as the WCC does its part to help preserve the species.

"We have a lot of birds that people would bend over backward for," says Reines. "As far as birds go, this is one of the most unique, private bird collections in the country." (Pull this quote and make it stand out visually)

Outside of the hornbills, the WCC is home to several hawks, emus, owls, a goose and a European White Stork, two Great Blue Turacos and four lemurs. The lemurs, which are currently the only mammals housed at the center, have become quite popular with visitors and – Reines notes – are both from species that are facing endangerment in their native habitats.

At the WCC, two Black-and-White Ruffed Lemurs play; they climb over obstacles and find the treats hidden for them by staff members. These lemurs weigh up to nine pounds and are among the largest of living lemur species. They are also critically endangered due to hunting and habitat loss in Madagascar.

The lemurs are seeing a population return as their species thrives in captivity, and the WCC is part of the efforts that are being made

to preserve the species through captive breeding.

The center is also home to two lesser-endangered Ring-Tailed Lemurs, which are smaller in weight and more well known than the ruffed lemurs. "We have some really rare and endangered species here," says Reines, and while the center is home to several unique species, it is what the center does behind the scenes that give further credence to their mission of conservation and species protection.

As their name implies, conservation is a deliberate project for the center, which Reines says they accomplish through three branches of outreach.

The first means of outreach is through the center directly and their breeding efforts, and the second is through supporting various in-field organizations that work directly with exotic and endangered species. "We donate to a lot of other conservation organizations, or we work with them directly," says Reines. His group works closely with VulPro, a

South African group that is working to solve the endangered vulture crisis in Africa;

Sia, which operates under the Comanche Nation to preserve American eagles and hawks as well as protect the nation's culture and heritage; and White Oak, a



Short-Toed Snake Eagle, native to the Mediterranean basin, Russia and the Middle East, as well as parts of Asia.



Floridian group that is saving one of Florida's most endangered native bird species – the Grasshopper Sparrow. The WCC facility currently houses an Augur Buzzard which was obtained through their partnership with Sia and will soon be facilitating Grasshopper Sparrow breeding programs.

Reines' group also funds the planting of trees in Madagascar – which contributes to preserving lemur habitats.

Perhaps one of the facility's most visible conservation contributions, however, is the public education they offer both on-site (through facility tours) and off-site (through educational programs).

For visitors, the WCC conducts tours of their budding facility. "People can come out and see our facilities and see the work that we do," says Reines. He advises that the WCC doesn't operate like a zoo – there are no trained tigers and no glossy exhibits.

"The purpose of our facility is not to be open to the public," adds Reines. "The purpose of his facility is to give a home and safe breeding facility to some of the world's endangered and exotic species. People get to see the animals we are housing, they get to understand the work we are doing, they get to interact with two of our lemurs and they can leave knowing and caring a lot more than they did before. Every single thing we do here is visible to the public."

The tours are also an added bonus for the nonprofit facility, which welcomes the income of the paid tours, as the center is supported solely through donations or tours. "We get most of our funding through educating visitors through tours," says Reines. The WCC offers guided tours, with visitors being able to go in and interact with the center's lemurs. Tour costs range between \$16-\$30.

"You get a full tour of our facility and, at the end, you get a chance to interact with our critically-endangered Black-and-White Ruffed Lemurs," says Reines. "Every penny of that goes back into our operations here. We are looking to expand, and we always expand quicker when the funding comes in."

Reines says that all of the center's volunteers, including himself, are under the age of 30. "We manage ourselves completely from taxes to animal husbandry, to building animal enclosures – and we are all between the ages of 15 to 23. We're all just a bunch of good kids, trying to save the world."

California
Red-Shouldered
Hawk.



Cape Barren Goose,
native to Australia.



Greater Rhea, native
to South America.

European White
Stork.





Black Casqued Wattled Hornbill.



Augur Hawk



The center is home to two Great Blue Turacos, both of whom will be later involved in the center's species conservation efforts through a breeding program.



Black-and-
White Ruffed Lemur.

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HAZARDOUS WASTE

Hazardous waste is collected at the Main Office and at some of the collection sites. JCSWD prefers to accept all of the following items at the Main Office.

- Household: cleaners, cooking fats, oils & grease, aerosol cans, , kerosene, photo chemicals, chemistry sets, spot removers, adhesives, glue, resins, fluorescent tubes & bulbs
- Outside: gasoline, insecticides, weed killers, pesticides, fertilizer, propane cylinders, swimming pool chemicals,
- Paints: oil-based, latex, stains, thinners & strippers, solvents & varnishes, wood preservatives, hobby supplies, artists' supplies
- Cars: engine degreaser, brake fluid, transmission fluid, motor oil, oil filters, batteries, antifreeze
- Batteries: all single use and rechargeable batteries
- Electronics: television & computer monitors, vacuums, blenders, etc. (anything with a cord)
- Medications: medications must be given directly to an employee at the JCSWD main office. Please remove the labels from bottles. Needles and similar supplies should be placed inside of a large bleach jug or similar and sealed securely. Note: Red Sharps Containers must be taken to the Health Department.

RECYCLING

Reduce! Reuse! Recycle! Recycling containers are located at all collection sites. Help keep reusable items out of the landfill. JCSWD collects the following:

- Cans: tin & aluminum (examples: food, dog & cat food, soda, beer)
- Paper goods: newspapers, magazines & office paper
- Plastics: soda & water bottles, milk jugs, laundry detergent bottles
- Cardboards: cereal & food boxes, laundry detergent boxes, shipping boxes, brown grocery bags. Note: Wax coated cardboard (example: meat and produce boxes) are not accepted.
- White goods: refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, dryers, air conditioner units, (anything metal)
- Glass: all clear, brown and green glass and jars

This program is partially funded by our recycling sales. Unfortunately, there is a high level of scavenging and theft of metal and aluminum cans from our collection sites, resulting in a loss of income to the County.

In an attempt to combat this loss, we have added OFFICE PAPER to our recycling program! The previous office space in the warehouse has been prepared for storage of office paper, which includes items such as copy paper, stationary, notebook paper, envelopes, magazines, file folders, and paper-based packaging. The campaign will be announced in April, 2015.



TREE DEBRIS

JCSWD provides a dedicated site for residents to dispose of tree debris. The site is conveniently located in a central area to county residents, just off Tyson Road at 8639 Landfill Road. No other items may be disposed of at this location. Call our office for access information.



ANIMAL CONTROL

At this time, the Animal Control program is limited to assisting the Sheriff's Department with dangerous and aggressive dogs. Stray animals are not accepted.

CODE ENFORCEMENT

A code investigation may be initiated upon a signed complaint by a county citizen. Our goal is to help citizens find solutions that will bring violations into compliance without the need for formal proceedings.



ADOPT-A-ROAD

This popular program encourages businesses, civic groups, or residents to adopt a two mile section of road to control litter, beautify and clean roadsides, and improve the appearance of the County road system.



TIRES

Citizens are allowed to dispose of only 4 tires per household per month. Commercial tires are not accepted at collection sites. JCSWD is a registered tire-hauler and can assist businesses with proper tire disposal.



CONTAINER RENTAL

JCSWD offers temporary container rentals for construction or cleaning projects and permanent container rentals for scheduled refuse pick-up. Sizes range from 4 yard, 6 yard and 8 yard (square) household to 20 and 30 yard (long) construction containers. Rental rates are as low as \$1 per day.

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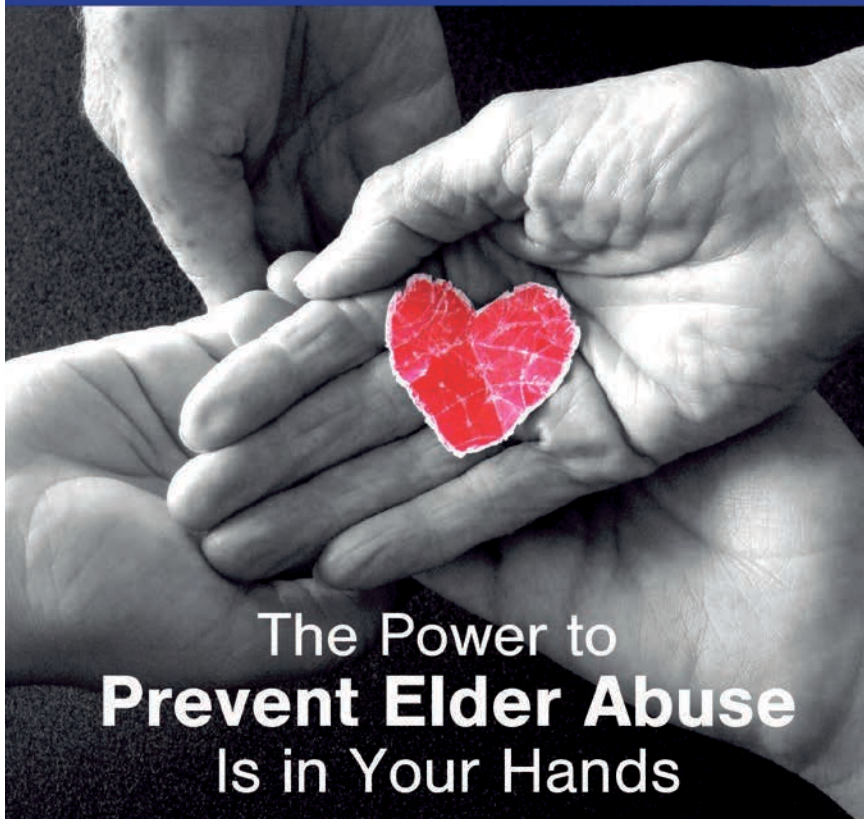
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Square dancing called generations to the dance floor

Story and photos by Mickey Starling, Staff Writer
Photo submissions courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker

Social activities are a part of all cultures and dancing has been a favorite in most of them. At the turn of the 20th century in the South, square dancing was the predominate social activity that was often the talk of the town. According to E.B. Browning, Sr.'s book, "The North Florida Scene," the square dance was wildly popular and almost exclusively accepted as the way to dance and socialize in those distant days. The dance also caused "much denunciation from the non-dancing church members," said Browning.

Square dancing is a modification of English and Scottish folk dances and derives its name from the square formation that participants take at the beginning of the dance. It probably grew in popularity due to the fact that a wide variety of skill levels could be at play within the dance without causing interruption or delay. So, the clumsy farm hand with two left feet could still feel as if they were Fred Astaire, dancing the night away. Some have been known to do some clogging when not in their figures, which are a prescribed sequence of basic movements that would not have included clogging. Browning notes that other types of dance had been familiar for decades, but were not prevalent in the rural South for quite some time. Browning recalls that a teacher did attempt to introduce other forms of dancing in the Hamburg section of Madison County, Fla. and was met with overwhelming disapproval. "... her efforts were literally blasted off the landscape by the aroused church people; the teacher ran for cover and square dancing continued its unchallenged way," said Browning.

These beloved weekend events were usually held in someone's home, with everything cleared away in advance and coarse meal spread across the floor. Local bands, typically made up of family members known for playing at square dances, would set up in the hallway in the afternoon before the big event. In Hamburg, Fla., the Deweys, Howards and Kings were often the family bands used at the local square dances. Each dance required a skilled caller to direct the dance. This individual needed to be part poet, singer,

humorist and auctioneer in order to create the best experience. Expert musicians also added stimulation to their beats by tapping broom straws across a fiddle in perfect time.

In more recent decades, the tradition of square dancing has been continued in this area, in large part, because of the efforts of the late Bob Bennett, from Valdosta, Ga. Bennett's love for the Southwestern Style Square Dance began in 1954, in Hinesville, Ga., when a fellow church member got him interested in the dance. Bennett was soon hooked, especially on the calling aspect of the dance. His kind nature, smooth voice and quick wit were perfect fits for the talents needed to be a great caller. No amount of passion was lacking from Bennett as he quickly grew in his gift to entertain dancers with his calling skills and natural charisma.

Bennett, a four-year Navy veteran, served our country as a Yeoman 1st Class, stationed in Norfolk, Va, serving in World War II on the USS Vulcan in the North Atlantic. He continued his service to the country with a 44-year civilian service career beginning at Camp Stewart (now Fort Stewart) in Hinesville, Ga. and then moved his wife, Vivian, and children: David, Terry and Debbie, to Valdosta, in 1962, serving at Moody Air Force Base as the Civilian Service Personnel Director. Bennett's wit wasn't the only thing he was quick with. Bennett mastered the skill of typing and could easily tap out an impressive 125 words a minute on a manual typewriter.

Square dancing became an occupational hobby for Bennett, who worked tirelessly to improve his craft. To make dances flow as smoothly as possible, Bennett

became a recording artist for Longhorn Records, in Dallas, Texas. In the early 1970s, Bennett moved his recording contract to Thunderbird Records, in Greenville, SC. Bennett so loved this business that he purchased Thunderbird Records, moved home and recorded at the Little River Studio at Reed Bingham, in Adel, Ga. Bennett did far more than just call dances. He advanced the dance throughout Georgia, being a founding member of the Georgia State Square Dance Association and the Dixie Federation of Callers Association. He also established the Kat Kickers (a play on the storied Valdosta High Wildcats) in the mid 1960's. Following the folding of this club, Bennett coupled with the Valdosta City Recreation Department to establish the Belles and Beaux Square Dance Club, also in the early 1970's. "My daddy taught almost everybody in Valdosta to square dance at some point," said his daughter, Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker.

Being born into the square dance world, Wisenbaker began dancing at the age of six, without so much as a lesson. At the age of 10, Wisenbaker began clogging as a hobby and subsequently began teaching clogging through the Valdosta City Recreation Department at the age of 15, establishing the Thunderbird Cloggers with the support of her parents. The Belles and Beaux and the Thunderbird Cloggers performed at community events and festivals throughout South Georgia. Perhaps the most rewarding performances were



Photo Courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker

Vivian Bennett (left) and Bob Bennett (right) established a tradition of square dancing in Valdosta that spanned over three decades.

each month when the Bennetts took their groups to local nursing homes and performed their toe-tapping dances for the residents. After six years of instructing the group, Wisenbaker's mother, Vivian, stepped in and continued teaching the clogging group for the next 20 years.

Southwestern Square Dancing was a family-friendly hobby, where alcohol and cursing were prohibited. For Bennett, his fame as a caller soon spread so much that he called dances around the nation and internationally. This exposure gave him the opportunity to meet many wonderful people, including dignitaries, such as then Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, who had been taught to square dance in Plains, Ga., by Bennett's close friend and national caller, Rod Blaylock.

While in office, Governor Carter served many times as Grand Marshall of the Jekyll Island Jamboree, a yearly event established by Bennett, held on Georgia's Jekyll Island for 35 years. This would not be Bennett's only encounter with Carter. As President of the United States, Carter wanted to share his southern roots with his colleagues. He so enjoyed square dancing, he invited Blaylock and Bennett, along with an entourage of dancers, to entertain Congress at a good 'ole fashioned southern picnic, held on the White House lawn in July of 1977. Blaylock and Bennett called the only square dance ever held at the White House. Mrs. Bennett and her daughter, Debbie, both danced with President Carter. Bennett danced with Mrs. Carter, while Blaylock called the dance for his former dance students ... something they will never forget.

Several Madison County families have enjoyed the rich traditions of square dancing. Roy and Catherine Smith square danced for many years at the Belles and Beaux club, of Valdosta, and the Smith family developed a long-standing friendship with the Bennett family. In fact, the last square dance Bennett ever called in his 50-year square dance career was at the Smith's 50th wedding anniversary celebration, in Madison. Later that year, both Bennett and his wife passed away. Roy Smith was the last friend to say "see you later" to Bennett.

Sometimes, the square-dance floor would inspire long-term relationships, as the late Gerald Anderson, from Madison, found out. Anderson was a former principal who had danced for many years. One night, a new dancer, Pauline Brown, showed up at the Belles and Beaux dance club without a partner, so various people took turns dancing with her to get her caught up on the steps of the dance. Brown had square danced since the 1950s, so it didn't take long to get her up to speed. Anderson talked to Brown several times after that first encounter and later called her and asked if she would like to attend a Florida State University football game with him. Believing he was married, Brown "let him have it" for the offer. After he assured her that he had been single for many years, she agreed to go to the game. A strong bond developed and the pair danced together for three decades in Valdosta and in various parts of the country. Poor health eventually sidelined Anderson from the dance floor and he passed away in 2017. Brown still cherishes many memories that were made with Anderson on the dance floor and as a close friend. "The best part about square dancing is the people you meet and the friends they become, said Brown. "A

President Jimmy Carter (center) poses with some of the dancers from Bob Bennett's entourage from Georgia. The group was part of the only square dance ever to be held at the White House.



Photo Courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker

Debbie Bennett was 10 years old when she enjoyed this hug from Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, who was a big fan of square dancing.



Photo Courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker

Governor Carter and his wife, Rosalynn (right) listen as Bob Bennett gives the next call during a square dance.

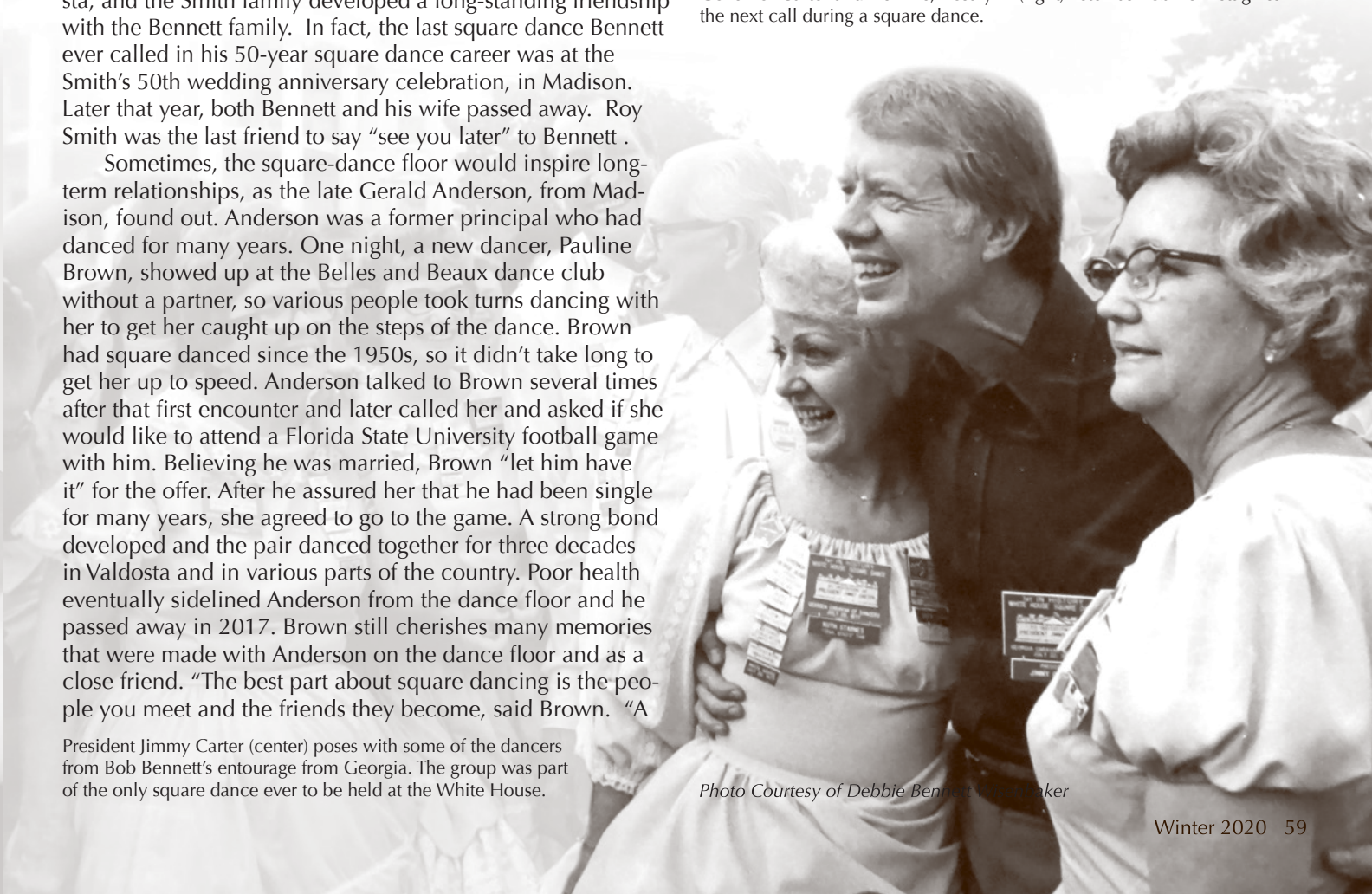


Photo Courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker



Photo Courtesy of Debbie Bennett Wisenbaker

Bennett and his daughter, Debbie, enjoy a last dance shortly before Bennett's death in 2004. Though Bennett was in much pain at the moment, he would not pass up the opportunity to enjoy this dance.

square dance club is almost like a family and everyone cares for and supports everyone else. Even when dancing out of town, strangers are friendly and make you feel welcome."

Fortunately, square dancing is still alive and well in Valdosta. The Belles and Beaux dancers are still meeting every Tuesday night, at the Valdosta Senior Citizen Center, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., located at 1360 East Park Avenue. The club was briefly suspended as Bob Bennett's health declined. George Lavender, who had met Bennett at an international square dancing convention in Memphis, Tenn., moved to Valdosta in 2004 and started the club back up in 2005. Lavender had been an active dancer and caller in Florence, Ala., where he also taught square dancing for 20 years to physically challenged children that he describes as "handi-capable" kids. The kids were part of a group called the "Proud Promenaders" and they regularly attended handi-capable club conventions. Attempts at similar children's programs in Valdosta were unsuccessful.

Lavender and his wife, Mary, have continued to infuse energy and excitement into this long-standing dancing tradition that continues to thrive nationally and internationally. They have had many one-night sessions with teenagers who loved learning the dance. "However, when they found out we do this every week, they often replied, 'We don't do anything every week,'" said Lavender. "Square dancing is suffering due to the influences of modern culture."

Lavender remains optimistic about the future of square dancing. "It's fun and it's great exercise," said Lavender. "It gets your mind clear and it always makes me feel better at the end of the night. Everyone is welcome to join us on Tuesday nights. There's no better way to build lasting friendships and have a great time."



Nancy and Harold Knobel have been dancing with the Belles and Beaux since 1978 and they credit Roy and Catherine Smith, of Madison, with helping them learn to dance. The couple have enjoyed dancing under both Bennett and Lavender. "Bob had a beautiful voice and Lavender is a great caller. People just love him," said Nancy Knobel.

George Lavender sings out the calls for a recent square dance at the Valdosta Senior Citizens Center. Lavender has been calling dances for the Belles and Beaux Square Dancing Club since 2005.



The current Belles and Beaux square dancing club, in Valdosta, meets every Tuesday night at the Valdosta Senior Citizens Center.

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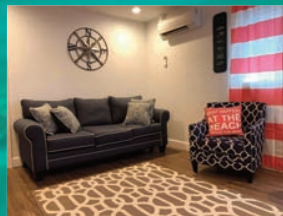
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history

McCulley Farms

A historical treasure

The Withlacoochee River.



Story and photos by John Willoughby, Staff Writer

With over 400 acres of timberland; quaint, winding trails; and grassy pastures, McCulley Farms is considered a treasure to horse riders and enthusiasts. Nestled along the Withlacoochee River, Richard and Carol McCulley call the century-old farm their home, but open the land to discoverers and riders throughout the year; not just to ride the trails, but for the history it provides.

I sat down in an old-fashioned rocking chair with the McCulley family, in front of vacant chicken houses, to discuss the valued history on the farm where, not just the McCulleys spent their lifetime, but generations of Wells before them.

For over 20 years, riders from across the state and other parts of the country have flocked to the west Hamilton County farm for serene rides that could span nearly four hours along the rut-filled trails that once laid host to wagons, passing by interesting places such as the Wells Cabin and the Pioneer Cemetery.

In the mid to late-1800s, the land off of County Road 143 belonged to the Wells family after Jacob and Rebecca moved from Clinch County, Ga. Their son, Alexander G. Wells married Sarah Waters around the 1870s, and built the Wells Cabin, which still sits quietly on a patch of manicured land behind the main McCulley Farms property. The home had been built on a hilltop near an ancient Native American burial mound, providing security from flood waters from the nearby Withlacoochee River.

Just a moment's walk to the east, around the turn of the century, Alexander and Rebecca's son, William, often simply known as "Will," built the home where him, his wife and two daughters lived until his untimely, and controversial death in 1909.

As Richard explained, William and his wife had separated and it pleased his father-in-law not one bit, who told Will he'd kill him if he saw him. Unfortunately, the father-in-law had kept it his word and shot William off of his horse. "Will said that he was going to go see his daughters," said Richard, whose family was given Will's saddle years later. Will currently rests in the pioneer cemetery, not far away from the original Wells Cabin, who hosted families until 1947, when the home later became a tobacco storage for T.C. McCulley until the 1970s.

Years later, in 1914, Thomas Peter (T.P.) McCulley, Richard's grandfather, bought the farmstead and 40 acres off of what's now known as County Road 143. Grandfather McCulley, who leased property in Madison County, near Blue Springs, prior to moving across the river, eventually turned the 40-acre buy into an over-600 acre dynasty for T.P., prior to his passing in 1954.

Richard's father, Thomas Colvin (T.C.) McCulley had returned from serving in the United States Navy in the 50s and began to take over the land, buying back acreage to restore 400 acres to its original namesake after his father had passed away in the 50s.

Through the years, the McCulley land was graced with tobacco farming until the McCulley chicken op-

erations began in the 70s. T.C. McCulley, as the years progressed, was blessed to see the beginning of the Withlacoochee Trail Rides.

In a partnership with Mainstream Hamilton County, but through a chance encounter with a lady who was looking for a trail ride in Hamilton County, over-75-miles of trails was opened to the public for two annual trail rides in 1999, which has been hosted in March and October of each year since then.

With the partnership, funds were used to revitalize the McCulley property, such as the Wells Cabin and the pioneer cemetery, as well as adding trails to the property, before the rides became a solely-family operation.

"They worked with us about three years," said Richard, referring to Mainstream Hamilton County, whose goal was to help businesses in Hamilton County succeed. "We just decided that as a family, we could do [the Withlacoochee Trail Rides] anyway. We were only doing it twice a year. It was a fall and a spring ride and other rides just kind of grew out of that." And grow, it did.

Today, the McCulley's welcome riders during the Thanksgiving and New Year weekend. "From about September through April is the busiest season," Richard added. And while there's not as many riders during the summer season, the farm still welcomes overnighters from South Carolina who travel north to ride in cooler weather, with a couple of kayakers here and there, taking advantage of the nearby river system.

Since welcoming enthusiasts and riders from northern and mid-western states, the McCulleys have added many features that have lured even more visitors to their land. Around four to five years ago, the farm welcomed the addition of an entertainment barn, which has served as a venue in the past, beginning with a rider whose family member was preparing for a rustic wedding. "They liked the barn the way it was set up and asked if we wanted to have a barn wedding," Richard said.

"It was kind of a joke to start off with," Carol, Richard's wife, laughed. "I said, 'Do you mean you want to have a wedding in this?' They said, 'well, yeah!'"

The fourth of six barns was converted into a 10,000 square feet open area featuring a large dining and dancing area with a stage. And while the entertainment barn isn't always used for weddings, the McCulleys have welcomed parties for schools, companies and other occasions.

"There's so many friends we've made from all over the place," Richard said. "They book before they leave, to come back. It's just really grown into a big family of friends."

McCulley Farms is located just east of the Withlacoochee River, in Hamilton County, at 3019 NW McCulley Farm Rd., in Jasper. For more information about the Withlacoochee Trail Rides, their venue or campsites with hook-ups, call Richard and Carol at (386) 938-1147.





Richard and Carol McCulley.
Winter 2020 69



The Wells family home.



In the pioneer cemetery on McCulley Farms, William Wells, a third-generation Wells living on the farm prior to the McCulleys, rests near the middle of the cemetery, among a number of Greens, Greens, Driggers and other Wells family members. The last burial in the cemetery was in 1944.

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John Willoughby
Staff Writer

Congratulations! You made it another year and I say to you, “Happy New Year!” Like most of society, you may have made resolutions for yourself, but if not, that’s okay. It’s just a fad in my opinion because, let’s face it, resolutions are forgotten after a couple of weeks.

When I wrote this column right before Christmas, I didn’t really have a plan or storyline to follow. Instead, I wanted to offer love and encouragement to you for a great upcoming year. Last year was tough for me, I must say, because of certain struggles I’ve had to endure. I know that some of you reading this have had your own struggles; you may have been laid off from work or lost a family member to an illness. You may have helplessly watched your bills rack up with no solution. It’s tough. I get it and I understand your pain and frustration. However, you’ve survived 100 percent of your worst days of 2019 and I hope that gives you a little encouragement.

This past year, I experienced an aching heart for a dear friend who passed to the Promised Land above. But as the year came to a close, I made a point to honor his life and legacy, by setting a precedence for a local organization that I’m a part of.



I met Robert Lane “Bob” Mixon in 2011 when he and the late Hunter Gutshall transported my Dad and I to the Shriners Healthcare of Children, in Tampa, Fla., for my final visit as a patient. The hospital took me in as an infant after I was born with a deformity which would have affected my ability to walk as I would have been unable to put my foot on flat ground if it wasn’t corrected. Luckily for my parents, the Shriners assured my family that, regardless of their ability to pay, I was getting the help I needed and deserved.

Fast forwarding to 2018, Bob encouraged me to join the International Shriners organization and wear the red fez proudly. Just months later, I began helping Bob by taking over the task of organizing travel for local parades and communications to other

nobles in the fraternal organization. Eventually, I was with Bob at the forefront of one of Marzuq Shrine Center's oldest parade units based out of Perry, Fla.

When he passed away in June of 2019, I was left to fend for the parade unit and began taking on daunting tasks – a line I had not dared crossed into yet. And though Bob left us, I had to keep my head held high and lead for awareness as others looked to me. Months passed by and I led a number of other nobles of the Shrine to many cities for parades, and planned an entire festival gathering of over 130 nobles and their families in October. But, I still wasn't satisfied. My heart still ached for this larger-than-life friend to see what I was accomplishing.

At the end of 2019, I took initiative to bring light to the accomplishments of others who allow themselves to be the backbone of the organization, and presented The Robert Lane Mixon Award of Excellence to a noble who stepped into the places

where a huge hole was left in June. The award is now a staple at the Perry Shrine Club and an honor to be bestowed annually in honor of Bob's achievements and excellence, not just as a person, but as a Shriner.

I could have allowed my grief to overcome me. However, I knew it was my mission to fight. Just like me, you too

have probably faced obstacles in 2019. But, I challenge you to make big moves in 2020. Celebrate, not in mourning for a family member or a friend, but in remembrance. Allow yourself to smile ... but also bring a smile to someone's face. Go shake someone's hand and tell them how much you appreciate them because they may be feeling the same way you are feeling today. Tell your parents or

children you love them and go out of your way to pay for someone's order at McDonald's. Be kind like Jesus was kind and I promise, you will notice a difference.



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