

UPDATE 2025

Government & Industry



UPDATE

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Why do we need an Update?

This special publication you're reading -- whether in its traditional print format or its digital version -- is one that has been produced annually by The Daily Home for more than two decades. Other newspapers produce their own versions specific to their coverage areas, often referring to them as their Progress editions.

We call ours Update.

Not that there's anything inaccurate or ill-fitting about Progress, but we chose Update because of how well the word highlights this publication's purpose.

Look up the word "update" in most dictionaries, and you'll likely find two definitions: one for its use as a noun and one as a verb.

"Update" the verb refers to the action of improving something, making it more modern and up to date. (Note how similar that is to the definition of "progress," which is the process of improving or developing something over time, the forward movement toward a place or goal.)

"Update" the noun is a report designed to bring someone up to date.

Both definitions apply here. The Daily Home's 2025 Update edition contains information about accomplishments that have been made in such areas as

economic development, education, and community improvement. It explains some of the challenges they have faced and what has been done to meet those challenges. Update also outlines what community leaders hope to accomplish in coming months, as one year has closed and a new one has begun.

Why is an Update edition necessary? Because progress has been made during the past year, and progress should be documented.

This edition updates the stories of Talladega and St. Clair counties by taking a look back at some significant accomplishments of 2024 while considering the state of municipal and county governments, schools, healthcare and businesses at the start of 2025.

As in past editions, we've grouped these stories into four main categories.

This section, Government & Industry, examines how local counties and cities have adapted to changing circumstances to continue to provide needed services to their residents, as well as how economic development initiatives have moved forward.

In Health & Education, we offer a glimpse into the state of local schools and health care providers as they continue to deal with unprecedented challenges.

Friends & Neighbors will introduce or reacquaint you with some fine individuals who are doing great things in their respective communities, recognizing what they do for the benefit of others.

In the three Commerce sections, we'll visit some local businesses that have been mainstays or are newcomers to communities in Talladega and St. Clair counties. We'll also find out what area chambers of commerce have been up to and what their current plans are.

As you read these stories, it is our hope that you will support the advertisers who have enabled us to bring this information to you. They have invested in Update because they believe it is important to recognize and document progress and because they believe in investing in the communities they serve.

The Daily Home is grateful to them for this opportunity and to you as our readers, both on a daily basis and on such special occasions as this Update.



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

UPDATE 2025

Government & Industry

PUBLISHERS

Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR

Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Laci Braswell
Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Loyd McIntosh
Laura Nation
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER

Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Darla Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Pam Isbell

RETAIL

ADVERTISING SALES
Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER

Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES

Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION

Elijah King
Charlene Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER

Debbie Bussie

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Talladega is 'poised for success' at the start of 2025

BY CHRIS NORWOOD

DAILY HOME EDITOR

"Having sustained a \$2 million surplus in the annual budget for the last two years and created the largest operational budget (\$22 million) in the city's history, the City of Talladega is poised for success," said City Manager Derrick Swanson. "Accomplishments in 2024 included creating new initiatives designed to attract, train, and retain talented employees; beautify and strengthen the community; better serve and protect residents and visitors; and promote economic vitality."

Eight months ago, Swanson launched an employee development program aimed at promoting job satisfaction, increasing productivity, and expanding advancement opportunities. During weekly training sessions, the mission statement, vision statement, motto, core values, and other guiding principles were created and voted on by staff in attendance.

"Subjects covered included communications, team building, leadership, counseling, evaluations, budgeting, and policies and procedures. Nineteen employees who completed the first phases of the training were honored at Talladega's first-ever Employee Development Graduation Ceremony," said Swanson.

In addition, several city employees completed outside training programs, including the Alabama City-County Management Association (ACCMA) Management Program, the International City Managers Association (ICMA) High-Performance Leadership Academy, and the Alabama Fire College and Personnel and Education Commission (AFCPEC) Public Safety Leadership Academy. Two city employees received funding to attend the U.S. Department of Transportation's 2024 SMART Grants Summit in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The city was also added to the Alabama Mural Trail, earned a 16-year Tree City USA Recertification, and received a plaque for its admission into the prestigious Innovate Alabama Network.

"To better attract and retain productive employees, the city has provided wage increases as well as free and reduced-cost city employee healthcare benefits," Swanson noted.

In 2024, the city increased pay for certified police officers to \$23.50 per hour, the highest in the county. Firefighters in the Talladega Fire Department completed more than 578 hours of core competency training, including fire suppression, search and rescue, equipment operation and maintenance, hazardous materials management, vehicle stabilization, emergency medical services, public service, communication, teamwork, and professionalism.

The airport applied for and received a \$756,114 FAA federal grant for new runway lighting and an ALDOT Aeronautics state grant for \$185,119 to seal its terminal apron. The Talladega Fire Department purchased two cardiac monitors and CPR devices, Paratech Rescue Equipment/Struts, airbags, tools, a Ford F-250, a Ford F-150 upfitted with emergency lighting and equipment, a 100-foot Sutphen aerial truck, and a Sutphen pumper. Other city purchases included two mobile light towers for construction crews, a new backhoe, police radios, a Ford F-150 truck for Community Appearance, and a Ford F-150 truck for Animal Control. TPD received a \$15,000 Norfolk Southern Railroad grant to purchase AED units, and an agreement



was signed to install six flock cameras around the city. The Talladega Armstrong-Osborne Public Library acquired a \$20,000 Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant to secure eight high-end computers and a new printer for the computer lab.

The city centralized grant management, established a community engagement schedule for local businesses, invested in Accounts Payable Automation to streamline and digitize AP, reduced operational costs, coordinated building infrastructure improvements, and completed the business process review in accounting. To ensure that all departmental goals are properly established and met, the City of Talladega Internal Strategic Goal Road was created.

In 2024, the city demolished 27 dilapidated, abandoned buildings using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. The blighted, unoccupied properties were demolished at no cost to the property owners, who maintained ownership. An additional 22 properties are scheduled to be demolished in 2025.

"Just as we want community members to maintain their properties, it is imperative that the city maintain its properties. There should be no doubt when you enter a city-owned facility that we are ready to do business," said Swanson, who launched an extensive campaign to begin transforming city properties shortly after being named city manager. "For the first time in over 10 years, painting and flooring updates and other upgrades were made at city buildings."

Phase I of painting city fire hydrants based on the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard began in June 2024. Phase II, which will include painting and flow testing, begins in 2025.

The city approved water and wastewater projects utilizing \$1.5 million in ARPA funds, extended the contract on its Water Plant project, replaced two-inch water mains on Shields Drive and Woodland Drive, and extended the water main on Turner Mill Road. The Brecon and Airport Wastewater Filter Replacement Projects were completed, and engineering was completed on a new water storage tank, Dam Remediation Phase III, and a Raw Water Pumping Station Replacement and Upgrade. To better protect the

community, the city opened two new storm shelters, one behind Fire Station 2 and one in Jemison Park.

In partnership with Coca-Cola, plans to upgrade the concession stands at the City of Talladega's Sports Complex were established, and the city is scheduled to receive new scoreboards for baseball, football, basketball, and possibly soccer, in phases. The concession stands will receive new coolers and menus.

With support from local businesses, organizations, and individuals, the city raised \$65,000 to help present Christmas on the Square 2024, which attracted thousands from Alabama and surrounding states. The city also held a groundbreaking ceremony for Unity Playground, which will be Talladega's first fully inclusive public ADA playground. Additionally, the city hosted U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) leaders, who visited Talladega to kick off a new \$1.1 million pilot project designed to create safer streets for all, especially those who are deaf and/or blind. More than

200 local youth attended the city's Glow-in-the-Dark Egg Hunt, and 35 local businesses, churches, and civic groups participated in the 3rd Annual Trunk-or-Treat on the Square. Talladega's annual 4th of July Fireworks Celebration was

also a great success, and thanks to an increase in vendors and market goes, hours for the annual Farmers Market were expanded. More than 100 seniors attended a city-sponsored Health Fair at the Spring Street Recreation Center, which featured guest speaker James Spann and 50 vendors. The city also hosted 50 companies at a job fair at the center.

Additionally, the city hosted its annual E-recycle Drive, Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week Food Drive, Winter Coat Drive, School Supply Drive, and Diaper Drive, as well as the Summer Food Program. The city partnered with the United Way of North Talladega County to present the third annual Christmas in the Park tree display in Davey Allison Memorial Park and held Talladega's Best Christmas Window Contest to encourage local businesses and organizations to create festive storefront displays. The city also hosted "Unifying to Ensure a Fair, Safe, and Just Municipal Justice System," a Keys to the City Community Coaching, LLC event focused on collaboration

and advocacy in the municipal justice system. In conjunction with the Safe Streets for All program, the city presented "Vision Zero Talladega," a community project aimed at reducing roadway fatalities and serious injuries. The city also hosted the Alabama EMS Challenge, a continuing education initiative presented in partnership with Alabama Fire College, at Talladega Superspeedway. The city hosted the District IV Alabama Municipal Clerks meeting, which included representatives from Talladega, Clay, Randolph, Calhoun, Etowah, and Cherokee counties.

The city implemented new mental and physical health initiatives to benefit employees as well as community members. Health-focused activities for staff included the city's first Breast Cancer Awareness Walk, a Diabetes Prevention Presentation, and an Employee Team-Building Pickleball Competition to reinforce principles covered during the Employee Development training program. In conjunction with the city's We Love Talladega campaign, 10 city employees committed to assisting Red Door Kitchen by delivering food to community members each month. Dozens of City of Talladega employees also purchased Christmas presents for youth at Presbyterian Home for Children, Department of Human Resources, and other organizations.

The city assisted local seniors at the Mabra Center and Spring Street Recreation Center in registering for the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which allotted each senior \$50 to be used for fresh fruits and vegetables. Seniors at the Mabra Center were also offered free gardening workshops, dancing lessons, and other activities to promote health. The Parks and Recreation Department added a new insurance program, Healthy Contributions, which pays the daily cost for using the facility for each eligible member. This program has increased membership and contributed to the growth of Parks and Recreation programs, which include a wide array of youth programs.

The Youth Archery Team took first place in 12U Boys, 2nd in 14U Girls, and the top three places in 12U Girls in the ARPA State Archery Tournament in Dothan. Additionally, all five of the city's competitors on the Special Olympics team won gold medals at the Alabama State Games. Members of the Swim Team and Youth Track & Field competed in the District V Meet, and numerous competitors advanced to the ARPA State level. Thanks to a rise in interest in the pickleball program, a third court was added. Talladega Parks and Recreation pickleball players competed in tournaments across the state, winning several and medaling in the rest. Participation in water aerobics classes, swim lessons for children, youth baseball, and youth soccer programs increased, and flag football was offered for the first time.

The Talladega Armstrong-Osborne Public Library offered an extensive array of programs, activities, services, and resources for children, teens, and adults. To show support for the community and the library, the city manager launched a successful internal campaign to encourage every department director and supervisor to secure a library card.



Talladega County Commission focuses on infrastructure in 2024-25

BY CHRIS NORWOOD
DAILY HOME EDITOR

The Talladega County Commission continued to make progress on a host of paving and infrastructure projects during the past year, according to County Administrator Pat Lyle.

The commission “awarded bids and approved contracts for the final phases of the county’s water system projects and obligated all American Rescue Plan Act funds before the December 31, 2024 deadline. These projects are expected to be completed during 2025,” she said. “County water system improvements were planned to increase capacity to serve existing and future needs.”

In addition, Lyle said, “in-house

maintenance crews surface-treated approximately 54 miles of county roads, and engineering for the Berney Station Bridge was completed. The project has been bid and awarded, with construction set to begin in the spring of 2025.” The county was also able to complete numerous other pipe and maintenance projects countywide.

Much of this was accomplished because the county was able to “fill five of the 20 to 25 vacant positions



PAT LYLE



Talladega County Courthouse

in the Road Department and replaced several older pieces of construction equipment.” The county’s engineering staff also performed evaluations on the county’s roads and bridges as part of the ongoing effort to improve inventory records, Lyle added.

Beyond the extensive infrastructure projects, the commission also approved and its IT Department implemented, a robust cybersecurity (and technology)

policy and program during the past year.

The commission also “continued working with a local volunteer group on an anti-litter campaign, purchased body and car video equipment for the sheriff’s office and purchased AED/ Life-Saving kits for county buildings, sheriff’s patrol vehicles, and road crews,” Lyle said.

The commission also voted to approve an updated county-wide emergency operations plan.



Expansion and recruitment of industries are priorities for Talladega County EDA

BY CHRIS NORWOOD
DAILY HOME EDITOR

The Talladega County Economic Development Authority has been working both to recruit new industries and to help existing industries to expand over the past year, and more is expected to come in 2025, according to Executive Director Calvin Miller.

Near Sylacauga, Dolemite Products LLC is in the midst of a \$2,931,000 expansion that will increase the number of jobs from about 10 to 26 when the project is complete and up and running by the end of the year. Dolemite is a quarry, Miller added.

Omya, also involved in the marble business in Sylacauga, is undertaking a \$6.7 million expansion project which is expected to add to 10 new jobs.

Programmable Logic Consulting LLC, also in the south end of the county, recently began a \$1,171,000 project that should result in the creation of 15 new jobs in an existing building mostly recently owned by Koch Foods.

Nemak is undergoing a \$92 million refurbishment, Miller said.

“A couple of years ago, they changed over to start handling more electrical vehicle parts,” Miller explained. “Now they’re moving back to parts for internal combustion engines, changing over all the machines and dies. This isn’t expected to actually create any new jobs, but it will let them hold on to the more than 600 jobs they already have.”

Meanwhile, Alabama Specialty Products in Munford is expanding its laser machining operations at a cost of \$3,250,000 that will create eight new jobs. There are about 200 people working there currently.

Automation, Robotics and Control or ARC, is moving into a 1,700 square foot facility in Childersburg from their current in home in Pell City, Miller added.

“Last year, we got a Growing Alabama Grant from the state Department of Commerce to clear off 300 acres in the Childersburg Industrial Park,” Miller said. “It helps to make the site more visible, and to let potential industries see how well prepared it is, and that really does make a difference.

It’s part of a program the state has to make these kinds of projects shovel ready.”

Although Miller and the Talladega County EDA were not directly involved, the county as a whole is poised to benefit from Calhoun County

EDA’s recent purchase of 300 acres next to Oxford West, which is just inside the Talladega County line.

The property is adjacent to the site of a Wellborn Cabinets facility currently under construction, but almost finished. The Wellborn project is expected to result in 415 or so new jobs in the next two years, after construction is complete.

Calhoun County is expected to clear the newly acquired property and apply



ARC groundbreaking in Childersburg

for state funding to put in needed infrastructure.

“It’s always nice when a neighbor develops property in your county,” he said. “It’s just over the line, but it’s close to their population centers, and with the new property they’ve got plenty of room to grow. It’s a nice, flat piece of property off U.S. 78 and close to I-20, and it’s in Talladega County.”

In the coming year, Miller said, the state will likely be making more programs available to develop industrial sites and making existing sites more attractive and easier to choose.

“We are grateful to the state, and the money the legislature delegates to them, that helps increase the chances of new businesses locating here. They can do things that

we just can’t afford to do on our own. It gives us an opportunity to look better.”

He also said there may be a major announcement coming in the north end of the county of the next couple of months but was unable to elaborate at press time.



Executive Director Calvin Miller.

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Goodgame Company observes its 70th anniversary in 2025

STAFF REPORT

Goodgame Company Inc. celebrates a milestone 70th anniversary this year. The Pell City-based industry marks the occasion by announcing a roster of seven projects – five in local communities and two elsewhere in central Alabama.

“This significant achievement marks seven decades of growth, innovation, and unwavering commitment to delivering quality construction solutions,” a company spokesman said. “As the company enters this new chapter, it remains dedicated to excellence and shaping the future of the industry.”

Goodgame Company’s anniversary year projects include the following.

• **First Baptist Church, Pell City:** This project is set to create a centralized welcome/information center plus the addition of five classrooms and a centralized elevator. This project will be built out of typical conventional construction methods that include structural steel, slab on deck, light gauge metal trusses with shingle roof.

• **Riverside Baptist Church, Riverside:** This project includes a complete new 10,000-square-foot church, replacing the building that was destroyed by fire last year. The new church will include a 150-person sanctuary, fellowship hall, seven classrooms, safe room, and full-size kitchen.

• **Grandstand Elevator, Talladega Superspeedway:** This project involves the installation of a grandstand elevator to improve accessibility and enhance the experience for racing fans.

• **Pell City Police Department:** This 17,000-square-foot facility will replace the current 3,000-square-foot space. It will feature evidence management, ample storage, break

areas, a gym, training and conference rooms, office space, an operations center, and a three-bay garage.

• **City of Pell City Fire Station No. 2, Cropwell:** A new 16,665-square-foot fire station with four bays and eight bunkrooms, hardened storm shelter area, and other residential operations for a daily facility with three shifts.

• **Conecuh Corporate Headquarters, Andalusia:** Design-build by Goodgame Company, this new 11,000-square-foot facility will house corporate operations, administrative employees, and sales and executive offices. It will represent Conecuh’s new look, positioned adjacent to the company’s new product facility in Andalusia.

• **Avient, Birmingham:** There are currently three projects at Avient – a warehouse addition and two resin mixing rooms. The warehouse addition is a 70’x140’ pre-engineered metal building with insulation, heating, and cooling. It includes two loading docks for handling shipments. Building 3 resin room is a 20’x54’ explosion-proof, steel-reinforced mixing area with specialized HVAC to safely handle volatile materials. Building 5 resin room is a 20’x30’ version of the Building 3 room, featuring an adjacent tank farm with two 15,000-gallon insulated tanks and heat-traced piping. This area is covered by a 43’x50’ open-sided structure to facilitate resin offloading.

“As Goodgame embarks on these projects, the company reaffirms its commitment to quality construction practices and fostering strong community ties,” a company statement said. “Each new project allows Goodgame to collaborate closely with clients, ensuring every build meets the highest standards of design, safety, and functionality.”



Architectural designs for the new Pell City Police Department headquarters.



An addition to the First Baptist Church of Pell City



The new Pell City Fire Station No. 2.

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Goodgame Company, Inc., is a proud partner of the St. Clair County Commission in building the St. Clair County Jail, Pell City, AL

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'The Honda Way' is key to local industry's success in 2025

BY LAMAR WHITAKER
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY HOME

Every experience I've had over the last 22 years working at Honda has given me the chance to learn new and different things from our talented team at the Alabama Auto Plant. You can't truly know the job until you are doing the job, and no one has more hands-on experience than our associates who are at the spot, doing their jobs with world class craftsmanship every day.

From time to time, there are suggestions from outside the company that there is a better approach. Yet, over the past four decades, no automaker has been more successful in growing its production operations in America than Honda – going from a single plant in Ohio to 12 plants in seven states employing almost 23,000 associates in production-related roles. Of course, this includes our Alabama Auto Plant, which now employs some 4,500 associates.

I attended college in Birmingham and observed as the state of Alabama was buzzing with excitement for Honda's arrival and the fast-approaching mass production start-up in Lincoln. I knew then I wanted to be a part of Honda's success story in Alabama and I joined the Honda team immediately after graduating, in 2001. I vividly remember watching the first official Alabama-built vehicle roll off our production line and the celebration that followed. I couldn't imagine that in a little over two decades, our team would be the source of more than six million vehicles and engines shipped across the world.

One key to our success is something we call The Honda Way – a culture based on teamwork, respect and open communication, a One Team approach that empowers associate involvement in problem-solving and innovation. A great example of this teamwork starts each time we design and develop a new product. I've been involved in the launch of ten all-new vehicle models in Alabama, as part of the purchasing and supply chain teams, to later leading one of our production lines, I've seen every stage of what it takes to bring a new model to life. Trust me, it doesn't happen without teamwork.

Before each one goes into production, our Honda associates typically contribute hundreds of

suggestions for changes to the product and the processes that will be used to build them. These efforts enable us to create a work environment that is safer for associates while achieving higher quality for our customers. That's an incredible win-win.

We value the opinions and the experience of associates who are working "at the spot" on the production line regardless of their title or rank. When our associates have concerns about a production process, we not only want to hear about it, we want their suggestions for how to fix and improve the issues they face.

Safety for our production associates has always been our priority, something we formalized into the Honda Ergonomic Guidelines.

While improving ergonomics is not about winning awards, Honda has been recognized for these efforts. The Ergo Cup is an independent competition that highlights successful ergonomic solutions in North America. In the Ergo Cup's 18 years, Honda associates have won 17 awards, including associates from each of our auto plants in the U.S. and Canada.

Efforts to re-route a wiring harness or add a lift-assist device for a heavy part to make a task easier might seem small and mundane, but changing a process that is repeated over and over again each day can have an enormous impact on the health and safety of our associates.

Just as we continue to update the product with all-new styling and features, we also invest in the processes, technologies and equipment that we use to make it safer and easier to build.

Our Alabama Auto Plant is the only place in the world where we build our four products – the Odyssey minivan, Ridgeline pickup truck, Passport SUV, and the Honda Pilot SUV. Our associates faced a number of significant challenges launching the all-new Pilot because it involved the most manufacturing changes since the first-generation Pilot was launched 20 years ago, including a new platform, a new engine, and the all-new and more rugged Pilot TrailSport.

The key to our success was the early involvement of Alabama associates working closely with the Ohio-based Honda R&D team even before the



Lamar Whitaker talks with Honda associates.



design of the Pilot was finalized. We don't know of any other automaker that allows, and encourages, production associates to have such a strong voice in new vehicle design.

One big change we made is the way we build the front end of the vehicle. Traditionally, the vehicle comes to the assembly line with the front of the body structure and bumper already attached, requiring associates to reach over the top of the front end to install key components. The new process we adopted in Alabama enables associates to step into the front of the vehicle to install components. We then attach the front end module to the vehicle after associates complete their processes, a major improvement in ergonomics for associates, while promoting higher quality and efficiency.

Our team really attacked the issues that created the highest ergo concerns. As a result, Pilot is the most ergo friendly model we have ever had in Alabama.

Now, our associates are in the early stages of preparing for our next model, an all-new Honda Passport. It's too early to share details, except for this

– even as we work to make the next generation Passport even more rugged and appealing to our customers, our associates are also involved in making it easier to build.

Honda has begun preparing for our electrified future, starting with the production of EVs next year at our EV Hub in Ohio. But our Alabama Auto Plant continues to have a unique and critical role to play, because even as Honda accelerates preparation for EV production, we plan to sustain current vehicle production in order to meet anticipated strong customer demand through 2030 and beyond. The sustained success of the vehicles we make also will support the required investment in the electrified future.

By that, I mean we will continue to invest not only in new technology, but in our people, listening to their ideas and working together to create products of the highest quality for our customers and unprecedented job security for our associates and their families. That is The Honda Way.

Lamar Whitaker is vice president and plant lead at Honda Alabama Auto Plant in Lincoln.

Sylacauga makes investments in public safety and infrastructure

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

2024 was a successful year for Sylacauga as city leaders made strides toward accomplishing an array of goals in public safety, infrastructure, and quality of life.

Sylacauga Mayor Jim Heigl said he and the Sylacauga City Council are excited to continue that success in 2025, especially given the extra year on their terms due to a law passed by the state of Alabama moving municipal elections to the year following presidential elections.

"When the governor extended our elected terms one year to offset the national election, it gave us another year to work toward projects that we feel we need," Heigl said.

The Sylacauga Police Department received several upgrades in 2024, most notably the purchase of two new Ford F-150 pickup trucks, part of a plan to better manage the department's fleet.

"It's our goal to build a fleet where patrol officers can get be assigned their own personal vehicle to maintain 24/7," the mayor said. "Not only will that make the vehicle more visible in their neighborhoods, but, also, the vehicles will be maintained a lot better and won't wear out quite as fast."

Sylacauga city leadership also upgraded the police department's safety camera system and approved a comprehensive new pay plan for the police department aimed at improving the recruitment and retention of officers to the department.

The Sylacauga Fire Department also received a shot in the arm through the purchase of a 2008 Sutphen pumper truck in April 2024. Additionally, Heigl said the city is purchasing an additional Sutphen Heavy-Duty Custom Pumper with expected delivery in early 2026.

"The new pumper truck is going to be a biggie for us," Heigl said, adding that department leaders recently traveled to Sutphen headquarters in Dublin, Ohio to inspect the truck's progress and that the 2008 pumper was purchased to "carry us over" until the new truck is in place.

Finally, city leadership approved a new Ford F-150 for Fire Chief Nate Osgood this year.

Heigl also highlighted the city's investment in a new dump truck and other essential equipment for the Streets & Sanitation Department and a Block 9 software package leading to greater efficiency for all city departments, as well as contracting with Meritech, a leading IT solutions firm, for key IT upgrades.



Sylacauga Mayor Jim Heigl

As for 2025, Heigl highlighted a bond issue passed by the city council which includes \$8 million earmarked for road paving and stormwater drainage improvements and the replacement of two bridges. Heigl said the bids for the paving project are expected to be presented to the city council on March 4 and, barring any complications or delays, the work will begin in mid-April at a cost of \$2.7 million. The bridge replacement projects are for the structures at Lake Howard and Lake Louise.

"The bridge over Lake Louise goes into a residential area, and half of that bridge is sort of falling in, and we got the money to rebuild that one. So those are major projects that we need to get out of the way."

Heigl is also exploring moving the Sylacauga City Court into the former Food World location on Fort Williams Street. With a footprint of 50,000

square feet and 8.1 acres, Heigl said this could be a solution for the City Court's severe lack of adequate space.

"I'm hoping we can get the money and approval from the council to go ahead and refurbish that building and move our city court," said Heigl. "They need the room badly."

The Parks & Recreation Department will also receive significant attention in 2025. The city council approved a bond issue in June 2024 for a new civic center with an indoor aquatic center, and the city is planning to build new pickleball courts on the site of a recently demolished old elementary school.

Lastly, Heigl highlighted Sylacauga's active business community and chamber of commerce, which are adding to the city's dynamism and making "the Marble City a great place to live and play."

Pell City experiences significant growth in 2024, plans major projects In 2025

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

2024 was a successful year for Pell City, thanks in large part to The Pell City Square, the new shopping center on John Haynes Drive anchored by Hobby Lobby. Opened in 2023, the shopping center had its first full year of activity in 2024 and has already overperformed projected tax revenue and is quickly leading to new growth.

Jud Alverson, Pell City Council president, estimates The Square has contributed close to 25 million in revenue and is the catalyst for many of Pell City's accomplishments in 2024 and priorities for 2025.

"2024 was the first full year that we can digest what the shopping center is going to mean to Pell City," Alverson said. "It was, obviously, a shot in the arm for the city and for the school system as well."

He continued, "It's a big deal because it's all sales tax, which is all revenue, and it's new revenue to the city."

The shopping center's success has paved the way for several high-profile restaurants to plant roots in Pell City. Outback Steakhouse is currently under construction on John Haynes Drive, and the city recently announced new Longhorn Steakhouse and The Olive Garden locations on a site near US 231 and Hazelwood Drive. Alverson said there will be out parcels available in that new development, and more land is being cleared now on John Haynes Drive for future development.

"Those restaurants will be a coup for our city," he said. "All of the development that has come will just lead to more and have entrepreneurs trying to take advantage of the growth and see if they can get their own slice of that pie."

"It's a lucrative time right now," added city councilman Jason Mitcham. "People want to come to Pell City, and Pell City supports what is here."

With The Square providing millions in new revenue, Alverson and Mitcham



Mayor Bill Pruitt and City Manager Brian Muenger

say they and other city leaders are now eyeing possible revitalization efforts, especially in the old Avondale Mills property and some adjoining acreage the city purchased from First Baptist Church of Pell City in 2024, and downtown. While no definite plans have been determined at this time, Alverson said they expect to have serious conversations on these areas in 2025.

"Avondale is going to be a high priority for us to try to develop and when I think about all of that property, I think about some kind of mixed-use," he said, stating his version for the property could include a mixture of retail, restaurants, living space, and an entertainment district. Mitcham added that he would at least like to see some aesthetic improvements to Avondale Mills in 2025. "I want the fences down. That's my push for 2025," he said. "I think other council members share that sentiment. Let's get the fence down. It looks like a prison right now."

As for public works and essential services, Mitcham pointed to the new police station currently under construction on 19th Street, and the city is expected to break ground soon for a new fire station to be located on 40 acres of property on U.S. 231 just north of Celebrations.

"Fire Station 2 is going to move from behind the Civic Center over to 231, so

we'll have better coverage on the south end of Pell City," he explained, adding that no while decisions have been made for the existing Fire Station 2 building, some options including giving the building to the Parks & Recreation Department for a new basketball court or other purposes.

Regarding infrastructure, the city completed several repaving projects and made waterline improvements on Golf Course Road in 2024, among other projects. For 2025, Pell City received a \$3 million Rebuild Alabama Grand earmarked for more road repair, including repaving Industrial Park Drive.

Finally, Alverson added that the city council, Mayor Bill Pruitt, and other city leaders including city manager Brian Muenger have taken steps over the last several years to improve the city's finances allowing them to pay for all new projects without taking on additional debt and refinanced existing debt, strengthening Pell City's financial position.

"We have taken a more proactive approach about the city's finances and have gotten us into a place where we can stop financing things," said Alverson. "We have been paying cash for everything since I have been elected and since Jason has been elected. We haven't borrowed a dime."



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Riverside officials expect 'a good year' in 2025

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

For Mayor Rusty Jessup, the main appeal of Riverside is the ambiance.

"The river is not only the engine that drives the economy but the outdoorsman in all of us," he said. "We love it. The location is very good, right off the interstate. We are far enough away from Anniston and Birmingham to be considered a rural community. We have a small town flavor, but the interstate gives us a metro feel."

Working on the interstate exchange is a long-term goal for Riverside, and Jessup is excited about the potential for the eventual development.

"A lot of folks are moving to Riverside. In the last year, we approved a couple of new subdivisions, and we have new businesses coming in," he said.

"One of the big things we did in 2024 was that we paved the walking trail in our park. It is over a mile long. We are going to continue to improve that," said Jessup.

Riverside finished 2024 in the black.

"We unloaded some debt we had. We paid off the industrial development grant we got," the mayor said.

"Our struggle is that we don't have huge retail. Most cities live on sales tax, but the future really looks good," said Jessup.

With affordable housing, access to the interstate and the railway and available property, Riverside is attractive to potential retail businesses.

"A new owner bought the hotel and is helping it fulfill its full potential. The new owner of the old Riverside Marina property has plans to make it a wonderful marina and restaurant. I hope it will come to fruition in 2025," Jessup said.

Riverside has applied for grants to improve some of their roads.

"We want to redo and widen some roads, and we need to connect the artery from east to west," said Jessup.

Mayor Jessup believes 2025 will be a good year for Riverside.

"We're in good shape and moving right along," Jessup concluded.



Riverside Mayor Rusty Jessup.



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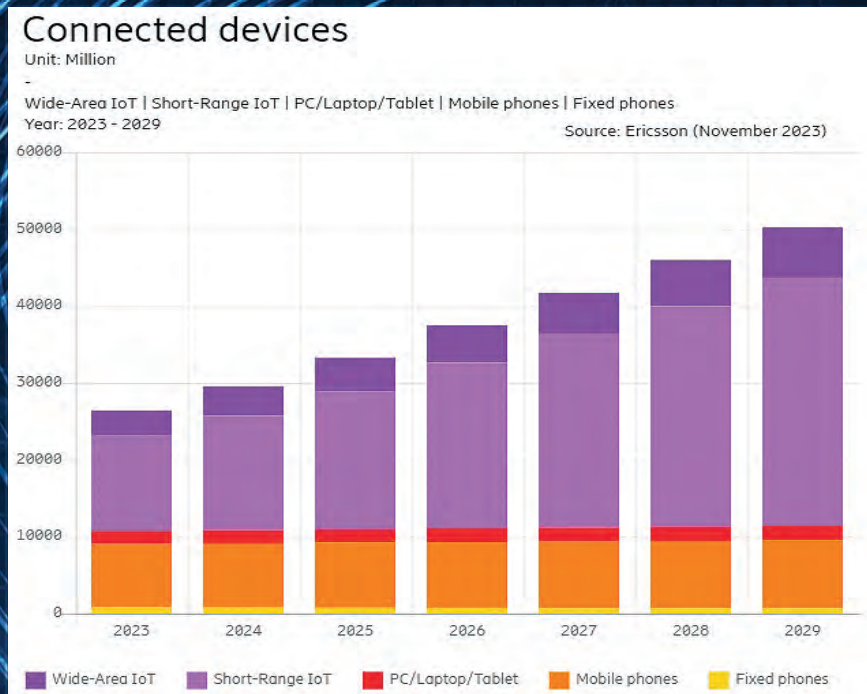
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Sen. Britt supports term limits, border wall, and Daylight Saving Time in new session of Congress

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECT EDITOR

U.S. Sen. Katie Britt has been appointed to serve on the Senate Judiciary Committee during the 119th Congress.

“I am proud my Republican colleagues selected me to serve on the Senate Judiciary Committee and am honored to have the opportunity to serve under the leadership of incoming Chairman Chuck Grassley,” she said in early January. “I will work tirelessly to bring Alabama’s conservative values to the forefront of the committee’s decisions, especially when evaluating nominees for the federal judiciary and safeguarding the God-given rights and individual liberties protected by the U.S. Constitution.”

Britt will remain on the Senate Appropriations, Banking, and Rules committees during the 119th Congress, which convened on January 3. Her subcommittee assignments had not been announced as Update went to press.

Britt has also been named deputy whip by the new Majority Whip, Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.).

“I am honored Senator Barrasso chose me to join his team as one of the deputy whips,” she said. “Our new Senate Republican majority has a tremendous opportunity to get things done and enact President Trump’s agenda. As deputy whip, I am excited to help unite our conference and make a difference in the lives of hardworking Americans.”

Barrasso said he is pleased to have Britt “as a member of our Whip Team. Katie is a fearless fighter for families and forgotten Americans. Her guiding principle is opportunity for all, especially our children. She works every day in the Senate to save our country and pass along a brighter future to the next generation. Katie is an incredible advocate for family-first solutions.”

Britt is one of 10 deputy whips that include Sens. Jim Banks (R-Ind.), Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), John Cornyn (R-Texas), Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), James Lankford (R-Okla.), Markwayne Mullin (R-Okla.), Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), Thom Tillis (R-N.C.), and Todd Young (R-Ind.).

The 118th Congress was Britt’s first since being elected to the Senate, succeeding longtime Sen. Richard Shelby.

“Each and every day I serve as U.S. senator for the great state of Alabama, I fight to grow opportunity for hardworking families and preserve the American Dream for generations to come,” she said.

“As I reflect on my first Congress, I’m proud to say that I’ve kept my promise to put Alabama first throughout the past two years, and I look forward to building on our important work in the 119th Congress. I am excited and ready to accomplish even more and deliver long-lasting wins for Alabamians. With Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress and President Trump back in the White House, we have a generational opportunity to implement the America First agenda voters overwhelmingly supported in November.”

Britt said she supports the agenda’s goals of securing America’s borders, growing opportunity and prosperity for American families, “unleashing American energy dominance, restoring peace through strength, and putting our families back in the driver’s seat.”

A member of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, Britt Senator introduced a package of four pieces of legislation aimed at sealing and securing the southern border and curbing asylum abuse. The package included the WALL Act, to complete building the wall on the southern border.

The senator supported the FINISH IT Act, legislation aimed at requiring the Department of Defense to allow millions of dollars of unused border wall panels already owned by the U.S. government to be used to extend the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border that was started under the Trump Administration. The FINISH IT Act was signed into law in 2024.

In January, Britt took part in certifying



Sens. Britt and Cruz

electoral votes for President Trump.

“I was proud to participate in certifying the election of our nation’s 47th president,” she said. “His resounding, historic victory in November was a message from the American people that they want a president who will put them first—making America safe, strong, and prosperous again. I’m excited for the start of President Trump’s second term.”

After the vote certification, as a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Britt introduced her first bill of the 119th Congress, the Laken Riley Act. Joining her in its sponsorship were Sens. Ted Budd (R-N.C.), Majority Leader John Thune (R-S.Dak.), John Fetterman (D-Pa.), and the entire Senate Republican Conference. The legislation was originally introduced in the House of Representatives by Congressman Mike Collins (R-Ga.).

The Laken Riley Act would require U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to arrest illegal aliens who commit theft, burglary, larceny, or shoplifting offenses and mandate that they be detained until they are removed from the country. It would also ensure states have standing to bring civil actions against federal officials who refuse to enforce immigration law or who violate the law.

Britt has also supported the bipartisan Sunshine Protection Act to make Daylight Saving Time the national year-round standard.

“The American people are tired of the antiquated practice of ‘falling back’ every year,” she said. “Alabamians want more sunshine, and it’s better for our mental and physical health. With the Sunshine Protection Act we would make daylight savings time permanent. I appreciate Senator Rick Scott’s leadership in working to ‘lock the clock.’”

Sen. Tommy Tuberville has also supported the measure.

Early during the 119th Congress, Britt joined Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and ten other Senate Republicans to reintroduce an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to impose term limits on members of Congress. The amendment would limit U.S. Senators to two six-year terms and members of the U.S. House of Representatives to three two-year terms.

“Our country deserves leaders truly accountable to the people they serve, which is why I proudly cosponsored the U.S. Term Limits Amendment as one of my first actions in the 119th Congress,” Britt said. “I am honored to fight for Alabamians and will continue supporting reforms to get Washington working for the American people once again.”

Cruz described term limits as “critical to fixing what’s wrong with Washington, D.C. The Founding Fathers envisioned a government of citizen legislators who would serve for a few years and return home, not a government run by a small group of special interests and lifelong, permanently entrenched politicians who prey upon the brokenness of Washington to govern in a manner that is totally unaccountable to the American people. Term limits bring about long-overdue accountability. I urge my colleagues to advance this amendment to the states so that it may be quickly ratified and become a constitutional amendment.”

Prior to being elected, Britt signed a pledge vowing to cosponsor and vote for the U.S. Term Limits Amendment.




Sen. Britt will serve as a deputy majority whip during the current session of Congress.



Britt with Vice President JD Vance on the Senate floor.




Alabama Senators Katie Britt and Tommy Tuberville.




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Tuberville supports Title IX and Daylight Saving Time bills

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

In late December, U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville said he was “proud of the wins we delivered for Alabama this Congress,” adding that he was “preparing to go on offense for President Trump in the 119th Congress.”

According to the senator, the best news for Alabama during 2024 was the election of Donald Trump as the country’s 47th president.

“With control of the White House, Senate, and House, we can get started on day one delivering wins for Alabama and the American people,” Tuberville said. “My priorities next Congress will be getting Space Command moved back to Huntsville, restoring lethality in our military, preserving Title IX protections for women and girls everywhere, and getting a common-sense Farm Bill passed.”

The 119th Congress convened on January 3 and will comprise the first two years of the new Trump administration. Five days into the session, Tuberville introduced the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act, aimed at ensuring Title IX protections for female athletes.

“For the past four years, the Biden administration has taken a sledgehammer to Title IX through rulemaking at the Department of Education,” he said. “This legislation would reverse the harmful rule that forces schools to allow males to share private spaces with females and compete in women’s sports or risk losing their funding.”

In 2022, the federal department of education issued a proposed rule to allow biological males to compete in women’s sports. Tuberville opposed the measure, favoring keeping the protections in place and cited concerns about the “negative implications” it would have for female athletes. The rule was rescinded in late 2024.

The Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act calls for Title IX provisions to treat gender as “recognized based solely on a person’s reproductive biology and genetics at birth,” banning recipients of federal funding from operating or sponsoring athletic programs that permit a biological male to participate in a women’s sporting event. The legislation is endorsed by Independent Women’s Voice, Concerned Women for America, Heritage Action for America, and Family Policy Alliance, according to Tuberville.

“President Trump ran on the issue of saving women’s sports and won in a landslide,” he said. “Seventy percent of Americans agree that men don’t belong in women’s sports or locker rooms. I have said many times that I think Title IX is one of the best things to come out of Washington. But in the last few years, it has been destroyed. While I’m glad that the Biden administration ultimately rescinded the proposed rule, Congress has to ensure this never happens again. I am welcoming my first granddaughter this spring and won’t stop fighting until her rights to fairly compete are protected. I hope every one of my colleagues will join me in standing up for our daughters, nieces, and granddaughters by voting for this critical bill.”

During the 119th Congress, Tuberville serves on five Senate committees: Armed Services; Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; Veterans’ Affairs; Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; and the Special Committee on Aging.

- The Armed Services Committee has jurisdiction over aeronautical and space activities associated with the development of weapons systems or military operations; the Department of Defense (including the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, and the Department of the Air Force); and military research and development.

- The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry oversees agricultural economics and research; agricultural extension services and experiment stations; agricultural production; and forestry and forest reserves.

- The Veterans’ Affairs Committee (SVAC) has oversight of the compensation, vocational rehabilitation, education, medical care, civil relief, and civilian readjustment of America’s 19 million veterans, more than 400,000 of which reside in Alabama.

- The Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions has jurisdiction over health, education and training, and labor legislation. It also presides over most agencies and programs within the Department of Health and Human Services, including the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, the Administration on Aging, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and the Health Resources and Services Administration.

- The Special Committee on Aging serves as a focal point for discussion and debate on matters relating to older Americans. “While special committees have no legislative authority, they can study issues, conduct oversight of programs, and advance important causes,” Tuberville said.

As ranking member of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, the senator praised the passage of the Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act in the House of Representatives. The legislation had been approved by the Senate and awaited the president’s signature in mid-January.

The measure seeks to provide greater oversight and data transparency for institutional youth treatment programs, improve information sharing systems between states, and set best practices for preventing institutional child abuse. Tuberville introduced the bill in the Senate, joined by Sens. John Cornyn (R-TX) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR).

Also in January, Tuberville joined 43 Republican Senators in sponsoring the Constitutional Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act, which would allow state-issued concealed carry permits to be treated like drivers’ licenses, allowing holders to legally use their home-state concealed carry permits in other states that allow concealed carry, as drivers use their home-state licenses to drive in other states.

“For too long, federal officials have misplaced their priorities by over-regulating the use of firearms that Americans are legally entitled to own,” Tuberville said. “The constant misalignment of Americans exercising a constitutional right has to end.”

The senator has also called for an end to the twice-yearly time change, joining Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) in reintroducing the Sunshine Protection Act make Daylight Saving Time (DST) the national year-round standard.

In 2022, Tuberville’s DST legislation passed the U.S. Senate by unanimous



The senator golfing with the 47th president of the United States.



Sen. Tuberville with Vice President JD Vance.

consent, but then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi declined to bring the bill to a floor vote in the House.

“Out of all the legislative efforts I’ve been part of in my four years in Congress, the thing I hear about the most from Alabamians is their desire to stop changing our clocks twice a year,” Tuberville said. “I was proud to lead the effort to get the Sunshine Protection Act passed by unanimous consent in 2022, and look forward to working with Sen. Rick Scott to get it completely across the finish line to ‘lock the clock’ once and for all.”

The legislation, if enacted,

would apply to states that currently participate in DST, which most observe for eight months out of the year. Standard Time is observed for the four winter months from November to March. The bill would eliminate the need for Americans to change their clocks twice a year. “Many studies have shown that making DST permanent could benefit the economy and the country,” Tuberville said.

The Alabama Legislature approved a bill to permanently implement DST year-round in 2021, but legislation must first be passed at the federal level for the state law to take effect.



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Sen. Tuberville talks with South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem prior to her confirmation as Secretary of Homeland Security.

New member of St. Clair County Commission takes office

STAFF REPORT

A new member of the St. Clair County Commission took office in late 2024, following the general election in November.

Newly elected Commissioner Joey Stevens took his seat on the panel, while Commissioners Ricky Parker and Bob Mize were re-elected to office.

Following the ceremony in which oaths of office were administered to the three officials, the commission established meeting times for the coming year and approved the securing of bonds for commissioners. Each member of the county commission is required to be bonded.

The commission agreed to meet at 9 a.m. every second and fourth Tuesdays. The first meeting of each month is held at the St. Clair County Administrative Building in Ashville, with the second monthly meeting held in the commission chambers inside the St. Clair County Courthouse in Pell City.

Commission work sessions are scheduled for 1 p.m. on Thursdays prior to commission meetings at the Administrative Building in Ashville.

According to Chairman Stan Batemon, commission meetings operate on an amended version of Robert's Rules of Order.



New St. Clair County Commissioner Joey Stevens takes his oath of office from Judge Phil Seay.



Members of the St. Clair County Commission are Bob Mize, Joey Stevens, chairman Stan Batemon, Ricky Parker, and Jeff Brown.

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Congressman Rogers applauds armed services spending bill

STAFF REPORT

The Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 resulted in a number of benefits for Alabama when it was approved last year, according to U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers.

“The FY25 NDAA gives junior enlisted servicemembers a historic 14.5-percent pay raise, boosts funding for housing, expands access to medical providers, supports programs that provide employment support to military spouses, and improves access to childcare,” the congressman said. “Providing for our servicemembers is the most important job that Congress has.”

The legislation also boosts funding for the Anniston Army Depot and includes provisions that will benefit other communities in central Alabama, added Rogers, who serves as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

“Every single man and woman who serves in our Armed Forces made the selfless decision to serve and protect our nation,” he said. “It is vital that we ensure that our servicemembers and their families are taken care of. I am immensely proud of the bipartisan work accomplished by the House Armed Services Committee to improve the quality of life for our servicemembers and their families.”

Rogers named China as “the most dangerous threat” facing the nation.

“The FY25 NDAA is laser-focused on deterring China and protecting our nation,” he said. “It boosts funding for U.S. defense initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, supports the continued modernization of our nuclear deterrent, revitalizes our defense industrial base, and expedites the fielding of innovative technologies. This year’s NDAA also bolsters U.S. support for Israel as it defends itself against Iran and its terrorist proxies. Additionally, the FY25 NDAA restores the focus of our military on lethality by prohibiting funding for Critical Race Theory and the politically biased Countering Extremism Working Group.”

The legislation also authorizes

\$119.6 million for military construction projects in Alabama. Rogers’ office provided the following list of the bill’s measures that specifically benefit Alabama.

BOOSTING FUNDING FOR THE ANNISTON ARMY DEPOT

- Increased funding for procurement of PIM combat vehicles, which are made at Vehicle Upgrade and Overhaul Center (VUOC) in Anniston.

- Increased funding for procurement of Abrams tanks, which are refurbished at the Anniston Army Depot.

- Increased funding for RDT&E for Stryker Modernization, which are refurbished at the Anniston Army Depot.

- \$3 million to design general purpose warehouse at Anniston Army Depot.

- \$5 million to design a guided missile maintenance building at Anniston Army Depot.

- \$56 million to construct a power generation and microgrid project at Anniston Army Depot.

- \$14 million to design a smalls arms warehouse at Anniston Army Depot.

SUPPORTING ALABAMA COMMUNITIES

- Supports Alabama’s textile manufacturing industrial base.

- Requires an assessment of the munitions disposal process to better protect workers and local communities in Alabama.

BOLSTERING INNOVATION

- \$40 million for the continued construction of Ground Test Facility Infrastructure at Redstone Arsenal.

- \$20 million for Defense in Depth as Mission Assurance for Spacecraft Multilevel Security.

- \$3 million for Virtual Integrated Testbed and Lab (VITAL) for Trusted Artificial Intelligence Operations (TAO).

- \$3 million for Distributed Gain 200-KW Laser Weapon System.

- \$3 million for RAPID C-sUAS Missile.

- \$6 million for Air and Missile Defense Common Operating Picture.

- \$6 million for Threat Counter-



Rep. Rogers with President Trump

Artificial Intelligence.

- \$3 million for Virtual Modification Work Order Digital Engineering Tool.

- \$6 million for Expansion of Radar and Avionics Repair and Sustainment Facilities.

- \$4 million for Spectrum Dominance with Distributed Apertures.

- Requires an assessment of the future basing of unmanned aircraft in Alabama.

- Establishes a pilot program on the use of robotic targets to enhance the lethality of reserve components of the Army.

- Accelerates the fielding of air defense capabilities at Air Force installations.

- Requires the Department of Defense to develop a process to expedite the manufacturing of critical parts for military aircraft.

STRENGTHENING MISSILE DEFENSE

- \$250 million to restore SM-3 IB production.

- \$176 million for an additional AN/TPY-2 radar Antenna Equipment Unit.

- \$167 million for an additional Patriot launcher.

- \$120 million for Missile Defense Agency special programs.

- \$65 million to expand SM-3 IIA production.

- \$33.5 million for the development of disruptive technologies.

- \$15.5 million for sensors modeling and simulation.

- \$13.5 million for the Missile Defense Agency’s infrastructure modernization initiative.

- \$3 million for Kinetic, Non-Kinetic Resource Optimization.

- \$3 million for Artificial Intelligence Decision Aids for All Domain Operations.

- \$10 million for Advanced Reactive Target Simulation.

- \$3 million for Hypersonic Kill Vehicle Hardware-In-The-Loop.

Approved annually by Congress since 1961, the NDAA authorizes such functions as funding for the military, outlining national security priorities, and setting targets for modernizing defense technologies and munitions.

Munford expects growth, infrastructure improvements in 2025

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Mayor Jo Ann Fambrough was raised in Munford and is proud to serve as its mayor. Part of the appeal of the town is its size and closeness of the community.

“I was raised here, and when I started my career, I moved away. After about 35 years, I moved back. We’re a small community with only about 1,363 people in town limits. Our school district is much bigger. We have excellent schools,” said Fambrough.

One of Munford’s highlights of 2024 was receiving a \$328,000 grant to help demolish parts of the old school that are falling down. The demolition will happen this year.

Mayor Fambrough is proud of Munford’s “fabulous” senior center.

“We deliver about 30 meals to the homebound every day, and we do in-home visits to 10-15 seniors a day,” she said.

Munford plans to address traffic on Highway 21 North and South with the addition of Flock cameras. “Oxford is partnering with us. They have a room with nothing but monitors, and they will be assisting us after we get the cameras up,” said Fambrough.

The mayor added that she is excited about the contractor who will build



MAYOR JO ANN FAMBROUGH

about 300 homes off of Priebe Mill Road.

“This is going to be a boost for our economy,” Fambrough said.

2025 is off to a productive start for the town of Munford.



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City of Lincoln plans paving projects during 2025

BY MICHELLE LOVE
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Going into the new year, the City of Lincoln has a lot to be proud of. Throughout 2024, the mayor and council focused on a number of new projects with the primary goal being growth.

Mayor Lew Watson said the city spent the majority of 2024 looking to expand on things that can aid the community as a whole.

“During the past year we were successful in being awarded a \$1 million grant toward the rebuilding of McCaig Road,” he said. “We also completed the plans for the new recreation park on Stemley Road. It’s going to be a major park with a walking trail, a playground, new bathrooms, a pavilion, and that project will be bid out within the next 30 days.”

Watson said the city is also in the process of obtaining some additional land for one of the local parks.

“The owner wants some land we have that is surface to the city deeds, so he’d like to have that land and give us the land around the existing park for an expansion,” he said.

In addition to growth of city parks, Watson said the city added a third garbage truck to its sanitation department which he said was a “major expenditure.”

“Our existing truck usually requires maintenance so this third truck will allow us to make our pickups every pickup day without having to hold over,” he said. “Two trucks just are not



Members of the Lincoln City Council include Joey Callahan, Sadie Britt, Jennie Jones, and Brandon Tate. Not pictured is Billy Pearson.

enough so it’s good to have this third truck to make sure we’re operating on time. We also did major maintenance on our waste water treatment plant. After 20 years some parts of the system needed replacing. Some items were no longer applicable because they didn’t make the parts anymore so we had to buy an entirely new system.”

Going into 2025, Watson said the city has plans to make some much needed updates to various aspects of the city. He said they’ve made plans for paving several roads throughout the city that need tending to, and that venture should start in February. He also said the city is looking toward replacing the heating and air system at the local senior center, and also has started plans to rectify a major sewer piping issue.

“This is through the state and the state is expected to approve this project any time now,” he said. “This has been a major concern to us because it’s a matter of the sewer running through



MAYOR LEW WATSON

that thing. It creates a smell, an odor, so we would like to get it fixed so people driving down the road don’t have to smell that.”

Mayor Watson said he is looking forward to Lincoln’s growth and seeing

the various projects be completed. “I’m excited to see the McCaig Road project completed especially, and also the park being bid out and hopefully being finished.”

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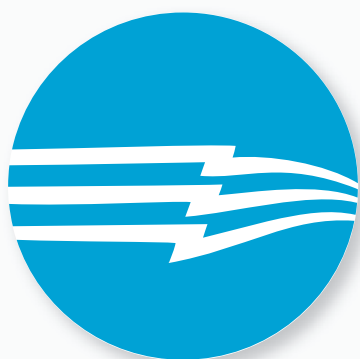
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UPDATE 2025

Health & Education



UPDATE

FEBRUARY
2025

Special Supplement to **The Daily Home**

UPDATE 2025

What's the connection between health and education?

Health and education have been described as the foundation of human development. They are undeniably two of the most important concerns in any community.

And for good reason.

There has long been a well-documented connection between health and education. It's a connection that some researchers say can't be fully explained by such factors as income, the labor market or family background, but the connection is real all the same.



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

Good health directly improves education, and quality education directly improves health. Poor health and few healthcare options have been shown to adversely affect education, and statistics indicate that when a community prioritizes education, it typically has lower morbidity rates from common acute and chronic diseases.

Are such conclusions absolute? No, but they do highlight how important health and education are to individuals, families, and communities. In many – if not most – political contests, two of the most-debated issues are healthcare and education. And the more they're talked about, the more questions arise.

This section of Update seeks to answer some questions of local concern at a time when both sectors experience challenges that require the making of hard decisions. Questions such as:

- What will recent changes at two of the area's major healthcare providers – Baptist Health Citizens Hospital and UAB St. Vincent's St. Clair Hospital – mean for local communities?
- What accomplishments have been made in local school systems -- Talladega County, Talladega City, Sylacauga City, St. Clair County, and Pell City -- during the past year, and what do local education officials anticipate in 2025?
- How has the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind continued to be a tremendous resource for Talladega County and the entire state?
- What's new at Talladega College, Jefferson State Community College, and Central Alabama Community College?

You'll find the answers to these and other questions in the following pages. Thank you for joining us as we recognize positive developments in local health and education sectors.

UPDATE 2025

Health & Education

PUBLISHERS

Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR

Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Laci Braswell
Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Loyd McIntosh
Laura Nation
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER

Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Darla Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Pam Isbell

RETAIL

ADVERTISING SALES

Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER

Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES

Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION

Elijah King
Charlene Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER

Debbie Bussie

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sheila.curtis.jrm9@statefarm.com

The greatest compliment you can give is a referral.

Talladega is home to the nation’s most comprehensive facility serving the Deaf, Blind, and Deafblind

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

2024 was a busy and successful year for Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), and the new year looks to be even more eventful for one of the state’s premier education organizations.

AIDB is aggressively adding new programs for children and adults in 2025, not only on its main campus in Talladega but on its 10 regional campuses around the state.

President Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., now in his second year leading the institute, said 2025 began with the launch of a pilot program serving preschoolers with autism who are also Deaf and/or Blind at AIDB-North Campus, a 200-acre facility in Decatur. Opening in late January, the program is already filling a huge need for families in Alabama.

“One of our goals was to increase our service to individuals who fall on the autism spectrum and also have an exceptionality,” explained Gilliam, adding that the program will be held five days per week for children ages 3-5 and is only a start toward addressing a shortage of services for the parents of children with unique needs.

“This is a tremendous opportunity for parents to access services that don’t really exist a lot across the state of Alabama,” he added. “We already have a waiting list and we haven’t opened the doors completely yet. We just brought our last staff member on board and we’ve got a waiting list for it right now, but we completely feel as though it is going to be a productive program. It’s going to serve a lot of Alabamians who need that resource.”

AIDB officials predict that “we’re going to have a lot more need across the state for resources for individuals who are diagnosed with Autism

Spectrum Disorder,” Gilliam said. “That’s a program we hoped to put in place this past year, and now it’s actually coming to fruition.”

Another area in which AIDB is making great strides is helping people with vision and hearing differences prepare for jobs in manufacturing. AIDB is developing a new computer numerical control (CNC) machine operator program for individuals requiring certification to join the workforce. AIDB is currently refining this program within its STEM lab at the AIDB-North campus, but is preparing to create additional space in Talladega for this program.

At the main campus in Talladega, AIDB has launched the Modern Manufacturing Program (MMP), a collaboration with Honda Manufacturing of Alabama in Lincoln and East Alabama Works, to prepare individuals for careers in automotive manufacturing. Honda donated a Passport to AIDB, allowing students to get valuable hands-on experience with modern vehicles and earn competitive salaries immediately upon graduating.

“It’s amazing to see our students take this brand new vehicle apart, to kind of disassemble it and put it right back together again,” Gilliam said. “There is a young man who just finished the program who came back and told me he was making \$22 an hour on day one, which is phenomenal.”

Gilliam also highlighted a multitude of innovative programs and initiatives, such as its STEM and Agricultural programs, ongoing renovations to key buildings, and positive relationships with local government and state government all helping AIDB position itself as a premier institute for people who are Deaf and Blind.

“For many years, we’ve said that we were Alabama’s best-kept secret. We are the most comprehensive facility



ASB's Alabama National Fair Quiz Bowl Team.



Members of the ASD volleyball team.

serving individuals who are Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind in the nation – probably the world – and we’re right here in Talladega, Alabama,” said Gilliam. “That’s what I want folks to

know, that we’re here to serve. We don’t charge tuition for students or adults. We’re just here to serve, and there’s not a better job in the world to have.”

New name, same commitment to patient care

Citizens Baptist in Talladega is now Baptist Health Citizens Hospital

BY CHRIS NORWOOD
DAILY HOME EDITOR

Talladega’s local hospital got new owners last year and a brand new name and logo earlier this year. More changes may in the pipeline, but right now it is a little too early to say what they might be.

Brookwood Baptist Health, now Baptist Health, became part of Orlando Health Inc. in October.

Orlando Health serves the southeastern United States and Puerto Rico and now manages day-to-day operations of the system in partnership with Baptist Health System.

In January, Citizens Baptist Medical Center officially became Baptist Health Citizens Hospital.

“We wanted our new name, our new logo, to reintroduce ourselves, and to demonstrate our commitment to this community,” hospital president and CEO Frank Thomas said at a reception announcing the new name. “We want to be a brand that is trusted, and this is synonymous with excellent care and compassion.”

That, he said, will not change. And no longer-term decisions will be reached until the end of a long period of study. “There will be a long assessment phase,” Thomas said. “Right now, we’re still just listening.” That process has been underway since the transition started last fall.

That said, he added, “in general, we’re very excited to be known as Baptist Health. We have a tremendous commitment to the community, and we will continue to provide quality healthcare close to home.”

There have been some recent changes inside the hospital as well, according to the CEO. “We were able to announce increased wages recently, and we have already started investing in equipment and maintenance. That’s



CEO Frank Thomas



The hospital’s new identity promotes health, happiness, and optimism.

our major focus right now going ahead. We’ve been able to buy some new equipment that we would not have been able to buy in the past, and we will continue as we go forward. We might be able to take up a couple of capital improvement projects as well.”

Baptist Health President Thibaut van Marcke added, “We feel strongly that this transition will generate excitement across all the communities we serve, and we certainly share in that excitement. The name Baptist Health speaks directly to our mission of extending the healing ministry



“A New Day in Healthcare” for the Talladega hospital.

of Christ through holistic, people-centered healthcare. We are a true faith-based healthcare system, and people will know that simply from hearing our name. With the launch of the new Baptist Health brand, and a supporting advertising campaign, Baptist Health has an opportunity to establish a unique identity and connect with the Birmingham community on a meaningful level.”

According to a press release from Orlando Health announcing the name change, “The new Baptist Health brand identity and logo reflect the healthcare system’s enduring commitment to caring for the communities it serves. The logo’s simple yet distinct design is thoughtfully inspired by its parent company, Orlando Health, maintaining a clear visual connection, while the introduction of the vibrant color orange – symbolizing vitality, health, optimism, and happiness – establishes its unique identity. This approach

ensures consistency across the brand family while allowing the new brand name to stand on its own. Now, as a leading healthcare brand in the Birmingham and surrounding areas, Baptist Health positions itself as a trusted leader, becoming synonymous with exceptional care, innovation, and compassion throughout the healthcare journey.”

The new multimedia campaign aims to elevate the brand’s perception and build trust with central Birmingham communities, according to the release. “A New Day in Healthcare, brought to you by the new Baptist Health, underscores the system’s commitment to delivering exceptional faith-based care with a patient-first approach,” it said.

“We feel like the new brand will underscore our commitment to delivering exceptional faith-based care with a patient-first approach,” Thomas said.

Talladega County Schools make progress amid changes and capital development

BY LACI BRASWELL

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

During the past academic year, Talladega County Schools made significant improvements district wide.

Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey said progress had been made in several areas, including career technical education programs expansion, increases on state test scores, multiple capital projects completed, and the smooth adjustment to the recent closure of Talladega County Central High School.

Talladega County Central closure

The Talladega County Board of Education voted to close Talladega County Central High School at the end the 2023-24 academic year due to declining enrollment over a 20-year period, excessive costs (both academic and operational), and the requirements of the current accountability system. Students have since been transferred to multiple schools across the system, including Winterboro, Childersburg, Munford, and Lincoln High schools.

Lacey said although the decision was difficult, the system pledged to do all it could to help students with the transfers.

“Dr. Tim Gallahar, former principal at Talladega County Central, has overseen the transition of students from TCCHS to their new schools,” she said. “He meets with students regularly, checks grades, and communicates with both teachers and parents regarding students’ progress. Dr. Gallahar has been instrumental in supporting students and their families. He also works collaboratively with each receiving school to ensure that students are well-adjusted and on track to graduate.”

Career Tech programs

The superintendent said the system continues to provide students with a

growing opportunity to learn about as many careers opportunities as possible with its top-notch career tech programs.

Talladega County Schools offers multiple pathways for students interested in a variety of subjects, such as healthcare science, building construction, agriscience, cybersecurity, education and training, family and consumer science, computer science, modern manufacturing, and information technology.

Lacey said Career Technical Education (CTE) and workforce development are “critical components” in shaping a robust economy and ensuring individual career success.

“Career Tech programs are essential to prepare students for life after high school, including both students who are attending college or entering the workforce,” she said. “Pathways allows students to credential in certain areas that make them more marketable upon graduation. For example, students in the healthcare pathway can obtain a Certified Nursing Assistant Credential while in high school.”

The superintendent noted most recently, cybersecurity has been added as a curriculum offering.

“It enables students to earn industry certified credentials that are needed for in demand STEM related careers,” she said.

The district has established multiple partnerships with local businesses and industries, giving students opportunities to learn onsite and shadow industry professionals, the superintendent added.

“Industry-recognized credentials earned during high school enables students to meet the necessary job requirements after graduation and positions students for in demand jobs,” Lacey said. “In a time marked by rapid technological advancements and shifting economic landscapes,

Career Technical Education programs are indispensable in preparing students for the workforce by addressing skill gaps and enhancing employability opportunities.”

State report card results

The superintendent praised efforts by staff to continuously improve academic scores across the board. The district announced its Alabama Department of Education state report card score had increased from an 87 ‘B’ in 2022-23 to an 88 ‘B’ 2023-24. The system also received a 25/25 in Academic Growth and a 28/30 in its overall graduation rate.

Several schools had overall score improvements as well. Most notably, Childersburg Elementary increased its score ten points from a 76 to an 86.

“Talladega County Schools continue to place academic instruction as top priority with emphasis on reading and mathematics instruction,” Lacey said. Instrumental to having students performing on grade level is intensive professional development. Elementary teachers are also supported by reading and mathematics coaches. At the secondary level, instructional coaches also support teachers to ensure middle school students are performing at proficient levels on the ACAP and ACT for secondary students.”

Capital improvements

Lacey cited multiple capital projects have been completed throughout the district during the last year. These include classroom additions at Lincoln Elementary School, new playgrounds at Stemley Road Elementary and Fayetteville, and HVAC upgrades at



Talladega County Central High School was closed during 2024.

Munford and Lincoln high schools.

“Ongoing classroom additions are 95 percent complete at Lincoln High School and additional classrooms are under review for Sycamore Elementary School,” Lacey said.

About the school system

Talladega County Schools is the fourth largest employer in the county, serving more than 7,000 students and 1,000 employees.

Talladega County Schools include A.H. Watwood Elementary, B.B. Comer Elementary, B.B. Comer Memorial High School, Childersburg Elementary, Childersburg Middle, Childersburg High, Lincoln Elementary, Drew Middle, Lincoln High, Munford Elementary, Munford Middle, Munford High, Sycamore Elementary, Stemley Road Elementary, Winterboro Schools, and Fayetteville.

The Talladega Board of Education includes Sandra Tuck (District 1), Dr. Donna Hudson (District 2), Johnny Ponder (District 3), Susan Shaw (District 4), and Kathy Landers (District 5).

The Talladega County Central Office is at 106 South St. W. in Talladega. The board of education meets the last Monday of each month at 4 p.m.

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Pell City Boys & Girls Club

recognized for its efforts to help local students

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

The Pell City Boys & Girls Club has received the Pell City Chamber of Commerce's Nonprofit of the Year award, recognizing its mission to put children first so that their futures can be bright.

"To have this organization in the area gives children a place that they can have community, safety, and fun after school," counselor Destyn Ross said. "Some kids unfortunately do not have that opportunity, and without that outlet in place, sometimes it can cause them to turn to bad activities when they do not have some one to guide them and set them on the right track."

Boys & Girls Club has more than 120 years of experience in youth development. Its mission to elevate youth and help them know they are important, capable, and worthy continues to stand true as the number of local members continue to rise each year. The organization accepts children from age 6 until graduating from high school, putting in place role models, care, guidance, and a level of structure that can establish a strong foundation for the future.

Ross' position as a counselor in the nonprofit is a full circle experience for him, as he has been a part of the organization since he was about 11 or 12. At the ripe age of 25 now, he has spent most of his life being a part of the club and is grateful for its role in the community, as well as the chance he now has to pay it forward to children who now come through their doors.

"The organization was a lot smaller when I was younger, but over the years we have grown tremendously," he said. "We have a lot more kids now, and it is a great feeling to see kids with troubled paths or with rough backgrounds and just see them having fun. You see that once-troubled kid get rid of bad habits and grow as an individual, and that's what I believe this organization is all about. Helping youth to develop into the best versions of themselves that they can possibly be. Then you see them later as an adult, it's crazy to see the change you can make in their lives, which is what makes it all worthwhile."

The Pell City Boys & Girls Club offers recreational activities, a large gym, game rooms, areas outside where youngsters can play, various programs for kids to be a part of, and a plethora of events throughout the course of the year. One of the programs Ross highlighted is Healthy Habits, which teaches students how to eat well, take care of themselves, and be healthy.

"When I show up each day, it doesn't feel like work for me," he said. "The most rewarding part of what I do is working with the children. I really cherish them because as much as I help them, they don't understand how much they help me. Seeing them smile and having fun is a very fulfilling feeling."

In an interview with The Daily Home, Ross had the following to say.

Q: How does it feel to see the club named the Nonprofit of the Year?

ROSS: It shows that we're getting recognized for the work put in and out for these children, and that we are doing something right. We've been doing really well over these past years through donations, members, the community, and fundraisers. We raised more money in 2024 than we have in previous years, and that comes as a great thanks to families, the community, and donations, and we couldn't be more



grateful. To show up for these kids takes working together, and in a sense this award is a reflection of those who help to pour into this organization in regards to helping the youth to develop. After all, they are the life of this place. This place doesn't go without them.

Q: What do you think stood out in the organization that led to the award?

ROSS: Our consistency. We have been a staple in the community for years. There have been places that shut down their after school programs, but we are still here and taking in kids who need a place of safety, comfort, and fun.

Q: Is there a certain degree of motivation than come with the award?

ROSS: I would say that in a sense it pushes us harder because we're going to continue to do better. However, it's not like we're going to try less if we don't get it another year, because making sure we deliver for the kids is the most important aspect of this organization. So we won't be upset if we don't win again because we're going to do the right thing regardless when it comes to these kids. So the pressure isn't in a negative sense but more of a positive one. The focus is just to keep striving to do good.

Q: What are your goals for 2025?

ROSS: We got a new director, Craig Little, and we believe that he will help to make us better than we have ever been. I think he's going to do a good job in steering us on the right path and keeping us on the path of growth, open doors for the community, and continue to make a difference in the youth in Pell City and surrounding areas.



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Sylacauga school system celebrates accomplishments, commits to continued improvement

STAFF REPORT

During 2024, Sylacauga City Schools were recognized by a regional advisory group for the system's Making Schools Work key practices and for meeting school improvement goals

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) presented the 2024 Pacesetter District Award to Sylacauga for implementing the program.

"The award to SCS was given for implementing best practices, instructional coaching, commitment to leadership training, career planning, and improvement in achievement," a board spokesperson said.

Sylacauga Superintendent Dr. Michele Eller said, "As proud as we are to be recognized with the Pacesetter Award, none of this would be possible without our teachers implementing the best practices and strategies learned through our training."

The district was recognized for school leadership implementing a strategic vision, proactive initiatives, and commitment to continuous improvement.

"Sylacauga's introduction of the Teachers of Promise-Sylacauga (TOPS) Academy demonstrates a commitment to developing and supporting aspiring teacher leaders and future administrators," the SREB said. "The Academy's goals, which include exploring personal leadership identities, emphasizing instructional leadership, and implementing SREB's change process and key practices, reflect a thoughtful and structured approach to leadership development. The Academy also includes a session on 'The Sylacauga Way' where local leaders share processes and procedures of SCS.

"Through visionary leadership, SCS and the TOPS Academy are partnering with Auburn University to award micro credentials to Academy participants, a first for educational opportunities in Alabama."

The superintendent emphasized the importance of implementing such measures at the classroom level.

"It is in the classroom where the outcome of these efforts come to fruition," Eller said. "These strategies and best practices equip classroom teachers to present curriculum in a way students can understand. You do not have to be an educator to know that kids today are different than they



Sylacauga High School

were 20 years ago. Society itself is different. Today's students do not relate to teacher instruction in the same way they did 20 years ago, which is why it is important for today's teachers to embrace new strategies for teaching today's students."

This focus on providing engaging instruction, ensuring the alignment of curriculum, providing systems of support, stressing the value of career pathways, all while always striving for continuous improvement was reflected in the most recent State of Alabama report card, on which all Sylacauga City schools scored a B.

The report card shows increases in academic achievement with growth in math and literacy proficiency from the previous school year. Both the graduation rate and college/career readiness numbers also increased, ensuring that graduating students are prepared for the future workforce.

Sylacauga High School also currently has the highest number of students taking dual enrollment courses at Central Alabama Community College, with several courses taught on its campus.

Eller added, "It is important to celebrate achievement and improvements, and the Pacesetter Award affirms that the teachers and leaders of Sylacauga City Schools are committed to providing the best educational opportunities with success for our students. While there



Sylacauga schools have been recognized by the Southern Regional Education Board.

is still much work to be done, we are confident this growth trend will continue. It is an ongoing process because tomorrow's students will be different from today's and we must be ready."

SREB works with schools and school districts by providing strategies to improve student learning and teacher effectiveness. The board began collaborating with Sylacauga schools for math support in 2021, and subsequently expanded to include support in literacy, STEM, teacher leadership, and Career Pathway development.



Supt. Dr. Michelle Eller

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UAB acquisition of St. Vincent's St. Clair is 'a home run' for local communities

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS
EDITOR

St. Vincent's St. Clair Hospital in Pell City is now part of UAB Health System.

Previously a part of the Ascension Alabama system, St. Vincent's St. Clair joins UAB as part of a \$450 million acquisition.

Through the purchase, the UAB Health System Authority has assumed ownership of all Ascension St. Vincent's sites of care including the St. Clair, Birmingham, Blount, Chilton, and East hospitals, the One Nineteen Campus the Trussville Freestanding Emergency Department and imaging centers and other clinics that had been part of Ascension Medical Group. The transaction included Ascension St. Vincent's services, facilities, caregivers and associates, including the network of providers serving central Alabama.

"We are excited about this development for St. Clair County," said Rusty Jessup president of the St. Clair County Healthcare Authority. "These two health care providers joining is a home run for our county."

Jessup described the Pell City hospital as "a wonderful facility, and this move will only make it better. The combination of UAB and St. Vincent's medical presence will bring better health care to the entire state of Alabama, particularly here in St. Clair County."

St. Vincent's St. Clair Hospital



Rusty Jessup, president of the St. Clair County Healthcare Authority

opened in 2011.

"We are thrilled to welcome St. Vincent's patients, caregivers, and associates to the UAB Medicine community," said UAB Health System CEO Dawn Bulgarella. "We are grateful and excited for how well this acquisition has been received by patients, as well as the St. Vincent's and UAB teams. I look forward to seeing how the combining of these two great health systems enhances patients' access to a larger network of care, creates exciting opportunities for our people and makes Alabama's healthcare system more sustainable."

According to Bulgarella, UAB St. Vincent's patients will continue to have access to the health care services and providers "they've come to trust, and they will also gain access to a larger care network. We exist to improve lives, and that purpose will continue to drive our actions."

Dr. Ray Watts, who chairs the UAB Health System Authority Board and serves as UAB president, said that UAB Health System is "uniquely positioned" to deliver on its commitment to sustain patient and employee success.

"UAB Health System is recognized among the nation's best for innovative, world-class, people-first care, as well as among the best places to work in health care," Watts said. "As an Alabama-operated health system, we love, understand and meet the needs of our local communities."



St. Vincent's St. Clair Hospital



UAB Health System CEO Dawn Bulgarella



UAB president Dr. Ray Watts

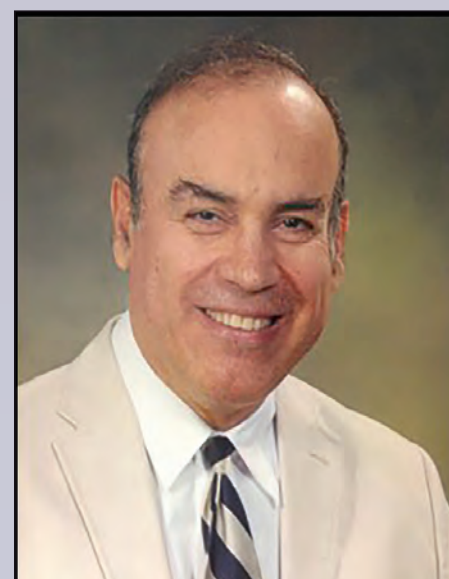
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Talladega College seeks permanent president

as the HBCU makes strides in academics and athletics

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Talladega College has been named one of the top-performing colleges in Alabama by SmartAsset's and annual best-value college study.



Interim president
Dr. Walter Kimbrough

The historically Black college and university ranks high for being affordable in tuition, cost of student living, and its average of 76 percent for student retention. The level of success stems not just on academics but within community reach, athletics, and student programs.



Director of communications
Marriel Hardy

According to Marriel Hardy, the school's director of communications, that's just Talladega College living up to its mission.

"When you think about HBCUs and why they were created and what they currently do, they are here to serve the underserved," he said. "So I am excited to be of assistance to help these young people reach their dreams, goals, and ambitions. Working here at Talladega means the world to me because this institution is taking kids where they are striving to go and giving them specialized attention that they need to get on to the next level. We are here to work with them hand-in-hand to give them the one-on-one relationships they need to be successful."

Talladega College may have been deemed as a historic landmark that was originally established back in 1865, but history continues with each class that comes to the Great Tornado campus. No matter if it's academics, undergraduate achievements, post-graduation accomplishments, alumni taking to the big screen, sports success, or business partnerships, the college has experienced some once-in-a-lifetime moments that continue to build upon the foundation of history already established.

At the start of 2024, Georgia Pacific gave a donation of \$15,000 to the college. As a leading producer of building, packaging, and paper products, the company accounts for more than half of the workforce in Talladega.

In April of last year, five McNair Scholars who are biology majors went aboard to explore Belize's culture, wildlife, conservation and sustainability efforts, and ecosystems.

In May, the college celebrated its food pantry opening with a ribbon cutting ceremony. The Tornado Market Food Pantry and Resource Center aims to reduce food insecurity among students and provides access to basic essentials for everyone within the Talladega College community.

In June, after returning to the Gulf Coast Athletic Conference, Talladega College volleyball team came was ranked as one of three schools in the National Associate of Intercollegiate Athletics to surpass 30 wins in the season.

Those are examples of achievements made at the college throughout the course of the past year, but Hardy says that to list everything seems almost impossible.

"One of the overall common goals that every student has that graces this campus and strives to reach is graduation," he said. "As a HBCU graduate myself, I want these students to know that achieving graduation is possible. It just takes believing in themselves, persevering, leaning on others at times, working hard, and keeping the faith that things are going to work out."

Hardy believes that as long as students continue to stay the course of what they are seeking, even when things get hard, they will be able to achieve anything, as well as reach new heights that might surpass what they might have



The Talladega College volleyball team enjoyed success during 2024.

originally even intended.

In an interview with The Daily Home, Hardy and the current interim president of Talladega, Dr. Walter Kimbrough, had the following to say.

Q: What academic progress was achieved at the college in 2024?

HARDY: We have initiatives in place to help ensure our students are moving forward and being successful. So we launched our writing center this year, which is something we are very proud of because we know the importance of writing and communication. We want to make sure our students are prepared to enter the workforce or even matriculate further than the academic career. Also, our education department received an accreditation to the Council of Accreditation for Educator Preparation. It is the first time this college has received that national accreditation. We've always been accredited by the state, so this level of acknowledgement is something we are very proud of.

Q: How have the 2024 graduates been prepared to enter the workforce?

HARDY: We are proud of the many internship opportunities that we have provided students through the utilization of our career services program. In fact, one of the other great achievements in 2024 was the chance to strengthen our partnership with Grand Valley State University through their HBCU/HSI Consortium. So students upon graduating from Talladega can transfer to Grand Valley State University to pursue their master's degree. In return, they also help them with job placement in the area as they complete the program.

Q: Did the college receive any awards in 2024?

HARDY: The school was awarded a National Science Foundation grant. The grant was \$400,000, and it is in place to help elevate STEM education, and it's called the Targeted Infusion Project. It will fund research opportunities for undergraduates in STEM programs, will provide jobs for students, and overall help elevate the STEM program here. It is set to run until July 2027.

Q: What is an unexpected accomplishment achieved in 2024?

HARDY: Two of things that come to mind. At the top of 2024, one of the biggest things that happened for the institution was The Great Tornado Band being the lead and featured band for the London New Year's Day parade. That performance put the institution



The Great Tornado Band participated in the London New Year's Day parade last year.



Talladega College's baseball team won the 2024 Gulf Coast Athletic Conference championship.

on an international stage. Then on the sports side of the house, our TC baseball team captured the 2024 GCAC Championship. Our students here at Talladega are not just thriving in the classroom but also on the field in their competitive sports.

Q: What is a goal that the college hopes to achieve in 2025?

HARDY: This year there is a search for a permanent president of the institution, so I think that is something exciting to look forward to – new leadership, new blood to really energize the campus.

KIMBROUGH: While the search for a permanent president is going on, my goal is to correct as much as I can before the end of June, to identify long-term challenges and opportunities and provide a road map for the new president. My main goal this year is to help the college identify and hire an outstanding president who will lead Talladega through a very challenging higher education landscape.

Q: In 2025, what is something that Talladega College is going to do that could help enhance the community for future generations?

HARDY: I think one thing that the institution is going to do is be more collaborative. That includes going beyond our gates, inviting our community

partners to thrive with us, and provide opportunities for students. Beyond the quest of experience, we want to make sure students know the benefit of stewardship and giving back themselves. Our student success team and student affairs team is actively engaging and involved in making sure students reach back and give back to make a difference here locally. Also we want people to partner with us to help provide exceptional experiences to students whether it's in line with internships, supporting our athletic programs, and so forth. So we're trying to bring the community in and be involved and invested in what we're doing here. That's a relationship and connections that we want to nurture, grow, and see expand.

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HEALTH INNOVATIONS offers care 'close to home' in St. Clair County

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Dr. Jolie Wildinger opened Health Innovations in Asheville during 2024.

Health Innovations is a health clinic providing primary care, sick patient visits, sports physicals, and specialty treatments like weight loss management, IV hydrations, thyroid optimization, and hormone management.

Dr. Wildinger discovered her passion for a career in nursing later than many healthcare professionals do, beginning her nursing school career in her late 20s.

"I had worked random jobs like you do when you're in your 20s. I became a phlebotomist, which are the people that go around and draw blood. I fell in love with a patient—not literally," Wildinger said with a chuckle. "I would sit and talk with him during our 4 a.m. draws. He had terminal cancer, and I wanted to do more to help him. I wanted to be able to do more for him."

That patient talked Dr. Wildinger into applying to the nursing school at Jacksonville State University.

"He ultimately passed away, but I ended up getting my degree because of him. The nurses in the ICU at the time also pushed me to go to nursing school. God had laid it on my heart at that point," said Wildinger.

Since that time, she has worked in a variety of nursing fields including the ICU, emergency department, pharmacy training and patient education. She holds dual certifications as a family nurse practitioner and acute gerontology acute care nurse practitioner. She considers her doctorate of nursing practice the equivalent of a Ph.D., but her degree is more clinically-focused rather than research-focused.

In addition to opening Health Innovations, Dr. Wildinger is also a full time faculty member at JSU where she serves at the lead faculty for the family nurse practitioner tract and teaches in their graduate programs.

Dr. Wildinger wanted to open Health Innovations due to a lack of healthcare in Asheville for several years. Her goal was to open a clinic close to home.

"About two years ago, my sister Allison Patten and I started talking about opening this clinic. Allison is



NURSE ABBIE HANNAH

the business brain of things, and I am the clinical brain," Wildinger said.

Last January, the women found the perfect building and began renovating it. Health Innovations held their soft launch last August 1, with a grand opening last autumn.

"So far, I feel like we have gotten a good response from the community. Before October 1, we didn't have the Blue Cross Blue Shield credentialing, but now, we have that and Cigna and quite a few others that we can accept. Just call us to see if we accept your insurance," said Wildinger.

Currently, the clinic staff includes Dr. Wildinger, nurse Abbie Hannah, and the doctor's sister, Allison.

"The faster we grow, the more people we can bring on. I want to be able to bring on more providers and offer more to the community, including aesthetics like laser hair removal and things like that," Wildinger said.

Dr. Wildinger's philosophy of care is founded on relationship-building.



Abbie Hannah, Jolie Wildinger, and Allison Patten at the grand opening of Health Innovations in Asheville.

"We want to work with patients individually. It is not a dictatorship, it is a relationship. I want it to be a partnership for care. We like to take a holistic approach, and sometimes that means not just using traditional healthcare ideas," said Wildinger.

Dr. Wildinger lives in Asheville with her husband, who works as a police officer for the city, and their four children, aged 12-20.

"Our friends and family are here, and we want to be able to give back to where we live and provide services we haven't had for a long time and maybe offer some new stuff," she said.



DR. JOLIE WILDLINGER

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Accomplishments of past year will benefit students 'for generations to come,' Pell City superintendent says

BY LAURA NATION
DAILY HOME STAFF WRITER

As 2024 closed, the Pell City Board of Education and superintendent of schools reflected on the accomplishments of the past year and looked ahead to the coming months.

Superintendent Dr. James Martin said he remains "extremely proud" of the achievements that will benefit students "for generations to come. You usually do a lot of reflection this time of year, and in Pell City, we have a lot of things to really be grateful for."

Considering a list of student and teacher recognitions for excellence and achievement, Martin said these are "proud moments," but the system will continue to set high goals and expect even more in 2025.

As Martin reflected on the system's State Report Card released last fall, which reflected an overall rating of "B" for its seven schools, he maintains the goal of the system receiving an "A" in the future.

"We can and will do better," he said. "Success comes with working to do something right, and that's our challenge for this school system. We are going to be an 'A' school system."

Martin added he is very happy with where the system is at this point, but there is progress to be made. "We can't just be satisfied. And we'll get there together."

Martin also discussed achievements the board has accomplished by adding facilities and new environments for the school campuses.

Major work to create a new cafeteria for Pell City High School was completed earlier this year. The new facility opened with a senior breakfast event on January 22.

By the end of January, Pell City High School's new band facility was ready for students, allowing space for classes, practice, and amenities that include a loading dock for ease of travel for the band and ensembles.

Martin attributed these improvements and projects to passage of the 2021 Kids' Count referendum that increased property taxes by five mills to accommodate the pursuits.

"We've done all the things we outlined as a board," he said.

Martin also thanked the many members of the school system's



Superintendent Dr. James Martin congratulates Amy Thornton and Daniel Harris, the Pell City School System's 2024-25 elementary and secondary teachers of the year.

teaching, administrative, and support staff for their efforts in the desire for excellence.

Iola Roberts Elementary School was particularly recognized for excellence last year. The school received an "A" rating on the State Report Card, which principal Haley Williams described as "a great gain."

The school's score rose from an 86 last year to a 90 this year, which Williamson attributed to the entire team at the school. "We have an extremely strong faculty, support staff, everyone," she said.

Iola Roberts serves students from kindergarten to 4th grade.

The school hosts Spirit Days for the youngsters to enjoy supporting their school system and STEAM events (using science, technology, engineering, the arts and math) to assist in guiding students' inquiry, dialogue and critical thinking skills and incorporates weekly counseling sessions for students.

Counseling has affected and enhanced the students' discipline as well as other concerns they can have, Williamson said, adding that there is a very strong PTO organization for the school that supports monthly school events.

The principal said her school intends to "keep climbing" and will focus on one aspect that has affected the entire system — absenteeism among students.

"Our goal is to be at 10 percent or less," she said. "The rate was 18 percent in 2022."

Absentee levels in a school system affect its overall rating for the State Report Card scores.



Superintendent Dr. James Martin congratulates Amy Thornton and Daniel Harris, the Pell City School System's 2024-25 elementary and secondary teachers of the year.

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State BOE sets long-term goals about computer science education and chronic absenteeism

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECT EDITOR

Beginning with the class of 2032, high school students in Talladega and St. Clair counties will be required to complete a computer science course to graduate.

The new requirement, adopted by the Alabama Board of Education, makes the state 11th in the nation to make computer science foundational in its education system, ensuring that students are equipped with the critical skills needed in today's economy, according to Dr. Eric Mackey, state superintendent of schools.

"Equipping our students with computer science skills truly prepares them for the future," Mackey said. "Whether they're from a small town or a big city, every child in Alabama deserves the chance to unlock opportunities in today's ever-changing technological landscape. This is about opening doors for all our students to succeed."

According to the state department of education, a total of 94 percent of public high schools in Alabama offer foundational computer science courses already. "Our state is well ahead of the national average, which is 60%, Mackey said.

In 2024, the Alabama Legislature appropriated \$9.27 million for computer science professional development, bringing the state's total investment in computer science education to more than \$37 million over the past nine years. Gov. Kay Ivey supported the initiative.

"This new expectation will keep Alabama students prepared in a competitive world," she said. "Preparing our students for tomorrow means giving them the tools to thrive



Dr. Eric Mackey, superintendent of Alabama schools.

in a world driven by innovation. Computer science isn't just an elective anymore – it's a necessity. We're committed to ensuring every Alabama student, no matter where they're from, has the skills to compete and succeed in the global economy."

Mackey added that Alabama is "proud of the diversity Alabama has been able to achieve in reaching Black, Hispanic, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students, bringing these groups to parity with their peers in computer science participation. By making computer science a graduation requirement, we are ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to engage in this essential subject and are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of a technology-driven world."

During the seven years designated to achieve computer science education statewide, state education officials say they also plan to work on cutting school absenteeism by half.

"Chronic absenteeism, or missing more than 10% of school days for any reason, spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic, and rates remain elevated across the nation," Mackey said. "Alabama had a 17.9 percent rate of chronic absenteeism based on



Members of the Alabama Board of Education are, from left, Jackie Zeigler, Dr. Yvette Richardson, Stephanie Bell, Supt. Dr. Eric Mackey, Gov. Kay Ivey, Tracie West, Dr. Tonya Chestnut, Marie Manning, Belinda McRae, and Dr. Wayne Reynolds. Most local schools (Talladega City, Pell City, St. Clair County, and the majority of Talladega County) are in Board District 6, represented by Manning, who serves as the panel's president pro tem. Sylacauga City Schools and B.B. Comer Elementary School, B.B. Comer High School, and Fayetteville High School of Talladega County Schools are in Board District 3, represented by Bell.

the latest state report card for 2022-2023. It has a negative impact on student academic achievement and development."

Nationally, 14.7 million students missed enough school to be considered chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year, according to a federal report. Mackey said that the state department of education hopes to reduce Alabama's rate by 50 percent during the next five years.

"Our administration has been working hard to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education, feel a sense of belonging at school, and receive the supports they need to attend school regularly and achieve," the superintendent said. "While it is experienced by students in all demographic categories, chronic

absence sometimes disproportionately affects children from low-income families and communities of color. It sometimes creates attendance gaps, which exacerbate achievement in local schools."

According to Dr. Melissa Shields, assistant state superintendent for student learning, "Alabama has been working diligently to address the rates of absenteeism, and while we've made progress, there's still much to be done. Through our collective efforts with families and community partners, we will continue to promote educational environments where every child has the opportunity to succeed. We will work to make chronic absenteeism a challenge of the past and to ensure that every student is present, engaged, and on the path to a bright future."



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CACC receives \$200,000 grant to benefit Talladega campus

College celebrates new funding, partnerships, and staff for 2024-25

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Central Alabama Community College has received a \$200,000 grant from the Expanded Industrial Training and Assessment Center (ITAC) Program that is being used its Talladega campus to develop the Pathways to Success: Dual Enrollment in Industrial Electronics Technology project.

The program will teach students key skills in electrical systems, automation, and instrumentation. Hands-on learning and work-based experiences will ensure graduates are job-ready, with target wages of at least \$27/hour in their first year of work.

In addition to degree and certificate programs, CACC will design upskilling opportunities through short-term courses and training for incumbent workers, allowing employees to upgrade their skills and bring new technologies to their workplaces. The project will explore strategies to support underrepresented students, focusing on students with disabilities, such as targeted outreach, mentoring, financial assistance, assistive technologies, and other tailored support services.

“This funding allows our Talladega campus to significantly enhance our training capabilities in Industrial Electronics Technology,” said college president Jeff Lynn. “We aim to provide top-notch education and hands-on experiences that prepare our students for high-demand roles in advanced manufacturing. We are grateful for the support from the ITAC Program and look forward to making a lasting impact on our community.”

The grant will also enable CACC to establish partnerships with local industries, ensuring the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with current industry needs. By collaborating with local businesses, CACC aims to create a seamless transition for students from education to employment, thereby strengthening the local economy.

This initiative, according to Lynn, is part of CACC’s ongoing commitment to providing its students with high-quality education and training opportunities. “The college is dedicated to fostering an inclusive learning environment that supports the diverse needs of its student body,” he said.

Among the partnerships CACC has developed is with Dovetail Landing in Lincoln, which has hosted a series of workforce development training programs as part of the Alabama Community College’s Skills for Success initiative. Tailored exclusively for veterans, the training is designed to enhance their skills and credentials and provide a supportive environment for successful transitions into civilian careers.

“We are excited to offer these dedicated training programs for our veterans in collaboration with Dovetail Landing,” Lynn said. “By harnessing our educational and training expertise alongside Dovetail Landing’s supportive environment, we aim to empower our veterans with the critical skills and opportunities they need to excel in their post-military careers.”

Alana Centili, secretary of Dovetail Landing’s board of directors, also praised the collaborative effort. “Our partnership with CACC is a significant stride towards equipping veterans with comprehensive training that readies them for successful careers after service,” she said. “Together, we are steadfast in our commitment to build a future where our veterans are well prepared with the



Dr. Kevin Ammons is CACC's new dean of students.



COACH JUSTIN MCQUEEN

necessary skills and knowledge for the workforce.”

Based on demand and feedback, the program plans to expand its offerings. “This initiative goes beyond merely providing education; it’s about actively creating opportunities for our veterans to thrive,” said Lynn. “We are dedicated to supporting them throughout their educational and career transitions.”

Also during the past year, CACC was the recipient of a \$1,016,997.44 grant aimed at bolstering healthcare education and workforce development in rural areas. This funding, provided through the Alabama Community



CACC Talladega campus



CACC President Jeff Lynn and Alana Centili of Dovetail Landing confirm a partnership between the college and the nonprofit.

College System from the 2024 Alabama Centers for Rural Healthcare Opportunity appropriation, is set to expand opportunities for health science students and enhance the healthcare workforce pipeline across the state.


“We are incredibly grateful and excited to receive this generous grant, representing a transformative opportunity for CACC and our surrounding communities,” Lynn said.

“This funding will enable us to enhance our health science programs, providing vital resources and training to produce highly skilled healthcare professionals ready to meet the demands of rural healthcare settings.”

The grant will support the development and expansion of CACC’s health science programs, including

SEE GRANT ON PAGE 13D


UPDATE 2025



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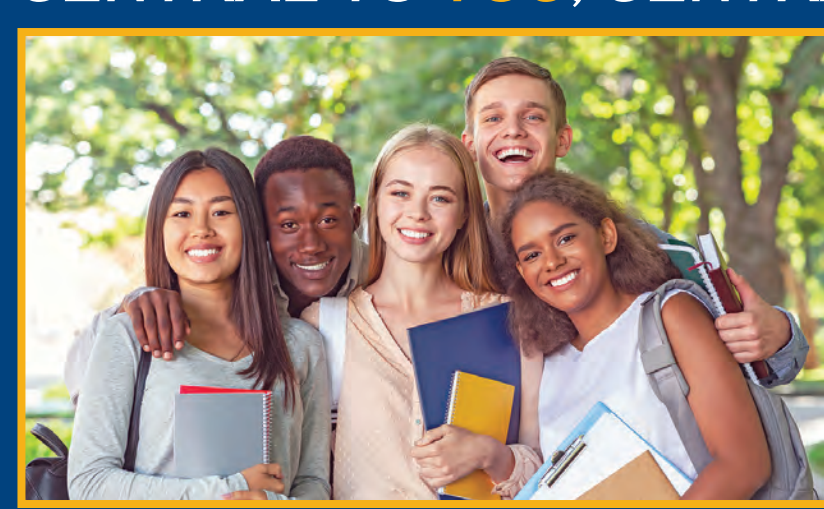



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St. Clair BOE member to serve as 2025 president-elect of state school board association

STAFF REPORT

The president of the St. Clair County Board of Education has been appointed president-elect of the Alabama Association of School Boards.

Scott Suttle took office in December during the AASB's annual convention in Montgomery. He has served as a member of the St. Clair County Board of Education since 2001.

Geneva City school board member Russell Clausell was named the association's new president. He will serve a one-year term, after which Suttle will take the helm of the association representing all of Alabama's public local school boards, including nearly 900 members. Local boards of education provide leadership that impacts the lives of the state's nearly 750,000 public school students.

Suttle previously served as the association's District 6 Director and was a 2021 recipient of its All-State School Board Award, the association's

highest honor for school board members. He has reached master status in the AASB School Board Member Academy, with more than 520 training hours, and has served on the AASB Resolutions Committee.

Retired from a 40-year career with Thompson Tractor, he is a licensed helicopter pilot and occasionally volunteers to assist the St. Clair County Sheriff's Department.

Since 1949, the AASB has served education leaders and the interests of local decision making in public education. The association's mission is to help develop school board leaders through quality training, advocacy, and services.

"Our incoming leaders bring exceptional vision, proven track records, and diverse perspectives from across Alabama," said Sally Smith, executive director of the AASB. "Their collective experience and dedication will be invaluable as we work to strengthen public education and advance our mission of excellence for every student."



Members of the St. Clair County Board of Education are, from left, president Scott Suttle, Allison Gray, Bogie Lovell, Bill Morris, vice president Nickie Van Pelt, Randy Thompson, and Superintendent Dr. Justin Burns. Not pictured is Cathy Fine.

FROM GRANT ON PAGE 12D

initiatives that address the unique challenges of rural healthcare delivery. It will also facilitate the creation of new partnerships with local healthcare providers, offering students hands-on, real-world experience in various medical settings.

Michael Barnette, dean of workforce and economic development programs at CACC, described the grant as "a game-changer for our health science education and workforce development efforts. It allows us to increase our training capacity and innovate how we deliver education and support services, ensuring our students are well-prepared to serve in rural healthcare environments."

During the past year, Dr. Kevin Ammons was hired as CACC's new dean of students. Ammons brings over two decades of diverse experience in higher education administration, with expertise in instruction, adult education, admissions, and student services.

"Dr. Ammons is a seasoned leader whose extensive experience in student services and commitment to student success make him the perfect choice for Dean of Students at CACC," said Lynn. "His leadership and dedication to higher education are exactly what we need to continue advancing our mission of fostering student success and community engagement."

Ammons expressed enthusiasm about his new role "I am honored to join Central Alabama Community College and contribute to its spirited campus community," he said. "I look forward to working with the students, faculty, and administration to enhance our student services and ensure an enriching academic and personal growth environment for all our students."

As dean of students, he will oversee an expansive range of programs and

services that support student success and well-being.

The college also hired a new head tennis coach during 2024.

"We are excited to welcome Justin McQueen to our team," Lynn said. "His extensive coaching experience at various levels and his passion for developing young athletes make him the ideal leader for our tennis program. We are confident that his leadership will bring great success to our tennis teams and contribute to the growth of our athletics department."

Justin McQueen comes to CACC with over five years of head coaching experience, most recently as the head women's tennis coach at Huntingdon College, where he was responsible for training and developing players, recruiting student-athletes, and managing the program's budget.

"I am excited to join Central Alabama Community College and eager to start working with the talented student-athletes here," McQueen said. "My goal is to build a program that competes at a high level, instills a lifelong passion for the sport, and emphasizes academic excellence

among our athletes."

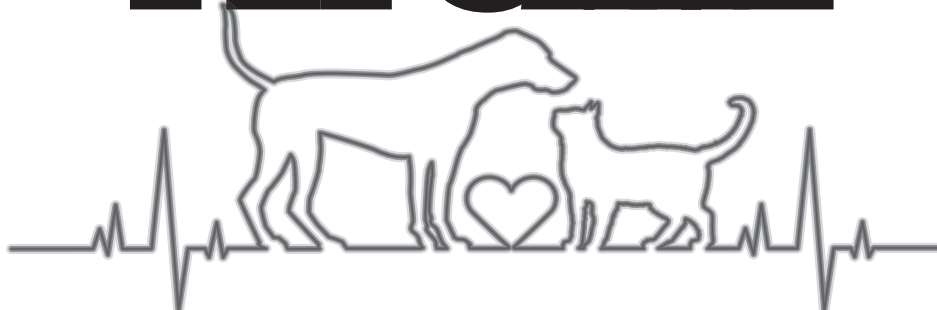
Among CACC's other athletic accomplishments during the past year was the softball team's 41-19 record, ACCC Conference regular season championship, and ACCC Coach of the Year award for Greg Shivers. The team achieved a cumulative 3.54 GPA.

The CACC golf team finished fifth in the NJCAA Tournament, emerging as District Tournament Champions and ACCC Conference Champions. Coach Daniel Allen received accolades as both the Conference Coach of the Year and District Coach of the Year.

The baseball team finished the conference with a 21-11 record and cumulative GPA of 3.05 and were state runners-ups.

"CACC is immensely proud of our student-athletes and their achievements," said athletic director Steve Lewis said. "This has been an amazing season for all our teams. Our student-athletes' and coaches' hard work and commitment have brought significant recognition to the college. Their successes on the field and in the classroom reflect the values and spirit of CACC."

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Talladega Seven has developed a successful partnership with the city school system.

Talladega City Schools reorganization is leading to positive results

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Talladega City Schools (TCS) has undergone a significant reorganization in recent years, making many changes benefiting students, faculty, and administrators alike.

Notably, in 2022, TCS reassigned the district's elementary schools to serve specific age groups. After that change proved to be successful, TCS reassigned the system's seventh and eighth graders to their own section of Talladega High School during 2024, a move that TCS Superintendent Quentin Lee said is leading to many positive improvements.

"This is really setting up the foundation for Talladega City Schools to thrive," he said. "We were able to see a reduction in discipline across the board and have formed many new partnerships."

Lee explained that TCS receives beneficial funding from the State of Alabama by putting new extra grades under the same roof, which opens new educational opportunities for TCS students.

The high school reorganization, he added, allows TCS to shift allocation

funds, stretched thin by the seventh- and eighth-grade school, into new electives and programs at the high school and beyond.

For example, Lee pointed to a new cybersecurity class at Talladega High School, and TCS is partnering with the Create Technology and Innovation Center in Oxford for special programming starting in the 2025-26 school year.

"In the fall, our students will be able to go there to take classes that we don't offer in the area of career tech, so that's another win for us here in Talladega," explained the superintendent. "We're revamping a lot of our programs, getting back on track, and going forward to meet the needs of our scholars. Prior to the exchange, seventh and eighth graders had maybe one or two elective courses that they could take, but now they're able to take some of the same courses as the high school students had at an introductory level."

He also highlighted growing numbers in the ROTC program (one of the high school's longest-standing programs), a partnership with Honda for the Modern Manufacturing Program, and career certification programs for such jobs as certified nursing assistants as evidence

that TCS is serving the needs of its students.

"We saw a lot of growth with our students, which lets us know what we are currently doing is working," Lee said. "We're revamping a lot of our programs, getting back on track, and going forward to meet the needs of our scholars."

In July 2024, TCS made one of the most important decisions in recent memory, converting the Graham Elementary School building into the system's central office. Prior to this conversion, Lee explained, central office staff were scattered among the system's schools, creating inefficiencies throughout the system.

Lee said the school system took some money left over from a project to expand the cafeteria at Salter Elementary and some other use-it-or-lose-it funds to pay for the project. With all central-office staff in one place and new available amenities, the TCS is better poised to student and parent needs, he added.

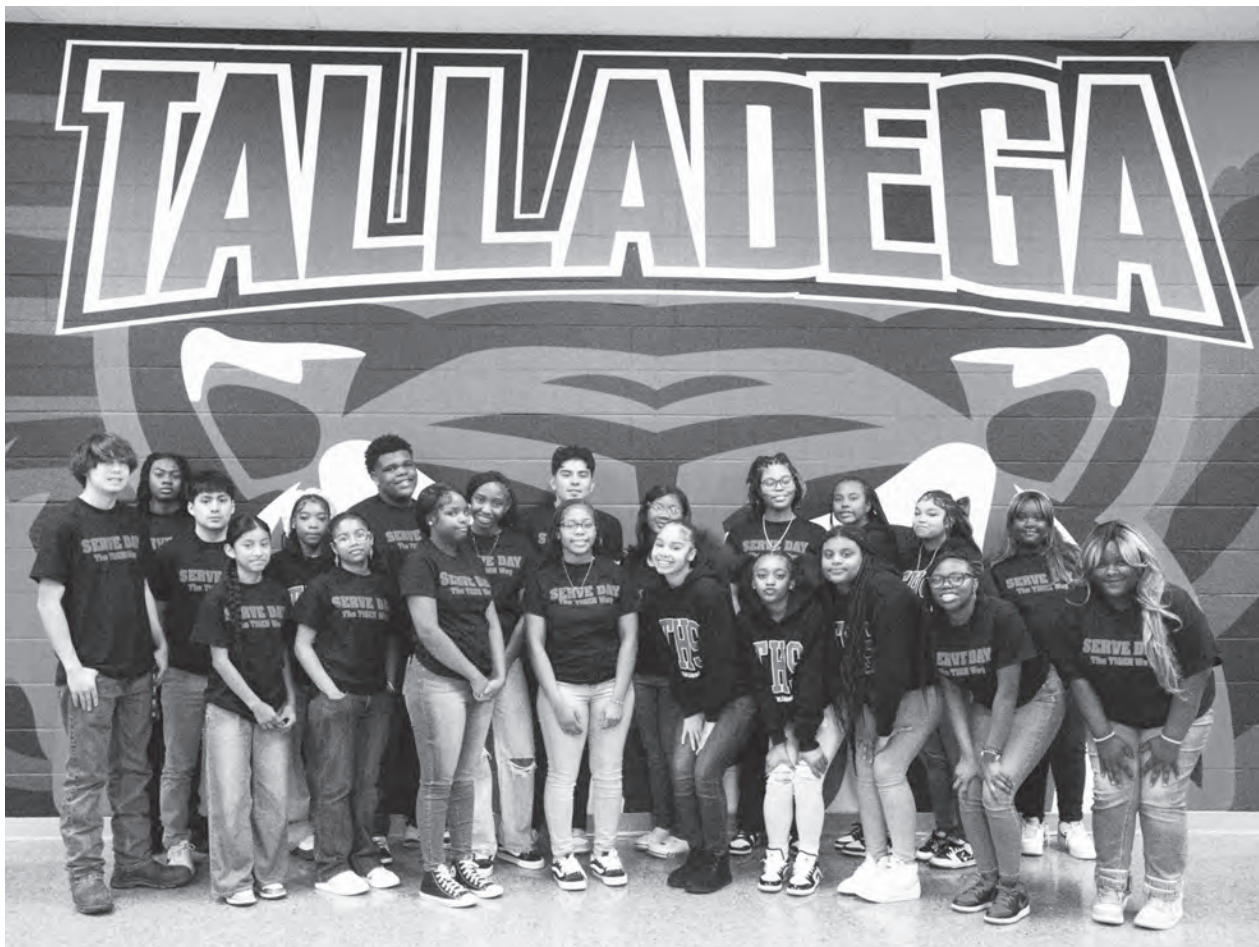
"We have our new board room over here, as well as offices for all of our central office personnel. We're not inside of classrooms anymore



Supt. Dr. Quintin Lee

and we have space for professional development. We've got an actual testing room, our special education files are locked off, and they have a room where they can meet and we have got six different places over here where we can hold meetings. At the old central office, we didn't even have a conference room anymore because we were so booked to capacity."

Lee also pointed to growing numbers of students participating in sports, a dedicated group of teachers and auxiliary staff, and civic partners such as Talladega Seven (a local non-profit organization focused on character development assisting with ACT preparation) as reasons why the future of Talladega City Schools is "very bright."



Talladega High School students participating in Service Day.



A scene from Career Tech Day at Talladega High School.

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The former state legislator and Jefferson State President Keith Brown (right) unveil the plaque designating the Dr. James H. McClendon Nursing Wing.

Jefferson State names St. Clair-Pell City campus nursing wing in honor of local lawmaker

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Jefferson State Community College has recognized Dr. Jim McClendon by naming the nursing wing at the St. Clair-Pell City Campus in his honor.

College officials praised McClendon for being “an ardent supporter of Jefferson State initiatives for many years.” McClendon was “instrumental” in the opening of the St. Clair-Pell City Campus in 2009 and the establishment of the nursing Wing in October 2017, an expansion that included two simulation labs, a fundamental instruction lab, two classrooms, six offices, and a conference room.

“Dr. McClendon was instrumental in Jefferson State starting in St. Clair County,” said Jefferson State President Keith Brown. “Because of his efforts, we’ve been able to educate hundreds of RNs, and they’re working and caring for people right here in this community.”

A native of Mobile, McClendon earned his Bachelor of Science degree at Birmingham-Southern College in 1965 and his Doctor of Optometry degree from the University of Houston in 1967. He joined the United States Navy Medical Service Corps in 1968 where he was commissioned as an officer. Lt. McClendon served with distinction in Vietnam, for which he was decorated with the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device.

Over the course of his optometry career, McClendon distinguished

himself as a leader in Alabama’s optometry community, serving as President of the Alabama Optometric Association.

In November 2022, McClendon retired from his private practice to pursue public service. That year, he was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives for state’s 50th District and was reelected for two additional terms. He served as chairman of the House Ethics, Redistricting, and Health committees.

In 2014, McClendon was elected to the Alabama Senate where he represented the 11th District for two consecutive terms. He served on the Rules, Education and Youth Affairs, Fiscal Responsibility and Economic Development, Transportation and Energy committee. He was vice chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee and chairman of the Healthcare Committee.

McClendon introduced 210 bills in the state legislature, addressing a range of critical issues, including education, public safety, economic development, and healthcare and the advancement of Alabama’s healthcare professions.

“During my time as a legislator, I always heard the importance of job creation, employment, and improving Alabama by creating good jobs,” he said. “That’s exactly what Jeff State is doing, and it is a model for all other programs in the state. The Jefferson State Nursing Program helps families by opening the door to a better future. This is changing Alabama and changing our community.”



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More Than Just A Daycare



National opioid crisis affects communities in Talladega, St. Clair counties

BY APRIL DOUGLAS
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY HOME

Opioid addiction remains a critical issue across the nation, and finding effective solutions to combat this public health crisis is more important than ever.

AltaPointe Health is committed to providing comprehensive care for individuals struggling with opioid use through Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT). This evidence-based approach combines medication with counseling and therapy, offering a holistic and supportive path to recovery.

Opioid addiction has affected millions of people across the United States. While the road to recovery can be challenging, Medication Assisted Treatment is highly effective in helping individuals reclaim their lives. MAT helps manage withdrawal symptoms, reduce cravings, and promote long-term recovery. The treatment typically involves the use of FDA-approved medications combined with counseling and behavioral therapies to address the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of addiction.

The benefits of MAT go beyond just treating opioid addiction. Studies show that individuals receiving MAT are more likely to remain in treatment, reduce illicit opioid use, improve their social functioning, and lower the risk of overdose. By addressing both the physical and mental health aspects of addiction, MAT helps individuals regain control of their lives and reenter society as productive and healthy individuals.

AltaPointe's MAT services also emphasize the importance of aftercare and ongoing support. Recovery doesn't end with the completion of treatment – it's an ongoing process that requires



sustained effort, support, and coping strategies.

AltaPointe Health is a healthcare system providing primary and behavioral care. Each year it provides more than one million services to 45,000 patients across Alabama. A national leader in behavioral health for more than 60 years, AltaPointe expanded its service array in 2018 to include primary care. With an even greater focus on the patient's whole health, it operates Accordia Health, a Federally Qualified Health Center with six clinic sites. Rounding out the continuum, AltaPointe operates

two psychiatric hospitals serving children and adults, one behavioral health crisis center, 20 outpatient behavioral healthcare clinics, and BayView Professional Associates, its private practice arm serving southwest Alabama. Its team of 28 physicians and 16 physician extenders renders the medical care services throughout the organization and serves as the administration and faculty for the University of South Alabama, College

of Medicine-Department of Psychiatry. J. Tuerk Schlesinger is its chief executive officer.

AltaPointe Health has offices in Sylacauga (1661 Old Birmingham Highway; 256-245-2201) and Talladega (10 Bemiston Avenue; 256-362-8600). For more information about its Medication Assistance Treatment services, call 251-450-2211 or email info@altapointe.org.



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At AltaPointe Health, we have witnessed profound transformations in the lives of those we serve. Our dedicated healthcare professionals and staff are committed to delivering compassionate care that enhances the well-being of those we serve and strengthens the fabric of the communities we call home.

Central to our success is the strength of the partnerships we have built with fellow providers, the judicial system, law enforcement, and higher education —an interconnected community that embraces and supports one another.

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UPDATE 2025

Friends & Neighbors



UPDATE

FEBRUARY
2025

Special Supplement to **The Daily Home**

UPDATE 2025

Who are the people in your neighborhood?

Anybody besides me remember that old song from Sesame Street? Usually it was performed by the late great Bob McGrath, who sang it as he walked along a set decorated as a street scene.



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

*Oh, oh, who are the people in your neighborhood?
In your neighborhood?
In your neighborhood?
Say, who are the people in your neighborhood,
The people that you meet each day?
Bob would then encounter two or three Muppets, each of which broke into song to explain their jobs. Such as when Bob met, say, a grocery store owner:
A grocer sells the things you eat,
Like cereal and cheese and meat.
Whatever food you're looking for,
You're sure to find it in my store.*

Then Bob and Grocer Muppet would duet:
*'Cause a grocer is a person in your neighborhood
In your neighborhood
In your neighborhood.
Yes, a grocer is a person in your neighborhood
A person that you meet each day.*

The process was repeated, perhaps with a doctor Muppet and a teacher Muppet, with everybody joining Bob at the end of the segment to sing:
*They're the people that you meet
When you're walking down the street.
They're the people that you meet each day.*

These days, knowing the people in your neighborhood might be considered an antiquated notion, a throwback to the early 1970s when most of those Sesame Street segments were produced, or to an even earlier era. It's considerably less common than it once was for people to know their neighbors, whether it's the person in the apartment next door or the house down the street.

The cities and towns in Talladega and St. Clair counties (Lincoln, Oak Grove, Munford, Riverside, and Childersburg, to name a few) contain many different neighborhoods, but for purposes of this Update, they may at the same time be viewed as one collective neighborhood.

Residents of both counties often say that the people -- their friends and neighbors in the community -- is what they like most about living in central and east Alabama. It is a region of the state -- and the nation -- that has managed to retain a neighborly spirit and mindset, even as other areas become increasingly private and introverted.

So, with a tip of the hat to my old TV buddy Bob, we happily introduce you to some of the people in our neighborhood. They're the people you might meet when you're walking down the street.

UPDATE 2025

Friends & Neighbors

PUBLISHERS

Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR

Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Loyd McIntosh
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER

Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Darla Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Pam Isbell

RETAIL

ADVERTISING SALES

Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER

Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES

Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION

Elijah King
Charlene Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER

Debbie Bussie

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Retiring St. Clair County coroner reflects on his years of public service

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Dennis Russell is hanging it up. After 26 years of service as St. Clair County's coroner, Russell is retiring before completing his seventh term in office.

Over the years, he has seen a lot of things, comforted hundreds of families, and ushered in a host of changes since first being elected to the office in 1998. Now, following two-and-a-half decades as the county coroner – and more than 40 years in the mortuary and funeral business – Russell is ready to pass the torch as he reflects on a career that has its rewards but also its fair share of challenges.

"If you're a coroner, death has no respect for dates, times, or anniversaries," he says. "If you're sitting there eating with your family on Christmas Day and there's a death, you gotta go. If you're at a ball game and there's a death, you gotta go. You can't say, 'Well, I'll be there in a couple hours,' when the interstate is shut down because there's been a vehicle wreck and there's a body ejected in the middle of the highway. You go. You can't wait."

In addition to his duties as coroner, Russell has balanced his role as manager at Kilgroe Funeral Home in Pell City for decades. However, he says that with a recently diagnosed health issue, four grandchildren, and "the most understanding wife you could have," he is ready to back away and spend some uninterrupted time with his family.

"My oldest granddaughter graduates from high school this year, and my other three are 13, 11, and 6, and they all play sports, and I want to watch them grow up and play baseball, basketball, and soccer," Russell says. "I'm still manager of the funeral home,

which is very demanding as well, as is the coroner's office, and it's just time for me to slow down."

Russell began his career after receiving a degree in mortuary science from Jefferson State Community College in 1978 and quickly getting a job at a funeral home. He spent much of his early career learning from Charles Forman, a local funeral director who served as St. Clair County's coroner from 1982 until his death in 1992. Russell was elected to the position six years later and has modernized the coroner's office in significant ways during his tenure.

"We now have a coroner's office in Pell City that actually has a refrigerated cooling unit so we can store bodies if we need to for a period of time," he explains, adding that before this development, a body would be transported to a local funeral home, which could be a problem if a death occurred during a weekend or a holiday. However, this and other innovations aren't the primary reasons why Russell has been trusted with this sensitive position for almost 30 years.

As a man of deep Christian conviction, some of his best attributes are his sense of humanity and empathy for people. Informing family upon the death of a loved one is never easy, and is a task that Russell has always taken with compassion and leaning heavily on his faith.

"I'm like other people. I cry too. I just don't cry in front of anybody else. I get away from them and cry like they do. You have to let it out and let it go. I don't hold it in. I've



DENNIS RUSSELL

got a strong faith in God and I try to tell people 'You know it's not going to be all right right now, but God sees us through it. He's never left us.

"There have been many times when I've gotten in the car and on the way I prayed all the way up there and I talked to a family, and then I get a card from them saying they appreciated the comforting words."

Russell will officially retire as the St. Clair Coroner on March 1. Deputy Coroner Joe Sweatt will complete Russell's term.



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Pell City native accepts role in the Trump Administration

STAFF REPORT

The name Emory Cox is familiar Pell City, and it's becoming more familiar in Washington, D.C., as he has been named to the Trump Administration's list of senior advisors.

Cox has been appointed to serve as Special Assistant to the President for International Economic Relations, serving directly under Kevin Hassett with the White House National Economic Council.

The son of Annette Cox and Metro Bank founder the late Ray Cox,

Emory is not unfamiliar to the world of Washington politics since serving as a White House intern during his college days at Washington and Lee University. He graduated summa cum laude and accepted a role as senior economic advisor for U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville after finishing college

"I am proud that Emory Cox, who has been my senior economic advisor for the past four years, has been hired by President Trump to serve as Special Assistant to the President for International Economic Relations," Sen. Tuberville said. "Originally



Emory Cox serves as special assistant to the president for international economic relations.

from Pell City, Emory has managed my financial services, tax, budget, appropriations, and international economics portfolios. Our nation will benefit from this Alabama patriot, and I'm grateful for his service. While I am sad to see him go, I know he will be a great asset to Dr. Kevin Hassett, Scott Bessent, and President Trump's entire team as they work to get the American

economy booming again."

While a high school student at the Altamont School, Cox served as an intern with U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, later taking an internship with former U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions. Through his internships, Cox worked with the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, the National Economic Council, and the Office of Presidential Personnel.

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Pell City's Citizen of the Year is recognized for her 'service heart'

BY MICHELLE LOVE

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Dana Ellison is incredibly humble about the work she does.

Rather than brag about herself, she would rather have her work in the community show the size of her heart and the drive she has to help others. It's that exact drive that earned her the 2024 Pell City Chamber of Commerce's Citizen of the Year Award.

"It was an honor," she said. "It was not expected at all, didn't do what I do for that, but it was an honor. And to have my husband present me with the award – he was the winner last year – that made it even better."

Even as this interview was conducted, Ellison was volunteering at the local animal shelter and apologizing for the sound of barking in the background.

"I said I was going to take this year off, and here I am at the shelter painting," she said laughing.

Ellison's award is notably deserved with her extensive resume of volunteer work around Pell City. In addition to being a full-time real estate agent with LAH Sotheby's, she's also a member of the chamber, though she doesn't serve on its board. Last year she joined the Heart of Pell City and was one of the volunteers responsible for decorating downtown. She's also served on the board for ASPCIA for the past 10 years, which is an organization dedicated to

raising money and helping families by offering discounted spay and neuter services for animals.

"I opened a shop called Resale to the Rescue four years ago, and we take in gently used donations and sell those, and all of our proceeds go towards our SNAP program, which is dedicated to spay and neuter," Ellison said. "Resale to the Rescue is affiliated with ASPCIA. It's all under the same umbrella. The items we have donated to us, we have a beautiful little resale shop and all of those are sold, and 100 percent of our proceeds go towards that."

She also spent all of last year volunteering at the Alabama Sheriffs' Boys' Ranch, a home for boys in the foster care system where they can find the love and nourishment they need from a family. Ellison oversaw inmates who were brought in from the county jail, and together with Ellison and her friends who were happy to volunteer, they were able to update and renovate several of the buildings and areas of the property on the ranch. They also reorganized and updated the clothing room of the ranch where boys can pick out clothes to wear.

"We renamed the clothing room which we named OpShop," Ellison said. "It gives the boys the opportunity to shop. Some of those boys come in there with nothing but the clothes on their back, and we wanted to give them the opportunity to have what other kids



DANA ELLISON

wear."

Two years ago, Ellison also spearheaded a campaign to relandscape the Veteran's Blue Star Memorial in Pell City.

"It was a leadership project back in 2013, but they didn't have irrigation, so all of the plants they planted didn't make it," she said. "So I took it on personally to see after it. I spent my own money on it, but I have a volunteer that helps me water, and through my civic relationships I was able to get a water hydrant put near the memorial and I have a friend of mine I work with to help water the plants and keep them looking good."

Offering her time to volunteer has never been an issue for Ellison. She describes herself as very "civic-minded" and believes the greatest reward comes from helping others.

"I have a service heart," she said. "I've gotten involved by wanting the city to be better. I'm a full-time real estate agent, and I want Pell City to be a place I'm proud to sell a home to. I want to be able to speak honestly about it being a great place to live."

One of the biggest highlights of the town that she loves so much is the giving and caring community that surrounds her. According to Ellison, there are many unspoken heroes throughout the community who are willing to help others any time day or night.

"When there is a need, it's just a matter of putting out on social media what the need is and people really step up," she said. "For example, here at the animal shelter there is a tremendous need for what we call enrichment toys for the animals. I put it on Facebook last week, and people started Venmoing

me money, and toys started showing up on my doorstep."

Ellison is also a breast cancer survivor of 10 years. Her journey fighting cancer did not slow her down, if anything it motivated her to keep going.

"While I was going through chemo treatment, that was actually my best year in real estate sales. I went through chemo and radiation, but I was very determined. I think it just gave me the fight to beat it and be that stronger advocate for others. There are so many people when they're diagnosed, they think it's just their death sentence, and it's not. I was given an opportunity at still having my life and I wanted to give back."

Her favorite part about working in the community is meeting other civic-minded people working towards the same goal, which she emphasized again that there is a huge community.

"You would just be amazed at the friends of mine that I would reach out to them and ask for help at the Boyd' Ranch and the next question was 'Where do I need to go and what time?' Just meeting other open-minded people. You have to open your mind, your heart, and your spirit to what can be, and working together to see improvement and making it a place we're all proud to call home. We all have bad days, but we can take it for what it is, suck it up and make something of it."

She encourages those who want to volunteer to explore all avenues to get involved.

"All it takes is to ask. There's so many ways to volunteer, whether finding sources on social media or just asking."



Ellison with her family.

PCHS tennis standout looks forward to playing college tennis at Coastal Alabama



In 2024, Stephania was named to the Alabama High School Athletic Association's North All-Star Team.

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Pell City High School senior Stephania Chacon has decided to continue her tennis career at Coastal Alabama Community College-South.

She selected the college based on the pathway to her desired field of employment, civil engineering, as well as knowing other students attending the school and the personality of the coach. After completing her basic college

courses, Chacon plans to transfer to a four year college.

Chacon has played tennis for eight years and plans to continue playing as long as she can. She says senior year is going well, and she is excited for all of the opportunities that will come.

"After I get my civil engineering degree, I hope to get a good job," said Chacon, "Whatever opportunities come up during that time, I will decide."

The Alabama High School Athletic



Stephania Chacon with some of the tennis trophies and medals she has earned since taking up the sport.

Association tennis season started on February 12, but she stayed busy during the off-season.

"We practice in the off-season. It is still the same hours. It is no different, besides the weather," she said, laughing.

In addition to playing high school and club tennis, Chacon is a member of Key Club and Beta Club and is the vice president of the Technology Student Association at Pell City High.

Chacon says she is grateful to everyone who has supported her tennis career, including coaches Sarah Stewart and Jennifer Lee.

"My parents encouraged me to play tennis, and they feel good about it. We moved here from Venezuela. I spent most of my childhood here, and my parents spent the money for me to go to coaches and camps, and it has paid off. I got to the goals I wanted to get to here."

St. Clair County native supports veterans as Miss Leeds Area

BY KRISTI SELLERS

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Samantha Hennings is a busy young lady.

You might catch her playing a gig at Trussville Social or Rails and Ales in Leeds, or venues across St. Clair County. Or you could possibly catch her planning her next event to benefit veterans in the area. Or preparing for her upcoming move to law school.

Samantha (whose family and friends call her Sam) is the current Miss Leeds Area and is eagerly preparing for the Miss Alabama competition in June. She has been involved with the Miss Alabama organization since 2018, when she competed for Miss Alabama Teen.

“Back then, the competitions were just a stage I could sing on and that was all I wanted,” she said. “After winning my first title – Miss Camellia’s Outstanding Teen – I began to notice all the amazing things involved in the Miss Alabama organization: scholarship, sisterhood, leadership, and more. Since 2018, I have earned over \$10,000 in scholarship money and made several friendships, countless professional connections, and many memories. One of my favorite memories was winning the Non-Finalist Talent Award at Miss Alabama 2024. I sang ‘Broken Wing,’ by Martina McBride, which was my granny’s favorite, and I promise I feel her every time I sing that song.”

Community service is a huge focus for Sam.

“I am proud to say that this year as Miss Leeds Area, I have been more involved in my community than with any other title I have held,” she said. “Since being crowned last July, I have attended over 20 community events. Additionally, I have worked closely with the American Legion Post 107, Leeds Chamber of Commerce, The Red Barn, Central Alabama Sign and Trophy, Rails and Ales, and the City of Leeds. I am so grateful to have this opportunity, especially since I grew up



Samantha Hennings performing during the 2024 Miss Alabama competition.

in Springville. I know Leeds very well.”

Through her community service initiative, which supports veterans and advocates for veterans’ issues, she will host the City of Valor’s Got Talent event at 6 p.m. March 1 at the Leeds High School Auditorium. The benefit contest is open to all ages and all types of talent. There will be three age divisions: 12 & under, 13-25, and 26 & older. The entry fee is \$50, and tickets are \$10 at the door. All proceeds from the event will be directed to The Red Barn in Leeds.

“Some of their employees recently underwent Man O’ War training at Columbia University, and they will implement this training in new programs for veterans suffering from PTSD,” Sam said. “My community service initiative – Willing Hearts Devoted to Heroes – is the official host of the event. I am so excited to see how it goes and what the work of the community can do at The Red Barn.”

Daughter of Dennis and Katrina Hennings, Sam grew up in Springville and graduated from Springville High School in 2021. She continued her education at Middle Tennessee State University and University of North Alabama, graduating last year with a B.S. degree in political science with a minor in Spanish.



Miss Leeds Area Samantha Hennings visits with members of American Legion Riders Chapter 107.

While living in Tennessee, Sam became a regular on Broadway. Along with her band, she played various venues up and down the famed Music City street. She occasionally returns to Nashville to play with her bandmates, but she spends a majority of her time performing with her dad at local Birmingham-area venues.

Sam works at the Friedman Law Firm in Birmingham, where she works as a legal assistant, assisting with veterans disability benefits. According to Sam, “through this work, I have been able to assist our attorneys in increasing our veterans’ benefits with the VA. I have learned so much and I am grateful to have this experience before arriving at law school.”

Soon, Sam will move away from Alabama again to attend law school.

“I am very blessed to be struggling to decide between two prestigious law schools in Virginia,” she said. “I will move to Yorktown, Virginia, in July and spend the next three years earning my Juris Doctorate. Fortunately, both schools offer amazing international law programs with concentrations in national security, so I am hopeful I will be able to continue my legal work with veterans and service-members. For now, I am just praying and trusting that God will lead me in the right direction.”

For more information about Sam’s community service initiative, visit www.willingheartsdevoted2heroes.org.



Samantha Hennings with Saniyah Thomas, Miss Leeds Area Teen.



Miss Leeds Area at a Veterans Day event in Leeds last November.

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Jenkins receives Pell City Chamber's first-ever Lifetime Achievement Award

BY VALLEAN JACKSON

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Jay Jenkins has lived his life with the passion to take risks and do the unthinkable with a servant's heart, and he has found his niche in helping to make a difference in Pell City.

"I have been involved in Pell City ever since I've been here," he said. "I have been in Pell City for about 45 years now. I've done a lot of things within the city and across the state, but I just love Pell City and its people, and I love trying to make a better place for everybody, no matter what I'm doing. I feel like as a city councilman, I can be a part of helping it become a better place for the citizens here."

Jenkins is a Manhattan, Kansas native, who served 11 years in the United States Army Reserves, seven years as a legal clerk in an Army law detachment and four years as a heavy equipment operator in an engineering battalion. He was a manager for the Pell City office before retiring after 26 years, owned a small retail shop called All-Pro Trophy, was the club secretary for the Pell City Rotary club, was a chairman for the St. Clair County Literacy Council, received the designation of a certified municipal officer through the Alabama League of Municipalities, was Santa Claus in the Pell City Christmas parade for 38 years, and a list of other involvements in various organizations and events.

"When it comes to being on the city council, I never considered running for office or anything like that before," he said. "One of the city councilmen in my area resigned and took a job with the city, and I filled the remainder of his term. He talked me into it, and then the council and the mayor appointed me in July 2012, but I had to run that year to be re-elected. Nevertheless, I enjoy being a part of advancing the city and trying to do things right and help people. That is what I get out of being on the council. It's not about me, but doing what I can to make a difference."

Jenkins mentioned that everything that has been achieved in Pell City comes from everyone working together for the greater good of the city. He added that though each city councilman has their own district, everything they do affects the entire city. So working together is essential.

"In my time on the council, I would say that the city has grown tremendously," he said. "We have added a complete shopping center, so many businesses and restaurants, and things all over that are just unbelievable. We had the movie theater come in and things of that nature that have really helped our city to flourish. Then, of course, that led to the population increasing and just overall continued growth that we just want to see moving forward each year."

In the time Jenkins has spent in Pell City, his commitment to the betterment of the city and working to help improve its quality of life shows a man of action and his word. Aside from his memberships and positions on boards and councils, he found it in his heart to do something that many cities probably haven't had... and that's having the same person to be Santa Claus for the past 38 years. Jenkins enjoys the smiling faces every year and being a part of the parade.

For the 2024 Pell City Christmas Parade, it was the first year that Jenkins didn't grace the city with his red suit and beard to close out the parade. Instead, as an honor to his dedication for almost over three decades to the role, he was asked to appear in the front of the parade as its grand marshal.

"I don't think there is another city that can say that they have had the same Santa to close out their Christmas parade for 38 straight years," he said. "I was Santa Claus for so long that my grandboys always used to wonder where I disappeared to around that time of year. It was different not being in the back of the parade, but being in the front to start off the parade wasn't so bad either."

With so many accomplishments, his involvement in the community, and his dedication to the people in Pell City, it's no wonder as to why Jenkins was



"To be involved in the community goes beyond just me," says Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Jay Jenkins.

the recipient of the Pell City Chamber of Commerce's Lifetime Achievement Award. In an interview with The Daily Home, he had the following to say.

Q: Why do you feel the need to be involved in the community?

JENKINS: To be involved in the community goes beyond just me. It is the ability to help everybody have a better life, and it's honestly just what I like to do.

Q: What are your goals moving forward while continuing to be on the city council?

JENKINS: I don't have any specific goals moving forward. I just want to continue to better Pell City and its people.

Q: What is your favorite part about being a councilman?

JENKINS: My favorite part is being able to help the city and know that I am doing something that is making a difference not just now, but for the future of Pell City.

Q: What is your favorite project that you have worked on?

JENKINS: I would say that anything we brought here would have to be my favorite. There's so much that has come to Pell City since I've been on the council that has helped the city to grow and that draws people in to stop by and visit. For instance, I remember when the movie theater came, and it was a big deal. Then so



Jenkins has portrayed Santa Claus in the Pell City Christmas parade for almost 40 years.

was the bowling alley. We have people come from all over because the theater is so nice. It has those reclining seats, multiple theater screens, and the new shopping center has been a great addition too.

Q: Can you share any upcoming projects that the city is working on for 2025?

JENKINS: In one of our recent meetings, it was determined that two new restaurants are coming that people have been asking about for a while now. We will be getting a Longhorn Steakhouse and an Olive Garden. An Outback Steakhouse is also opening soon.

Q: When did you find out that you were the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award?

JENKINS: They tricked me, honestly, but I found out the night of the event. The Pell City Chamber of Commerce Business Awards is an annual thing, and for about four to five years I was there as a presenter for the Small Business of the Year award. However, for the recent one, they said they weren't going to do it the same way as previous years, and I said okay. Then a couple of weeks

before, they called and said the board needed me there for an award, and I felt that anybody could present an award, especially if they were doing things differently, but they kept asking. I eventually agreed, went, got there, looked at the program, didn't see my name, and that they had a new award on the list, but it didn't have a name by who the recipient was. Now I know why my name wasn't on the program, as I was the recipient for the first-ever lifetime achievement award.

Q: What do you think you were selected?

JENKINS: Everybody in town just about knows me because I'm involved in so much throughout Pell City. And one of the biggest factors that I believe played a part in it is being Santa Claus in the Pell City Christmas parade for 38 years.

Q: How do you feel to have been chosen?

Jenkins: I don't involve myself in the community to be recognized, but it's good to know that people appreciate it and recognize you've made a difference. To receive the lifetime achievement award was certainly appreciated.

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C.J. Knight boating on the Coosa River with wife Mary Teresa.

Masie Knight Memorial Scholarship Fund raises dollars for students in south Talladega County

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Twenty years after her untimely death, Masie Knight is still making a positive impact on the lives of people in her community.

An up-and-coming country music artist from Fayetteville, Knight was diagnosed with breast cancer in her early 20s, putting up a valiant fight for three-and-a-half years before succumbing to the disease in 2005 at the young age of 27.

Two decades after her passing, Knight's son C.J. ensures her legacy lives on while providing scholarships for deserving students in Talladega County. Since its inception, the scholarship fund has given away more than \$80,000 and continues to grow every year.

The Masie Knight Memorial Scholarship Fund was launched shortly after her passing by Masie's

younger brother, Shane McKee, who began offering scholarships, mostly out of his own pocket, to Talladega County students. In 2017, McKee turned the scholarship fund over to C.J., who found his footing early on by creating an annual event to raise funds.

"I was just out of college college, and I didn't even have a job," he explains. "I didn't know what to do, so I started a fundraiser. It's so crazy how much it's blown up."

That first year, Knight spent close to \$500 on a hunting rifle, selling raffle tickets and raising approximately



MASIE KNIGHT



C.J. KNIGHT

\$4,000 for scholarships in the process. Realizing he was on to something, Knight used his experiences fishing in local tournaments to come up with an idea for an outdoor event

— the annual squirrel rodeo.

Now in its seventh year, the Masie Knight Memorial Squirrel Rodeo serves as a vehicle to promote the outdoors to area youth while also raising funds for the scholarship through a raffle with prizes ranging from hunting rifles and game cameras to deer stands and taxidermy services.

"This is the seventh year that we've done it, and it's really turned into a big

community event," says Knight. "It's gained a lot of momentum."

The 2025 edition of the event was held in mid-February. Knight, who established the Masie Knight Memorial Scholarship Fund as a 501c3 in 2021, said the generous donations from local sponsors such as Orvis Shooting Grounds at Pursell Farms, Pradco Outdoors, Sylacauga Marine & ATV, and Bourbon on Broadway — among more than two dozen others — as well as the civic-minded individuals who have bought raffle tickets and formed teams over the years, has helped the Masie Knight Memorial Scholarship Fund offer more and more students with scholarships every year.

"Last year, I think we had 50 applicants for 12 scholarships, which was, by far more than any year before," he said. "I just wish we could raise enough money to give everybody a scholarship."



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Local Literacy Council prepares for annual spelling contest

BY BUDDY ROBERTS AND MICHELLE LOVE
THE DAILY HOME

Ron DeThomas is a man on a mission. He wants everyone to be able to read.

After one conversation with him, his drive and passion make it clear why he's the right person to serve as St. Clair County's coordinator for the Literacy Council of Alabama. Affiliated with the United Way of Central Alabama, the Literacy Council's mission is to improve the lives of adults and their families through literacy education that teaches people to read, write, and speak English.

The council estimates that 21 percent of adults ages 16-74 in Central Alabama need improved reading, writing, or language skills. Its programs align educational opportunities for adults to optimize their potential, pursue their goals, and help their families thrive.

DeThomas is a staunch proponent of that mission, but he's aware it doesn't come without challenges. "One of our biggest challenges," he said, "is to get people aware of what's going on with our programs so we can keep the ball rolling."

The council's most visible awareness program is The Great Grown-Up Spelling Bee, which returns to the Center for Education and Performing Arts in Pell City on March 6. The bee is a fundraiser competition of three-member teams, with a maximum number of 15 teams. DeThomas said participation has grown considerably over the years, with participants including medical professionals, lawyers, educators, and locals who just want to take part in some fun and friendly competition.

That isn't to say, though, that the teams don't take the contest very seriously.

"When I first started," DeThomas said, "I thought about this as just a lighthearted thing where people get together and it's no big deal, but you don't even grin when you talk about the spelling bee around these



RON DETHOMAS


people. It is serious with them, but they do enjoy the evening."

Words are chosen by the National Spelling Bee Foundation with traditional spelling bee rules. St. Clair

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Childersburg native tours the country as Broadway musical cast member

Los Angeles resident Corey Mekell reflects on his small-town roots

BY KELLI TIPTON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Career coaches and motivational speakers often say lasting success happens in stages.

Childersburg native Corey Mekell has seen many stages since he began touring with the Broadway musical, "Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of The Temptations." He is listed in the playbill as a swing member of the cast and described as an "emerging artist" from Los Angeles.

"Having a swing role means I have to be ready, at any time, to play any one of five parts," he said. "So I had to learn five different scripts. Each member of The Temptations had their own vocals and dance moves for each song, so I learned the same songs differently, and the mannerisms and choreography for each member in addition to their lines in the script. It's probably the most challenging thing I've ever done."

The tour included a stop at the Oxford Performing Arts Center last month, but snow and ice prevented the show from going on. The disappointed performer posted a message on Facebook to his hometown fans.

"For those that were ready to see me this weekend, just know I am devastated!!" it said. "We were ready to put on a phenomenal show! Thank you to every single person that purchased tickets, warmed my heart more than you know! If there's any update about future shows, I promise you, you'll hear it here from me first! From the bottom of my heart I felt all the love! Thank you soooooo so much!"

Then, just days later, MeKell received news from his friends in LA that his home there, his belongings, and the places he loved were in danger of being destroyed by fires sweeping through southern California.

Suddenly, focusing on his performances during the upcoming weeks became the more challenging than his onstage roles.

"Maintaining my focus during the fires, was definitely the most difficult thing I've ever had to do," he said. "I wish I could say I stayed calm initially. However, that wasn't the case. I was beyond nervous, as one could imagine, but my agent, my family and friends kept me together, encouraging me to keep my head in the game. My strategy to stay focused was to live in the moment and not worry about things I couldn't control."

Mekell eventually learned the fires stopped burning about 10 minutes from his Los Angeles home. He and the cast have celebrating 100 shows on their current tour, and he says he is "having a great time, but it has been a wild ride."

NEW YORK

Mekell moved to New York from Los Angeles last August for full-time rehearsals with the other cast members. He began touring with "Ain't Too Proud" in September, and on November 1, he made his debut in front



COREY MEKELL

of 2,000 people at Hershey Theater in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

"That night was incredible for me," he said. "It was validation for me as a singer, songwriter, and film actor that I am good enough to tour with a Broadway musical, and I do have a gift, and I do matter in spaces I never even imagined having access to."

LOS ANGELES

While living in California, Mekell gained recognition for his talents as a singer/songwriter, working with such major artists as Raven Symone, Chris Brown, Usher, and Jason Derulo.

In 2017, he toured with Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter Eric Bellinger and is featured alongside the artist on his hit single "IF."

He wrote five of the songs on NeYo's 2022 album, "Self Explanatory," proving his creativity and consistency as a songwriter. He also released two singles from a solo album he is recording between tour dates, writing sessions, modeling gigs and acting in made-for-TV movies for Netflix and other streaming sites.

"With this solo project, I wanted to bring the true essence of what I call Modern R&B back to the world," he said. "I feel that there's a certain type of R&B sound that the fans of it have been missing, and I'm excited to fill that void."

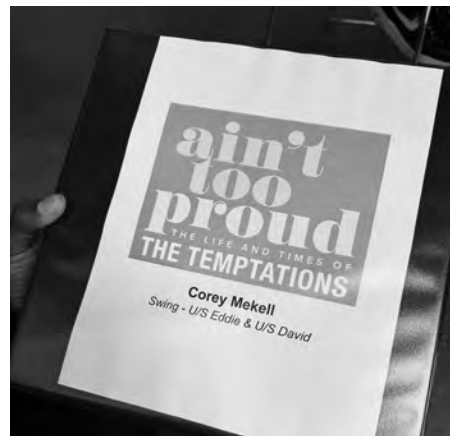
Mekell's "Pardon Me" and "N'trest" are available across all online music platforms, and according to comments made by subscribers, he is hitting the right notes with his smooth vocals and gritty lyrics.

He is acknowledged in the February issue of "People Magazine," for serenading Gabriel Union, and he performed with Omarion in Miami Gardens in March. He was signed to tour with Omarion's summer tour as a backup singer, but the tour was postponed.

"I have learned to be patient and to not take things personally," he said.

CHILDERSBURG

Resilience and patience are necessary qualities for longevity in the business, but Mekell credits his family for instilling core values like integrity, respect, and the pursuit of personal growth that help him make daily decisions that keep him focused and productive. He maintains a strong



relationship with his mother, Prudence Williams, and her sisters.

His aunt, Deborah Scott, said she calls him several times a week and always looks forward to his hometown visits.

Scott said she and her sisters were adopted by Frank an Ollie Evans of Childersburg in early 1966. Frank Evans was pastor of Mountain Gove Baptist Church in Childersburg for more than 40 years.

"Corey was raised in a house full of love," she said. "From the time he was little, we all pitched in and took care of him. His first public performance was on stage at Watwood Elementary, during a Christmas program when he was in kindergarten. He had a beautiful voice even at that age. Ollie made sure that he had singing lessons after that. I made sure that I was at everything he did, and I would leave work and rush home to get him to where he needed to go."

"And I know from our conversations since he moved away 10 years ago that some people have promised him things in return for his work and contributions, but they never kept their word. And people can be mean. But God always puts 10 good people in his path after every bad person he encounters, and these people have kept their word and given him credit for his creative contributions."

And we talk all the time. I constantly remind him to stay grounded in his faith and to put his trust in the Lord. God will use his talent for good things. He comes home when he can to unwind and rest. He's just Corey here. He has the same friends, and they come here and hang out. It's really laid back."

It's these small-town

family moments that keep him true to himself and accountable for choices he makes in cities that never sleep among people who don't keep promises.

"I would never do anything to embarrass my family," Mekell said. "They supported me from the beginning, in everything I wanted to do, and I know I the sacrifices they made, and the sacrifices I've made to be able to live my dream and achieve the goals I set for myself."

Sometimes, he added, it's hard for him to realize how much he has achieved. "I have been so busy just going and going, and doing this and everything else, that I haven't really looked back at all I've accomplished. My aunt reminded me during my last visit of things I've done this year, and it gave me a chance to reflect on what it means to be successful."

"And I believe if a person can make a decent living doing what they love to do, they are successful. And if they have a family that loves them and supports them by calling and visiting while they are working to be successful, they are blessed."

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LEAPS Academy is dedicated to helping its students thrive

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

LEAPS Academy was recently named Middle Business of the Year by the Pell City Chamber of Commerce.

LEAPS stands for Learning Effective Academic and Play Skills. The clinic helps children with varying delays and developmental disabilities to be able to survive and thrive in the world. It serves clients from birth to age 21.

Ashley Faust, founder of LEAPS Academy, opened the therapeutic service in 2010.

“My background is in early childhood special education with a minor in sociology and social psychology. I also have a national certification in behavior,” she said. “I knew I wanted to work one-on-one rather than in a public school.”

Faust says her desire to work with these clients is “just a God-given thing.”

Clients at LEAPS Academy can learn a variety of skills depending on what their needs are.

“They can learn basic communication, social and life skills and motor skills, as far as feeding, grooming, and dressing. They can learn social communication, how to get what they need as a child, how to apply for a job, how to play with their peers, or how to play independently. These are skills children generally develop on their own,” Faust said.

LEAPS Academy also offers targeted math and reading interventions,



tutoring and homeschool support.

The academy has about 500 appointments each week.

Faust says that if LEAPS Academy was not in operation, the children they serve would not be learning the skills they need.

“The majority of them have Medicaid, and the majority of providers don’t accept it. School-based services are available beginning at age three,



but private insurance skills are based on personal skills, rather than global skills.”

Everyone at LEAPS Academy is grateful for the recent recognition from the Pell City Chamber of Commerce.

“It is amazing,” Faust said. “It is such an honor that the community

recognizes us and our staff but also recognizes these babies and that they matter, and the hard work that they’re doing matters. Being named Middle Business of the Year gives us recognition and helps us continue to operate in these rural areas.”

Call 205-885-7621 for more information about LEAPS Academy.

FROM LITERACY ON PAGE 10E

County educator Walter Kennedy is the designated “Wordmaster” who reads the words out for the teams to spell, and DeThomas said nobody has access to the list of words ahead of time, so preparation is not really possible.

“There’s no list passed around so people know how to spell them ahead of time,” DeThomas said. “They keep you on your toes. There’s no error in this where people have foreknowledge of the words. It’s a controlled thing.”

While the event’s mission is a serious issue, that doesn’t mean the spelling bee participants don’t have fun with it. Some of the teams in the past have dressed up in costume, and there are door prizes given out throughout the evening including a dinner for two from local restaurants and gift cards from local shops.

In 2024, the annual bee raised approximately \$10,000, a huge jump from \$7,000 raised in 2023.

The Lakeside Hospice team the Lakeside Bee-lievers won in 2023 and back in 2019. Tracy Whitten with Lakeside Hospice is one of the team members of the Lakeside Bee-lievers. Her other team members are Francis Garrett and Dr. James Tuck, the Lakeside Hospice medical director.

Whitten said the council does a “phenomenal job” putting the event on every year.

“We just love it,” she said. “It’s needed. It’s a wonderful fundraiser. I’m very passionate about people who can’t read

and write, and I’m very passionate about that being carried through so they can get the help they need. It’s fun to come together and take part in it every year.”

DeThomas said that St. Clair County alone has a rate of 22 percent of adults that read at a first grade

level. Both DeThomas and Whitten discussed the hindrances of illiteracy in everyday life.

“There are people who can’t read a menu at a restaurant or read road signs – just things people take for granted but make such a huge difference,”

Whitten said. “Knowing that there are people out there that if they could learn to read, they could do stuff for themselves that they can’t do without that skill. I love reading, and it’s so sad to me there are people out there that can’t. If it wasn’t for the

Literacy Council they wouldn’t possibly be able to do that.”

The Great Grown-up Spelling Bee starts at 7 p.m. on Thursday, March 6, and admission is free to the public. If you’d like to participate, register your three-person team

by visiting Pellcitycepa.com/spell. The registration form can be edited digitally and sent via email to Ron DeThomas with the Literacy Council at wisdom.seekers@ymail.com. The entry fee is \$100, which can also be paid online.

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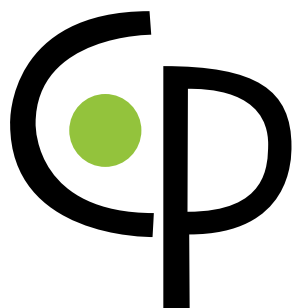
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UPDATE 2025

Commerce
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UPDATE

FEBRUARY
2025

Special Supplement to **The Daily Home**

UPDATE 2025

Finding the humanity in Commerce

‘Commerce’ is one of those words that isn’t used often in everyday conversation. And when it is used, such as in references to chambers of commerce or state and federal departments of commerce, not much thought is given to its meaning.

Generally, ‘commerce’ is defined as ‘the activity of buying or selling’ or ‘the exchange of goods, services or something of value between individuals or businesses.’



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

As is often the case, those definitions are more than a bit clinical and contain little hint of humanity. That’s why we can’t talk about commerce strictly in terms of definitions.

Commerce is all about humanity.

Who engages in the activity of buying or selling? People do.

Who makes the exchanges of goods, services, and valuable things? Once again, it’s people.

We are reminded of that through some of the stories in this Commerce section of Update. It looks

at small businesses in north and central Talladega County, including such communities as Lincoln, Munford, and Talladega.

It is in these pages that we find what’s missing in the definitions of the word ‘commerce:’ the stories of the people who are making it happen. The stories of people who love their communities, love serving others, love producing quality products and love making positive contributions in the lives of others as they operate the small businesses that provide their own livelihoods.

Being a small business owner is stressful and challenging even under the best of circumstances, but the unprecedented events of recent years have intensified those stresses and challenges. Some of the stories presented in this Commerce sections will explain how some local small businesses have recently started or persevered for years. Others will detail how the area chambers of commerce has worked to support business owners and what other local initiatives are doing to assist small businesses and promote civic improvement.

Local businesses are sometimes referred to as “the backbone of local communities, landmarks and establishments that bring a sense of home and comfort to generations, neighbors helping neighbors and friends helping friends.” Such statements could easily be taken as cliches, but they shouldn’t be, just like the humanity of commerce should not be overlooked.

We hope these Commerce stories will inform and inspire you. And we encourage you to support the business owners you read about and who have advertised in this Update publication so that The Daily Home may present these stories to you.

UPDATE 2025

Commerce: Talladega Lincoln • Munford

PUBLISHERS

Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR

Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Laci Braswell
Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Loyd McIntosh
Laura Nation
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER

Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Darla Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Pam Isbell

RETAIL

ADVERTISING SALES

Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER

Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES

Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION

Elijah King
Charlene Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER

Debbie Bussie

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Michael's Men's Wear still thriving after 56 years in business

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

A beloved anchor of The Courthouse Square in downtown Talladega, Michael's Men's Wear has been one of the city's key businesses for 56 years.

Under the watchful eye of owner Michael Gee, Michael's has been helping men from Talladega and beyond look their best since the Nixon administration, and despite constant changes in the retail clothing business, the shop remains one of the last mainstays from Talladega's glory days.

Michael's Men's Wear was launched by Jay Gee (Michael's father) in 1969 on the corner of Court Street and Battle. The elder Gee launched the small business after a few years of working in a lumber mill and at his uncle's shop, The Pants Store, a longtime key business in downtown Leeds. With his cousin Mickey finishing college and set to take over The Pants Store, Jay Gee decided it was time to strike out on his own.

Michael Gee explains that his father initially saved enough money to buy an existing Western Auto location, but after the deal fell through, Michael's mother encouraged her husband to go into the retail clothing business himself.

"Mom turned to him and said 'Get into something you know,'" relates Gee, chatting about the business's founding while lounging in the store's shoe section. "You can't open a sawmill."

Gee decided to leave the small town of Leeds and set up shop in Talladega, which had experienced significant growth throughout the 1960s. Michael's Men's Wear originally occupied the only empty space on the square, a single storefront next door to Southern Shoe, where the store has remained ever since. "Talladega was a good place for us," says Michael Gee. "It was a good base, and we've built our business here."

In the decades since its humble beginnings, Michael's has expanded, now occupying three storefronts - use the original corner entrance, please - outlasting the age of big department stores, indoor malls, the domination of online retail, and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic by staying ahead of the curve and the best customer service experience possible.

"We shocked everybody. We opened at 9 and stayed until 9 six days a week," Gee said "My daddy worked a lot of hours. He got here at 8:30 and closed at 9, six days a week. "Customer service is very important to us. That's the biggest thing that we have going for us that the department stores don't (have). Think about it. When you walk into a department store, if you want something, you have to find somebody. You don't have to find anybody here."

Gee is proud of the fact that Michael's Men's Wear is one of the last stores offering free alterations, and other old-school services out of his decidedly old-school establishment. Walking through the store is like entering in a time machine, and that's a good thing. While the clothing options have changed throughout the years, the decor and feel emit a late 70s-early 80s vibe that is a significant part of the store's charm.

Now 71, Gee was 15 years old when his father opened Michael's Men's Wear, and he's never left. He took over the store in the mid-1980s following his father's retirement. Over the years, he has seen every fashion trend imaginable come and go, from bell bottoms and Nehru jackets in the 70s, parachute pants and MC Hammer pants in the 80s, flannel shirts and ripped jeans in the 90s, and so on. However, one thing has remained constant: a level of customer service that shoppers of Michael's Men's Wear have come to expect for more than 50 years.

"I was raised when a man comes in your front door, he's doing you a favor. You're not doing him a favor," Gee says, "and if he doesn't buy anything, tell him 'thank you' because he still did you the favor of coming in your store."



Michael's Men's Wear is at the corner of Court and Battle streets in downtown Talladega.



Owner Michael Gee



BOURBON STREET COMES TO TALLADEGA

Downtown hosts kickoff to the 'Biggest Party North of Mobile'



BY LACI BRASWELL
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Talladega's downtown business district is ready to host the area's two-week long Mardi Gras celebration, which begins today (Saturday, February 22) and concludes Saturday, March 1.

This year's Mardi Gras festivities feature a pancake breakfast, sponsored by the Talladega Masonic Lodge, a parade, a Party Gras on the courthouse square, and the annual gala.

"We're excited to continue our tradition of being the biggest Mardi Gras party north of Mobile," said Lauren Deal, executive director of the Historic Ritz Theatre. "It will provide a much-needed break from the mid-winter blues with a fun, safe and festive outdoor environment."



PANCAKE BREAKFAST

As in years past, the Mardi Gras activities will start with the pancake breakfast from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. today.

"Members of the lodge have always been supportive and wonderful to help us with Mardi Gras," Deal said. "Tickets can be purchased at the door, and funds raised from the breakfast benefit the lodge." The Talladega Masonic Lodge is at 109 Court Street North. Tickets cost \$5.

PARADE

The Talladega Mardi Gras parade starts at 11 a.m. today

Deal said that Valerie Burrage, executive director of United Way of North Talladega County and Talladega's 2024 Citizen of the Year, will be the grand marshal.

Participants will include a variety of floats, bands, antique cars, walking groups, and the Shriners Comedy Units from Alabama and Georgia.

"There is no entry fee. It is absolutely free," Deal said. She encourages parade participants to purchase beads and Moon Pies from The Ritz. Beads cost \$60 a case, and Moon Pies cost \$35 a case.

Deal said the route will be the same

as previous years, starting at Zora Ellis Junior High School at 414 Elm St. and heading east down South Street to Asbury Street, which follows to East Battle Street at the former Rite Aid Pharmacy building.

The parade will continue west on East Battle toward the courthouse square, where it will then circle the square before heading down East Street to South Street, ending back at Zora Ellis.

PARTY GRAS

Immediately following the parade, the annual Party Gras will return to the Courthouse lawn.

"Join us for a day filled with Cajun food trucks, gumbo, cocktails, live music and family-friendly activities that will keep the Mardi Gras spirit alive throughout the afternoon," Deal said. "We hope guests will feel like they are at the heart of downtown Bourbon Street."

GALA

The Ritz's annual Mardi Gras Gala will conclude the two-week long celebration, on Saturday, March 1, inside the International Motorsports Hall of Fame from 6 p.m. until midnight.

The six-hour long event will feature a "Big Easy" multi-course dinner catered by Classic on Noble. As always, the evening will include silent and live auctions, raffles, live music, a top-shelf bar, and more.

"We are thrilled to announce Scott Deering and The Usual Suspects featuring Kirk Jay as the headlining band for our Mardi Gras Gala 2025," Deal said. "This dynamic and electrifying group of musicians brings unparalleled energy and versatility to every performance. With decades of combined experience, they have mastered a wide range of genres, from soulful R&B and toe-tapping country to timeless rock and high-energy pop. Their ability to seamlessly blend music across generations ensures there's something for everyone to enjoy."

Deal continued, "If you were fortunate enough to attend their unforgettable performance at The Ritz on January 17, then you already know just how incredible this band is. Their ability to engage the audience, deliver exceptional musicianship, and create a one-of-a-kind atmosphere left the crowd wanting more."

She added, "Together, Scott Deering and The Usual Suspects with Kirk Jay



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promise to turn the Mardi Gras Gala into an exhilarating celebration of music, dance, and joy.”

Deal expressed the significance of the gala, and how it helps the community.

“The Ritz Mardi Gras Gala is more than just a celebration; it’s an opportunity for the community to make a meaningful impact on education and the arts in Talladega,” Deal said. “Proceeds from the Gala directly support the Historic Ritz Theatre’s free educational programs, which inspire creativity, foster learning, and provide students of all ages with opportunities to engage with the performing arts.”

These programs not only entertain but also educate, enriching the cultural fabric of the community and nurturing a deeper appreciation for the arts, Deal said.

Additionally, the funds raised help preserve the Historic Ritz Theatre itself, a cherished landmark that serves as a beacon of creativity and history in the region. “Attending the gala allows community members to enjoy a festive evening while contributing to the continued growth and sustainability of the theatre as a hub for cultural and educational events,” she said. “By coming together to celebrate,

the community ensures the legacy of the Ritz Theatre and its programs, inspiring the next generation of artists, performers, and leaders.”

Gala ticket price options are as follows: single \$120; couple \$240; and the 2025 monumental year special, a table of eight \$960. It is an additional \$50 to reserved singles and couples tables.

For additional details, call the Historic Ritz Theatre at 256-315-0000

and leave a voicemail, or email Ldeal@ritzalladega.com.



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Pheasant Cove at Brookside Farm & Venue is now open for weddings, events

BY VALLEAN JACKSON

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Pheasant Cove at Brookside Farm and Venue is a new event space in Talladega that sits on almost 60 acres. The picturesque landscape has Kelly Creek running through it, a pond, farmland, pheasants, quails, a Southern manor, and more. Its natural beauty is the ideal backdrop for weddings, company events, family gatherings, school functions, or even an afternoon with friends.

Owners Hughlena and Shane Kay saw the need to offer something one-of-a-kind to the Talladega area. They took a once-private property that had never before been open to the public and transformed it into a charming place where people can create amazing memories that they will cherish for a lifetime.

"I started this business," Kay said, "because I love making things beautiful, and my belief in fairytales kind of just became my thing – the magic behind them, I'd say. To own a wedding venue and event space wasn't my longtime dream, but my love for entertaining people, decorating, and making events special led me down the road of owning a venue. When it all came together, I knew this space was too beautiful not to share, and that's kind of how it all came along."

Development of Pheasant Cove at Brookside Farm and Venue started with remodeling the property in March of 2024, and it hosted its first event (an after-hours event for the Talladega Chamber of Commerce) in December, officially opening to the public in January. The venue is available to host weddings, bridal showers, bridal teas, or any special event.

"Some of the property features include a large venue which we call the banquet hall or The Pheasant," Kay said. "It's at the top of the hill overlooking everything. We have a croquet court wrapped with a performance stage beside a clubhouse that has a creek running beside it, a bridal cottage where they can stay overnight that can accommodate six to eight people, a groomsman's house with grilling areas that can accommodate six to eight people, a



Owners Hughlena and Shane Kay.

wraparound open deck, swimming pool, fountains, hot tub, and our house sits in the middle."

In an interview with The Daily Home, Kay had the following to say.

Q: What does the venue bring to Talladega?

KAY: It is a different style of venue than there is everywhere else. People have asked about other event spaces that we would be competing with, and I don't think there's any, because there's only so many Saturdays in every month. Everybody can't use one facility. I just want to compliment the area by offering a different style than what other people offer. We're a brand new venue and are glad to host spring and summer weddings this year. Our calendar is open and is filling up. Thus far, we have some weddings booked for this fall and even some for 2026. However, I'd love to see some action for spring and summer of this year. So if you have a last minute event or wedding and need an event space, check out us.

Q: What are your goals for 2025?



KAY: To have some family events here along with a few other things. With it being our first year, we're doing smaller events and family events. I would also love to see corporate picnics here.

Q: What is something that makes the venue unique?

KAY: We will be offering some all-inclusive packages where people can come book with us, and we will handle the rest. That will include everything from flowers, photography, and more.

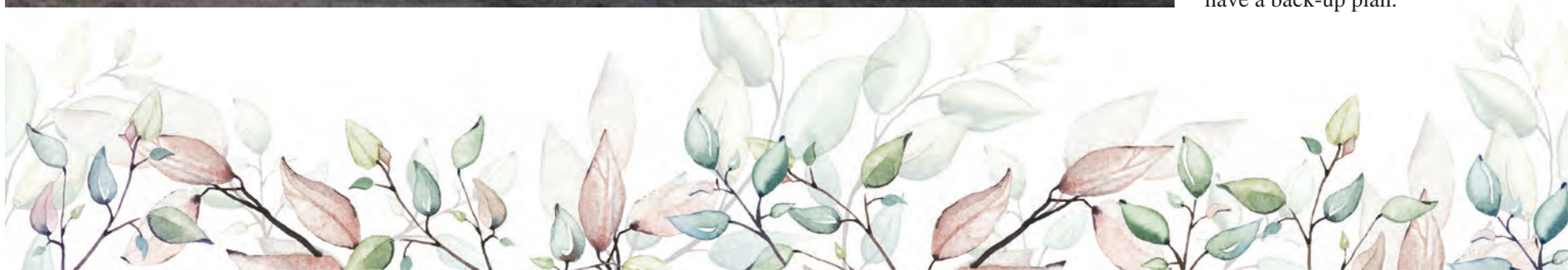
We have preferred vendors that will work with us that will allow us to be able to do those things.

Q: Does Pheasant Cove at Brookside Farm and Venue have any upcoming events?

KAY: On May 17, we're having what we call the Brookside Ball. It's a Bridgerton-inspired ball. We're also going to do a strutting show for the ladies. We will have a flyer coming out with more information. Then on May 18, we are having a styled bridal expo show from 1-4 p.m. where we will have arbors done, people in wedding gowns, and photographers. We're going to style four different wedding shoots and vendors, so a bride can see what the arbor looks like decorated with florals and get the feel of what a wedding would look like. We're hoping that our Brookside Ball becomes an annual event. Lastly, we're hosting Donoho's prom here in April.

Q: What advice can you give about preparing for a wedding or event?

KAY: Hire a wedding planner or event coordinator. It sounds simple, but there's a lot more that goes into that day and making sure that everything goes off without a hitch than people imagine. It's not something that most people's aunts – unless that's what she does for a living – can do. You invest a lot in making that day special, and you don't want anything to cause it to unravel. So after securing your venue, hire the event planner or coordinator to help you through the process, because the things you don't think about, they're going to know. They will have a checklist, the experience, the contacts, and in case a problem arises, they'll have a back-up plan.



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Talladega Chamber of Commerce seeks a return to the city's past as a thriving commercial center

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

As executive director of the Greater Talladega Chamber of Commerce, longtime business owner Donnie Miller is adamant about helping Talladega get back to its vibrant, thriving self and about building up the community.

"The square used to have every single building with somebody in it," he recalls. "Downtown would be covered up from eight o'clock in the morning till five o'clock in the evening. There'd be cars parked in every parking spot and people driving around trying to find a parking spot. That's the Talladega I'm trying to help it become again. It was great growing up as a kid here in Talladega, and I just know getting back to that will make a great difference."

Miller has 20 years of business experience that he believes is beneficial not just in his role as chamber director but to current and aspiring business owners. One of his goals is to create an entertainment district in Talladega.

"Aside from the businesses and entertainment, another one of my aspirations is to build the chamber back up," Miller said. "The chamber always had something going on all the time, events all across the city. Now with this being Talladega, Lincoln, and Munford, you're having to run three different cities out of one area. So it's kind of hard, but I've landed with both feet down and the fire running behind my back."

The Greater Talladega Chamber of Commerce offers many helpful services, but Miller believes that one of greatest services offered is social networking.

"We've gone from having 130 members in the chamber to over 200 now. We're growing, and we want anybody that wants to be part of that growth."

In an interview for this Update publication, Miller had the following to say.

Q: What makes the Greater



Talladega Chamber unique?

MILLER: Well, we have three chambers in the county, but we're working together. We have what's called an alliance association. We meet every quarter in either Talladega or Sylacauga or Childersburg to invite people to come to see what's new going on as far as industries or anything of that nature. We're trying to work to make this county strong with chamber members. We offer a lot of incentives to the members to help them grow as well as to help the county grow.

Q: What is a significant accomplishment that the chamber achieved in 2024?

MILLER: Probably just putting together a new website as well as getting information out to people a lot more. We have been working on more social contact and people getting out and seeing what's out there and getting response from the business owners.

Q: What was the biggest event in 2024, and how was the turnout?

MILLER: Halloween, we probably had close to 1,800 people here. We had a Trunk or Treat in our parking lot. We had some requests from some of our chamber members who were business owners. We had 22 trunk or treaters handing out candy. We started at 5 p.m., and by 6 most of them had run out of candy. We had people that were down East Street and down Coffee Street. Then the Christmas Parade, of course, as another big event.

Q: During g 2024, did the chamber



receive any awards or special recognition?

MILLER: We were credited as a U.S. Chamber member and as a State Chamber member.

Q: What are some goals for the chamber for 2025?

MILLER: We're having a car show here, we are in the process now of trying to find a Christmas tree farm that

can provide us with Christmas trees for a project we have going on. I would also like to see Talladega with a little more businesses drawing the public from outside the city. This can draw more into the city to see what all we have to offer. We do have some unique houses and buildings, and we have some unique venues and services that people need to see.

Freedom Fitness focuses on convenience and community

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Freedom Fitness is a locally-owned 24-hour gym that opened in 2024 in Lincoln. It is owned by veteran Corey McCord and his wife April.

Corey is a former Marine and athlete who long ago had a desire to have his own gym.

"I think the gym is one of the greatest forms of discipline that there is," he said. "I feel like a person's physical fitness speaks volumes. The gym has always been empowering for my body. It's where I find my discipline, motivation, and it's where I'm always able to succeed. So I wanted to be able to supply that for other people, to give them a facility where they're able to go in and win every day."

April equally loves fitness, after about four years of living in Lincoln, their drive back and forth to Oxford to workout was became tedious. They believed that if they were feeling that way, other Lincoln residents probably were too. So they opened Freedom Fitness.

"All of our members have access to the gym 24/7 with our members app on their phone," April said. "We offer

tanning, locker rooms with daily use lockers, a workout of the day written on a board in our classroom, and we have a play area for their children. It is supervised Monday through Friday. We also have pre-workout protein, lifting equipment that is available for purchase, tanning lotions, workout log books, and anything really that you would need for your workout."

In an interview with The Daily Home, she and Corey had the following to say.

Q: Did you two always have a feeling that Freedom Fitness was going to happen?

APRIL: Well, I will say, if my husband puts his mind to something, it's going to happen eventually. I guess it started out as just a dream that I hoped that it would happen. Once we moved to Lincoln, it was more of, 'Hey, let's try and find a way for this to happen.' We loved the Lincoln community as soon as we got involved in it.

Q: How have you seen the business make a difference in Lincoln?

APRIL: The community has certainly taken a liking to the gym. We've seen a lot more people staying on track to their goals now that they have a place close

by. We have had a lot of people tell us that the fact that it's right here on their way home or way to work is convenient for them.

Q: What makes the gym unique?

APRIL: We're community-oriented. Corey and I pretty much built the whole gym ourselves with the community in mind. It has unique equipment that other gyms around our area do not have. We have a pendulum squat machine and a belt squat machine that we just added. We are also updating our equipment as frequently as we can.

Q: What does the business mean to you?

APRIL: It means a lot to me, the fact that we can open this facility to

the community so that they can take advantage of it, especially the youth. We allow ages 11 to 13 to come and work out with their parents, and ages 14 to 18 can come and work out by themselves, but with a parental waiver. The fact that everyone in the community does have the opportunity to live a healthier and more fit lifestyle means a lot to me, that we can give that to everyone.

Q: What fitness advice would you offer to beginners?

COREY: Establish discipline, and put yourself first. Have the discipline to get up in the morning and eat a healthy breakfast. Get up and walk. Walk before you go to bed. Work out, make some time

to exercise. Taking the time to invest in yourself makes a great difference.

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UPDATE 2025

Commerce
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UPDATE

FEBRUARY
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Special Supplement to **The Daily Home**

UPDATE 2025

Commerce: What does it mean?

‘Commerce’ is a word that isn’t used much in everyday conversation. And when it is used, such as in references to chambers of commerce or state and federal departments of commerce, not much thought is given to its meaning.

Generally, ‘commerce’ is defined as ‘the activity of buying or selling’ or ‘the exchange of goods, services or something of value between individuals or businesses.’



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

As is often the case, those definitions are more than a bit clinical and contain little hint of humanity. That’s why we can’t talk about commerce strictly in terms of definitions.

Commerce is all about humanity.

Who engages in the activity of buying or selling? People do.

Who makes the exchanges of goods, services, and valuable things? Once again, it’s people.

We are reminded of that through some of the stories in this Commerce section of Update, which

showcases small businesses in south Talladega County communities, such as Sylacauga, Oak Grove, Childersburg, and Fayetteville.

It is in these pages that we find what’s missing in the definitions of the word ‘commerce:’ the stories of the people who are making it happen. These are stories of people who love their communities, love serving others, love producing quality products and love making positive contributions in the lives of others as they operate the small businesses that provide their own livelihoods.

Being a small business owner was stressful and challenging under the best of circumstances, even before the unprecedented events (at least in our lifetime) of the past five years intensified those stresses and challenges. Some of the stories presented here will explain how many local small businesses have persevered and become pillars in their communities. Others will detail how area chambers of commerce have worked to support business owners what some local agencies and individuals are doing to assist small businesses and encourage support for shopping locally, and how businesses have invested in their cities.

Small businesses have been described as the backbone of their communities. Longtime small businesses have been described as landmark establishments that bring a sense of home and comfort to generations, as neighbors helping neighbors and friends helping friends.

Such statements could easily be taken as cliches, but they shouldn’t be, just like the humanity of commerce should not be overlooked.

We hope these Commerce stories will inform and inspire you. And we encourage you to support the business owners you read about and who have advertised in this Update publication so that The Daily Home may present these stories to you.

UPDATE 2025

Commerce: Sylacauga Oak Grove • Childersburg

PUBLISHERS

Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR

Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Laci Braswell
Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Lloyd McIntosh
Laura Nation
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER

Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Darla Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Pam Isbell

RETAIL

ADVERTISING SALES

Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER

Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES

Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION

Elijah King
Charlene Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER

Debbie Bussie

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Coosa Valley Chamber of Commerce

Making a difference for local businesses



Executive director John Mark Freeman

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

The Greater Coosa Valley Chamber of Commerce continues to expand its reach and adhere to its mission to advocate for local businesses.

“What keeps me dedicated to being on the chamber is the growth potential that we have,” said John Mark Freeman, the organization’s executive director. “To see where we have come from in the past three years and knowing that I had the opportunity to lead and be a part of that is really exciting. I love how we’re able to meet with more people and strengthen our community. It brings me much joy to have a job where I get to go to work and help somebody solve an issue.”

Freeman believes that one of the greatest services the chamber offers is advocacy. Advocating for businesses is something he feels the chamber has “really done a great job of. It’s highly beneficial to be in place to just help connect those dots. It’s almost like a mixture of collaboration and advocacy at the same time.”

Freeman added, “I feel like I am in this position to be a voice for people even when they’re not in the room. A lot of them don’t even know that I’m doing it or when I do it, but I know it helps to have that level of support and advocacy. I have witnessed first-hand how creating more awareness for a business has made a difference not just for that business but the community as well.”



Freeman presents a chamber award to the Coosa Valley Electric Cooperative.

In an interview with The Daily Home, Freeman had the following to say.

Q: What makes the Coosa Valley Chamber unique?

FREEMAN: I think it’s a personality superpower that I have to be very personable and relatable with all of our people. I think the majority of my chamber membership would say that if they have a problem, they can contact me in some form, and I will respond. They know that if needed I’ll be at their doorstep, if that’s what it takes. I think that personal approach makes a great difference because we are a smaller community and chamber, but we use that to our advantage. That means that we get to have more points of contact with our members and we’re constantly working to improve and expand.

Q: What is an accomplishment that the chamber achieved in 2024?

Freeman: The ability to have the cash

flow to bring on another employee. I worked diligently along with the board for the past three years to be able to bring that person on board, pay them well, and offer a job that people wanted. I think that is something that we’re very proud of.

Q: For 2024, did the chamber receive any awards or special recognition?

FREEMAN: On the federal level, they have an award that they give out to chambers of commerce, and it’s called 40 Under 40. They take chamber executives and chamber employees over the whole United States, and if you are performing very well in your position and make a little bit of a difference, you get recognized. I may not have won, but our state association only nominated one person in the state of Alabama and that was myself from the Coosa Valley Chamber.

Q: How did that level of recognition

make you feel?

FREEMAN: I was surprised, if I’m being honest with you. I just think I was looking at it as just me doing my job. I really appreciate it, but to me it came out of nowhere. However, when I took a step back and reflected, we really have accomplished a lot in just three years, and if with my leadership that showed, I’m grateful to be recognized.

Q: What are some goals for the chamber for 2025?

FREEMAN: The goal is to go out and really sell the chamber to other people so that we can continue to strengthen our community. The past three years have been a lot of fine tuning who we are, trying to figure out who we are, what we want to do, and how we’re going to execute that vision. So 2025 is a year that we hope to see some incredible growth as far as membership.

Town of Oak Grove offers stable setting for new businesses

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Oak Grove invites businesses to consider the “hidden gem” of a town when opening a location. The small town has plenty of potential for prospective employers.

Sales tax revenue in the town remains stable, and the town foresees no challenges in the short-term future. Town investments remain steady, and no large-scale expenditures are planned.

The town has procured a contractor to clear land to expand park activities beginning this spring. Oak Grove is planning to add pickleball courts this year.

In late 2024, Cody Cleghorn was appointed to serve as chief of the Oak Grove Volunteer Fire Department. Chief Cleghorn has been with the department since October 2019. The fire department plans to apply to the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program to acquire funds for a new pumper this year.

The Town of Oak Grove approved and submitted an ordinance to the Alabama Office of Water Resources to join the National Flood Insurance Program. Once the town is approved, residents should then be eligible to buy flood insurance, although there are no significant flood areas in the town.

Oak Grove has completed systemwide sewer work funded by CDBG and ARC.

The resurfacing of Gantts Junction Road is expected to be completed this spring. This year, Oak Grove will be conducting surveys and assessments to determine the overall status of



roads within the town limits. This information will be used to create a transportation asset and improvement plan to inform prudent use of taxpayer dollars that are restricted to road work.

Oak Grove continues to provide door-to-door transportation service funded in part by the 5311 program which supports public transportation for people living in any area outside of an urbanized area. The town has acquired two new buses which increased its operational fleet to three buses.

Oak Grove held its 13th annual Hodges Meteorite Festival in October. The Comer Museum and Arts Center in Sylacauga loaned its meteorite replica to the town for display during the festival. The festival featured three live bands, inflatables and a Home Depot-sponsored children’s workshop. Marble City Cruisers were on-site with their classic and vintage vehicles, and several food and craft vendors also attended the event.

Last year, the town purchased and installed a digital sign mounted to town hall that displays details about important events and other general information. The town has also



Mayor Tony White

begun using social media regularly for informational updates and announcements.

This year, Oak Grove town staff members are collaborating with residents on town branding and

marketing. Final designs are expected to be completed this fall or early winter.

With these on-going developments, Oak Grove is a town with a promising future and an appeal to business owners.

Take a trip back in time at Sweet Pickins antique mall

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Last September, Jerica McLellan became the new owner of Sweet Pickins. The vintage and antique marketplace boasts more than 100 vendors with a wide variety of wares.

“They have a complete variety: vintage home decor to antique furniture to handcrafted gifts,” said McLellan, “Our vendors bring in the most unique stuff, including some I’ve never seen before. As far back as I can remember, I have obsessed over old stuff and flea markets and junking. I have always loved it. Keeping this gorgeous, well-made stuff out of landfills is a dream I

never knew I had.”

Sweet Pickins is a community-oriented business, and McLellan appreciates the warm response from the community.

“We are extremely community-oriented, and we love this place. My husband and I lived in Florida for a few years before we moved back. Childersburg is home, and with Sweet Pickins, we get to be a bigger part of the community,” she said.

“We are probably more therapists than anything else,” McLellan added with a laugh, “People lay their problems on us, and we listen. We embrace the community.”

She first experienced the overwhelming support of the community during Sweet Pickins’ first open house in the fall.

“It was just pouring down rain, and we still had a line of people waiting to get inside and shop. At Christmas, we had an open house and brought in Santa and Mrs. Claus. We had refreshments, and so many people came and fixed a plate and hung out. After our Christmas open house, I was just teary-eyed to know that the community loves this place as much as we do.”

McLellan says that Sweet Pickins is the only indoor antique mall in Childersburg and the only one on their side of Highway 280.

“If you enjoy the thrill of the hunt, then we are a one-stop shop for that. We have so many vendors, and you just dig through. If you enjoy going back to a simpler time, even if it is just while you’re walking the store, you will enjoy Sweet Pickins. When you walk in, you go back in time. We play oldies music, and you see all these vintage items that just take you back to your grandparents’ house.”

Sweet Pickins will host a spring open house on Saturday, March 15, with refreshments from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and giveaways from 11 a.m.-4 p.m. You must be present to be eligible to win a giveaway.



Sweet Pickins is at 80 River Run Road in Childersburg. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays.

‘It’s one big family’ at Lori Darlin’s at Kozy Korner

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Lori Manning owns Lori Darlin’s at Kozy Korner in Fayetteville.

“I had a restaurant years ago called The Hog. I sold it, then bought it back in 2017 as Lori Darlin’s,” she said. Lori Darlin’s is a one room building called Kozy Korner at 126 Talladega Springs Road, outside Sylacauga.

“Well, you know how that goes. Once a building is known by one name, it will always be that name, so I said it’s always going to be called Kozy Korner, so we just went with it and renamed the restaurant Lori Darlin’s at Kozy Korner,” Manning explained.

Manning’s family was somewhat skeptical about her initial decision to open a restaurant, as she did not have much culinary experience prior to opening Lori Darlin’s. “The building was available, and I made the decision to open the restaurant. My family laughed at me when I said I was doing it,” said Manning with a chuckle. But it’s worked out well.

Lori Darlin’s at Kozy Korner boasts a large menu including such popular items as barbecue, catfish, and pork chops. The French fry supreme with barbecue meat is a customer favorite, and the employee-invented Graysn Special (french fries topped with chicken and covered in a tangy sauce) is a hit with children. Manning says it is difficult to pick her own favorite order, but she loves the chicken fingers.



Lori Darlin’s at Kozy Korner decked out for the 2025 holiday season. The restaurant, which draws regulars from as far away as Montgomery, is open from 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays.

“I’m here every day. A lot of days, I’m in and out. Sometimes, I even get on the line and cook or run the window,” Manning explained.

Her relationships with her customers and employees are her favorite part of owning the restaurant.

“The response from the community has been awesome. We do a lot of stuff with the school, and we have a very supportive community. In fact, this

past Saturday we did a fundraiser for the softball team. We let all the softball girls waitress and make money. We have a great rapport with the school,” said Manning.

“I think the reason we do as well as we do is because it is a friendly, laid-back atmosphere. People come from

Anniston and Alexander City and Montgomery just because they love the waitresses. It is one big family here.”

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Fair to Middlin' offers a variety of clothing and gift items.



Kara Eslinger is the owner of Fair to Middlin' Gifts and Boutique at 705 1st Street SW in Childersburg. Store hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Fridays and 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays.

Fair to Middlin' Gifts & Boutique is new member of Childersburg business community

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Kara Eslinger owns Fair to Middlin' Gifts and Boutique in Childersburg. She decided she wanted a career change and saw a need in her community that she could fill.

"In order to buy a gift, you would have to go to the next town over or even up to Birmingham," she explained. "We had our grand opening last November, and the reception has been very positive so far. People love that they can come in and buy clothing or a quick gift item."

Eslinger's store's name was inspired

by her grandfather.

"I was really close to my grandparents growing up," she said. "I'd ask my grandad how he was doing, and he'd always say, 'Fair to middlin,'" and that always stuck with me. He was a humble, family man with high ethical values. I wanted to name the store after him and dedicate it to him and go along with my Southern roots. I want to keep the same values in my business that he did in his life."

Fair to Middlin' offers clothing in sizes ranging from XS to 3X, including graphic t-shirts, sweaters and dresses. The store also sells

devotionals, King James version Bibles and Blind Date with a Book.

"We also have several purse and bag options, as well as jewelry. We have candles that you can use as a lotion that are 100 percent soy, and the fragrance is skin-safe. We have essential oils, bath bombs, room spray and laundry soap," said Eslinger.

There are currently very select men's items including soap and an "everywhere spray" that can be used as cologne or an air spray. Eslinger says they will be expanding their men's inventory soon.

"We have a lot of unique items and

gift ideas, and I will be bringing in more. I put a lot of thought into every single purchase I make, and I want to have it at a fair price. I do research before I do business with any vendor. I want to have nice items at different price points."

Eslinger is grateful for all of the community support for Fair to Middlin' Gifts and Boutique.

"I want to thank every single person who has ever come in and shopped and for their encouragement and support. We are so happy. Every kind word is beyond words. I can't thank them enough."



Barrio Fiesta Mexican Grill is at 40810 U.S. Highway 280 in Sylacauga.

Barrio Fiesta 'A great time for every customer every visit'

BY VALLEAN JACKSON

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

If you love Mexican cuisine and you live in southern Talladega County, then the new Barrio Fiesta Mexican Grill is definitely worth a visit.

The restaurant opened in January and is already developing an excellent reputation for its food, atmosphere, and customer service.

"Since opening, I think we're doing great with business," said manager Christian Sanchez. "We have customers coming from the other location we have in Chelsea because this one is closest. So between the convenience and the food, we're very busy."

Sanchez's statement of the restaurant being busy is no understatement. As this interview was being conducted, even

after the noon lunch rush, he was tending to customers while answering interview questions, telling customers to have a good day and thanking them for coming, his voice rising above the background noise of a still-crowded dining room at 2 in the afternoon.

Barrio Fiesta Mexican Grill is festive and colorful, offering a wide range of affordable menu options. It is open daily, from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

In the interview with The Daily Home, Sanchez had the following to say.

Q: What is your most popular item?

SANCHEZ: The fajitas. People love those, and we make a lot of

them.

Q: What makes this restaurant unique?

SANCHEZ: We treat everyone with care, and our serve times are pretty quick. People aren't waiting long for their food. The food comes in good portions, and prices are affordable. The atmosphere in this place is something you have to come and see. Everybody loves it. We also decorate a lot, so it feels like you're in Mexico, you know. It's not like just any regular place.

Q: What are your goals as a new business?

SANCHEZ: To try to continue to make customers feel good, make them happy when they come here, and help them forget their problems. Our goal is to deliver a great time for every customer every visit.

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Majestic Caverns brings tourists from all over the world to Talladega County

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Majestic Caverns, formerly known as DeSoto Caverns, has been stewarded by the Mathis family for more than a century. The location is notable for many reasons, including being the first cave on record in the United States. It has one of the largest collections of onyx-marble stalagmites and stalactites in the world.

In addition to its natural beauty, Majestic Caverns hosts laser light shows and above ground attractions such as inflatable axe throwing, water balloon battles, the “Lost Trail Maze,” archery, and panning for gemstones.

“Our gift shop is a hidden gem that has a ton of gift items, gemstones, candy, and fudge. Come shop even if you don’t do the day’s adventure,” said Crystal Storey, Majestic Caverns’ general manager.

Majestic Caverns has a new section called Hoof and Feather which houses five Nigerian Dwarf goats. The new section even features Hoof and Harmony Stretch goat yoga.

“We are a place where families can come and detach from cell phones and electronics,” Storey said “We are also a great place for field trips and epic overnight adventures.”

Many groups are “spending the night in the cave now,” said Storey, “We also offer team building for corporations or groups, if they want a different, unique experience.”

Tourists come to Majestic Caverns “from all over the world. People want to come here and go underground,” Storey explained, “They go to local restaurants and gas stations and hotels and go to other destinations in the area. We refer them to other locations here.”

Storey says Majestic Caverns is implementing new attractions. “We are in the process of updating the park and transforming it into more of a show park.”

This summer, on July 4, 5, and 12,



Majestic Caverns will host Libertas. The event is named for the Latin word for freedom. There will be shows in the park, characters, stilt walkers, fire jugglers, water activities above ground, dancers, and more. “There will be fun for all ages above ground and below,” Storey said.

This year will also be an important milestone for Majestic Caverns. This year is the 50th anniversary of Al Mathis turning Majestic Caverns into the family fun park it is known as today. Majestic Caverns will host a 50th anniversary party to celebrate the occasion.


“So much is happening, and I am excited about the future. We are going to continue to make an impact for the next 50 years,” said Storey.

Majestic Caverns is at 5181 Desoto Caverns Parkway in Childersburg. Consult www.majesticcaverns.com for specific information.





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UPDATE 2025

Commerce
PELL CITY • RIVERSIDE
ST. CLAIR COUNTY



UPDATE

FEBRUARY
2025

Special Supplement to **The Daily Home**

UPDATE 2025

Commerce is all about people

'Commerce' is a word that isn't used often in everyday conversation. When it is used, such as in references to chambers of commerce or state and federal departments of commerce, not much thought is given to what it means.

Generally, 'commerce' is defined as 'the activity of buying or selling' or 'the exchange of goods, services or something of value between individuals or businesses.'



Buddy Roberts
Special Projects Editor

As is often the case, those definitions are more than a bit clinical and contain little hint of humanity. That's why we can't talk about commerce strictly in terms of definitions.

Commerce is all about humanity. Who engages in the activity of buying or selling? People do.

Who makes the exchanges of goods, services, and valuable things? That would also be people.

The stories in this Commerce section of Update remind us of that. It's dedicated to the St. Clair County portion of The Daily Home's coverage area.

It is in these pages that we find what's missing in the definitions of the word 'commerce:' the stories of the people who are making it happen. The stories of people who love their communities, love serving others, love producing quality products and love making positive contributions in the lives of others as they operate the small businesses that provide their own livelihoods.

Being a small business owner is stressful and challenging even under the best of circumstances, but the unprecedented events (at least in our lifetime) of recent years have intensified those stresses and challenges. Some of the stories presented here will explain how many small businesses in St. Clair County have started, persevered, and adapted. Others will detail how local chambers of commerce have worked to support business owners and what state officials and agencies are doing to assist small businesses and their owners.

As you read these features, some common themes, ideas, and phrases might come to mind. They might be about how local businesses are the backbone of local communities. Or how, at its core, small business is all about neighbors helping neighbors and friends helping friends. Or how small businesses that become landmark establishments bring a sense of home and comfort to generations.

Such statements could easily be taken as cliches, but they shouldn't be, just as the humanity of commerce shouldn't be overlooked.

We hope these features will inform and inspire you. And we encourage you to support the business owners you read about and who have advertised in this Update publication so that The Daily Home may present these stories to you.

UPDATE 2025

Commerce: Pell City Riverside • St. Clair County

PUBLISHERS
Blucher Ehringhaus
John Fry

EDITOR
Chris Norwood

SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR
Buddy Roberts

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Laci Braswell
Faith Dorn
Michelle Love
Loyd McIntosh
Laura Nation
Vallean Jackson

LEAD PHOTOGRAPHER
Tucker Webb

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Daria Allen

MARKETING/ ADVERTISING DIRECTOR
Pam Isbell

RETAIL ADVERTISING SALES
Ginger Staude
Sherry Unger
Candee McCabe

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING MANAGER
Candace Nesby

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SALES
Candee McCabe
JoAnna Allen

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER
Ginna Gray

DISTRIBUTION
Elijah King
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BUSINESS MANAGER
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Meet Our Board

The Pell City Chamber of Commerce board members for the upcoming year. Pictured: (L-R) back row- Philip Brewer, Jacob Compton, Urainah Glidewell, William Bullard, Caran Wilbanks, Stephanie Garner, Nicole Anderson Front row- President-Elect Thomas Ray Mauldin, President-Shirley Kujan, Treasurer Donald Gover, Vice President Rotunda Forman
Not pictured: Jean Speer, Chelsea Isbell

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Pell City Chamber of Commerce

'When our community is successful, we're successful'

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

The board of directors and staff of the Pell City Chamber of Commerce are committed to improving the quality of life for the city's residents.

Urainah Glidewell, executive director, has been with the chamber for almost six years and is happy to call Pell City home. She has been able to raise her children here and believes strongly in continuing to work to grow the city by supporting local businesses and help new businesses get started.

"What inspires me to continue as the executive director is seeing the impact that we can have on our local community," she said. "As a result, thriving businesses are produced. We're giving business owners a resource to network with other business, community leaders, and offer educational opportunities for them to expand their business. When our community is successful, we're successful."

The chamber organizes a host of events throughout the year, from the annual Hometown Block Party to the Christmas parade. Other chamber endeavors involve giving back to the community in direct ways.

"When it comes to giving back, one of my favorite things that we do is offer two scholarships to graduating high school seniors and present a scholarship to a future business leader in our area. To know that that's going to have an impact on their life is very rewarding," Glidewell said. "Then we do two job fairs a year, which I feel helps to bridge the gap between local business, industries, and job seekers. Of course, we do a lot of wonderful events, like our business awards and our stakeholders meeting, but just knowing what we do has a direct impact on people's lives in a positive way is most rewarding."

In an interview for this 2025 Update publication, Glidewell had the following to say.



Members of the Pell City Chamber of Commerce's 2025 board of directors are Jacob Compton, Thomas Ray Mauldin, Donald Gover, Rotunda Forman, Adam Vandiver, Jean Speer, Philip Brewer, Shirley Kujan, Caran Wilbanks, William Bullard, executive director Urainah Glidewell, and Stephanie Garner. Not pictured are Chelsea Isbell and Nicole Anderson.

Q: What is an understated benefit that the chamber offers that residents and/or businesses need to know more about?

GLIDEWELL: Our website. It has a full business directory with an integrated map where all businesses are pinpointed on that map. We've also recently updated our software so we can offer enhanced listings of business

members. They can post photos, videos, and in-depth descriptions about their businesses and the services they offer. We have a community calendar that's open for the public as well, so if a nonprofit organization is having a fundraiser or there's a local event, they can post it to the website with pictures. Another benefit is our member-

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Buffalo Wild Wings recognized for its contributions to the Pell City community

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Buffalo Wild Wings in Pell City has kicked off 2025 with a remodel that has transformed its appearance.

The brand-new look offers new furniture, a vibrant color scheme, more space, 64 televisions at angles positioned for viewing comfort, and 30 beer taps with 30 different draft beers.

“I would say what makes our location unique is our atmosphere, the people, and how we welcome everyone like family,” said general manager Kelly Paysinger. “Then our food is consistent, we have a lot of regulars that have been coming since we have been in this location, and it is just an overall fun place to have a good time.”

Paysinger has been with the restaurant since its doors first opened to the community eight years ago, when she started out as a server. She has watched the location grow over the years and can proudly say that having the franchise in the area has been a great way to bring the community together.

Buffalo Wild Wings is a sports bar and restaurant that offers a wide selection of food for the entire family, cocktails, and beer. According to Paysinger, even though BWW is known for their chicken, they also have “really great cheeseburgers that are quite popular. One of the greatest rewards of what I do is knowing people are consistently happy and that they

can get the same friendly service and great food every time they visit.”

Besides its basic role as a restaurant, the business also has the goal of being a part of the community in a meaningful way, the manager said.

“Since becoming a part of this franchise, one of things we do every year is an angel tree. We usually raise about \$5,000 that goes towards families to help make Christmas happen for them. However, at the tail end of the year, we decided to do something a little different in our way to give back. For the Christmas holiday of 2024, instead of the angel tree, we gave back to a homeless person in the area. We got him stuff for his tent, got him gift cards, and made Christmas special for him this year, and that was really heart warming to make a difference in his life.”

Paysinger says that she may be the general manager of the restaurant, but she also sees it as her role to be there for her staff and community. In an interview with The Daily Home, she had the following to say.

Q: What are some accomplishments that Buffalo Wild Wings achieved in 2024?

PAYSINGER: Being nominated by the chamber of commerce for Large Business of the Year is one of our great accomplishments. This would be our third time to be up for nomination. To be repeatedly nominated is honestly a great thing and an amazing way



Director of operations Sean O'Brien with general manager Kelly Paysinger.

of the community showing that they believe in us, and that means millions, honestly.

Q: What led to being to the restaurant being nominated for an award?

PAYSINGER: I think it is because of the donations we make and the time we invest in volunteering in the community. We participate in a lot of local events, we sponsor, do fundraisers, and more. I'm honestly always giving back, as I feel that pouring back into those who pour into you is important and a great way to show your appreciation.

Q: What are your goals for this year?

PAYSINGER: To reach out to more

schools and expand our community outreach so that they can know what all we offer. Our program “Eat Wings, Raise Funds and Home Team Advantage” helps to adhere to our goal to make where we eat, live, and play the best that we can. The program is great for schools, businesses, organizations, and fundraisers.

Q: Are there plans to expand, offer new menu items, or sponsor upcoming events?

PAYSINGER: As far as expanding the physical location, no. But we're here to grow as a business in sales and in community. However, as far as new food items, we do six activations every year. So I would say to definitely be on the lookout for them.



FROM PELL CITY ON PAGE 3F

to-member discount program. Our members all get a discount card that's good for the year, and over 40 different businesses offer discounts on products and services, ranging from sandwiches to electrical and plumbing work to boutiques.

Q: What makes Pell City's chamber unique?

GLIDEWELL: What I've heard from our members and from the community is how welcoming we are. To make sure that everyone feels heard and included is important to us. I try to meet people on every level, because everyone is equally important and all contribute to the success of our community. I think having a good

relationship and seeing them able to build relationships with each other is one of the unique things about the Pell City Chamber.

Q: What is an accomplishment that the chamber achieved in 2024?

GLIDEWELL: Well, I think it has been a wonderful opportunity, building our relationship

with the Pell City High School Future Business Leaders of America and their sponsor, Austin Noaker. In getting the younger generation involved, it shows them different opportunities and career paths that they may not have thought about. We hope to continue building that relationship and bridging a gap between the school

and our local industries.

Q: What are some of the chamber's goals for 2025?

GLIDEWELL: We have a wonderful new president, Shirley Kujan, who does a lot for the community, so I'm really looking forward to her leadership and what ideas that she's going to bring to the chamber for 2025. The intent is to just

continue building a strong relationship with our key leaders and growing and fostering our ambassador program. Lastly, we have four new board members that are coming on this year: Donald Gover, William Buolard, Stephanie Garner, and Philip Brewer. We're very excited to have them join us on our board of directors.

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TME Electrical experiences tremendous growth during past year

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT

THM Electrical and Maintenance Services has cared for residential, commercial, and industrial electrical needs in St. Clair County since 2022. For the past three years, THM has shown up to homes and businesses to deliver efficient solutions, quality craftsmanship, top brands, licensed electricians, and stellar customer service.

Owner Tim Mogren founded the business because he saw a need in the area for comprehensive electrical solutions that went beyond just the standard of fixing an electrical problem. He sought to offer an electrical business that focuses not just on enhancing electrical wiring, installations, and repairs, but electrical maintenance and preventative care.

“This business is my calling in life because I am passionate about the electrical trade,” he said. “I feel like it is our duty as tradesmen to teach young men and women the electrical trade. We are building a great team, and I pride myself on that because it makes a difference not just now but for future generations as well.”

THM Electrical and Maintenance Services has received top ratings from customers for its promptness, customer service, reasonable rates, quick turnaround times, and satisfactory work.

“Aside from the opportunity to be able to show up for the community when need arises, one of my greatest rewards of what I do is being able to work with my kids Mary Beth and Holden,” Mogren said.

“The chance to teach young apprentices is a really cool experience. To be able to help and serve the community is what it is all about. Since founding this business, we have met a lot of great people, and the warm welcomes received are humbling, to say the least.”

Mogren believes that what sets his business apart is its location on Highway 231. “It has generated a lot of exposure for them,” he said.

In 2024, THM Electrical and Maintenance Services was nominated by the Pell City Chamber of Commerce for its Medium Business of the Year award. Mogren said he could “not be more grateful” for the recognition. “I think the businesses that won business of the year were very deserving, and it was an honor to be a part of the process.”

In an interview with The Daily Home, Mogren had the following to say about 2024 and his hopes for 2025.

Q: What are some

accomplishments that your business achieved in 2024?

MOGREN: We have continuously grown month over month and hit all of our goals in 2023 and 2024. We have set some aggressive goals for 2025, and I know that we will succeed in hitting those just like we did in 2024.

Q: To what do you attribute your nomination for the chamber award?

MOGREN: We are partnering with a lot of awesome businesses as their go-to electrical contractor. I would like to think that had a huge role in being nominated.

Q: How has the business grown?

MOGREN: We have grown 600 percent from 2023 to 2024, and I predict that 2025 is going to be the same.

Q: Are there any plans to expand or offer new services in the new year?

MOGREN: We are applying for a general contractor license to be able to bid prime on jobs, so I feel that will open us up to some good opportunities.



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Metro Bank employees who participated in a Habitat for Humanity projects last spring.



The Fortune Tellers won the company's annual Halloween costume contest last October.

Metro Bank Believing in Pell City – and beyond – for more than 35 years

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

It's been almost 36 years since Ray Cox sold \$2 million worth of stock and formed Metro Bank in a single branch on Martin Street in Pell City — May 30, 1989, to be exact. Metro Bank has flourished greatly over the three-and-half-decades since, growing to nine branches, with more than 160 employees and just more than \$1 billion in assets.

Metro Bank's success is due to a combination of loyalty and stability during a time of significant upheaval in the banking industry, according to Jason Dorough, the bank's president and CEO.

"We've been fortunate," he said. "We have some great employees and some great customers that really helped us grow. We've paid out over \$68 million in dividends to our shareholders since the bank opened. We've had some success and we just try to do it one customer at a time and treat everybody right."

The banking industry has been through momentous changes during the last 20 years, especially during the

financial crisis of 2008. Almost 500 FDIC-insured banks failed between 2008 and 2013, and many smaller banks were gobbled up by larger firms like Wells Fargo, Citigroup, and Bank of America. However, Dorough says Metro Bank not only survived but emerged stronger by remaining focused on the customer and the communities the bank serves.

In the 36 years of the business's existence, Metro Bank has had only three top executives. Cox, its founder, led the bank until 2005, followed by Don Perry, who served as president until his retirement in 2015. Dorough started working at Metro Bank in 1992, eventually taking over as CFO in 2005 and as president in 2015. He says that kind of stability is rare in the modern world of banking, giving Metro Bank an edge over the competition.

"We know our customers could go to Regions or Wells Fargo, someplace like that, but you don't get the attention and care that you get from a community bank," Dorough says. "We're now big enough to do anything, like some very large loans, yet I think we're small enough to be able to know who our

customers are."

Dorough says getting to know customers on a personal level has also benefited the community as a whole. For instance, Metro Bank is willing to take a chance on new entrepreneurs while other banks strictly follow the playbook. He says believing in the hopes and dreams of people only makes the community stronger. It's also one of the reasons the Pell City Chamber of Commerce chose Metro Bank as the

winner of the 2025 Large Business of the Year award.

"With some banks, you've got to prove to them you don't need a loan to get one. When Ray opened this bank, we were the new kid on the block. There are banks that had been here a hundred years. We just went to the folks, believed in them, and they've been successful, and they've been loyal to us. I think that is healthy economic growth."



Metro Bank's Ragland branch staff members Emily White, Kelly Deason, Tabria Looney, Elizabeth Bertram, Lavenia Burnham, and Lizzy Rhodes demonstrate their community spirit.



Metro Bank is a regular participant in Pell City's Lights in the Park holiday display.

WHEN WE JOIN TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

The Springville Area Chamber of Commerce's goal is to help serve and promote the local small businesses in our community. The only way we accomplish this goal is with our members and their desire to positively impact our community. Our membership is growing and we have big plans for 2025. When we band together with a common goal for the success of our small businesses, great things can happen. Won't you join us in 2025?

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MAYOR DAVID MILLER

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Get them both at JNR's Ice Cream & Pizza Shop

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Robin Brooks is living her much-anticipated dream as a business owner. For 20 years, she longed to own a coffee shop with a little ice cream parlor nestled in, but fear kept getting in the way.

Until she survived breast cancer. After that, fear was the last thing on her mind.

"In 2020, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I went through the treatments, surgery, and radiation... the whole shebang," said Brooks, now the owner of JNR's Ice Cream & Pizza Shop in Pell City. "When I came out on the other side, I told my husband that I think life is short and it's now or never. If I can beat cancer, there is no way I wasn't going to give my dream a shot."

She created a business inspired by her family and her love for wanting to go above and beyond the usual, and she believes that if she had never gotten breast cancer, she wouldn't have been able to see her dream come to fruition.

"Breast cancer truly changed how I looked at life. Before my diagnosis, I just did whatever whenever and didn't think about the consequences. Now everything changed. Everything flipped a whole 180. The things that I used to do, I don't do. Things I might have put off, I no longer do that because I see how life can change in a matter of a seconds. So now I just want to live life to the fullest as much as I can."

And that's what she's doing through JNR. The J, she explains, stands for her business partner, co-owner, and husband Jon. The N is for their son Noah, and the R is from her name, Robin. One of the reasons why she always wanted to get into the business is because she likes to be around people and make people happy. She believes ice cream and pizza do just that.

JNR's Ice Cream & Pizza Shop is located at 1917 Cogswell Avenue Suite 5 in Pell City. It is open Tuesdays through Fridays from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturdays from noon to 7 p.m. They have 36 flavors of ice cream, more than 20 toppings, 25 flavors of shaved ice, sundaes, milkshakes, homemade waffle cones, pizza, and muffulettas.

In an interview with The Daily Home, Brooks had the following to say.

Q: Having a desire for a coffee shop for 20 years, how did you end up in the direction of ice cream and pizza?

BROOKS: Well, with that coffee shop that we had planned on doing, there was always the idea to have a small ice cream section in there too. So when the ice cream business became available, we thought, 'Oh, we could do that and coffee.' So that was kind of our thought process when we purchased the shop. We did try coffee, but, in Indiana, where I'm from, you can drink coffee up until about 10 or 11 o'clock at night. In Alabama, you only drink coffee until about 3. So that didn't quite work out for us because we don't open up until 11 o'clock, and then we were open until 8 or 9 o'clock. When we were doing coffee, people didn't really purchase the

coffee because they've already had it by the time we opened. So it was more of a cultural thing.

Q: What makes your business unique?

BROOKS: We decided a long time ago that basically anything that we do in our business is how we would want to be served. For example, our scoops. Normally people get a three-ounce scoop. That's your regular scoop of ice cream. We decided that's just not good enough. So we do anywhere between a four- and five-ounce scoop, and sometimes a little more. That's what we go with. With our pizzas, we decided the more toppings, the better the product. We do it as if we wanted a pizza. We want to be better at the quality and the quantity of our product so that people understand what they're going to get when they come to JNR's.

Q: How does your business contribute to Pell City?

BROOKS: We try to do a lot of different things. We have a free scoop program for the kids. The program involves us going to the local elementary schools and giving them free scoop coupons to hand out to the children. The coupon may go to that child who has perfect attendance, one who reaches their math goals, or character award winners. Then on top of that, this year I branched out to a local church, and I gave free scoop coupons to the children that can recite their monthly verse. So that way it gets them, you know, a little bit more excited about learning their verse and also puts God into their life. They're also used for report cards, if they have all A's or all A's and B's. It's a way I feel to keep their grades up and give them motivation so they're learning and working towards achieving and being successful.

Q: What are some of your most popular items?

BROOKS: Well, I guess for the ice cream, it would be our milkshakes. Milkshakes can be made from any of our 36 flavors, so it's not just chocolate, strawberry, or vanilla. If you want a cotton candy milkshake, you can get a cotton candy milkshake. People like that because it's a different variety than what they would get at a regular drive-thru. For pizza, it would be our Meatza pizza. It is layered with pepperoni, sausage, ham, and bacon. Lastly, it would have to be our original muffuletta. We offer three, but the original is what's the most popular.

Q: What's a muffuletta?

BROOKS: The muffuletta is a sandwich that was originally born



SEE ICE CREAM ON PAGE 9F

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Quick Lane at Town & Country Ford



The interior of the covered wagon accommodations at Angler's Pointe.



Angler's Pointe's glamping tents are ideal for a weekend getaway. There are four themed options: Boho, Safari, Lodge, and Moroccan.

Angler's Pointe creates a buzz and drives economic growth around Logan Martin Lake

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Angler's Pointe creates a buzz and drives economic growth around Logan Martin Lake

In just three short years, Angler's Pointe has transformed a former mobile home park into a unique and desirable place for people looking for a little rest and relaxation on the shores of Logan Martin Lake.

Located on Pelican View in Lincoln, Angler's Pointe has transformed the sleepy stretch of waterfront property into a true destination offering travelers an alternative to hotels and motels, plenty of room, and an array of experiences visitors won't find within 10 country miles.

Angler's Pointe is a 200-acre lakefront resort featuring covered and uncovered RV sites, 1- and 2-story cottages, bungalows, glamping tents, tiny homes, cabins, and even covered wagons -- all with spectacular views and access to Logan Martin.

Chase Griffin, property manager and son of Angler's Pointe owner DeLane Griffin, says the resort quickly created a buzz for its natural beauty and quiet solitude upon its official opening in the spring of 2022.

"When you come out here, you can feel a difference in the energy. It's very calm. It's not rowdy with people partying everywhere," Griffin says. "It's just a relaxing place to come. Our RV sites aren't stacked on top of each other, either. They're fairly large sites, so when people come and stay, they don't feel like they're walking out of

their back door into their neighbor's yard."

Angler's Pointe attracts couples and families from around the region – Georgia and Alabama in particular – looking for a peaceful getaway and has also become a point of interest for diverse groups. Griffin says the resort has hosted competitors and spectators for the 2024 Bassmaster Open and is becoming a favorite for parents and coaches in town for youth sports tournaments.

In the center of the resort, Griffin explains, is The Yard, a venue for regular live music. He says that they hope to have more music events there. "The goal is to have regular weekend bands for the guests here. As occupancy and demand grows, that will probably come along faster."

Angler's Pointe is one of the catalysts transforming the business community in Lincoln, Pell City and throughout Talladega and St. Clair counties. Griffin said Angler's Pointe actively promotes neighboring restaurants and retail establishments to visitors and has developed a symbiotic relationship with a nearby business, Lincoln's Landing Tournament Fishing Park.

"There is a great dynamic duo between Lincoln's Landing and Angler's Pointe," he explains. "You've got Lincoln's Landing bringing in these fishermen. They need somewhere to stay, and we're right next door, so they're paying lodging tax to the city of Lincoln by staying with us. So, for every time we rent a lodging, it is tax dollars going to Lincoln. We



have people from all over the country coming in and pouring in revenue to Angler's Pointe, which is getting paid out to Lincoln in taxes. While I don't

have a specific number for you, I can tell you the impact is substantial."

Learn more about Angler's Pointe at www.anglerspointe.com.



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Butterscotch Bourbon is the Goodnight Moon Candle Company's all-time best seller.

'We love our community,' owners of Goodnight Moon Candle Co. say

BY FAITH DORN

DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Chris and Annie Andersen own Goodnight Moon Candle Co. in Pell City. The husband and wife team launched the candle-making business in August 2023 and have been positively received by the community and beyond, including recently selling out two days in a row at Homestead Hollow last fall.

"The idea and the name were my wife's idea," Chris said. "She wanted to start making candles. I thought it would just be a weekend thing, and now it's a full-fledged business."

"I just wanted a good candle," Annie said laughing, "Here I am today with a whole candle business."

The business name was inspired by the classic children's book "Goodnight Moon," which Annie used to read to her children. She has always enjoyed candles and wax melts, but Chris says that he never has been a "smelly" person. The couple taught themselves how to make candles by watching videos of the process.

"We tried winging it when we first started making candles. We watched a lot of videos, and it was a lot of trial and error," said Chris.

"We thought the process would be to pour a little wax and add a little scent. Our house looks like a scene from Breaking Bad with beakers and everything," he joked. "We tested and retested everything until we got it right."

The Andersens make all of their products by hand. Their products are made of all-natural soy wax, which means they are slow-burning and produce no soot. The products are pet-safe and allergen-safe.

"That is something that is important to us. We're huge animal lovers, and we have a small animal kingdom at our house: three dogs and a turtle, and we want to be safe, too," said Chris.

"The products we use are the best of the best," Annie said.

"We're just like anybody else. We love our community and our animals. We want to make sure we put out the best quality product that we can and have reasonable prices. We do everything in our ability to keep the cost down for the folks," said Chris.

Their love for animals extends beyond their own pets. The couple regularly donates money to the animal shelter in Pell City to cover adoption fees.

According to the couple, soy wax has to cure for two weeks before you can burn it, so product testing can take a while. After two weeks, the Andersens make sure that the wick sizing and fragrance load is appropriate.

Other candlemakers have welcomed the Andersens into the industry with open arms.

"We have gotten a lot of info from other candle stores, and we are truly grateful for them," Annie said.

Since opening their candle business, the Andersens have participated as vendors at many events. They enjoy connecting with customers and other vendors at the events.

"Other vendors have given us tips, and we try to help them, as well. We don't gate-keep. We want other people to succeed, too," said Chris.

The Andersens sell candles, scent diffusers for cars and "squeezy wax," which is just like a wax melt but

SEE MOON ON PAGE 10F



FROM ICE CREAM ON PAGE 7F

in Alabama, but New Orleans took it over. It is a sandwich that is made on a sesame seed bun, and the original has a layer of salami, pepperoni, ham, and it's topped with cheese. It's toasted, and when it comes out, you add an olive salad to the sandwich. We have a

Sicilian olive salad, which includes black olives, green olives, carrots, and cauliflower in a brine sauce. When it goes onto the sandwich, the heat and the cold mix together, and it's just like a flavor explosion in your mouth.

Q: What is the most rewarding part of being a business owner?

BROOKS: The

recurring customers, because we've really made friends. When they come back, they usually bring their friends. So it's like word of mouth advertising that I appreciate so much. Them coming back means everything to us because without them, we wouldn't be able to do what we do.



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Home decor shop encapsulates the history and spirit of Riverside

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT

"I've always been crafty, and I always wanted to do my own thing," says Maddie Staples, the owner of Local Sister, a home decor shop in Riverside.

Over the noise and bustle of coffee beans grinding and customers ordering iced coffees and caramel macchiatos at the Pell City Starbucks, Staples, her mother Shannon Cochran, and grandmother Cynthia Coleman are chatting away about Staples' bold decision to launch a business in her hometown.

"I love to make stuff, build stuff, and create my own designs," she says. "Now that I'm doing that, there's no greater feeling in the world than creating something on my own and everybody else loving it, too."

In her early 20s, Staples is making a go at being her own boss, establishing Local Sister in 2021 while still in college at Jacksonville State University. A seventh-generation native of Riverside, Staples is newly married, and with her whole life ahead of her, she is more than content to scratch her creative and entrepreneurial itch in her hometown rather than search for success elsewhere.

"Riverside's not very big at all," she says. "It's a very small town and people have asked me, 'Have you thought about moving? Are you going to move to Pell City?' Yes, I have thought about moving, but, Riverside is so supportive of me."

The daughter of Chad and Shannon Cochran, a football coach at Oxford High School and language arts teacher at C.E. Hanna Elementary School respectively, Staples grew up in Riverside, the town her ancestors founded in the mid-1800s. Her great-grandfather, Bill Coleman, was mayor of Riverside for more than 20 years while establishing himself as a successful businessman in the area.

After graduating from Pell City High School in

2020, Staples earned an academic scholarship and enrolled in the nursing program at Jacksonville State University. However, it didn't take her long to realize nursing was not her calling.

"I did all of my prerequisites and got into nursing school and went to orientation. Of course, it was during COVID and all that stuff going on. I left orientation and my dad called me, and I was just distraught in the parking lot."

Staples switched her major to business, but at the time she was unsure what career path to take. She leaned on advice from friends, her gut instincts, and a knack for creativity – a trait she shares with her mother – and decided she could be successful on her own.

"I think if you ask anybody who knows me, I've always been crafty, and my mom is very crafty. She can do, literally, anything in the world. So I got a lot of that from her," Staples says. "Many of my friends have told me, 'You need to have your own shop.'" Everybody's always told me that. "You need to be your own boss and do your own thing."

She didn't wait until graduation, starting her business in 2021 at the age of 20. Staples opened Local Sister to the public twice a month and launched the Hat Bar, selling customized trucker hats, an item that remains popular.

Staples opened Local Sister in a building on some property that has been in the family for more than 100 years. Her parents currently live in the Coleman House, a historic home on the property built in 1848, 38 years before Riverside was incorporated, and is one of the oldest homes – if not the oldest – in St. Clair County.

Coleman also owned several thousand acres in the area and, over time, either sold or donated parcels for various purposes, including the Riverside Post Office and Riverside Baptist Church, which was severely damaged in a fire in June.

FROM MOON ON PAGE 9F

with twice the amount of fragrance in it. The candles are sold in 10-ounce and double-wick 14-ounce units. The "squeazy wax" is eight ounces.

"We have scents that you probably won't find at Walmart. We don't do the typical apple pie or other ones you would think of," Annie said "And we have unique names for all of our candles."

One candle in their collection is called "Stolen Hoodie."

"It really does smell like that stolen hoodie from high school. I have to give my wife credit for all of the names," said Chris.

Goodnight Moon

Candle Co.'s all time best-seller is "Butterscotch Bourbon."

Customers can order online at www.goodnightmooncandle.com. The products can be shipped anywhere in the United States. If customers are local to Pell City, they may also schedule a time to pick up an order from the company's digital pick-up box.

"You schedule a day and time, and we will send you the code to get your order," Chris said.

"People will find a scent they really like and beg us to make it year round, but our seasonal stuff is seasonal. We're glad they like it, but when it is gone during the season, it is gone."

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