

Next Door

Neighbors

Bluefield State University unveils strategic plan as enrollment growth continues

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Building on one of the strongest enrollment growth rates among West Virginia’s public four-year institutions, Bluefield State University has unveiled its new strategic plan, “Building the Future Together,” a roadmap that will guide the university’s continued growth and expansion of opportunity for students across southern West Virginia and the broader region through 2030.

Bluefield State recently recorded 7.8 percent overall enrollment growth, continuing a strong upward trend for the university. The institution also led all public four-year institutions in West Virginia in full-time equivalent

enrollment growth at 9.5 percent, while first-time freshman enrollment increased by 37 percent, reflecting growing interest among new students.

Bluefield State University President Dr. Darrin Martin said the strategic plan will help the university build on that progress while strengthening its long-term mission.

“Bluefield State is experiencing a period of renewed growth and optimism,” Martin said. “This strategic plan provides a clear direction for where we are headed and how we will continue expanding opportunity for students while serving the workforce and communities of our region.”

The strategic plan outlines several priorities that will guide the uni-

versity through 2030, including growing enrollment, strengthening student retention and success, enhancing the student experience, ensuring financial sustainability, advancing academic excellence, and investing in faculty and staff development.

University leaders say the plan will also focus on expanding career pathways, strengthening partnerships with employers and community organizations, and aligning academic programs with workforce needs in high-demand fields.

“Our responsibility is not only to educate students, but to prepare them for meaningful careers and leadership in their communities,” Martin said. “This plan ensures that Bluefield State continues to grow



File photo by Tara Wyatt

Bluefield State University has been named a Fulbright Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Institutional Leader for 2025, marking the fifth time the university has received the recognition from the U.S. Department of State.

while staying true to our mission of access, excellence, and student success.”

The plan was developed through a collaborative process involving a diverse committee of faculty, staff, and university leaders who worked together to identify priorities

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BSU, E-2

New housing projects underway across Mercer

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Efforts to develop new and affordable housing across the region are continuing.

Five projects are currently planned across Mercer County to address the region’s housing needs. The Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Corporation is serving as a co-developer on all five of the projects, which includes the ongoing efforts to convert the historic Hotel Thelma in Bluefield into a new 10-unit apartment complex for senior citizens in the city’s East End, as well as the creation of space for a new restaurant.

Work on the Hotel Thelma project got underway in January, and a formal groundbreaking ceremony was held last month.

Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., was able to tour the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“She asked a lot of insightful questions,” Tracey said of Capito.



Contributed photograph

Ground was broken Feb. 26 on the Hotel Thelma project in Bluefield. Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., also toured the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“Clearly she understood what we are doing at the property. We also had the opportunity to tell her what this project will bring to the community. Affordable housing for seniors, specifically designed for that age group. We

walked her through all of those design features. She was very impressed with the design that we’ve developed, and also spent some time in what used to be Thelma’s Cafe.”

The old Hotel Thelma is a historic landmark

in the city that served Black travelers during the days of segregation.

In all, 24 different funding sources are helping to transform the historic landmark into the new senior apartments, Tracey said. That’s up from

the original 19 funding sources when the project began in January.

In addition to Hotel Thelma, two other housing projects are planned in Bluefield, along with a fourth in Princeton and a fifth in Bramwell. Each project was

awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh’s Affordable Housing Program.

Tracey said if all goes as planned, BARC and its co-developers are hoping to begin work on the remaining four

HOUSING, E-2



AMERICA'S 250 BEST HOSPITALS 2026

LEADING HEALTHCARE

in the Two Virginias

Princeton Community Hospital























BSU

Continued from E-1

that will guide Bluefield State's next phase of growth.

Amanda R. Matoushek, PhD, Dean of the College of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences and Professor of Psychology at Bluefield State University, served on the committee and said the document reflects the university's broader commitment to developing well-rounded graduates while strengthening the institution itself.

"This strategic plan reflects the true nature

of Bluefield State, supporting development of our students academically, civically, and ethically, preparing them to make impactful change locally and globally," Matoushek said. "All of the strategic priorities are interconnected, providing not only improved student outcomes, but a sustainable future for BSU by investing in faculty and staff development so we can continue innovating our methods to remain on the cutting edge of academic excellence."

The strategic plan also emphasizes collaboration across the uni-

versity and engagement with alumni, community partners, and industry leaders to support long-term institutional growth.

"Building the Future Together reflects exactly what this moment requires," Martin said. "It is a shared vision that calls on our entire campus community to work together as we strengthen Bluefield State University and help shape the future of our region."

University leaders said the plan is also designed to strengthen Bluefield State's role as an economic and

workforce partner for southern West Virginia and the surrounding Appalachian region. By aligning academic programs with emerging industries and expanding pathways for traditional and nontraditional students, the university aims to help meet workforce demand while creating new opportunities for students and families across the region.

The strategic plan focuses on six key priorities designed to guide the university's growth and impact:

- Grow Enrollment through expanded recruitment and new path-

ways for traditional and nontraditional students

- Strengthen Student Retention and Success with improved advising, first-year programs, and support services

- Enhance the Student Experience by increasing engagement opportunities and strengthening career readiness

- Ensure Financial Sustainability through diversified revenue, expanded fundraising, and responsible budgeting

- Advance Academic Excellence by aligning programs with workforce needs and supporting faculty innovation

- Invest in Faculty

and Staff Development through training, mentorship, and professional growth opportunities

Bluefield State University, founded in 1895, is dedicated to providing affordable and accessible pathways to higher education through certificate, associate, bachelor's, and master's degree programs while preparing students for meaningful careers and lives of service.

The full "Building the Future Together: Strategic Plan 2025-2030" can be viewed on the Bluefield State University website at www.bluefieldstate.edu.

HOUSING

Continued from E-1

projects soon.

"It's possible that all four could start construction this year," Tracey said.

The largest of the four developments is a housing project planned on Duhring Street in Bluefield, not far from city hall, that calls for the construction of 10 new single-family homes. It is a home ownership project with the newly constructed houses then being sold to income qualified buyers. BARC is a co-developer on that project along with the Bluefield Land Bank, according to Tracey. BARC is still looking to raise additional funding for the project, but officials are hoping to start construction on the development this year.

Tracey said BARC and the Bluefield Land Bank are currently working to document all of the funding sources lined up for the Duhring Street project, including the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh and the West Virginia Housing Development Fund.

"So all of that is pre-work before we really put the shovel in the ground," Tracey said. "And of course hiring a civil engineer to do soil tests. Everything preparing for the starting structure."

The second Bluefield project calls for the transformation of the former Traveler's Hotel

in Bluefield into an 11 unit affordable apartment complex while also providing space for retail and commercial development on the first floor of the structure. The old Travelers Hotel on Raleigh Street is located adjacent to the Raleigh Street Cinemas. The hotel was originally a Green Book property during the 1930s and 1940s. It was later converted into an office building and offered some dining in the 1980s. The structure is currently vacant.

Once completed, it will benefit people who work downtown, including employees of Alorica/Intuit, who may be looking for a place to live close to their job. Those living in the apartment complex also will be able to walk to the Raleigh Street Cinemas, the Granda Theater, the RailYard restaurant and other downtown attractions.

Tracey said officials are working to finalizing funding sources before construction begins on the Traveler's Hotel project.

The third project to receive a \$1.5 million Affordable Housing Program grant is located in Princeton and will be called the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments. BARC is partnering with Mountain Acres Properties, Inc., a church non-profit that comes out of the United Holy Church of America denomination on the development. The goal is to develop housing for senior



Contributed photograph

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citizens in the area.

The fourth project seeks to convert the former Pence Hotel in Bramwell into 10 affordable apartments to serve both senior citizens and those working in the ATV hospitality industry. BARC is partnering with the Bramwell Foundation on the Pence Hotel project.

"And of course BARC has partners on all but one of the projects," Tracey said. "The Traveler's is BARCs alone."

According to the individual project summaries, the Travelers Hotel Apartments project will preserve and renovate an historic Green Book hotel at 602 Raleigh Street in downtown Bluefield, adjacent to the recently reopened and restored historic Granada Theater. The project will create 11 affordable, healthy, and safe studio

and one-bedroom apartments targeting individuals working in downtown Bluefield and one commercial/retail bay on Raleigh Street. The project is designed to benefit low- and moderate-income residents of Bluefield, particularly individuals who work in the city's downtown.

The Duhring Street Homeownership project will use vacant land owned by the city of Bluefield's Land Bank to build 10 new single-family homes for sale to first-time homeowners and other income-qualified buyers. The homes will be built on city-owned parcels on Duhring Street and Mercer Street. The sites were chosen based on their proximity to services and amenities (grocery stores, pharmacies, health care, transportation,

churches, schools and entertainment); their suitability for development (topography and access to utilities); and readiness to proceed. The project is a short two-block walk from the site of Bluefield's largest employer, Alorica/Intuit, which has 350 employees. Two types of single-family homes will be built: seven two bedroom, two bathroom homes with 1,035 square feet of living space and three bedroom two bathroom homes with 1,435 square feet of living space.

According to the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments project summary, it will create 10 affordable apartments for seniors in Princeton. The project will consist of newly constructed one-story apartments, in multiple buildings, built on vacant land, which was previously the site of the historic Dunbar School. The project's location is nearby to grocery stores, restaurants, health care services, and opportunities for recreation and entertainment.

The Pence Hotel project will convert the historic Pence Hotel on Main Street in Bramwell to 10 affordable studio and one-bedroom apartments. The Pence building will also include a first floor retail/commercial bay, with a medical clinic identified as the desired use for the space. The apartments will target seniors as well as workers in the ATV-related hospitality business.

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Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Top: Brush Creek Falls. Bottom: Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Tourism growth continues in Mercer County with record visitor spending

BLUEFIELD — Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The figures highlight continued growth in the county's tourism sector and ongoing marketing efforts by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau to attract travelers to southern West Virginia.

Visitor spending in Mercer County has increased by more than 50% since 2019. Officials say travelers now bring more than \$600,000 into the local economy each day. The industry also generated \$20.19 million in com-

bined state and local tax revenue, which officials estimate saves local households about \$827 annually in taxes.

"Our mission is to create economic growth by promoting Mercer County as a destination," said Jamie Null, executive director of Visit Mercer County CVB. "Tourism continues to strengthen our communities, support local businesses, and highlight the natural beauty and culture that make Mercer County uniquely Appalachian."

Investments aimed at improving visitor experience

The Visit Mercer County CVB has also continued investing in projects aimed at improving the visitor experience and strengthening local tourism assets.

Recent projects include restoration of the

Almost Heaven Swing at East River Mountain Overlook, a popular scenic attraction frequently photographed by visitors, and development of a new visitor center intended to help travelers plan trips and explore local attractions.

Officials say the improvements are intended to enhance access to the county's scenic overlooks, outdoor recreation opportunities and small-town attractions.

Website redesign boosts trip planning tools

Tourism officials also point to growth in digital engagement following the redesign of the Visit Mercer County website, which focuses on accessibility and trip planning resources.

The site recorded more than 317,000 active users and more than 360,000 sessions,



Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

according to the CVB. Improvements included accessibility features for users with assistive technologies, along with mobile performance upgrades and improved navigation.

Data from the bureau shows the website generated 4,986 travel guide requests, 633 newsletter subscriptions and 43,932 referrals to local tourism partners and businesses.

National exposure increases through media and social platforms

Visit Mercer County's digital marketing and social media campaigns also expanded the county's national reach. Tourism videos and social media posts highlighting outdoor recreation, waterfalls and local attractions generated more than 4.5 million views across platforms.

Public relations efforts resulted in 231

media placements across more than 75 outlets, generating an estimated \$331 million in editorial value, according to the CVB.

Mercer County tourism was featured in publications including Southern Living, Forbes, Blue Ridge Outdoors, Matador Network, WV Living and Only In Your State, along with other travel and lifestyle publications.

Work underway on key projects across area

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

PRINCETON — Work is now well underway on a number of key projects for the region, including Princeton's new wave pool and Bluefield's transformative Safe Streets for All transportation project, among various other regional developments.

In Princeton, the bath house and mechanical room that will serve the wave pool are now under roof. Warm weather, including several days of 70 degree readings earlier this month, allowed construction crews to make significant progress on the project.

The wave pool and aquatic facility project are on schedule with officials still eyeing a grand opening date to coincide with the Fourth of July, Princeton City Manager Mike Webb said.

In the meantime, work continues on the bathhouse, concession area and mechanical room, all of which are being handled by Swope Construction Company of Bluefield. A second contract was awarded for the actual wave pool, which is being built by Aquatic Builders Ltd of New York.

"The main thing is that again they're on schedule," Webb said. "It is going to be something that not only Princeton can enjoy but Mercer County, the surrounding counties and really the region. Whether it'd be from Blacksburg over or Wytheville up you've got a true regional tourism draw type of product that is coming together here, and that's why we want to make sure that everybody has a chance to enjoy it. Families can come in, you can have food while you're there. You can get drinks while you are there. You can enjoy the sunshine as we build out the dog park and the walking trail and the other amenities around it. It really makes it a full day of things you can do in Princeton."

The wave pool project is being funded through a \$4 million bond issue, which is being matched with an additional \$475,000 in city funds.

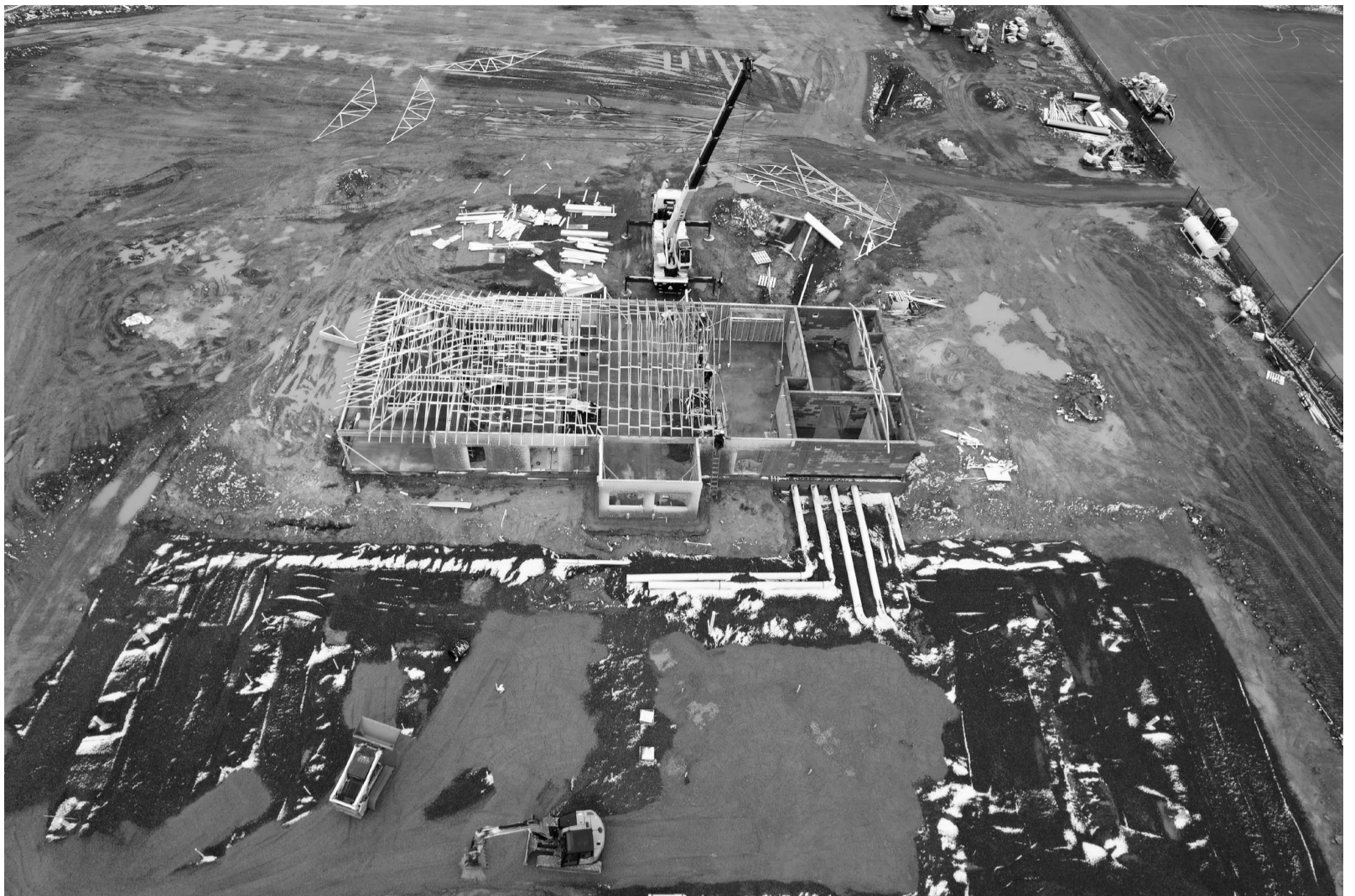
Wave pools are swimming pools which create artificial waves. The aquatic facility is being constructed in the field behind the Princeton Towers, not far from the existing city hall complex off Bee Street.

Work got underway on the new wave pool and aquatic center last fall, and the two contracts on the project called for a 160 day construction schedule. While the snow, ice and cold temperatures in January and February did impact the ongoing work, Webb said construction crews were able to make significant progress once temperatures warmed up.

The city is hoping to have the wave pool open in time for the Fourth of July, which is always a big day in Princeton with a variety of musical shows and activities, as well as fireworks.

But this year's Fourth of July gathering will be even bigger since it coincides with the U.S. Semiquincentennial celebration observing America's 250th anniversary.

Already a number of events are being planned in the city to coincide with the expanded patriotic celebration this year, including a performance by "Slippery When Wet – The Ultimate Bon Vib Tribute" show that will perform at 8 p.m. on the evening of July 4th along with three opening acts, the city announced earlier



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

this month.

The wave pool and aquatic facility are being developed along a 11-acre tract of land that was donated to the city of Princeton by the Preservati family. In addition to the wave pool and bath house, several multi-purpose fields also are being developed at the site along with a new dog park.

The first multi purpose field will be ready for the public, and area schools, to utilize later this spring, according to Webb.

Hydroseeding and grading work was completed last fall at the site of that first multi-purpose athletic field, which Webb said will be available for area schools, community groups, organized leagues and the general public to use.

Work on a second multi-purpose athletic field — at the same 11 acre site — is expected to begin later this summer.

In the neighboring city of Bluefield, design and engineering work got underway in early March on the \$31 million Safe Streets for All project, a federally funded initiative that has been more than two years in the making.

City Manager Cecil Marson announced during the March 10 meeting of the Bluefield Board of Directors that engineers were now on the ground in Bluefield working on design plans as well as right-of-way assessments for the Safe Streets for All project.

The transportation improvement plan for the city is being funded through \$25 million in federal dollars and \$6 million in state funds.

"We're just excited to finally get it under way, and I think it will be really great," Marson told the Daily Telegraph after the March 10 meeting. "As we get through the summer folks will start seeing some renderings, and some real designs of what the roads are going to look like, and the sidewalks and the streetscapes, which I think everyone will be really excited about. It's going to really change the way these streets look, and the way folks have access in the bike lanes and things like that. So I'm really, really excited to get this thing rolling."

The actual construction probably won't start until next spring, according to Marson.

"You're not going to see shovels and grounds being torn until spring



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

of next year," Marson said. "So right now, a lot of the engineering and work with utilities and the environmental is underway as we speak."

Engineers with CTL engineering and AECOM engineering are working with the city on the Safe Streets for All project, which focuses on College Avenue, Stadium Drive and U.S. Route 52.

The project will specifically convert four of Bluefield's key intersections to roundabouts, create pedestrian and bicycle accommodations through a strategic mountain gap, and make safety improvements that include implementing traffic-calming strategies and installing sidewalks, crosswalks, rectangular rapid-flashing beacons, and street lighting on selected corridors, according to the project's description. Locations for Safe Street projects range from College Avenue, Stadium Drive, Cumberland Road, Princeton Avenue, U.S. Route 52 and other roads in the city along with the intersection connecting Cherry Street, Maryland Avenue and Stadium Drive.

As for the planned roundabouts, two of them will be on College Avenue and one at U.S. Route 52 near Hill Avenue and the entrance to Bluefield State University.

The Safe Streets for All project isn't to be confused with the \$1.25 million federally-funded Reconnecting Communities project, a

similar transportation improvement initiative that calls for an overhaul of roads and sidewalks in the city's East End area.

The Reconnecting Communities plan focuses on an area of the city that begins near the entrance of Bluefield State University and from there extends through the northeast end of Bluefield past the Grant Street Bridge and toward Hotel Thelma, a local historic landmark that is currently being converted into apartments for senior citizens with room for a restaurant.

The planned pedestrian sidewalks for Bluefield State University students traveling from the former Bluefield Regional Medical Center site to the main university campus is also a part of the Reconnecting Communities project.

In addition to the Safe Streets for All and the Reconnecting Communities projects in Bluefield, planning also is continuing for a \$13.4 million transportation project in the city that will allow for the replacement of the archaic Midway Tunnel and the construction of a new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the flood-prone tunnel.

In 2023, U.S. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va. announced a \$13,480,000 award for the city of Bluefield through the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, a component of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act leg-

islation, which will allow for the replacement of the Midway Tunnel and the construction of the new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the tunnel.

Marson said planning for the Midway Tunnel project is continuing.

Another project envisioned by Bluefield also is in the planning stages, and will actually be developed outside of the city limits on land owned by Bluefield near Kee Dam and the King Coal Highway construction site.

Marson also announced at the March 10 city board meeting that a boundary survey of the land owned by the city near Kee Dam had been completed.

The project planned on that property is expected to be connected to the region's ATV tourism industry, and may include a housing component for ATV tourists.

In the neighboring town of Bluefield, Va., remediation work will be getting underway soon on two downtown properties that are being renovated for new business use.

The town sought bids for remediation work earlier this year on the former Bank of Graham building and the former Graham Jewelry building.

Both structures are currently owned by the town, but the building that once housed the former Bank of Graham is being sold by the town. It is located at the corner of Spruce Avenue and Virginia Street. As its name implies, the

two-story structure was once a bank, but it is currently vacant.

The Bank of Graham will be sold by the town to a private entity once the remediation and renovation work on the two-story structure is completed, according to Bluefield, Va. Town Manager Andrew Hanson.

The former New Graham Jewelry building will undergo remediation work and then renovations with help from a \$245,000 Industrial Revitalization Award from the state and a \$250,000 grant award from the Virginia Tobacco Commission. The Bluefield, Va. Industrial Development Authority is working to restore the 4,000-square-foot building into a modern commercial space capable of supporting two new businesses. The first floor of the building will be designed for retail or dining use, while the second floor will be converted into a communications lab.

Hanson said discussions are continuing with Bluefield University for the second floor of the structure and the search for a restaurant for the first floor continues.

"On the Graham Jewelry building, we would like to partner with Bluefield University for them to have space for their students on the second floor," Hanson said in an earlier interview. "We are still hoping for a restaurant (on the first floor)."

Contact Charles Owens at
cownens@bdtonline.com

Beaver, W.Va. teen wins state's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest

By Eric Cravey
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BECKLEY — It's not often that a middle schooler's artwork ends up on thousands of pieces of clothing, but that is the new reality for Reese Childers, of Beaver.

The Shady Spring Middle School eighth grader is the winner of the West Virginia Secretary of State's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest. Reese's work was selected from art submitted by more than 1,100 eighth grade students from 42 West Virginia counties. The 42 first-place winners were separated into four regional contests. On Feb. 17, Secretary of State Kris Warner named Childers one of four Regional Winners who would then also serve as finalists for the statewide award.

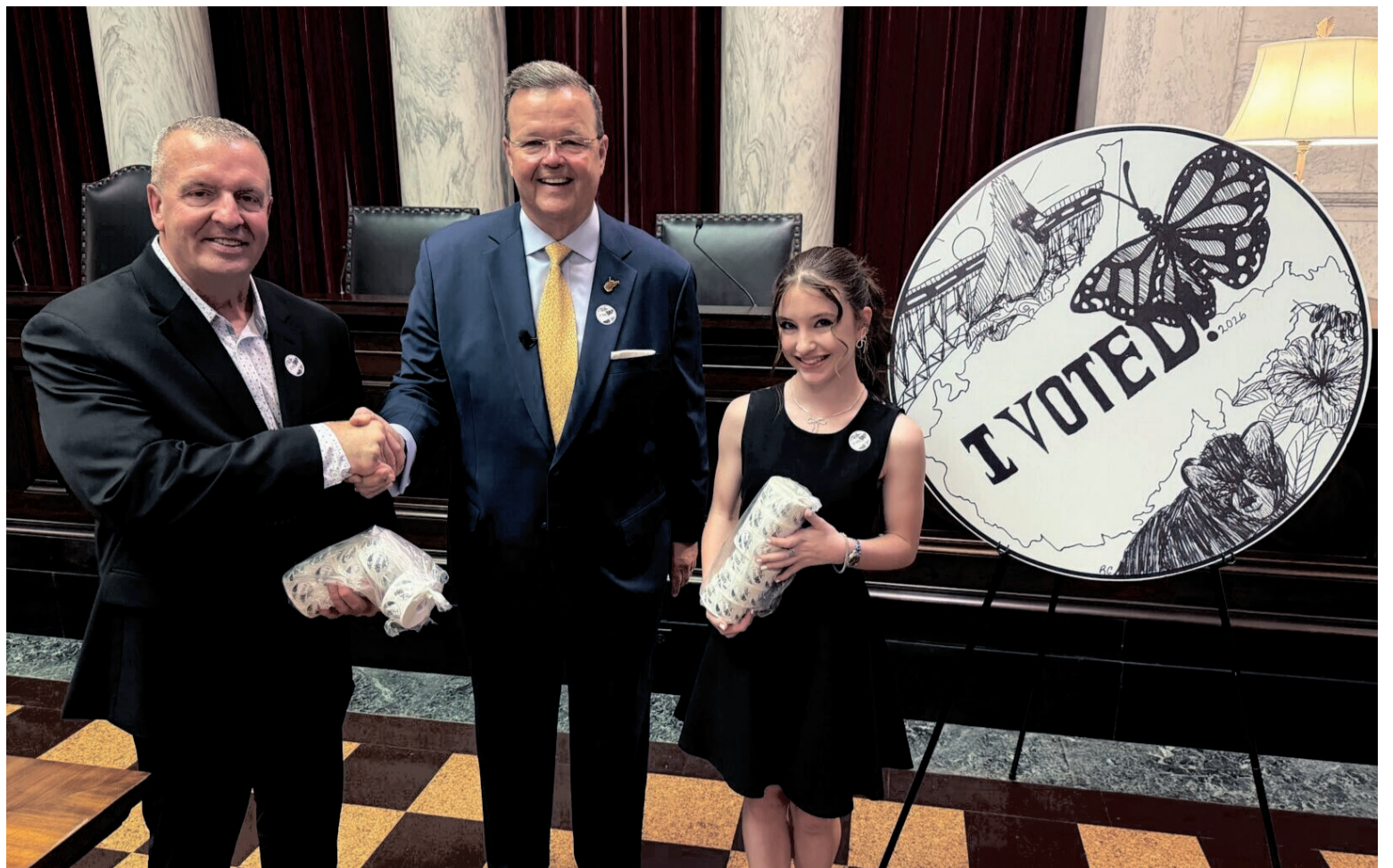
Reese learned about the contest in her West Virginia Studies class and, having been an accomplished artist whose award-winning work was displayed at Tamarack in 2025, she knew immediately what she wanted to draw for her contest entry.

"Typically when I set my mind to something, my brain just rushes with, like images or ideas of what I usually want to do, and it's hard for me to change from that," she said. "So, I knew right there on the spot what I was going to put in the sticker drawing. And I rushed home, and I started doodling and sketching it out."

Childers has been exposed to art and creative pursuits since she was born as her mother, Crista Childers, teaches art at Shady Spring Elementary. She was also Reese's fifth grade art teacher.

"She just has such a natural gift for it. She's very talented, and it's just something she's always doing," Crista Childers said. "And she's always like, doodling on her hand, doodling in her binder, drawing in a sketchbook. You know, just everything is just like, she said, in pictures to her."

Contestants were limit-



From left, Raleigh County Clerk of Court Scott Van Meter, W.Va. Secretary of State Kris Warner and Reese Childers, winner of the first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest held by Warner's office. Van Meter and Childers are holding rolls of "I Voted!" stickers made with her original artwork.

W.Va. Secretary of State Office

ed to using three colors, but Reese chose to use black. The sticker, which will be given to voters statewide in the May Primary, could be placed on lapels all over West Virginia. After all, she used some of the Mountain State's most precious icons to promote the civic duty of voting.

"Well, my sticker showcases all of the state symbols for West Virginia, like the black bear, the monarch butterfly, the state outline, New River Gorge Bridge, the red Cardinal, the Rhododendron and the honey bee," Reese said. "So really, it's just, it's kind of some of them have bright, vibrant colors, but a lot of them also have lots of black in them."

Even though Reese's West Virginia Studies class included a lesson on civics and why it is important to vote in a democratic society, she has had

similar lessons in such duties previously. Her grandfather Sam Suttle, of Beckley, has served for years as an election poll worker. When he found out she was a finalist for the contest, he became her biggest cheerleader.

"I put it on Facebook. I told everyone I knew," Suttle said. "I worked in the public for years, and I knew a lot of people, so anyone I saw, I would show the artwork and say, 'She's in this contest. And these are 'I Voted!' stickers. So if you would look for I'd appreciate it.'"

From Feb. 17 until 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 27, the general public was allowed to vote online for their favorite of the four designs. Warner's office said 15,947 votes came in during the 10-day period.

As the winner of the contest, Reese took home a plaque featuring her artwork, while

Raleigh County Clerk Scott Van Meter took home 11,000 stickers featuring Reese's design.

Warner presented Reese the award on March 11 after his office hosted a forum dubbed "Civic Learning for a Stronger West Virginia." The forum and the press conference were held in the Chambers of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals at the State Capitol.

During the ceremony, Reese became the first person to use one of the stickers she designed as she placed it on her grandfather's lapel.

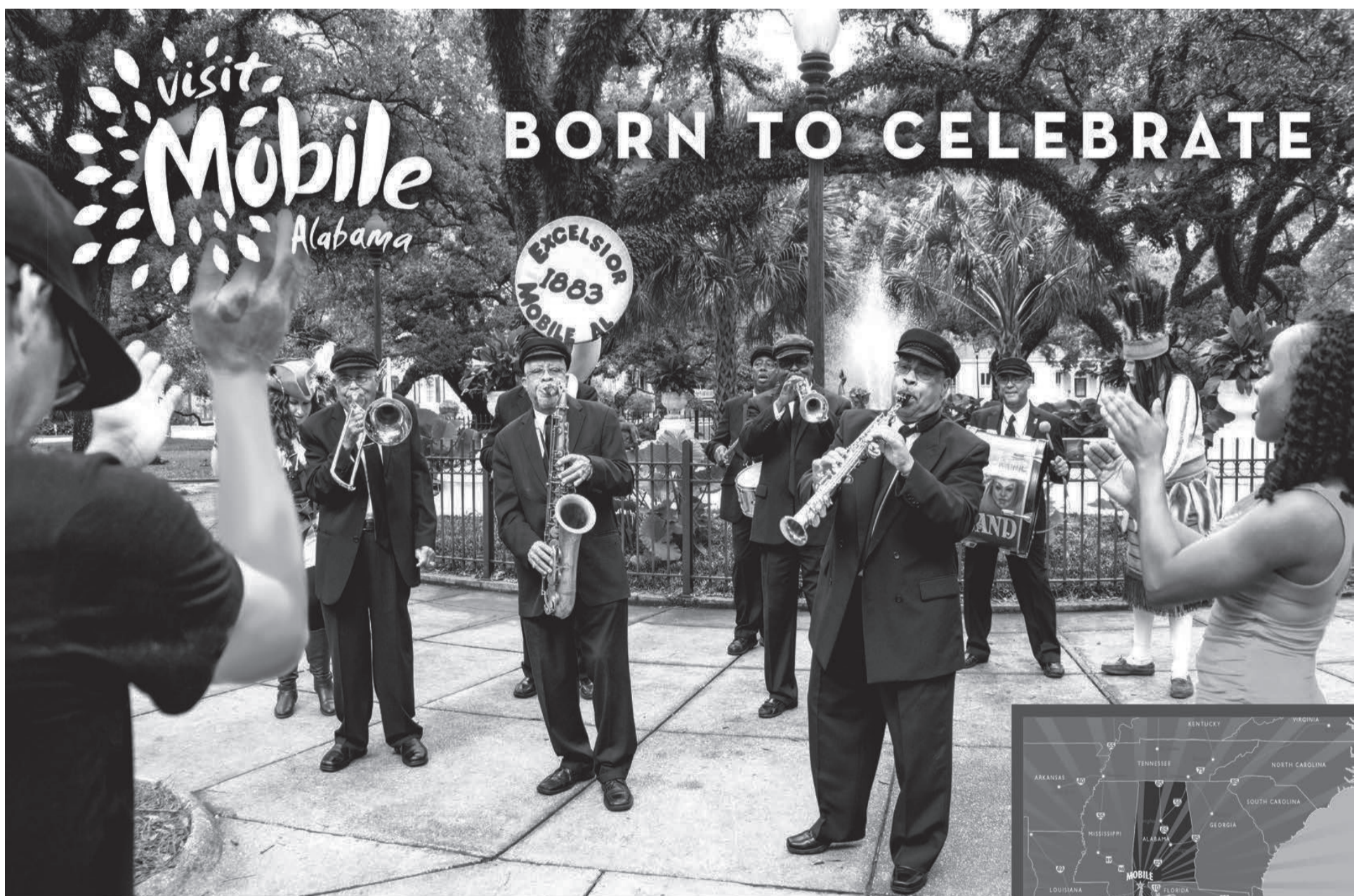
"Oh, that was a highlight for me that day. I mean, to think that I got the very first sticker that was to go on people's lapels after they voted, a symbol that, you know, saying, 'I voted in a West Virginia election,'" Suttle said. "I mean, it was very flattering."

Suttle characterized Raleigh County voters as committed and said the County Clerk's Voter Registration staff takes a lot of pride in increasing the number of voters each year.

"I mean, they're very, very excited about the fact that the winner of this contest is from Raleigh County," Suttle said. "And I think the people that vote in Raleigh County will be excited to know that they're wearing a sticker that was created by someone from this area."

And while art and civic duty are not often paired together, Reese hopes her sticker design will make people think differently.

"And, judging by my sticker, it may change people's minds, to maybe get out more and do more hikes and see the natural beauties we have out here," she said.



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Noteworthy

Neighbors

Magazine documents the “mystique” of W.Va

By Steve Keenan
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

BECKLEY — The “mystique of West Virginia” was simply too enticing to ignore.

Thus, West Virginia Explorer magazine experienced its genesis more than 25 years ago.

Founder, publisher and editor-in-chief David Sibray says the journey over the Mountain State’s hills and dales while exploring and documenting the state’s past and anticipating its future has been well worth it. And, with over a quarter-century down, West Virginia Explorer is prepared for continued growth in the coming years, Sibray says.

The magazine, available at wvexplorer.com, observed its 25th anniversary on Jan. 1, 2025. “Amazingly, I did launch it on Jan. 1, 2000,” Sibray said. “We had been working on it a little bit up until that, but the button was punched on Jan. 1.”

An explanation of what prompted the magazine to come into existence is two-fold, according to Sibray.

“I was always driven to write about the mystique of West Virginia,” he said. “I don’t fully understand why, but there’s an emotional experience I have walking around the state, meeting people, visiting these historic landmarks and natural resources, and I wanted to share that.”

“And, that has been my drive as a journalist shining through in that area.”

“Secondarily, I realized that the internet would allow me to reach more people than remaining in the print industry had,” Sibray added.

A former newspaper reporter and editor, Sibray — a 1983 graduate of Woodrow Wilson High School who now resides in Beaver — admits the internet opened up the world decades ago. “I was using it at The Register-Herald in the mid-90s to look for information, so I knew what it was,” he said. “And other reporters were, as well.”

At a later stint as marketing director for the Southern West Virginia CVB, he said, “We were starting to delve into it then.”

“I came back to being a publisher for Thomson Newspapers’ niche division, helping such products as West Virginia Golfer, West Virginia Retirement Times (the

latter which he founded),” he added. “I realized in doing that that the internet would allow me to interpret these natural and cultural resources for many people and, indeed, that’s been the key to our success ... that I can reach people in Washington, D.C., Portland, Ore. Print can’t necessarily so easily do that.”

Via a late 2025 report by Google Analytics, West Virginia Explorer hosted over 3.3 million users in August, which marked one of the highest traffic surges in the magazine’s history, according to Sibray.

How has the magazine’s expansion into a very reliable, entertaining source for West Virginia news on travel, history and culture occurred?

“It’s taken constant reinvention, because the internet has continually grown and changed,” Sibray says. “So at first we were reaching search engines such as Alta Vista, then Google came along and we had to modify what we did to work with Google. And then, Wikipedia came along, and suddenly our resource pages about towns and counties and rivers and creeks and lakes” were thrust into competition with Wikipedia. Following that, the “hotel pages in which we got money from reservations at hotels” were affected some, as “suddenly Travelocity came along, and Google itself developed a hotel reservation system. Then Airbnb came along.”

To remain abreast of the shifts and still be a compelling source for consumers and readers, Sibray said it wasn’t hard to choose the proper path. “There’s just been this constant effort to figure out how to maneuver, and one of the things that I’ve figured out is that good information wins out every time,” he stressed. “Well-written, well thought out information all the search engines like, and the readers like.”

“We have a subscriber base of 30,000, but the more important thing is that we reach through the Google news aggregator and different news apps more than 400,000 people a month,” Sibray said last fall. “Those are people finding us through the different applications online. We do that through a number of technical things; most of it comes through the essence of good journalism.”

“We’re constantly exploring new technology,”

Sibray continued. “We have to stay up to date on that, which is why we have a director of technology.”

While WV Explorer concentrates on digital and social media outreach, Sibray says a print version of Explorer content is still possible in the future. “Yes, I continuously consider a print publication, and people in the next few years are going to see more printed material in bookstores and on the shelves at travel plazas and, of course, available online.”

While Sibray acknowledges he spends a great deal of time toiling on his computer, he also hits the road two or three days a week to create content for the magazine. The magazine also has some staff members as well as a roster of about 10 contributing writers and photographers. He also communicates on various matters with experts in different fields.

The actual exploration process is “a dream come true,” says Sibray. “When I’m sitting out there on a mountaintop looking off at distant hills, I know why I do this. There’s nothing better.”

The travel didn’t occur with frequency until the more recent years. “The first half of our existence, I spent much of it compiling information that could be gathered by interviewing sources and finding books and other manuscripts,” he said. “A lot of our information on the early history of the (New River) Gorge was gathered by spending time at the Mine Health and Safety Academy at Beaver or at the archives in Charleston.”

As the years progressed, Sibray realized that, while words matter, they weren’t enough. He said his editor/writer background hadn’t really prepared him to provide images for the readers. “As the need for photography increased, I realized the job was going to have to fall on me to learn photographic skills to get photos of all of this,” he said. “We have 380 town pages. I’ve visited 380 towns and tried to find the photo that would define that town best.”

In addition to Sibray, helping guide the magazine in 2025 were Jonathan Moore, the director of technology since 2000; Terry Foster, the director of programming; and Rodney Clark, the CFO and director of



Steve Keenan/The Fayette Tribune

West Virginia Explorer founder, publisher and editor-in-chief David Sibray has guided the online magazine through 25 years and counting. He travels West Virginia helping readers understand the state’s history and attractions.

merchandising.

“About 20 years ago I realized the only way we could get ahead of a lot of this technological growth was to (involve) ourselves more in producing authentic, human-written information,” Sibray said. “That was before I saw artificial intelligence (AI) coming. It’s here. Artificial intelligence is vapid. It cannot write like a human being can write.”

When asked if he utilizes AI, Sibray quickly answered in the affirmative. “I am agin it still and forced to use it. And I use it in a helpful way. ... Again, it cannot do what a writer can do. It can’t think.”

As he and the staff offer readers the chance to brush up on their West Virginia history and enjoy the stories, Sibray said he, too, still learns.

“In fact, I still know nothing,” he said when discussing the state’s history. “Every single day, I learn something that I did not know.”

That quest for knowledge was planted in a young teenager’s mind long before West Virginia Explorer became a reality. It took the launch of one of the more successful movie franchises in history to partially ignite the spark. “When ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ came out (1981) was the year I said maybe somehow I could get a hat and travel the state,” Sibray said. “There are pictures of me at Harpers Ferry on a family vacation wearing a hat, wearing a khaki shirt.”

“I began to see that West Virginia was a place to be explored. It happened that early. I’d say that at that time, I recognized that West Virginia was as exotic a landscape as the jungle or the desert. I probably watched it (the movie) a dozen times that year. It wasn’t my

favorite all-time movie, but I consider it the best adventure movie ever made. It did help me realize that a person could be an academic and an adventurer at the same time.”

His later newspaper work solidified his story-telling capabilities and cemented his future plans, Sibray said. “It took me going to the newspaper becoming a journalist” to lay the groundwork.

Sibray admits he gets noticed because of his traveling outfit when he’s in the field for WV Explorer. “People do recognize it; you’re that guy in the hat,” he said. His hats are made for him by Landers Hatworks of Elkview, a professional hatter, with some Sibray adjustments.

“In 1999 when I picked the name West Virginia Explorer, I recognized West Virginia was an exotic destination for people. We as West Virginians, it’s hard for us to recognize at times. Waterfalls, mountains, forests, ghost towns in these deep forests that was just like anything out of ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark.’”

The 2020 designation of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve has been a definite game-changer for the southern West Virginia region and the state, says Sibray.

“It’s changed everything forever statewide,” he said. “I was speaking to the marketing director of the Tucker County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and every year I call around to the different bureaus and find out how everything is going. He said we’ve kind of leveled off in terms of people coming to Tucker County to visit, except for the number of people who are coming through from Washington, D.C.

to go to the New River Gorge.

“That put us on the map in many ways. And, other things have put us on the map.”

Other recent changes in the landscape have enhanced the focus, too. “The other big change is the work from home revolution. Why would you not want to live in a place like this around people like this? There are people who want to live in the cities, of course, and you have all kinds of wonderful things about living in cities. But, if you’re looking for being able to look up and see the night sky, or being able to get out to a waterfall and get your feet wet, this is the place to come.

“Coincident with the launch of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve comes this revolution in technology that was prompted at the same time by Covid.”

Will life ever settle back down to previous levels? “No, I think — and it’s not just because of the national park — but everything has changed, everything changed during Covid worldwide, but for us here in West Virginia; also with Starlink (internet provider) and the availability of anyone to practically live anywhere in the state, it’s changed. The number of people who use Starlink now is astonishing.”

“People who are moving here now are inventive people,” Sibray concluded. “They are willing to take the risks to move into a place that is beyond their city experience, yet at the same time they value the authenticity of West Virginians, they value people who look them in the eye, they value people who shake their hands firmly.”

For more on West Virginia Explorer, visit www.WVExplorer.com.

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Expert: Appalachia's forests are a 'natural pharmacy,' but overharvesting puts species at risk

WVU TODAY

MORGANTOWN — A West Virginia University expert is highlighting the ecological, economic and cultural importance of medicinal and aromatic plants native to the Appalachian Mountains, while warning that overharvesting threatens many species.

Kirsten Stephan, teaching professor of forest resources management and program coordinator of forestry in the WVU Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the region's forests are globally significant for temperate plant diversity.

"The Appalachian Mountains are a global biodiversity hotspot for temperate flora," Stephan said. "Ancient, unglaciated landscapes allowed species to persist and diversify over millions of years. In Appalachia's mixed hardwood forests, shade-loving medicinal and edible plants thrive in remarkable abundance."

She said Native American burning practices historically shaped forests into open, oak-dominated systems that supported diverse plant communities beneath the canopy.

"Cultural fire practices increased light, recycled nutrients, and created habitat mosaics that likely enhanced the diversity of many edible and medicinal species," Stephan said. Among the most well-



WVU Photo



Left: Kirsten Stephan, teaching professor of forest resources management and program coordinator of forestry, WVU Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Right: Mike Costello hold paw-paws at Lost Creek Farm.

known Appalachian medicinal plants is American ginseng, long valued in East Asian markets as an adaptogen believed to support immune and metabolic health. Its high market price has contributed to heavy harvesting pressure and population declines.

"It commands high prices, but slow growth and heavy harvesting pressure have led to population declines, making sustainable wild-harvest regulations and forest farming initiatives critical," Stephan said.

Black cohosh, widely used for menopausal and hormone support, also faces localized threats from commercial demand in the herbal supplement industry.

"While still relatively widespread, localized overharvesting threatens wild stands, underscoring the need for monitoring, responsible sourcing and cultivated supply chains," she said.

Once abundant across much of its range, Goldenseal has become emblematic of conservation challenges in the herbal trade due to extensive exploitation.

"Protecting goldenseal requires habitat preservation and a shift toward propagation, away from extractive wild collection," Stephan said.

Other culturally significant species include Ramps, a wild leek celebrated in Appalachian festivals and increasingly featured in national cuisine. Because ramps

reproduce slowly, harvesting entire plants can devastate colonies, Stephan said, emphasizing the importance of partial harvesting and cultivation.

She also pointed to Pawpaw, the region's largest native fruit, as an emerging opportunity for sustainable economic development. With flavors often compared to banana and mango, pawpaw is drawing interest in regional food systems and agroforestry projects.

Beyond individual species, Stephan said many medicinal plants are slow-growing perennials that depend on intact forest canopies, rich soils and stable microclimates. Timber extraction, land conversion and invasive spe-

cies can disrupt those environments.

Forest farming — cultivating high-value botanicals beneath existing tree cover — offers a potential solution, she said.

"By cultivating high-value botanicals beneath existing tree cover, landowners can generate income without clearing forests," Stephan said. "This model supports biodiversity, improves rural livelihoods and reduces pressure on wild plant populations — demonstrating that conservation and economic development need not be opposing forces."

Climate change presents additional uncertainty, she said, as rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns and emerging

pests threaten sensitive habitats.

"Species adapted to cool, moist microclimates may see their habitats get smaller, making monitoring essential for conservation planning," Stephan said.

Protecting Appalachian medicinal and edible plants preserves more than biodiversity, she added.

"It preserves traditional knowledge, supports regional food sovereignty and maintains genetic resources with unexplored pharmacological potential," Stephan said. "Appalachia is a powerful example of how ecological stewardship, cultural heritage and sustainable enterprise can intersect to build a resilient future."

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WVU Tech robotics team ranks among top 15 in the world

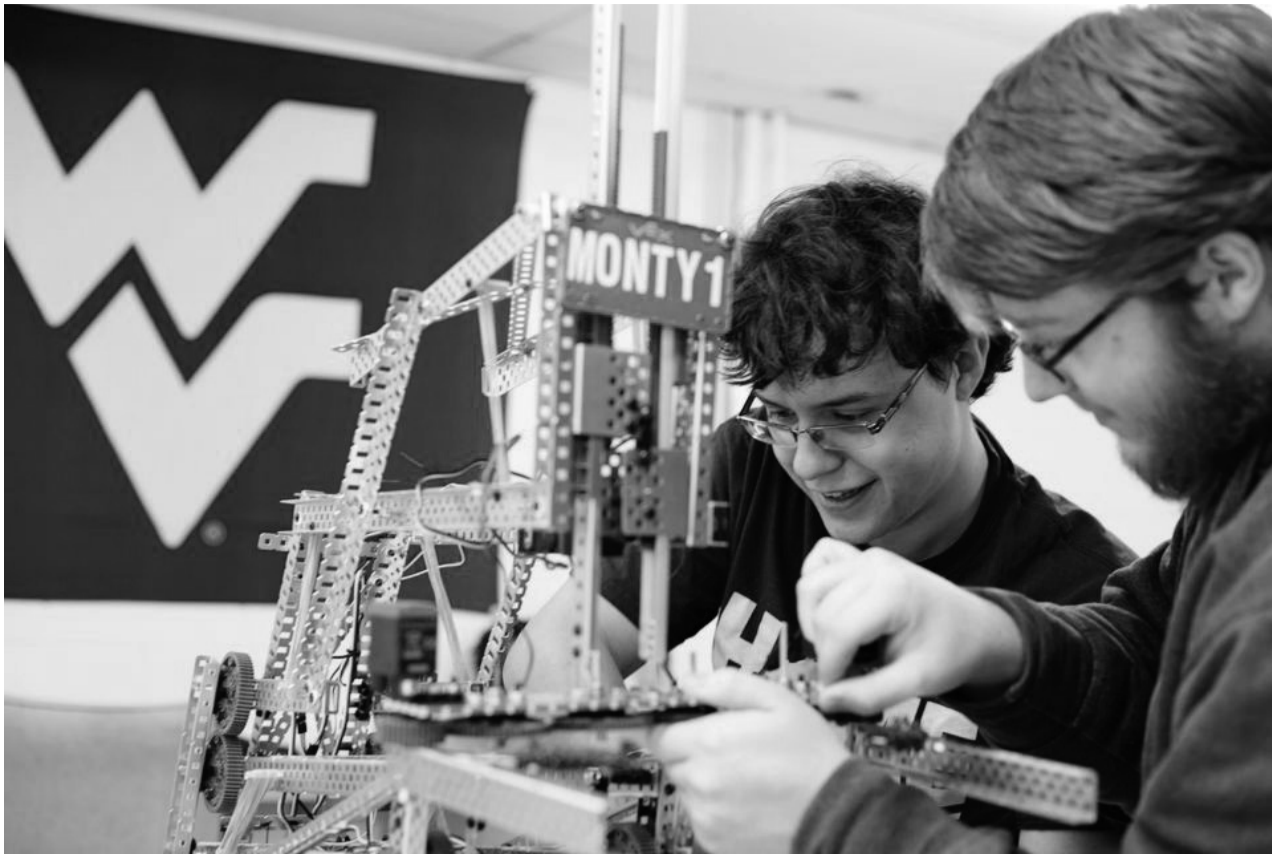
BECKLEY — The robotics team at West Virginia University Institute of Technology has emerged as one of the top collegiate teams in the world this season, earning a place at the upcoming VEX World Championship in April.

The WVU Tech VEX Robotics team, known as WVUTE1, recently went undefeated at a VEX Robotics Tournament in Fairmont, winning the Excellence Award, Tournament Champion Award and Skills Award. The competition drew high-performing teams from across the northeastern United States and Canada.

Alexander Franck, team leader, founder of the robotics club and a junior mechanical engineering major from South Charleston, said he is proud of the team's performance.

"Winning the top three awards — the triple crown — that's a very difficult task," Franck said.

The team posted a score of 192 points in the individual team skills competition, placing it 11th globally and fourth among U.S. teams following the Fairmont event. WVU



Courtesy photo

The robotics team at West Virginia University Institute of Technology has emerged as one of the top collegiate teams in the world this season, earning a place at the upcoming VEX World Championship in April.

Tech is currently ranked 14th in the world.

The score placed the team ahead of larger universities including the University of Florida, the University of Louisville, Tennessee Tech and Auburn University — programs WVU Tech had previ-

ously competed against at an earlier event in Bristol, Tennessee.

"At Fairmont, we played against RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology in New York) and they're really, really good," Franck commented. "We've beaten a lot of big

schools like Virginia Tech and Ohio State."

The top 100 teams worldwide qualify for the VEX World Robotics Competition, which will be held in St. Louis.

The team opened its season with a competition hosted on WVU Tech's campus in Feb-

ruary and has continued to improve, Franck said.

"We were close to being ready then, but we were not exactly where we wanted to be. The competition at Virginia Tech was a week later. That made all the difference," he said.

Franck founded the robotics club during his freshman year after participating in VEX Robotics competitions in high school and wanting to continue at the collegiate level.

"There aren't as many restrictions in college as there are in high school. You get to do a lot more stuff, like 3-D print parts. I like the university competition a lot more," Franck explains.

The club currently has 11 members representing majors including electrical engineering, mechanical engineering and computer science, and membership is open to all students. Franck said interest in the program continues to grow and he expects additional members next year.

"We're expecting to rank a lot higher during the World Championships. There's a lot of commitment to the team, which is nice. We put in a lot of work. Being a much bigger team than in years past really helps us in competition," Franck said. "I think we're going to be very successful at the World Championship. But next year, we're going to be even better than this year, and we'll be the team to beat."

Jazz Securo rose from humble start to UFC announcer and filmmaker

By Joe Smith
FOR CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

If you mention the name Jazz Securo in Fairmont, you probably won't get much of a response outside of a terse "never heard of him."

But if you ask someone about Chip Gerdes? Well, that name still carries a little weight.

At the very least, you'll turn a few heads. After all, Gerdes did capture the 1988 state championship in the 110-meter high hurdles for Fairmont Senior, and served as the anchor for their state championship shuttle relay team as well.

But Chip Gerdes and Jazz Securo are one in the same. After college, Gerdes left the area to pursue big dreams, and decided a name change was in order for the new beginning. He took on the last name Securo because it was his mother's maiden name. Jazz came from a combination of being born in New Orleans and the fact that he wanted to add some Hollywood flash to his identity.

"I left, I wanted a new start. I wanted to recreate who I was while still honoring my roots," he said.

Now, Securo has found success outside of Fairmont as well, building a reputation as a well-known ring announcer in the combat sports. And now, Securo can add Hollywood director to his resume, as he recently debuted his first-ever film "Thy Will Be Done" to rave reviews. And through it all, he never lost touch with his Fairmont roots.

Humble Beginnings
If you ask Securo where he grew up, he'll tell you, "the west side down there past Maple Avenue." If you ask him how he got to where he is today, he'll tell you, "I did it on my own."

When he was growing up as Chip Gerdes, he didn't come from a background of wealth or status. Instead, he had very little of either of those things early on, nor did he have a very large support system.

But he wanted to win at something, so he trained hard on his own to become a state champion in high school. He made it his goal. He recalled in the 1988 article from the Times West Virginian about his vic-



Submitted Photo

When former Fairmont Senior High track and field state champ Chip Gerdes left Marion County, he adopted the stage name Jazz Securo. The UFC and Real American Freestyle announced also produced his first film in 2025.

tory (which still hangs on his wall) that he was further fueled by East Fairmont and North Marion athletes laughing at him showing up to race the hurdles his sophomore year.

By the end of his senior year, he was a double state champion, and no one was laughing. And winning those titles and seeing himself featured on the front page of the local newspaper lit a fire under him, and helped prove to himself that he could chase even bigger goals in life.

"I never came from money, I didn't really have a lot of support. For some reason that became important to me," Securo said. "And when they came out with that paper, the front page — it started with that Times West Virginian article. It just put me on a path, and I decided I can do whatever I want to do if I put my mind to it."

New Adventures
Once Securo left Marion County, he became well-known under his new name on a national stage. He has spent

a career carving himself a lane in the world of combat sports, serving as a ring announcer in prominent promotions such as the pro wrestling organization Ring of Honor, ESPN's Professional Fighting League and UFC.

Currently, Securo is the announcer for Real American Freestyle, which combines freestyle wrestling competitions with the televised flair and presentation of pro wrestling. The promotion was founded by Hulk Hogan before he passed away in 2025 in partnership with long-time WCW and TNA Wrestling executive producer Eric Bischoff, with its flagship events currently airing on Fox Nation and a television deal in the works for 2026.

"It's big. They're seven-digit shows. They have a big platform, and a big distributor. It's a big operation, and as an announcer, you want the biggest platform," Securo said on why he enjoys working with Real American Freestyle.

"When I step into an

arena, it's not a local thing. I announce some of the best athletes in the world, and it makes it very attractive to me," he said.

Securo also pursued an acting career, and has a few different credits to his name. But in recent years, he decided that what he really wanted to do was direct his own movie so he could bring his own vision to life.

He approached the right people, and was met with a similar response to when he was in high school pursuing state championship dreams — laughter, and the sense he was being blown off. But Securo doesn't take that as a valid answer, so he embarked on the filmmaking journey on his own.

"I had this idea five years ago that I wanted to make a movie. It was a crazy idea, and I had no idea thinking like that," he said.

He was working with less than half the budget that most comparable projects would receive, but he spared no expense bringing in the

best production team he could afford.

He secured prominent actors for starring roles, including Courtney Gains of "Back to the Future" and "Children of the Corn" fame, Doug Bradley of "Hellraiser" fame, and former pro wrestling star and Olympic gold medalist Kurt Angle. Securo also took on a starring role himself.

The movie, titled "Thy Will Be Done," released last year, is currently available on Amazon Prime Video and Google Play. It will also be coming to DVD and Blu-ray on Feb. 24 at most national retailers, including Amazon, Best Buy, and Walmart. Securo wasn't expecting much, but so far the film has garnered rave reviews from critics, and the distributor has approached him about a potential sequel.

"There were many times I prepared my failure speech for that, because I definitely bit off more than I can chew," Securo said. "Making a feature film at that level is easily the biggest artistic ex-

pression of my life, and without question the biggest endeavor. And by God's grace, I don't know how I completed it. I'm very proud of it."

Hometown Pride

Securo has an interesting relationship with Fairmont, as many do with their hometown. The lack of support from certain people in his family and his community, the way he was often laughed at chasing his dreams in high school, the rough upbringing — it all sticks with him in a way. And while that part of the relationship with Fairmont could foster resentment in some, Securo has always chosen to try and use it as motivation.

"This is kind of tricky, you know. It's very tricky. I'd be lying if I didn't say that was motivation. There's a lot I've carried with me from that lack of support," he said. "You can look at that and say that's terrible, or that you feel sorry for me. But would I have done what I did without it? That's what has been the field and continues to be the fuel."

But Securo also still has friends in the community. He still visits Marion County, and was recently in town. He always stops for pepperoni rolls and hot dogs — his preference for those being Colasessano's and Woody's respectively. His brother is more of a Yann's man for his dogs, though, and goes every day.

And no matter where he goes or what accomplishment comes next for Securo, he'll always have those Fairmont roots. Those roots, in fact, have helped guide him and motivate him towards his current levels of success, and he's grateful for what his upbringing and hometown has instilled in him.

"I've never shied away from Fairmont because of any negative experience I've had. I've made calls to people who helped me in my community, and I thank them for that. It's not all sad tale of 'oh, woe is me,'" Securo said.

"[Fairmont] ain't Bel-Air buddy. But I remember where I'm from, and I'm not ashamed of where I'm from. In fact, I'm proud of where I am from."

Christianity is a process, says Bishop Calloway

By Steve Keenan
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

Christianity involves following a process, Bishop Sam Calloway Jr. said during a recent Sunday sermon.

And, he says he's fully committed to that process.

Calloway, 67, pastors Spirit and Truth Ministries in Oak Hill and is a veteran educator and coach in Fayette County public and private schools.

"Christianity is a process," Calloway reiterated during a March 11 interview. "It's step by step."

"It's a process; the more you put into it, the more you get. It's like training for a race."

"I wasn't always as close to God as I am now, and I'm not still as close as I should be," he continued. "But, I'm going to continue to work at it and work at it and work at it."

"It's a process ... of getting better." However, he stressed that people need to possess "the desire of getting better. You grow."

Spirit and Truth Ministries — located on Main Street in Oak Hill's downtown area — is in its 27th year of operation.

"Being non-denominational and independent, we started this in my living room," Calloway said. "There's no governmental system. I can't go to the state office for funding. We govern ourselves, so it's just us and God."

"But, we survive. Twenty-seven years and going strong."

Calloway likens leading a church congregation to the coaching he's done over the years. With 46 years of teaching under his belt, including 34 in the Fayette County public school system and 12 more at Mountain View Christian School at Hilltop, he also coached 16 years at Oak Hill High School in boys and girls basketball and track and field during that time.

"There is a great similarity between coaching and preaching," he said. "You always have to continue to motivate. You've got some that don't want to put forth much effort (either in practice on the court or in the church pews)."

"It's always a challenge, as was coaching. The next opponent, the next Sunday, dealing with finances, new people, somebody on drugs, somebody getting delivered from drugs, broken families, weddings, funerals."

"It's the same; I'm still coaching. Still trying to motivate people to do better, to be better. Ministry is more of a weight, a moral weight. ... You can't give up on them."

Calloway currently doesn't have an assistant pastor, although the church has a youth director and Calloway's wife, Lana, serves as the church's musical director. He preaches every Sunday and most Wednesdays. "I just need more (leadership assistance)."

In the midst of helping provide hope and guidance to church members, he is asked if he sometimes gets worn down. "It does wear you down," he replied. "I don't get discouraged, but it's a lot of weight, a lot of responsibility."

"You've got to stay in the Word. It's not easy, but the Lord helps. He provides. I depend on Him a lot."

In today's society, how much more important is the collective church's mission?

"The most significant thing the church needs to do is to get families in," Calloway said. "If you get the husband, you're going to get the



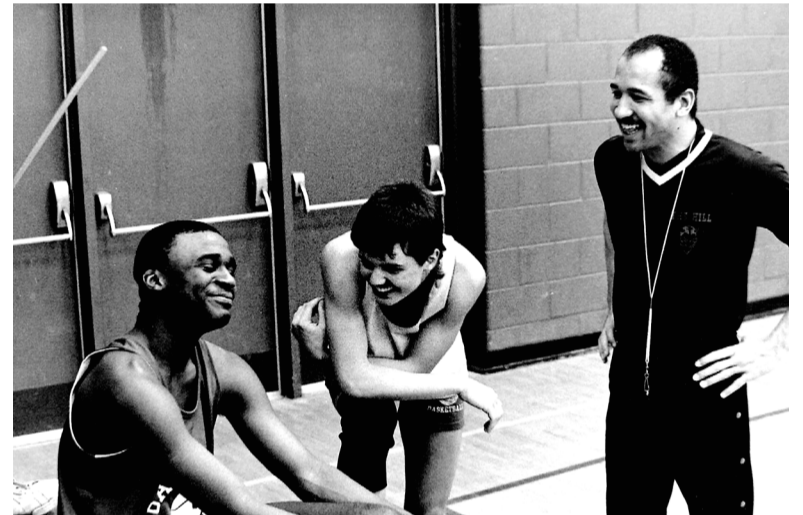
Steve Keenan/The Fayette Tribune

Bishop Sam Calloway Jr. poses for a photo outside Spirit and Truth Ministries in Oak Hill on Wednesday, March 11.



File photo/The Fayette Tribune

A group of Mr. C's Cubbies is photographed.



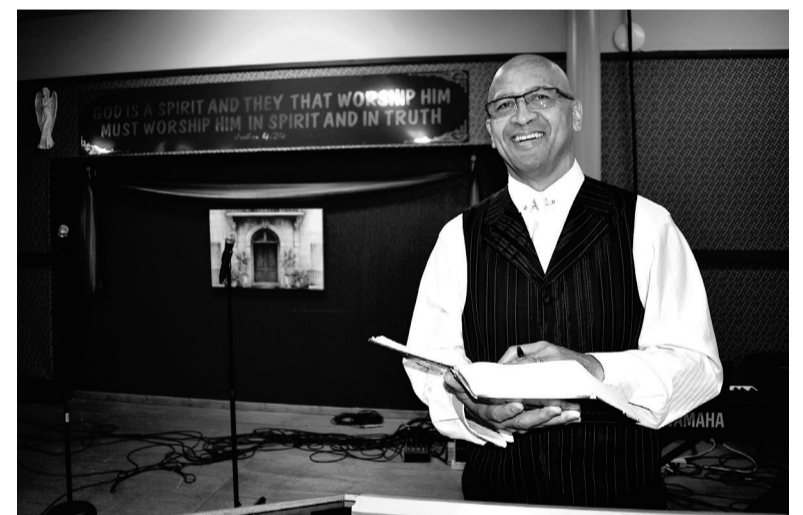
File photo/The Fayette Tribune

Sam Calloway's career has included nearly five decades as a teacher and coach in Fayette County.



File photo/The Fayette Tribune

Sam Calloway, left, is pictured with fellow Red Devil alumni Cornelius Jackson and Benitez Jackson at a past hall of fame function in Oak Hill.



File photo/The Fayette Tribune

Bishop Sam Calloway Jr. pastors Spirit and Truth Ministries in Oak Hill and is a veteran educator and coach in Fayette County public and private schools.

family." Having the whole family attend and be involved is a key, he said.

"The absence of male leadership" in some families is a main concern for society, Calloway stressed.

Always athletic and active, his health has become more of a life consideration in recent years. He takes chemo pills nightly to combat Lymphoma Type C in the fluid over his brain and in the fluid in his spinal column in the back, he explained. He will return to the Cleveland Clinic in July for tests to gauge his progress.

His doctor says the disease is "treatable but not curable."

"It's slowing me down quite a bit," Calloway said. He put on some weight and has balance issues at times, but "I'm able to go to work, teach, preach, hang out. So I'm able to function."

"I just try to keep moving and doing what I'm doing. I'm just glad I'm able to be with my kids, my grandkids."

Currently the chaplain at Mountain View Christian School after relinquishing his gym teaching duties last year, Cal-

loway was a member of the Collins High School Class of 1976, the last graduating class before the school changed over to Oak Hill High. He then completed his teaching degrees from Montgomery's West Virginia Institute of Technology in 1981.

At Mountain View, he still substitute teaches some and handles school discipline. "I've got a whole different role, got me an office sitting behind a desk."

Calloway adds: "It's a major change and I do miss it, because when you teach physical education as long as I did, ... me, I can teach you PE, use no equipment, we could work out right there. Just work on muscle groups and cardiovascular, just be second nature because I did it so long. Didn't need lesson plans, I knew what I was going to do."

"I knew how to work to get aerobics, upper body, lower body, hand-eye coordination ..."

The students he's taught over the years included several years supervising a group called Mr. C's Cubbies at Rosedale Elementary School in Oak Hill.

"It was great," Callo-

way recalls. "That was when I had good kids. The parents were so cooperative. We went all over the state, even into Virginia. The parents would go with me and help with the kids. It was a great experience."

The troupe performed in parades, games and other events in the Fayette-Raleigh County area and elsewhere, as well as dancing at a game at his college alma mater. The names of participants such as Adam Ray, Kiley Dodson, Andy Kania and Benitez Jackson roll off Calloway's tongue as he remembers with fondness the Cubbies.

"We had a bunch of good kids," he said. "The kids loved it. It was a lot of work, but the kids enjoyed it."

Calloway even points out more recent students such as Arabella Holly, Parker Holly and Solomon Truman with whom he's worked on their physical fitness. "I gave them their basics," said Calloway. "If you just do basics, they'll pick up the rest along the way. They've got to have the basics, they gotta learn how to run, get the body coordination ..."

Calloway admits he still misses the interac-

tion with children in the gym. "I'd love to (continue to) do that and develop them, but my time in the gym is up."

At Oak Hill High, he coached 12 state champions in track and field and cross country and was an assistant coach for the 1989 Red Devil boys state champ basketball squad.

While the individual state champs and qualifiers are special, helping head coach Jim Lilly guide the winning basketball team gave him a little more joy, he said. "That was probably one of the greatest feelings and aspirations I have. It's a different feeling when your team wins."

"Shannon Morrison and those guys were so gifted and had such a work ethic."

In his estimation, today's school children don't receive enough physical education instruction during the school week. "That's the key word, they don't get enough. The kids at my school get it twice a week. They really should have it five days, and at least three, and they're not getting that. (Overall) They've lowered the requirements so you

don't have to put as much time into it.

"At the elementary level, they need it just to burn off energy, to work on basic skills, coordination, cooperation. They need all of that, and they just don't get it."

He says there is more concentration on keeping test scores up than "on them actually moving." That is askew, he said, because statistics show that children who remain active and in sports tend to stay out of trouble more often.

Calloway praises the rise of emphasis on sports such as pickleball, flag football and archery, and he says, "Golf has picked up and soccer is really growing."

"I would hope the emphasis of all that is to get more kids involved in sports; just keeping them busy," he said. "There's so much social-ly they get involved with now with the internet."

"Sports participation and remaining physically active leads to better home life, better society. Things have changed a lot. The whole emphasis on life itself puts the focus on so many things that are negative instead of the positive things."

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Atha-Rader remains busy on a variety of fronts

By Steve Keenan
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop" is a proverb rooted in biblical teachings.

That particular scenario has never been much of a hindrance for Kristi Atha-Rader. A self-described "nerd" who takes a shine to hardware shows, she's perpetually on the go in her life.

Atha-Rader, who grew up in Oak Hill but has resided with her husband, Kris, and their children in Fayetteville for 15 years, is currently in her 17th year as CEO of Rainelle Medical Center. Prior to that, she was the hospital's CFO for three years, bringing her total commitment there to 20 years.

"In that time, the health center has quadrupled in budget and we have added a lot of new sites in Greenbrier, Fayette, Summers and Monroe counties," she said. "We have a great team that I trust, and who works well together."

According to Atha-Rader, RMC has 150 employees at 27 locations and a mobile unit. "We have several locations that offer primary care and behavioral health services, two dental centers, two pharmacies, one location that is behavioral health only, and we provide several schools with behavioral health only," she said. "At our main location in Rainelle, we also have x-ray, mammography, dexascan, Black Lung Clinic program, and several locations offer a diabetes education program."

"My favorite sites are school-based sites where students, teachers (and at three schools the community) can access ser-

vices. At Midland Trail High School, Summers County High School and Greenbrier East High/Eastern Greenbrier Middle School, the community has access to services, which is great for more rural areas like Hico and Hinton."

What does the future hold for RMC? "Funding is always a concern," she said. "We are a Federally Qualified Health Center, so we see patients regardless of ability to pay and offer a sliding fee scale so there is some government grant funding that helps cover that, and it's also always a concern when we hear of changes for the Medicaid and Medicare programs."

"Additionally, as documentation and quality care requirements increase, the work burden on employees also increases, so we want to make sure people don't burn out. I love our RMC employees. They work hard and really care about our patients."

The health center is just one of many items on Atha-Rader's to-do list on many days.

For example, she serves as vice president and treasurer of Fayette Awning & Glass in Oak Hill, a family-owned business that started as Fayette Awning in 1968.

"There was a big snowstorm that brought a lot of awnings down," she tells the story. "My grandpa had worked with his brothers, first at Raleigh Glass and then at Oak Hill Glass, and decided to go out on his own. He did estimates during the day, and when my dad got out of school in the evening, they would do the work."

"When the business started they did mainly awnings, windows, doors, railing, fencing



Courtesy photos/Kristi Atha-Rader
Kristi Atha-Rader addresses the crowd during a special ceremony at Rainelle Medical Center.

and projects like that. Then, they grew to add commercial projects, hardware, plumbing, paint, electrical supplies, flooring, stained glass supplies, appliance parts and more.

"All of our family worked there at one time or another ... my grandparents, parents, aunt and uncle, cousin, brother and me. Family dinners growing up always involved at least a little talk about projects at the store or things that were going on. Several times the whole crew went to hardware shows together as well."

"I love hardware shows."

Fayette Awning & Glass is a staple in the Oak Hill community.

"We often hear people say 'If Fayette Awning doesn't have it, you don't need it,'" she says. "We've always prided ourselves in offering good service, treating people like family and having a wide variety of items in the store."

"I do things at the store as needed. Mom usually calls when she needs help, an opinion or a signature. We have some wonderful employees, including our

longtime manager, Rob Long, who has been with us for about 40 years."

"I worked at our family business a little during college on breaks and for a few years after college," she adds. "After my dad and grandfather passed away, my brother and I both took (and passed) the tests for contractors licensing to make sure we never had an issue with that, and I also help my mom with computers, accounting or anything else she needs."

"We all pitch in and do what we have to for the business to stay successful, and that's how it has been my entire life."

A former Mrs. West Virginia, Atha-Rader also has a long affiliation with pageants in addition to hardware, health and home life.

"I don't do a lot with pageants any more beyond helping young ladies who need help getting started in competing, and I still co-own Fit for a Queen in Crossroads Mall, so I try to stay up to date on trends so that the store has what competitors need," she said. "I also try to make sure we have things that women need for homecoming courts,

prom and other special events that are going on in the area."

As with many other active, involved women, Atha-Rader juggles life's responsibilities with a family that includes daughter Maddie, 17, and son Brock, 13. She's an assistant coach on her daughter's Midland Trail High softball team.

"I have always been busy," she says. "In high school, I was involved in a whole lot and learned to manage my time well when I was young. I have been fortunate to never miss anything important for either of them, but I do have a lot of help to make sure they are where they need to be and that they are supported in the things they are involved in."

"My husband, my mom, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law and aunts and uncles have always been great to help if we need it. It truly takes a village, because both of my children are involved in several things and sometimes we have to divide and conquer, but it always works out and they know they are loved and supported."

The family attends Grace Baptist Church in Fayetteville. "We aren't as active as we'd like to be and miss some Sundays, but it's something that we are working on and want to be more active in," she said. "The people there are amazing."

No matter the time, her day's probably not done yet.

"On top of everything else, I do tax preparation for individuals and businesses," Atha-Rader said. "My grandpa Smith started doing taxes and bookkeeping in the 1980s after he retired from being a reve-

nue agent with the IRS, and my mom worked with him."

"I'm the third generation to be an accountant. I started doing a few taxes on my own just out of college and when my grandfather passed away, I started doing taxes for some of the people he had worked with. I don't do an overwhelming amount, but it helps keep me current on tax laws and, honestly, I just like doing them. It's the nerd in me that likes to see how pieces of the puzzle fit together."

When there might be time for a small breather, she says, "I love watching sports. I also really enjoy genealogy and family history. I'm working on my application to join Daughters of the American Revolution. It's great to remember where/what we came from so that we can truly appreciate what we have and learn from the past."

"I don't have a lot of free time, but I'm completely content and love staying busy," Atha-Rader concluded. "I love to be active. I also teach lifeguarding during the summer and have coached different sports before I even had children involved."

"My grandparents and parents were also active in the community, especially my grandparents, Bradford and Dainty Smith. They really taught me the importance of giving back and leaving things better than I found them. If we aren't willing to be involved and help make the community a better place, we have no one to blame but ourselves if we aren't happy here."

"I came back home after going to college in Tennessee because I love Fayette County and southern West Virginia."

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