

Welding a future in service

At 11 years old, Cooper Prince already knows the sound of hard work. It sounds like the steady crackle of his welding machine or boots hitting the ground in step during drill. Those sounds not only shape his hobbies, but his future.

From welding in a barn to earning rank in the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps, Cooper, a Chickasaw citizen from Marietta, is building skills, discipline and leadership at a very young age.

Cooper's introduction to welding began at only four years old, watching his grandfather, Kevin Flanagan, at work. Cooper, a self-proclaimed "thrill enthusiast," said one memory of his grandfather welding perfectly captures what drew him into the vocation.

"We were making a fence out of pipe, and I was outside of the truck watching him," Cooper said. "I see him come over, and he picked me up and put me in the truck. The fire trucks started to show up, and I looked back and that's when I saw the flames."

A grass fire had erupted from the welding sparks. Thankfully, no one was hurt, and the fire department quickly contained the flames. But for Cooper, the rush of excitement from that moment hooked him.

"It's kind of the thrill of welding – you might catch on fire, you might not," Cooper said.

Since then, welding has become more than a curiosity for Cooper. It has become his craft, and he's learned welding is not all "thrill." It requires patience, determination and a steady hand.

One of his most recent projects was transforming an old backhoe bucket into a wood-burning stove for his grandfather's shop building – a challenging and time-intensive feat.

"Before I could start on anything, I was using a Bauer surface conditioner with a wire wheel attachment to get all of the rust off to get it to its natural state," Cooper said, referring to the old tractor bucket.

Once the rust was removed, Cooper welded steel plates onto the sides and back of the bucket blade to form the stove body. Because the bucket was open on one end, he sealed it with a cut-to-fit steel plate and cut an opening for a fire door.

Cooper then fabricated and placed the fire door on the stove, attached with hinges and a latch so it could be opened and closed easily.

Cooper then welded a short section of pipe to the top to serve as a chimney, allowing smoke to vent. He added a metal grate inside, so air could circulate beneath the fire along with an electric fan to push air through vents he fabricated in the front.

After grinding down rough edges and giving his new project a quick paint job, it was ready to be installed in his grandfather's shop. But first, he wanted to enter the project in some welding contests. After all, it did take him 121 hours to complete.

The wood stove earned him a blue ribbon at the Oklahoma Youth Exposition, grand champion at the Love County Fair, and first place at the Oklahoma State Fair.

"I wasn't expecting it, but I was proud," Cooper said, referring to the awards he received for the welding project.

Other than the thrill of welding and the satisfaction of a completed project, Cooper said his favorite part is the camaradery.

"The experiences you get just being in the ag barn with everybody and the friendships – it's kind of like one big family," Cooper said. "We all help each other and stick together."

That sense of support in the agricultural barn starts with leadership. Cooper said he credits Josh Bazor, Marietta Public School agricultural mechanics instructor and adviser for the school's chapter of the National FFA organization, for helping fuel his interest in welding.

"Mr. Bazor has helped me so much," Cooper said. "I am thankful for him."

Welding is only one part of Cooper's schedule. As Marietta 4-H president and president of the Love County 4-H cooking club, he balances leadership with community service. The cooking club frequently pairs food projects with outreach efforts, including baking cupcakes for veterans and organizing food drives for local food pantries.

He takes his role as 4-H president seriously, organizing club events and leading monthly meetings. "I'm kind of like the person that keeps order," Cooper said. "Either me or the vice president do all the pledges and the motto (during 4-H meetings)."

He also participates in shooting sports and plans to continue competing in agricultural mechanics while eventually transitioning into FFA.

Cooper has even found success in public speaking – something he considers daunting. Portraying rodeo legend Lane Frost in his first 4-H speech contest last year, he earned a grand champion ribbon.

While welding sparked his interest in building and 4-H led him to leadership, the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps shaped his sense of purpose.

Cooper joined the program at 10 years old – the youngest a member can be – after reading about a cadet's achievements in a newspaper article.

"Kall Meador was selected for the U.S. Naval Sea Corps

Cadet of the Year award, and he had a newspaper article about that," Cooper said.

"I really thought it would be a fun experience. That's when my grandma contacted the commander there to see when I could come to see what it was all about. The second I got there, I was treated like family."

Cooper attends drill one weekend a month. They begin early Saturday mornings and continue through Sunday afternoon, filled with marching, inspections, team-building exercises and classroom learning. The schedule is structured and demanding, designed to build mental and physical agility.

"Discipline and respect are the two big things – also, perseverance," Cooper said, explaining what he has learned from the U.S. Naval Sea Cadets Corps.

When he first joined the program, he struggled to pass the physical fitness test. After pushing himself, he got stronger and faster and now passes the monthly tests with ease.

Cooper's hard work has paid off. In November of last year, he was promoted to petty officer third class, the first level within the petty officer ranks. He was promoted to petty officer second class in March of this year.

Advancement requires coursework, testing, time in the program, academic achievements and physical fitness standards. Cooper completes his coursework outside of drill through an online platform, while also balancing academics with extracurriculars.

His favorite part of drill weekends comes at the end.

"Commander's Call" is my favorite part of drill, because it is where you get Commander Fletcher's award accommodations," Cooper said.

Recently, he earned a citation ribbon for academic performance, inspection results, training participation and consistent attendance.

Beyond drill weekends, Sea Cadets offers opportunities for advanced training across the country. Cooper has already traveled to Rhode Island, Oregon, Texas and Washington, D.C., for training.

"In Rhode Island, I went to a medical training where I got CPR certified and trauma wound care certified," he said. "It was hard to get."

The training was rigorous and hands-on. He learned how to pack wounds and respond in emergency scenarios – skills far beyond what most 11-year-olds encounter.

"My hands and knees were stained for about two or three weeks with fake blood," Cooper added. He also experienced life on base while in Rhode Island. "I actually got to wake up to the view of an

ocean," he said. "I got to see four U.S. Coast Guard ships the entire time I was there."

During his training in Texas, Cooper was stationed aboard the USS Lexington, a retired naval ship in Corpus Christi. As a self-proclaimed "fish out of water," he said he especially enjoys trainings on or near the ocean.

For Cooper, Sea Cadets is more than a hobby – it's preparation for his future.

If he ages out as a petty officer and enlists, he could enter the Navy at a higher rank than typical recruits. The program also strengthens college and scholarship applications, something Cooper is already anticipating.

Beyond resume benefits and rankings, Cooper has his eyes set on a specific occupation – a hull maintenance technician. These sailors are responsible for fabricating, installing and repairing shipboard structures, piping and sewage systems on U.S. Naval ships.

"I want to be on one of the ships repairing, welding the hull and stuff like that," he said.

With his welding background and his can-do attitude, Cooper has his sights set on making his dream a reality. He hopes his ambition can inspire others.

"You have to have perseverance. You have to not be afraid to get back up when you fall," Cooper said.

Behind Cooper's accomplishments stands a strong support system – including his grandmother, Sherry Flanagan.

"We are beyond proud," Sherry said. "He is an amazing young man and everything he does – it's almost hard to believe."

She has watched him push through demanding trainings and long drill weekends.

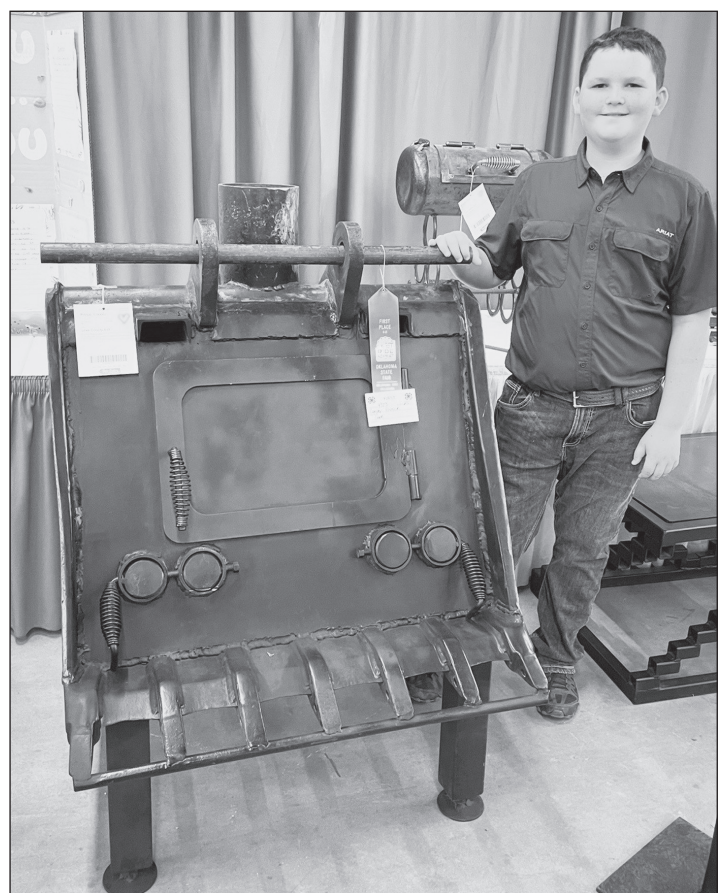
"These trainings can be nine days long, and for nine days they are on their feet working and drilling and training," she said. "I don't know very many kids who would go through that. And he comes out of it smiling every minute."

Cooper's grandfather, Kevin Flanagan, said those qualities in Cooper have been evident for years.

"He is kind, respectful and always ready to help wherever he can," Kevin said.

Whether Cooper is welding in the shop with his grandfather, leading a 4-H meeting or standing at attention in uniform, he approaches each opportunity with a positive mindset.

If his current path is any indication, he is already doing exactly what his future calls for – welding together the skills, discipline and determination needed to one day carry him into a life of service.



Photos provided

Cooper Prince and his 2025 agricultural mechanics project, above, a wood-burning stove crafted from an old backhoe bucket, which earned him a blue ribbon at the Oklahoma Youth Expo, grand champion at the Love County Fair, and first place at the Oklahoma State Fair.

Below, Cooper is shown aboard the USS Lexington, docked on North Beach in Corpus Christi, Texas, during an advanced training for the U.S. Naval Sea Cadets Corps.



Public Notice

IN THE DISTRICT COURT FOR LOVE COUNTY STATE OF OKLAHOMA

IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE OF)
ANDY LEROY MERRIMAN, DECEASED) PB-2026-18

ORDER AND NOTICE OF HEARING

NOTICE IS GIVEN that Andy Montgomery Sims has filed herein a Petition for probate of the Will of the estate of Andy Leroy Merriman, deceased, requesting that a Personal Representative be appointed, as to said estate, and that, for purposes of executing consents and waivers, the heirs at law, devisees, and legatees of the decedent be determined.

NOTICE IS FURTHER GIVEN AND IT IS ORDERED that said Petition is set for hearing in this court in the Love County Courthouse, Marietta, Oklahoma on the 28th day of April 2026, at 2:00 p.m. in the courtroom of the undersigned Judge, when and where all persons interested may appear and contest said Petition.

Dated: April 6, 2026

/s/ Todd Hicks
TODD HICKS, JUDGE

Richard A. Cochran, Jr. OBA #1747
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Attorney at Law

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Public Notice

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF LOVE COUNTY STATE OF OKLAHOMA

IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE OF)
LISA LARAE MCENTIRE,) CASE: PB-2026-11
Deceased.)

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

To the Creditors of LISA LARAE MCENTIRE, Deceased:
All creditors having claims against LISA LARAE MCENTIRE, Deceased, are required to present the same with a description of all security interests and other collateral (if any) held by each creditor with respect to such claim, to the Personal Representative of the Estate, CYNTHIA ANN HICKS AND TONY CLYDE HICKS, c/o Larra Williams, 215 Stanley SW, Ardmore, Oklahoma 73401, on or before the following presentment date: June 26, 2026 or the same will be forever barred.

Dated this 9th day of April, 2026.

/s/ Larra Forsythe-Williams
LARRA FORSYTHE-WILLIAMS 34193
215 STANLEY ST SW
ARDMORE, OK 73401
580-798-3485 voice
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Public Notice

NOTICE OF SALE OF BONDS

In accordance with 62 O.S. 2021, § 354, notice is hereby given that the Board of Education of Independent School District Number 4 of Love County, Oklahoma, will receive bids by: sealed bid, facsimile bid, electronic (Parity®) bid or similar secure electronic bid on the 12th day of May, 2026, at 12:30 o'clock p.m., at the Administration Building, Thackerville Public Schools, 18943 US Highway 77, Thackerville, Oklahoma, for the sale of \$895,000 of General Obligation Combined Purpose Bonds of said School District, which Bonds will mature \$895,000 annually in two (2) years from their date. The bids will be opened and read and shall be awarded at the first Board of Education meeting held after the bids are due.

Said Bonds shall be sold to the bidder bidding the lowest rate of interest the Bonds shall bear and agreeing to pay par and accrued interest for the Bonds. Each bidder shall submit with his bid a sum in cash, cashier's or certified check, electronic (wire) transfer or surety bond payable to the Treasurer of the District, equal to two (2%) percent of the amount of his bid. The Board reserves the right to reject all bids.

WITNESS my official hand and seal this 13th day of April, 2026.

Billy Foreman
Deputy Clerk, Board of Education
(SCHOOL DISTRICT SEAL)

Published in the Marietta Monitor on April 17 and 24, 2026.

LPXLX

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Friday, May 15th @ 8-10 am
Red River Shooter Supply, 103 S 8th, Marietta

Saturday, June 6th @ 8-10 am
Wells Feed, 108 Broadway, Marietta

Presented by: Riley & Co. Real Estate Office - 100 US-77, Marietta, OK

"All dreams are within reach. All you have to do is keep moving towards them."
—Viola Davis

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