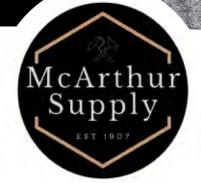


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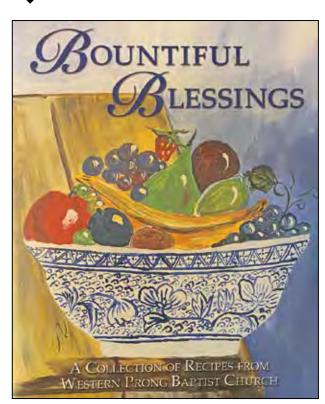
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The rewarding part is seeing the "change in their personality and see[ing] them come out of their shell. You feel like you've made a difference in a person's life and their future as well as in the community."

- Sandra Clemmons

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THE DRAWING BOARD

Student art from Columbus County Schools

Recently I heard, for the first time in a long while, the song "Unwritten" by New Zealand artist Natasha Bedingfield. The catchy chorus soon had me singing along.

Amazed that I could still remember the words from this 2006 hit, and curious about the song's backstory, I Googled Bedingfield and learned that she wrote it for her brother's 14th birthday. She said in a 2019 Los Angeles Times article that she'd been, "thinking of what someone his age needs to hear, what I wish I had heard at that point in my life. There are a lot of pressures and expectations."

The lyrics encourage listeners of any age to look at life as a blank page and fill it with choices authentic to themselves, to "Drench yourself in words unspoken, Live your life with arms wide open, Today is where your book begins."

Choices can be risky. Bedingfield told the interviewer her favorite lyric in the song is, "We've been conditioned to not make mistakes, but I can't live that way." She explained, "I just want to be perfect and I can't be. I have to remind myself and give myself a break. And, yeah, sometimes the mistakes actually lead to even better things."

This edition of Flourish features people in our community who chose to pursue their passions in various ways. I'm thankful that they gave themselves permission to dream big dreams and take a few risks along the way.

- Stuart High Rogers, contributor and founding editor

Flourish Bit a tax tales Character Carry St. o

Cover Art by Debbie Conway

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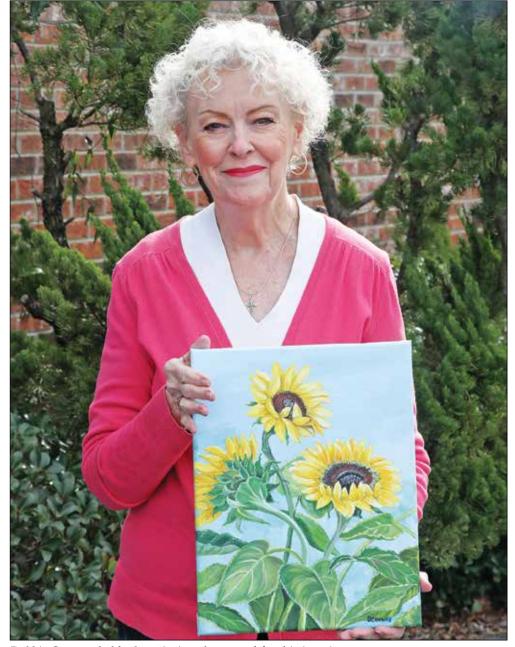
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Debbie Conway holds the painting she created for this issue's cover.

Get to know our cover artist DEBBIE CONWAY

Story by Dashuan Vereen | Photography by Justin Smith and Contributed

The concept of flourishing has a deep connection to Debbie Conway's preferred art style.

"I would describe my art style as mostly realistic," said Conway. "I love doing nature and living things. The word 'flourish' fits into my conception of arts very well. I think of flourishing as developing and thriving in your environment.

"The expression 'Bloom where you are planted' comes to mind," said Conway. "God's creations are so magnificent — flowers, animals, people, trees. I enjoy manipulating colors and textures of natural things to make a pleasing, harmonious composition. To flourish, in a broader sense, is to use your Godgiven abilities, whatever they may be, to make a contribution to others in a positive way."

Conway, 74, taught public school art in Kentucky and North Carolina for 25 years. She has earned ribbons for her work at the

Columbus County Arts Council Art Show.

She has also had exhibits at Southeastern Community College, the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville and the Lake Waccamaw Depot Museum.

Conway's inspiration for the magazine's cover came from her favorite artist, Vincent van Gogh, who created two series of still life paintings called "Sunflowers" in the 1880s.

Early Years

Conway said that, although she's been drawing and painting for most of her life, she didn't have an art teacher until seventh grade. However, she said that some of her grade school teachers encouraged her to create.

Conway grew up in Kentucky and attended Eastern Kentucky University, where she majored in art.

"A lot of my friends had no idea what they wanted to major

in," said Conway. "But I knew right away that's what I wanted." She wasn't sure if she wanted to teach after she graduated, but she earned an education degree, too.

"I was really glad I did that," Conway said. Teaching "turned out to be the joy of my life."

After teaching in Kentucky, Conway and her husband Rob Conway, moved to Columbus County in 1989. He would become an assistant principal at Edgewood Elementary, Central Middle School and Whiteville High School, and he served as principal of North Whiteville Academy before his retirement. Debbie Conway would teach art in the area for 22 years before retiring in 2011.

Passion for teaching

Conway's love for sharing her art ability is easily recognizable when you ask what's her favorite aspect of teaching children.

"I think one of the most enjoyable things I did with the little ones was watercolors," said Conway. "Teaching them how to use watercolors without mixing all the colors up in the tray, and using a light touch with the brush.

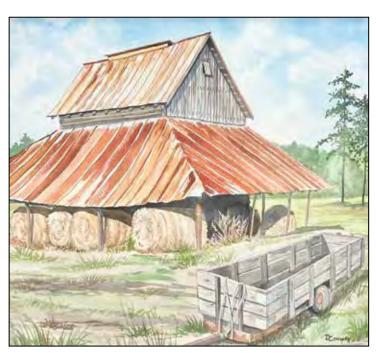
"I would play classical music for them while they were painting, and they made some of the most beautiful artwork. Most of the time, it was abstract paintings that they did."

She found that, if she let the students paint until they stopped, the watercolors "ran together and made a muddy mess," so she would remove the trays when she felt the time was right.

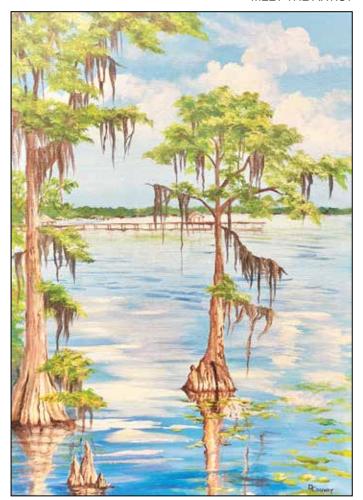
"It was fun seeing them do things that they didn't realize they could do," she said.

Conway said she realized that abstract art was a good way to introduce her students to painting.

"I don't do any abstract work," said Conway. "But I respect people that do and I certainly enjoy looking at abstract art. But I tried to encourage some of the kids and teach them how to do a good abstract. Some of them would say, 'Well, I just can't draw.' But you can create without being really good at drawing.



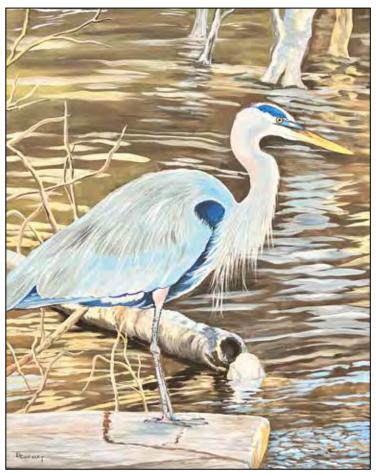
Scenes of the past



Turquoise Lake



Elizabeth



Standing watch

MEET THE ARTIST

"My passion comes from the joy of teaching and encouraging students to enjoy what they're doing and teaching them to have confidence in their artwork. So many people, especially adults, seem to have more inhibitions about artwork, where little children, especially those in kindergarten or first grade, just let it fly."

Still loves drawing

Although she's retired from teaching in the schools, Conway has continued to create new art over the years.

"People commission me to create things for them," said Conway. "Also, I do a lot of art work for my church (Whiteville United Methodist). I feel like God gave me this ability, so I need to give back to Him through it.

"I've done bulletin boards for the church. I've also done some artwork on the front doors. I started doing that when COVID came along, and I've really enjoyed doing it."

Conway still loves to share her gift with others. She teaches classes at her church, although most of her students now are adults.

"The older people get," said Conway, "the more inhibited they get when it comes to worrying about how it's going to look. But I really love to do it. It keeps my teaching juices flowing."

Some of her students have moved on to careers in arts and teaching. Conway added that one of her greatest joys is seeing how her students have flourished in their lives.





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Saute mum until tender in ponetick pan. Cook rice in chicken broth and union until days. Add peas, salt and popper and mix well. Pit in serving dish and sprinkle with Parmasan characteristics.

PINEAPPLE CASSEROLE

Topping

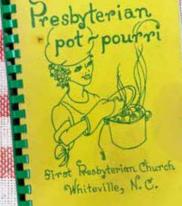
1 tube crushed Ritz anacters

1 stick melled butter

Mix together and spread in this. Mix topping and spread over pineupple mixture. Bake at 350' for 30 minutes.

POTATO CASSEROLE

Topping:



MRS. WALDROW'S PIPTH GRADE

hungry Jack Cannerale

MRS. WALDRON'S

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Change Hinson: "/17s binguick dough



Idea C.L. Tale: Jr.



Community cookbooks preserve memories, culture

STORY BY JOSEPH WILLIAMS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH WILLIAMS AND SUBMITTED

The South is known for its well-seasoned cooks, and Columbus County is no exception

Rather than opting for fast food or a frozen meal, what better place could you find tonight's dinner than among the treasured recipe collections in Columbus County's community cookbooks?

As president of the Whiteville Business and Professional Women's Club, Jackie Ray-Pierce helped to publish "Carolina's Best" in 1997. Her group is far from the only one to do so — churches, schools and other local community organizations across Columbus County have published their own cookbooks.

In "Carolina's Best," you can find recipes for sweet potato casserole, Watergate salad, and other traditional Southern fare. But it and other community cookbooks serve as more than just a repository for satisfying home-cooked recipes. They also preserve local history, rekindle memories and foster goodwill among group members.

As Ray-Pierce flipped through the pages of the cookbook she helped to publish years ago, she was flipping through memories in her mind.

"Yeah, it's a cookbook," Ray-Pierce said. "But so much more came out of that."

'No small feat'

The recipes included in the community cookbooks surveyed for this article tended to be brief, each consisting of a list of measured ingredients and concise instructions on how to prepare the dish step by step. They're so short that two or three recipes can usually fit on a page.

Which means that it takes quite a few recipes — 350 to 400, in fact — to fill what Mary Anne Tyndall deems to be a "nice-sized cookbook."

Tyndall would know. She chaired the First Presbyterian Church of Whiteville's cookbook committee through the publication of two cookbooks: "Breaking Bread Together," published in 1994, and "Breaking Bread Together: A Second Helping," published in 2008. Collecting recipes, editing them and handling negotiations with a publisher is "no small feat," Tyndall said.



Jackie Ray-Pierce served as president of the Whiteville Business and Professional Women's Club when it published its cookbook "Carolina's Best" in 1997.



Mary Anne Tyndall served as chair of First Presbyterian Church of Whiteville's cookbook committee, which published "Breaking Bread Together" in 1994 and "Breaking Bread Together: A Second Helping" in 2008.



Sandra Love served on the Columbus County Hospital Auxiliary's cookbook committee, which published "Columbus Regional Cooking" in 2004.

Preserving the past

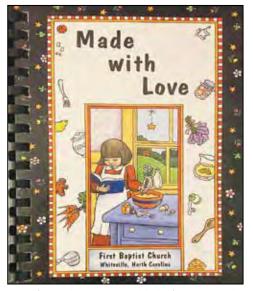
Proceeds from the sales of these two cookbooks went into the First Presbyterian's women's group fund, but, according to Tyndall, the greater motivation for publishing them wasn't about the money.

It was important, Tyndall said, to preserve recipes from past cookbooks the church had published, with the names of the people who contributed them, for future generations.

Often in community cookbooks, each recipe has the contributor's name. For instance, Nancy Floyd's "Hocus Pocus Clam Dip" was the first appetizer in First Presbyterian's second edition of "Presbyterian Pot Pourri," published in 1984. When Tyndall's cookbook committee published "Breaking Bread Together" years later, the cookbook included the same recipe — but this time, the contributor's line read "In memory of Nancy Floyd."

In similar ways, other community cookbooks remember and honor cooks who have passed away.

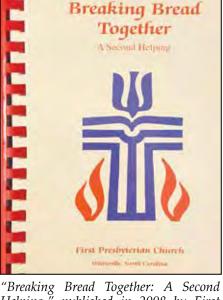
Each group cookbook also typically contains a brief history of the organization itself: when and how it was founded, what the organization



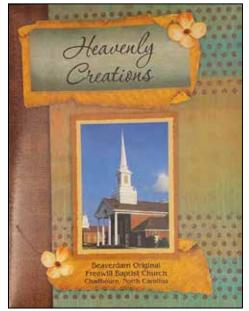
"Made with Love," published in 2006 by First Baptist Church of Whiteville



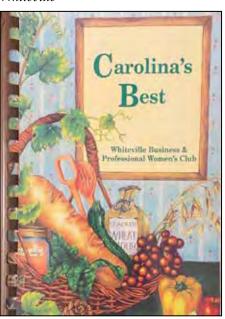
"Breaking Bread Together," published in 1994 by First Presbyterian Church of Whiteville



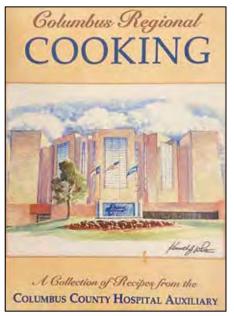
"Breaking Bread Together: A Second Helping," published in 2008 by First Presbyterian Church of Whiteville



"Heavenly Creations," published in 2010 by Beaverdam Original Freewill Baptist Church



"Carolina's Best," published in 1997 by the Whiteville Business and Professional Women's Club



"Columbus Regional Cooking," published in 2004 by the Columbus County Hospital Auxiliary

does today and some significant developments in between those times.

In this way, community cookbooks not only preserve the recipes themselves but serve as a record of the people who made them.

A 'treasure' in the kitchen

By virtue of all the work they require to assemble, community cookbooks are a labor of love.

Sandra Love attests to that personally, having served on the Columbus County Hospital Auxiliary's cookbook committee when it published "Columbus Regional Cooking" in 2004.

Love said she still uses her copy of "Columbus Regional Cooking," calling it "a treasure" to have in her kitchen.

ry to tell —and the \$50,000 grand prize.

Tyndall triumphed with a deceptively simple dessert: her fudgy bonbons. Each bite-sized treat consists of a Hershey's Kiss enveloped in a tablespoonful of chocolate dough. Once baked at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for just six minutes and cooled, the little morsels are topped with a drizzle of white chocolate frosting or a vanillaflavored candy coating.

> "It was a fun experience, even just to go," Tyndall said. "I enjoyed every second of it." Of course not every recipe's story ends with a cash prize, but many have

Ray-Pierce said that she doesn't believe that contributors to these community cookbooks "just cut something out of a magazine." Instead, contributors usually share recipes "that have meaning behind them," — like their grandmother's pecan pie recipe or another beloved favorite, she said.

Sharing cherished dishes like these with someone else is like sharing "a part of yourself" with them, Ray-Pierce said.

Among other treats inside, you'll find Rebecca Ann and Evans Lowery's "Nakina High Hot Fudge Sundae Cake" and Hardy Ledbetter's seafood puffs, consisting of a mix of shredded crab, scallops and lobster spread over toast and broiled in the oven.

The auxiliary printed the cookbook to sell copies in the Sunshine Store, the hospital's gift shop. But the cookbook paid dividends in more than just sales, Love said.

Love had never put a cookbook together before, so the experience offered her a chance to get to know the hospital employees a bit better.

In putting the cookbook together, Love and other volunteers had to "do a lot of talking to the employees one on one" to collect recipes. The experience "brought us all closer," Love said.

Love said she still uses her copy of "Columbus Regional Cooking," calling it "a treasure" to have in her kitchen.

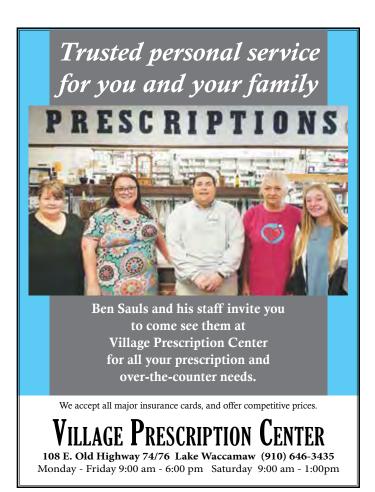
Love would like to think that others still appreciate their copies of the book. "I would hope that most everybody held onto it," she said.

'Recipes have a story to tell'

Recipes are more than just the sum of their ingredients. "I think recipes have a story to tell," Ray-Pierce said.

Love agrees. In putting "Columbus Regional Cooking" together, she found that each contributor "always had a story behind the recipe" to share.

One special original recipe took Tyndall across the country to San Diego, California, to compete in the 1994 Pillsbury Bake-Off against 99 other hand-picked home cooks. Tyndall walked away from the competition with a sto-



COOKBOOKS

Pillsbury Bake-Off winner Recipe for victory Mary Anne Tyndall prepares her prize-winning sweets during the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Tyndall takes national prize with fudgy bonbon recipe



To prepare her famous fudgy bonbons, Mary Anne Tyndall begins by heating chocolate chips, butter and sweetened condensed milk over the stove. After combining the mixture with flour and a teaspoon of vanilla, Tyndall forms each bonbon by hand. Tyndall won the \$50,000 grand prize with this recipe at the 1994 Pillsbury Bake-Off in San Diego, California.

'Mama's strawberry shortcake'

Community cookbooks such as these offer a chance not only to delight in delicious recipes, but to catch a glimpse into the past in more ways than one.

Ray-Pierce recalls "Made with Love," a cookbook published by First Baptist Church of Whiteville. In it, there are pictures of her children from nearly 20 years ago.

"They were so young," Ray-Pierce said. When she pulls that cookbook out and sees "how young they were, that's just precious."

Ray-Pierce said she plans to pass her cookbooks along to her now-grown children one day. When she does, she said she hopes they will look over them fondly and think to themselves, "Oh, I remember when Mama cooked this," or, "That's Mama's strawberry shortcake."

Passing along these recipes — and the memories, people and traditions wrapped up in them — is what makes these community cookbooks so special.

When you read through them, Ray-Pierce said, you see more than just recipes. "You can see who went before you."

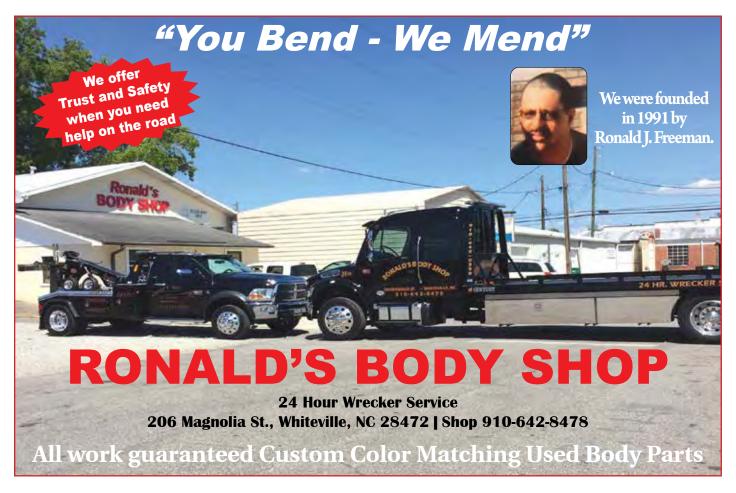


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BROOKS, TROY WANT TO SEE LIVES TRANSFORMED

Two female pastors share their visions

STORY BY TONNYE WILLIAMS FLETCHER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONNYE WILLIAMS FLETCHER AND SUBMITTED

When you hear the word "pastor," chances are you picture a man, probably in a suit or robes. However, Columbus County also has some female pastors overseeing congregations. Two of them spoke with Flourish about how they came to lead their churches, what rewards they find in ministry and how they deal with the realities of the work.

Making an impact

Pastor Daisy Vereen Brooks of Facts of Life Church of God has a welcoming stance and friendliness that are helpful in her role pastoring two congregations. Brooks stays busy directing multiple outreaches to address serious needs in the community, but she doesn't dwell on any challenges in her way. Brooks offers this advice to the rest of us: "Stick with God's plan and stay focused on God's work."

Family relationships brought her to the area. She was born in Maryland but had family in the Carolinas. In fact, her sister was driving from Virginia to Tabor City weekly to do ministry. Brooks began helping out with the music ministry in Tabor City, having studied music at Bowie State University in Maryland.

Eventually her sister passed the baton — and the responsibility of pastoring the Tabor City congregation — to Brooks.

Brooks had been reluctant to answer the serious call of pastoral ministry, much like Moses and Jonah of the Bible, but her sister knew that putting her in charge of the Tabor City church was just the nudge she needed. Once she took the reins of the ministry here in Columbus County, she was "all in," she said, continuing the outreach activities already in place and beginning to expand them to fulfill the needs of her new community.

Brooks is now the senior pastor over two Facts of Life Church of God congregations — one in Tabor City and one in Whiteville. She is very appreciative of her husband, Alexander Brooks, who supports her in her role as pastor and is also a minister within the church. Some of the ways Facts of Life Church of God serves Columbus County residents are Yokefellow Prison ministry at the Tabor City Correctional Institution, food distribution and mental health



Daisy Vereen Brooks is the pastor of Facts of Life Church of God in both Tabor City and Whiteville.





Tracey Troy is pastor of Victory in Jesus Ministries on N. Madison Street in Whiteville.



"The Lord supplies our needs," Brooks says.

services in Tabor City and "The Feeding Pot" (hot kitchen) in Whiteville. Brooks says she is "too busy doing kingdom work" to focus on challenges, adding, "The Lord supplies our needs."

Relationships are key

Brooks certainly has her hands full leading a church that is so involved in serving the people and meeting needs in the area where she lives and works. The most rewarding part of her calling as pastor is "seeing people change," she said. She described watching (and helping) broken people find healing, unhoused people find housing and prejudice being replaced with friendship. In fact, she shared a story of some county residents whose relationship with her began with "the n-word" but who now call her "pastor."

Brooks intentionally builds relationships with people, showing her caring nature by meeting needs and being on the front lines of the service projects in which she is involved. She believes that change begins with growing relationships.

Many needs

Brooks is also passionate about partnership. She recognizes there is "so much to do, so many needs, so many people hurting," and that no one could do it alone. Facts of Life Church of God joins hands with many local individuals and organizations to accomplish all it does. It partners with

Community CPR, Columbus Baptist Association, local grocery stores and banks. Brooks understands that many hands make light the work. Brooks emphasized that nothing is wasted in the food distribution. Donations come from two Food Lion stores. Anything that is good for human consumption is either distributed or cooked at the Feeding Pot to share with the community, but the church also partners with a local hog farm to share the items that are more fit for swine than humans. Additionally, the church has a relationship with composters who utilize whatever is not edible by pigs or people. Stewardship is important to Brooks and her partners. She would love to have more volunteers to help with the ministries meeting the needs of Columbus County residents and beyond. If you're interested you can find out more at factsoflifeoutreach.org.

Praying for guidance

Tracey Troy, senior pastor of Victory in Jesus Ministries in Whiteville, was born and raised here in Columbus County but left for a few years for college and a seven-year season in New Jersey. While

Troy has served in ministry all her life, she was uncertain of the path to be a pastor and resisted in the beginning. Troy had been taught that women could not serve in pastoral roles, so when she felt the call to ministry, she wasn't sure how to proceed. "I got bold and fleeced God," she said. "I had to be sure. I said, 'Lord, you're going to have to show me the ABCs if this is really what you want from me.'" Soon after Troy's prayer, a visiting preacher shared a message with a title that reduced Troy to tears: "The Responsibility and the Prerequisites of Carrying the Gospel: From A-Z." When even her own parents were unsure of this next step, Troy felt isolation during the transition, but God was working it out, she said.

Some local male pastors had been very vocal in their disapproval of women as pastors, but when the Rev. John Beese Jr. heard Troy speak to youth at a meeting, he came up to her and said, "Young lady, you didn't just speak. You preached." Later he showed strong support for her in the pulpit when she delivered her initial message and received her license.

Deacon Harry L. Simmons had often said that, "God cannot use a woman to preach." But it was he who gave Troy her license after that initial message. He took back his earlier statements and became a strong supporter of Troy's ministry. Her family came around, too. All these affirma-



The Whiteville congregation of Facts of Life Church meets at 506 N. Lee St., across from Whiteville High School.



Troy's church, Victory in Jesus Ministries, is located at 109 N. Madison St. in Whiteville.

tions came while Troy was still 17 years old.

Balance is healthy

After moving back to Whiteville in the late 1990s, Troy discovered local churches were using the same music and doing the same activities as when she'd left, and the number of youth attending was decreasing.

Troy said she believes there should always be a healthy balance. She says she was taught that, "The young run the race, but the elderly lead the way." The church needs both, she believes.

To get that balance and have a healthy "spiritual body," Troy's church focuses on teaching and practicing these five F's: Faith, Family, Fitness, Finance and Friendship. She cites 3 John 2, which says, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." Troy believes health and prosperity in other areas of life are based on what she calls soul prosperity (spiritual health).

Challenges

Troy, like Brooks, says the most rewarding part of pastoring is seeing lives transformed through the power of the gospel. She also recognizes that these journeys can be long and arduous, requiring patience and care from a pastor. She says that pastoral work is hard and not for the faint of heart. She shares a couple of examples of transformation:

A young woman struggling with a crack addiction was drawn to Troy. Later, after much pastoral guidance and love, she went to Southeastern Community College's cosmetology department. She went on to Mt. Olive University, receiving a master's degree in social work, and now heads a department at a prominent nonprofit organization.

A young man with a drugaddicted past went through SCC's nursing program and is now a responsible citizen, a

LIVES TRANSFORMED

nurse who heads his department as well.

"The word of God draws people," Troy said. "We pour into them so they can go back and 'each one reach one,' and pay it forward."

Teamwork

Troy and other leaders in the church work with nursing homes, prisons, youth and married couples to strengthen those unifying "F" tenets. Church leaders hope to soon reinstate their Thursday night kids' activities. They also partner heavily with the hospital, bringing the Bloodmobile, diagnostic tools and medical education to their campus and their parking lot.

In addition to her pastoral role, Troy is also a gospel artist. She released a song called "Healing God" (available on digital outlets). She is excited to be working on new material and said she looks forward to what God will do with her music in the future.

One thing Troy said she would like to see is more unity among churches in the area. She also said she feels that there is not enough camaraderie between local ministries. Troy began a ministry during the pandemic called the Prayer Unitive — a page on FaceBook where local pastors and ministers could share messages and pray, and where community members could hear those messages. According to Troy, a person's race, ethnicity or denomination isn't what matters. What matters is for them to serve the same God.

While Troy and her church serve the same God as other local Christian churches, she is quick to state that, "We are not your traditional church. Definitely not traditional."



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At Community CPR in Whiteville, Troy interacts with a mission team of college students, some from outside the U.S. "Community CPR and Victory in Jesus Ministries have collaborated on a number of projects, and we are definitely community partners whenever we can be," said Wallyce Todd, Community CPR executive director, seen front left.

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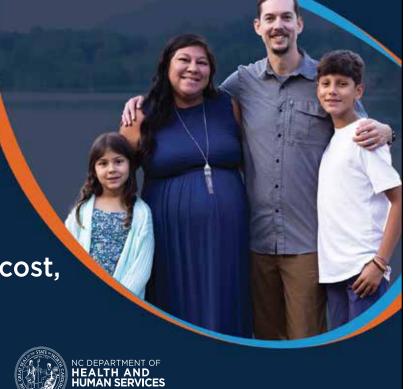
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Sandra Clemmons, left, confers with her colleague Helen Williamson at Easterseals UCP. Clemmons began work there almost a year ago helping disabled people obtain meaningful employment. [Williamson] "is always there for me to ask a question, and I appreciate her willingness to help and give me wisdom for job coaching," Clemmons said.

Clemmons creates change with job support for disabled clients

STORY BY GRETCHEN MARLOWE | PHOTOGRAPHY SUBMITTED BY SANDRA CLEMMONS

After seven years in corporate America, Sandra Clemmons knew it was time for a change. Working in the Concessions Abuse Department for Amazon, she had to find and deal with customers who were defrauding the company. "You can imagine my job was not very fun," she said, "because I had to confront a lot of bad behaviors."

It was unrewarding and "mentally draining," Clemmons said. She didn't enjoy going to work, knowing that her shift would consist of "verbal abuse — extreme mental abuse."

Despite the advantages of a job with a major corporation, the toll on Clemmons made her realize that it was time "to look for something else," she said. And this time she wanted a meaningful job where she could make a difference.

In March 2023 she discovered her new calling as an employment specialist for Easterseals UCP. She now helps people with a variety of physical and mental health disabilities find meaningful employment.

Almost a year later, you could see Clemmons working anywhere her clients work: She says that includes "fast food or sit-down restaurants, greenhouses, school systems, the hospital, mom-and-pop grills, roadside stands, day care centers, salons, retail stores, barber shops, farms or veterinary offices."

Whatever new jobs her clients are learning, Clemmons does alongside them, she said.

When she's not in the hands-on training phase with a client, she's visiting "absolutely any business," she said, "just to see if someone I'm assisting would be a match." Clemmons describes her new career as "a job that I can honestly say does not feel like work."

'A huge step'

Clemmons is a graduate of Whiteville High School, wife to Jeremie Clemmons and mother to daughters Jayda Shaw, 26, and Paisley, 14, and to son Ashton, 13. "Acts of service are always something I've enjoyed," she said. "Both of my parents were nurses."

Once she decided to leave the Amazon position, Clemmons looked for "something fulfilling where I [could] contribute," she said. After a brief job search, Clemmons "stumbled upon Easterseals UCP."

Clemmons applied for the job. At her interview, "I felt silly because I said about 50 times I just want to do something that is rewarding," she said. Nevertheless, "I was offered the job on the spot."

Christina Mount, program supervisor for Easterseals UCP, remembers that interview. "When she came in and repeated the fact that she really wanted something that was giving back, I'm like, 'Okay, this is a perfect fit,'" she said. "I turned her over to my best employment specialist." Mount admired Clemmons' drive and willingness. "She's gone everywhere I asked her to go, which you know sometimes includes Wilmington," Mount said.

Despite the advantages Clemmons saw at Eas-

terseals UCP, leaving her job wasn't easy. "That was a big step...leaving everything I had known for the past seven years," she said. "It's a huge step, especially with the economy. Making sure your kids are fed at the end of the day."

Despite being nervous, Clemmons was ready. "I said, 'You know what? This is what I've been praying for and what I need," she recalled. Once she started, the smooth transition told her she'd made right choice. "I'm happy I made that decision every day," she said.

A typical day

At Easterseals UCP, Clemmons went through an intense program to learn to meet her clients' needs,

which go far beyond a brief workplace orientation or skills training. Clemmons helps them prepare resumes and navigate their job searches. Once they're hired, she still has lots of work to do. In addition to learning job tasks, many of her clients may be hesitant in a new social environment facing new challenges and expectations.

"If a client is in the intensive training portion, I go to work with them, and we work side by side," she said.

Clemmons' encouragement and example help her clients learn skills many other adults would take for granted, such as clocking in, emptying the trash, keeping track of what tasks they need to complete and handling the social aspects of their jobs. Clemmons supports her clients with checklists. Whether in a grocery store or working as a teacher's assistant, "They enjoy routine," she said.

Meanwhile Clemmons is answering client questions and giving "lots of praise for a job well done." Moreover, she also "supports the employer's questions and concerns," she said. "I like to think I bridge the gap between the two."

Making a difference

True to what drives her, Clemmons takes pride in

helping her clients find places that fit and teaching them new skills. They may start out with an attitude of "I can't do anything," but, as they grow, "It's just so rewarding to see smiles and help them with really simple skills," she said. "They appreciate any gains.'

For Clemmons, the rewarding part is seeing the "change in their personality and see[ing] them come out of their shell. You feel like you've made a difference in a person's life and their future as well as in the community," she said.

The Easterseals UCP website says the organization's purpose is "to provide meaningful and exceptional services so that children, adults and



Clemmons works alongside an Easterseals UCP client in a retail store. Some of her other assignments have taken her to fast food or sit-down restaurants, farms, greenhouses, the hospital, nursing homes and child care centers.





CREATING CHANGE

families living with disabilities and mental health challenges can live, learn, work and play in their communities." Clemmons' work has given her the opportunity she dreamed of to contribute to other people's wellbeing.

Dreams fulfilled

Clemmons isn't the only one with dreams. Her clients dream of the chance to fit in and be part of the fabric of their community, Columbus County. Thinking back over all those she's worked with in almost a year with Easterseals UCP, Clemmons smiles, thinking of the many success stories she's seen unfold.

Without violating the organization's privacy policies, she told the story of a recent client, a man whose transformation was especially dramatic.

After determining the kind of job the new client sought and his past experiences, Clemmons said she learned that he was "unable to maintain eye contact with me and barely spoke." Clemmons knew it would be a "real struggle to find him employment."

Months passed with "no good matches," leading her to enlist help from Mount, her supervisor. Soon an interview led to a job offer in a fast food business, and on-the-job coaching began. Clemmons was nervous about seeing him flourish in the new work environment. Her daily job shadowing and laminated check-off lists paid off, however. Her client now "loves coming to work, being part of his work team — even joking with me and his coworkers," she said. Clemmons adds "responsibility and compassion" to her client's new soft skills. "I think he touches lots of people's hearts."

Clemmons is still giving her client follow-up support, which lets her see the impact he has on those around him. "Almost daily," she said, "someone comes up to me while we work and says, 'He is such an inspiration and a hard worker." Clemmons makes sure to pass those compliments along to the client, "and the smile on his face is so satisfying to see," she said.

Overcoming the stigma

One challenge in helping clients achieve their dreams is the stigma that others often attach to disabled people. Clemmons firmly believes her clients "deserve to be there. For people to judge someone based on a disability is wrong," she said.

Thinking of her client now working in a fast food setting, Clemmons knows he has proven his worth, and, "I'm just thankful they could give him an opportunity," she said. Her client loves his job: "He's good at it, and it's an absolute success," she said. "It means so much more to see them feeling accomplished, confident and ready to take on their day with the new skills they learn. Being a part of that is so rewarding — it's a blessing," she said.

Clemmons' latest success story was "given an opportunity. He excelled, and it made [his] dream come true," she said. Clemmons smiles, knowing just how that feels. A dream come true.



Some Easterseals UCP clients obtain "stocking or blocking" jobs, said Sandra Clemmons, above. They could be working at "Walmart, Big Lots, Dollar General, Food Lion, etc. We help show the clients how to organize, look at prices, match up the labels, pull items to the front and check expiration dates." Clemmons learns job expectations so she can help clients plan and carry out their tasks successfully.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you're interested in volunteering for Easterseals UCP, fill out the online form at eastersealsucp. com/volunteer/ with your preferences and learn how you can make your own difference.

If you're a person with a disability or have a family member with a disability who is looking for employment assistance, call Sandra Clemmons at 910-906-3529 or e-mail sandra.clemmons@eastersealsucp.com.

First-time Flourish contributor:

Gretchen Marlowe of Lake Waccamaw enjoys teaching English at Whiteville High School, gardening and spending time with family, including two- and four-legged grandchildren.



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Ashley Lomboy is shown surrounded by family members after receiving the Indigenous Excellence Award from the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. From left are her daughter Mercedes Lomboy Gathers, husband Efren Lomboy, Ashley Lomboy, son Logan, mother Linda Patrick and son Jaren.

Border Belt People: Ashley Lomboy brings Western science, Indigenous culture together

This story first appeared in the Border Belt Independent, borderbelt.org, a digital news organization covering southeastern North Carolina.

STORY BY KERRIA WEAVER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BBI AND SUBMITTED BY ASHLEY LOMBOY

A shley Lomboy of the Waccamaw Siouan Tribe took an interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) from a young age. This fascination led her to become a global information security manager at Corning Optical Fiber and Cable, and later, founder of the Waccamaw Siouan STEM Studio.

The Border Belt Independent spoke with Lomboy about her many accomplishments and how she is making a difference in her community.

Q. Seeing how you identify as being a part of the Waccamaw Siouan tribe, how has that shaped you into the person you are?

I think every person has their own unique history and culture. I think that Indigenous people have that additional connection to being on their traditional lands, which is something many others who immigrated or migrated here don't have. It's that uniqueness of connection to who I am, not just metaphorically, but within our native culture. I think that the shaping of it really has come from strong family ties and family values that I was raised with within my tribal community that are all really tight. There are examples of how our culture has continued to survive over hundreds of years. So being raised in that way, it's been really special and has really shaped who I am today in valuing family and traditions as a part of our daily lives.

Q. What accomplishment would you say are you most proud of?

I think the greatest accomplishment, other than my children, is winning the AISES national award for 2023. If you're not familiar with AISES, it stands for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society.

Every year across North America they choose native Indigenous professionals to win that award. Mine was in Indigenous excellence, which is the involvement and the incorporation of your culture into science. I was nominated for that award, and hundreds of submittals were sent in from state and federal tribes across North America. Through all that I won the award. It was an awesome time. I think it's been one of the largest awards anyone from our tribe has ever won on a national level, especially in the field of science.

Q. Outside of working at an IT security job, what other interesting things did you pursue at the time and after?

My passion is really around helping my tribal community. Indigenous youth in STEM is one of my passions, also around just advocacy. I'm an advocate for Indigenous people. Some folks may feel threatened by that word, but I don't see it necessarily as advocacy. I'm giving it a title because that's what other people call it. I do my best to sit at tables where we're underrepresented to help make sure that our voice is being heard in the right places. I speak out whenever I see or hear about things that we may not be included in, offering a different point of view, or different perspective, and I don't mind sharing that with others. I didn't go into it saying or wanting to be an advocate or be called that in any way. I think that's what the definition of it is, though.

Q. When did you take an interest in STEM?

It probably started in middle school. I was one of the good kids, which basically means I didn't get in trouble a lot. If you were a good kid, you got to go to



Lomboy is founder of Waccamaw Siouan STEM Studio and an advocate for native people in Columbus County and beyond. She has directed projects to educate people about environmental issues and to integrate Western science with Indigenous knowledge.

LOMBOY

this very special class, a computer class. It was only for the good kids who were behaving in class. We would go in there and get on these old, big-screen floppy drive computers and we would play Oregon Trail, Hangman, and many other games on the computer. I had so many questions. I remember when I saw my first GUI screen and the first time seeing a mouse go across the screen. Thinking back, that feels like a long time ago, but it was really only 35 years ago. I just had a lot of questions. I remember asking my parents about getting a computer at home and instead got a four wheeler for Christmas. All the kids had to agree on one gift for Christmas so there was either a four wheeler or computer, and

they got the four wheeler. Next year, they got the computer. I remember connecting to AOL dial-up all the way up until I left home, which was in 2001. I was always interested in how this works, and I have always been a very inquisitive person.

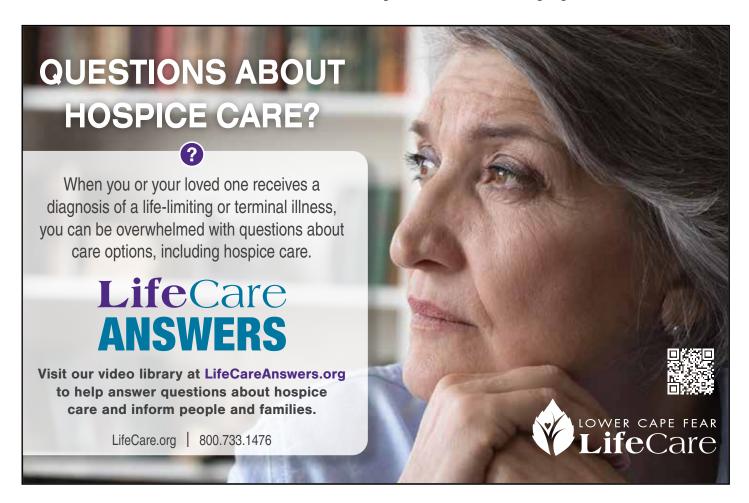
Q. What is STEM Day all about?

STEM Day is really about us bringing Indigenous



youth together, and also bringing Western science and Indigenous knowledge together. You can see them side by side, giving honor to both of them. We want you to explore Western science, making medicines, how to make makeup, explore fossils, horticulture, engineering with robotics. We want them to experience those things alongside honoring our elders. We had an elder lounge where the elders came in and got to experience virtual reality and 3D printers. Elders were honored that day. Youth were coming in, asking questions, and learning from their elders. They heard stories about their upbringing and things they learned, sharing that with the community.

We also explore Lake Waccamaw. We gave boat tours to those who have never been on the lake. It's a privilege to be able to go to Lake Waccamaw. A lot of folks from the tribe don't have boats or even access to the lake. For many of them, this was their first time ever going out on Lake Waccamaw. It was an amazing time. We had 14 different workshops being presented. We had 13 or 14 different partners and about 400 people come to the event; 300



of those were youth and elders who participated. We had about 80 chaperones. We had 13 different tribes represented during STEM Day.

Q. When was STEM Day established?

We founded the STEM Studio Jan. 1, 2020. That first year we had all these big plans, but due to Covid, we shifted models to just mailing STEM kits that were really engaging. We mailed out close to 100 STEM kits that first year. The second year we did mostly that too. We also started a fish camp that year and did STEM Day later that year.

Q. What feedback or comments do you receive from people who participate in STEM Day?

Magical. A lot of them felt like it was a welcome home, a homecoming for our people of sorts. STEM Day had a lot of significance to it, not only the location and the land, but historically. Lake Waccamaw is our ancestral home. Those around the lake don't acknowledge that. As long as that town has existed, the acknowledgement of Waccamaw Siouan people as being the original people of that space and stewards of that land and water has not occurred. That full acknowledgement of saying this is your land and this is your lake has never been heard until STEM Day.

For STEM Day, I worked with Lake Waccamaw State Park Superintendent Toby Hall, an amazing man who works so hard on STEM Day to make sure everything was exactly the way it needed to be. Whenever we opened up, Toby started out with "Welcome home." A sea of native people were there, and they were just telling them, "Welcome home, this is your land." That acknowledgement even today still gives me chills. Elders have died wanting to hear some type of acknowledgement that this land was theirs.

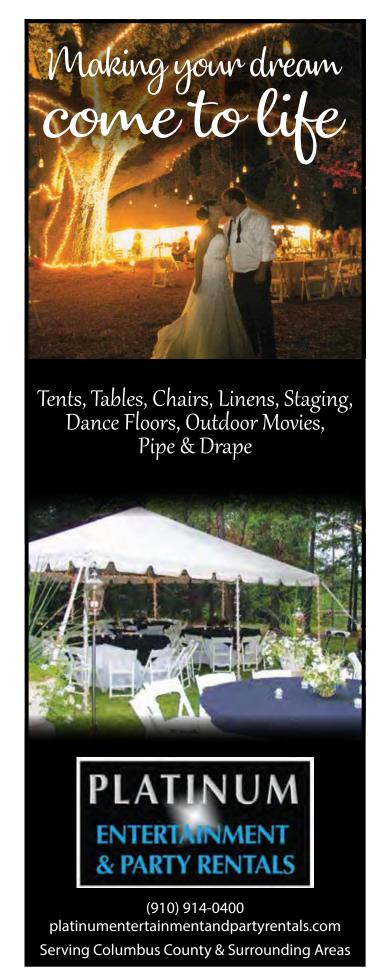
This doesn't mean we're telling the state park to give us back the land or get off of it. That acknowledgement that we're the original people of that land, it's needed and necessary. It was unceded land that we were forced off of and was stolen from us. For those reasons acknowledgement is key.

Q. How do you see the STEM program growing in the future?

We want to continue establishing and improving our annual programs, which is our Yacunne fish camp that we have in April and our STEM Day that happens in September. We're also kicking off a new project where we plan to reforest longleaf pine and bring back cultural burns onto our land.

Long term, I would like to see after-school programs. It would be great to have a stable after-school program that helps improve literacy and mathematics, a program that really will help us elevate our use beyond just our events.

To sustain and to get to that point, we need to do more. Just being realistic, you're not going to learn how to breathe better by coming to STEM Day, but you might be inspired to learn more about it. That's really the goal, to have that sustainable, long-term program that can help move our tribe forward.



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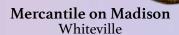


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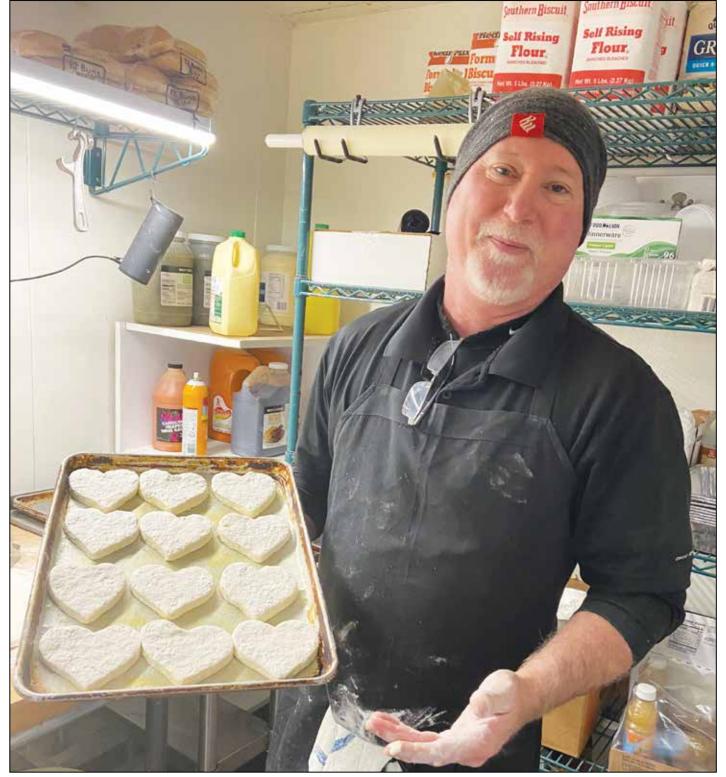
- Interventional radiology, which uses minimally-invasive, image-guided procedures to diagnose and treat diseases.
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Walt Munroe, owner of Cruzers Drive Thru, likes to try new things. He had fun using a new cutter to create his Love Biscuits.

Biscuit-making not just for mamas and grandmamas

Restaurateur reflects on strong women, wise mentors

STORY BY GINGER LITTRELL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GINGER LITTRELL AND RHONDA BULLARD-DUTTON AND SUBMITTED

Tt's probably safe to as-**L**sume that if Steve Harvey asked Family Feud contestants to name the top Southern food, 95% would answer, "Biscuits!" We envision mamas and grandmamas waking before dawn to create those fluffy tastes of heaven. With the convenience of frozen, canned, boxed or pre-made biscuits, who does that these days?

Walt Munroe does!

For 15 years, he's unlocked the door of Cruzers Drive Thru in Whiteville at 4:30 a.m. to create a staple of his business. Tuning his radio to NPR morning news, he gathers the ingredients for a special recipe he's perfected through the years.

A metal biscuit bowl shows its age with bumps and scratches where the dry ingredients are literally dumped in without need of a measuring cup. Any lumps of butter are carefully hand-rubbed to the perfect consistency before the buttermilk joins the party.

"It's all about ownin' it ya gotta own the dough," Munroe, carefully says combining the sticky concoction and talking to it. "OK, it's comin' to me now." Grabbing the crank handle of the vintage flour sifter, he dusts the table surface, and the magic begins.

Careful kneading and folding, patting and rounding result in a large, soft bun of dough. Munroe knows how to roll it to the perfect size and thickness for the next step. Using a trusty metal cutter that requires frequent cleaning for a sharp cutting edge, he



by working the flour and butter mixture until shared a tip to use a size 6 can for a handy it's the perfect consistency for adding the but- biscuit cutter. He thinks of her every time he termilk.



Munroe starts a batch of his popular biscuits Munroe's Grandmama Katrine Munroe cuts with it.



Properly kneading the dough is crucial for a perfect biscuit.



Rolling the dough to the right thickness takes a light touch and a lot of practice.



Munroe used a new cutter for his Valentine's Day "Love Biscuits."



The oven, called "Bertha," delivers the day's first golden batch of biscuits for Cruzers customers.



Fuller Royal stops by daily for a country ham biscuit on his way to teach at East Columbus Jr.-Sr. High School.

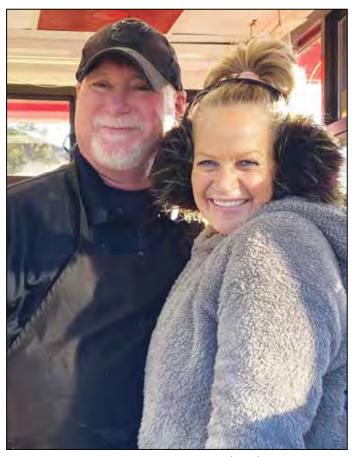
says, "I've worn my fingernail down doing this."

The early morning process gives Munroe quiet time to reflect on the important things – his faith and the mentors along his path. "Every business I've been in, I asked the Lord to come and help me, and He always shows up," said Munroe. "When I come back to this little corner to make my biscuits, it's my meditation time."

Munroe credits his family and lifelong friends with his success. "My mama and grandmama taught me that cooking is something that men can learn to do, and I ended up making a career out of it," he said. "The biggest thing they taught me, though, was that the most important

ingredient in any recipe is LOVE! That's what made Grandmama's creamed corn and Mama's Salisbury steak so good. When I get to the pearly gates, I'll be SO happy to see them!"

Memories of growing up in the Munroe household are comparable to the 1950s and '60s "Leave It To Beaver" series, says Munroe. "Daddy built the house, but Mama made it a home. Those were the years where it was said that a woman's place was in the kitchen." The four children were expected to do their part in getting dinner ready. "We had to get ready for Daddy to get home at 5 o'clock and learned things like how to set the table — things like that."



Munroe, left, can rest assured that cashier/cook/server Sha Carter will welcome every customer with her signature smile and a kind word.

Sylvia Munroe was 'somethin'!' said Munroe. "When I got in a fight at school because kids called me a mama's boy, I'd go home and tell her. She'd say, 'You just go back to school and tell 'em they're right!' I guess life is just easier when you're the favorite!" he chuckled.

Grandmama Katrine Munroe believed that wisdom comes with age. "You can't mess with older people. They know things," her grandson said. "When I was trying to get some help at a job I was working, Grandmama would get up early and come and help me make my biscuits. She advised me to look for older people when I was hiring employees because they'd show up for work at 5 a.m. It's always worked for me." One of his prized relics is a vintage size 6 peach can that Katrine used as a biscuit cutter. "It's amazing the wisdom she had in directing me to that peach can," he said.

More mentors

When Flossie Blanks heard that Dr. Munroe's son was opening Cruzers, she wanted to lend a hand. "Flossie was my daddy's friend from the hospital. She didn't say she wanted to work FOR me. She just wanted to HELP me," recalls Mun-



Known as the Biscuit Queen, Flossie Blanks worked with Munroe for several years. "She was a friend of my dad's from the hospital," he said. "When she heard I was opening the restaurant, she said she wanted to help." Flossie's Corner is featured on the company's website

"The biggest thing they taught me, though, was that the most important ingredient in any recipe is LOVE!" - Walt Munroe

roe. "She took pride in her work and loved making biscuits." Known as "The Biscuit Queen," Blanks was something of a mascot for the restaurant. Although she's retired, Munroe maintains "Flossie's Corner" on his website. In addition to his daddy, who was his best friend and mentor, his granddaddy Homer Munroe taught him a special skill that would serve him well.

"Granddaddy would say, 'Walt, let's go cook us a pig.' So we'd dig a hole in the ground, put down a sheet of metal and prepare a feast." But it was Grandmama's special barbecue sauce that topped it off. Barbecue is a popular menu item at Cruzers, where Katrine's famous barbecue sauce is available for sale. (A story for another day...)

Other mentors included well-known businessmen such as Jim High, who attributed business success to creative advertising. Jesse Fisher believed that the art of selling is explaining. Former brother-in-law Gary Whitman shared his recipe for success: Remember that anything worth having is worth working for, and always use the KIS method — "Keep It Simple."

BISCUIT MAKER

Pebo Collier summed up his philosophy, "It's not about the bells and whistles in the business. It's how people feel when they leave."

Munroe learned quickly that owning a business means being a part of the community. Whether it's feeding the football team, delivering breakfast to the heroes at the hospital or surprising local shut-ins with tasty treats, he believes, "You can't have a successful business unless you help people." And helping people includes his employees.

Right: Jackson "Cowboy" Duncan stops by every morning for a chicken biscuit and a Sun Drop. "I think they named a biscuit 'Cowboy' for me," he joked.

Below: Alex Baldwin orders a Western omelet every morning on his way to work.





BISCUIT MAKER



Sha Carter and JR Sellers clean the grill between orders. Both are cross-trained to handle anything necessary to keep the food moving.

"When I hire someone, I tell them, 'Don't come to work unless you plan on leaving. I want this place to better you for your next step,'" says Munroe.





BISCUIT MAKER

It takes a crew of six to prepare and serve more than 30 menu items. When a first-time customer picks up their order at the window, a brass bell is rung. Dozens of "regulars" come daily, not just for the food, but for how the Cruzers experience makes them feel.

Anyone who hits the floor in the moonlight at 4:30 a.m. and works until late afternoon, six days a week, has a passion for their career choice. "I love this little place," Munroe says. "It's my heart and soul, and no matter how hard it is, this business has saved me."

Cruzers Drive Thru is located at 807 Jefferson St. in Whiteville. Hours are 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The telephone number is 910-640-3692, and the website is cruzersdrivethru.com.

First-time Flourish contributor:

Freelance writer Ginger Littrell of Lake Waccamaw is the proprietor of Weaver's Landing bed and breakfast. She enjoys antiquing and is a history buff.





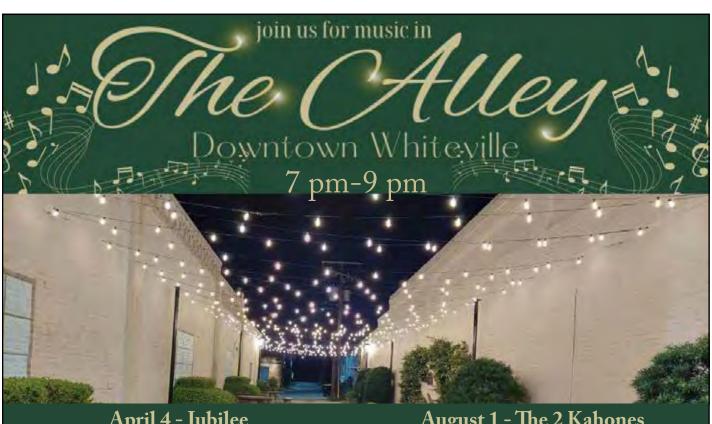
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Ethel Bordeaux Rivenbark writes a check to pay for shoes and socks for students at Chadbourn Elementary School in October.

'9 wanted to buy children some shoes'

101-year-old poet and artist donates book proceeds

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY DIANA MATTHEWS

For a woman who's going to turn 102 years old this year, "I get around good," says Ethel Rivenbark of Chadbourn, "and I don't feel like [my age], either."

Ethel Bordeaux Rivenbark was born in 1922

and grew up in New Hanover, Brunswick and Columbus counties. She left as a young woman because she didn't want to work in "greasy tobacco" anymore, she said.

Rivenbark moved back into the area in her

90s, and last year she published a book titled "Blessings and Talents." She donates all her proceeds from sales of the book to provide local children shoes and socks — items that were in short supply during her own childhood.

The book contains 200 original poems, mostly on Christian themes, along with stories inspired by her own life and drawings of nature and country scenes.

A message of her writing, she said in an interview, is that, "God still answers prayer."

Early life

The Great Depression began early for Rivenbark's family; she was a small child when the Coast Line Railroad laid her father off in 1925. In those days, "Families

were very close," she said. "All we had was family."

One of Rivenbark's early memories was

when, "My shoes were worn out and torn up at the top" she said. Not having money to buy more, her mother used skills learned from her own father, a cobbler, and mended them. She stitched the uppers back together with waxed thread. Then, taking a piece of leather from a pair of worn-out work shoes, she soaked it until it was pliable, and nailed it to the girl's shoes to make new soles.

> "It kept my feet off ground," the Rivenbark said. "I made up my mind, if I could ever get the money, I wanted to buy children some

shoes."

'God-given talents'

"When you're a poet, you just write the poems when they come to you," Rivenbark said. tends to dream about an

idea, then "write it down quickly" as soon as she wakes up.

"I'm an artist and a designer," she added. "I never had a lesson in designing; they're all



Rivenbark's book contains 200

original poems, mostly on

Christian themes, along with

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drawings of nature and country scenes.

A message of her writing, she said in an

interview, is that,

"God still answers prayer."

BUY CHILDREN SHOES

God-given talents," she said, but she taught design at Cape Fear Community College in its early days.

Since 2007, some of Rivenbark's closest friends are John and Claudia Toner of Indian Land, S.C., not far from Charlotte. John Toner's mother, Catherine Toner, met Rivenbark in a retirement home in nearby Pineville, N.C.

The two older women became "fast friends" and "good companions," John Toner said. He and his wife became "adopted family" to Rivenbark, who "was basically by herself," he said.

Toner used to drive both women to the mall or pick them up for "holidays, cookouts, birthdays and other family occasions at our house," he said. "She was just part of our family."

Catherine Toner died in 2022 at age 102, well after Rivenbark had moved first to Leland and to Chadbourn. But Rivenbark has stayed in touch with John and Claudia Toner. When she decided it was time to publish her writing, she turned to them for help.

"We put our heads together" and collected the materials, some of which Rivenbark had saved for decades, Claudia Toner said. Her favorite story in the book is "How We Survived the Depression." Her two favorite drawings are of a barn in the snow and a boot.

Claudia Toner keyed Rivenbark's writings into her computer and helped her publish the work, which made its debut in May 2023.

Writing and drawing aren't Rivenbark's only creative outlets, Toner said. "Ethel used to sew clothes for children," she said. "She crocheted beautiful sweaters and toboggans with pompoms, and she made toys." Toner called Rivenbark "just a wonderful person."

Shoes

Compared to all the work she used to do teaching, gardening vegetables and raising a family, "I don't do much of anything now," Rivenbark said. But she still cooks two meals a day in a home she shares with other retirees.

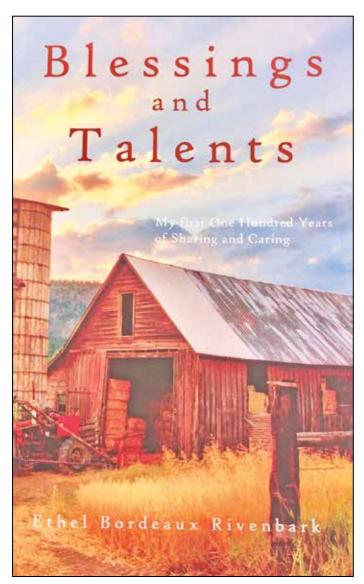
With help from the Whiteville Rotary Club, Rivenbark got in touch with Herman Bland, principal of Chadbourn Elementary School, who agreed to help her identify children needing shoes. One afternoon in late October, Rivenbark sat in the school library with Bland, writing a check for \$600 and giving careful instructions to make sure those children don't "fall through the cracks." She said

Bland should also get each child "four pair of socks all just alike so they won't have trouble mating them. And if they're all white, they'll go with everything."

Faculty and staff members gathered around the 101-year-old author to hear her reminiscences. They laughed when she commented that one man's colorful socks looked as if they'd been painted onto his ankles.

Rivenbark isn't done writing. She told Flourish magazine in January that she's working on an autobiography.

Rivenbark said that most of her family members have died and, at her age, she's living "on borrowed time." She also points out that the Bible says, "If you're good to your parents," God will bless you with a longer life. "Well," she said, "I tried," and, "I'm glad I'm here."



Rivenbark's book contains a collection of her poems, stories and art.



Rivenbark and Chadbourn Elementary School Principal Herman Bland are surrounded by school staff in the library.

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Accepting the challenges of leadership

Three lessons from school board chair

Speech by Anna Hall Richardson | Photography Contributed



Anna Hall Richardson

Anna Hall Richardson delivered the following charge to the Fifteen under 40 Class of 2024 on Jan. 25 in the auditorium at Southeastern Community College.

A graduate of Whiteville High School, East Carolina University and UNC Pembroke, Richardson has taught at the high school level and at Southeastern Community College for a total of 22 years. She has twice received SCC's T. Elbert Clemmons Outstanding Faculty Award.

Richardson is also the former president of Whiteville Junior Woman's Club and a current member of the State Employees' Credit Union Advisory Board. In 2018, she was elected to the Whiteville City Schools Board of Education, and she currently serves as chair.

Richardson has granted Flourish permission to print her comments. It is truly an honor to stand before this remarkable gathering of talent, dedication, and achievement. Each of you, in your unique way, has answered the call to serve. You've demonstrated excellence, innovation and a commitment to making a positive impact in your respective fields and in our community. You are the future leaders who will shape Columbus County in the years to come.

As I'm sure you know, leadership can be a rewarding experience, but it also comes with challenges and pressures. In other words, leadership is hard, y'all. Tonight, I would like to share some of the countless lessons I have learned about community service and leadership. As I often tell my students, it's time for some real talk.

Lesson Number One

Criticism is part of the job. When you take on a lead-

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGES

ership role, you automatically become subject to scrutiny. There are lots of Monday morning quarterbacks out there. People will openly question your decisions and offer their unsolicited opinions (and sometimes those opinions are broadcast on social media). How you respond to that criticism defines who you are as a leader.

You must discern between someone giving valid feedback and someone who may be criticizing from a place of anger or misunderstanding. If it's valid feedback, embrace it, digest it, and grow from it. If it's invalid, never let it undermine your confidence or vision.

I have learned that effective leaders balance feedback, make informed decisions and stay true to their values and goals despite the chatter around them.

At this point many people would ask, "Why would anyone want to serve? Why invite these headaches into your life?" The answer is simple. It's not about you. Service isn't about personal glory, recognition, or accolades. True service is a self-less act that places the needs of others before one's own.

Lesson Number Two

You must realize that not everyone will share your vision of positive change. Admittedly, I've been naïve in thinking people have the same pure intentions that I do. I have learned that sometimes there are hidden agendas or motives that are not aligned with the greater good.

When you encounter this, be discerning. In fact, pray for discernment. And don't let others' ulterior motives overshadow your commitment to serve. In Matthew chapter 10, before Jesus sends out his disciples, he tells them to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Sometimes you must navigate an issue with a combination of wisdom like a serpent and the purity of a dove. You must be discerning and strategic but always maintain the purity of your intentions.

Lesson Number Three

There are two types of people in this world: batteries and vacuums. Batteries are people who energize you. Being in their presence is uplifting and inspiring. They spread their positivity and charge everyone around them.

Vacuums, on the other hand, are those who suck the life from you. They complain without offering solutions and see the negative aspects of all situations. Vacuums make people around them feel exhausted.

In any service role, you will encounter both batteries and vacuums. In leadership, your attitude, outlook, and tone are contagious to everyone in your organization. Surround yourself with other batteries, protect your positive energy, and be the most charged up battery of the bunch.

At this point many people would ask, "Why would anyone want to serve? Why invite these headaches into your life?"

The answer is simple. It's not about you. Service isn't about personal glory, recognition, or accolades.





Anna Hall Richardson is chair of the Whiteville City Schools Board of Education.

True service is a selfless act that places the needs of others before one's own.

1 Peter chapter 4 says, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." God has gifted each of you with a talent or skill to help other people, and it's your responsibility to find your place and serve in a way that glorifies God.

I'm going to leave you with this quote from motivational speaker Simon Sinek: "Leadership is not about

being in charge. It's about taking care of those in your charge."

Serving others, in whatever capacity you choose, is a noble calling that transcends the individual. It is dedication to the wellbeing of others and the building of a legacy that will impact our community for years to come.

Congratulations to all of you, the newest class of Fifteen under 40. I can't wait to see the wonderful ways you choose to serve Columbus County in the future.





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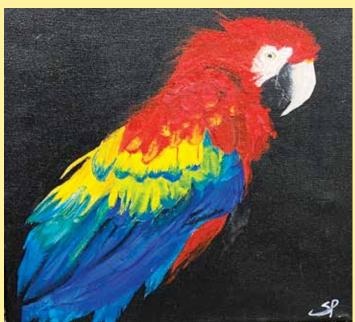




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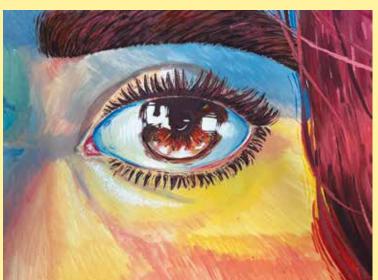
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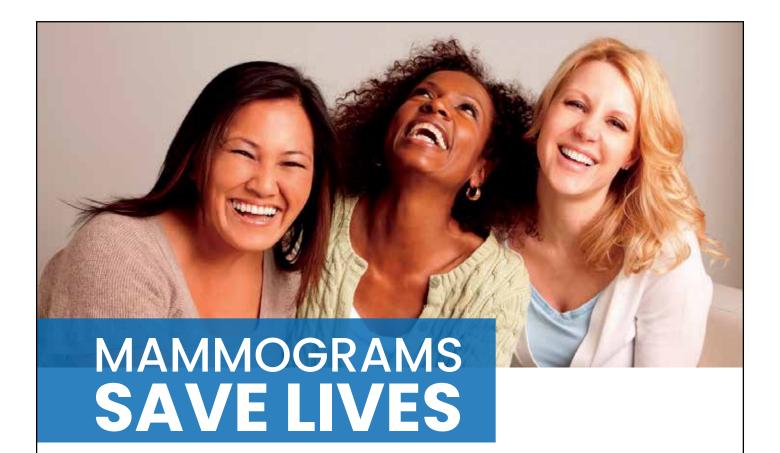






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