



In Our 137th Year

Serving Oconee County

The Oconee Enterprise

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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Clif & Jennifer Mullis, Happy Anniversary!

THURSDAY • 8 JULY 2021



Kittens in need of adoption

Shelter has an influx of cats. Lifestyles, **A6**



Wire Park under construction

Development to open in 2020. Business, **B3**



Petroski talks time at AA

Spartans AD looks back on his career. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on a possible TSPLOST referendum.

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Unsolved RaceTrac murder still No. 1 priority, says Hale

Oconee County woman arrested for vehicular homicide

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA
Three and a half months after RaceTrac clerk Elijah Wood was fatally shot, Oconee Sheriff James Hale said the murder remains the highest priority for his office.

"We talk about this case every day," said Hale.

The murder appears to be a botched armed robbery. The suspect, who moved with a distinctive gait while committing the crime, was fully covered in black clothing, including gloves and a face mask.

After shooting Wood, the suspect left the store with the murder weapon.

Although no arrest has been made or suspect publicly named, the Sheriff's Office is keeping some evidence confidential



Hale

investigate a murder, they look at the case through the eyes of a defense attorney so that everything is ironclad when a suspect is arrested and brought to trial.

Anyone with information about the crime should call the Oconee County Sheriff's Office at (706) 769-3945. The reward for information that leads to an arrest is \$25,000.

In other news, Athens-Clarke County Police arrested a

because only the suspect and deputies working the case know about said evidence.

Hale said that when deputies investigate a murder, they look at the case through the eyes of a defense attorney so that everything is ironclad when a suspect is arrested and brought to trial.

The teen who was killed was a passenger in the other vehicle that Tully struck head-on.

Tully was seriously injured and admitted to the hospital prior to her arrest.

She posted bond and was released from the Clarke County Jail.



Chief Superior Court Judge Eric Norris apologized for "for raising his voice, lacking patience, being discourteous and using undignified language," according to court documents. [File photo]

Judge admits to berating a bail bondsman

Norris responds to an ethics complaint

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In responding to formal charges of an ethics violation, Western Judicial Circuit Chief Superior Court Judge Eric Norris admits that he "chastised and berated" an Athens bail bondsman, according to court documents filed June 29.

The Judicial Qualifications Commission Investigative Panel has requested proceedings to determine if Norris has violated the Code of Judicial Conduct, and, if so, the appropriate sanction.

Rule 2.8(B) of the Georgia Code of Judicial Conduct states that "judges shall be patient, dignified and courteous to litigants, jurors, witnesses, lawyers and others with whom they deal with in their official capacity..."

On July 10, 2019, Norris met with Liberty Bonding owner Nathan Owens to discuss misinformation on social media about a particular case and the judicial system.

Days earlier, Owens had shared on Facebook an Athens Banner-Herald story about a rape suspect who failed to appear for a retrial. Norris had presided over the first trial, which ended in a mistrial. When Owens shared the story, some people made erroneous or critical remarks about Norris and the case itself.

Upon arriving at the courthouse for the meeting, Owens was told by a deputy that he could not bring his phone into the judge's chambers. In his official response, Norris claimed that he was not personally present or involved in the deputy asking Owens to leave his phone outside of judicial chambers.

Norris' attorneys stated in their response that Rule 22 of the Georgia Uniform Superior Court, which gives judges the flexibility to limit the use of electronic devices in a courtroom setting, also applies to judges' chambers. Norris also has no knowledge of anyone objecting to that request, according to the official response.

Owens claimed that an armed deputy was at the doorway and that Owens asked several times to have his attorney present.

However, Norris' account of that day is different. Although a deputy was armed, he was not standing at either of the two office doorways, according to Norris' response. Furthermore, when Owens said he wanted an attorney, Norris told him that he "did not violate any laws and was not in trouble." Norris also denies that Owens asked for an attorney more than one time.

Owens claims that Norris instructed him to "sit down and listen" to what he had to say and

that "at no time while he was in Judge Norris' chambers did [he] feel like he was free to leave."

Although Norris admitted that he asked Owens to sit and listen, "This was not done in a way that actually created any physical restraint on Mr. Owens's person or his freedom to leave the meeting," according to Norris' response.

"Judge Norris, however, admits that these words and the direct and fairly harsh and candid tone in the meeting overall created a subjective belief in Mr. Owens that he was not free to leave," state Norris' counter claims.

According to Owens' account, Norris accused him of fearmongering and sharing fake news. Owens' complaint said the judge told him that he did not have "testicular fortitude" to meet with him alone.

Norris disputes that verbiage, claiming that he used the phrase "intestinal fortitude" or "the cajones" in reference to Owens' failure to admit that he made a mistake and spread false information.

Norris acknowledged that the words he used were "undignified" and "inappropriate," according to court documents.

Norris admitted that he "chastised and berated" Owens, but he also disputed specific details in Owens' narrative of the half-hour meeting.

For example, Owens claimed that he saw a Georgia code book open to the requirements of professional bondsmen.

In his response, Norris said it was not a code book but a printed-out copy of a portion of the code.

Owens said Norris' hands were shaking, and he described Norris as being "extremely upset" and "visibly agitated."

Norris disputes this characterization but did admit the "meeting was not going well, the tenor was tense and awkward and seemed to digress further at times."

"To be clear, during the meeting Judge Norris did not curse at Mr. Owens, yell or scream at him, call him names, joke or mock him or his profession..." according to Norris' official response.

However, Norris "remains apologetic for his tone, raising his voice and communicating in an impatient, discourteous and undignified manner that was simply not appropriate for a Superior Court Judge," states Norris' response.

"It would be reasonable for Mr. Owens to have felt belittled and disrespected based on how the meeting ended up progressing," according to Norris' response. SEE JUDGE PAGE A2

Proud to be an American



In celebration of the Fourth of July, the Junior American Citizens of Watkinsville planted flags around town in addition to the city's patriotic decorations. From left, Avery and Kendall Yates and Nathan Bailey. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

Gale named Thomson police chief

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

When she was in high school, Courtney Gale did a ride-along with a police officer and instantly fell in love with the profession.

"My mom wanted me to be a veterinarian," the Oconee resident recalled, explaining that her degree was in animal science with a minor in criminal justice.

The latter area of study became her career. She went to graduate school in 2010 and took management development training with the Southern Police Institute to further her goal of becoming a police chief.

"I always held on to that goal," she said, happy to announce that she has achieved that milestone.

The city of Thomson has hired Gale as its chief of police. According to The McDuffie Progress, Gale was selected from a pool of 14 applicants.

Gale, a lieutenant with the University of Georgia Police Department, will start her new job July 26.

She will eventually move to McDuffie County but will still keep property here in Oconee County.

Gale said she has visited with the business and community leaders of Thomson and found that the town is



Lt. Courtney Gale will depart the UGA Police Department to become police chief of Thomson. [File photo]

very friendly and welcoming.

"I want to create a relationship with the community," said Gale, who plans to have town meetings. "I can see what statistics say, but getting out and talking to the community about what they want to address is important."

Gale, who is the founder of the Georgia Association of Women in Public Safety, will be the first female police chief of Thomson. She has a long history of public service outside of law enforcement as well. She was a longtime member of the now-disbanded Oconee Citizen Advisory Committee on Land Use and Transportation, as well as a volunteer with Northeast Georgia American Red Cross. In the mid-2000s, she collaborated with other citizens to successfully oppose a rezoning in Farmington that would have allowed a massive truck stop.

And she was a contestant in Dancing with the Athens Stars, a benefit for Project Safe to provide shelter and services to victims of domestic abuse.

Gale was not just any contestant. She made headlines for competing only a year after a near-death experience of being stabbed 10 times at an Athens Kroger. She returned to the Athens-Clarke County Police in 2013 and joined the UGA Police Department in 2017.

Gale said she will focus on having a positive impact in Thomson by reducing crime and protecting civil liberties.

This issue was mailed Wednesday, July 7, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

