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The Oconee Enterprise

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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Brock Vandagriff, Logan Johnson, John Ferguson, Kurt Knisely, Payton Bowles

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School burned in 1954
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Lady Spartans get big victory

AA girls start region play 1-0. Sports, **B1**

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This issue was mailed Wednesday, Jan. 12, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



Malcom Bridge Elementary School showed off their Bulldog spirit Monday before the game. Front, Lydian Brock. From left, Ethan Sweeney, Kneele Pair, Clayton McDaniel, Grant King, teacher Jill Joiner, Lilly Baxter, Emery Gurley and Miller Sonnier. [Photo by Anisa Sullivan Jimenez]

2022 brings 'Generation of Champions'

Oconee families celebrate historic Bulldog victory

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

A sea of grown men and women crying with unbridled joy.

Generations of people high fiving and hugging each other—some of whom have waited 41 years while others reveled in a triumph that has been unmatched for their entire lives.

Those scenes from Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis were unbelievable and magical, said Oconee fan Steve Nugent, who was there with his three boys.

The Nugent family was delighted when former UGA Coach Mark Richt stopped by their tailgate.

Nugent was impressed how gracious Alabama fans were and how Coach Nick Saban was “genuinely happy for UGA Coach Kirby Smart.”

High Shoals Elementary School first grader Taylor Green excitedly asked her parents, “Mommy and daddy, did you see Coach Smart kiss the trophy?”

“Proud to be a Dawg everyday, but being there to watch the game made it unforgettable,” said her mother, Megan.

“I think it’s awesome they won,” proclaimed Kinney Hammond, a third grade student at Colham Ferry



From left, David, DeeDee and Knox Gaines celebrate the University of Georgia’s National Championship win at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. Knox just started his first semester at UGA. [Submitted photo]

Elementary School.

Oconee County Middle School sixth grade student Tate Jenkins declared, “It was electrifying just being there.”

“This was our one time we took off to go to an away game,” said Tate’s father, Taylor. “We got tickets from a professor at UGA ... that we couldn’t pass up.”

Tate’s grandfather, Ronnie Jenkins, was a UGA running back in the late 1960s in the Cotton Bowl.

Spectator Jeff Hood was a sophomore at Morgan County High School when UGA was crowned the 1980 National Champions of college football.

Near the end of Monday’s game, Hood asked a friend, “Can you imagine what Larry Munson would be saying right now?”

“There were plenty of hugs, fist pumps, smiles, tears shed and laughs Monday night,” Hood said with exuberance. “We created new memories

and celebrated deep into the Indiana night.”

DeeDee and David Gaines had their two adult boys there. The younger started his first semester at the University of Georgia and the oldest works for the team and was actually on the field.

Oconee resident Richard Boone said, “Outside of the birth of my two beautiful daughters and my granddaughter, this is one of the most amazing days of my life.”

Family battling cancer thanks community for its support

BY MORGAN PHILLIPS

“If anyone would have ever told me that we were going to go through this, I would have been like, ‘Oh, we can’t go through that,’” Jessica Smith, a Watkinsville resident said on learning her husband, Brandon, was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2021.

At the time of the diagnosis, the Smith family lived in Florida but decided to come back to Oconee County.

“All of our friends and family and our roots were here,” she said. “So we knew that while we were going through something like that, we needed to get back here to get through it.”

Smith said it was a one-in-a-million chance that her husband would get cancer because he had no family history of cancer.

At first, Brandon was shell-shocked about the news.

“When he was first told that he had cancer ...[and that] he was going to have to start radiation and chemo, he told the doctor, ‘I can’t do that. I have to work. I have to make a living for my family,’” Smith said.

God gave them peace about the situation.

“I wouldn’t be able to make it through a single day going through this if I didn’t put all of my faith and all of my trust in God,” Smith



The Smith family is grateful for help from the community. From left, Dylan, 11; Jessica; Drake, 3; Brandon and Olivia, 9. Brandon was diagnosed with cancer last year. [Submitted photo]

said. “I think I’ve learned more about God than I’ve learned about myself.”

Smith said that Brandon’s faith has made him at peace with the diagnosis.

“I think that’s what keeps bringing me peace—watching him grow spiritually and [seeing] his love for

the world growing in such an amazing way and seeing how God is working in his life through this,” Smith said.

The pastor of Mars Hill Baptist Church offered the Smith family a house on the church’s property.

“We don’t have to pay them rent,” Smith said. “They’re just let-

ting us live here just to kind of take the pressure off.”

Strangers and friends alike have supported the Smiths. People have sent Publix gift cards to help with food, and others have given money for medical expenses and groceries.

Project Lumberjack, a group that sells firewood to help those in the

District Attorney apologizes

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In a Dec. 18 email to her campaign supporters, Western Judicial Circuit Deborah Gonzalez wrote that she is “the most hated woman in Oconee because of the work I am doing.”

She claimed that she can’t walk alone in the Watkinsville area because “white supremacists are out to get me.”

The email was sent two days after a man was assaulted at an Oconee restaurant where the Oconee Democratic Party had been congregating. The victim was a white man, and the attacker resides in Athens-Clarke County.



Gonzalez

Following backlash on social media, Gonzalez met with Oconee Board of Commissioners Chairman John Daniell and Commissioner Chuck Horton on Dec. 29 for over an hour. She invited former Democratic Rep. Jonathan Wallace to the meeting as well.

Horton, who earlier in his career was the University of Georgia chief of police, told The Oconee Enterprise that only two commissioners met with Gonzalez in part because three or more would have constituted a quorum and required a public meeting.

Oconee Sheriff James Hale said he was aware of the meeting but was not invited to participate.

As a result of the meeting, the District Attorney’s Office and Oconee County released a joint statement last week.

“District Attorney Gonzalez deeply regrets the unfortunate choice of language used in a recent email,” according to the statement. While DA Gonzalez only intended to single out the actions of a few, she understands why Oconee County was offended by these comments. It was not her intent to cause such offense, and DA Gonzalez apologizes.”

“She looked straight at me and said she was sorry,” said Horton. “I didn’t get the feeling that she was not being sincere with me and John.”

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community with cancer, gave \$500.

Then, there were members of the fire department in Athens-Clarke County, where Brandon used to work, who prayed with Brandon and gave him financial support.

“I feel like everywhere we go in this community, God puts people in our path who love us ... It makes us feel loved while we’re going through this,” Smith said. “It means so much to live in a loving community, especially when you’re going through something hard.”

For Brandon, the greatest form of support was the daily flow of messages, phone calls and visits.

“The love that he has received from other people has meant so much to him,” Smith said. “It means so much that people are praying for us and that our community is behind us.”

Brandon is currently getting chemotherapy every other week, but Jessica said it doesn’t bring him down.

“When he’s having chemo, he’s sick ...[but] he has this genuine happiness and joy about him and love for people,” Smith said. “I know that the doctors say they don’t believe they can cure his cancer, but that doesn’t even faze him.”

The family has left it in God’s hands.