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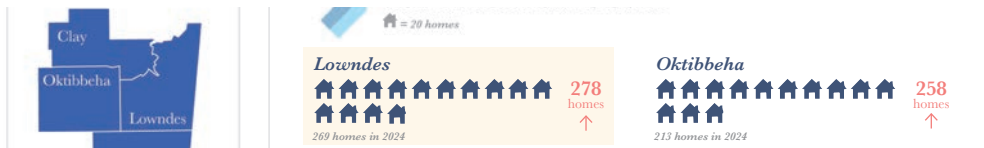
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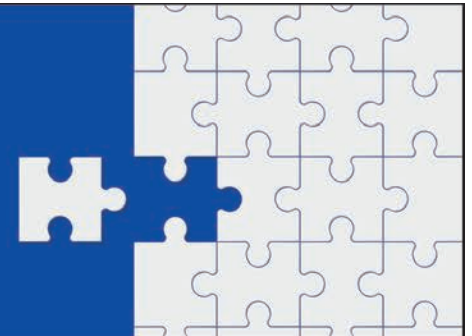
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Police Chief Mark Ballard stands in Starkville's real-time crime center.

21ST CENTURY POLICING

STARKVILLE RESIDENTS, BUSINESSES HELP SOLVE CRIMES THROUGH VOLUNTARY CAMERA REGISTRY

Lee Upchurch, an intelligence analyst with the Starkville Police Department, can usually be found at his desk in a dimly lit room at the back of the station. On the wall beside him is a bank of four larger screens displaying a map of Starkville dotted with camera icons.

Each camera represents a home or business participating in Connect Starkville, a public safety program that allows residents to assist police by sharing footage from their security systems. When a crime occurs, Upchurch quickly identifies which cameras are nearby and sends alerts requesting footage.

“It’s immediate, which means we get the information back quicker, which means we get the vehicle quicker, which means we solve the crime,” Upchurch said.

The program, launched in 2021, grew out of Chief Mark Ballard’s push for “21st-century policing,” a push that involves embracing technology, he said.

SPD developed the system after visiting real-time crime centers in New York, New Orleans

and Oxford, and seeing firsthand how cameras worked together to streamline investigations.

Gone were the days of officers spending hours walking streets, looking for cameras and knocking on doors – a labor-intensive process often reserved for the most serious crimes, Ballard said.

“The community connect program allowed us to knock out all those checkpoints to not just save candidacy for the most egregious crimes, but for crimes like property crimes (and) autoburglaries,” Ballard said. “... The ability to be able to connect with people ... to ensure that ... safety is a shared responsibility, bridging the trust there with us, with the camera systems, ... allows us to be very fast, I would say.”

Since its launch, Connect Starkville has grown to include 853 registered residential cameras and 807 integrated business cameras, numbers that continue to rise.

Registered cameras simply give police knowledge of camera locations, and residents can choose whether to share footage when requested.

Integrated cameras, often located outside of

businesses, schools and churches, allow voluntary live-feed access to high-traffic areas. SPD cannot tap live feeds from any residential cameras.

Ballard said the system has played a key role in solving “numerous” crimes.

One 2022 case involved a shooting on Orchard Lane near Reed Road. Footage from a nearby camera showed a group of minors and young adults fighting in the street. One man sneaked around a car with an AR-15, firing about 11 rounds before the group dispersed.

Only one 911 call came from a quarter mile away.

“No one (in the area) called,” Ballard said. “... You just thought when people are around where a crime is going to take place, people will call. ... Well what did the camera show? What really happened.”

Another video captured a woman being shoved into a car outside of a gas station. Though bystanders looked concerned, only one 911 call was made. Police used the footage to

track the vehicle to a motel in a nearby city, where officers and a SWAT team rescued her.

“I truly believe we saved a life,” Ballard said.

Cameras also help officers verify events and protect against false allegations, particularly during jury trials. Witnesses may refuse to cooperate, fall ill or be impaired, Ballard said, while cameras provide consistent evidence.

“(A camera) doesn’t get scared,” he said. “It doesn’t get emotional. It’s going to record. ... At the end of the day, a criminal still has to walk, ride a bike or a car to commit a crime ... and chances are, they’re doing it in front of someone’s camera.”

Ballard said the system’s effectiveness grows as more cameras join the registry. Residents and businesses interested in registering or integrating their outdoor cameras can visit the Connect Starkville website.


STORY BY **CADENCE HARVEY**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



Lee Upchurch controls what is shown on the crime center’s displays.

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Elvie's

SMOKE, SPICE AND SOUTHERN ELEGANCE

TWO JACKSON RESTAURANTS RECEIVE MICHELIN'S BIB GOURMAND DISTINCTION, AND THEY'RE WELL WORTH THE DRIVE

The first thing you notice walking into Sacred Ground Barbecue isn't the longhorn art on the walls or the Western touches of decor scattered throughout the dining room. It's the woody, smoky smell drifting from behind the front counter, where a knife cuts through the steaming bark of a freshly smoked prime brisket.

Outside, ceiling fans turn above picnic tables filled with diners, from groups of friends to families to lone customers ducking in on their lunch hour. Nobody seems to be in too much of a hurry aside from children racing to climb a slide set off to the side.

That easy going pace, coupled with thoughtfully smoked meats, is the appeal of Sacred Ground, a barbecue joint located in Pocahontas that earned the Michelin Guide's Bib Gourmand distinction last year recognizing exceptional food sold for a reasonable price.

Opened in 2024 by Chef Derek Emerson and Jennifer Emerson, the restaurant is heavily inspired by Texas barbecue. Jennifer said that

influence stems from years of traveling the state with their daughter, an equestrian who rode with a group out of Austin, Texas, and exploring the barbecue scene.

Sacred Ground mirrors the Texas tradition, complete with staples such as metal trays lined with butcher paper and slices of white bread, but the restaurant brings its own personality in both its food and atmosphere.

Outside of the main building, where customers order food and enjoy the air conditioning, covered patios offer diners a place to linger. The goal, Jennifer said, is an approachable, family-friendly atmosphere.

"Who dictates where you go to dinner or lunch when you have a family?" she said. "Your children do."

But the main draw of Sacred Ground lies in the barbecue itself. While the menu offers everything from fully loaded baked potatoes to Kun Pao pork belly burnt ends to burgers, Michelin recommends the "excellent meats" sold by the half-pound.

Among the standouts are the pineapple jalapeño smoked sausage, which pair a subtle heat with complementary sweetness. The original smoked sausage, on the other hand, leans into a more traditional profile, delivering the classic straightforward taste barbecue fans know and love.

Thick slices of prime brisket carry a dark, well-seasoned bark and a rich seam of fat that seems to season the meat as it melts. The pulled pork, dense and deeply flavored, pair best with the gold, mustard-based Carolina sauce.

Sacred Ground's St. Louis style ribs easily packed the most flavor among the meats, with a subtle heat building in each tangy bite.

Sides prove just as memorable as meats at Sacred Ground, with collard greens and braised pinto-brisket beans being the top picks. The greens are fresh, tender and lightly peppered, not too far off from those that sit on a southern grandmother's stove on a Sunday afternoon.

The pinto beans, meanwhile, lean firmly Texas, with a smoky flavor and gentle heat reminiscent of the ranch-style beans common across the state's barbecue scene.

For an appetizer, the double smoked jalapeños are a rich opening act. Stuffed with brisket and three cheese, wrapped in bacon and wood smoked, the peppers are savory and rich, enough so that the three-pepper serving feels more than enough.

The meal captures what Sacred Ground does best: Texas-style barbecue served without the rush that often surrounds it. The restaurant delivers the flavors of a serious smokehouse while maintaining the relaxed feel of a backyard cookout.

Jennifer said foot traffic at Sacred Ground has picked up since the Bib Gourmand distinction, an honor that came with the announcement of the Michelin Guide's first North American regional edition focused on the American South. Customers come from as close as Oxford to as far as Germany, she said.

"We were really shocked about it, and to get the distinction that we got, being one of two that got the highest distinction in the state," Jennifer said.





NO SUCH THING AS A BAD DAY AT ELVIE'S

For diners from the Golden Triangle, the recognition means two Michelin-recognized restaurants now sit only a couple hours away in Jackson, including a dining experience that offers a very different atmosphere from the backyard charm of Sacred Ground BBQ.

Housed inside a renovated home in Jackson's historic Belhaven neighborhood, Elvie's blends the understated elegance of a French cafe with the feeling of a family kitchen, in keeping with its roots.

Cody McCain and Chef Hunter Evans opened Elvie's in 2020, naming the restaurant for Evans' grandmother, May Elvioletta Good, whose kitchen in New Orleans made a lasting impression on him.





The restaurant reflects that inspiration, pairing French influences with ingredients sourced directly from farmers and fishermen in Mississippi and other Southeastern states. The result is a menu that feels both deeply refined and intimately familiar.

While Elvie's offers options for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the dinner service is slightly more upscale.

Diners can't go wrong with the Oysters Elveretta when it comes to appetizers. Half a dozen oysters, sourced off the coast by Ocean Springs-based French Hermit Oyster Company, are baked beneath a parmesan artichoke cream sauce with bacon and garnished with a warm, buttered loaf of French bread.

When it comes to entrees, Elvie's signature dish – redfish almondine – highlights the restaurant's ingredient-driven style. The fish arrives topped with almonds, capers and brown butter sourced from Georgia. Beneath it, a bed of buttered lettuce adds a fresh balance that complements the sharper flavor of the capers and almonds.



This signature dish, McCain said, “encompasses the best things about Elvie’s.”

A pan-seared mackerel special offered a slightly richer option. Served skin-on over greens in a creamy crawfish sauce, the dish delivered deep flavor without becoming overwhelming, with the sauce providing the star element.

Dessert arrived in the form of a citron soufflé, garnished with delicate pansies. Light and airy, the lemon-forward dessert provided a bright, refreshing finish to the meal.

Altogether, dinner at Elvie's feels elegant without being heavy – a meal built on fresh ingredients, balanced flavors and a sense of hospitality rooted in family tradition.

Like Sacred Ground, Elvie's has seen increased interest since receiving Michelin recognition.

“We definitely get more out-of-town visitors who use the Michelin guide as solid recommendations (for) where (to) go,” McCain said.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
EMMA MCRAE



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3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

In every community, there are those among us who lead by quiet example. They seldom hold positions of power, nor do they have a title or any official designation that distinguishes them from their neighbors. Yet they are often the ones who, having found their own inspiration, serve to make us better people and a better community. The spark of imagination they ignite through the pursuit of their own dreams, passions and curiosity can spread down the street, through a neighborhood, across a community. Their stories are an inspiration and in the telling of their stories, others may be similarly inspired. In each edition, Progress tells the story of three of the “Inspired People” of our community.

PROFILES BY **SLIM SMITH**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



ROBERT DAMM

The way Dr. Robert Damm figures it, there are two types of people: drummers and people who don't know they are drummers.

He should know. Damm has been playing drums for 51 years and teaching percussion as a music professor at Mississippi State for 30 years.

"You hear people say they can't play because they don't have any rhythm," Damm said.

"What I have found is that is not true. Everyone has rhythm. Some just don't realize it."

As Damm sees it, saying you have no rhythm is like saying you can't breathe air.

"Rhythm is everywhere, all the time," Damm said. "We live in a world of rhythms. Our daily routines are rhythms. Part of my responsibility is to remind people that rhythm is who we are and how to use it to make connections with others."

Damm's credentials as a performer, teacher, researcher, essayist and ambassador in the world of percussion are impressive.

His recitals feature world music instruments, including African xylophones, berimbau, cajon, congas, djembe, darbuka, frame drums and steel drums along with styles played on marimba, vibraphone, timpani, multiple-percussion, and drum set. He studied music and culture in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. He has published articles on drumming's effect on children with autism, the jembe in Mali, Mississippi hill country fife and drum, New Orleans' bamboula rhythm, among many other genres.

He is a longtime member of the Percussive Arts Society, which has chapters in all states and 25 other nations currently serving as the editor for PAS publications.

Locally, people may recognize him as a free-lance drummer in blues, jazz and rock bands.

But he is probably most recognized around

the Golden Triangle for leading the West African percussion ensemble Jembe Den, more commonly known as drum circle. Damm and his ensemble of students play at cultural and educational programs throughout Mississippi.

Their performances have been wildly popular, helping raise awareness of African music and culture, something Damm approaches with both enthusiasm and reverence.

"I don't want this to be something appropriated from the cultures they originate from," Damm said. "The instruments and the styles and rhythms I use were given to me through deep and meaningful relationships developed over years. That allows me to be a culture bearer through the lessons I share with our community."

Damm said drum circles are best when they complement poetry and storytelling of theme, culture or issue. He plans his drum circles' repertoire to accurately reflect the occasion.

Although the world of percussion music is incredibly diverse, Damm said they all have at least one thing in common.

"It's joyful," Damm said. "Across cultures, drums are part of celebrations, a birth, a good harvest, all the things that bring us together to celebrate."

In addition to his duties as a professor, Damm teaches a drum circle every Monday morning open to all MSU students. He also teaches drum circle two nights a week at Backstage Music Store in Starkville.

For those who want to learn more about drumming and drum circles in particular, Damm said there are a great variety of clubs and organizations on social media. He particularly recommends visiting the Percussive Arts Society at pas.org.



STEVE GREENOUGH

What was supposed to be a six-month visit to Columbus turned out to be permanent residency for Steve Greenough, much to the pleasure of his friends and the benefit to a pair of local charities.

“There’s a saying, ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him you have a plan,’” Greenough said. “That’s me. I had all these plans, none of them including staying here.”

Greenough, a native of Bolton in northwest England and an engineer by profession, moved to Columbus in 1993 to help with installation of some equipment for Don DePriest. He remained in Columbus, managing DePriest’s business until 2008, when he moved to Arizona in hopes that a dry climate would be better for his wife, who was in poor health. In 2018, he retired to become his wife’s full-time caregiver. She succumbed to cancer after a three-year battle that left Steve emotionally and spiritually drained.

“After she passed, I decided to come back to spend time with my church family,” Greenough said. “It was comforting to me to be with people who loved her. I planned to stay about six months.”

During his “visit” Greenough began volunteering again at St. Vincent de Paul, something he had started doing in 2003 but had given up when he moved to Phoenix.

He also started volunteering at Loaves and Fishes, which provides meals for those in need through a group of church volunteers who take turns providing the meals. Greenough volunteered when his church – Annunciation Catholic Church – took its turn for a week in 2019.

“I’ve been boots on the ground ever since,”

Greenough said. “For me it’s Monday through Friday, every week.”

Greenough’s devotion to Loaves and Fishes led to a spot on the nonprofit’s board. He’s been gratified to see how much the program has grown over those years.

“In 2021, we served 44,000 meals,” he said. “In 2022, it was up to 67,000 then to 84,000 in 2023. We’ve stayed in that 84,000 to 86,000 range ever since. We went from serving 90 to 100 meals a day to as many as 400.”

Greenough, 77, said his work with Loaves and Fishes and St. Vincent de Paul is distinctly different.

“I’m mostly behind the scenes at Loaves and Fishes,” said Greenough, who handles logistics of the program, including coordinating donations from Walmart, Chick-fil-A and Longhorn Steakhouse, which are used to supplement the food provided by the churches.

At St. Vincent de Paul, it’s more hands-on, more personal.

“I visit homes to find what they need,” Greenough said. A lot of them have nothing. Whatever it is, beds, furniture, I try to get it for them.”

Although his roles at the two nonprofits are different, the motivation is very much the same.

“It’s doing the work of Jesus,” Greenough said. Jesus fed people. So do we. It’s not means-tested. Anyone who turns up gets a meal. No one is turned away.

“At St. Vincent de Paul, it’s amazing to be able to sit down and talk to somebody who has no visitors at all and listen to them talk about their life. It’s so rewarding, in a wonderful kind of way.”



MICHAEL WILLIAMS

If Michael Williams ever produces a film about his second career as a gardener/herb-
alist, there is an obvious title: “How Michael Got His Groove Back.”

Williams began making short films in 2004 as a high school student at Oak Hill Academy in West Point. Since then he has produced, written, directed and filmed everything from feature films to documentaries to music videos with his own production company.

“I went from Legos to filmmaking,” says Williams, 38. “Making films was always what I wanted to do.”

The life of an independent filmmaker is filled with highs and lows, successes and disappointment.

In 2023, after 20 years in the film business, Williams found himself running low on enthusiasm.

“That year was just a really bad year for filmmaking,” he said. “I lost a lot of work and didn’t have a lot to do. I was burned out on films.”

As many people do, he turned to gardening as therapy.

“For me, gardening was a way to recover, to get my creativity back,” he said. “I just needed to take a step back.”

What Williams didn’t anticipate is that gardening would go from therapy to a second career.

“I didn’t really have any experience,” Williams said. “Honestly, I avoided vegetables or anything green until my late 20s. I had a bad relationship with food.”

Gardening as a distraction soon began to fire

his imagination.

An important part of filmmaking is removing anything that doesn’t have a purpose. Naturally, he applied that discipline to gardening.

“My whole method is that everything has to have a reason.” He said. “It has to make sense to me. Everything I grow has to have a purpose. I wanted to learn how to plant things that had a purpose for me which was the same way I learned filmmaking.

In just three years, Williams has emerged as a leading influence for gardening in the Golden Triangle. His website, The Great Catsby Herb Cartel (a nod to his two cats), has been a sales platform for his gardening which focuses heavily on herbal teas, skincare products and seasonings.

He has also shared what he has learned through workshops entertaining visitors to his home garden in West Point.

Williams said gardening is more than therapy or even a side business.

“I do think there is a spiritual component to it,” he said. “I think it has the power to change people, I really do.”

Lots of people speak to their pants. Williams is convinced, this plants talk to him.

“I do believe they are sentient beings,” he said. “They can tell you things. They can teach you things.”

When Williams returns to filmmaking, that’s a story he wants to tell.

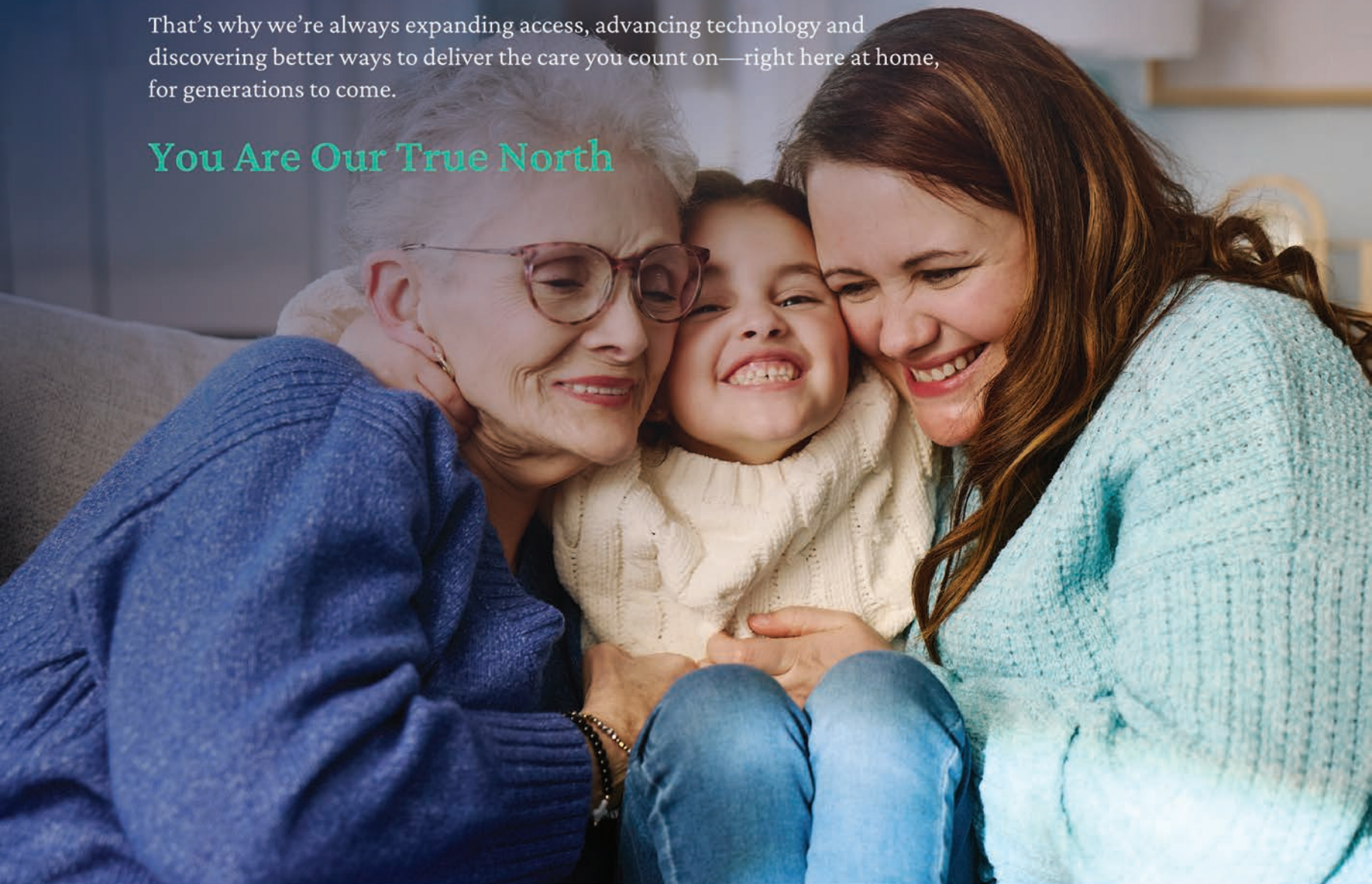
“The things I am currently getting inspiration from, these living experiences will one day be a good subject for a movie,” said Williams, who is well on his way to getting his groove back.”

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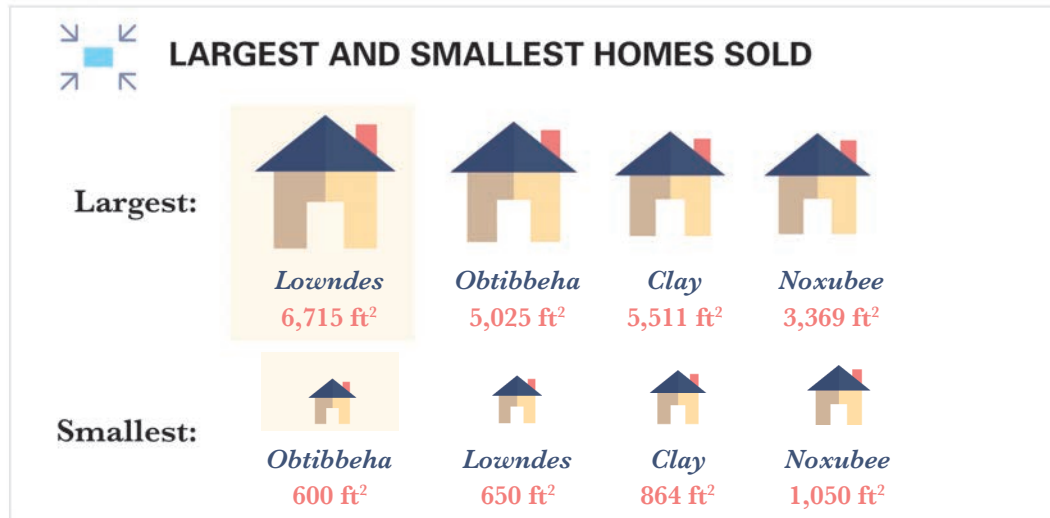
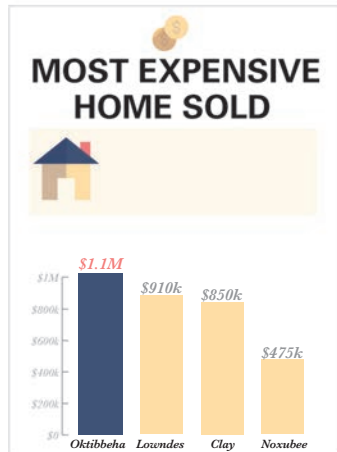
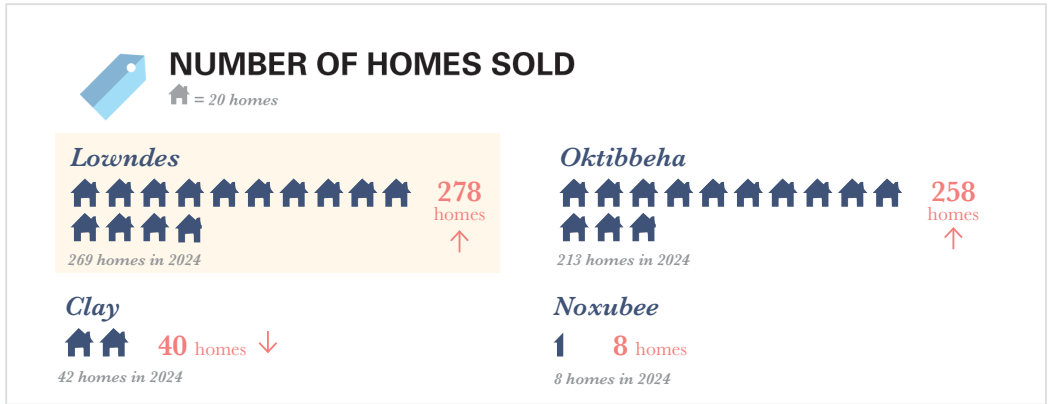
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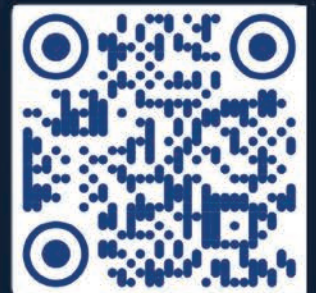
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A LEGACY OF HER OWN

CHASE HAZARD EXPANDS A THIRD
GENERATION BUSINESS WHILE MAKING
IT DISTINCTLY HER OWN

Chase Hazard needs to take a break. But, she won't, at least not anytime soon. She's the busiest she's ever been.

In the last year and a half, she's taken over her parent's Gardner Boulevard institution, Lighting Unlimited, and led it through a rebrand to Uncommon Living. This Spring, she's set to rebrand another Columbus institution. Hazard has purchased Pizazz Gifts from Patti Griffin and is moving it downtown and renaming it Saint & Scott, a nod to her parents, the late Scott Pridmore and her mother Helen (a 'saint' for putting up with Scott).

"I am so excited," Griffin told The Dispatch in a January interview. "I've had several people approach me about Pizazz over the years, but she was the right one. She's creative, energetic, kind and is fun to work with. Pizazz is in good hands."

On Hazard's agenda as well are several interior design projects in various stages of completion

— including the much-anticipated and highly-discussed Amata, an Italian restaurant set to open in downtown Columbus.

Working this hard and seeing her vision for the stores take shape is bittersweet. For her, saying "yes" to this many projects started as a way to help cope with the grief of losing her dad, who tragically passed away in November of 2024.

"When I decided to go back to work I hid in my office for the first few months," she said. "You need something to take your mind off of it... I was like 'I can't just sit here and think.' I started saying, 'yes, yes, yes', to everything. I wanted to do the work. I really dove back in."

It hasn't been easy. There have been a lot of long nights, early mornings, and weekends.

"I'm trying to figure out how to take over one business and here I am going to try and take over another one, when I have zero experience being an owner or a boss. But I'm the type of person

that’s like, ‘I’ll figure it out.’”

And figure it out she has. Uncommon Living has been transformed from its humble beginnings. What began as her grandfather’s simple electrical supply store, turned into a lighting store when her parents Scott and Helen took the reins. They had a successful run – last November they celebrated 40 years of business. But Chase had a different vision.

It was around 2019, right after she got married when she found herself hunting for something specific, and she couldn’t find anything in Columbus.

“I drove to Tupelo, and the whole drive I was thinking ‘How do we not have this?’” she said. After she came back from her search, she approached her parents with an idea: what if they started their own custom furniture and

upholstery line?

“We started out with a small, local Mississippi upholstery company.” she said. “And our first order was \$5,000 and my mom was freaking out about it, and she was like, ‘what if it doesn’t sell?’ And I was like, ‘it’s gonna do good, we’re gonna do good.’”

That first order was the start of something new. Today, the space on 1116 Gardner Boulevard is no longer just a lighting warehouse – it’s a beautiful showroom offering custom upholstery, unique home accents, rugs and furniture. And with her keen eye and understanding of functionality, Chase now provides interior design input and decorating services. Despite carrying Lighting Unlimited/Uncommon Living into its third generation, she is still committed to carrying forward the legacy her parents began – while





also forging her own.

“When we first started moving things into Saint & Scott, I was like, okay it’s actually taking shape,” she said. “I feel like I’m really doing this part on my own, versus coming into Lighting Unlimited and turning it into Uncommon Living. As far as everything else goes, I feel like it’s mine. I think my dad would be really proud of that.”

When asked what her hopes are for the next year, she doesn’t ask for much. Chase hopes to have two “thriving businesses” and the same

people working for her, the team she says has a “family bond.” And, if she’s lucky, she may even have a little extra time on her hands to spend with her husband James, and their dogs Moby and Herman. If she’s really lucky – they’ll travel. Though even when she’s traveling, she still thinks of work.

“But it’s a joy,” she said. “That’s the joyful part. Getting inspired everywhere I go.”

STORY BY **ASHLYND KING**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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MEET IAIN VASEY

Named the new CEO for Golden Triangle Development LINK in February, Iain Vasey brings more than 30 years of economic development experience in Texas, Louisiana and most recently Oregon, helping recruit almost \$60 billion in capital investment over that span.

From landing one of the nation's largest economic development deals in Texas to creating military construction cooperative agreements to boost city revenues and championing housing initiatives in Oregon, Vasey's experience lies in data-driven, long-term economic strategy and large-scale project execution.

News editor Emma McRae spoke to Vasey in March to discuss some of his passions within economic development, his past experiences and how the two will come into play for the Golden Triangle in his new role.

Housing is a big conversation here right now. How do you see that playing out in the Golden Triangle?

It's a passion of mine because I think housing is an important economic factor that not enough that not enough economic development organizations pay attention to. Think about it this way: if you land a factory that has 300 or 400 employees, where are you going to house those employees?

I have to delve into the details and the data, and I don't have my arms around it yet. But when you think about it, there are two factors at play. One is the affordability index. So the first

one of those is, can a family making \$60,000-\$80,000 a year using traditional financing mechanisms ... be able to afford \$240,000-\$250,000, or are there no houses at that price point? Are they all \$300,000-\$350,000? Then you've got an affordability index. Then you look at the availability index. ... Is it a seller's market or is it a buyer's market? You kind of want a little bit of equilibrium between them.

I'm just realizing, I sound like the biggest nerd ever. My history and background is in economics. So I try to understand, what are the economic factors? I read every economic paper I can get my hands on to be able to understand that.

Both with housing and the military construction cooperative agreements, you seem like someone who is looking for solutions that might be out of the box.

My job is to think not about today's challenges and today's problems. It's to start thinking ahead five years down the line, because the solutions you come up with today are going to be implemented and going to take several years to put in place. You know, you can't just go, 'Oh, we're going to have a housing policy and all of a sudden, 500 houses show up the next day. It doesn't happen.

There's a saying I kind of follow... you know who Wayne Gretzky is?

The hockey player?

Yes, he was famous for saying, 'Don't skate to where the puck is. Skate to where it's going to

be.’ So you have to think ahead. There are a lot of people dealing with the today problem. How do you deal with this today? But then there are other folks that say, ‘How do you position your economy and your economic development strategy and all of your policies that tie into that, how do you put them in place five years ahead, so that five years from now, you’re in a very strong position?’ Nothing happens instantaneously.

Like, a Megasite isn’t built in a day?

Right, that Megasite took a lot of time, investment and planning by a lot of folks. Now we’re at the point of, can we execute? That said, you watch what’s going on in today’s economy. ... In old fashioned terms of economics, two consecutive negative quarters is a recession, right? So you look at what’s happened, and you never truly know you’re in a recession until it’s in your rearview mirror.

You look at the numbers, like the revised job count numbers from last month is, I think we lost 90,000 jobs nationwide, the amount of investment that’s going on.

Since about 1995, when the numbers started really being tracked across the entirety of the South, the biggest (three) categories for major investment economic development deals are in either automotive and related ... aviation and financial services, and there hasn’t been a year compared to 2025 in decades of the lack of performance and uncertainty in the market. And there are, there are deals, but they’ve been primarily in things like data centers.

It’s clear you have to be judicious in a lot of different areas when you’re making economic development deals.

You have to be rational, and you have to do a lot of analytics. ... When somebody asks, ‘Well

what do you bring to the table?’ At the end of the day, a company might know who I am. A site selection consultant may know who I am, knows that you’re a straight shooter or not. They may take a meeting because they know who I am. But at the end of the day, the company won’t make a positive decision based on any individual. It’s all down to the analytics =, those labor costs, utility costs, your availability or water and sewer and power and rail and all the other factors.

It all comes down to Moneyball economic development. Do you have the data? And the accuracy of the data has to be unimpeachable. There are economic development people in this universe that will shade the truth, not quite honest. At the end of the day, you don’t operate like that. Companies are smart. They have very smart people. They will figure it out if you are not being straight, and you have to be absolutely straight up. And if you’ve got a challenge, if you’ve got a weakness, admit the weakness and understand how you’re going to address it and build towards removing that weakness and turning it into a strength.

What do you see as your responsibility when it comes to working on the community side of the job?

My job is to, at the moment, I have to translate being just a name and a photograph or something on a piece of paper, to this is a person who has background and skills and knowledge and experience in the industry and credibility. ... We don’t play favorites within (the municipalities), there are three counties and multiple cities. We don’t steer deals. The client tells you where the client wants to go.

STORY AND PHOTO BY **EMMA MCRAE**

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COVER

FROM CARNEGIE HALL TO STORY TIME

IN COLUMBUS, MUSIC ISN'T
JUST SOMETHING PEOPLE ENJOY.
IT'S SOMETHING THEY DO – FOR
EACH OTHER.

About 50 people settle onto couches and folding chairs, balancing plates piled with hot casseroles, homemade bread and heaping salads, with chocolate cake and key lime pie nearby for dessert.

Then, the music starts. On especially good nights, the audience joins in, singing along to the words they know.

“To sit in a room listening to a musician you love, surrounded by people who are into it and loving it, too, is the most amazing feeling in the world,” said Sunstroke House owner Jami Nettles. “... It’s hard to beat that feeling.”

Since 2016, Nettles has opened her historic Columbus home to traveling musicians for house concerts. In the years since, she’s hosted be-



Steve and Kay Ellis' Barn

tween 80 and 90 concerts featuring indie artists like Clay Your Hands Say Yeah, Faye Webster, Wheatus and John Paul White.

Nettles is one of many in the Golden Triangle who fits the bill of a “citizen artist.” Initially coined to describe Leonard Bernstein, the term describes artists who use music to build community and improve society. From concert organizers and conductors to musicians teaching the next generation, they take a step beyond simply making music for themselves.

“I’m doing this for everyone,” Nettles said. “... Everybody thinks, ‘What can I bring to this community?’ And by narrowing in on this mission, bringing people here who would not play here otherwise, that is a gift.”

UNIQUELY RICH

Columbus is uniquely rich with citizen artists, and Diane Ford, director of the Suzuki Strings Program, says those musicians, teachers and organizers know and frequently collaborate with

each other.

Just across town on Mac Davis Road, Steve and Kay Ellis host the Barn Concert Series in a renovated pavilion behind their home. The building, which once held wedding receptions, birthday parties and family reunions, now regularly fills with music.

The Ellis family collects donations from attendees at each show and has raised thousands since launching in 2019 for organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Loaves and Fishes and Helping Hands.

While the Ellis shows feature many local and regional musicians, Nettles often brings touring artists who might not otherwise stop in Columbus, or Mississippi at all.

Other venues provide platforms for the region’s homegrown musicians.

Just down the street from Sunstroke House, Munson and Brothers Trading Post hosts open-air nights and small concerts on an outdoor stage strung with lights overhead. The restaurant

also organizes PorchFest, an annual multiday music festival.

When the restaurant opened in 2020, owner Ryan Munson said music and art were always part of the plan.

“We just don’t have very many venues that offer a platform (for musicians), and art is always a spark for revitalization,” he said. “It’s a spark for community.”

‘IT’S A DEDICATION’

Suzuki Strings has served the community for about 40 years, teaching students of all ages, from beginners learning how to hold a bow to advanced ensemble players.

Students perform in two concerts each year and appear annually at various events. In 2017, they took that music to Carnegie Hall.

“We all have this nest egg that we’re develop-

ing and keeping it growing,” Ford said. “It’s a dedication. ... I think it’s just a love for music ... and connecting with different people. Everyone ... has a camaraderie.”

Like Suzuki Strings, Catfish Alley Studio and Columbus Girlchoir teach young musicians, who take their music to the community. Josh Gillis’ Catfish Alley Studio provides lessons but also coordinates public performances. Cherry Dunn’s Columbus Girlchoir was founded in 2004 and performs two concerts a year.

“One thing the Girlchoir does is it brings together a group of girls to sing together who would never have an opportunity to know each other in any other way,” Dunn said.

Performers from all three of those programs have often appeared in productions at Golden Triangle Theater, said Garrett Torbert, executive director for the theater.



Cherry Dunn rehearses with Columbus Girlchoir



Josh Gillis, center in hat, horses around with the band Collective Dust in his Catfish Alley Studios.

“That’s the beauty of theater,” Torbert said. “... You bring all these elements together under one roof and it produces this spectacle.”

Large-scale community performances offer another expression of that shared spirit.

Since 2001, Columbus Sings Messiah has

gathered roughly 125 singers and a full orchestra each year to perform George Frideric Handel’s “Messiah” at Annunciation Catholic Church, organized by James Allen. The singers come together once a year for this performance – strangers and neighbors alike, filling the church

with music and culminating with the Hallelujah Chorus.

But perhaps the most recognizable, and unlikely, citizen artist in the area is Edwina Williams, better known as Mother Goose.

Often donning a blue apron and a flower-filled hat, Mother Goose visits classrooms and hosts Story Time each week at the library, where she has taught generations of children about manners and responsibility through simple songs she calls “little diddys.”

While the audiences elsewhere in this article settle in quietly, waiting for the music to begin, children waiting for Mother Goose can barely contain themselves.

“It’s not talent,” Williams said. “... It’s just being around children and knowing that they love to sing, they love music and they love surprises. ... They learn, and I know that’s true.”

STORY BY **CADENCE HARVEY**
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



James Allen plays the organ in the 2025 performance of Columbus Sings Messiah.



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ALLIE VANCE FINDS HER FOOTING, AND HER CONFIDENCE, BEHIND THE BAR

Allie Vance stepped behind the bar at Walk On's Sports Bistreaux shortly after turning 21 with no experience making drinks.

Nearly a year later, she moves with ease, grabbing pint glasses and shaking cocktails without a second thought. She manages the controlled chaos of a Friday-night rush like a seasoned professional.

"After working at the bar, I've definitely got my footing and (am used to) standing up (for myself) because you would get up here and people would talk to you crazy," Vance said. "That doesn't happen as often anymore, now that I'm kind of known back here."

When she started the job, the pace of the restaurant and even the potential for confrontation terrified Vance. Now she feels like she could "stand up to Goliath."

"Now that I've been here a little bit, behind the bar, (the customers) kind of know me," she said. "We have a mutual respect for each other. They're not going to talk to me crazy, and I'm not going to talk to them crazy."

That mutual respect has made navigating the chaos easier, Vance said.

"Once you kind of get that footing with your customers, it's a lot easier to maneuver through that chaos," she said. "It's going to be chaotic. It's going to be fun though. Until you get your 17th lemon drop. It's not that

good."

When she isn't fielding a rush of orders or whipping up a custom variation of an espresso martini for a regular customer, one of Vance's go-to drinks is Walk-On's Eye of the Hurricane.

"It's sweet, but you can still taste the alcohol," she said. "It's not going to punch you in the chest."

EYE OF THE HURRICANE

1 oz. Crown Royal Regal Apple

1 oz. Bacardi Superior Rum

.75 oz. orange juice

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1 oz. passion fruit puree

Splash of soda water

Splash of grenadine

Step 1: Combine Crown Royal, Bacardi, orange juice, lime juice and passion fruit puree in a shaker and shake with ice.

Step 2: Strain into a pint glass filled with ice.

Step 3: Top off with soda water and add a splash of grenadine.

Step 4: Garnish with a dried blood orange slice and a cherry.

STORY BY **EMMA MCRAE**

PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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All across the Golden Triangle, crews have been hard at work developing new parks, repaving new roads and constructing new facilities for companies.

STARKVILLE/OKTIBBEHA

Road work has continued chugging along in Starkville as the Highway 182 revitalization project continues to make progress with about a half of the mile-long stretch of improvements complete. The project will reduce the street down to two lanes, add sidewalks, install new drainage and relocate utilities underground. The project, which begins near Long Street and goes up the west side of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., should be finished in late 2027.

Downtown, the \$7.5 million Main Street

Revitalization project, which began construction in July, is on pace to be completed by the end of this year. The project aims to expand sidewalks, add additional lighting and brickwork to the street. The project recently wrapped up construction efforts in front of City Hall, including brick laying for the roundabout which reopened in February. The project has moved on to phase 4 of 6, which includes the section of road between Lafayette and Jackson streets.

Starkville has also continued moving forward in planning a new roundabout for Highway 12 near Garrard Road with an \$8 million Safe Streets for All grant the city received in July. The project is expected to begin construction in the fall and is projected to be completed by 2028.

In February the city accepted a \$120,000



Starkville Sportsplex

grant from the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Recreation Trails Program to go towards a new skate park at the Starkville Sportsplex. The remaining roughly \$280,000 of the project is being covered by the city's 1% and 2% tourism taxes. While the project is still in early design phases, the plan is for construction to be complete by the end of the year.

Oktibbeha County, after finalizing the \$55 million sale of OCH Regional Medical Center in October to Baptist Memorial Healthcare, approved the Oktibbeha County Reserve and Trust Fund Act in February. The board placed the proceeds into a professionally managed en-

dowment while also passing a resolution to issue up to \$15 million of the funds in bonds to fund county-wide capital projects.

The George M. Bryan Airport began dirt work for a 1,000-foot extension to its runway in December. The \$10 million project is projected to be complete some time in 2027. The airport is also building a new 100-by-65-foot corporate hangar which is expected to begin in the summer. The airport is also expected to break ground on a helicopter and living quarters building sometime in April or May.

The county also began a \$330,000 renovation project at the County Administrative Annex, which is expected to be completed in 2026.



George M. Bryan Airport



COLUMBUS/LOWNDES

Columbus has nearly completed about \$6 million in ARPA funded drainage work, which seeks to address flooding issues in Wards 1, 4 and 5. The projects include ditch and box culvert clearing, replacing some drains and erosion control in ditches. Crews have nearly wrapped up a box culvert and pipe replacement. The work is expected to be complete by the summer.

In December the city shifted about \$269,000 in ARPA funds toward a pair of smaller drainage projects on Highway 45 and Summerhaven Drive. Both projects are projected to be complete by June.

The city has continued trucking along with \$1.8 million in Fifth Street North improvements, which include narrowing lanes, new lighting, a new signal at Fifth Avenue North and Fifth Street North and adding sidewalks and bike lanes. Crews have largely completed demolition work on the street and have made significant strides in sidewalks and driveways since October.



The project is expected to be completed sometime in April or May.

The nearly decade-long redevelopment effort in Burns Bottom is projected to complete roughly \$5.2 million worth of initial infrastructure improvements sometime between December and early 2027. Friendly City Development, since entering into a \$800,000 deal with the city's



redevelopment board in August, has sold 11 of its initial 28 lots, which could begin seeing houses going up in early 2027.

In January, the city received a more than \$536,000 grant from the Mississippi Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund to cover a kayak and canoe launch at Propst Park for the city's Fossil Park project. The grant covers about two-thirds of the projected cost of the project. Construction is expected to begin some time in 2026.

Beginning in late April or early May, the city will begin about \$3 million in repaving efforts that will include streets as well as a number of parking lots in need of improvements. The work is expected to be completed before November.

The city and the Columbus-Lowndes Convention and Visitors Bureau each ponied up an additional \$1 million to go alongside \$1 million in state funds for capital improvements at the Terry Brown Amphitheater. Construction will include new restrooms, a concession stand and gating in the venue and is projected to be complete around the end of the year to early 2027.

The city has set aside \$100,000 for the construction of field lights at Propst Park. The city is currently taking bids on the project and hopes to have the lights constructed by April.

At the Columbus-Lowndes County Airport there are a number of ongoing and future proj-

ects which include a new weather system, which is expected to begin construction around the fall with completion expected before the end of the year. A new open hangar to increase capacity at the airport, is also expected to begin construction around the fall and is projected to be completed in 2027.

Out in Lowndes County, more than 40 roads are set for repavement this year thanks to \$11 million in state and county funds.

PACCAR Engine Company's Lowndes County plant completed construction on its new remanufacturing facility, which officially opened in March. The additional 50,000 square-foot building is expected to bring an additional 100 jobs.

In December, Firehawk Aerospace, a Texas-based munitions company that develops rockets and motors powered by 3D printed propellants, signed a 20-year lease agreement for 636 acres in Lowndes county. The business is expected to bring roughly 100 jobs over the next five years.

Just outside the Caledonia town limits, the new Caledonia Combustion Power Plant broke ground in October. The project, which represents an \$800 million investment by the Tennessee Valley Authority, is expected to be completed by May 2028.

WEST POINT/CLAY

West Point has plans to repave about \$2 million in city and neighborhood streets. The city will begin addressing repaving efforts sometime before April.

Down Highway 45 South, West Point has been working since May on installing a new sewer line to increase capacity around the south side of the city limits. The line will filter to the city's main plant and will increase capacity for the city's sewage system. The \$3 million project is expected to be completed in March.

In the center of the city, the West Point Growth Alliance is expected to begin a beautification project at West Point City Park with more than \$161,000 the organization has received in American Rescue Plan Act funds. The project will include the demolition and replacement of the park's gazebo, construction of new benches and landscaping work. The project is expected to begin in May with a projected completion in September.

MACON/NOXUBEE

In Noxubee County, there has been continued work on the county's new \$2 million emergency operations center, which is expected to be completed in March. The location for the center will be by the current center in the Macon city center on Washington Street. The intent is for the building to be a safer



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Noxubee Medical Complex CEO Meg Ebert, left, listens as trustee Willie Mary Reece speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony for the hospital's new Outpatient Pavilion.

and more modern center for the county.

Huber Engineered Woods has continued construction of the organization's newest wood mill near Shuqualak. The project continues toward a completion date in the second half of 2026. The project is projected to bring about 150 new jobs to the area for positions in logging, hauling and hospitality.

A \$350,000 bridge construction out on Mickens Clay Road is expected to be finished by May.

The county is also looking to perform \$1.2 million of road resealing, which will cover about 10 miles of roads some time in April or May.

Noxubee County is poised to gain a major expansion in local health care access with Noxubee Medical Complex's planned \$8.5 million outpatient pavilion, which is expected to open in 2027. Hospital leaders say the project is designed

to keep more patients in the county by adding space for visiting specialists and new services that residents now often have to seek in Columbus, Meridian or Starkville.

The pavilion will include an infusion center, therapy services, another primary care clinic, a geriatric mental health day program and upgraded diagnostic equipment, while also creating room for rotating specialists such as cardiology, orthopedics, neurology and pediatrics. Hospital officials hope the expansion will not only make care more convenient in this rural county, but also strengthen the hospital financially by boosting outpatient revenue in the years ahead.

STORY BY **BRADEN SIMMONS**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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