

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

January / February 2024

DELTA LAND SURVEYORS

Marks 40 Years

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Six Emergency
Management Directors**

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The Front Porch

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Dawn Perez

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photograph Courtesy of Dawn Perez

While Dawn Perez wasn't born in Taylor County, she has called it home for the last 36 years, after moving from Michigan at the age of 19 to be closer to her parents after their retirement. The choice has been an easy one for Perez to live with, as she finds immense enjoyment in the Florida coastline and small-town atmosphere, where, as she puts it, "everyone knows everyone."

Perez currently works as Executive Director of the Taylor County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Development Council (TDC), a position she has happily held for approximately 30 years. While it is fairly uncommon for someone to remain in the same career field for that long, Perez enjoys working with the public, and says that being involved in creating events and bringing people in to visit and see all that Taylor County has to offer is deeply rewarding. She also praises the board she works with, and says that working with a great group of people is a definite perk of the job. Above all, she enjoys being able to make people happy to live in their rural and charming community.

When she isn't at work, Perez is an avid outdoors-woman, and loves to kayak, travel and fish. Some of her favorite places to go fishing in Taylor County are Yates Creek, Hagens Cove and Dallus Creek, as their quiet location and shallow waters make them prime locations for catching trout and redfish. Among her many kayaking adventures, Perez has seen a myriad of amazingly

scenic views, along with some iconic Florida wildlife like birds, gators and even once spied a deer taking a swim.

All this kayaking makes for some amazing stories, and as a skilled writer, Perez enjoys telling these stories through her travel blog, *Unexplored Adventures with Dawn*. Through her website, *Unexploredadventureswithdawn.com*, she has compiled a collection of first-hand experiences from her various travels across natural North Florida locations as well as North Georgia, and even Tennessee. While her blog is relatively new, she has already begun to build a following, and she hopes to be a full-time travel blogger upon her retirement from the Chamber of Commerce and TDC. She seems to be on the right track, as people have already reached out requesting for her to visit their establishments and write about them in her blog. Her true passion, even in writing, is fishing, and sharing fishing stories about the beautiful places she loves is an enriching part of her writing experience overall.

The creative juices don't stop flowing from a writing standpoint, however; Perez is also a skilled artist, specializing in abstract works of art. Although she does dabble a bit in paint mediums, she mainly works with ink and pencil to create her drawings.

"I've done art ever since I could hold a pencil," says Perez. "It's a stress reliever; it's how I clear my heart. Years

ago, I would just go home and draw, and I'd share some of my drawings and things on facebook."

Through her various posts online, Perez kept getting requests and suggestions for her to create a coloring book featuring her drawings, so she gathered up her artwork and sent her designs to a publisher, who put them together into a coloring book that she now offers for sale through Barnes & Noble, Books-a-Million and Amazon. Shortly after her first publication came her second coloring book, and currently, Perez admits to being in the process of developing a third.

When asked how she would best describe herself, Perez laughed good-naturedly and said "chaotic."

Upon further reflection, she expanded. "I would describe myself as driven. I'm a complex person, I'm all over the place, so I'd say a little chaotic. I can be competitive; I'm always trying to outdo myself on projects I'm working on. This comes in handy through my work, for instance, when I am planning an event. I like to always expand on events I've done before, and find ways of making them bigger and better until I've taken it as far as it'll go. Then, I'll add a new component to that event, and focus on that."

Though she stays busy with her many hobbies and projects, Perez is happy living life in quiet, rural Florida, and is comforted by the perks of small-town life.

“Everyone [in a small town] looks out for each other,” she says. “Take the recent hurricane. Even before the rain stopped, once the storm was over, everyone was suddenly outside, helping one another clear up fallen trees and pull away debris. Big cities don't do that.”

Perez also says she enjoys truly knowing the people in her community, and things like being on a first-name basis with her doctor, running into people she knows in the grocery store and feeling a true connection to the people who live in the community are all a big part of what makes rural life so special to her.

Perez has a 35-year-old son named Kevin Murray, whom she describes as “sassy and single.” It would seem that Kevin inherited his mother's eye for art, as he currently works in the Art Department at Universal Studios. While Perez recognizes that each artist has a uniquely personal style, she can sometimes see hints of her style hidden within her son's work, something she finds amazing.

Perez is confident in her many talents, but above all, she boasts her fishing skills. Four years ago, she married her best friend, Juan, and says that while most husbands would be shy about admitting to being out-fished by their wives, Juan openly admits her prowess at the sport. She confidently states that she can “out-fish any man, any time, any day.” Together, the two of them love to fish and spend time in the great outdoors.

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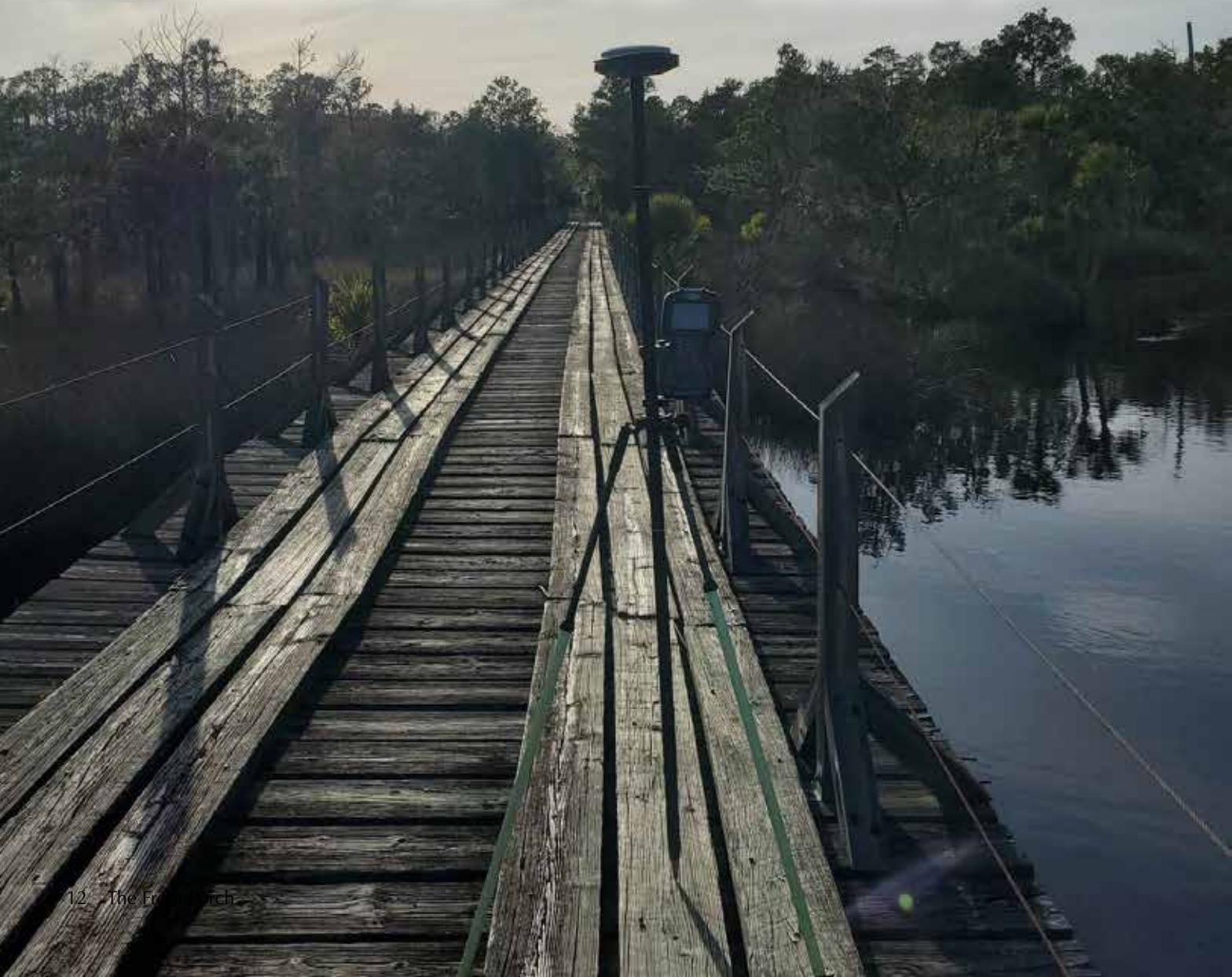
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COVER STORY

Delta Land Surveyors Marks 40 Years



Story by Laura Young

*Photographs Courtesy of
Delta Land Surveyors*

When Lawrence Dale Rowell returned from serving with the Air Force in Vietnam in the early 1970s, he soon made an educational choice that would impact not only his life, but also his extended family as well as countless businesses, agencies and property owners across North Florida. One of his brothers, Auley Rowell, was employed surveying timberland for Proctor & Gamble, and he suggested that Dale look into this line of work. The University of Florida, he said, had just started a school for surveyors that could be a good opportunity.

Dale followed up and became the third student ever to enroll in the new program. Auley had been the first family member to become a surveyor, and Dale was the next. In 1976, he went to work for Tom Howard's surveying business in Monticello. Less than a decade later, in 1983, he started Delta Land Surveyors. The name derives the D from Dale, the E from his daughter Edith and the L from his daughter Liz, with the T and A added to complete the word for the Greek letter Delta, a symbol for change.



The next year, Dale increased Delta's customer base by buying Tom Howard's business. His other brother, Randy, joined him in the operation, and they established offices in both Monticello and Perry. The company grew and grew as they worked on all kinds of projects that took them into plots of farmland, down neighborhood streets, waist-deep in swamps, along coastal property lines, through paper company timberland and across vast stretches of government-owned tracts.

In 2007, the two brothers decided to create separate businesses that would continue to work cooperatively with the same name of Delta Land Surveyors. Randy and the Monticello business focused on projects on one side of the Aucilla River while Dale and the Perry-based business handled projects on the other side of the river.

Randy recalls that in the early days of the business they did their work with a transit, reading the angles with a magnifying glass and measuring distances with a 100-foot steel chain. Today they use robotic instruments and GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) technology to triangulate the measurements from satellites. Through the years, many of their



children, nephews, nieces, in-laws and grandchildren have also worked at Delta (some whether they wanted to or not, notes Randy).

"I am proud to say many of them have found surveying to be what they wanted to do as an occupation," he adds.

About two years ago, Randy passed ownership of Delta Land Surveyors in Monticello to his children: Joe Rowell, Corey Rowell and Kim Rowell Odom. With Kim as one of the partners, Delta Land Surveyors became in part a woman-owned small business, remarkable in a field where less than three percent of surveyors are female. Over the past year under the new generation of owners, the family business has continued to thrive and expand their service area across North Florida and South Georgia.

At the start of 2023, Delta Land Surveyors celebrated 40 years in business, and the two separate companies merged together again into one Delta Land Surveyors business headquartered in Monticello.

Randy reflects, "I have had some real good people that helped us along the way. They are my friends, and I miss working with them. I still consider them as part of our Delta Land Surveyors family. There are a few of us old-timers still here along with many very capable younger surveyors and mappers. I feel that Delta Land Surveyors' successes have come through hard work and support from the local businesses as well as the county commission, city council and school board, who obviously have wanted us to succeed. I have recognized that the local business and leaders' support in us is why we have

been able to stay here in Monticello so long. It is truly my blessing to have a family that is interested in carrying on what Dale and I started."

Neither Randy nor Dale are ready to retire, though, and they continue to work as one of Delta's five Florida Registered Professional Surveyors and Mappers in the family.

Randy's son, Joe, remembers starting at Delta one summer at the age of 16, when he needed gas money for his hand-me-down truck.

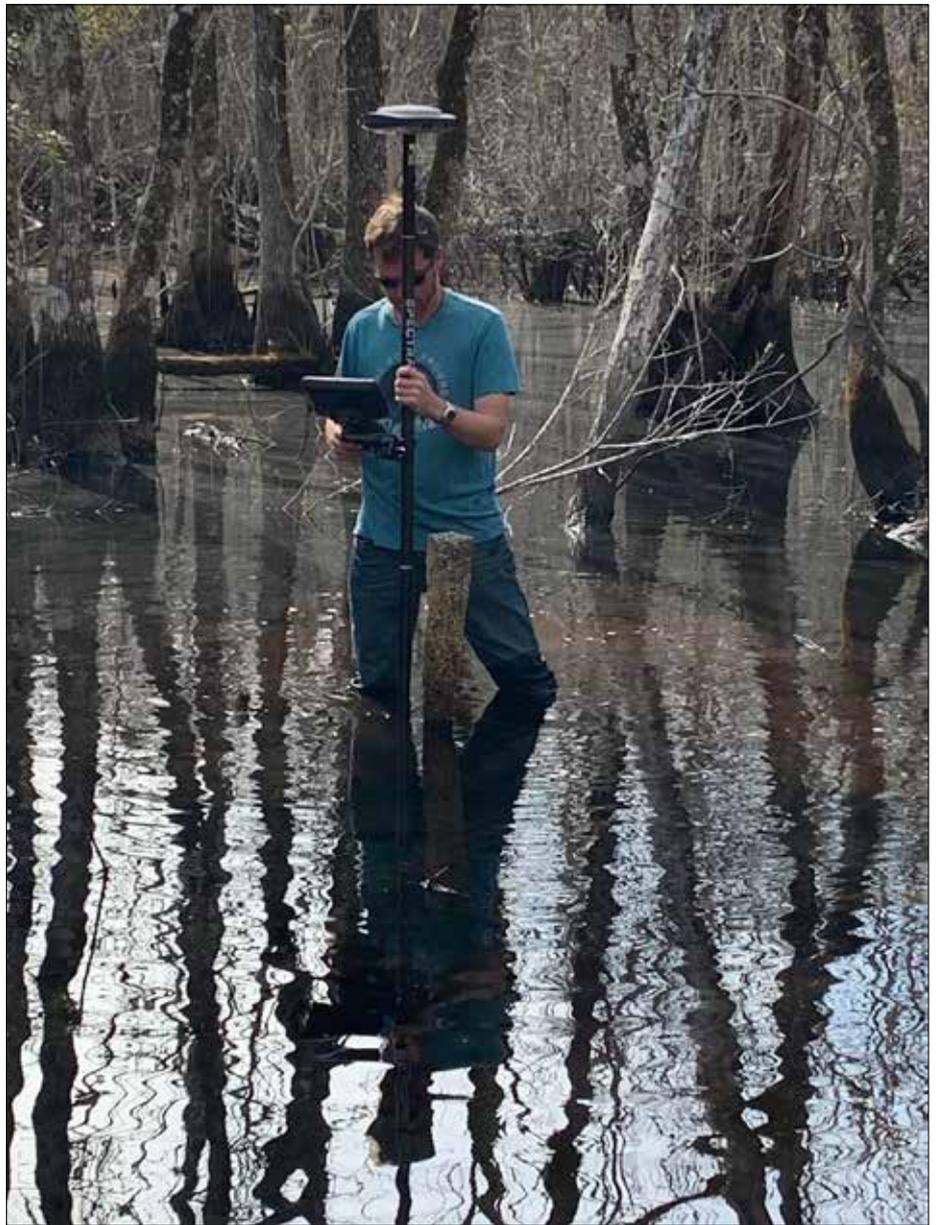
"It has been a long road from where I started in 1997," Joe says, "from being a rodman who gets sent back to the truck for a tree bender to an owner who sends the crews out across North Florida. I love being in the woods and seeing what our creator has set in place for us to be good stewards over. Over the years I have been blessed to see deer, hogs, bears, bugs and all secluded places in North Florida that most have never seen. It takes a special breed to be a land surveyor. We wade in water with snakes, we go through bushes full of ticks, and we seem to attract mosquitoes. It takes hard work, dedication and perseverance to be a good surveyor."

Corey recalls starting to help out at a very young age, first around the office and later working in the field. Like his brother, he enjoys the variety that every day brings, and he recognizes that his father wanted to instill in them a good work ethic.

Kim is proud to be one of the few women who are registered surveyors, and she also works on the business side of the operation. Over the past year, she has seen Delta Land Surveyors triple in size, including both the workforce and the service area.

"We are now three generations strong," says Kim, "with land surveying as a family business."

Some employees have worked so long at Delta Land Surveyors that they are just like family, including Mike McIntosh (38 years at Delta) and Pandora Padgett (with the company for 30 years). Padgett, now a senior survey technician and cad operator, remembers way back when she was in the drafting program at North Florida College that one day a Delta

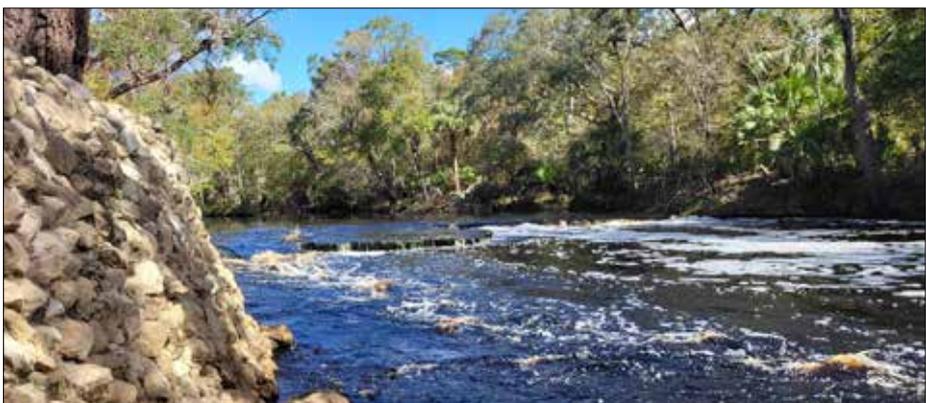
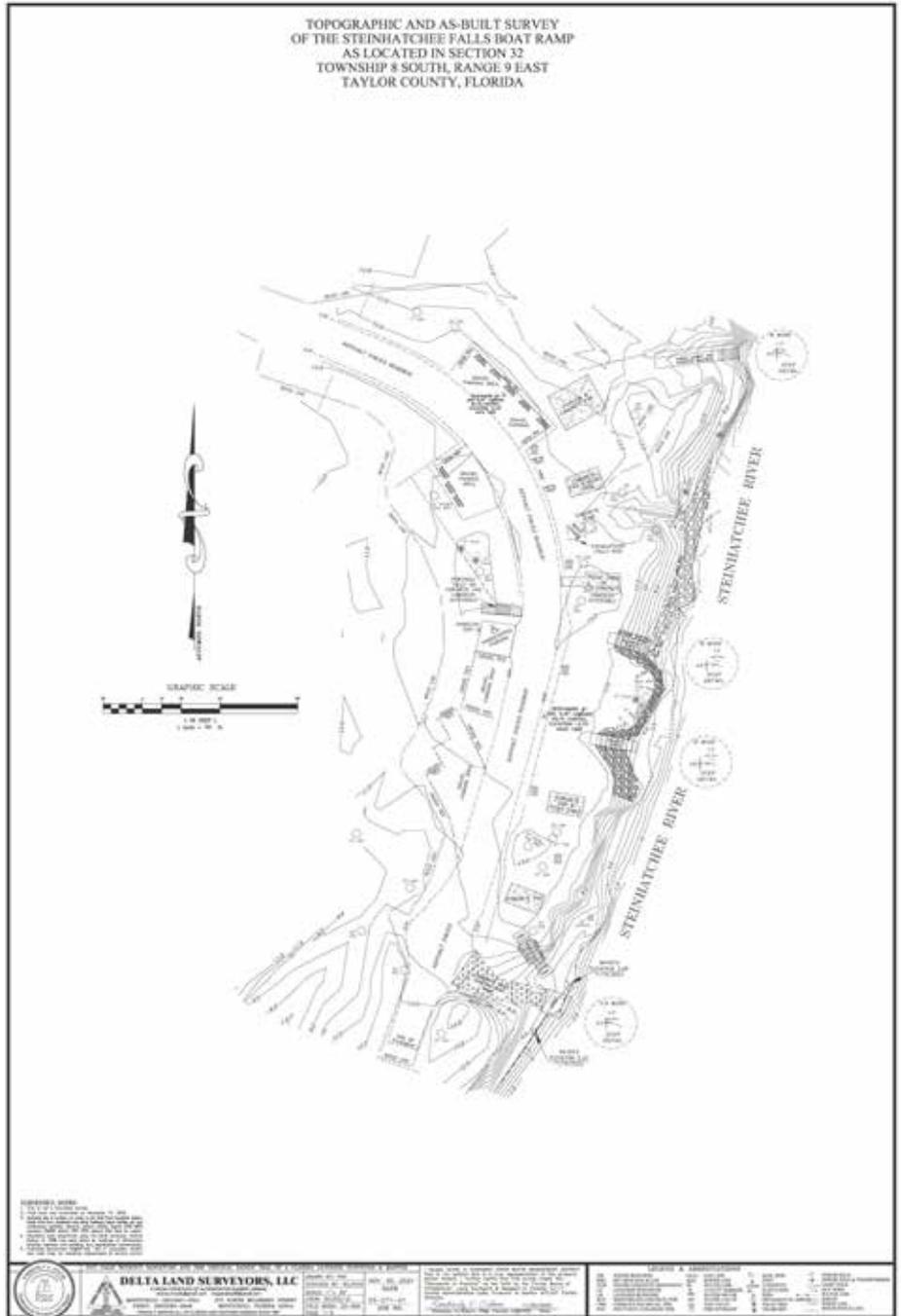


employee came to one of her classes and said they needed help. Although she had been planning to go into architecture, she started helping out at Delta and has been there ever since. In her current position as one of three cad operators at Delta, Padgett works with the data that surveyors send in from the field, draws it up digitally and checks it against information in the property deeds. Then she generates the survey plots that are the company's primary work product.

"It's very interesting work," Padgett says. "I like doing the research. There's always something different."

In the course of its work, a land

surveying company naturally builds working relationships with area realtors, planning officials, title companies and those in the property appraiser's office. One recent project of interest was surveying the height of the Jefferson County Courthouse in order to establish a limit on how high other buildings in the area could be. Delta also recently provided a survey of Steinhatchee Falls related to rebuilding the boat ramp there. They've mapped out the boundaries of the old LOG&P railroad, locating remnants of the old railroad and bridges near the coast east of the Aucilla River. In Live Oak, the design for the city's new potable





water system is using surveys Delta did to locate roadways, existing water lines, sewer lines and other features critical to the municipal project. They've located the natural springs and creeks that make up Adams Springs, some of the last privately owned natural springs in the region. And they've helped the Jefferson County School Board create a thorough and current inventory of all their properties. The list goes on, and is just a glimpse into the many ways that Delta Land Surveyors continues to serve a wide variety of clients, with no project ever the same.

Their extensive experience extends to more than 13 categories, including Boundary and Topographic Surveys, Mean High Water, Ordinary High Water Line and Tidal Boundary Surveys, Coastal Construction Control Line Surveys, DEP Surveys, Wetland Delineation Surveys, Drainage Surveys, Utility Location Surveys, Right-of-Way Mapping, Construction Stakeouts, ALTA/ NSPS Surveys, As-Built Surveys and survey support for property acquisitions. In addition, Kim has been appointed to serve on the Jefferson County Planning

Commission for the past two years, gaining experience from the planning perspective that enriches Delta's approach to their work.

Jefferson County Property Appraiser Angela Gray remarks that Delta has always worked with her office in identifying property boundaries, especially in difficult areas.

"They have a wealth of knowledge about Department of Transportation right





of ways and highways that is a big help," says Gray. "We don't always have access to those maps."

Delta also works closely with Leslie Wilkinson of North Florida Abstract & Title, who regularly orders surveys from Delta in connection with title searches for real estate sales.

"I just know I can call on them if I have a question about a legal description or a survey," says Wilkinson. "I couldn't do my work without them. They are always there for me."

Scott McPherson, a local investor, developer, entrepreneur and restorer, says that working with Kim and the folks at Delta has been amazing: "When I started





in Monticello, I made a commitment to use everyone local we could find. Delta was one of the first contacts, and I have zero regrets. They come through every time.”

People involved with Delta Land Surveyors over the past four decades hope that the company will continue to serve the community for many years to come.

Randy says, “Looking back, it has been my pleasure surveying in Jefferson County and the surrounding community. It is especially pleasing to remember and recognize the people we have worked for and those who have helped along the way. My hope is that Delta Land Surveyors

LLC would be able to grow along with the county and still be here forty years later. It

hasn't always been easy, but looking back it's been fun.” ■

What's Happening

January 6

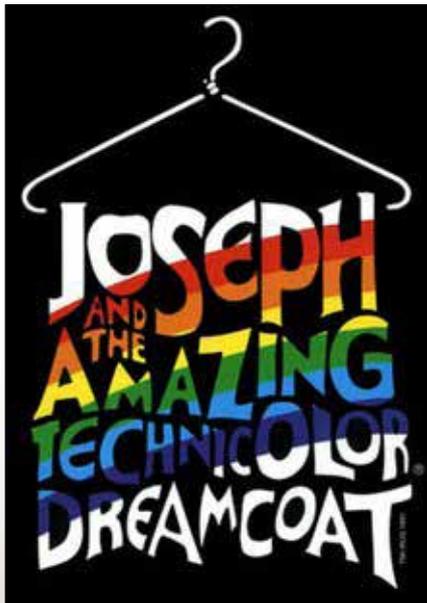
Live Oak Makers' Market

Your one-stop-shop offers a variety of locally-made goods from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Suwannee County Historical Commission and Museum (208 Ohio Ave. N., Live Oak).

January 11

Gold City at Ragans

Bring your family along to enjoy performances by the singing group, Gold City and their special guest, Jonathan Wilburn, former Gold City lead vocalist, at Ragans Family Campground. Admission is free, though a love offering will be received. For more information, call (850) 773-8269, email info@ragansfamilycampground.com or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.



January 12 - 28

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat at MOH

This musical follows the biblical story of Joseph, who is sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. During his misfortunes there, he discovers his ability to interpret dreams, which leads him to solve a problem for the pharaoh and turn his fortunes around. For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera

House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

January 13 - February 3

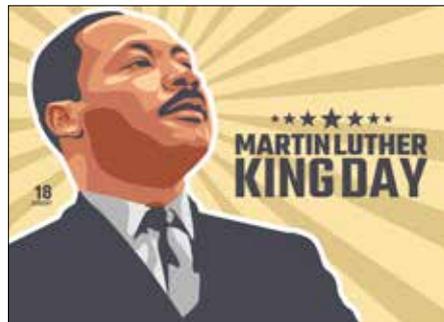
Fibers Are Fun at JAG

This exhibit showcases a fascinating variety of fiber arts. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

January 13

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.



January 15

MLK Day Parade & Celebration

Keep Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy alive and celebrate his 95th birthday with a parade in downtown Monticello beginning at 11 a.m., followed by activities at the MLK Community Center (1420 1st St., Monticello). For more information, call (850) 322-9002 or (850) 933-2012.

January 15

Grower's Market @ the Circle

The Courthouse Circle in downtown Monticello becomes an open-air market one Monday a month from 3 to 6 p.m. in the parking lot of The Social. Expect vendors like Ashwood Homestead, Blue Sky Berry Farm, Florida Georgia Citrus, Florida Line Nursery, Full Moon Farm & Apiary, Rocky Soil Family Farm, UF/IFAS and Under the Oaks. Interested

vendors should contact the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce at director@monticellojeffersonfl.com or (850) 997-5552.



January 27-28

NFWC Pavilion Grand Opening

The North Florida Wildlife Center will celebrate the completion of their educational pavilion from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day. Enjoy lively animal presentations, keeper talks, goat feedings, crafts, food trucks, vendors and more. Special low admission for the event is just \$12 for kids and \$17 for adults at the door; \$10/\$15 when purchased in advance online at www.northfloridawildlife.org.

February 1-10

Little Women

In a war-torn world defined by gender, class, and personal tragedy, Jo March gives us her greatest story: that of the March sisters, four dreamers destined to be imperfect little women. All performances take place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse, 122 N. Ashley St., in downtown Valdosta. For showtimes and ticket information, visit www.theatreguildvaldoest.com or call (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

February 3

Live Oak Makers' Market

Your one-stop-shop offers a variety of locally-made goods from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Suwannee County Historical Commission and Museum (208 Ohio Ave. N., Live Oak).

What's Happening



February 3

All Aboard Festival

Celebrate the history of the railroad and its impact on the growth of North Florida with music, food, vendors and information during this free festival at the Suwannee County Historical Commission (208 Ohio Ave. N., Live Oak).



February 10

Chili Cook-off and Brewfest – Madison

Enjoy unlimited samples of craft beer and/or chili from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m., at Lanier Field (112 Range St., Madison) live music and vendors. To purchase a ticket, apply for a vendor or contestant application contact (850) 973-2788 or visit madisoncountychamberofcommerce.com/tourism.growthzoneapp.com/ap/Events/Register/VPN03Bmr.

February 10

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.



February 14 – March 3

Proscenophobia (Stage Fright) Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

A prop gun that fires bullets instead of blanks sets the plot in motion for this dinner show that focuses on human motivation more than police investigation. Who was the intended victim? Who loaded the gun? Find out at MOH! For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

February 15

RIVEROAK Technical College Career Day and Program Showcase

Explore career opportunities and more with the annual Career Day and Program Showcase at RIVEROAK Technical College (415 Pinewood Dr. S.W.) from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

February 19

Grower's Market @ the Circle

The Courthouse Circle in downtown Monticello becomes an open-air market one Monday a month from 3 to 6 p.m. in the parking lot of The Social. Expect vendors like Ashwood Homestead, Blue Sky Berry Farm, Florida Georgia Citrus, Florida Line Nursery, Full Moon Farm & Apiary, Little Hidden Pond Farm & Rabbitry, Rocky Soil Family Farm, It's Sugar Suga, UF/IFAS and Under the Oaks. Interested vendors should contact the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce at director@monticellojeffersonfl.com or (850) 997-5552.



February 24 – 25

Annual Live Oak Strawberry Festival

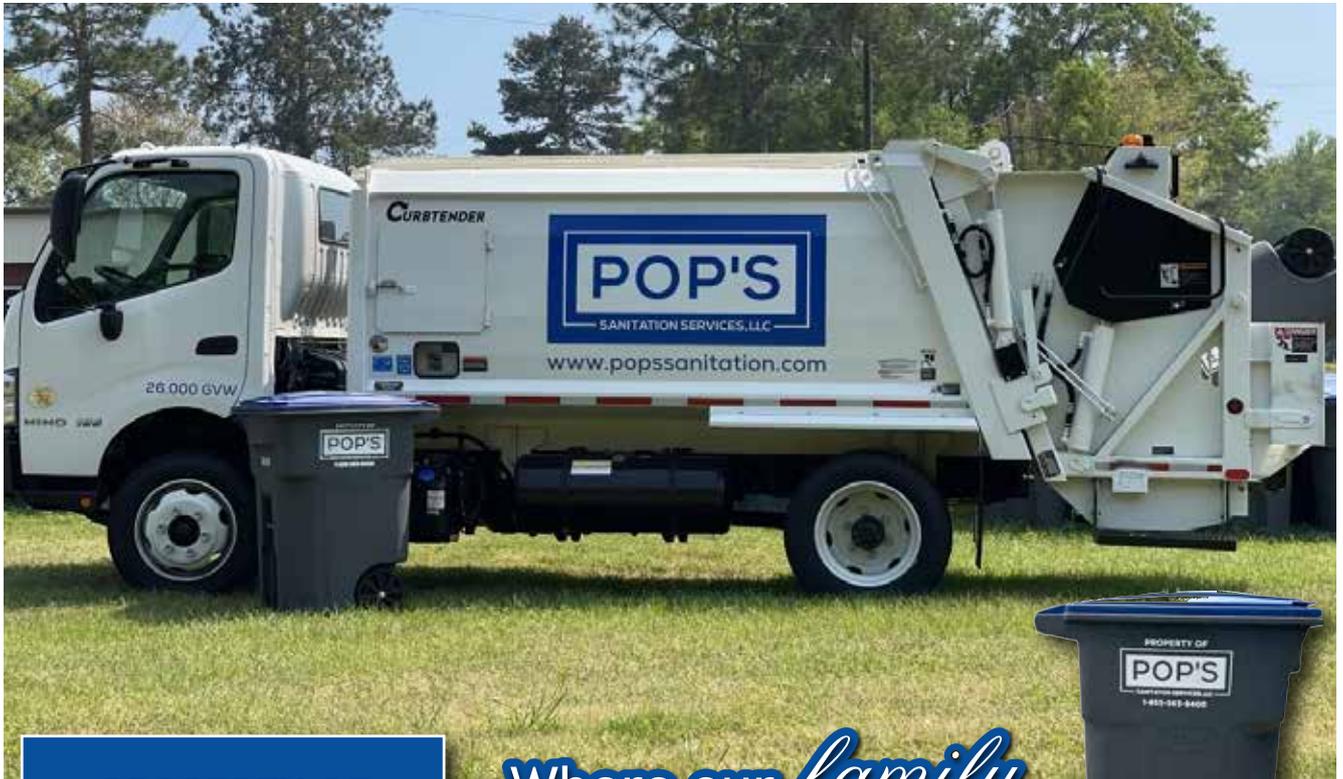
There's fun for the whole family from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Suwannee County Fairgrounds (1302 11th St. S.W., Live Oak). Taste an array of strawberry delicacies and enjoy activities for all ages, including free bounce houses, rock painting, a strawberry relay race, face painting, and much more. Admission is \$7, but kids ages 2 and younger get in for free. Receive \$1 off admission by visiting www.LiveOakFestival.com and printing off a coupon, or bring a canned good to the festival gates to benefit the local food pantry.



February 29

RUNA in Concert! At MOH

Celebrating 14 years together as a band, this Celtic-American Roots music "super group" continues to push the boundaries of Irish folk music by interweaving the haunting melodies and exuberant tunes of Ireland and Scotland with the lush harmonies and intoxicating rhythms of jazz, bluegrass, flamenco and blues. The show begins at 8 p.m. For ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.



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David Wilson (left) and fellow veterans pay tribute to fallen Vietnam War veterans at their grave sites.

DAVID WILSON:

A veteran who continues to serve

Story by Mickey Starling

Photograph Courtesy of David Wilson

Most kids grow up with some sort of goal that dances around in their imagination and then flutters far away as new interests arise in adulthood.

Such was not the case for David Wilson, who grew up in Apalachicola, Fla., the oldest child of the late Bernard and Betty Wilson, who later relocated to Madison County.

Wilson was a sports enthusiast from an early age, taking to the gridiron in junior high school, playing for Coach Joe Worden, who would also later make

Madison County home. During high school, David played football under the watchful eyes of Coach Wagoner and later Coach Elmer Coker, in Crawfordville, Fla. All of these men left an impression on young David.

"I wanted to grow up to be like them," remembers Wilson, who did just that.

They all stressed the values of dedication and hard work, and he found those traits useful as he entered Florida State University in the fall of 1966. With his parents unable to pay his tuition, Wilson took a part-time job with the

United States Postal Service, which eventually became a full-time position. He worked the midnight shift, getting off at 8:30 a.m., just in time to get to his morning classes. Wilson also served in the United States Air Force (USAF) ROTC and was inducted into the Arnold Air Society in 1968. The mission of this organization is to produce excellent officers for the Air Force.

Upon graduation, Wilson was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the USAF. He was assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC), 381st Strategic Missile Wing, at McConnell

Air Force Base (AFB), in Kansas, where he served as a Missile Launch Officer for the Titan II Intercontinental Ballistic Missile weapon system. In January of 1972, David qualified as a Deputy Missile Combat Crew Commander. Less than a month later, his teaching skills were noticed, and he was promoted to the Instructional Squadron as a Deputy Instructor. By November, he advanced to the Wing Senior Deputy Instructor position, responsible for writing lesson plans and training other Deputy Instructors.

In August of 1973, Lt. Wilson qualified as a Missile Combat Crew Commander, again demonstrating exemplary leadership skills.

"It is note worthy that Lt. Wilson was given a crew not noted for its superiority, and in less than four months, raised the level of crew proficiency to recognition as 'Number One' line crew in the Wing," said the squadron commander.

In a later prestigious completion known as Olympic Arena, Wilson led his young and inexperienced team to victory, outscoring 35 other teams to be named Best Missile Combat Crew Commander in SAC. He later returned to the Olympic Arena as an instructor, leading McConnell AFB to win the Blanchard Trophy, which signified it as the best missile wing in SAC. Wilson left the Air Force in 1975 at the rank of Captain to pursue his dream of becoming a high school head football coach.

Wilson realized this dream after successfully serving as an assistant coach in Madison and Taylor counties. In 1978, Wilson took the helm as athletic director and head football coach at Crescent City High School, advancing the team to the semifinals of the state championship, a feat never before or since achieved at Crescent City. In 1982, Wilson took his coaching talents to Middleburg, Fla., as the head coach at Middleburg High School. During his nine-year tenure there, his teams won four district championships and two bowl games.

In 1991, Wilson brought his winning ways closer to home, becoming the head coach for Lincoln High School, in Tallahassee, Fla. In 1996, Wilson led



David Wilson (left) enjoys educating students about the importance of honoring veterans and remembering their sacrifices for others.

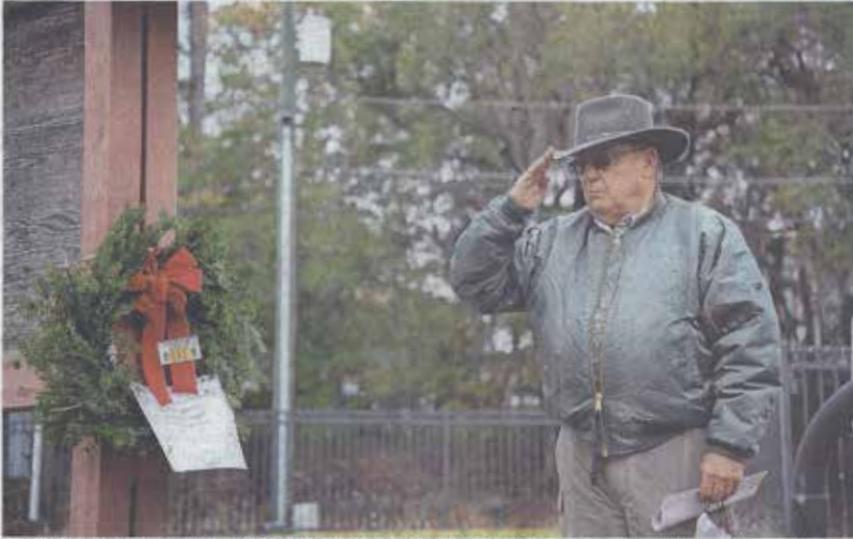
the team to its first undefeated season, and in 1999 added a Class 6A State Championship to the school's bragging rights. Another state championship was won in 2001, the same year that Lincoln received the Gatorade Trophy, which recognizes the best high school football team in Florida. In 2005, with 31 years of high school coaching under his belt,

Wilson retired to care for his aging parents. He had helped 147 of his players receive college scholarships, with more than 90 of them attending Division 1 schools.

"Many of them are now college graduates because of those scholarships," said Wilson.

Retirement did little to slow the

Christmastime mission: 'To remember, to honor'



David Wilson salutes a wreath hanging at the entrance of Greenwood Cemetery on Thursday in honor of three veterans buried there in unmarked graves. Volunteers plan more this weekend. PHOTOS BY TORI LYNN SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



passion Wilson had for his fellow veterans. Of especial concern to him are the slain heroes of the Vietnam War.

"My dad inspired my service to veterans," said Wilson. "I have long felt that Vietnam veterans were poorly treated. The dead have a special place in my heart. Their families need to know we respect them."

Wilson and others have been on a mission to show that respect and honor to Vietnam veterans in several ways. Annually, on March 29, National Vietnam War Veterans Day is observed, and Wilson took full advantage of it last year, partnering with Leon County Schools to have local veterans throw out the first pitch at boys' and girls' softball games. There was also a brief ceremony celebrating the heroic service of those killed in battle.

The reward for these ceremonies comes through the appreciation expressed by those who were touched by the service of these brave men and women. One Vietnamese lady approached Wilson after a presentation, thanking him for doing it.

"My family caught the last ship

out of Saigon," she said. "Without the Americans, I never would have made it."

Another lady recalled that her parents were given permission for her to be born on a military base so that she could be an American citizen. Her mother told her of a day, shortly after she was born, when she began crying loudly in the hospital. Her mother feared that the noise would disturb the numerous wounded soldiers who lay nearby.

One soldier approached her bed and asked, "Can I look at your baby?"

After a satisfying gaze, he returned to his bed, obviously not disturbed at all. Perhaps the sight of new life and innocence encouraged him that his efforts were worth the trouble.

"There were no dry eyes after that story," said Wilson.

Throughout the year, Wilson and a team of fellow veterans, are devoted to locating the graves of fallen veterans of all wars and providing ceremonies honoring their lives and service. These ceremonies deliberately involve children as part of the presentation. This helps to ensure that future generations will not forget the sacrifices of the fallen. Recently,

Wilson successfully located the grave of serviceman Billy Maddox, who died during WW II after being struck by a car near Camp Blanding, in Florida. Maddox lay in an unmarked grave for 78 years. Wilson's group provided a headstone and a special service for the young man who had just begun his military career at his death. A military headstone was applied for and received, and Maddox has a niece who was so appreciative of his recognition that she flew down from Rhode Island for the ceremony.

Wilson continues to be involved in numerous other stories such as these, and each success fuels his passion to find other slain veterans who have been lost and forgotten. They gave their all for their country, and for Wilson, all should be remembered and given the honor they deserve.

David Wilson is a prime example of what can happen when a child is surrounded by people of good character and influence who imprint vision and purpose in their life. For Wilson, the sky was the limit, and his years of service to his country, children and veterans are proof that investing in others is always worth the effort. ■

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Jared and Redstick's Rainbow prepare for a run.

Jared Lewis Lee:

From farmboy to champion

Story by Christian Peterson

Photographs Courtesy of Jared Lewis Lee

Jared Lewis Lee is a fifth-generation Florida cowboy who was born and raised in Live Oak. He has spent his entire life on the farm and has a deep love for it. However, his true passion has always revolved around dogs, particularly cowdogs. Even as a toddler, Lee was surrounded by pups and would sleep alongside the litter.

"I guess I just had the fever, and it was

in my blood," Lee said about his love for dogs. His parents also have stories of him growing up with dogs and how he was always drawn to them.

In 2011, Lee moved to Mississippi to start a new life. He got a job managing a yearling operation where he was responsible for taking care of 5,000 to 8,000 head of cattle every year. During his time there, Lee realized that the dogs he had grown up with were not suitable for the job. He started looking for better

options and found the perfect fit in a border collie named Scout.

Scout helped Lee become a skilled stockman and inspired him to learn more about herding-type dogs. Lee needed a dog that could handle any situation, listen to his adrenaline and work quietly and calmly. He wanted a dog that was strong and confident, yet soft enough to handle sheep or baby calves. He found the perfect dog in the Hangin' Tree Cowdog, which could work in big open pastures as well as

hunt in the woods. It was strong enough to fight off a bad, mad cow but gentle with delicate animals. This is the point where Lee's career really started to take off.

"As I began to run these dogs and further my training and handling, I turned a 1,000-acre backgrounding operation from six full-time men to me, my dogs, one full-time man and one part-time man," Lee said. "This saved the ranch over \$90,000 a year for five years."

Recognizing the potential of his skills, Lee decided to buy his own place to train dogs full-time. This decision led him to his next great adventure, the Cowdog Trials.

Lee participated in his first contest, the Hangin' Tree Cowdog Futurity, in 2019. This event, held in Texas, is considered the most prestigious competition for the cowdog breed.

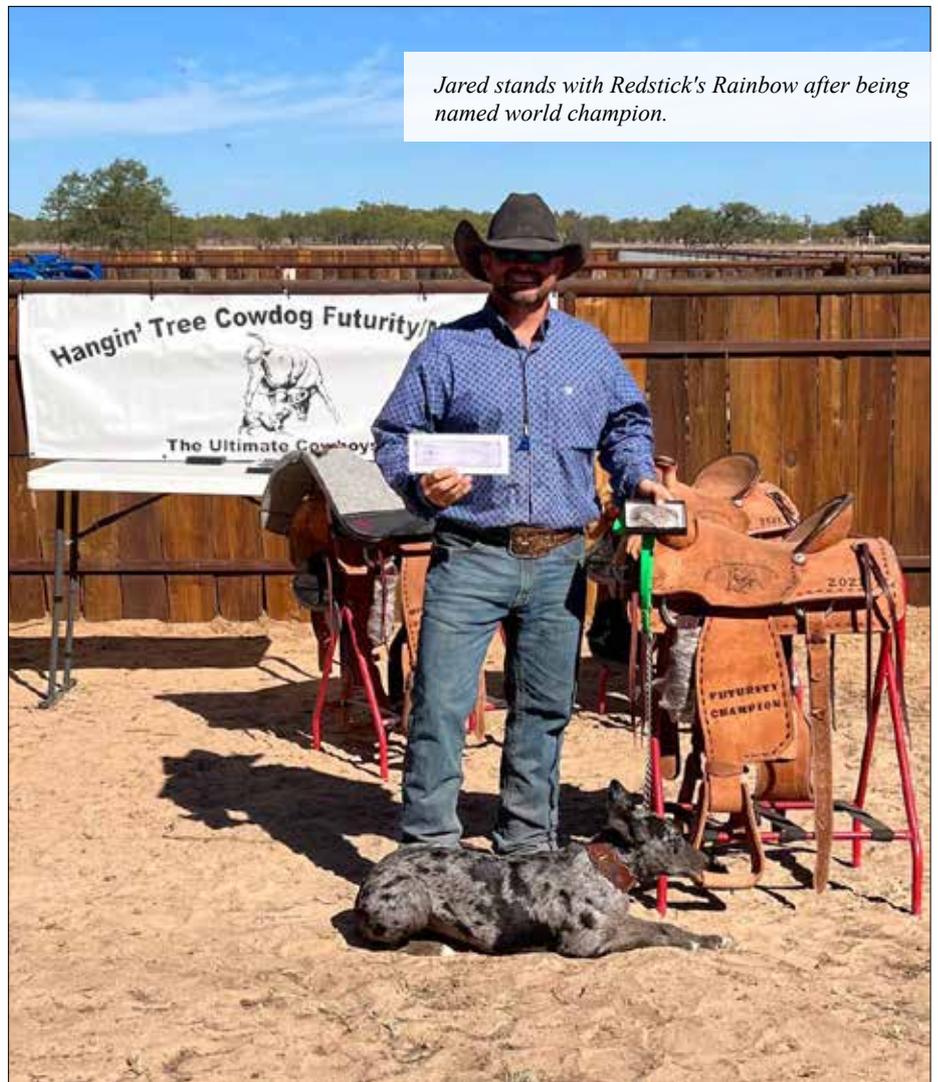
"I was showing against the best in the world and was blessed to win one and three in round two and the reserve futurity championship," Lee said.

After this incredible triumph, Lee took a break from the competition until 2022, when he entered the Mississippi State Sheep Dog competition. Once again, Lee and his dog, Redstick's Rainbow, emerged as the reserve state champions. However, that wasn't the end of their victories in 2022. Redstick's Rainbow also won the American Ranch Dog Trials Open World Championship and the 2022 Hangin' Tree Futurity Championship.

In October of this year, Lee and his dog won the championships once again. However, the journey to victory took work.

"This year, headed into the championship, we started with a bang. The dogs were the best," Lee said. "I knew more this year than I did previously, and we felt it was in the bag coming into 2023."

But things took a turn when he sold his ranch in Mississippi and moved back home to Live Oak. Hurricane Idalia hit at the end of August, just a month before the competition, causing widespread destruction in North Florida and halting training for six weeks. Instead, Lee spent that time rebuilding fences and cleaning up fallen trees. When training resumed, there was less than a week left to prepare.



Jared stands with Redstick's Rainbow after being named world champion.

"Being out during that time was not good for me and the dogs. I had thought about just throwing in the towel," Lee said. "Why drive 20 hours when the dogs and I weren't ready?"

However, he states he was encouraged by a few friends he ran into at the baseball field one day.

"They said, 'Jared Lee, go show 'em what Live Oak and Florida is all about. You got this; trust in God.' So, I rolled up, rolled out and kicked some butt out west."

He decided to give it his all and ended up winning the 2023 American Ranch Dog Open World Championship with Redstick's Rainbow and the Reserve Futurity Championship with Lee HDC cowdog Stella. To top it off, his brother, Cody Lee, won the Assisted World Championship with Redstick's Piper, making it an emotional victory

for the family, considering the desperate situation Lee was in just weeks before the competition.

Lewis' expertise in this field also earned him a spot on INSP Network's Ultimate Cowboy Showdown. However, his Season One run came to an unfortunate end when he broke his leg. Lee was given another opportunity to compete in Season Four, which premiered in September and featured all-stars from previous seasons. Season Four has since concluded, but Lee was unable to win the coveted Ultimate Cowboy belt buckle.

However, he was a clear winner in one category. In late October, the Ultimate Cowboy Showdown Facebook page opened a vote for viewers to select the fan-favorite cowboy. Without a doubt, the title of Fan Favorite All-Star Cowboy went to Lee, who walked away with 55

percent of the votes – a staggering 20 points over second place, which had only 35 percent. These results proved he was a winner in everyone's hearts simply for his entertainment and passion.

Lee has developed expertise in training cowdogs over the years, and he possesses valuable insights that can benefit those who own such animals. Cowdogs can be incredibly useful on farms, as they help save on labor and reduce stress while also becoming great companions. Lee has even explained the difference between a competitive dog and a farm dog.

“A trial cowdog has to be able to engage its instincts and turn them off with the snap of a finger, while also being

willing to let the handler take complete control at any moment,” Lee explained. “On the other hand, a ranch dog needs time to think on its own. It doesn't have to be told every step, but still needs to listen well.”

Lee starts training his own dogs at eight weeks old, keeping them on a leash and introducing them to sheep. He introduces the dogs to the smaller and meeker animal to help build their confidence and control. Once the dog has mastered that, they are moved up to cattle and finally on to real jobs.

Having returned to Live Oak once more with two championship titles under his belt, Lee is planning to spread his expertise to others interested in learning

the way of the cowdog.

“We are opening up a cowdog camp for folks to come to learn with us, do cattle drives and do real-life ranching,” Lee said.

They have partnered with Redstick's Cowdog, the world's largest Hangin' Tree breeder, to provide this opportunity.

“We want to continue to grow with rodeo shows and demonstrations, hosting cowdog trials here in Florida and continuing to win and build successful cowdogs for ranchers and farmers all over the world.”

For more information about Lee's accomplishments or to learn more about his business, Lee HDC Ranching, visit www.jaredleecowboy.com. ■



Redstick's Rainbow herds some cattle.

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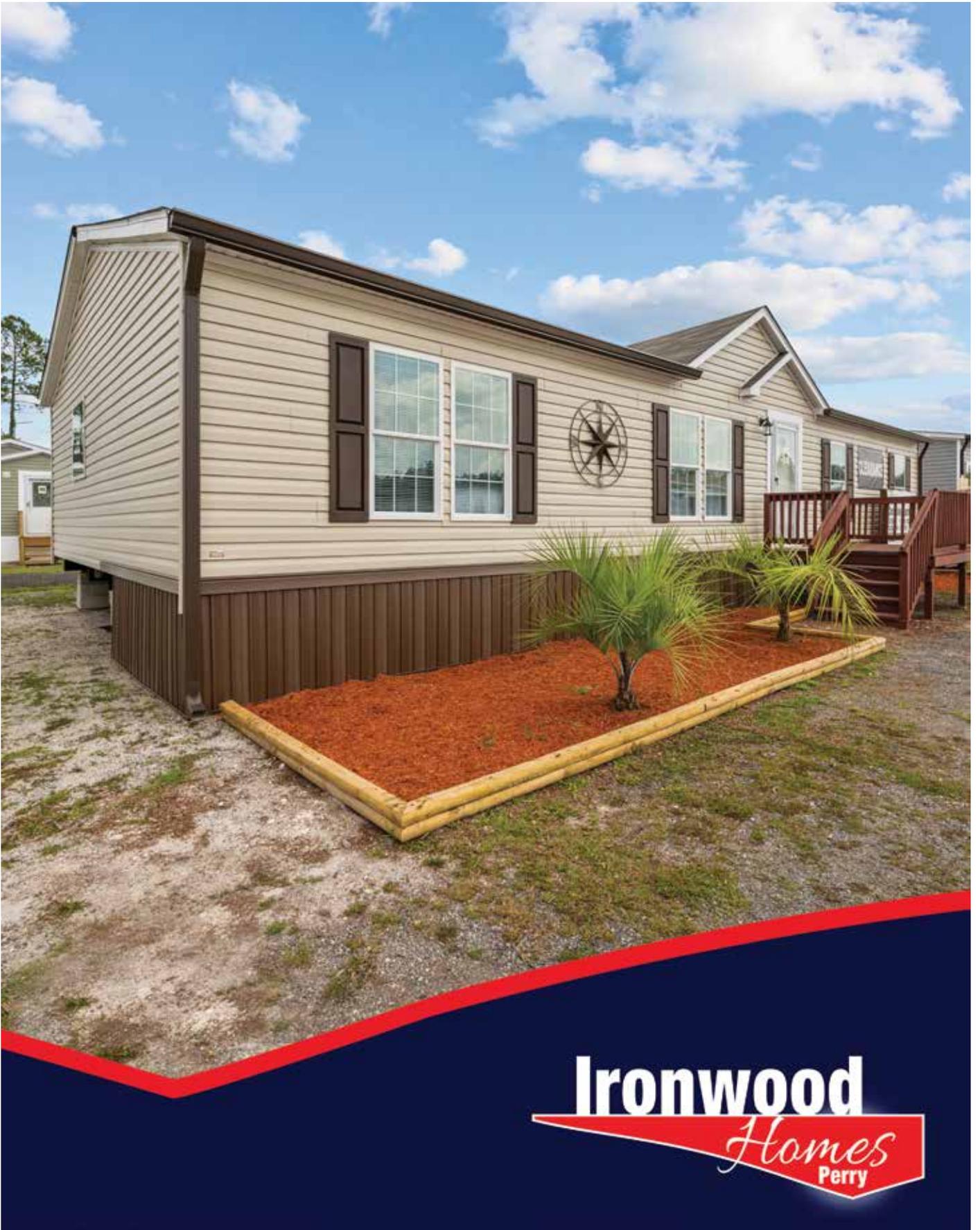
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To Our Directors of Emergency Management

Thank You!

When Hurricane Idalia spun into Keaton Beach on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023, it was packing sustained winds of 125 mph. The strongest storm to hit the region since 1896, it blasted buildings, sent Gulf waters surging through towns and flattened forests. Multiple counties experienced total loss of power. Residents needed, more desperately than ever, the skilled expertise of their emergency managers to get them through the aftermath. We dedicate the next pages of this issue to thank them for what they did then, and what they do every day to be ready when a big disaster strikes.

Paula Carroll | Jefferson County



Story and Photograph by Hailey Heseltine

Jefferson County's Emergency Management Director is Paula Carroll, a dedicated director who works hard to keep her county's citizens safe and informed.

Since childhood, Carroll has always done her best to be a good, helpful person. In her youth, she often tended to the needs of others without expecting a reward. When other kids were playing, Carroll was cutting the grass for a neighbor. It was simply embedded into her character, which motivated her to pursue a career in serving others.

She only began her career in Emergency Management about nine years ago, when she first arrived at Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (JCSO) in 2016 to

be an administrative assistant. She recalls that her first day was during Hurricane Hermine, which she says was "quite the eventful initiation." Though the job was high-pressure, she learned many skills that would serve her well later – especially from February 2018 onward, when she became JCSO's Emergency Management Director.

Though it has been more than five years since her appointment as director, Carroll says she is "constantly going through training." She has countless certifications but believes the most valuable training of all is experience. She says it is the perfect opportunity to reflect and refine her approach, so she can face each disaster that follows better prepared.

"You have to be extremely organized, and you have to be a people person," she says. "You also have to have a great team, since it takes all of us to make it work."

Figuring out how work under fiscal constraints, she says, is one of the hardest parts, since you must plan carefully and build resources over time. There is also the challenge of helping people understand her job. As manager, you must tend to an entire community by providing them with the resources and the information they need to act wisely, but the provisions are not always respected.

"It's always important to pay attention to the warnings and be prepared," she advises, as decisions can only be effective

with public cooperation.

A recent challenge was Hurricane Idalia. Carroll says the unpredictability of the storm made it difficult to plan for, but she was pleased with the county's efforts. The evacuation order and other information was conveyed to the citizens, even to those who did not have internet or phones. Major roads were cleared in just hours, and city power was restored in mere days – much faster than the initial estimate of two weeks. Provisions such as food, water and tarps were also made available.

Carroll attributes this success to her team, especially Jefferson County Sheriff Mac McNeill.

"I'm very fortunate to have a wonderful boss who backs and supports me, and who really works alongside all of us. We are truly blessed," she says.

Though the relief effort was not perfect, she says it has been a valuable learning experience. She hopes that as she continues to serve her community, she will also continue to serve them with efficiency, comfort and, most of all, compassion.

Outside of work, Carroll loves spending time with her family, especially her grandkids. She also wants to express appreciation for her husband.

"I wouldn't be able to do this without his support and love," she says. "He's a great guy, and I adore him."

She also enjoys gardening, which she says is very relaxing. Additionally, she makes dollhouses to give away to children, a hobby she began because she did not have a dollhouse as a child and wanted to provide ones to for those who were in

situations like she once was, so that she can “share the joy.”

In everything she does, Paula Carroll strives to go above and beyond what it means to serve her community. She not only makes sure the citizens have all the

information and resources they need, but also offers personal interest and care. To her, that's what being a true helper is all about.

Leigh Basford | Madison County

Story by Rick Patrick

Photograph Courtesy of Renata Keeling

There is a quote often attributed to the late American novelist James Lane Allen that says, “Adversity does not build character, it reveals it.” During late August and early September of this past year, the character of Madison County’s Emergency Management Director, Leigh Basford, a Madison County native, was certainly revealed through more adversity than many of us will face in a lifetime. It was Basford who was the tip of the spear in terms of the community’s response to a natural disaster most had never experienced first hand. Even before Hurricane Idalia made her appearance in southern Taylor County and embarked on her trail of destruction that wreaked havoc on the entire North Central Florida Region, including Madison County, before heading northward into Lowndes County in Southern Georgia; Basford was hard at work, diligently working to brace the community for the storm that was to follow.

For weeks before the storm came, Basford was the voice of warning, urging people to be prepared for a storm that would surely come one day. “Those who fail to prepare must be prepared to fail,” are the words of caution Basford is frequently heard to say. During the late spring and early summer months, Basford took every opportunity to speak to anyone who would listen about the importance of having an emergency plan, making sure one has adequate supplies in the event of an emergency and more.

“We always tell people to be prepared to go without any help for at least 72 hours,” said Basford. The events

of Wednesday, Aug. 30, and the days that followed, proved Basford’s prophetic warnings to be accurate. The days also revealed Basford to be a more than competent leader who was able to juggle multiple tasks, while remaining laser-focused on the task of helping to bring a devastated community back to normal as quickly and as safely as possible. The adversity of Hurricane Idalia revealed another valuable character trait Basford possesses; that is the humility to ask for and accept help when needed. Basford readily points out that the success Madison County had in bouncing back from the storm as quickly as it did was not due to just one person, or even just one department. It was due to a multitude of people from many different communities coming together to assist.

“Emergency management is a family,” added Basford.

That “team mindset” is nothing new to Basford. She played softball at Madison County High School (MCHS) before graduating from MCHS in 1999. She then attended North Florida Community College (NFCC) in Madison while continuing her softball playing career with the Lady Sentinels. She then went on to Valdosta State University, where she earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology, in 2003. She went on to earn a Master of Social Work degree in 2007. She began work with the Madison County Office of Emergency Management in April of 2010, as a program director before moving up to the deputy director slot in 2014. In the fall of 2019, she was named Madison County’s Emergency Management Director. Her first activation as director was the COVID-19 outbreak.



“Hurricane Idalia presented many challenges to our county, but I’m extremely proud of the resiliency this community showed in the face of the worst storm to ever impact Madison County,” said Basford. “The heart of this community was evident on so many levels and the kindness shown to each other and the many responders that helped us get back on our feet is what makes me proud to say I’m from Madison County and that we are Madison County Strong! There is still work to do and recovery will be ongoing, but as Emergency Management Director I am committed to making this community stronger and better prepared for any disaster that comes our way.”

In her spare time, Basford enjoys playing softball on her church league team and traveling with her family, especially to Maine.

Basford is married to Brian Basford and she has a daughter, Avery Webb (age 11), and a son, Ty Webb (16).

Thank You!

Chris Volz | Suwannee County



Story by Danny Federico

Photograph Courtesy of Chris Volz

Chris Volz has been working in law enforcement for 14 years and has been serving as a lieutenant for almost three years with the Suwannee County Sheriff's Office. During his time as an officer, he has mainly worked in emergency management and similar departments. In August 2023, he was promoted to the position of director after serving as the deputy director of emergency management. As the director of emergency management, his responsibilities include overseeing and coordinating all emergency response efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of the community.

"It's something I'm passionate about,"

Volz said. "It's a great way to help people. It's a challenge – there are a lot of things people don't understand about what we do and things we're required to respond to in public, but I like the challenge. It's like a puzzle every day."

Volz has not only undergone law enforcement training, but has also received multiple certifications from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), particularly in the Incident Command System (ICS), along with credentials from classes related to logistics and planning. Additionally, he holds a master's degree in Public Administration from the University of South Florida.

"This [Idalia] was a historic event. We haven't had a storm come up through this area in the Big Bend, especially not what they call a major hurricane – something Category 2 or stronger -- since 1896," Volz said, adding how the county's response was unprecedented. "So, we were tested and stretched, and we hit a lot of bumps in the road through the path that we had to overcome. We had a lot of learning and growing through that and through building relationships with some people that I didn't know."

He went on to state there were four stages the county went through: preparation before the storm, the response when Idalia hit, recovery mode and, subsequently, mitigation. All the while, the emergency response teams looked toward the future and how they could better prepare the county's infrastructure for future events.

"I'm blessed because I get to serve the people of Suwannee County every day, blue skies and gray skies," Volz said, "but with an event like this (Idalia), you get tested to your limit. People who have lost a great deal, emotionally and spiritually, have been impacted, and you're able to help them with something as simple and kind as a warm meal, a hot shower or helping them figure out a path to restoration for getting their house back or their power turned back on."

Whatever the need may be, Volz stated being able to fulfill it was a blessing.

Volz further expressed how his work is important to him by stating he gets paid to think of every bad scenario that could happen and come up with unlimited solutions. From hurricanes to tornadoes, flooding, active shooters, cyber attacks and more, the emergency management division makes sure it has a solution to whatever the future may hold.

"The rewarding part is being able to go through all that training, practice, preparation and learning and being able to implement it seamlessly," Volz said. "I feel like we were able to do that in Suwannee County. We had an unprecedented response to a historic storm that came through our area. We had zero loss of life and, to my knowledge, we only had a few critical instances, but all of them were handled very quickly."

Volz loves having the opportunity to grow and learn, and is very passionate about doing better at his job.

Thank You!

John Louk | Taylor County

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Photograph Courtesy of John Louk

Taylor County's Emergency Management Director is John Louk, a mission-focused director who strives to help his county be prepared for any circumstance they may face.

Louk has served as director in Taylor County for about two-and-a-half years. He developed an interest in the field because of his previous career in various areas of law enforcement, which meant he often worked in tandem with the Emergency Management Office. When he developed a true appreciation of the job and realized it was "much more than just hurricanes," he felt compelled to pursue it.

After high school, Louk studied at North Florida College to earn certification in Corrections, which pushed him to begin his career soon after at the Madison Correctional Institution. In the years to follow, he worked in the Madison Police Department and then at Taylor Correctional Institution until he retired as a major and chief of security. He moved on to work with a local company that made transfer vehicles for a few years, then was hired by the Taylor County Sheriff's Office, where he worked in the jail until the position of Deputy Emergency Management Director opened, and finally, the position of Emergency Management Director.

Though his prior experience in the law enforcement field helped him have a good head start at his new job, he still had to undergo extra training to ensure he was truly prepared to handle the task of

tackling an entire county's needs.

"To have this job, you have to take a series of courses from FEMA... Basically, it's so that you can understand how emergency management works," he explains.

Equipped with those skills, Louk set out to accomplish his mission as director to ensure Taylor County "is prepared for anything to hit it, whether man-made or natural."

Naturally, accomplishing that goal is no easy feat. He says that "just keeping up with everything" is one of the most difficult aspects of the job, as he has to keep pace with the same standards large counties are held to while working within fiscal constraints and with a much smaller team than the average county. As a result, extensive planning is needed to successfully distribute resources and maintain a high quality of organization. To continue to refine his process, he is constantly reevaluating his plans and alters them as needed.

Hurricane Idalia, which made landfall in Taylor County's own Keaton Beach last August, was something Louk described as unfamiliar territory, since the area had not faced a hurricane like it in more than a century. Even so, thanks to the efforts of the emergency workers "pulling together to pull it off," distribution of resources and restoration of power proceeded well, especially considering the circumstances. Louk says he has taken pages of notes on how to refine his approach, which he plans to implement as soon as possible.

He knows that disasters "don't hit



home 'til they happen," but he hopes that those in the county will continue to plan for worst-case scenarios, pay attention to warnings and appreciate the efforts that emergency workers put into keeping everyone safe.

In his spare time, Louk likes to ride his motorcycle, play guitar, hunt and fish. He also loves to spend time with his wife, Gloria, and his three daughters, Delaney, Kristina, and Josie, whom he describes as "a great family" and whose support he immensely appreciates.

During both blue skies and gray skies, Louk is hard at work ensuring that those in Taylor County have the resources and sense of safety they need. He is his duty as director, as well as his duty to the community, his loved ones, and the place he calls home.

Thank You!

Pam Allen | Hamilton County



Story by Rick Patrick

Photograph Courtesy of Pam Allen

For Hamilton County Emergency Management Director Pam Allen, dealing with Hurricane Idalia was an event for which she had been preparing. When the storm hit, on Wednesday, Aug. 30, she was the Deputy Emergency Management Director for the county. She has since been promoted to the position of Emergency Management Director for the rural North Florida county. She still falls under the auspices of the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office, for whom she has worked since August of 1992. She transitioned to the Emergency Management Department in 2009, serving as the Deputy Director until taking the directorship of the department.

Allen welcomes the challenges that naturally come with a position as important as helping a community prepare and deal with the aftermath of any emergency situation. During the time she has spent in the department, she says the focus has shifted from responding to events to being more prepared for any possible eventualities.

"We prepare every day for whatever event will arise," said Allen. "It's not so much as 'what,' but 'when.'"

Even with the focus on being prepared, few anticipated the magnitude of destruction Idalia would bring that Wednesday morning and afternoon as the hurricane made her way from the Taylor County gulf coastline northward through North Florida and into South Georgia.

"Hamilton County had not had a storm of this magnitude since Sept. 29 of 1896," added Allen. Normally, Hamilton County, due to its proximity to two surrounding rivers, plus the Alapaha River that runs through Hamilton County, has to deal with flooding issues, brought on by heavy rains. However, with Idalia, it was another matter altogether. Instead of heavy rains, the area had to contend with unusually strong winds that resulted in widespread power outages, damage to structures and scattered debris.

One aspect that proved to be invaluable during the immediate aftermath

of Hurricane Idalia was the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT).

"These individuals are highly skilled and trained to support all of our first responders," said Allen. "They are trained in everything from wildland fires to back boarding and assisting to search and recoveries of missing persons. They sacrifice their time monthly to train. They have always set up, managed and operated our general population shelter during events, such as this past hurricane. They also served in emergency support function roles in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). They make my job flow a lot smoother because of their commitment to serve."

Still, Hamilton County, much like her neighboring counties, proved that the community spirit that permeates through the hearts of her citizens was much stronger than any storm that could blow through.

"Our community pulled together and helped their neighbors," said Allen. "This included everything from cleaning debris from roads, to serving meals and distributing water, food and tarps."

This sense of service to her fellow Hamilton County citizens is a driving force for Allen, who said, "I like to serve and help the greatest number of people during any emergency."

Thank You!

Brian Lamb | Lafayette County

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Sheriff Brian N. Lamb of Lafayette County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) is currently fulfilling the role of Emergency Management Director in the county, striving to serve his county to the best extent possible with his experience and passion for the community.

When he originally decided to pursue a career in law enforcement, he underwent plenty of valuable training to ensure he was qualified for the job. He is a graduate of Florida State University who holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology. He has also had plenty of other training beyond the university at places such as Lively Criminal Justice Training Academy, Florida Highway Patrol Training Academy, Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute and others. He has also taken many additional courses throughout his time in law enforcement.

His career first started in 2009 as a Deputy Sheriff for LCSO, where he served until he became a State Trooper for Florida Highway Patrol. Later, he was elected to become the Sheriff of LCSO. At present, his duties include management of LCSO, Lafayette County Detention Center, Lafayette County 911 Communications Center and, of course, Lafayette County Emergency Management. Though it is busy, difficult work, he says that he loves his job because of the love of his community and the people in it. He also believes that he is a good fit for the position because of his extensive education and firsthand experience in the field.

In Lafayette County, one of the challenges associated with management is the fiscal constraints. Sheriff Lamb says it

can be difficult to deliver all the necessary services with limited resources and personnel, which is something that creates a lot of pressure.

Despite the pressure, he believes the rewards outweigh the stress.

"Although it is physically and mentally exhausting at times, knowing at the end of the day that you helped someone in a time of need is the greatest reward..." he explains. "We chose to be in a profession that is service-driven, and it requires public servants to be selfless while performing these tasks, whether in Law Enforcement or Emergency Management."

When he performs his duties well, he gets to experience the joy of "having the satisfaction of knowing that you have helped someone and reduced the suffering of a fellow human being." He identifies keeping his community safe as one of his most important duties, and the feeling of being able to accomplish that is immensely rewarding.

"Although it gets hectic at times, I have always enjoyed helping people and giving back to this county and assisting its citizens. It is all I have ever wanted to do, and I enjoy it immensely..." he says. "When it comes to the performance of our duties to the public, the risks are worth the reward."

Though Hurricane Idalia did not present as dire of a situation for Lafayette County as it did for its coastal neighbors, it still brought devastating damage to the county. However, Sheriff Lamb says that local and state support was unlike anything he had ever seen before, and that the officials involved went "above and beyond" with providing aid. He was also



able to gain more experience, and can now manage resources more efficiently and will prepare for future disasters accordingly.

In his spare time, Sheriff Lamb likes going to church, fishing, working with farming equipment and doing everything possible to be involved in the community. He is a resident of Lafayette County, so it is more than just the place he serves – it is home for him and his family. He lives with his wife, Joy Arnette Lamb, and they have two sons, Brayden, who serves in the United States Navy, and Brannan, who is currently attending North Florida College.

"I am extremely proud of the tremendous work that has been done to help Lafayette County recover. Our community is made up of people that are hardworking, resilient and truly caring," Sheriff Lamb says.

He plans to continue doing his best to serve his community in every regard possible, and Lafayette County Emergency Management is certainly no exception to his firm determination. ■

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Scrappy Wonky Circle Quilts, Merri, and Me

Story by Robin Postell

Photographs Courtesy of Merri McKenzie

Out of the nearly 400 Instagram posts on Merri McKenzie's page, there are more than enough fantastic quilts that were brought into existence by her very own hands, easily qualifying her as a wizard of the craft.

Locked in an ice-breaking intro, I scour her Instagram studiously to get schooled on Merri and the driving passions that make her who she is. Her Instagram header tagline reads: "I am retired and dreaming big. Project Runway has inspired my inner designer to think outside the box – living large in North Florida."

Not a peep about quilting. Designing seems to be her main interest. When I reach out to interview her for this article you're reading now about her quilting creds, she suddenly becomes baffled and almost dismissive in what I interpret as bashful humility.

"Quilting! Oh, good gracious," she says with a follow-up chuckle. "Who in the world gave my name?"

My confusion mounts, but I must recenter and figure out just what it is Merri from White Springs, Fla., considers wizard-level art.

We synchronize our monitors as we scroll through her Instagram together. She directs me to go up four squares or down five and one to the left, while she provides personalized narratives of each image.

Her quilts are being unfairly marginalized, I think, which I express. This amuses her and we hen peck back and forth about how I think they are probably the coolest quilts I've ever personally seen, and she still isn't appreciating my sincerity.

This is classic child prodigy type behavior. They become desensitized to their exceptionalism and wind up thinking

all the glory on display whenever they do amazing things is normal, garden-variety responses from all average folk.

We laugh over our banter, and I begin to put together an accurate assessment of Merri.

"Ok, I'm a quilter," she concedes. "But I'm so much more than a quilter."

I giggle. She's clever, quilting wizard or not. Clearly the deal is fairly obvious. Merri is multi-talented and easily oscillates between creative drives like a pro footballer who also likes to head over to MLB and give it a go, too. Michael Jordan did it shamelessly, for instance.

Part of her brilliance lies within her flexibility between mediums, while

managing to retain her signature style with her recognizably original designs, attention to untraditional methods yet remains steadily herself, and the colors... we must address the colors.

She really is a wizard.

Another stall in conversation and business creates a space for her to inject another golden nugget: "Art is not my career," she says in a deliberate and measured tone. "Art is my life."

Growing more impressed by the sentence, I question her about different photos. She explains one is a fly, very small – the photo just makes it look big, she says. She baby talks to it, which I think is cute. I've been known to baby





talk to warm-blooded creatures and even inanimate objects on occasion.

The positive vibe she radiates is the real thing, which we discuss like we're on Joe Rogan's podcast.

"I have what I call the Party Theory," she confides in a more hushed tone. "When you're happy, and in a joyful state, other people see that and respond. It's important to be happy and welcome others who might need to learn how to be. They always come around eventually."

My mental notes write down, *test this theory*. I personally have encountered some stubborn hold-outs who were offended by persistent happy people moments. But she's making the kind point that I share. I tend to be too happy for seemingly no good reason, which I think is preferable to the alternatives.

Next subject.

One of her Instagram posts is exquisitely saturated in colors that sing directly to my saturated-color addicted soul. Whenever I see anything sporting superior levels of saturation, I typically

have to stand with it and bask in the glow it emits. You might not see it, but I do.

Then my new buddy Merri says to me: "I think my use of color is my superpower."

Those kind of emboldened declarations are my cup of special tea. Merri keeps scoring, and I'm cheering proudly from the stands. Associating yourself with the term superpower indicates unflappable confidence, which I commend emphatically as evidence of self-assuredness worthy of merit.

Memory lane opens up and I stroll along ready for some background, interested to see what kind of beginning led to the present.

As a kid growing up in Tallahassee, Merri discovered something about herself.

"I have knacks," she nods.

"Knacks?" I parrot.

"Yes, knacks," she continues. "I was already caning chairs and weaving, all on my own. It just seemed like certain things, especially in relation to textiles, I was able to do without being shown."

As a result of these knacks, Merri decided going to Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina would hone her skills. Merri was dedicated to refining the inherent skills that naturally inspired her to create and experience life in artistic ways.

Divergent thinking 101, and the sign of a probable genius, I muse. But there's more.

A change was coming, Merri sensed. She was feeling maybe she wasn't getting the adequate tools for boosting her performance and stalled when shooting for higher levels of efficiency.

Enrolling at Florida State University with a major and a minor focused on textiles and structural design felt like a move in the right direction. She found a loyal ally in Professor Mary Moody, who quickly recognized Merri's talents and skillset. Instinctively Professor Moody was compelled to get Merri in a more advantageous position. This dedication paid off when Moody heard the National Endowment for the Arts had introduced a grant that would be awarded to one uniquely skilled student. The description of an ideal candidate matched Merri so precisely that Moody was resolved. She knew it was earmarked by unseen forces for Merri.

The miraculous chain of events that led to Merri's relocation to White Springs to fulfill her commitment changed the trajectory of her life.

"On day one," she says, reflecting on her arrival to a new world and life back in 1974. "...The first day in White Springs I knew I was home. It is the richest experience living here. It's the people. There have been people move here through the years who began complaining about the lack of museums, and culture, throwing in disparaging remarks before moving away. But they don't understand. They don't have the vision to see how you can make your community as big or as small as you want it."

Fifty years later, Merri is still there, living in a house she bought shortly after arriving. The house was built in 1907 with towering ceilings. She immediately named her new sanctuary Villa Flamingo.

■



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Next Man Up



Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of Sam Madison Jr.

You're going to have to be tough.

You're going to have to be tough-minded.

You have to have a sense of toughness about you to fight through different objectives.

Things happen.

These are the sentiments of Sam Madison Jr. as he looks back to a childhood that began in Monticello, Fla., and the intervening years that brought him to his current position on the coaching staff of the Miami Dolphins professional football team.

In Madison's view, the strength that comes from a good upbringing and the discipline that comes from competitive sports are key qualities that prepare a person for times when life throws you a curve ball, when those ahead of you and around you are not able to step into a challenging situation, and you are the next man up.

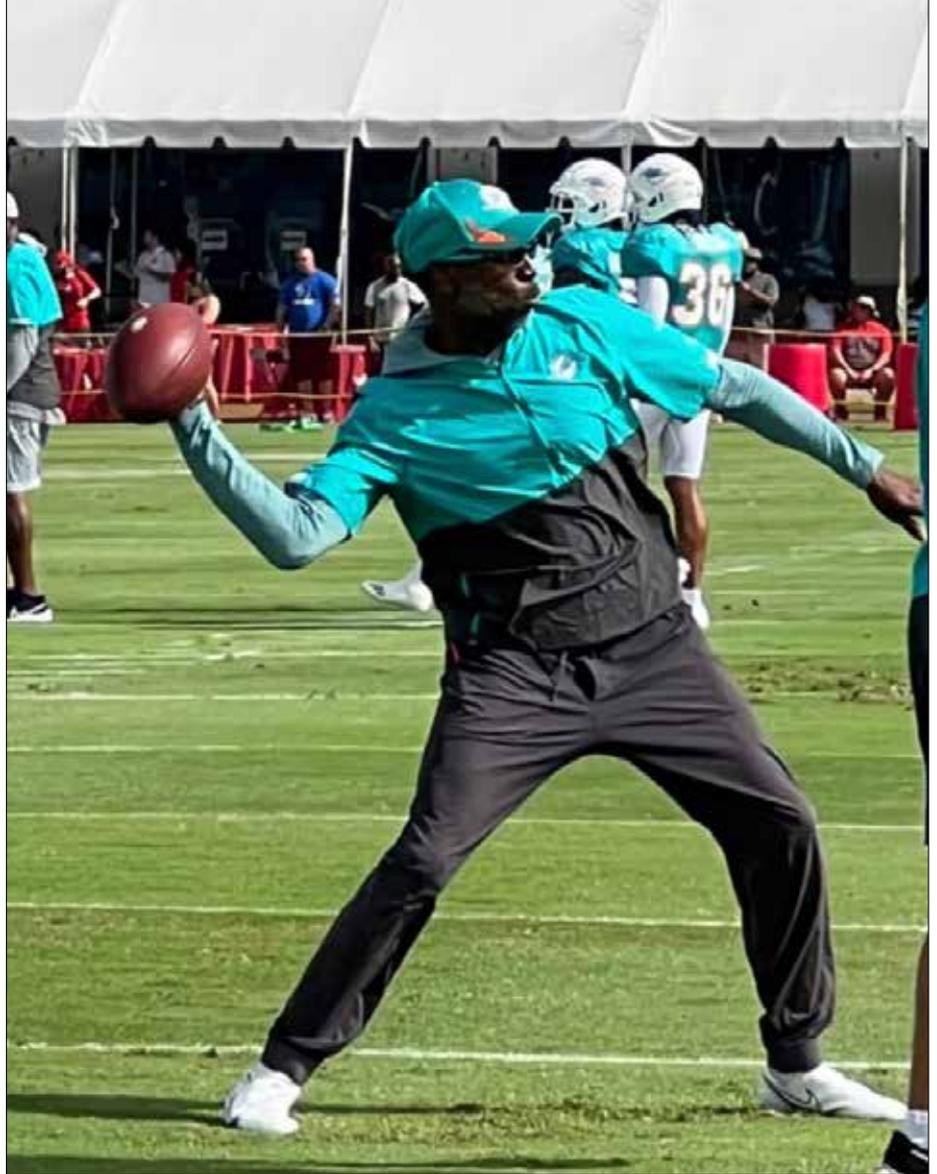
He was born the youngest of three children to Sam and Mary Madison, who raised their family in Monticello.

"I didn't enjoy the benefits of a privileged lifestyle," Madison says. "I did have an extremely supportive family who taught me three very important aspects of life: getting a quality education, setting high standards and showing respect."

Toughness to do this, he has reflected, was instilled in him, not by any parent or teacher or coach, but through the "elbow to the ribs or knuckles to the noggin" that is the fate of being the youngest sibling.

"Though we played rough, we loved each other dearly," he says.

For his formal education, Madison attended elementary and middle school in Jefferson County and then for high school went to the Developmental Research

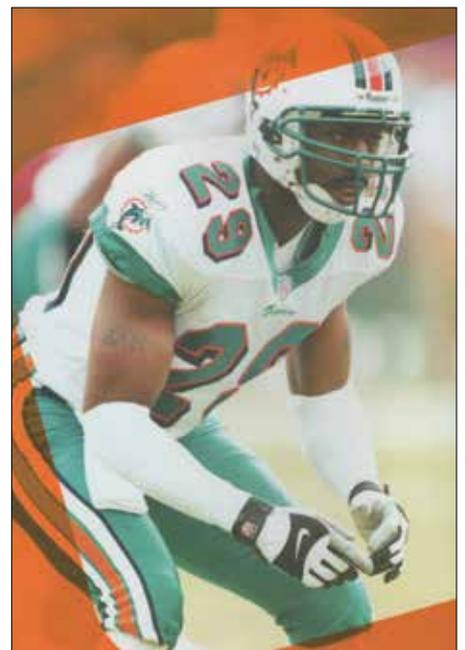


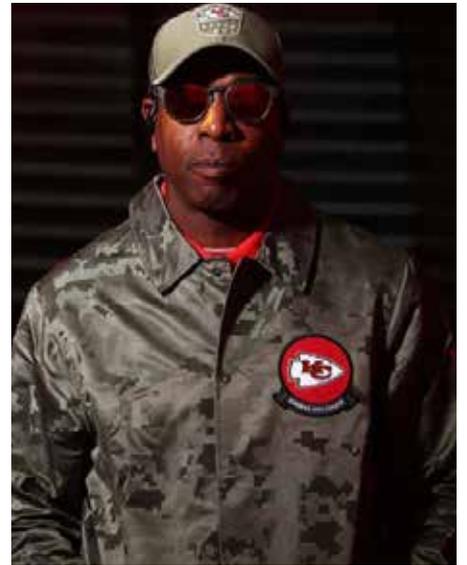
School at FAMU in Tallahassee, hoping to play baseball, which he says was his first love in the world of sports. A curve ball came, so to speak, when the baseball program was cancelled his freshman year. Although the school brought the sport back in time for him to letter in it his senior year, in the meantime he channeled his athletic talents into track, basketball and football.

"The camaraderie, the friendships, the brotherhood, the hardship, being able to work with others and come together collectively to be successful," Madison identifies these as the aspects of sport that make it so valuable in life.

"It doesn't matter what sport, just have your kids play sports," he advises.

It turned out that football would be the sport to put him through college, give





him a satisfying profession and provide the means to give back to the communities he became embedded in. During his tenure at the University of Louisville-Kentucky, Madison was a four-year letterman and three-year starting cornerback. He set records for both interceptions and passes defended.

His achievements at Louisville resulted in a second-round NFL draft pick in 1997 from the Miami Dolphins. During his nine seasons with the Dolphins (1997-2005), Madison earned first-team All-Pro honors twice and was selected to the Pro Bowl four times. His 31 interceptions are third in the team's history and the most by a Dolphin since the 1970s.

The caliber of his play caught the attention of other NFL teams, and he was recruited by the New York Giants. Madison remembers being on the Giants squad in 2008, the year they won Super Bowl XLII.

"We lost about six, seven, eight starters to injuries that season," he recalls. "We were second and third string."

It was a time when he became the next man up, and helped his team win the ring.

While he was a player, Madison began to dabble in sports

communications, walking around with a "Sam Cam" in locker rooms, on team buses and flights to games. During the Giants run to the Super Bowl, his communications on their website caused hits to spike from 6,000 to 100,000 a month.

When Madison retired from professional play, he continued to work in sports communications, which he says allowed him to still have his thumbprint in the game. Meanwhile he was also finding a way into coaching.

"I did television for the Dolphins for 10 years and was coaching youth sports," says Madison, adding that he also completed several NFL coaching internships with the Giants, Ravens, Dolphins and Seahawks.

Eventually he was asked to join the Kansas City Chiefs staff as a cornerbacks coach. He helped lead the Chiefs in several AFC championships and their Super Bowl LIV win in 2020.

Madison notes that while he was coaching in Kansas City he had to travel back and forth to be with his family, who remained in South Florida, where his kids were still in school. When a coaching job with the Dolphins franchise opened up in 2022, it offered the perfect

opportunity to come full circle to the NFL team he started with, and to come home permanently to his wife Saskia and their children, Kellen, Kennedy and Kaden. He's thankful that Chiefs Coach Andy Reid also saw what this opportunity would mean for Madison and allowed him to opt out of his contract with them.

"You never know what's going to pop up," says Madison. "You just have to be ready for it."

Throughout his life, Madison has shared what he's learned and what he's earned with the communities that have shaped him. Early in his professional career, he established the Madison Avenue for Kids Foundation. Back in Monticello, the place he says will always be home to him, he has donated computers, sponsored shopping sprees and held yearly back-to-school haircut days. Now that he's back with the Dolphins, he's active in their Cancer Challenge that benefits the University of Miami Cancer Center and the Thanksgiving and Christmas giveaways for Habitat for Humanity.

Although his work has taken him to some of the most exciting cities in the U.S., Madison's heart maintains a strong link to his little hometown, Monticello.

"You learn to appreciate where you are from," he says, "how you were raised. You don't know how much you miss it until you don't have it. I love the peace and the quiet when I come home, being able to feel the wind." ■



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Rainbow's Edge

The edge of a new tomorrow



This very large mare is one of the rescue horses that currently calls Rainbow's Edge home. After trying to house her separately, it was determined that she was actually much more comfortable sharing a pasture with the foals from this year's Mustang Baby Project. / Photograph by Heather Ainsley

Story by Heather Ainsley

They say that if you sit with animals quietly, they will show you their hearts, but if you sit with them kindly, they will help you locate yours.

For Roxanne Spear, her heart is apparent in everything she does. As President and Director of Rainbow's Edge Equine Transition Center, Spear has seen her fair share of heartache, most of which comes in the way of neglected or abused animals. She and her dedicated team of board members and volunteers at Rainbow's Edge help rehabilitate horses that have been seized by law enforcement from abuse and neglect cases. It's a hard job, both physically and emotionally, but

Spear and her team have been working diligently since 2012 to improve the lives of horses that have faced truly heartbreaking circumstances.

While in operation since 2012, Rainbow's Edge registered as a 501(c)3 organization in 2014, to better serve their purpose of rescue and rehabilitation. Today, the rescue runs almost entirely on generous donations from the community and the manpower of volunteers. One of the biggest goals that Spear and the other board members had for the rescue was to establish it with its own land, and the reason for this was stability for the horses themselves.

"Most rescues are set up in someone's

backyard," says Spear. "It starts out as someone's passion and they do it right at home. The problem we saw with that scenario was that when someone gets old, and passes away, that land is lost or exchanges hands, and the animals are displaced with nowhere to go."

Spear continued, gesturing to the sunny pastures that make up the facility. "This land belongs to the horses," she stated proudly. "Whatever we build here for them is under Rainbow's Edge. That means that no matter what happens to myself or the other board members, the land will never be lost. We can pass this along to the next generation of Rainbow's Edge directors, and the horses will be

able to live here without the risk of being displaced due to who owns the land. It's theirs."

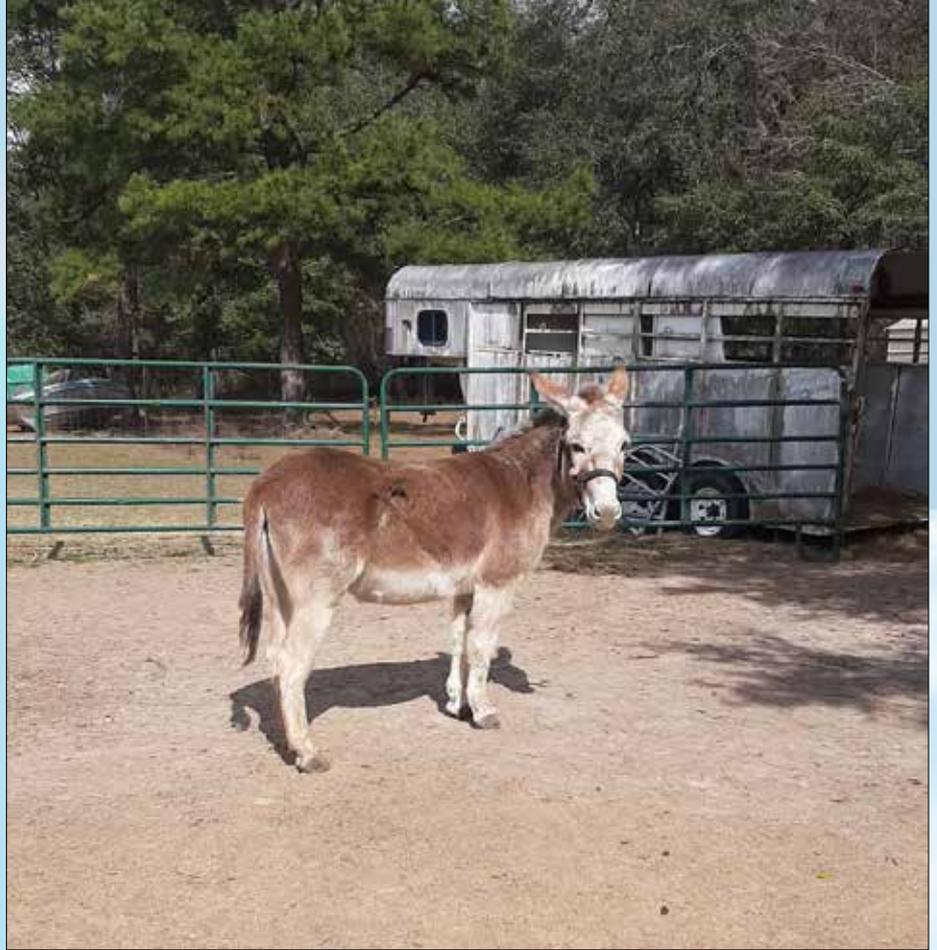
Spear says that the rescue's name often gets confused with the well-known animal poem "Rainbow Bridge," which was written in the early 1980s by Paul C. Dahm, a grief counselor in Oregon. Although there have been many adaptations of the poem since then, the general sentiment is one of comfort for animal owners who suffer the loss of their animal companions. The poem suggests that, in death, pets await their owner's arrival in a beautiful paradise where they are never hurt, hungry or sad. When their owner arrives, they are reunited with joy and cross over the rainbow bridge together into Heaven. Although nearly every animal-lover out there has their own sentiments about the poem, Spear says the true inspiration for the Rainbow's Edge name came as a way of honoring an actual horse named Rainbow.

"The land we started on was borrowed," says Spear. "It was originally owned by Sandra Cole Chance, who had inherited it as family land. There was a horse that lived there that came with the land when she inherited it, and the horse's name was Rainbow. Instead of selling the land, Sandra drove every day from where she lived in Tallahassee just to take care of Rainbow. She did this for years, so that Rainbow could live the rest of his life at his own home without having to be relocated or rehomed. When Rainbow passed away, Sandra set up a rent-free lease to us for our horse rescue."

Spear says that this act of generosity inspired the name. The ability for Rainbow to live the remainder of his life peacefully in a place he knew as home galvanized Spear and her team, and, wanting to continue that kindness and pay homage to the horse that started it all, they decided to call their rescue Rainbow's Edge.

"We didn't want it to be Rainbow's End," recalls Spear. "We wanted his memory to continue. We all knew it was just the beginning."

Rainbow's Edge was able to use Rainbow's land for seven years before they needed to find a new, permanent location. Through what Spear describes as "just



This donkey lives on the property of the Rainbow's Edge facility. / Photograph by Heather Ainsley



luck and a really good realtor," Rainbows Edge was put together with a foundation in Madison County, Fla., and was able to buy

a 21-acre plot of land in Greenville.

"We need about 100 acres," reveals Spear, but for now, the rescue is hard at



This young foal was extremely shy when she arrived at the rescue facility, but with hard work and patience provided by the Rainbow's Edge team, she now adores all the attention and can't get enough! / Photograph by Heather Ainsley

work setting up the land to best suit the rescue and its horses. The first step was to put up fencing. The property has 10 separate pastures and currently houses 14 rescue horses. The next step will be to build shelter structures, a training arena and space for classes, and the plans are already underway.

Rainbow's Edge responds to all agricultural calls from the Sheriff's Office or Animal Control, regardless of whether or not the animal in question is a horse. In January of this year, they responded to requests for assistance with a feral goat that had been wandering the median of Interstate 10 for several months. Local law

enforcement and animal control had made several attempts to capture the animal, but had been unsuccessful. Using traps and assistance from Jefferson County Animal Control, Rainbow's Edge volunteers were able to catch the goat in just three days.

While they do aid in the initial rescue of other livestock species, such as alpaca, goats, pigs and cows, Rainbow's Edge does not keep them at their property. For placement, they rely on a strong network of relationships with not only other animal rescues that specialize in different animals, but also local farms. For example, the feral goat captured on the interstate was kept for just three weeks at Rainbow's Edge before a transport was arranged for her to be transferred to Magnolia Springs Ranch, located in Chattahoochee, Fla.

"Sometimes your best tools aren't the ones in your hands," says Spear wisely. "When we respond to an ag call from animal control or the sheriff's department, we try to immediately reach out to people in the area who have special experience with that particular type of animal, so that we know that we are going to be arriving with the right people. We want to keep the animals safe and the people safe, and that's why we network. The process of networking is lengthy, but necessary."

When a horse is brought in to Rainbow's Edge, each case starts out with a vet visit. Because most of the rescues come in as a result of a lawful seizure of the animal through law enforcement, getting an independent assessment of the animal's health from outside of the rescue is a crucial part of the process.

"Transparency is very important here," says Spear. "We don't get involved in the police's job. We get the paperwork from them, and get each animal seen by a vet and given a professional assessment. Our job is to listen to that assessment and give the animal everything they need, without getting involved in the case itself. We are just here for the animals."

The horses come from a wide array of situations that require confiscation by law enforcement, including abuse, cruelty and neglect. Horses are brought in to the facility, rehabilitated and worked with by a dedicated team of experienced volunteers. But even after rehabilitation and vetting

is complete and the horses have been restored to a clean bill of health, the work doesn't stop there.

"Our mission is to rehabilitate, train and prepare horses for a new forever home," says Spear, adding that a professional trainer comes out to the facility twice a week to work not just with the horses but with the volunteers as well.

Once a horse has been professionally trained, an appropriate adopter can be found that will be a good match for that particular horse. One of the most rewarding parts of working at the rescue for Spear is seeing a horse go home with its new family, knowing that the union will be a good fit for both parties.

"Most of our horses actually go home with children," reveals Spear, "and honestly, that's incredible, because you know those kids are going to do everything for that horse. Some adults get horses and don't do anything with them, but those kids are going to get home, drop their backpack down, and be out in the field every day with that animal. I watch the way kids interact with the horses – it's like their souls come together. You know that when a horse goes home with a kid, that they are going to have the best life. You put horses and kids together, and the horses are going to really live life."

Rainbow's Edge has pioneered many different programs to fuel their mission of helping horses and other animals. Among these is their disaster relief program, where they organize the transport of supplies or set up relief areas for agricultural animals affected by disaster or hardship. Using their access to large trailers and trucks, Rainbow's Edge is able to transport large shipments of necessary food, supplies and resources to impacted areas.

In conjunction with this program is their Feed Bank Program. Anyone can reach out to Rainbow's Edge for assistance with feed or supplies when facing a temporary hardship. Rainbow's Edge then begins a fundraiser and will provide food and other care for the animal. This can help get good owners through tough times without having to re-home their pets. Anyone who reaches out for assistance is never shamed or ridiculed, and remains anonymous.

Their most recent program is called the Mustang Baby Project, and it is organized through a partnership with RJF Equine out of Oklahoma that handles feral mustangs. Branded pregnant mustang mares are pulled from auctions and brought to the RJF Equine facility. Six months later, after the foals are fully weaned from their mothers, they are brought to Rainbow's Edge where they will stay for a year. In that year they are raised, trained and adopted out to homes that are a perfect fit for their temperament and abilities.

"In six months, we can get a feel for what they actually like doing," says Spear. "We can also get a good estimate on what their size will be like. They leave here educated with the right person, where they will be a good fit for a good home. This program is a preventative measure that helps keep them out of auction cycles."

As for the feral mothers, they remain at the RJF Equine facility and are trained and re-homed themselves. The entire program helps prevent wild mustangs from getting bought by what are often referred to as "kill buyers" at auctions.

Rainbow's Edge also boards and employs two search and rescue horses. These horses are often requested to help locate missing or disoriented livestock, pets or even people, although they are not used to locate escaped prisoners. With this program, Rainbow's Edge recently reunited a plantation with their missing miniature horse. The horse had been missing for days on a land plot that measured about 2,000 acres. In just an hour, the horse was successfully returned home.

Rainbow's Edge relies heavily on the continued donations from the community. With transparency as a continuous goal, donors can rest assured that their donations are always used as intended. Spear and the other board members believe wholeheartedly in honesty and transparency within the rescue, and they welcome anyone to come out to the facility to volunteer or see the horses.

Anyone wishing to make a donation can do so via Paypal by donating to Rainbowsedgetrainingstable@gmail.com. Donations can also be made to Florida Farm and Feed by calling (850) 877-0932



and letting them know you'd like to donate toward the horses at Rainbow's Edge. Spear says that Rainbow's Edge is grateful for every donation and for all the help it receives from the community.

"Rainbow's Edge can only do everything it can because of the local farms that we network together with," says Spear.

It is with this collaboration, care and compassion that Rainbow's Edge is able to work so hard to save horses in need. At the end of the day, there is no "I" in rescue. ■

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TEN YEARS OF BIG LEAGUE SHOT CALLING AND COUNTING:



Mike Estabrook, second from left, is one of only 76 MLB umpires in the world.

MLB UMPIRE MIKE ESTABROOK

Story by Robin Postell

Photographs Courtesy of Mike Estabrook

The workplace for former Madison County native Mike Estabrook is always going to be a hot spot as a Major League Baseball umpire. Delivering fierce, split-second decisions that are guaranteed to infuriate many, confrontations come with the job and he's no shrinking violet.

"You're never going to make everybody happy," Estabrook says. "That's impossible. You get used to it. The responsibility is enormous. But in the end, we are professionals. In the moment the pressure is high, but once the game is

over and we see one another we typically say hi and move on. That's what being a professional means."

Estabrook's humble beginnings in Madison weren't ideal for a future in professional sports. A father he never met, a remote mother and growing up on a small Greyhound farm limited his opportunities.

"I was poor," he says. "I never met my father. We lived on a small Greyhound farm. We had nothing. If it hadn't been for people in the community who really raised me, I would not be where I am today."

It could be said that Estabrook was raised by a village. Estabrook credits Father Stephen Conserva from St. Vincent's Catholic Church for saving him.

"He was my father figure," he says. "He'd take me school shopping, and I'd stay there at the house with him. My family lived in Lee and didn't have a car or anything, so he'd help me out a lot. We're still very close. He's like my dad, but now he's stationed up in Massachusetts. There were a lot of people who helped me. Father Steve helped by getting me set up with families who would also help me, like Bob and Karen



Whelan (actors, teachers) who would also let me stay at their house, and I lived with Ms. Pat Stewart, too. She recently passed.”

Estabrook’s kind benefactors along with one chance event set the proverbial wheels in motion for a future utterly unimagined.

“I would never have become an umpire if it weren’t for Dick Stevens, who was a coach and umpire at the rec department,” Estabrook comments. “He booked all the little league, middle and high school games. He was the one who introduced me to umpiring that first day and took me under his wing, introducing me to sports officiating. But even then, I never thought I’d be an MLB umpire. I was out at the rec field one day, and a Little League game was going on. They needed someone out there, and I was the only one around. I felt scared, nervous. I’d never umpired in my life. All the Little League parents and mothers were screaming at me. But I weirdly enjoyed it and was hooked. I couldn’t umpire high school until I was 18.”

Working at National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) during high school, he found a mentor in his boss,

Bern Smith.

“I credit him for supporting my umpire career because he would let me get off work early,” Estabrook recalls. “It was a high school program to help students get a job. My mom, sister Peggy (Hasty) and I were on welfare. And suddenly I saw umpiring as my way out and I took to it. I became very passionate doing it. There are only 76 MLB umpires in the world. People say you have a better chance of winning the lottery than becoming an MLB umpire. A lot of people helped me.”

Young Estabrook figured out that he could learn the ropes and make a little extra cash by working high school baseball and basketball games.

All his experience gave him the confidence to attend umpire school in Daytona Beach. He enrolled in 1999 and became the number one standout student, graduating first in his class. Estabrook had distinguished himself as a leader and a scholar of rules and all things officialdom. Gaining deference from others, he wanted more.

“I realized I could make a possible umpire career,” Estabrook recounts. “I was asked if I’d be interested in a pro career and was assigned to spring training in Clearwater with the Phillies minor league. I moved to Tampa after that for a decade.”

Estabrook’s Minor League journey had begun. His debut was a Marlin game in 2004, which he counts as a huge highlight of his career.

“You never forget that first time,” he says. “Richie Garcia was a supervisor at the time, and I was driving down the road when he called me and said, ‘You’re going to Miami for spring training; they said your jersey number is 83.’”

“Once you go into minors it’s ingrained in you to go to the major league,” he adds. “Only one percent make the major league. Umpiring is not like a player. A player is released and can go to another team, umpires get one shot... if you’re released, you’re done. You go to umpire school but you’re never going to go back.”

The entire time an umpire officiates in the Minor League, they’re trying to

navigate through the system, which creates constant pressure to perform at optimum levels.

“They come watch you; you have to go through all these levels,” Estabrook explains. “The last eight years in the Minors I started going up and down between the minors and majors. All those games are trials. I make one mistake, it’s over. I was hired when I was 37. Imagine getting released at 37. You reach that point, and you’ve put all your eggs in one basket. And most – 99 percent of us – fail; most will go into college baseball or do whatever they can.”

His appearances in hundreds of MLB games during his years in the minors paid off in 2014 when he, along with a new crew, were hired full-time. They would be part of baseball’s tech upgrade with the Instant Replay addition.

“I want to be right,” he emphasizes, allowing a glimpse behind the stoical wall he presents while officiating. “I want to make calls that cannot be reversed. The benefit of having access to Instant Replays helps me do the best job I can. My job is to know the rules. I always go through the rulebook and read it again – and it’s tough to read. I read 20 minutes a day, just for brushing up. There are crazy rules in baseball, and you have to immediately know what to do. We are always striving to be knowledgeable about the rules. That’s why we’re MLB umpires – we’re paid to officiate and know what we’re doing. We have all the tools. We can watch replays; we can do everything – watch tape, check my positioning on plays, my timing, my mechanics. They give us all the tools to be successful. It’s just up to us to use them.”

Despite all the challenges and impossibly hectic schedules with only four weeks total off throughout any year, Estabrook is full of gratitude.

“I work in a sport where you get a front seat to history,” he says with a little starry-eyed boy’s excitement. “I’ve been right there to witness what only 400 umpires in the world have – when someone hits 700 home runs. It’s a cool job, a fun job, and you get to be around something that happens once in a century.” ■



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Military Monuments Near You

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Throughout the counties of Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee and Taylor, numerous markers and monuments have been erected to commemorate veterans, both living and deceased. These commemorations are designed to honor those who believed in their country and were willing to pay the ultimate price to fight for it, as well as the families and friends they left behind. Whether you have served in the military, have lost someone you cared for in service, have an interest in history, or simply would like to visit and learn more about these people what they fought for, many options are available to you.

Hamilton County:

White Springs Veterans Park in White Springs, Fla., is on Spring Street, east of Wesson Street. A small monument there resembles a gravestone located within, bearing the inscription "all gave some, some gave all," and a United States flag.

Veterans Memorial Park in Jasper, Fla., is meant to honor all who served in the Armed Forces in "past, present, and future." It also is in memorium to those who lost their lives in service. It features a garden-like brick walkway with the names

of military members inscribed in them, as well as a granite wall with the names of those who lost their lives. This park is located at 1153 U.S. Hwy 41 NW.

Jefferson County:

The **Jefferson County Florida Confederate Memorial** was erected in 1899 by the Ladies' Memorial Association of Jefferson County. It was built to commemorate local Confederate soldiers who participated in the Civil War (1831-1865). Poem-like inscriptions on the west and east sides declare the association's appreciation. This monument can be found at the north side of the Jefferson County Courthouse grounds, facing North Jefferson Street.

The **Ernest I. Thomas Memorial** was erected in 1981 in honor of Sergeant Ernest "Boots" Ivy Thomas Jr. U.S.M.C.R., a World War II marine who participated in the raising of the first flag on Iwo Jima, Japan, on Mount Suribachi, during the morning of February 23, 1945. Thomas, a Monticello native, received the Navy Cross for his efforts. He was killed in battle eight days later, on March 3, 1945. This monument consists of flags, a plaque and an etched facing depicting SSgt. Louis R. Lowery's photograph of the Iwo

Jima flag raising. It is located on West Washington Street, 0.1 miles from the Jefferson County Courthouse, on the north side of the street.

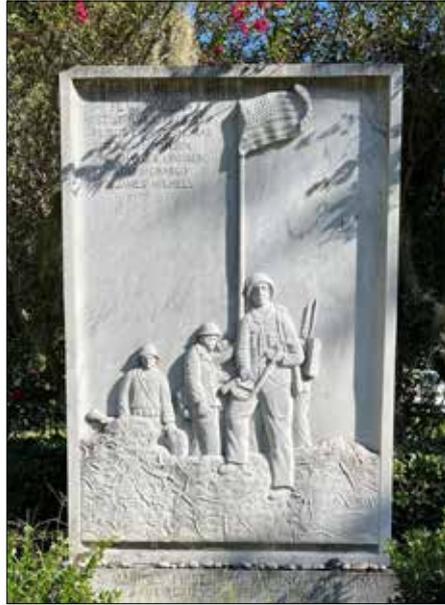
Lafayette County:

The **Veterans Memorial Park of Mayo**, located at 123 S.W. County Rd. 300 in Mayo, Fla., primarily has a focus on activities and history other than war history, but still commemorates veterans through its name.

Madison County:

The **Four Freedoms Monument**, erected in the 1970s, is a representation designed by Walter Russel of the Four Freedoms that President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined in his 1941 State of the Union Address: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear - the aspirations of mankind many lost their lives in pursuit of. This monument is located in Four Freedoms Park, located at 112 Range St. There are also several other monuments located in the park.

The **Florida Honors and Remembers Our POWs and MIAs** marker in Lee, Fla., was erected by the Florida Department of Highways. This marker honors the memory of Prisoners of War (POW) and



those Missing in Action (MIA), whose uncertain fates may not always garner the same honor as those whose service is fully recognized. It features a flag and an inscription, which expresses gratitude for their service. It is located at the Visitor Rest Center, on I-10, by mile marker 265.

Suwannee County:

Suwannee County Veterans Memorial Marker was erected in 1975 by the county of Suwannee. It was built to honor veterans who served both

during times of war and times of peace. It is located in the city of Live Oak, at the intersection of Ohio Avenue South and Howard Street West. There is also a Veterans Memorial Park open for visitation at 220 Pine Ave. S.W.

Taylor County:

Veterans Memorial Park is home to many commemorations in honor of soldiers from World War I onward. At the forefront of the park stands the Taylor County Veterans Memorial, a

monument with the names of those from Taylor County who were killed in action. The park also features other markers and monuments in honor of those who fought in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the War on Terror. Three flags fly among the monuments: the flag of the United States of America, the Florida State Flag and a POW/MIA memorial flag. The park can be reached from the intersection of North Jefferson Street and West Cherry Street. ■



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