

# The Front Porch

*Where the Tea is Sweet and the Talks are Long*

September / October 2023



Everyone's talking about  
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Learn more about the region's  
Award-winning home builders

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Building Your  
Dream Home,  
Nail by Nail

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Sept. 8 & 9
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Sept. 16
- Lee Day - Sept 23

## *October*

- Best of Madison  
Oct. 19
- Founder's Day-Oct. 21
- Ghouls Night Out  
Oct. 26

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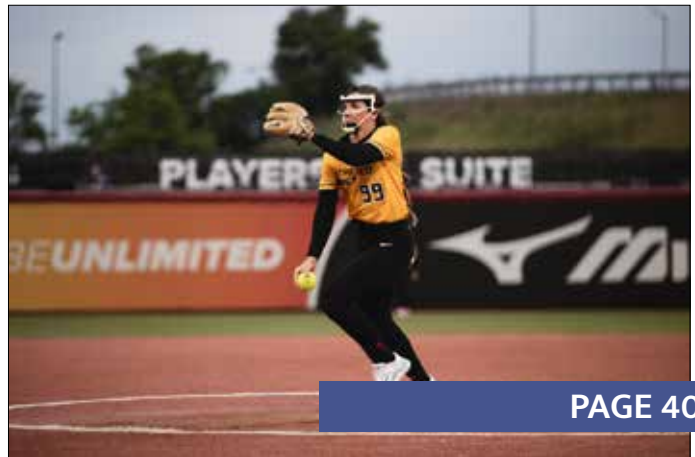
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# The Front Porch

*Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long*

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# The Front Porch

## Meet Our Staff



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# *Ola Sylvia Lamar Sheffield*

**Story by Denise Vickers-Leon**

*Photograph by Lorenzo Sheffield Sr.*

A conversation with Ola Sylvia Lamar Sheffield is like taking a cultural and world history class combined, both being interesting and enlightening.

Sheffield boastfully exclaims that she is “Jefferson County bred, fed and led and when she dies, she’ll be Jefferson County dead.” Born in 1958, she was raised by her mother, Willie Lee Lamar-Bivens, and her grandmother and namesake, Ola Lamar, on the southside of Monticello in what is known as the Roostertown Community.

Sheffield began her long and illustrious educational journey at Howard Academy and then with desegregation she went on to Jefferson County High School where she graduated with the bicentennial class of 1978 as the salutatorian. Sheffield then attend Florida A&M University, graduating in 1980 with a bachelor’s degree in Broadcast Journalism. Soon afterwards, she was awarded a stipend to attend the University of Florida,

where she earned her master’s degree in 1981 in Journalism and Communication. Not quite done yet, Sheffield went on to obtain her Ph.D., which she refers to as “Praise Him Daily,” from American College in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn.

Sheffield’s spiritual and religious foundation began at Bethel A.M.E. Church. Building on that foundation and training she got from her mother and grandmother there,



Sheffield took it to Faith and Worship Ministries led by Pastor Barbara Proctor, where she is an active and loyal member.

Sheffield's love and commitment to Jefferson County and its residents, especially children and senior citizens, is evident by the countless hours she spends volunteering in support of them. Whenever she does allow spare time for herself, Sheffield utilizes it by practicing yoga and is fanatical about swimming. Sheffield is also deep into music of all genres. She uses the lyrics from songs to apply them to her own life. Combined with her creative writing talents, Sheffield wrote and produced a spoken word CD entitled, "Things are getting better." Besides that, Sheffield is a skin and makeup consultant for Mary Kay Cosmetics and coaches others pertaining to the benefits of healthy cooking and eating. Also a global traveler, Sheffield loves Africa, where she has visited three times thus far.

Ola Sylvia Lamar Sheffield is a Jefferson County icon who diligently and admirably works for its positive growth and enhancement. She is the only surviving member of her family; her brother, Albert Bivens Jr., suddenly passed away in 2020 after preaching what was to be his last sermon. Sheffield still holds down the family house built by her grandparents in the 1940s.

Sheffield is married to Lorenzo Sheffield Sr., and they have two sons, Lorenzo Jr. and Ezekiel Nehemiah. ■





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# Nailed It Tallahassee

## *Building Your Dream Home, Nail by Nail*

**Sponsored Content by Heather Ainsley**  
*Photographs Courtesy of Nailed It*

For many aspiring homeowners, finding the home of your dreams can be a bit of a challenge, especially considering the current housing market. Even when a prospective buyer can find a home within their budget, there are many factors to consider that can complicate the process.

Does the home meet the current and future needs of the family? Is the location just right, or does it leave something to be desired? Is the home in good shape or will it be needing work in the near future? Is this the home the buyer really wants, or the home they are willing to settle for?

Buying a home is a huge investment, and one that not many people take lightly.

Not only is it a big purchase, but one that you'll literally have to live with (not to mention in) for many years to come. With so many uncertainties surrounding the process of finding the home of their dreams, homeowners are opting to go a rather different route than the typical buy/sell method of homeownership: if you can't find the house of your dreams, build



the house of your dreams! That's where Nailed It Tallahassee, LLC comes in.

Nailed It Tallahassee is a residential development company that specializes in custom home builds in the North Florida area. The business is owned and operated by husband and wife duo, Amber and William McKinney, and is qualified as a Certified Residential Contractor and Certified General Contractor. Generally, the company focuses on new construction homes, but they also do renovations and additions to existing housing as well.

"Our ultimate goal," states the Nailed It Tallahassee website, "is to ensure that you fall in love with your new home. The key to achieving this is by teaming up with a custom home builder who listens to your every requirement and guides you in designing a home that truly resonates with your desires."

The team acknowledges the frustrating reality in the industry of builders often not being able to fully understand a buyer's specific demands, and how this can lead to subpar quality and limits to buyer options. Nailed It Tallahassee combats this by maintaining

a thriving team of seasoned architects, designers and builders, who all work under one roof to provide their customers with a seamless experience while building the home of their dreams.

Amber and Will started Nailed It Tallahassee in 2019, shortly after the family moved to the Tallahassee area. Prior to their move across the country, the McKinney family lived in Las Vegas, where they owned and operated a property-flipping business. Since becoming established in North Florida, they have taken on multiple projects, building homes not just within the city of Tallahassee, but also in other areas of Leon, Jefferson and Franklin counties.

Most recently, the team has undertaken a special project in Monticello, with the development of a new neighborhood area called Hemings Pond. Currently, Hemings Pond consists of 25 lots allocated for new-construction homes, with an added section that will hold 18 duplexes that Nailed It Tallahassee will construct. It is located off of U.S. 19 North and Tecumseh Road. Although this development is still new,

Nailed It Tallahassee has also built in other areas of Monticello, including homes located in the Crooked Creek Community and other custom homes around Jefferson County.

"We build homes for people in our community," says Will, "and we know how important that is. A home is one of the most important purchases in a person's life. They are where memories are made and families are raised. Every time we build a home, we know how impactful it will be to the people who will ultimately live in it. Not only that, but we are contributing to the overall footprint of the cities we build in. We remember that every single day."

Nailed It Tallahassee has a motto, and that is "Building Your Dream Home, Nail by Nail," and this is something the team takes very seriously. While the construction company faces many of the same challenges that all builders face – rising labor costs, a steady increase of the price of materials, limited access to subcontractor's times, and a competitive industry – Nailed It Tallahassee strives to provide a level of quality and trust that





clients can rely on.

“We know how expensive it is to buy a home, and we do everything in our power to give our clients the best price,” says Amber, who adds, “We build a great house! We were Tallahassee’s Parade of Homes Best of Show for a reason, and we put that much thought and care in every project we have the privilege of being a part of. We are confident that the people who trust us enough to be a part of this process walk away with every single expectation met and exceeded. We love what we do – and we want you to love it too.”

Nailed It Tallahassee strives to offer even more than just high-quality houses and fair pricing standards; they also understand that when waiting to move into a new house, time is of the essence! They pride themselves with being among the timeliest builders in the industry.

“We will never tell you it will take two years to build a house because it won’t,” states Will. “Our contracts are one-year contracts, and we do anything and everything to stick to that. There is not a day that goes by during the building process where someone’s house is not being worked on in some way, shape or form. We also have a really strong team



of talented individuals who enjoy the work they do every day.”

The building process consists of several steps. Clients begin with an initial meeting, where they sit down with a consultant to discuss requirements such as school district, homesite size, special needs and budget. During this meeting, a homesite will be selected and the designing process can begin. Prior to any construction or design, a client will enter into a pre-construction agreement and give a deposit. Deposits are non-refundable, but will be credited toward the purchase price of the new home. The deposit covers a full set of plans, engineered foundation and geotechnical reports on soil testing.

Designing can be really complicated, and not just anyone knows how to

design a home. It can be tricky to make concrete decisions and stick with them. Fortunately, Nailed It Tallahassee has a designer on staff that can help clients narrow down design options that fit the home size and price range. Among these options, they offer a range of design choices that vary from expensive to less expensive options. During this stage, a client will discuss hundreds of design alternatives, to ensure they pick the options that suit their needs.

Once the architectural design and budget plans are complete, clients will be able to sign their contract! Experts at Nailed It Tallahassee take care to prepare of all of the paperwork necessary to place a client’s homesite and plan under contract. This contract can then be handed over to a client’s personal





lender, or a lender partnered with Nailed It Tallahassee, who will already be familiar with their new construction loan timelines.

After a contract is signed, the fun part can start! A client will be able to make selections for specific elements of the home that fall outside of the architecture. Clients can be guided to make timely decisions, and after materials and elements are selected, Nailed It Tallahassee uses their vendors to estimate pricing, ensuring that everything selected can stay within the budget. No items will ever be ordered without client's approval.

When all of this has been completed, construction can begin. The lot will be cleared, foundation poured and inspections passed. Then the Nailed It team does what they do best: build! Clients can watch as the home of their dreams is created, with framework, mechanics, electrical, insulation and drywall installed. They can even see their brand new cabinets, doors and trim positioned before everything is painted in the color scheme selected.

A final walkthrough and necessary inspections are held. A construction manager will meet with each client during the walkthrough to explain the features of the house, and listen to any corrections or concerns the client has. After the home has passed inspections and gained the excited approval of the client, final paperwork will be processed. On closing day, the client will sign the paperwork and move in can begin!

The Nailed It Tallahassee website, [nailedittallahassee.com](http://nailedittallahassee.com), offers an extensive look into the building process as well,



providing prospective home owners a unique window into what they can expect when designing their dream home. This transparency in the process helps clients feel secure and in the loop when undergoing the construction of a new home, and ensures that they know what to expect, every step of the way.

Hemings Pond is still in the design

and development stages. Nailed It Tallahassee promises that Monticello can expect some beautiful homes in this budding neighborhood community, and they are very excited about the months ahead and things to come. For more information, visit the Nailed It Tallahassee website or give the team a call at (850) 755-2494. ■







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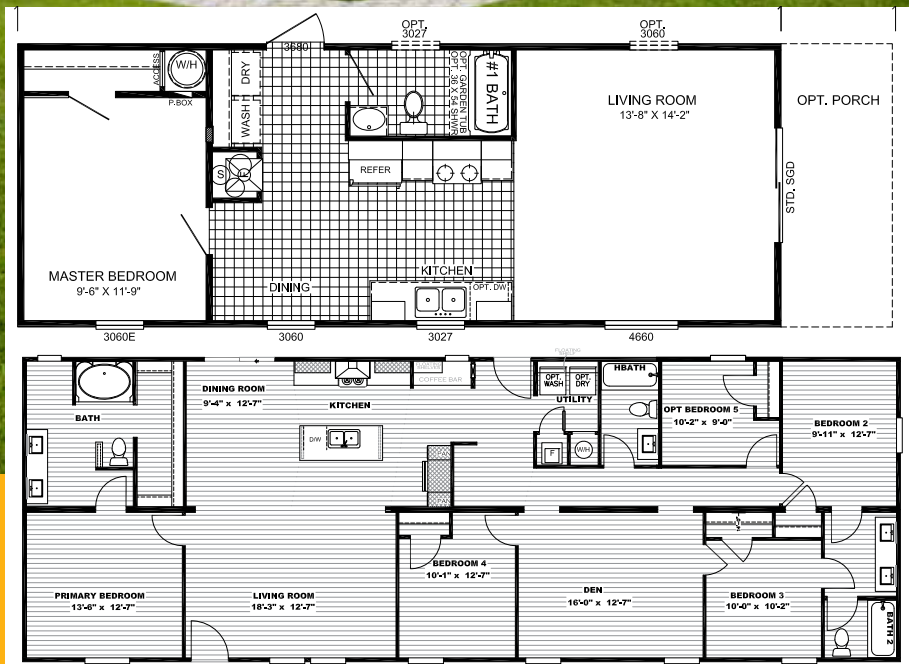
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# What's Happenin'

## September

### September 1 - 4

#### Labor Day Weekend at Ragans

Celebrate all the hardworking men and women who keep this country running at Ragans Family Campground. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269, email [info@ragansfamilycampground.com](mailto:info@ragansfamilycampground.com) or visit [ragansfamilycampground.com](http://ragansfamilycampground.com).

### September 4

#### Labor Day Picnic

The Veterans and their families of American Legion Post 49 in Monticello invite everyone to join in their Labor Day celebration. Hamburgers, hot dogs and all the trimmings will be served at 11:30 a.m. at 1065 S. Water St. and will end around 1:30 p.m.

### September 8, 9

#### Support Madison's Local Market

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce hosts this event from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day at Four Freedoms Park (112 Range St.) in downtown Madison. Call (850) 973-2788 for more information.

### September 9

#### Monticello Second Saturday

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

### September 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 24

#### Alibis! Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

In this interactive and fun-filled murder whodunit, the famous Primavera Donna throws a party and winds up dead. As a storm outside rages and the body count mounts, the guests must contend with interruptions, shocking revelations, tacky special effects, and the arrival of a mysterious visitor. The action and repartee are fast-paced, and the surprising conclusion leaves only one question: who gets the movie rights? For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit [www.monticellooperahouse.org](http://www.monticellooperahouse.org).



*The Monticello Opera House*

### September 9 - October 14

#### For the Love of Animals Exhibit at JAG

This show features animals depicted by many artists in a wide range of mediums. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Jefferson County Humane Society. 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.

### September 14

#### Bob Malone in Concert at MOH

Critically acclaimed keyboard wizard Bob Malone combines unforgettable songwriting, refreshing reinterpretations of classic tunes, and a one-of-a-kind hybrid of rock, melodic pop, blues, and New Orleans R&B, delivered with high-energy piano virtuosity and a voice all his own. See his concert at 8 p.m. on the historic upstairs stage at the Monticello Opera House in downtown Monticello. For tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit [www.monticellooperahouse.org](http://www.monticellooperahouse.org).

### September 16

#### TCEC Annual Meeting

Tri-County Electric Cooperative's annual in-person business meeting takes place at Madison County High School gymnasium at 10 a.m. All registered members will receive a free gift and a chance at one of 50 door prizes to be given away.

### September 20 - 23

#### Suwannee River Jam

Come and join the Suwannee River Jam, a four-day country music and camping festival featuring the top country music artists. As one of the largest country music festivals in the South, the Suwannee River

Jam has been entertaining music lovers for almost 30 years at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park in Live Oak (3076 95th Dr.). For further details or to buy tickets, visit [suwanneeriverjam.com](http://suwanneeriverjam.com).

### September 22, 23, 24, 29, 30

### October 1

#### Stone Soup

Enjoy The Gingerbread Players (the children's theatre wing of Theatre Guild Valdosta) production of this fanciful tale of dragons, knights and characters who may not be what they seem. 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](http://www.theatreguildvaldoest.com) or call (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

### September 23

#### Lee Homecoming Day

The Town of Lee host this free annual event at 286 County Road 255, featuring a pancake breakfast, parade, live music, vendors, activities for kids of all ages and much more. For more information, visit [leehomecomingday.com](http://leehomecomingday.com).

### September 26

#### Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner

Wrap up a bustling year of commerce with dinner catered by The Porch on the Green. The evening begins at 5 p.m. at the Monticello Opera House (185 W. Washington St.). Tickets are \$50 per person; go to [www.monticellojeffersonfl.com](http://www.monticellojeffersonfl.com) to RSVP.

### September 29, 30, October 1

#### Hour of the Wolf at MOH

See this suspense thriller by North Florida playwright Anthony Lamarr White on the historic upstairs stage at the Monticello Opera House in downtown Monticello. The story unfolds on the set of a popular talk show as Simon Morrison, who has kept silent about the night he brutally murdered his parents and younger brother, has been released from prison and is ready to tell his story, live, on national television. For showtimes and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit [www.monticellooperahouse.org](http://www.monticellooperahouse.org).



# What's Happenin'

## October

### October 1 - 31

#### Scarecrow Extravaganza

As you visit downtown Monticello, enjoy seeing dozens of creative, funny and scary scarecrows all month long!

### October 5 - 8

#### Seventh Annual Suwannee Roots Revival

Experience a wonderful lineup of Americana, bluegrass, jam and blues music at the Seventh Annual Suwannee Roots Revival, held at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park in Live Oak (3076 95th Dr.). In addition to the music, the festival offers camping, a Dance Tent, a Kids Tent and interactive workshops. For information and tickets, visit [suwanneerootsrevival.com](http://suwanneerootsrevival.com).



*Aunt Louise's Farm*

### October 7 - November 12

#### Fall Farm Days at Aunt Louise's Farm

Enjoy wagon rides, barrel train rides, rubber duck race, lots of friendly animals and a corn maze on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sundays from 2 to 6 p.m. at 8101 Waukeenah Hwy. in Monticello. For more information, visit [auntlouisesfarm.com](http://auntlouisesfarm.com).

### October 13 - 14

#### "Arrowheads to Aerospace" at MOH

The Aucilla Research Institute's 2023 public conference takes a look at Floridians and their environment over time. Admission is free. Enjoy fascinating presentations, interactive Q&A, displays and an artifact identification booth. Plus, you can see Priscilla the mastodon on display in the courtyard! Find the conference flyer, online registration form and link to promotional video at [www.aucillaresearchinstitute.org](http://www.aucillaresearchinstitute.org).

### October 13 - 15, 20 - 22, 27 - 29

#### Halloween and Fall Fun at Ragans

These popular spooktastic weekends will feature scary haunts, trick or treating, costume contests, site/cabin decorating contests and much more at Ragans Family Campground. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269, email [info@ragansfamilycampground.com](mailto:info@ragansfamilycampground.com) or visit [ragansfamilycampground.com](http://ragansfamilycampground.com) or visit [ragansfamilycampground.com](http://ragansfamilycampground.com).

### October 14

#### Scarecrow Pageant

View a variety of creative scarecrows constructed by the public and vote for your favorites while enjoying live entertainment, hayrides, cake walk, food, vendors, adult and children's games, raffle table, blacksmith demonstration as well as plant and bake sales. The free event is from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Hearthstone Gardens (3300 134th Place in Wellborn). For more information call, (386) 438-3102.

### October 14

#### Monticello Second Saturday

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

### October 14 - 15

#### Farm Tour 2023

Visit over 40 regional farms, ranches and orchards during this amazing educational and family event. See the Facebook page for FL-GA Farm Tour for more information.

### October 19

#### 2023 Best of Madison Awards Night

This event, presented by the Madison County Chamber of Commerce at 6 p.m., features the "Taste of Madison" and "Made in Madison" Silent Auction and takes place at the Madison Church of God (771 N.E. Colin Kelly Hwy.). Tickets are \$35 each, or \$30 each for six or more. Call (850) 973-2788 or email [chamber@madisonfl.org](mailto:chamber@madisonfl.org) for more information.

### October 21

#### Live Oak Garden Club Fall Bazaar

Browse a huge variety of reasonably priced plants suitable for fall gardening and enjoy unique vendor merchandise, food and member rummage and bake sales. Doors are open from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 1300 11th St. S.W. in Live Oak. For more information, call (386) 209-7861.

### October 21

#### Hickory Grove Methodist Church 32nd Annual Founder's Day

Enjoy cane grinding demonstrations, train rides, a shooting gallery, turpentine demonstrations, food galore and much more at 1218 N.E. Hickory Grove Rd., in Pinetta.

### October 26

#### Ghoul's Night – Madison

Enjoy a Halloween-themed night of shopping from 5 to 8 p.m. in downtown Madison. For more information, call (850) 973-2788 or email [chamber@madisonfl.org](mailto:chamber@madisonfl.org).

#### Ghoul's Night Out – Monticello

Grab your best friends for a festive night of shopping, treats and ghostly fun from 6 to 9 p.m. in downtown Monticello. Costumes are encouraged! For more information, see the Experience Monticello Facebook page.

### October 26 - 29

#### Suwannee Hulaween

Every Halloween weekend, visitors can delight in electronic music, art and camping at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park in Live Oak (3076 95th Dr.). The festival boasts a blend of mesmerizing lights, art exhibits and live performances. For further details or to buy tickets, please go to [suwanneehulaween.com](http://suwanneehulaween.com).

### October 27, 28, 29,

### November 3, 4, 5

#### Jekyll and Hyde, The Musical at MOH

The epic struggle between good and evil comes to life on stage in this musical phenomenon, based on the classic story by Robert Louis Stevenson and featuring a thrilling score of pop rock hits. See it on the historic stage at the Monticello Opera House in downtown Monticello. For showtimes and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit [www.monticellooperahouse.org](http://www.monticellooperahouse.org).

### October 28

#### Candy Crawl in Downtown Monticello

Kids 12 and under are invited to dress up in their favorite costume and visit participating merchants from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. in downtown Monticello for candy, prizes and more. For more information, see the Experience Monticello Facebook page.





# Fall Breeze In Monticello

September 4

## Labor Day Picnic

The Veterans and families of American Legion Post 49 invite everyone to join in their Labor Day celebration. Hamburgers, hot dogs and all the trimmings will be served at 11:30 a.m. and will end around 1:30 p.m. The picnic will be held at the American Legion Post 49.

September 26

## Chamber of Commerce Annual Membership Dinner

All Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce members are invited to the Annual Dinner. From 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. enjoy fellowship, cocktails and appetizers. Dinner, annual program and awards are from 7:00-9:00 pm. (Tickets must be purchased in advance.)

October 1 - 31

## Scarecrow Extravaganza

As you visit downtown Monticello, enjoy seeing dozens of creative, funny and scary scarecrows all month long!

October 7 - November 12

## Fall Farm Days at Aunt Louise's Farm

Enjoy wagon rides, barrel train rides, rubber duck race, lots of friendly animals and a corn maze on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sundays from 2 to 6 p.m. at 8101 Waukeenah Hwy. in Monticello. For more information, visit [auntlouisesfarm.com](http://auntlouisesfarm.com).

October 26

## Ghouls Night Out

Grab your best friends for a festive night of shopping, treats and ghostly fun from 6 to 9 p.m. in downtown Monticello. Costumes are encouraged! For more information, see the Experience Monticello Facebook page.

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*Veterans stand at attention at the beginning of Christie's funeral.*

## *A hero's return:* Alton Christie finds rest in his hometown

**Story and Photography  
by Christian Peterson**

***"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13***

"This may be the last time I ever see you," Alton Christie said to his brother, Claude Christie. The moment was most assuredly emotional for the brothers, and those words continue to live with Claude. It was the last time the brothers would see each other, as Cpl. Christie sadly lost his life serving the United States overseas.

Cpl. Alton Christie was born and raised in Jasper, Fla. At the age of 16, his parents, L.D. Christie and Edith Christie, allowed him to join the United States Army. Eventually, he joined Company

B, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. Two years later, his unit was stationed in Osan, South Korea, during the Korean War. At just 18 years old, Cpl. Christie and his unit were engaged by the Korean People's Army; Christie was reported missing after the engagement ended.

The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency (DPAA) began searching for the location of the American soldiers who had lost their lives, including Christie. However, they could not find evidence that his body had been recovered, nor did they find evidence of him being taken as a prisoner of war. Then, in 1950, the year that the Korean People's Army engaged Cpl. Christie's unit, the Army recovered 20

sets of remains near Osan. Seven of these were deemed "Unknowns."

One recovered "Unknown" was labeled X-214 Taejon and initially thought to be Cpl. Christie. However, investigators at the Central Identification Unit-Kokura in Japan could not make a positive identification. Because of this, X-214 was taken, along with all the unidentified bodies from the Korean War, to be buried as "Unknown" at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, otherwise known as the Punchbowl in Honolulu, Hawaii. This forced the Army to issue a presumptive finding of death on Dec. 31, 1953. In January 1956, Christie's remains were deemed nonrecoverable.

Things changed, however, on Dec. 14, 2014, when Christie's next of



kin contacted the Army and requested they disinter the body under the label of X-214. They justified their request by explaining that the individual was potentially associated with Cpl. Christie. On March 7, 2016, the Army honored the request. The remains were then taken to the DPAA laboratory at Joint Base Pearl Harbor in Hickam, Hawaii, for analysis.

Due to the scientific advances made since Christie's disappearance, the Army had new ways to identify remains. They used dental records and comparisons, as well as anthropological and circumstantial evidence, to prove the body was, in fact, that of Cpl. Christie. Furthermore, top scientists from the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System used mitochondrial DNA analysis to assign a complete identification of the remains. After years of searching, hard work and some incredible science, Cpl. Christie was finally found. His name, recorded on the Courts of the Missing at the Punchbowl, will now have a rosette next to it, letting the world know he has been recovered.

It was Tuesday, June 6, 2023, when Cpl. Christie finally completed his journey home. In true patriotic fashion, his remains were greeted with a hero's welcome. Residents of Hamilton County lined the streets as a parade of law enforcement led the hearse carrying his remains to Reid Funeral Home. Once there, the Honor Guard brought him inside with care. At this reunion, Christie's sister, Shirley Lindsay, was overcome by emotion. For the first time since she was four years old, she was in the same room as her brother.

That weekend, on Saturday, June 10, Christie's body was laid to rest at Evergreen Cemetery in Jasper. His decade-long journey around the world



*The military honor guard stands at attention behind Christie's casket.*

had come to a close as he was finally brought home. For the ceremony, citizens from all over Hamilton County gathered in Jasper, including law enforcement officers, military personnel and Christie's relatives. A soldier stood watch over Cpl. Christie's casket as the crowd sang. Servicemembers performed a three-volley salute before the flag laid over Christie's casket was folded and presented to his brother, Claude. Throughout the emotional ceremony, Veterans stood tall in honor of their fallen brother.

"I am very glad that my great uncle Alton was finally able to return home and be laid to rest," said Christie's great nephew, who bears the same name, Alton Christie. "I attended several meetings

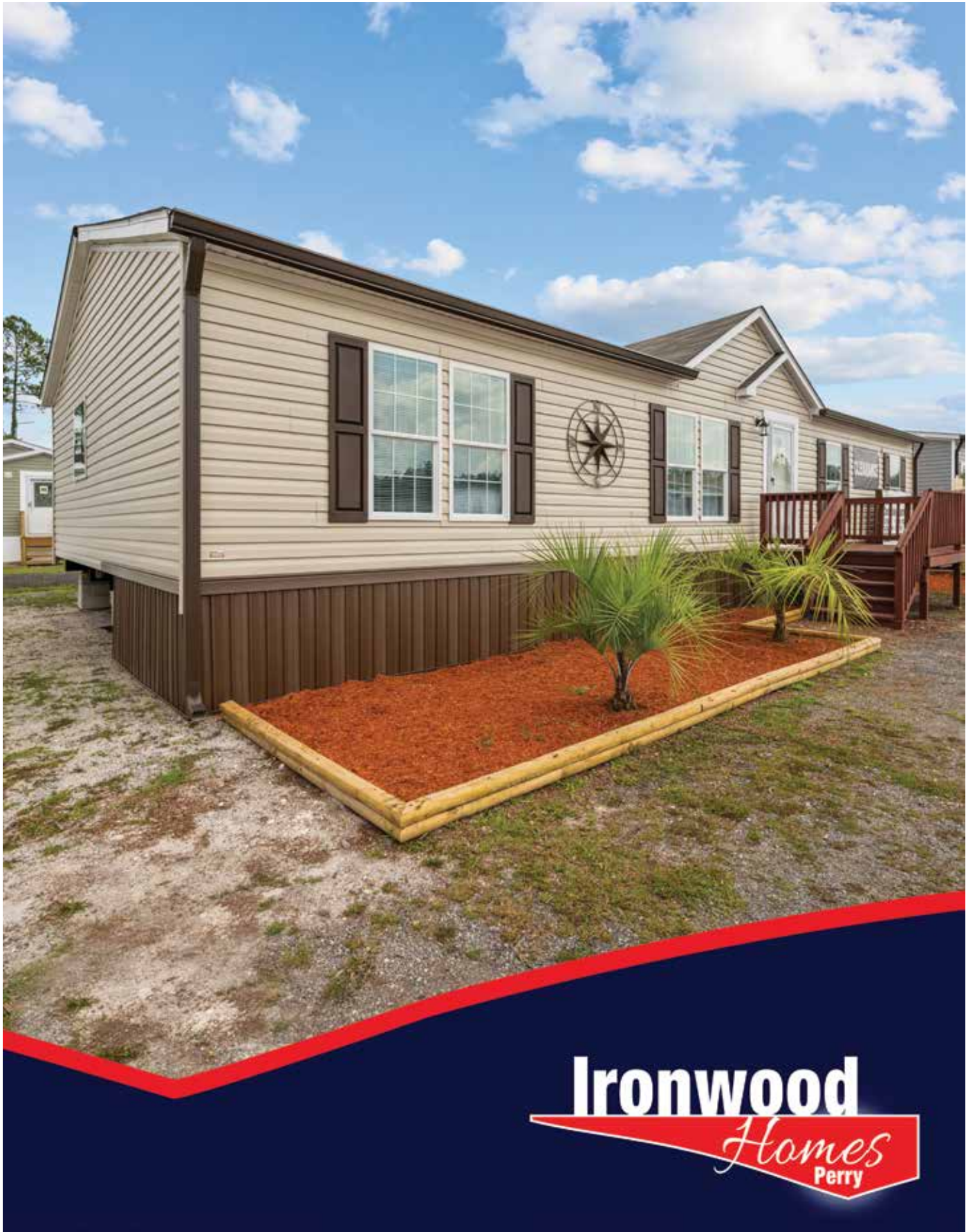
for Alton involving POW-MIA with my grandparents, Howard Christie and Lawanna Christie, and my uncle, Howard Christie Jr. I am very thankful that my grandparents and uncle set the ball in motion to identify his remains and start the journey of returning him home. Even though I have never met Uncle Alton, I have this strange bond with him, as he is my namesake and holds a special place in my heart."

He went on to say he had never seen anything like the funeral service.

"It was probably one of the most beautiful things I have ever witnessed and been a part of. I am very thankful for everyone involved and the community's support." ■







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# 6 SAVVY

## Small Business Women

*In the month of October, our nation shines a spotlight on women who run their own small business, raising awareness of the many ways their industrious endeavors benefit the communities where they operate. In this segment, we take time to recognize six of the many savvy women in our region whose small businesses have had a big impact on us.*

### Belinda Travis | The Mayo Cafe

#### Story and Photograph by Lee Trawick

The history of the Mayo Cafe began long before 1988 when it opened its doors for the first time. The restaurant, operated by Belinda Travis for the past 24 years, was started by her mother, Shirley Watson Travis, a self-made chef who built her own restaurant from the ground up. What began as an after-school job grew into a thriving business, the Mayo Cafe. To many, her restaurant was known as Shirley's. It offered a country-style buffet and had a menu to order from, but her fried chicken was the course she became known for.

In 1999, when Shirley became ill, she turned the Mayo Cafe over to her daughter Belinda Travis, who of her five children seemed the only one who could care for the brand she had spent a lifetime building with the same love, dedication and leadership that she had.

Belinda was born and raised in Mayo, and when she got older she began working in her mother's restaurant, first as a dishwasher and later serving tables. There she watched her mother dedicate herself to her craft. She learned how to interact with people, and she saw how people looked up to her, not for her food but as a human being. She learned how to navigate the times with grace, dignity and unshakable character. All the while, she also was learning a work ethic that would carry her throughout her career.

Belinda would graduate from Lafayette High School in 1983, under the shadow of her mother's rising success and the sister to Hornets' football legend Ben Travis. Thus, making a name for herself seemed a daunting task, and while her dream never was to take over her mother's restaurant, the Queen of the Mayo Cafe is what she became.

It has been 24 years since Belinda took over her mother's business and brand. While her mother will forever live through her fried chicken, Belinda has built a legacy in her own right through the countless relationships she has built over the years. Belinda greets every customer who walks through the Mayo Cafe door as if they are her long-lost best friend.

As she begins to look back over her career in the cafe with a peek toward retirement, she reflects on her journey, the opportunities she had as a child and the pride with which she carries her mother's legacy while creating a legacy of her own.

"We didn't know any better of the opportunities out there when I was coming up. You went to work when you got old enough," Belinda says. "I wish I would have known what all was out there, but I think I did ok, here." If she could sit down with today's youth, knowing what she has learned over her lifetime, she would explain this to them: "Don't limit yourself. The world is yours; go do anything in this world you want to do."

As Belinda sits down at a table to fold napkins with silverware, she looks around with a smile. Her surroundings humble her. She clings to her mother's dream and legacy, refusing to admit she had anything to do with the success of the Mayo Cafe's longevity.

She does hope, however, that she has had the same of impact on her customers as the restaurant has had on her.

She is forever grateful for her mother having the courage and faith to bet on herself. She only hopes as the lights begin to dim in the Mayo Cafe, she has made her mother proud. She doesn't know her plans moving forward; she only knows when she retires, the Mayo Cafe will close its doors for the last time.

It has created a wonderful life for two generations of women that have proven to be larger than life in their own right. They are famous in a small town for cooking their way into the hearts of everyone around.

"Don't limit yourself. The world is yours; go do anything in this world you want to do."

- Belinda Travis





# Sandra Coxwell-Wilson | Wilson's Bait & Tackle

**Story by Heather Ainsley**

*Photograph Courtesy of Sandra Coxwell-Wilson*

Nestled in the rural charm of Perry, Fla., is a family-owned business that has served their community for over 65 years. Wilson's Bait & Tackle, now owned by Sandra Coxwell-Wilson, has been a longstanding staple for residents and visitors alike, particularly those who love hunting and fishing in the great outdoors.



The business was established in 1957 by Sandra's parents, Wilson and Millie Coxwell, who specialized in fishing equipment and live bait. Over the years, The Coxwells built a solid foundation of trust and reliability that the locals and visitors knew they could depend on.

In 1990, Wilson sold the business to Sandra and her brother, Glen. Upon the death of her brother, Sandra became the sole owner of Wilson's Bait & Tackle, and to this day continues to serve her community with the same old-fashioned hospitality and quality service the business was founded on.

While being a woman can sometimes pose challenges for aspiring entrepreneurs, Sandra says she hasn't really experienced any setbacks as a result of being a female business owner.

"I have been here all my life," she says proudly. "I was the youngest of eight kids, and we grew up right here. Being a woman hasn't really affected me, because all my customers know me. They've always known me. This is the only place I've ever worked, the only job I've ever had."

Looking back, Sandra admires her mother, Millie, for being a strong business woman and helping Wilson run the business.

"My mama was a good woman," recalls Sandra. "She worked hard to balance the kids and help my daddy build the business. It wasn't until I got older that I really realized what she contributed to the store. She was raised in hard times, but I'd say she was a good, Christian woman – she had a really good balance to her."

Wilson's Bait & Tackle sells exactly what it is known for: bait and tackle. Over the years, Sandra has also added to the store's inventory by incorporating different types of diving gear, like masks, snorkels and spear guns, as well as hunting supplies like crossbows, ammo, ladder stands and hunting blinds.

Sandra enjoys the help of her husband, Mike Wilson, around the shop, and they manage a strong team of reliable and knowledgeable staff that help keep the business running an incredible seven days a week. Together, the husband and wife duo have three children, two daughters and a son, and, true to tradition, they are raising their children in the family business. Their two daughters work in the shop, and are helping to carry on the family name.

"In my heart," says Sandra, "I hope they continue it, but beyond that I hope that they enjoy it. I don't want them to think of it as just a job – it is a job, but I also want them to love what they do."

Sandra is very grateful for the love and support her clients have provided throughout the history of the business.

"I'd like to thank them for supporting us," she says of her customers. "Not just me, now, but me and my brother, and my parents before that. They make it possible for us to be here."

Children have been a focal point of the Wilson's Bait & Tackle mantra since the foundation of the store was built. Their motto, Take a Kid Fishing, has been a part of the business since Wilson himself was in charge, although, Sandra admits, it has been updated since its inception with just a tiny tweak.

"In the 70s, Daddy put up a sign that said, 'Take a boy fishing!' and that hung outside the shop for years when I was little," recalls Sandra. "But we would get so many little girls who would come in with their families and make a fuss about that, so finally Daddy changed it to 'Take a Kid Fishing' so as not to leave out the girls. And that's been our motto ever since."

It should come as no surprise that, when she isn't watching the shop, Sandra enjoys being in the great outdoors, hunting, fishing and spending time with her grand-babies. And unlike the big box stores, Sandra takes her family business motto with her when she goes home, and loves taking her seven grandchildren outdoors for fun adventures.

"It might be a simple life," she says contently, "but there is just something about taking a kid fishing."

"My mama was a good woman. She worked hard to balance the kids and help my daddy build the business."

- Sandra Coxwell-Wilson

# Kim Davis | Tupelo's Bakery & Cafe

## Story and Photograph by Laura Young

For the past 16 years, folks living in Jefferson County and visitors to Monticello have sought out the wholesome and delicious fare at Tupelo's Bakery & Cafe. Inside the simple storefront located just a block and a half west of the courthouse, Kim Davis has built her business from a young mom's dream into a bustling community hub.

One day back in 2007, Davis was at the library's story time for toddlers, chatting with another young mom, Claire Olson, about her desire to open her own bakery. To her surprise, the two of them shared a similar dream, and before too long Tupelo's was born.

"At the beginning, it was literally just the two of us," recalls Davis. "We did everything."

With a focus on fresh baked goods made from scratch and three lunch items with locally sourced ingredients – a menu that could be jotted on a small chalkboard each day – the cafe was on its way. After the first four years, Olson's life took a different direction, and Davis has been the sole proprietor ever since. Now she runs the busy cafe with nine employees, and the menu features more than 25 regular lunch items that pair well with any of the many baked goods showcased in the glass-fronted counters.

Tupelo's customers will tell you how much they love this food, not just their favorite items but also the interesting new things they've given in to the temptation to try. The consistent, high quality of this cafe's food is no accident.

Although Davis had trained to be an anthropologist, she put herself through college at the University of New Hampshire by working in a bakery, where a love of baking and cafe life began to take root. Later, when working as an archaeologist in South Florida, Davis decided to change her life completely by going to culinary school in West Palm Beach. She then worked at The Breakers, a historic luxury hotel in Palm Beach, where she gained incredible experience working with talented chefs creating phenomenal food. When she and her husband Joe decided to trade city life for the quieter pace of North Florida, Monticello gained a new resident who would not only find her own place in the community but create a community-minded space where others could connect.

Before opening Tupelo's, Davis gained further experience working at the Governor's Club in Tallahassee and as a private chef at a plantation in Quitman, Ga. When she and Olson set up their first tables inside an antique store, they agreed to call their restaurant Tupelo's, after the first dog "kid" Kim and Joe Davis had, a canine foodie who really seemed to relish every bite of every meal. To this day, the logo features the image of that dog, and the cafe continues to benefit from sharing space with other businesses, currently Full Moon Farm & Apiary's gift shop and the Starling Musings Gallery.

Building the business has not been without its challenges. Just a year after the opening, the Great Recession dealt blows to restaurants large and small, but Tupelo's Bakery & Cafe somehow carried on. Davis faced a big learning curve while expanding her staff, but she figured out how to let go of certain tasks, how to show those who worked for her their value and how to create a workplace environment she can be proud of. Instead of the competitive, ego-driven intensity she had encountered in some other restaurant kitchens, Davis has worked to nurture an atmosphere that is fun, respectful and not stress-producing, that highlights teamwork and keeps lines of communication open.

Davis found a way to balance family life and business demands while raising her children, Joey (now 20) and Harper (17), whose school bus stop was right in front of the restaurant. There were procedural adjustments to make during the pandemic, and inflation has made managing food costs difficult. In every situation, though, Davis has stayed true to what is at the heart of Tupelo's success – using good ingredients to make food from scratch and serving it up fresh in a space that welcomes everyone.

"At the beginning, it was literally just the two of us. We did everything."

- Kim Davis





# Cathy Jo Foster | Sunsations Flowers

Story by Christian Peterson

Photograph Courtesy of Sunsations

Cathy Jo Foster didn't always work with flowers. In fact, Sunsations Flowers of Jasper, Fla., didn't even start as a floral shop. However, Foster's journey through Hamilton County has truly reflected how a small hometown can bring out the best in a person, just as she brings out the best in nature around her.



Foster was born in Jasper, and she spent her entire life in the area attending Hamilton County Schools all the way until her graduation in 1991. Then Foster began attending trade school in Madison. There she learned how to do nails and other aspects of cosmetology. After graduating, Foster began Sunsations; however, it wasn't yet about flowers but about nails and tanning. She started growing her fan base as folks came to visit, until 2008 when things changed.

The florist across the street from Foster had closed down. Even as a child, Foster was good at decorating. Her grandmother, Edna Ward, worked with florists, and Foster grew up around the concept. After the florist near Foster closed, she continued running Sunsations as the cosmetology store it was originally. One day during the holiday season, she was working on a friend's nails. On her door hung a wreath that she had designed and made herself. As she was working, a lady came into the store holding the wreath and asked Foster how much the wreath cost. Before Foster could respond, her friend said "\$75." Foster had meant to tell her that it wasn't for sale, but the lady gladly accepted the price, paid for it and said as she left that she would be back and she would tell her friends about what Foster offered. This changed everything for Foster; she saw the opportunity and she jumped on it.

Slowly the transformation began: Sunsations faded out nails and tanning beds and became a full-time florist shop. Foster had found her passion being creative with the natural world around her.

"I love bringing ideas to life, creating something new and special for people and then watching them enjoy it," Foster said.

She said that the spotlight is not where she likes to be, so working behind the scenes as a florist just felt natural to her. She could still participate in the joy that her flowers would bring without being pushed into the limelight.

However, just because she loves her job doesn't mean there aren't struggles.

Foster said it is sometimes hard to know your customers. Websites like Pinterest can sometimes make it harder because the items in photos folks find online can be faked and impossible to make in real life. Of course, the hardest part is sharing the grief of others as she designs arrangements for funerals. She refuses to let that hold her back, however, and her business continues to grow.

Now Sunsations offers a plethora of options for those interested in bringing the beautiful world around them into their homes and events. Popular occasions for Sunsations include weddings, birthdays, baby showers and funerals. They are willing to simply provide flowers or do event planning. They can set up the event, making sure each bouquet looks pristine, or just deliver the flowers requested and let the customer take the wheel. The shop itself has added an in-house coffee bar for customers to enjoy while shopping. Sunsations does not just serve the Suwannee River area but has connections all over the South. Foster has traveled all the way to South Carolina to deliver flowers and work with individuals.

Foster said she chooses to work with flowers "because there are so many options that all make people smile." She has been happily married to Phillip Foster since 1994 and they have one son, Burke Foster, who is 16 years old. Foster is very grateful for the community support she has around her because "it takes a village to keep a business thriving." At the same time, she eagerly looks forward to the growth of her hometown as the downtown area of Jasper gets bigger and better. She hopes that the community continues to shop local first.

The future looks bright for Sunsations. They have some new additions coming this fall and offer great new deals during the holiday season. Contact Sunsations by visiting the website [sunsationsflorist.com](http://sunsationsflorist.com), emailing [Info@sunsationjasper.com](mailto:Info@sunsationjasper.com) or calling (386) 792-3538. Or stop by the store at 110 Hatley St. W. in Jasper.

"I love bringing ideas to life, creating something new and special for people and then watching them enjoy it."

- Cathy Jo Foster

# Juanita Gallon | Corner Kitchen Cafe

## Story and Photograph by Mickey Starling

Though Madison native Juanita Gallon has held other jobs, cooking has been her passion since childhood. As the youngest of 10 children, she had plenty of practice helping her widowed mother, Charlotte Fudge, feed the large family. What began as a necessity turned into a calling for life. Since her dad passed away when she was only five years old, the kitchen is where Gallon grew up.

Fortunately, Gallon was blessed with a mother who could make practically anything taste good, and she was an excellent teacher who passed on her skills to all of her children. Even difficult dishes, like tripe (stomach lining) and raccoon meat could be made tasty under Fudge's skilled hands.

"The 'coon would taste just like chicken," recalls Gallon.

Though she doesn't offer these dishes in her restaurant, Gallon does sell a lot of pig's feet. Serving up delicious food runs in Gallon's family. Her sister, the late Easter Edwards, operated a successful restaurant in Madison for over eight years, and Gallon worked alongside her during that time. She went on to open her first dining establishment, Sister's Restaurant, which served the Madison community for four years.

After taking a brief break from the restaurant business, Gallon returned in 2018, opening Corner Kitchen Cafe, located at 860 S.W. Pete Mobley Ave., in Madison. The popular cafe serves authentic soul food and breakfast every weekend, and it is normal to have difficulty finding a parking space. Though the restaurant requires a lot of work, it's a labor of love for Gallon and her husband, Wille, who begin their Sundays at 5 a.m., preparing for the breakfast rush which begins at 7:30 a.m. Three hours later, the lunch crowd rolls in, with customers coming from

Tallahassee, Fla., Thomasville, Ga., and some venture from South Florida to enjoy Gallon's fine southern cuisine. Saturday's schedule is shorter, as the cafe is only open for breakfast, from 7:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m.

Since Gallon has only four employees, some of the cooking is done in advance from home. Gallon's home is often filled with the aroma of freshly-baked pound cakes, which is her favorite dessert to cook.

"I cook several types of pound cakes, and it often takes the better part of a day to prepare them," said Gallon.

Pound cakes are only the beginning for the Gallons. Much of the week is spent preparing for the weekend. Mondays are used for completing payroll and compiling a shopping list. Tuesday is a crucial day, as Gallon shops throughout the surrounding area to find the best meats and produce available. Gallon is aware that she could simplify her work by ordering from food service companies, but that would lessen her ability to provide the freshest ingredients.

"I like to pick what I want, so I know it's good," said Gallon, whose high standards are why she only opens on weekends. "I couldn't do this the way it needs to be done if we opened all week," said Gallon.

Wednesday and Thursday are prep days, getting everything ready for the inevitable rush that is coming. A few select vegetables are cooked and frozen during these days. Some of those delicious pound cakes find their way to the oven as well. Friday is a day for rest, which is essential preparation for the long days ahead. Something about this formula is

working, as the rapidly vanishing trays of food testify to each week.

"I can go through some oxtails and rice and collard greens," said Gallon with a proud smile. "I love satisfying my customers and hearing them compliment my food."

Compliments for the Corner Kitchen Cafe aren't hard to find, as many of the customers are regulars. Madison resident Tommy Morrison is a weekly fixture in the buffet line.

"Their food is excellent," said Morrison. "They put a lot of love in what they do, and they care about their customers."

The warm, friendly atmosphere in the small cafe lends more evidence that the Gallons love both what they do and the people they serve. Juanita is hoping to move to a larger location in the future so that more folks have the opportunity to experience authentic soul food at its best.

"I cook several types of pound cakes, and it often takes the better part of a day to prepare them."

- Juanita Gallon





# Savannah Herring | Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy

Story by Lee Trawick

Photograph Courtesy of Savannah Herring

Twenty-two-year-old Savannah Herring, a lifelong resident of Branford and graduate of Branford High School, has embedded herself in the community in an impressive way. While most people 19 or 20 years old haven't decided what they want to do with their lives, Herring hit the ground running by owning her own business, Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy. By combining her passions for community, cheer and dance with a strong, disciplined work ethic instilled in her by her parents, Herring had the pleasure of working with more than 40 kids at any given time in 2021. Today, the number of students has doubled in size. Herring said she's thankful for the support group she's had throughout her life, especially now.



"All of my family has helped and supported me in any endeavor I've taken on," Herring said. "My sister, Caylee Boone, has been an extreme blessing. She helps me with instructing classes, organizing camps and everything else in-between."

Herring grew up cheering and dancing and has been twirling baton since she was two years old. God has given her a gift, she said, and she doesn't plan on wasting it. Herring stated her foundation is her faith in God; she believes everyone has a purpose and we're all created with gifts. One of Herring's own hidden gifts is she was born with a servant's heart. Not only does she teach kids dance, cheer and baton, Herring also mentors them with anything that may arise along the way. In addition, she has a scholarship she gives out each year to a graduating senior.

"My students and their parents help support this scholarship that recognizes a high school senior involved in the arts, such as cheer, dance or band. It is a monetary scholarship given to a senior that displays leadership in their art," Herring said. "I've been fortunate enough to offer this scholarship for the past two years. This is just one way in which

Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy gives back to the community."

Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy was born out of a simple baton camp Herring hosted in Hatch Park in 2019. After seeing the great turnout, Herring decided this is what she's supposed to be doing. From there, she decided to rent a building, allowing youth to be able to do something they can be passionate about and possibly help them find themselves.

"I believe that, to be involved in a community, it is important to give back to that community," Herring said. "I enjoy helping the Branford High School cheer teams choreograph dances and routines, as well as helping with camps. I push for my students to be involved in the community as well. We participate in our town's parades, local festivals and more."

Herring said there are two Bible verses she leans on for inspiration: "Let us praise His name with dancing" (Psalm 149:3) and "Perhaps this is the moment for which you have been created" (Esther 4:14). These two verses are printed on the walls of her studio.

"I believe we're all given talents and we're all put into situations where we can use those talents. For me, I enjoy sharing my talents with children and adults in my studio," Herring said. "I know that when we are dancing and cheering, it is for God's praise and hopefully even one of my students will find their talent and that moment for which they were created."

Knowing her walk in life is an evolving example to the kids she teaches, Herring advises her students to "set their goals high, achieve them and understand that, when God closes one door, it is always for a reason...there is always another door opening."

Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy offers ballet, tap, baton, tumbling, jazz and cheer. Youth may participate in dance starting at age three and cheer starting at age five. Herring also offers private lessons for cheer tryouts, talent routines and even pageant coaching. She also holds cheer camps for high school cheer teams. Parents can register their kids for classes by contacting Herring through the studio's Facebook page, "Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy."

Today she is a proud business owner and wife to Cole Herring. The two were married on Dec. 23, 2022. Savvy's Cheer and Dance Academy is located at 27049 83rd Pl., in Branford. ■

"I believe that, to be involved in a community, it is important to give back to that community."

- Savannah Herring

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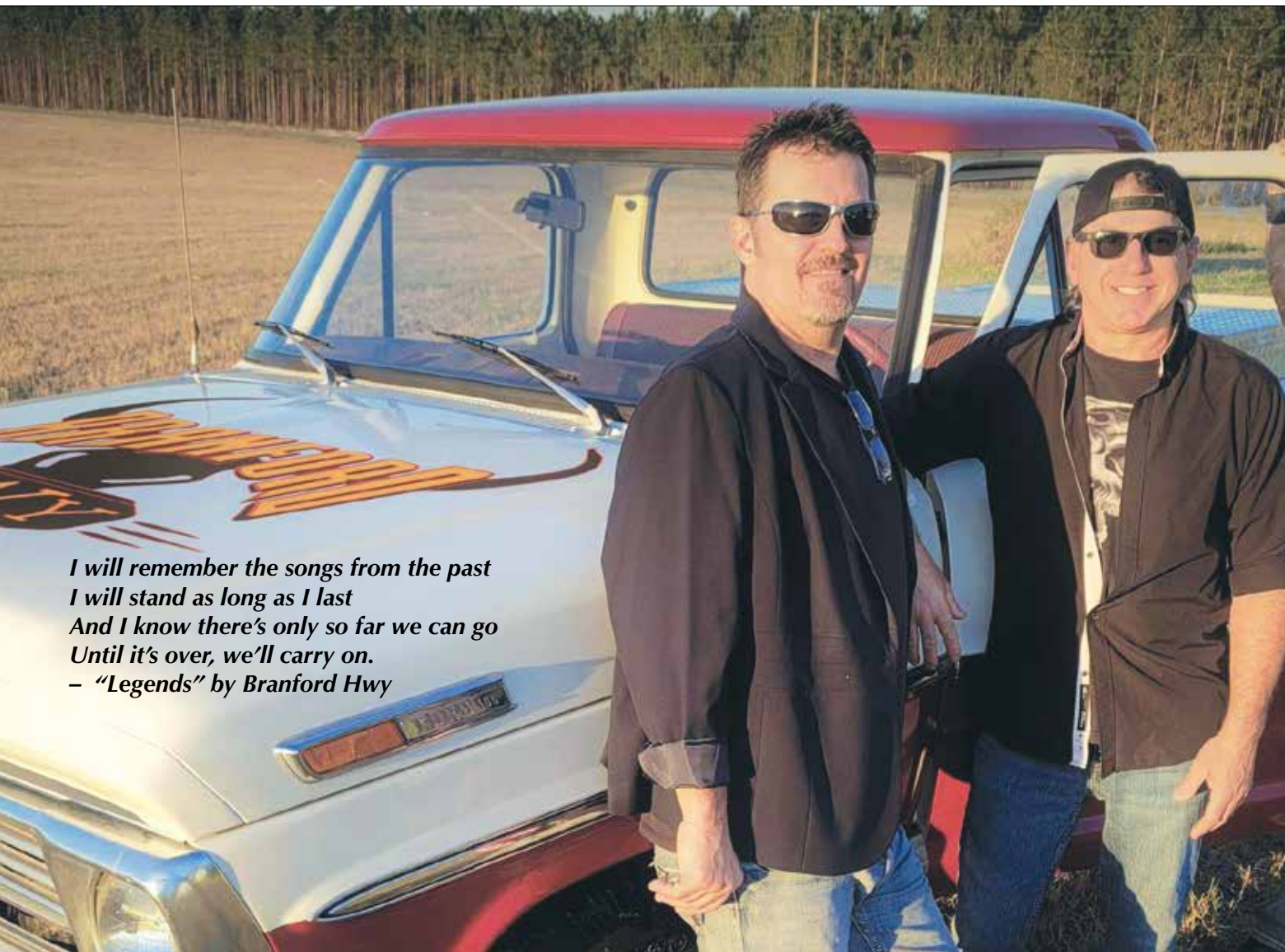
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Until it's over, we'll carry on.  
- "Legends" by Branford Hwy*

## *Rekindling the rock and roll dream:* **The story of BRANFORD HWY**

**Story by Danny Federico**

*Photographs Courtesy of Branford Hwy*

In the early years of childhood, it's common to dream of being in the spotlight, basking in the glow of a large audience and creating a memorable entrance. It's typical for young people to aspire to become actors or musicians,

considering music and television are some of the earliest forms of media we consume. However, only a select few are able to turn this dream into reality. Dewayne Hart, Marc Myers and James Menezes, who are part of the popular local band Branford Hwy, understand

firsthand the challenges, as well as the triumphs, of starting out in this field.

"Dewayne and I thought we were going to be rock stars in high school," Myers said, reminiscing on their time at Branford High School. "We were going to be famous rock stars."





The passion started while they participated in the high school band; Myers was passionate about playing the drums, while Hart had a love for the guitar. Back then, however, the two had a hard time finding other people who would “stick with it.” Despite this challenge, Hart and Myers made lasting memories playing at Branford High. The “highlight” of their experience, Hart said, came from a performance during the school’s field day.

“Everybody went to school, but it was like they had the day off; there wasn’t much class going on,” Hart said. “Everybody went into the auditorium. All the elementary kids – everybody – was there.” While they couldn’t recall every song they performed on that particular day, the two did recall the enthusiastic

reaction they received when they played “Free Bird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

“All the kids went nuts and we were just, ‘Okay, that’s it. We’re stuck. We’re doing this for the rest of our lives,’” Hart and Myers recalled with fond amusement. “That’s one of those days you just don’t forget,” Hart said.

Sadly, the good times didn’t roll for much longer. A year after they graduated, the two went their separate ways. Myers served in the United States Air Force for 25 years and was stationed in Jacksonville, Fla. He retired in 2012. On the other hand, Hart moved to South Florida, where he began working for a sound company and, later, a concrete business. During his time down there, he also started a family.

Still, throughout this time, their

passion for making music never faded. The two joined several other bands during their time apart. One band Myers found a home with was American Attitude in Jacksonville, while one Hart found was Kinlin, which plays in South Florida and has released three albums; he still plays with them occasionally. Eventually, Hart made his way back up to Suwannee County and joined Alliance, which is when he met Menezes.

“When I came back, I was looking for a band to play with, and that’s how I met James,” Hart said.

Menezes, who graduated from Soquel High School in Santa Cruz, Calif., had a slightly different experience at the start of his rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. Unlike Hart and Myers, he never played with his high



school band. Instead, he says it was just him and a bunch of guys hanging out in a garage wanting to be rock stars. The first working band he played with was Coencidence, named after their keyboard player, Otic Coen. Playing alongside him were guitarist Vergal Robenson and drummer Eric Kretz, who is currently the drummer for the Stone Temple Pilots. Coencidence played together for almost 10 years and had a few opening bookings with Three Dog Night and Room With a View, as well as bass player Tiran Porter and the Patrick Simmons Band, two founding members of The Doobie Brothers.

Eventually, Menezes made his way down to Columbia County, where he began working in automotive retail. He met Hart at his store in 2015.

"Somehow, we started talking about playing music," Menezes said. "Not sure how we got that conversation started, but we ended up getting together with two other guitar players and a drummer, and we formed a band called New Alliance."

During the formation of this new band, Hart and Myers would finally reconnect, right before the rise of COVID and approximately 30 years after they separated.

"We played locally for about three years. During that time, there were a few shows that our drummer couldn't make, so we called Marc to fill in," Menezes said. "All I can say is, 'Wow, what a difference.' With no rehearsals, Marc nailed the

set list, and the chemistry we had was amazing."

Then, in 2019, Hart and Menezes were looking to take New Alliance to new heights; however, no other members were willing to put in the extra effort to grow. In the end, the two called on Myers to play

**Their vibe is always approachable and friendly. It's similar to the feeling of sitting on a front porch and enjoying the company of others.**

the drums.

"We weren't called Branford Hwy at the very beginning," Hart said. "We had a few other ideas, but so many people already had those names."

They came up with Branford Hwy and, after finding out no other bands went by the same name, they made it official. Now, Branford Hwy is known not only throughout Suwannee County but across Florida and the United States, as they've played an assortment of rock covers and their own songs at various locales.

With a wide range of influences, Hart, Myers and Menezes provide a unique experience with every show. One of the bands that led Hart to learn electric guitar was Van Halen's song "Eruption." However, he's also found inspiration from Journey and 38 Special, among others. For Myers, Toto drummer Jeff Porcaro was a significant influence, and he has recently been learning a lot from Led Zeppelin's drummer, John Bonham.

Branford Hwy's song "Legends" was actually written after some of their favorite musicians passed away, such as Neil Peart from Rush, Eddie Van Halen, Tom Petty and numerous others.

"That was really kind of what that song was about," Hart explained, stating the lyrics resonate with all three of them. "I'd rather hear all that old stuff than the new stuff. I mean, I try to find new music, but I always wind up listening to the older stuff that I grew up with."

Myers agreed, stating the song is a "nod to the older dudes."

One of the distinctive qualities of Branford Hwy is their dedication to performing songs that are not typically covered by other bands. For instance, during the Second Annual Family Fun and Togetherness Day in Branford this July, they performed Fleetwood Mac's "Oh Well." And although they primarily play rock music, their overall aura exudes a sense of Southern hospitality. According to Myers, even when they perform in Jacksonville or other places, their vibe is always approachable and friendly. It's similar to the feeling of sitting on a front porch and enjoying the company of others. This could be attributed to the band's relaxed atmosphere, as Myers explained that "everyone just clicks," and the cohesion among the members is apparent. It's almost as if they were meant to be together.

"We work as a team," Menezes said. "We play music with our hearts, and we have fun as a family and inspire each other to grow."

Instead of going into the recording studio with a message to convey, Hart, Myers and Menezes go in with the mission of simply having fun.

"We try not to take it all too seriously, you know?" Hart said. "We have a new song we're working on now that's a little more upbeat and lighthearted."





Ultimately, their main hope is that listeners just like their music and want to hear more.

“When you get the applause, and people appreciate your music, that’s when you feel good,” Hart said. “To me, that’s the most rewarding part, when you get the crowd clapping and yelling, hooping and hollering for what you do. That’s a great feeling; that’s what really got me back in school when all the kids were screaming after we did ‘Free Bird.’ That’s what keeps you wanting to do it.”

Looking to the future, the trio hopes to get back into the recording studio next year. Myers hopes the band will be able to release an EP (extended play), if not a full album. They would also like to branch

out to other places to play. Hart stated the band started playing in Steinhatchee a couple of months ago, but they would also like to play at Sturge’s at Ellie Rays and during Daytona’s Bike Week.

“Right now, we’re performing from Steinhatchee to Jacksonville in the North Florida area,” Hart said. “But we want to keep expanding the places that we play.”

“We feel like this area we’re playing is our home,” Myers said. “We’re just so well received, and I’d like to thank everybody in the Suwannee and Columbia County area for the love they show us.”

To learn more about Branford Hwy or view their show schedule, visit [branfordhwy.com](http://branfordhwy.com). ■





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# Still playing



## Elizabeth Hightower

The former Aucilla Christian Academy and University of Florida softball standout has decided it's not quite time to hang up her cleats and glove.

*Photo Courtesy of The University of Florida*



# for something bigger

**Story by Rick Patrick**

*Photographs Courtesy of Elizabeth Hightower and the University of Florida*

Although Elizabeth Hightower's softball career at the University of Florida has come to a close, she has found ways to stay involved with the game she has loved for so many years.

Even with the success she has achieved playing softball, the game of softball itself was not necessarily the destination, but rather a means to a greater end. Elizabeth's father, James, a 32-year Navy veteran, spoke of Elizabeth's early days playing travel softball. At one point, Elizabeth decided she did not want to play any longer. Whereas many parents take a "you started this, you're going to finish it" mindset, James took a different tact. To Elizabeth's surprise, her father said she didn't have to continue playing.

"I couldn't see making her do something that was supposed to be fun," said James. "I told her that if softball was no longer fun, we could find another activity that she would enjoy."

It didn't take Elizabeth long to change her mind and stick with the sport she actually did enjoy.

Before making her mark with the University of Florida Lady Gators, Hightower was a star pitcher for the ACA Lady Warriors. During her high school career, Hightower had an earned run average of 1.38 while chalking up 200 strike-outs, 139 of which were during her senior year. Hightower was not only a threat in the pitcher's circle, but she was effective in the batter's box as well. During her senior year with the Lady Warriors, Hightower had a batting average of .358 while chalking up 28 RBIs and belting three homers. During her freshman year, she had helped lead the Lady Warriors to the school's first Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSA) 2A State Championship in any sport. During her senior year, Hightower helped lead the

Lady Warriors to the state championship game where they faced the Academy at the Lakes Wildcats in an epic contest that went 11 innings and ended with a 1-0 win for the Wildcats. Some of the many accolades Hightower earned during her time at ACA include 2017 Florida Class 2A State Pitcher of the Year, 2017 Florida Class 2A All-State First Team, 2017 Tallahassee All-Big Bend First Team, 2016 Tallahassee All-Big Bend Second Team, 2015 Florida Class 2A State Pitcher of the Year, 2015 Florida Class 2A All-State First Team, and many others.

During her playing career with the Gators, Hightower, a right-handed pitcher, had an earned-run average (ERA) of 2.46 and tallied a total of 427 strikeouts on the mound. A five-year letter winner with the Gators, she made 136 appearances in the circle, including 100 starts. She compiled a record of 57-29 with the Gators. During her first career start with the Gators, she registered a career-high 10 strikeouts against Utah State. She also received Southeastern Conference (SEC) Academic

Honor Roll distinction three times.

It was not all easy sailing in Gainesville for Hightower, however. Like many athletes at this level, Hightower had her fair share of struggles during her early time as a Lady Gator. Hightower's father told the story of a call Elizabeth received from Tim Walton, head softball coach at the University of Florida, during the fall break of her junior year. Coach Walton told Hightower that her level of play was not at the level he needed. Coach Walton informed her that she could still play with the team, but that she was unlikely to travel with the team. He informed Elizabeth that if she chose to go to a different school, he understood and would help her in any way he could. He also told her what she would need to do in order to rise to the level he needed from her.

Devastated by this news, Elizabeth turned to her father, who told her the decision was up to her. Determined to continue wearing the orange and blue, Hightower put the work in, almost completely re-learning how



*Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Hightower*



to pitch. When she returned to the softball diamond, she turned in her most productive year as a Lady Gator, registering a 17-6 record and a 1.61 ERA. That same year, she earned First-team inclusion on the National Fast-pitch Coaches Association (NFCA) All-Southeast Region and a spot on the 2021 NFCA All-America Team.

"Most girls would have taken the easy way out and transferred," said Hightower of her situation, "but I decided I wanted to stay at the University of Florida. I think that experience made me not only a better player, but a better person. It made me realize I wasn't a 'power pitcher,' but I learned to place the ball better. It also made me realize that you are much more in control of how good you are going to be at anything than you might think. That's something I really try to teach to younger players."

This summer, Hightower signed to play softball on the professional level with the Athletes Unlimited (AU) professional softball program. AU is a fairly new league and a new concept in professional sports. The league gives the athletes much more autonomy than other professional leagues. The players' teams don't represent any particular city, and all games take place in Rockford, Ill., near Chicago. The rosters change frequently during the year, with teams holding drafts throughout the year. Individual players are awarded points based on both individual performance and team performance during games. Selection of

Team Captains is based on point totals for those individual players. For more information on AU, visit their website at [auprosports.com](http://auprosports.com).

"That was an amazing experience," added Hightower. "They were so welcoming of me. When I got there I looked to my left and to my right and there were the same players I had looked up to when I was younger. Now I was on the same team with them. That was pretty cool."

Looking back, Hightower is certainly grateful for the support and help she has received over the years.

"It has taken a village," said Hightower. "I am thankful for the drive and work ethic I developed from coaches, my parents and everyone who has helped along the way."

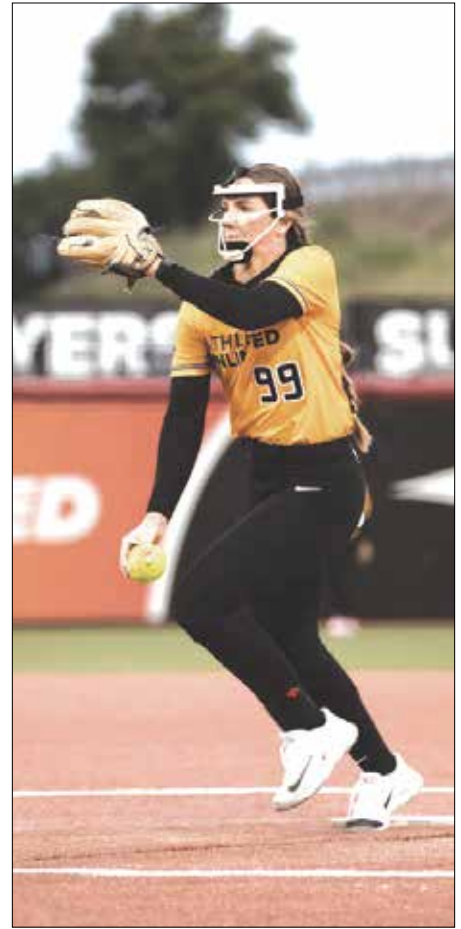
Hightower has now moved on and has begun a new chapter in her life. She has accepted a graduate assistantship to coach at Florida Atlantic University, in Boca Raton, Fla., where she plans to pursue a Master of Science degree in the field of Anthropology. Although she may not be actively playing softball, she will continue to teach the lessons she has picked up along the way and putting her leadership skills into practice. Those leadership skills are possibly the greatest benefit Hightower has gleaned from her time on the field.

"[Elizabeth] has more of a leadership style than I ever had in the Navy," said James. "I see that in the way she works with younger players through the private lessons she teaches and in how she interacts with parents."

Hightower graduated from the University of Florida with a Bachelor of Science degree in Anthropology in 2021 and completed a certificate in sports management in 2023. She is still a bit uncertain about what exactly the future will have in store.

"I love anthropology, and at the same time, I love coaching," said Hightower. "Maybe I will find a way to do both."

Regardless of the specific direction she takes, one thing is certain. Hightower will approach the future with an understanding and acceptance of who she is and a clearer picture of who she can be. She is the daughter of James and Gretna Hightower, of Monticello. ■



*Aucilla Christian Academy graduate Elizabeth Hightower, takes time to visit with a young fan at the University of Florida. / Photography courtesy of the University of Florida*





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# YOUR HONOR

## *Stephen "Buddy" Murphy*

in high school, was a tax collector and had an office in the courthouse with a staircase up to the courtroom – where I would often go to sit in and watch trials. Most of those were criminal cases.”

Young Buddy was seeding his mind to pursue a career as a criminal attorney, and ultimately a judge.

“In first and second grade I would read books on statutes in the courthouse and was enthralled,” he says. “I was enthralled, too, with the clerks, bailiffs – the whole court system.”

Though he refuses to watch shows or movies about lawyering today, knowing how unrealistic they are, he refers to Perry Mason enough to suggest those bygone episodes of the fictitious criminal attorney made an impression on him as a youngster.

Born and raised in Perry, Murphy went into law enforcement prior to attending law school at Mississippi College. He served with the Florida State University police department before joining the security team of Florida’s 37th Governor Reubin Askew during the 1970s with the Federal Department of Law Enforcement.

“I truly respected Gov. Askew,” he underscores.

Post-Askew, Murphy was stationed in South Florida with Palm Beach County, which suited him just fine.

“I liked to go fishing,” he reflects with a chuckle, “So that worked out.”

But home began crying out to Murphy.

“I was just a young boy with sand in his shoes and I wanted to go home,” he relates. His family had deep multi-generational roots in Taylor County, and like Dorothy he knew there was “no place like home.”

“My family now has been in Taylor County since before [Florida] was a state,” he says. “My father’s family came to Florida a little after 1840, and my mother’s family since 1830. I wanted to go back,” he said, adding, “I resigned from the FDLE

### Story by Robin Postell

*Photographs Courtesy of Stephen Murphy*

Stephen “Buddy” Murphy knows a thing or two about his hometown of Perry, Fla. – and Taylor County as a whole. Being a County Judge for 28 years, a Senior Judge for three, and appointed as a circuit judge handling juvenile cases, has made him privy to generations of human behavior and a near-Shakespearean peek into the intimacy that weaves families and the community into a rich, meaningful tapestry.

As the bard himself aptly penned, “the better part of valor is discretion,” and Buddy is a responsible custodian of his beloved hometown folks’ tribulations and deepest secrets.

“A lot of people don’t quite understand that being a judge is not like you’re able to just pal around with anybody. You have to be careful about your conversations,” Murphy says. “I didn’t discuss my cases as a lawyer or a judge, not to my family or anyone else. You get to be isolated in a sense as a judge because

of being so limited with who you are great friends with. I’ve got a lot of friends, but a lot of times people would want to talk with me about cases and I’d tell them, ‘You wouldn’t want me to talk about your case.’ I’ll talk about the weather, but not about law.”

Murphy stresses how important it was for him to treat every person who came before him with respect.

“When I would make a ruling, whether they liked it or disliked it – that was my job to do. I told people, ‘I’m going to do my job.’”

After retiring officially more than a decade ago, Murphy worked for Conrad Bishop’s law firm, and now continues practicing law on a contract basis for the Trey Howard law firm. Murphy, you see, loves the law. He always has.

“I’ve always wanted to be a lawyer since I was a child,” Judge Murphy recalls. “There was just something about it and I said, ‘That’s what I want to do.’ I don’t know what put lawyering in my mind that young. My father, who passed when I was



and took a job with the Taylor County Sheriff's Office as Chief Investigator."

Already married to his sweetheart, Tina (nee Frith), Murphy got the opportunity to go to law school.

"I said to myself, 'If I don't do it now, I won't do it,'" Murphy recounts.

In his late 20s he entered the Mississippi College School of Law in Jackson, while Tina remained in Perry where she had a good job.

"Tina was one of my biggest supporters," Murphy says, ruminating through memories of those early days as a first-year law student.

As any law student knows, making a commitment to study is more than a full-time job. He recalls those rigorous days, consisting of a strict 19-hour-a-day diet of class and studying. He also clerked for a Jackson law firm.

"As a result, even now my normal bedtime is about two to three in the morning," he confesses.

First year law students all share similar experiences, pushing them as far as their will can go – then a lot further. A driving commitment to the law is required to get through the hard years, during which wheat and chaff are quickly separated.

"Leading up to my first final in law school, I remember being very concerned about Tina, who was having a medical issue," he says. "I called to ask her about it, and she said, 'By the way, we're going to have a baby.' You got to go with it and say this is what I want to do with my life, and I want to do the best I can do."

Stephen, his first child, was born, despite the heavy load of studying. This became one of his first lessons about being a well-prepared lawyer, which he insists makes the best ones – the ones he points out have made his career so rewarding.

"Mighty good lawyers," he emphasizes, "are well-prepared ones. I've had the privilege of working with some great lawyers, who make a good judge out of you. Also, I can't say enough about the clerks and bailiffs. There are just some incredible people in the Taylor County – and Florida – court system. Whenever I asked for something, they were always johnny-on-the-spot, just magnificent!"

While in law school, money woes hit the young family and Buddy headed home for a year to work with the Taylor County Sheriff's Office before returning to finish out his last year.

In February 1981, he took the Mississippi bar.



"My wife picked me up and I couldn't even tie my shoes," he says of that historically harrowing experience for law school grads coping with the bar exam – the final slog before becoming a bona fide attorney.

Finally, Buddy lived up to his own expectations, rooted so deep in his earliest childhood. He made it.

He briefly practiced with two good attorneys in Jackson before heading back home to take the Florida bar, after which

he joined the local law firm of Weed, Bishop.

Stephen "Buddy" Murphy, attorney-at-law, would soon expand his legacy.

"Judge O'Grady retired so I ran for office and got elected," he says casually.

"I served as a County Judge doing all the jurisdictions - like criminal, domestic, county civil, traffic, but also an acting Circuit Judge and did all the juvenile and domestic," he explains.

Murphy has witnessed many changes throughout his time as a judge, watching generations grow up and have children of their own; but the biggest change, he says, has been technology.

Clerks of Court have benefited tremendously from the digitization of record-keeping, he points out, and he's also noted that people in general seem to have a better understanding of the judicial system because of their easy access to the Internet. However, he's quick to administer some still-standing bench wisdom.

"I used to tell people when I was on the bench, you have the right to counsel or represent yourself, but don't believe everything you see on the television or the Internet," he half-chuckles.

Murphy is assured that people in his community have supported him, considering all but two of his elections were contested.

"If you hold any kind of public office, there's always gonna be some folks who don't think you're an honest person. If I hear 'good ole boy system' one more time...all I could hear from this one person, I said, 'sir I don't know what you mean by that. I want to be a judge in a

place without the good ole boy system.' I think I persuaded him."

Murphy muses over what he hopes his legacy will be.

"I want to be known that I did my job, and I did it without favor - if it was right, and the law," Murphy articulates. "The law gives you some leeway, but the final say so is what the law says. I was fortunate to be in a small county and used some discretion; I tried to judge with the facts, but the law is the law. I didn't apologize for doing my job, but at same time you must think about the collateral damage, the family, and the victim's family. I tried to be fair and impartial. I hope I leave the legacy that I did my job and was faithful to it, and it was never personal. My thing was, basically, court was at 9. At 8:59 I was Buddy, and at 9 I was Judge Murphy. I loved every minute of it. I loved my job."

There came a point when Murphy felt it was time to let someone else do it.

"I loved the job until it became a job," he says. "A lot of people don't understand that it is a seven-day-a-week job. You handle all your cases Monday through Friday. But I would have to go to jails for first appearances on the weekends - people elected me to do that job and I always did it. I always felt like if I could be there, I would be there."

Murphy never allowed the judgments of others to impact his decision-making, knowing it would always vary.

"In a single day, I had three phone calls, not about a specific case," Murphy begins. "In the morning, not long after I got in the office, the first caller said, 'Buddy, you're too hard on those kids,'

and I said, 'Well, I'm doing what the law requires.' Got another call - I'm telling you it was the same day - 'Buddy you're not hard enough on them kids,' and I said, 'I'm doing what the law requires,' then the third call, 'Buddy, you're doing it just right.' That never happened again. Fair is in the eye of the beholder. People want mercy for themselves and justice for the other guys."

Murphy has two children: Stephen is the Director of Physical Therapy at Doctors' Memorial in Perry, with three children; and Stacey (Shellnut) is a school teacher in Alabama, with two children.

He tells his grandchildren, "Don't be a lawyer; be a doctor. I've never seen a poor doctor, but I've seen plenty of broke lawyers."

Now that he's (mostly) retired, Murphy gets to marvel at his family, bragging on his "all tall" grandchildren, all of whom have "special talents," like his granddaughter who "has the voice of an angel," and enjoying his inherent love of music.

Murphy taught himself how to play bass guitar years ago and plies that skill as a member of the gospel group Latter Reign at New Home Baptist Church to his fellow flock members every Sunday. Both his parents were musically inclined, with his father playing fiddle and mother playing guitar. Murphy's wife, Tina, plays piano, and his son, Steve, is an excellent drummer.

"I go in my music room and play CDs (I still use CDs) and kick along with them," Murphy says happily. "I've got a great friend, Mike Denmark, and we play at a local restaurant, Old Mexico, owned by my friend Luis. I'd do it every night if I could. There are great pickers in Perry."

In the scheme of things, Murphy just thinks of himself as a "poor old country lawyer," (as he referred to him in a text during this writer's constant messages for more information) whose home is where his heart is.

"I'm just born and raised in Perry, Florida, and most likely die here, but never have thought myself to be anything special," he ponders. "I've never used my position to get anything although mine has been used by others. People didn't elect me to be their overseer, or taskmaster, they elected me to serve. I think I've lived up to my end of the bargain. It's been my greatest privilege to serve the people. I'll be forever grateful to them, and I've tried to be the best judge I could be." ■







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# JIM STANLEY'S *Legacy of Service*

## Story by Mickey Starling

*Photographs Courtesy of Jim Stanley*

To say that Jim Stanley's roots run deep in Madison County is an understatement. He is a sixth-generation native who grew up with a mischievous group of friends who kept things lively during their school years. Stanley's father once remarked that James "never let books get in the way of his education." Sports were more to his liking, and he was fortunate and skilled enough to be part of the Madison Red Devils' basketball team in 1960, when an outstanding roster of athletes took the team to a 23-2 record. This remains the highest winning percentage in the school's history.

Stanley won big again in 1967, when he married the lovely Sandra Tuten, whom he had met in his father's drug



store two years before.

"Except for Jesus Christ, she's the best thing that ever happened to me," said Stanley.

Though most of the locals remember

Stanley as the manager of Beggs' Clothing Store, a job he held for 30 years, he began his career as a dispatcher for the Florida Highway Patrol.

"I learned a lot of discipline while working there," said Stanley, who was also working part-time with Beggs for a few of those early years.

Never one for sitting still, Stanley was appointed as Civil Defense Director in 1990 (now called Madison County Emergency Management). He managed this program until 2009. In 2011, the facility was renamed as the Jim Stanley Emergency Management Building to honor Stanley for his years of hard work and dedication. Stanley was a part of implementing many updates that have kept the citizens of Madison informed and ready for dealing with weather and related emergencies. Emergency

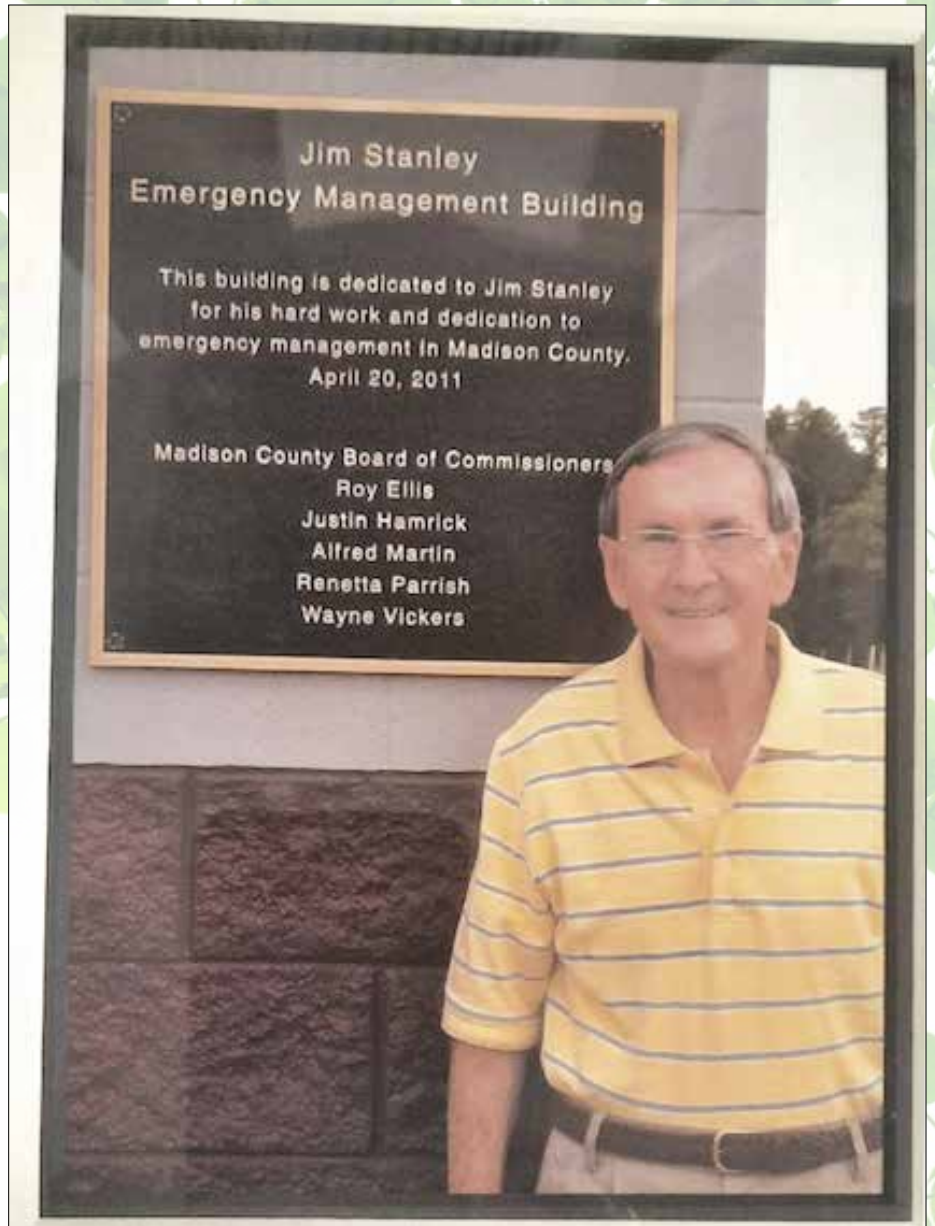




Management's budget saw a huge increase in 1993, after Madison suffered through a devastating downburst that uprooted trees and destroyed homes throughout the community in 1992. This was the same year Hurricane Andrew paid Florida a visit. With the budget increase, Stanley's position became full-time in 1995.

Regardless of his employment, Stanley has lived his life in "full-time" mode for decades. He has had a seat on numerous boards and committees, including the Madison City Commission, where he served as mayor on two occasions. Stanley held the office of secretary/treasurer for Madison Church of Christ for 37 years and was secretary of both the Madison Lodge No. 11 F & A.M. and the Madison County Shrine Club for 43 years. Along with this lengthy tenure, Stanley was named an Ambassador Emeritus with the Shriners, which is the highest honor given in the organization. In addition, he has served as past president and board member of the Madison Rotary Club for 46 years and past president and board member for Madison Academy. In 2004, Stanley was named Madison County Citizen of the Year.

The foundation for all of his dedication to the community was learned



*Jim Stanley was honored with the renaming of Madison County's Emergency Management building to the Jim Stanley Emergency Management Building.*

early, observing his father in the drug store.

"My dad was helping people all the time," remembers Stanley. "He often told me that 'money doesn't make class, helping people does.'"

The influence of his father and his conviction as a Christian have kept Stanley active in the community.

"I want to do as much as I can to please the Lord, said Stanley.

One of the many blessings that Stanley has enjoyed during his career was working alongside his wife at the Beggs

store for 28 years.

"We worked well together," said Stanley. When rare occasions of tension occurred between them, Stanley remembered one of his father's many wise pieces of advice: "You can disagree without being disagreeable."

That adage has served him well, and finding anyone with a negative opinion of Stanley is a difficult task. His pleasant demeanor and servant's heart make him a joy to be around, and hopefully, he will be serving others for years to come. ■

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