

The Front Porch

Where the Tea is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

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The 1987
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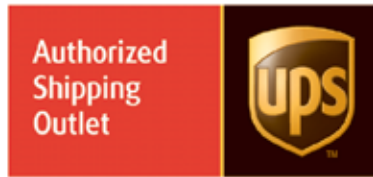
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Photograph by Laura Young.

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The Front Porch

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The Front Porch

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Sittin' on the Porch with...



Patrica Brown Henderson

Story and Photograph by Lee Trawick

Patrica Brown Henderson's journey may have taken her thousands of miles away from White Springs, but she will always call White Springs home. After all, it is where she grew up. It was the foundation of the woman she is today. So, while she has too many memories to reminisce, she reflects on the most influential moments in her life.

Today, Henderson is a well-accomplished registered nurse with a Master's Degree in Nursing. In addition, she is a published author, military veteran, breast cancer survivor, wife and – her proudest accomplishment – a mother and grandmother. On the surface, life may look easy for Henderson. She has it all. She has been married to Charles Henderson for 26 years, and they have two sons who have grown up into impressive young men who have carved their path in the world and given Henderson three beautiful grandchildren. It was the journey, however, that paints the depth of her story.

Henderson got her first glimpse into the world when she graduated from South Hamilton Elementary School in White Springs. While she graduated top of her class, her eyes were opened to how cruel the world could be. At a young age, she could not comprehend why her classmates and others would bully her for graduating at the top of her class. Although everyone attributed her accomplishments to the fact that her parents were successful, Henderson took offense at that suggestion, which belittled her achievement. Instead of making her feel sorry for herself, however, the experience lit a fire in her to prove everyone wrong and show that she is her own person. While grateful for her parents, she admits nothing was given to her, and she wanted the world to know it. She vowed to herself that she would show everyone that finishing at the top is more than what she does; it's only part of who she is.

The fire ignited at elementary school was given a direction when Henderson got a phone call on a Saturday afternoon during her sixth grade year.

It seemed to be one of the most traumatic moments in her life: her grandfather had passed away. She had just seen her “papa” the day before, and he was in good spirits; therefore, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Unprepared for such tragedy, she dropped the phone and ran out of her house. She remembers running out of her house down Mill Street, across the railroad tracks, towards her papa's house. She can't recall what was going through her mind; only that she wanted to get to her papa. She was crying when her brother came driving down the road, unaware of the news. When she informed him what was going on and where she was going, he loaded her up and took her to her papa's house. There she walked in, saw him in bed and couldn't believe what she was seeing. This was the moment she realized that she wanted to save lives; she wanted a career in the medical field.

Then as a junior in high school, a young lady named Julia Cato, now Johnson, became her unsung mentor. Henderson remembers seeing her in her crisp, white nurse uniform and noticing how she carried herself. Henderson smiles when reflecting on the impact she had on her life, without even knowing it, for just being the type of woman she was. She is grateful to this day for how Cato gave her a direction in life.

Her journey got a little more challenging when, still as a junior in high school, she found out she was pregnant. Scared and not knowing what to do, she turned to her parents, who overwhelmed her with support. For some, the situation might have been an excuse for why life didn't work out as planned, but that wasn't who Henderson was. She knew what she wanted in life and understood that this was just another challenge, just like proving to everyone in elementary school that she had earned her status at the top of her class. She therefore remained focused in school and set herself up for several academic scholarships. After high school graduation, she began a path toward becoming a Registered Nurse at Lake City Community College. Henderson struggled to balance a social life and school but managed to get through her first year. For her sophomore year, she enrolled at Daytona Community College. There, one of her instructors suggested that she realign her path to the Licensed Practical Nurse program. All Henderson heard, however, was another

challenge. She then slowly began to reshape her social life to balance it with school and realized she would have to make a few changes to get where she wanted.

In her junior year of college, she was accepted into the Nursing Program at Valdosta State University (VSU), where she completed her bachelor's degree and eventually earned a Master's Degree in Nursing. Looking back at her college career, Henderson explains how exhausting this time at VSU was. Her parents were terrific supporters financially and emotionally, and she admits it would not have been possible without them. Still, she was a single mother who worked full-time as a Certified Nursing Assistant while going to school, and she was determined not waste her opportunity to make the most of her education.

Upon graduating college, she remembers looking back at a school assignment that profoundly influenced her life. She undertook a research paper based on an interview with her uncle, Joseph McKire, about his military career and service in Vietnam. What she learned after sitting with her uncle made it clear to her what she intended to do with her education. She would honor her uncle and join the military as he once did. She saw the United States Army as a challenge, and challenges in life were all she knew. It was only fitting that she was drawn to another challenge.

After completing training at Fort Riley, Kansas, Henderson found herself a member of the Army Nurse Corps. Although she was well-educated and well-trained, nothing prepared her for life as a nurse. She remembers losing her first patient. Almost 30 years later, Henderson still tears up from the pain and disappointment she felt when a patient was wheeled into her care on the verge of death. She struggles to finish telling the story about how the young soldier looked up at her, pleading with her, “Please don't let me die.” Just a few hours later, however, he died. Henderson remembers that the support of her husband (then fiancé) got her through that time. Later, the incident would be a valuable life lesson for her in more ways than one.

After the soldier died, the military investigated the actions of the staff who had cared for him. Henderson recalls that it was her documentation that saved her career. A particular doctor was willing to throw everyone under the bus, so to speak, to save himself. With exact

documentation, however, Henderson's actions were never questioned. Because of that incident, throughout her career she has never underestimated the value of proper documentation.

Then, while stationed at Fort Polk, La., in 1996-1997, Henderson was informed that the United States Army was making budget cuts within its Nurse Corps, and she would not be retained. She finished her four years of service with an impeccable record, reputation and the rank of First Lieutenant. Although Henderson felt knocked down again, this time at the hands of the Army, she held her head up, took those lessons she had learned in the military and put them to use moving forward. She worked in the civilian medical field for almost six months before becoming a Registered Nurse with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), first in Fort Polk and later in Lawton, Okla.

Then in 2008, tragedy struck again when she received a phone call from her brother back home informing her that her mother was sick. Henderson remembers calling her uncle the next day. When she asked if she should come home, the answer was simple: yes. She knew then that what she was walking into wasn't good. She came home to find out her mom had breast cancer. This time was heartbreaking to her because she felt she failed her mom as a nurse. She had dedicated so much of her life to helping save her patients' lives, and she could not save her mother. The guilt was overwhelming for her and tough to deal with; yet, again, her husband was her saving grace and refuge of comfort. However, the realization didn't hit her until the doctors recommended it was time for hospice to come in. Henderson will always reflect on the last five days with her mom.

“I'm so thankful for those last days. They were an amazing time with her. I'll cherish those days forever.”

Unfortunately, her mom passed away on June 28, 2011. With having to handle the arrangements and everything, Henderson admits she did not have time to grieve properly.

In 2018, that time would come when she received another significant phone call, this time from her doctor, suggesting she schedule a follow-up mammogram after a routine checkup. Something did not appear right from her first appointment. After the mammogram, she was asked to come into

the doctor's office. She recalls the moment she entered the conference room where she was asked to meet the doctors.

"As soon as I walked in, I lost it," Henderson says. "I knew what it was, but I lost it. That moment took me back to my mother."

Until then, she didn't realize how much she had bottled up from the loss of her mother and how she had never taken time to grieve that loss. In the conference room full of doctors informing her that she had breast cancer, she broke down. At that moment, all she wanted was her mother. Though her mother was not physically there to hold her, she felt she was with her in spirit throughout the process.

With the support of her husband, family, friends and her mother in spirit, Henderson faced the challenge of breast cancer head-on. Although she has never allowed self-pity to creep into her mind, there was a challenge in front of her; therefore, she must face it, defeat it and move forward. While she was scared, she was equally confident. With the grace of

her heavenly Father and the support of her husband and good friend Linda Tucker walking with her through the entire process, she knew she would beat it.

Unfortunately, after her initial surgery to remove the breast cancer, a test showed she was at risk for ovarian cancer as well. Henderson had a decision at that point about preventive surgery. Her doctor slowed everything down for her and suggested one surgery at a time. Then, after her fifth surgery, Henderson was ready to enter 2018 on a positive note. After defeating cancer in 2017 and making life-altering decisions to better care for herself, she looked forward to the new year.

As 2018 came around, Henderson attacked life, moving forward to spread awareness of the importance of regularly scheduled screenings and medical checkups. While breast cancer may be in her review mirror, it will never be out of her mind. She admits that with every sore muscle or ache, she can't help but wonder if it is back.

Today, Henderson continues with her

life's passion as a nurse at the VA hospital in Lawton. Her life's messages reach far beyond the hospital walls, as she is also an ordained minister and remains active in her church. In addition, in 2022 she published her first book: *In the Midnight Hour, Keep H.O.P.E. Alive!*

In the book, she talks about her journey and all she has overcome through the grace of God and the love of her family. She wants to convey the message to everyone throughout her life that you must always cling to hope and not let the little things knock you off track. Henderson believes in the power of prayer as she saw her mother's example as a prayer warrior throughout her life. Today, Henderson's testimony is strengthened by the power of prayer. Even though she has had many nights screaming and crying on the bathroom floor, she has never lost hope and faith that God would see her through. Her mother's walk motivated her and inspired her to keep going, and she hopes that her walk can one day do the same for others. ■

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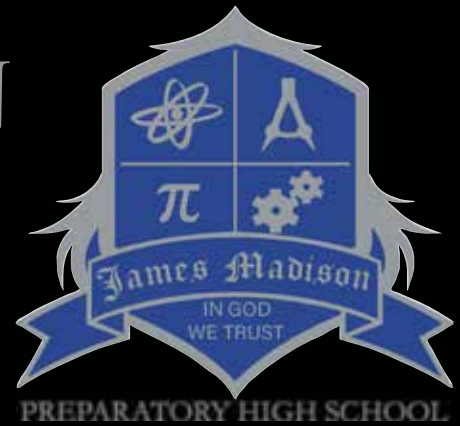
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**THE
15TH
ANNUAL
FARM
TOUR**

October 15-16, 2022

The 2022 Farm Tour Patron Sponsors are the Boyd Family of Farms:
Boyd Farms Fresh, Glendower Farms and Schmoie Farm

Story by Majken Peterzen and Laura Young

Sponsored Content

Take any side road, any highway, or any dirt road around and you can drive for miles following fence lines with hints of barn roofs, tractor dust, hoop houses and silos. Some of these fences are fancy and painted, some are three strips of wood, while others are just hog wire and metal posts. Passing by, you may see the soft eyes of cattle looking back at you from expansive pastures, or you may gaze upon seemingly endless rows of glinting blueberry bushes.

Some fields have no fence at all, opening directly beyond the berm into stretches of timber, fruit trees, row crops or sod that lead your eye to the horizon. Whatever the view, the land radiating out from the Big Bend is home to hundreds of farms, ranches, orchards, you-pick gardens and micro farms. Farming is at the heart of our region. It's the food we eat and the culture we love.

The Annual Farm Tour gives area residents a special opportunity each fall to take a closer look at local food production enterprises that at other times may be only glimpsed in passing or secreted away down forking country lanes. The event offers a chance to satisfy our curiosity and, in doing so, to meet our farming neighbors and see first-hand how they participate in the miracle of producing nourishing food.

What's back behind those fences, those borders of ancient oaks and towering pines? What's at the end of those long, well-worn dirt drives? Who are the people who live on the land, work the earth and raise the food that sustains us? And who are the people who have brought farming into their urban and suburban lifestyles by tilling up what was once set aside for mowed lawn?

The farming renaissance is perhaps the most exciting aspect of our area's growth. Long-established farms are exploring new methods, and new farms start up every year in response to the call for healthier food and sustainable farming practices.

A movement began some years ago, encouraging us to eat better and stay away from additives and dangerous residues being found in food. The movement also questioned why food no longer tasted as rich as it once did and why food was being flown in from thousands of miles away. This movement asked us to drive down those long dirt drives and familiarize ourselves with the local sources of our food.

A new way of thinking emerged that supported vibrant farmer's markets where we could wander through tents of vendors to find fresh food and quality products that satiated us in body and soul. Some restaurants changed their menus to recognize locally grown foods. And out of this farming renaissance, our local Farm Tour was born.

Some 15 to 16 years ago, two Tallahassee farmers visiting near Asheville, North Carolina, went on a tour of farms organized by the North Carolina Farm Stewardship Program. So impressed were they with the concept and the joy of the tour, that they returned home intending to create something like that close to home. Louise Devine, a well known local "health food aficionado and farmer," and her husband, Hermann Holley, began to talk up their ideas with others in the farming and food business. Devine (Turkey Hill Farm) and B. O'Toole (O'Toole's Herb Farm) approached New Leaf Market Health Food Co-op with the concept and sought their advice and assistance. New Leaf (now Community Co-Op in Tallahassee) embraced the idea, organized the first tour in 2007 and remains a large supporter of the tour to this day.

It began with a handful of farms opening up for the public to come explore, purchase products, sample foods and ask questions. There was no doubt then that there would be a second tour, then a third and more. This year, 2022, brings the 15th Annual Farm Tour. The event has evolved and become an anticipated part of autumn, not only to learn about nearby farms and food suppliers, but also to share a great weekend outdoors with family and friends. Now-a-



Allen Boyd leads a Farm Tour hayride / Photo Courtesy of Suzanne Boyd



The Boyd family has been farming the same land for going on eight generations / Photo Courtesy of Suzanne Boyd

days, more than 40 stops feature farms across 12 counties that grow anything from bees to beef, grains to goats, and lettuce to legumes.

It's exciting to realize that the local farms are as diverse as our communities and as varied as our individual tastes. Crops and livestock run from the historic to the exotic. Cows and llamas graze together. Bananas and tomatoes flourish side by side. The climate and soil in our region provide an unusually wide variety of possibilities. More importantly, the tour reminds us that fresh and local is always the better choice.

Get ready to see production focused just on micro-greens; see sausage being made; visit flower farms, citrus orchards and bamboo cultivators; taste-test myriad delights like the best ice cream ever, homemade breads, honey products, handcrafted wines, local beer,



FARMS ON THE 2022 TOUR

Allison Acres (Pinetta)
Arrowhead Beef Farm (Chipley)
Artzi Organic Veggies (Thomasville)
Bluefish Aquaponics & Greenhouse (Cairo)
Boyd Farms Fresh (Quitman)
Cindale Farms (Marianna)
Deep Roots Meat (Greenville)
Dreamin Big Eventing (Cairo)
Florida-Georgia Citrus (Monticello)
Frenchtown Heritage Hub and Farmer's Market (Tallahassee)
Frenchtown Urban Farm and Compost Community (Tallahassee)
Georgia-Grown Citrus (Ochlocknee)
Glendower Farm (Greenville)
Good Ground Farm (Monticello)
Grady Ranch (Whigham)
Granny Kats (Monticello)
Heritage Farm (Panama City)
Johnston's Meat Market and Locker Plant (Monticello)
JMM Finishing Yard—@ Ouzt's (Cairo)
Just Fruits and Exotics (Crawfordville)
KB Farms Cut Flowers (Cottondale)
The Lazy Acres Family Farm (Marianna)
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Longview Farms (Havana)
Madison Seed Library (Madison)
Martin's Harvest (Marianna)
Millstone Institute of Preservation (Tallahassee)
Monticello Vineyards & Winery (Monticello)
Moonpie Farm & Creamery (Cottondale)
Orchard Pond Organics (Tallahassee)
Pemberly Farm Homestead (Chipley)
Promised Land Homestead (Lee)
Rocky Soil Family Farm (Monticello)
Schmoe Farm (Quitman)
Serenity Acres Farm (Pinetta)
Schuckelberry Farm (Clarksville)
Southern Craft Creamery (Marianna)
Tallahassee Kombucha (Tallahassee)
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**To get involved in farm tours
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**For more farm tour information follow
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jams and jellies; browse artisan weavings, baskets, iron work, soaps and more.

Come visit – come enjoy – come sample. The Farm Tour guidebook for October 15-16 tells you about every participating farm, provides a map of their locations and specifies the hours they will be open. It's the best type of weekend – a little lazy, a lot yummy. Bring the kids, climb some trees and get a little dirty!

Creating the tour takes months each year. Millstone Institute of Preservation in Tallahassee has coordinated the tour for the past six to seven years and loves seeing the evolution, not only in the farms, but also in the visitors. The tour is a labor of love for Millstone. It takes many sponsors to help make the tour happen, and each year there is a Patron Sponsor – someone or some farm that goes over and above to help financially underwrite the tour. This year the Patron Sponsor is the Boyd Family of Farms. Boyd Farms Fresh, Glendower Farms and Schmoe Farm have graciously come together as “three farms, one family” to support the tour. Other main sponsors of this year's tour include Farm Credit Bank (Monticello), Prime Meridian Bank (Tallahassee), Florida-Georgia Citrus (Monticello), Johnston's Meat Market (Monticello), Redemptive Love Farm (Tallahassee) and the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce. The Farm Tour is ever so grateful for its many sponsors and supporters.

See the sidebar for a full list of this year's tour stops, get your guide and mark your calendar. Here's a glimpse of what's in store for you:

BOYD FARMS

“Our family has owned and operated our farms on the same land near the Florida/Georgia line for more than 180 years,” says Allen Boyd with a deserved sense of pride. His daughter, Suzanne, explains that Boyd Farms has been using a traditional farming model to grow cattle, corn, soybeans, cotton, peanuts sod and timber. In recent years, however, the old family farm began “really trying to come into this new way of farming,” she says. In addition, members of the Boyd family have branched out, creating their own new farming enterprises inspired and supported by the legacy of their ties to the land.

BOYD FARMS FRESH

Two years ago when the pandemic disrupted supply chains, local cattle operations took a hit, including Boyd Farms, which suddenly was no longer able to sell its cattle to beef markets out West. The family's innovative solution was to create a new branch of the business that would specialize in fresh, not frozen, beef delivered directly to their customers. Thus Boyd Farms Fresh came into being. Their strategy also included joining Florida Cattle Ranchers, a group that had formed to gain collective buying power. Their supply-chain issue was solved, and local buyers can now directly purchase locally grown, fresh beef online at boydfarmsfresh.com, their storefront in Quitman and area farmers markets. On the tour, you'll drive down a stunning oak-lined lane to enter a festive vendor's market where you can sample the goods while enjoying live music and hayrides to see the cows.

GLENDOWER FARMS

The Boyd family has been farming on the Glendower property on the Ashville Highway for going on eight generations, and when family members started branching out into specialized markets, Hines Boyd chose pork from the iconic acorn-fed Spanish Iberico pigs, renowned in farm-to-table and high-end restaurants for its exquisite flavor. He had helped pave the way for the first Iberico herd to enter the United States less than a decade ago, and not long after that started his own herd at Glendower. It is one of only seven Iberico herds in the U.S., and you can find this rare operation

Photo by Laura Young



just down the road as well as online at glendowerfarms.com. At this Farm Tour stop, you'll see the Boyd's family homestead, meet the thriving pigs and piglets living naturally in their pastures, learn about their sustainable “farrow-to-finish” process, and have the opportunity to buy some of their prized pork delicacies to take home.

SCHMOE FARM

This small enterprise on the Florida-Georgia line near Quitman raises pastured poultry, pastured eggs and forest-raised pork. Owned and operated by Drew and Christian Schmoe, Schmoe Farm shares borders with the Boyd family farms, and some of the Schmoe chicken flocks share pasture with Boyd cattle. They sell their products online at schmoefarm.com and then deliver to several area pick-up hubs. For the Farm Tour, Schmoe Farm and Boyd Farms Fresh are co-hosting a special tour stop at the Blackwater property that offers a mini festival within the tour.

“We'll have hayrides to take visitors right into the middle of the chickens and cows,” says Christian. “There will be a farmer's market



Promised Land Homestead raises American Freedom Ranger Chickens / Photo by Laura Young



The Phillips family uses a bio-intensive approach to raise food on half an acre at Good Ground Farm / Photo by Laura Young / Photo by Laura Young

with vendors selling products like fresh produce, homemade jellies, sourdough bread, micro-greens and goat milk soap.”

A food truck will be grilling up Schmoie chicken and Boyd Farms Fresh beef, alongside live music featuring the rock rhythms of Dabbit on Saturday and the bluegrass sounds of Somethin' Sassy on Sunday. This tour stop may be a bit farther off the beaten track, but these farmers want to make it well worth the drive.

GOOD GROUND FARM

The tour presents a great variety of ways people grow food, and Good Ground Farm is a new tour stop that illustrates just how much can be done with a bio-intensive approach. Owner Kory Phillips tells how his first attempt at farming in southwest Florida ended with saltwater intrusion into their well. He persisted, but his second farm setup was destroyed by Hurricane Irma. Not willing to give up on his dream to live a debt-free, sustainable life on the land, he started looking for somewhere with higher ground not prone to flooding, an affordable place with quality groundwater, a home in the country yet not too far from a city.

Five acres in Monticello met all of his criteria, and last July he, his wife, Cassandra, and their two daughters, Abigail and Rebekah, moved to Jefferson County. They began putting a half acre of their property into intensive production, and not long after, baby Sarah arrived. The family grows around 30 different vegetables in a combination of hoop tunnels and open garden beds. Using human-scale production (no tractors, just a walk-behind tiller) and compost-based fertility, they raise enough to feed the family, offer a weekly produce subscription service (www.thegoodgroundfarm.com) and sell their veggies to buyers at the Red Hills Online Farmers Market (www.rhomarket.com), the Thomasville Farmers Market and the

Frenchtown Farmers Market. They are also a major supplier of the salad mix used at Tupelo's Bakery and Cafe in Monticello. Visitors on the tour can meet the family, see how they grow lush crops without synthetic aids and watch them demonstrate their tools and methods of production.

PROMISED LAND HOMESTEAD

Tobi and Tony Hester began their farming journey seven years ago when personal health issues led them to change their diet. To eliminate soy and corn consumption entirely, they took to raising grass-fed beef and sheep, pastured chickens, rabbits and honeybees. The Hester's 62-acre homestead in Lee includes open pasture, oak hammock bottoms and uncultivated ranch land where they practice rotational grazing and sustainable regeneration.

They rely on a network of like-minded homesteading farmers who help each other out by pitching in on labor-intensive tasks and sharing equipment like fish emulsion sprayers, planters and tractors. The Hesters love sharing what they are doing and learning, not just during the Farm Tour, but year-round to individuals, families and groups (see promisedlandhomestead.farm to schedule).

Visitors who come out to meet the Hesters during the Farm Tour can also meet baby rabbits, lambs and heritage American Freedom Ranger Chickens. A 40-minute hayride goes right up close to their heritage Florida Cracker Cattle, Florida Cracker Sheep and Gulf Coast Native Sheep, all of which are especially well suited to thrive in naturally sustained pastures.

"It's so important to know your local farmer, get connected and learn," says Tobi. "We can help each other."



Tobi Hester and her husband Tony raise Florida Cracker Sheep and Gulf Coast Native Sheep at Promised Land Homestead in Lee, along with heritage cattle, rabbits and bees / Photo by Laura Young

SERENITY ACRES FARM

Serenity Acres is a state-of-the-art goat farm in Pinetta that many visitors say feels like a sanctuary. They produce goat milk, yogurt and cheese, which is labeled and sold as "pet food" per Florida state law. Some of the goat milk also goes into their own brand of goat milk soap, and they now offer a successful line of other skincare products as well. Owners Julia and Wayne Shewchuk shifted from corporate careers into goat farming in 2008. They started with just three goats and quickly discovered that they really liked goats. Now their Animal Welfare Approved operation includes dozens of Nubian and Saanen goats as well as some Black Angus cattle, free range chickens, a couple of horses and an impressive pack of Great Pyrenees livestock guardian dogs.

Different pastures separate the milkers, the breeders, the young bucks and the retirees. The goats live out their full life on the farm, from being kids, to birthing and producing milk, to enjoying a well-earned retirement. The Shewchuk's success with natural, sustainable and ethical farming practices draws veterinary interns from around the world who come and stay at Serenity Acres for up to six months to learn how to run a goat farm. They also often have other helpers and volunteers in residence at the farm, along with RV campers who book a site on their property through the Harvest Hosts program.

For the interns and helpers, the farm day starts before 7 a.m., with one group inside milking and another group outside doing maintenance tasks like deep cleaning, mowing, checking fences, running the tractor or trimming hooves. The campers can take a farm tour any evening around 5 p.m., and what an interesting wayside stop it must be in their journey! The Shewchuks enjoy the steady



Julia and Wayne Shewchuk operate a state-of-the-art goat farm in Pinetta that many visitors say feels like a sanctuary / Photo by Laura Young



Photo by Majken Peterzen

flow of visitors throughout the year, and they've been a part of the Farm Tour since its early days. During this year's Farm Tour weekend in October, Serenity Acres will offer tractor rides, have learning stations, provide photo opportunities with the goats and set up a farm stand to sell their amazing range of products. Don't miss it!

MONTICELLO VINEYARDS & WINERY

The 50-acre farm of Ladybird Organics is also home to Monticello Vineyards &

Winery, which makes a range of wines on site from organic Muscadine grapes and fruits like blackberries, strawberries, peaches and satsumas that are grown in the Red Hills region. The farm and all vineyards have been USDA certified organic for more than 30 years. Owner and vintner Cynthia Connolly began the farm as a second career after working internationally in agricultural education. Handcrafted in small batches from hand-picked grapes, the wines she makes range from dry to sweet, with something to please every palate.

Connolly says, "I am very appreciative to our community, the folks who connect with and support the small and medium size food producing farmers in our area."

Visitors on the Farm Tour can meet the vintner, see how the grapes are grown, learn about the winemaking process, taste some wine and browse among what's available to purchase, either by the bottle or by the case.

JUST FRUITS AND EXOTICS

The Farm Tour not only puts local residents in contact with area farmers, but it also offers opportunities to learn how to grow your own food in your own yard, whatever its size or location. Imagine picking a fresh grapefruit right outside the kitchen window, cultivating a patch of berry bushes along the side fence or digging up ginger fresh from the earth just beyond the backdoor.

For 40 years, the folks at Just Fruits and Exotics in Crawfordville have been helping their customers find the right varieties to successfully grow in our climate, where it's hot and humid but also can freeze in the winter. They have a test orchard on site where they figure out for themselves what species will do well for their customers, and they provide specific guidance in person and through their website (justfruitsandexotics.com) for how to successfully cultivate the plants they sell.

The current owner, Jamake Robinson, grew up coming to Just Fruits and Exotics as a kid, and when its future became uncertain



The staff at Just Fruits & Exotics help their customers find locally tested varieties of fruit and herbs to successfully grow in their own yards / Photo Courtesy of Jamake Robinson

five years ago, he and his family decided to buy it.

"We didn't want it to go to the wayside," says Robinson. "We wanted to keep it going and expand. We wanted to become a resource to the area and to communities that don't have a similar nursery nearby."

Visitors to Just Fruits and Exotics will get to see numerous cold-hardy citrus varieties, Asian persimmons, peaches, plums, pears, mulberries and blueberries, plus many less well known items like pineapple guava bushes, melonberry trees and jujube trees. Take a look, but also stop by the tasting table to discover what you could enjoy growing at your own home.

There's nothing quite like the Farm Tour! Be sure to get a copy of the guidebook to read descriptions of all the farms on this year's tour and decide which ones you'd like to visit. You can even download a geo-referenced list of the sites and use it with a navigational app like Avenza Maps.

Whether you're a consumer getting out to appreciate where your food comes from, a fellow farmer interested in what other farms are up to, or someone with an itch to scratch the earth and get things growing yourself, there's something on the Farm Tour for everyone. ■



Millstone Honey / Photo by Majken Peterzen

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October 22, 2022



Perry, FL

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

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ADMISSION!

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Saturday October 8th: Little King & Queen Pageant 6pm

Wednesday October 19th -Saturday October 22nd: Carnival

Thursday, October 20th: Fireworks at 8:00 p.m. sharp at the Perry-Foley Airport

Friday, October 21st: Downtown Events

Kid's Fun Run 5:30 p.m. , Kids' Parade 6:15 p.m. and the Strut Your Mutt Contest at 6:45 p.m.

Saturday, October 22nd FESTIVAL DAY!!

Downtown Events: King Tree Parade 9:30 a.m.

Forest Capital State Park: (ALL DAY) Arts & Crafts, Heavy Equipment Exhibit, World's Largest Free Fish Fry Noon, Chainsaw, Cross Cut & Loader Competitions, Military Vehicle Show, Carnival!

Entertainment 12:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. Andy Pursell, River Dan and the Green Farm Road Band



floridaforestfestival.org 850-584-TREE (8733)



Manuel Smyrnios

One of three, and one of a kind



The Smyrnios triplets are completely identical. Pictured here, from left to right are Gus, Manuel and George.

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photographs Courtesy of Manuel Smyrnios

The chances of having identical triplets organically are extremely slim. Although experts cannot agree on the exact statistical percentage, the chance falls somewhere between one in 60 thousand and one in 200 million natural pregnancies. Non-identical triplets are still rare, but are more common. These triplets are called trizygotic triplets, meaning that they come from three individual eggs that are fertilized by three individual sperm. Identical triplets, or monozygotic triplets, occur when a single egg is fertilized by a single sperm, and the resulting zygote evenly divides into three

separate, healthy zygotes, which then develop into fetuses and, subsequently, babies. This split occurs shortly after fertilization and before a woman even suspects she is pregnant.

When identical triplets are formed, they are said to share the same DNA, gender, characteristics and features. For Manuel Smyrnios and his two identical brothers, this couldn't be more accurate. At 54 years old, Manuel is the youngest by just eight minutes, and the three identical brothers are extremely close, even as adults. While many people may ask the trio what it was like growing up as triplets, Manuel's answer is a simple one.

"It is all we know," he says. "We just grew up in it, so we don't really have anything different to compare it with. As far as growing up goes, we absolutely loved it. It has to be different than growing up as a single child or with siblings who are a few years apart, but we can't really say what those differences are. We grew up the same age, with the same appearance. Even beyond that, there is a deeper connection. You always hear people talk about it with twins and triplets, that deep connection between them. We can read one another, and know what the other is thinking just based on the slightest look or inflection. Kind of like when you know someone your



Manuel and his wife of 31 years, Misty. The pair met in college in 1988 and together have three children.

whole life, like a best friend. You just know."

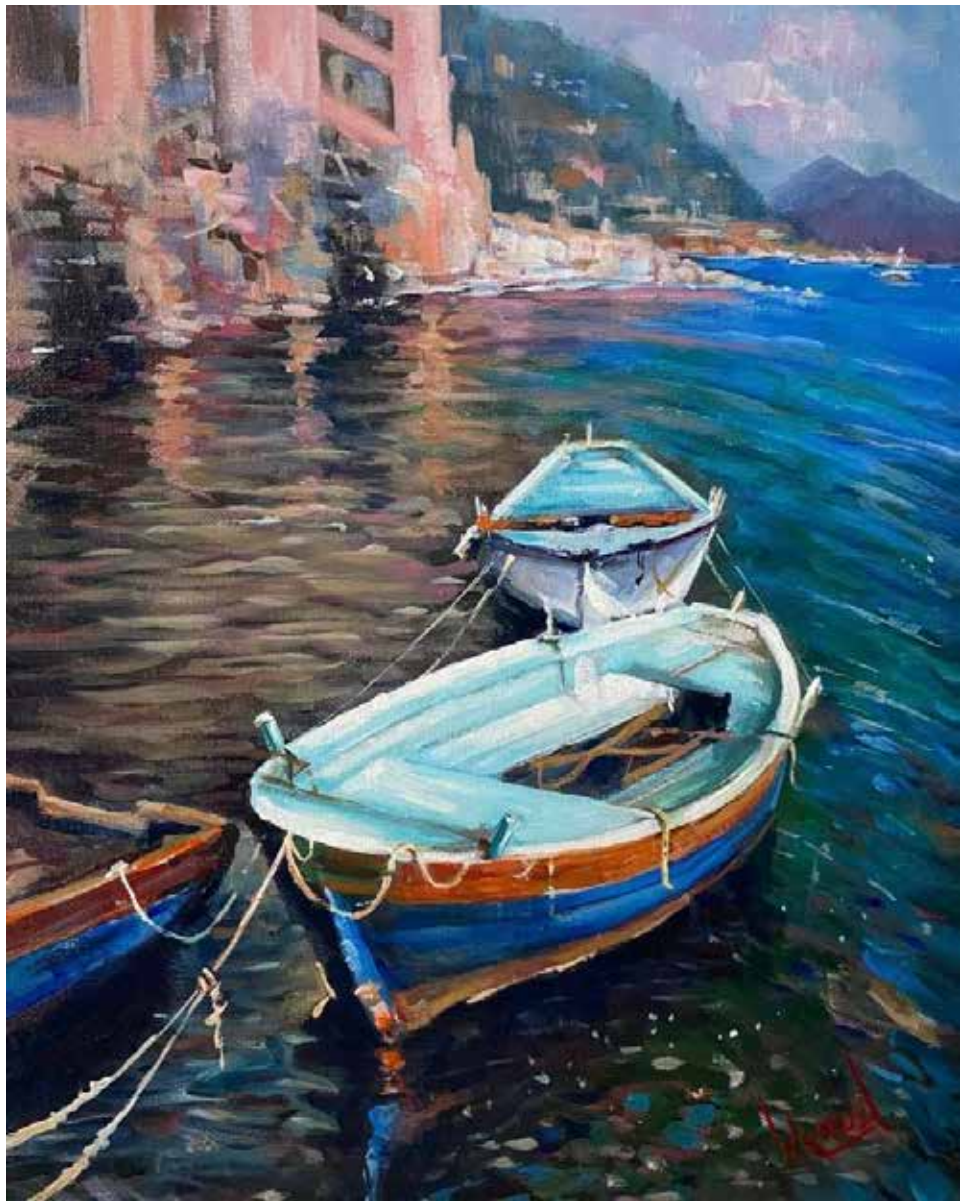
Manuel and his brothers grew up in the Madison, Taylor and Jefferson County areas, attending Aucilla Christian Academy with a close network of friends. "There were just 17 of us in my graduating class of 1987," recalls Manuel, adding that many of his close friendships exist to this day.

"I was a little confused right out of high school," admits Manuel. "It's not realistic to expect an 18-year-old kid to know what they want to do for the rest of their life, who they want to be. I had a few things in mind, but didn't really know what I wanted to do. My dad was a trooper for FHP for 28 years, and he presented a good image for us growing up, so I always sort of thought about being a trooper like he was. After graduation, I went to college, but being a trooper was always in the back of my mind. After about two years of college, I left and applied for a job working for FHP. As they say, the rest is history."

His work as a Florida State Trooper included a relocation for him and his family, as his first assignment after graduating from the academy was in Ft. Meyers, Fla. Although the family has lived there since 1991, his heart remains passionately connected to the roots of his hometown, and Manuel says he likes to visit as often as he can.

"We've made it a sort of 'home away from home' here, but there's just no place like home," he said. "Gus, my mom and my sister all still live in Perry, so I try to come and see them about four or five times each year. I also attend festivals in that area."

At the festivals, he regularly showcases a unique and impressive talent that he alone possesses out of the three triplets. Manuel is an artist, specializing in acrylic



paintings that depict a vast variety of stunning locations and heart-stopping action scenes. Although it is very common for identical triplets to share a great deal of characteristics and abilities, Manuel says that his artistic inclinations are his alone.

"As a youngster, I was the only one who was left-handed and who had any inclination for art," recalls Manuel. "I was always sketching, but I never really thought about it like a hobby or anything. It was just something I did, that I enjoyed doing. In college, I would often be drawing instead



of doing my homework. My girlfriend (who at the time I didn't know would one day become my lovely wife) and I would go

to the library to study, and I'd just end up drawing the whole time and not getting any studying done!"

It was his wife Misty who later pushed Manuel into pursuing his creativity in a more tangible way than just idle sketching. About six years ago, before his retirement, Manuel suffered a herniated disk and was required to take six months off work in order to recover fully.

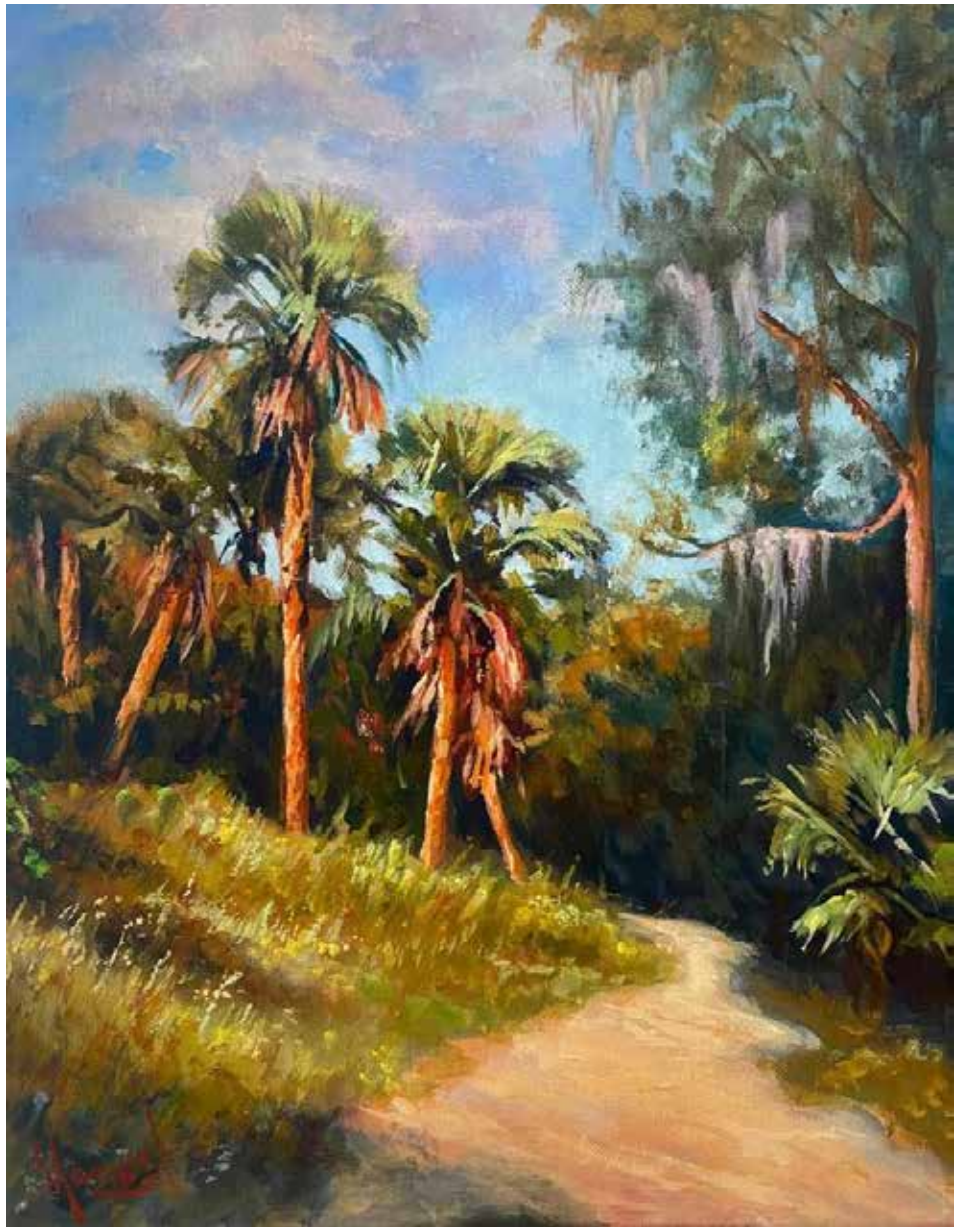
"Six months is a long time to be at home doing nothing," he said, adding that his wife suggested he use some of his newly found free time to focus on his art, recommending turning some of his sketches and drawings into paintings. "At first, I resisted. I thought it was just too much hassle! You have to get the canvases, and the brushes, and the supplies and everything. And then you have to deal with the clean up. It just seemed like too much work."

"Then one Father's Day, I was given a session for a painting class at a place called Painting with a Twist. You get to bring your own wine or drink or whatever and they provide all the supplies, the brushes and canvases and everything, plus they handle all the clean up. You just do the painting part. That was much more up my alley," said Manuel. "After my first time there, I was hooked! We went out and got canvases, an easel and brushes. From that first session, I never stopped."

Today, Manuel's body of work contains magnificent paintings that depict not just the tranquil peace of untouched Florida landscape and wildlife, but also the immediacy of intense moments captured in the peak of action. Some paintings exhibit the silent solitude of sun-kissed ecosystems, while others capture the harsh ferocity of stormy seas, wild chases and turbulent skies. Although his work is done using strictly acrylic paints, it displays a clear skill regarding manipulation of color, stroke and form to give his acrylic pieces a semblance akin to oil paintings, but without the heavy price tags.

When it comes to sharing his artwork with others, Manuel believes that art should be something that is available for everyone to enjoy. "Making art isn't for everyone, but everyone enjoys art in some capacity," he says. "Everyone has 'the painting' that has the ability to stop them in their tracks. You just have to find the type of art that speaks to them. It's a pity when someone has to walk away from a piece that really speaks to them because they cannot afford it."

This mentality fuels Manuel's pricing of his artwork. "Whenever I am at a gallery, and I see these little paintings with huge price tags on them, it just makes me sad. Not everyone has thousands of dollars they



can drop on a painting they really like, and why would they have to? They end up walking away from a piece they really enjoyed and felt connected to. I try to keep my paintings priced on the lower end. Even with that, if someone really feels connected to one of my pieces, I try to make it happen. I'd rather people go home with a piece of work they like than to feel like they have to walk away without it."

While some professional artists may argue that low prices for quality, original paintings is a bad business practice, Manuel maintains that for him, his art isn't a business. "I don't do this for a living," he muses. "This isn't work for me. Painting is fun. You get to do figure studies and experiment with blending out colors. You can make them faded and blurry, or sharp and vibrant. You can sketch out ideas on a canvas and work it around until it looks how you want it to. It's fun."





Manuel, Gus and George Smyrnios

When asked what part of being an artist he finds most enjoyable, Manuel says the answer isn't such a simple one. "It's tricky," he admitted, after some thought. "It isn't just one thing, one aspect, but all of the different aspects of creating art. It just feels like what I am supposed to do. Opening a new canvas, and letting the creativity take over,



Manuel stands behind his brothers, Gus (left) and George (right)

it's like creating magic, almost. You get to bring an image, a piece of art to life that has never existed before."

Manuel has an online gallery on Facebook called Manny's Art Gallery, where he showcases his stunning array of paintings, and where some interested onlookers may inquire about paintings



Gus (#9), Manuel (#6) and George (#2)

that they wish to purchase. While he does package and ship paintings to clients who live out of his local area, Manuel says that face-to-face sales are by far his favorite, as he enjoys meeting the people who admire his art, and prefers to make real-life connections with his customers.

Manuel has been a staple vendor at the



Florida Forest Festival in Perry, Fla., for the last four years, and will be there displaying his work at the Art and Craft vendor show that will be open during the festival on Saturday, Oct. 22.

Although his art keeps him busy, Manuel also enjoys a variety of other activities, such as baseball, football, weightlifting and fitness. He and his wife, Misty, have been married for 31 years and together have three children, who are grown. "We met in college in 1988," he said, "and she has been the best mother and the best wife I could ask for. She has been with me through it all. And while I loved my job working in law enforcement, and really did enjoy that line of work, you do sometimes find yourself in some tricky situations. She has been a rock, with me through thick and thin."

Much like Manuel followed his family legacy through law enforcement, Misty comes from a long family line of educators. She currently is beginning her second year as an assistant principal, a job that Manuel says she absolutely loves.

While Ft. Meyers is currently where the Smyrnios family resides, Manuel says his heart has never left his hometown areas of Madison, Taylor and Jefferson Counties, and he expressed his wishes to someday return home.



"When I think of the tri-county area, there's no amount of words that can express how it feels to be there. It's home. Those feelings of belonging, the spiritual connection, you just can't create that. Anytime I find myself back in the area I grew up, I feel like I am right where I'm

supposed to be."

While his deep connection to his triplet brothers makes him easily recognizable (and somewhat indiscernible) as one of three, his amazing skill and artistic ability certainly help to set him apart, making him truly one of a kind. ■





Neal Dunn

Dr. Neal Dunn never considered running for public office. However, when failed healthcare policies started impacting his urology practice, he felt called to do more for his patients and his country.

Neal Dunn comes from a long line of soldiers and public servants. He knows that if you want something done right, you roll up your sleeves and get to work. And his background as a physician, soldier and businessman has proven beneficial in his six years in office.

There are currently less than 20 physicians serving in Congress, which makes Dr. Dunn's insight invaluable, especially as we continue to combat COVID-19. At the height of the pandemic, he spoke out against government overreach, unnecessary handouts and lockdowns. He also challenged many of Dr. Anthony Fauci's flawed recommendations.

Dr. Dunn knows that medical decisions should be made by you and your doctor, not the federal government. That's why he is committed to preserving the doctor-patient relationship. Additionally, he focuses on improving access to care and life-saving screenings, especially after many Americans missed their annual cancer screenings due to the lockdowns during the pandemic.

But Dr. Dunn's expertise doesn't stop at health care. As a businessman and community leader, Neal Dunn uses his experiences to find solutions for common issues in North Florida. Following Hurricanes Irma and Michael, the congressman fought for Florida timber producers, offering numerous amendments to the Supplemental Disaster Funding bill to ensure that timber producers were included in the disaster aid passed by Congress in June 2019.

He also introduced a bill that requires the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to reimburse local governments and electric cooperatives burdened with millions of dollars in interest payments incurred on loans used



Congressman Neal Dunn

to restore essential services after natural disasters. The language from Dr. Dunn's bill was recently included in the RESTORE America Act that passed in the U.S. House.

After owning a small business, Neal Dunn knows firsthand how damaging high taxes, supply chain woes and staffing shortages can be. The congressman continuously fights back against frivolous spending and tax increases. He also meets regularly with local county officials, law enforcement, first responders, farmers and

foresters. These people are the backbone of Florida's Second Congressional District, and Neal Dunn knows North Florida cannot thrive without them.

Over the last six years, Dr. Dunn's experience helped him successfully represent this region, and there's still more he would like to accomplish. This is why he's seeking re-election this November. As he often says, "The people of North Florida have been good to my family and me. It's my turn to do some good for them." ■

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Re-elect
Dr. Neal
Dunn

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Estic Rollings (in the back, second from the right), a retired school teacher from the Taylor County school system, joins students from a South African elementary school. These students received school supplies through the Rollings Foundation. As an extra bonus, they enjoyed a lesson taught by Rollings.

THE ROLLINGS FOUNDATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE *from Taylor County to the World*

Story by Rick Patrick

Photographs Courtesy of the Rollings Foundation

"For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and my blessings on your descendants." Isaiah 44:3

Since 2008, the Rollings Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, operating out of Dallas, Texas, has been helping to pour out water onto the thirsty land in South Africa. The foundation was begun by William Rollings, a 1987 graduate of Taylor County High School (TCHS), in Perry, Fla., after visiting the South Africa region with his wife, Grenna, who hails from South Africa.

"I immediately saw the need for clean drinking water in many communities," said Rollings. "We decided to start the

foundation to help address the need for clean drinking water and food security. My wife's [Grenna's] father is a pastor there in South Africa. We help provide funding and the local church helps provide the manpower."

According to a statement on the foundation's website, "We envision a world where people can use their God given abilities to provide for themselves and improve their own lives. The foundation aims to encourage and equip people in South Africa to become self-sufficient. We will work closely with targeted communities to develop and implement solutions to help people overcome poverty. [The foundation] aims to give people better access to nutritious food. We want people to know where their next meal is coming from. By helping people produce their own food, they will have a longer term solution

to fight hunger and provide food for their families. On a daily basis, many people die due to diseases caused by unclean drinking water. Providing clean water will improve people's health and save their lives."

Since the foundation's beginning, thousands of lives have been greatly impacted. As of December of 2019, a total of 22 water wells have been dug and four water tanks have been put into use. More than 70,000 school lunches have been served to children from primary school age through high school.

Rollings is the son of Estic Rollings, a retired and beloved English teacher who taught many years at TCHS. Estic is also an inductee into the Taylor County Educators Hall of Fame. It is obvious that proud is quite the understatement when speaking of William and his work with the foundation. Estic has helped gather support locally



THE ROLLINGS FOUNDATION

for the foundation and has even had the opportunity to travel to South Africa with school supplies provided by the foundation to help teach children (or as Estic fondly calls them, “young scholars,” a term of endearment she has used to describe generations of students).

“Several years ago, God afforded me and the mission team with an opportunity to go into [this] South African class and teach a lesson. I was engulfed with humility. The ‘scholars’ were immensely focused, precocious, respectful and grateful for the diverse gifts that God had bestowed upon them,” said Estic on her memories of that trip. “We must be the change that we desire to see in the world. It is a blessing to bless others.”

Upon graduating from TCHS, Rollings went on to Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), where he earned a degree in computer information systems. He soon went to work for Texaco, the oil company, in Texas. Rollings also earned a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. Currently, he works for the federal government in the area of real estate sales, in addition to his work with the foundation.

He has also written two daily devotional books. One is entitled “Jump Start Your Day,” which he followed up with “Jump Start the Next Generation.”

“I wrote the books to be a practical devotional guide to help people see the work God does in our lives, on a daily basis,” said Rollings. Both books are available on Amazon.

Just as jupples spread out when a



pebble is dropped into a pond, so does the work of the Rollings Foundation. Through donations, great and small, communities are able to have life-saving, clean drinking water. Because of the generosity of every-day people, like William Rollings, children are being fed nutritious food. How many more lives will be changed for the better by those children when they are able to reach adulthood and continue their own positive impact on the world? In that way, simple acts of kindness can, and will, help change the world. It is up to us to "be the change we desire to see in the world."

To make a tax-deductible donation to the Rollings Foundation or for more information about the foundation, please visit their website at: www.rollingsfoundation.org. ■



William Rollings, a native of Perry, Fla., has been helping the people of South Africa through the Rollings Foundation. Pictured, from left to right, are: Alexis, Grenna, William and Alyssa Rollings.

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Jason Spicer:

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH



Story by Mickey Starling

Photographs Courtesy of April Spicer

Jason Spicer could have a great conversation with King David, from the Bible. They have a lot in common. Psalm 23 is now much more than a lovely passage for Jason. The “valley of the shadow of death” became an ever-present reality for a self-made man who thought he could handle almost anything. He was accustomed to long hours and hard work. And, as a genuinely tough son of the South, he was okay with that.

All of that changed in the early-morning hours of July 21, 2021, when he began having trouble breathing. Jason ended up in the emergency room of Madison County Memorial Hospital, diagnosed with COVID-19. ARNP Luci Strickland asked that his wife, April, pray that going on a ventilator could be avoided. Unfortunately, the ventilator was necessary, and Jason’s health was rapidly declining. Strickland eventually recommended that April come see him, fearing that he could soon die.

Jason continued clinging to life, so the search began for a room at a nearby hospital where Jason could receive the intensive care that he needed. After days of phone calls to hospitals that were overwhelmed with COVID patients, a room was finally located at South Georgia Medical Center (SGMC), in Valdosta.

COVID, however, was just beginning to unleash hell’s fury on Jason’s body. Along with his breathing difficulties, which were exacerbated by an additional infection and double pneumonia, Jason soon required a tracheotomy. He was burning up with a relentless fever of 104 degrees. Desperate to lower his temperature, doctors placed Jason on a bed of ice for about a week.

Since he was heavily sedated, Jason had no idea why he was so cold. Even in sleep, Jason dreamed of cold scenarios, some of which included lying next to people who were frozen to death. Jason had now been dealing with COVID for about two months, and despairing of life and thoughts of death were becoming more common. He was so sedated that he couldn’t move. His body was consumed with fever even while lying on ice. Adding to the mix was an unusual swelling in his stomach that previously had gone unnoticed. Such factors can make death seem a sweet alternative.

Even so, love has always been more powerful than death, and it would soon play a strong hand in ushering Jason back to the land of the living. Sharon McClune, a former nursing instructor at North Florida College, was aware of Jason’s condition. She happened across a recording of his son, Waylon, singing. McClune sent a link of the recording to Jason’s nurse, who kept it playing by his bedside.

Jason’s spirits were lifted by the sound of his son’s voice, and he resumed his fight to survive. That fight would be called upon several more times in the coming weeks and months. Jason had already flatlined once because his tracheotomy had shifted, causing him to be unable to breathe. When breathing wasn’t an issue, hunger was. Though he still couldn’t move, the tracheotomy allowed for some talking, and Jason began inquiring why the food cart was never stopping in his room.

“You aren’t eating from there,” the nurse replied, while showing him his IV and feeding tube.

“That really broke me down,” remembers Jason. “I realized I was in serious shape.”

Another indication of just how serious his condition was came from a

doctor whose bedside manner could have used improvement. Referring to the many sedatives required to keep Jason from moving, he stated, “You have more medicine in you than Michael Jackson did when he died.”

After about six weeks in SGMC, Jason was transferred to Specialty Select Hospital in Tallahassee, Fla., where he could receive more extensive physical therapy. In reality, most COVID patients who were being sent there rarely survived due to the damage the virus had already inflicted upon them.

Jason, though, was continuing to prove that he wasn’t like most patients. As he was entering the ambulance for the trip to Tallahassee, his tracheotomy shifted again, almost killing him for the second time. Had this occurred after the ambulance had left, he probably would not have survived, but



Jason gets the first haircut he’s had in a while.

the strong hands of love and faith never relinquished their grip on Jason. He was now regularly praying for God to spare him if He still had plans for him.

Despite the continuous flow of problems and setbacks, Jason was finally able to make physical contact with his wife. Even those happy moments were overshadowed by the fact that he wasn't expected to live more than a week.

Having now lived in the valley of the shadow of death for more than two months, prayers and support from churches and individuals were pouring in, despite the steady stream of issues pointing towards Jason's demise. The week came and went, as did the next three weeks, and Jason continued to receive physical therapy.

"They were picking me up out of bed with what looked like a cherry picker," says Jason.

Finally, he had improved enough to be moved to a regular room, but his ordeal was far from over. After a month of rehabilitation, Jason was transferred to Encompass Health Rehabilitation Hospital of Tallahassee for even more extensive therapy. At this point, he was still barely lifting his fingers, because the months of sedation had severely weakened him. After observing his condition, a staff member made a comment that his wife had heard far too often: "I don't even know why he's here."

That mysterious swelling in Jason's stomach continued to worsen while in Tallahassee. When an alert nurse insisted that tests be conducted to determine the cause of the swelling, an abscess was discovered that covered the entire width of Jason's stomach, which required a drainage tube and antibiotics. After so many weeks on his back, bedsores were becoming a



significant issue as well.

In the midst of all these trials, a high fever returned, and Jason was sent to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital (TMH), where 3.8 liters of fluid were drained from his stomach. His condition improved and worsened several times, causing him to be shuttled between TMH and Encompass on several occasions.

While at Encompass, Jason began to steadily improve. Though still equipped with a feeding tube, he began eating lightly, and, with the help of a machine, he was

lifted out of bed and began walking some. He was sent home for the first time on Nov. 16, 2021, although he was not feeling well. After being home for a week without any improvement, Jason headed back to TMH with more swelling in his stomach. TMH staff quickly surmised that they had done all they could do, so Jason was sent to Shands Hospital, in Gainesville, Fla., after a 10-day wait for an opening.

At this point, Jason has become all too familiar with tubes. His swelling required two more drainage tubes. A little more than



Fully on the mend, Jason and his wife and kids enjoy a night out. Pictured, clockwise from left to right, are: Keith, Waylon, Emilee, April and Jason.



Looking and feeling better, Jason gives a thumbs up to signify his hope for a full recovery.



a month later, his pancreas and gallbladder began acting up, and two more tubes were required. The pancreas eventually failed and the gallbladder was still awaiting removal.

As the new year rolled around, Jason had improved enough to go home on Jan. 3. His very supportive family was thrilled that the man who had been given perpetual death sentences for the last several months was now leaving the valley of the shadow of death and walking through the front door of home, sweet home.

On Feb. 18, Jason and the family enjoyed a night out at Bonefish Grill in Tallahassee. April was concerned that he might be overeating and gently chided his exuberance at the dinner table. On the trip home, Jason began having chest pains, which were assumed to be heartburn.

As time passed, the pain increased and Jason asked his daughter, Emilee, to bring him a fan because he was sweating.

"The pain was horrible," recalls Jason. "I finally had to call an ambulance."

The EMTs quickly suspected he was having a heart attack. They were correct. One blocked artery was found, requiring a stent to be inserted through his wrist. Miraculously, there was no damage to his heart.

Today, Jason is a tube-free, changed man.

"God never left my side," says Jason. "This experience has taught me that you have a choice. You can say 'Why, Lord,' or

you can get closer to Him. I got a lot closer. I have slowed down and appreciate daily living. I now know that, with God, all things are possible."

April echoes those sentiments. After months of presenting a brave face each day and crying herself to sleep at night, April has a personal understanding of what it really means to trust God, even when it seems there is no hope left.

"There was a lot of fear," recalls April. "But, churches, individuals and strangers sent money and prayed endlessly for us. The world is full of evil, but there are a lot of good people out there. This experience has made us better people. If we had to face death today, we would be all right with it. We know we will wake up in His presence."

For the Spicers, each day is its own gift, no matter what comes. Jason is eternally grateful to April for all she did to support him physically and spiritually through the entire ordeal. When the threat of death has loomed over you each day for months, perspective comes easily. And when the Lord walks you out of that valley against all odds, His peace becomes the greatest present of all. ■



Though very weak after being released from the hospital, Jason couldn't resist picking a wildflower for April.



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The Bulldogs Legacy

Story by Lee Trawick

Today, Suwannee High School (SHS) is known for their championships. Most notably they had four consecutive football Florida State Championships between 1987 and 1990. SHS had previously won the Northeastern Conference Championship, in 1955. To the class of 1987, however, the 1955 championship was almost mythical. Prior to 1985, the Suwannee Bulldogs football team had not had a winning season in 15 years.

In order to talk about the four consecutive state championships, Bulldog nation has to go back to the 1985 football team. It was that team that built the precedent for a winning expectation and a standard of excellence. Bulldogs great Matt Frier talks about what the 1985 football team means to the Bulldogs football program.

"You can't talk about the state championships without talking about Frankie Stankunis, Bill Ragans, Jeery Brown and those guys on that 1985 team," Frier says. "We all went to camp that summer and none of us had a clue what we were getting into, looking back on that summer. Those were men that survived that camp, and those guys I just mentioned led us at camp that summer. Frankie Stankunis embodied everything coach Pittman wanted from us, so to see how hard he was working only pushed us all to keep with him. That really set the tone for that season."

ENTER MIKE PITTMAN

Mike Pittman, an alumni of the SHS Class of 1969, had played center for the Suwannee Bulldogs. After college, Pittman joined the coaching ranks at Lowndes County. He was an assistant coach when Lowndes County won a state championship, which made Pittman an obvious choice for SHS athletic director. Although Pittman had never been a head coach before, he knew how to win. Thus, in 1985, the Pittman era began at SHS.

80 WENT TO CAMP

The first thing Pittman knew he had to do was change the culture that surrounded the Bulldogs football program. In order to do that, he had to find football players. He wasn't looking for the fastest, the biggest



or the strongest; he was only interested in football players. Pittman laughs today when thinking of that summer camp in 1985.

"I don't think those boys realized what they were getting into. They were expecting more of a fun summer camp atmosphere," Pittman says. "Every day we would run them, and in one particular place where we ran them there was a phone. I would tell them, 'There is no shame if you want to stop and use the phone to call your moms. Nothing will be said to anyone. Your moms can come and get you and that will be it.' We took 80 kids to camp. We came back with 19 football players," Pittman recalls.

FINALLY A WINNING SEASON

As the 1985 season got underway, the community was not completely sold on Pittman as the coach who could turn the program around. It wasn't until the win over rival the Columbia Tigers that season that the community bought in. The Bulldogs finished the season just shy of the playoffs with a 7-4 record. The takeaway from that team was far more than the 7-4 record they produced. The culture also was changing at SHS.

"Those kids were so used to losing, they just wanted to win," Pittman remembers. "I was fortunate to have good football players on that team. They just outworked everyone and set a standard that still remains today."

A NEW MINDSET

The following season, the Bulldogs were a young team.

"Any time you have to play sophomores, you are going to struggle," Pittman says, "but we had a group of football players that wouldn't quit."

The Bulldogs finished the '86 season 5-5 and lost the district championship to Godby High School 20-14. As with the '85 team, the '86 season had plenty of moments to build on, such as the final play against Santa Fe High School when Stankunis simply out-jumped all defenders for a Hail Mary of a pass to win the game. At that moment, the players believed they could win, despite only having a 5-5 record and coming off a better record the previous season.

"That play was something I'll never forget" Frier says. "It was at that moment I think we all fell in love with winning. That play changed everything for us. Before that play, we hoped to win. We were confident that, if we did everything right, we would win; but after that play we expected to win. We all wanted that feeling again, and coach Pittman demanded it from us. Coach Pittman wanted us to understand, if you don't expect to win then you have already lost. We took that and ran with it."

During that season, Bulldog nation saw firsthand why Pittman put such emphasis on his offensive and defensive lines.

According to Pittman, "The players got it. I think when we were playing Madison and our offensive and defensive lines dominated the game, we were able to control the whole game because our linemen just whooped up on Madison and made the game easy for us."

The players were not the only ones starting to get a taste of winning. The fans were as well. Pittman noticed a difference in the fans when he arrived in 1985 compared with the fans of 1988.

"You know, all through that first season, I would constantly have parents and fans yelling at me from the stands, calling me everything you could think of. Then, after that first state championship, parents were yelling at me to get on their kids. 'Get him coach,'" Pittman recalls them saying.

PRESEASON #1

Pittman was excited about his 1987 team. He understood that the once-sophomores were now veterans of the game. It was time the Suwannee Bulldogs

took that next step.

Frier recalls, "I don't know what it was about that season, but coach was telling anyone that would listen, the Bulldogs were going to win the state championship that year. That was crazy. There we were, coming off a 5-5 season, and we hadn't ever won a district championship much less anything close to a state championship."

Yet there they were, ranked number one in every preseason poll. Frier says that Pittman really sold it to everyone. Maybe the players didn't fully comprehend what they had, but Pittman had previously been a part of a state championship team in Lowndes County, and therefore he knew what a state championship team looked like. Regardless of the hype, the Bulldogs had to win first.

"We knew we were going to be good," Frier remembers, "but we had no idea where that team was going to go. Remember, we had never won anything."

A state championship seemed so far off, like a dream they could barely imagine.

THE PATH TO VICTORY

The Bulldogs, led by quarterback Jay Jernigan, opened the 1987 season against Hamilton County High School. In that game, the Bulldogs saw a glimpse of what the season could be. In week two against Quincy High School, the Bulldogs continued to roll, but they still had not hit their full potential. The next few games seem to prove to everyone – the players included – that perhaps what coach Pittman was selling could be true. They went on to win their first five games, outscoring their opponents 174-64. Then the Bulldogs saw the impossible come to life: they lost to Leon County High School. The Bulldogs answered by winning three straight games and clinching the district championship against the Taylor County Bulldogs 21-6. This set them up for a matchup with rival Columbia for the final regular season game, where the Bulldogs were handed their second loss of the season. Like their response to their first loss that season, the Bulldogs followed with three straight wins. This time, though, the third win was not a district championship but instead the state championship.

In the first round of the playoffs, the Bulldogs left little doubt after dominating the Walton County High School Braves on their way to a 33-7 victory. Some may not have agreed with Pittman calling the play to throw the ball deep down the field to try and score with only minutes remaining in the game that was clearly over. Perhaps they did not know the backstory going into the game. The Braves head coach had refused to share game tape with the Bulldogs. Then, Pittman recalls, to make matters worse for the Braves, their coach was so arrogant about his team that before

kickoff he said, "If you think you can beat me as bad as you can, do it. Because I am going to try and beat you as bad as I can."

Next, the Bulldogs were matched up against a familiar foe in the Santa Fe Raiders. While the Raiders were able to score 24 points against the Bulldogs, the Raiders could not stop the Bulldogs as they ran away with 49 points of their own. With the win over the Raiders, the Bulldogs were set to play for the elusive state championship they had heard about all preseason and throughout the regular season.

THE FIGHT

Upon arriving in Naples for the big game, the Bulldogs were so amped to play, they could not control their emotions during practice.

"My defense broke out in to a fight," Pittman remembers. "Then, two of my managers got in a fight. We finally got all that under control, and after we ran one play of offense another fight broke out. But you have to understand, our team was extremely competitive, and they were just ready to play. I asked them if they were ready, and they said 'yes,' so we wrapped up practice right then."

STATE CHAMPIONS

Finally, for the first time ever, the Bulldogs were playing for a Florida State Championship. Only one team stood in their way, the Lely High School Trojans in Naples. Pittman says he studied his opponent to the point of obsession.

"I studied them and knew we didn't have anything to worry about. We knew we were going to win," Pittman says. "At halftime, we were up 28-0, and they couldn't stop us."

The Bulldogs made easy work of the Trojans on their way to a 35-7 win and their first ever state championship.

It was the first of four straight state championships the Bulldogs would win from 1987 to 1990. Pittman describes the local culture in Suwannee County during those years as unreal. The entire community was bought in, and everywhere you went businesses had something in their window that showed their support of Bulldogs football.

"Suwannee High School football coach is the greatest job in the country," reflects Pittman. "It's the only job I ever wanted."

The legacy built by those teams still looms over Paul Langford Stadium today. The standard of excellence is not only strived for throughout SHS but expected.

"What I love about high school football is anyone can play. All you have to do is come out," Pittman says. "That '87 state championship team was everyone in the right place at the right time. We had talented players up and down our roster, but most importantly we had homegrown football players and we simply outworked our opponents." ■

1987 Suwannee Bulldogs Roster

No. 1	Satish Singh
No. 15	Travis Baker
No. 41	Syron Depass
No. 70	David Bass
No. 2	Jay Jernigan
No. 18	Jerry Fletcher
No. 43	Bret Bonds
No. 76	Kevin Bender
No. 3	Jay Harvard
No. 22	Bill Stubbs
No. 44	Eric Smith
No. 77	Gantt Crouch
No. 5	John Palmer
No. 23	Buddy Hogan
No. 55	Matt McMilan
No. 79	Jessie Chaires
No. 6	Chris Murat
No. 25	Dexter Haynes
No. 56	Bobby Hart
No. 80	R.J. Williams
No. 8	Steven O'Steen
No. 26	Charlie Hines
No. 61	Sean O'Hara
No. 81	Derrick Manning
No. 10	Curt Harrell
No. 27	Tracy Brown
No. 62	Donnie Brown
No. 82	Brent Ryals
No. 11	Andy Williams
No. 29	Terry Williams
No. 63	Ty Robinson
No. 85	Robbie Bosserman
No. 12	Matt Frier
No. 30	Dwayne Mobley
No. 64	Barry Roberson
No. 86	Matt Harrell
No. 13	Jamie Gaylord
No. 33	Conel Crockton
No. 65	Sammy Starling
No. 87	Brad Howard
No. 14	Eddie Johnson
No. 40	Chad Mobley
No. 68	Curtis Bass
No. 88	Patrick Taylor



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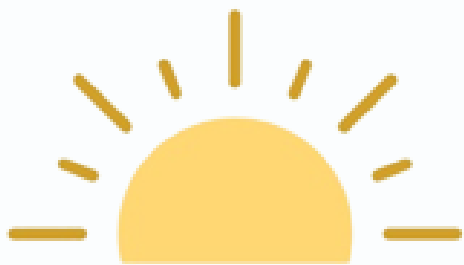
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A life of distinction

Story by Lazaro Aleman

Photographs Courtesy of John Nelson

John Nelson strives for excellence in whatever he does, not letting barriers or obstacles stand in the way of progress. Indeed, he views barriers and obstacles as challenges to be overcome on the path to personal and social growth.

From his school days through his college years, military service, professional career with the State of Florida, stint as a Jefferson County commissioner and thereafter, Nelson has ever sought to distinguish himself – all the while holding firm to his convictions, voicing his views unafraid, and standing his ground. He moreover is an accomplished saxophonist, who has performed in small and large venues, and is a public speaker with Toastmaster International credentials.

Even today, in his 70s and retired, Nelson remains active in the community and engaged in the issues that pertain to the betterment of his fellowmen. You will still see him about town and at public hearings and events, or working quietly behind the scenes, always impeccably dressed, moderated in his speech and strong-willed in his advocacies. And he continues performing with the saxophone and giving talks whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Born and raised in Monticello, Nelson attended Howard Academy, Jefferson County's all black segregated school. He graduated sixth in his class of 88 students in 1966, four years before desegregation of the schools arrived locally.

Nelson recalls that at the time many opposed integration, and hence a biracial committee was appointed to help smooth the transition. The committee, he says, came up with what was called Freedom of Choice, which afforded black families the option of sending their children to Howard Academy or to the white schools. Black families, he says, came under economic pressure to dissuade them from integrating.

"The pressure was on black families because many of them worked as domestics or farm hands, and their white bosses didn't want integration," Nelson says.

He applauds the several brave black families who defied the pressure and sent their kids to the white schools. He also recalls the abuse that these first black students underwent at the hands of their white counterparts. Yet despite the abuse, the black students went on to graduate and distinguish themselves in the greater





world, he says. It was these experiences that shaped his views and prompted his interest in the NAACP.

Offered a college basketball athletic scholarship upon graduation, Nelson chose Alabama State over Savannah State and enrolled in a program to earn a music degree. Less than a year later, however, he transferred to the American Business College (ABC) in Jacksonville. His reason for transferring, Nelson says, was that ABC was accredited, which qualified students for a draft deferment. The War in Vietnam was then in full swing, and Nelson, like many other young Americans at the time, wanted no part of the fighting.

Upon graduating from ABC in 1968, the FBI tapped Nelson for entry into one of its programs to train as a fingerprinting technician. Nelson was in the process of readying the required paperwork for the program when the armed services drafted him.

Wanting no part of the infantry if he could help it, Nelson applied and qualified for aircraft technical school, considered an elite unit, but one that added two years to the regular two-year enlistment. He graduated first in his class, Nelson says.

"If you graduated number one, you supposedly remained stateside," he says, "but they shipped our entire class to Vietnam."

This was in 1968, during the height of the TET Offensive, a large-scale series of coordinated attacks by the North Vietnamese across South Vietnam to foment rebellion and force the United States to abandon the war.

Nelson was stationed at De Nang with the First Marine Amphibious Force, in the aviation military intelligence group, which used low-flying planes to do surveillance

missions over enemy territory and gather information. After his year in Vietnam, he returned to the U.S. in 1969 and served the remainder of his four-year enlistment in the states and in Germany.

Upon his discharge in 1971, Nelson went to work for a brother who owned a construction company in Williston, Fla. It was there that he received a call from a Monticello friend who encouraged him to try for a firefighting position.

As Nelson tells it, Monticello then had Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funding to train firefighters, part of which money it used to send him to the Florida State Fire College in Ocala for firefighting training and certification. Upon his graduation, Nelson went to work for the city as a full-time, paid firefighter in 1975. A year later, in 1976, he was offered the position of fire chief, a first for Monticello in terms of it being the city's first full-time paid fire chief position and Nelson its first African-American fire chief. Nelson didn't have it easy, being a groundbreaker.

"I faced many challenges, beginning with my confirmation," Nelson says. "People had to get used to an African-American being the fire chief."

He recalls that his confirmation barely got council approval, with two of the five members recusing themselves for unstated reasons, although one of the two he had known since childhood. Nelson remembers the name of each council member who voted for him or recused himself.

As fire chief, he had run-ins with the city clerk, who falsely accused him of wasting taxpayers' money on unneeded equipment parts, and with the police chief, with whom he often clashed over shared space, as the fire and police departments then were housed in the same building.

One of the worst encounters Nelson recalls was the time his department responded to a house fire on Palmer Mill Road and the homeowner confronted him with a shotgun, presumably because he didn't want a black man on his property.

"I said, 'I don't have time to argue, I need to save your house,'" Nelson says.

The police ultimately arrested the man for interfering with a firefighting operation, Nelson says.

But normally, he says, he was able to avert or defuse confrontations using common sense. Despite the opposition and pushback, he persisted and was able to improve the department, restructuring it and the volunteer organization and acquiring a new truck and tanker, as well as other much-needed firefighting equipment.

"I had to implement some monumental changes, because of my vision of what the fire department should be," Nelson says. "I stirred up the pot, but I got equipment and breathing apparatus for my guys, which they hadn't had before. In six months, we were really ready to fight fires."

His accomplishments didn't go unnoticed. It led to his recruitment by the State Fire Marshall (SFM) in 1977. Nelson served in the SFM Office about 15 years, attaining the rank of deputy fire marshal, before moving to the State Insurance Commissioner Office in 1992. Throughout his years with the state, Nelson traveled extensively, received various meritorious recognitions, took additional educational courses to improve his standing and performance, and initiated several innovative statewide programs that still exist.

Retiring in 2010, after 33 years with state government, Nelson jumped into the political arena, running and getting elected to the Jefferson County Commission District



John R. Nelson, Sr., CCC
Jefferson County Board
of Commissioners;
Chairman - 2012-13



2 seat. Politics, he notes, had always been part of the mix, both in his roles as a community advocate and state official. So it wasn't that far a stretch for him to run for public elected office, he says. In his typical fashion, once elected, Nelson enrolled in the certification programs recommended by the Florida Association of Counties for excellent and effective leadership. He took not only the basic program, but also the advanced one, and excelled in both.

Of his many accomplishments in office, Nelson cites the paving of 51 miles of dirt roads, the construction of the new fire and solid waste departments buildings, and the initiation of discussions that led to the county's inclusion in the Deepwater Horizon funding that came from the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf.

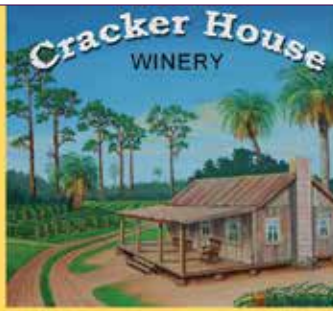
He had other projects in the pipeline when he narrowly lost reelection to the office after his first term and decided truly to retire; but not really, or completely.

Nelson remains an integral member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which organization he continues to champion and assist. He also continues to work behind the scenes to get more county dirt roads paved, along with an associated effort to promote ecotourism of African-American landmarks. And he continues performing musically and giving educational talks, such as he did at the Juneteenth Celebration in Chipley earlier this year.

"I've always been a person who sees things that others don't see and act on them," Nelson says, which could well serve as his personal motto. ■



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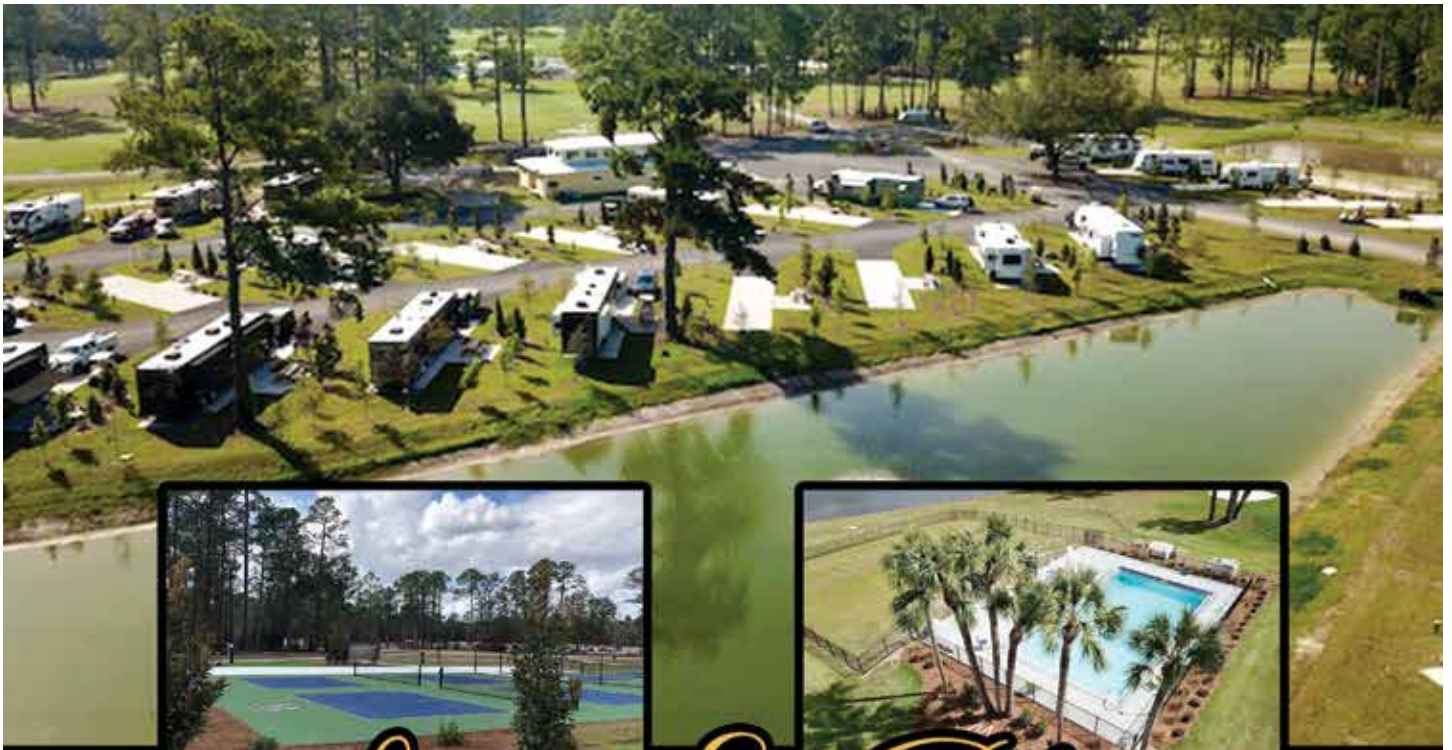
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