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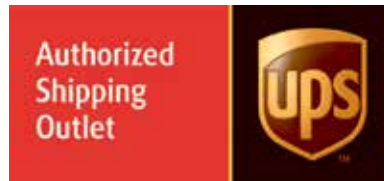
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The Front Porch

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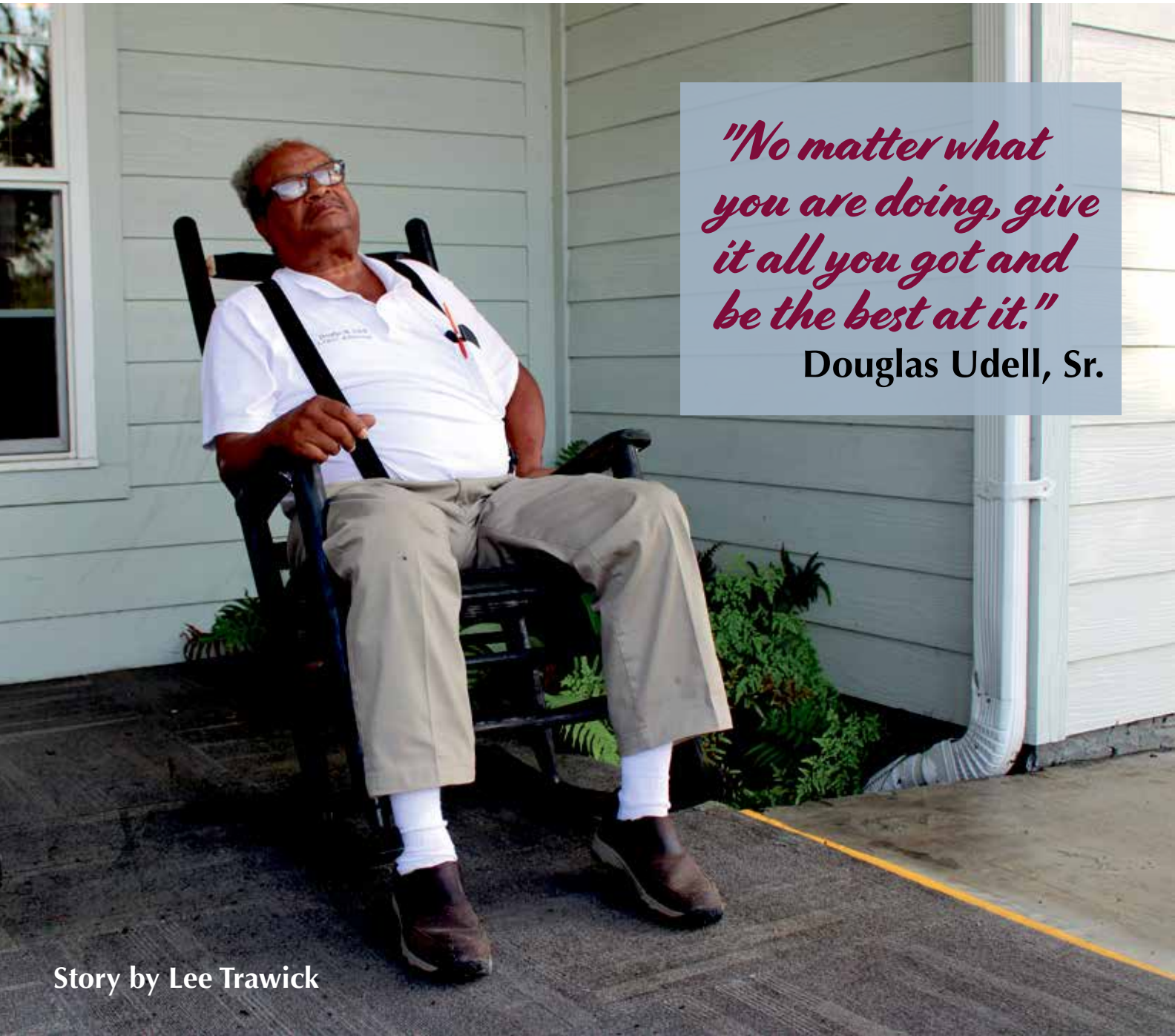
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Sittin' on the Porch with...

Douglas M. Udell, Sr.



*"No matter what
you are doing, give
it all you got and
be the best at it."*

Douglas Udell, Sr.

Story by Lee Trawick

Douglas M. Udell, Sr., has traveled half a million miles throughout his lifetime. During his travels, one thing remained constant, and that was the drive to be the best.

Udell was born in White Springs, on May 15, 1946, the son of Jasper Roberts, a white man, and his mother, Julia Udella. His mother was Ethiopian, and when her family came to the United States, they dropped the last part of their family name to Udell in the hopes of better acclimating into American society. In 1946, interracial marriage was illegal, and as such, Douglas was born with his mother's maiden name.

Udell grew up in the Black Bay Community located in White Springs, Fla., during a time of much racial turmoil. He remembers being six years old in 1952 and learning that the Ku Klux Klan was coming to their hometown. At such a young age, Udell didn't know what the Ku Klux Klan was; he only knew that they were coming to Black Bay and he was curious about them. It did not take long for him to find out more about the nature of the group that was approaching.

In contrast to many citizens who lived in Black Bay who may have been worried or scared, Udell's father was not afraid. Jasper and his friend, Mallory Roux, got together and bravely decided that the Klan was not coming through their town that night. Young Udell walked through the woods that evening to see what his father and Roux planned to do to stop the Klan from coming into Black Bay.

Udell watched through the trees as his father and Roux planned an interception of the Klan at Swift Creek Bridge. The two men piled car tires across the bridge, and as the Klan came up to it, Roux was waiting on the bridge in plain sight with the car tires behind him. He was seen calmly sitting on a bucket with two pistols, one on each hip. Like many men in those days, he often carried two pistols with him.

As the truck full of Klan members came closer, Udell watched as Roux lit the pile on fire, and the Klan was forced to halt. The Grand Dragon Klansman ordered Roux to remove himself and the blockage from the bridge and let them pass. Roux knew that he was facing a truck full of hate, armed with rifles. These particular Klansmen were

looking for some sense of revenge after the recent death of Senator-Elect Dr. Leroy Adams in Live Oak. In spite of the Grand Dragon's orders, Roux refused to back down, because he knew something they did not. He had the upper hand, with his friend Jasper tucked away in the trees with a loaded rifle pointed right at the driver's head.

Jasper had always had a reputation as a sharpshooter, as was common for most men at the time. He was particularly dangerous, however, with a rifle. When the Grand Dragon asked Roux if he thought what he was doing was very smart, Roux replied, "I believe it is."

When Roux was asked what he thought he could do with those measly pistols against all the rifles in the truck, Roux replied, "I can unload both of these pistols in every one of you, but what you don't know is that I'm not alone." It was then that he called out to his friend, "Jasper, how is it looking from there?"

Jasper answered, "It's looking real good from here; I've got my sights locked on the driver in the truck."

At that moment, everyone had a moment of reckoning, and Roux, still sitting on his bucket, informed the Klan, "I don't believe you all are crossing this bridge tonight. Best you all go on home now."

The Grand Dragon turned to the men in hoods and said, "It's not worth it; we ain't got nothing to do with what happened in Live Oak."

Watching the men depart, six-year-old Douglas Udell realized that not only were the Klan members just men, but they were men that Roux knew. Men his father knew.

While this may have been a moment that could have bred hatred into young Udell's heart, it did not, although the impact of that night would continue to bear lessons, even as he grew older.

His father raised him to believe that money opens doors; not skin color, not the last name, but money. In the years to come, many would harbor ill feelings toward those men and their families who

were present that night on that bridge, but Udell did not hold onto bitterness. The lesson came full circle when, many years later, he and his father were cropping watermelon, and the pair realized that they were not given a rail car space for their crop, despite there being ample empty cars available, and all of the other farmers had been given spaces except them. Sticking firm to his beliefs, Jasper did what many would have considered unthinkable: He got into his truck and drove to White Springs to propose a plan to the very man who once was dressed in a Grand Dragon robe and mask and had opposed him on a bridge with hatred. Jasper knew what was going on, and while he was frustrated, he also knew that pride had never paid his bills, and he was going to get paid.

His once-adversary was persuaded to travel to South Florida and play the role of crop owner, demanding to have his watermelons loaded onto the train. This taught Udell a powerful lesson, to do as his father taught him and make money. Don't let something as foolish as pride stop you from making money. Udell saw this lesson again in Daytona, when his father was told by a car dealership that he could not buy a new vehicle when his own broke down on the road. His father responded to this by walking down the road to another dealership where he paid cash for a brand new car. His father instilled in him the importance of having money, that skin color didn't matter if you had money. That there are enough obstacles in life, most people's biggest obstacle being a lack of money. His father warned him, "Don't ever let that be an obstacle for you." Udell took that lesson to heart and continues to live by it, even today.

At 11 years old, Udell put this lesson to practice, hustling on his father's farm. His father raised hogs and sold them to Copeland Sausage, and as a young boy, Udell would work hard to maintain the hogs, ensuring that they were healthy. But instead of cash payment from his father, Udell insisted on being paid in

piglets. He wanted the baby pigs off of his father's group of hogs, so that when the representative from Copeland came around to buy his father's hogs, Udell would have hogs of his own to turn over for a higher profit than just work-wages. "Making money is easy; you just have to work it, and when you get enough of it, make it work for you," Udell said. "It's all about money."

Udell also recalls running moonshine for his father when he was just 12 or 13. Despite the color of his skin, he was able to sell to very influential people of Hamilton and Suwannee Counties, as well as the area of Valdosta. In those days, a colored man was unable to get the grain or sugar needed to make good moonshine, but Jasper could. Udell recounted having taken many trips to Providence to pick up the supplies. With such a sturdy pipeline of supplies, a man from Valdosta nicknamed "Bossman" pulled some strings to link Jasper and his son with Sam McCollum. Together the three of them created a business that fueled both black and white establishments.

"It wasn't about color," recalls Udell, "It was about making money, and making money was easy. It was all a racket back then, but it was about making money, so we did."

In school, Udell always had money, and even teachers at Carver High School borrowed money from him. He never looked down on anyone who came to him to borrow money, as he knew he was fortunate to have it. He also knew that while he had it, he was going to make it work for him. Everyone who borrowed money from him, whether they were black or white, paid him back with interest. One of his teachers, Elijah Rhodes, once told him, "Whatever you're going to be in life, be dedicated to it." This quote continues to be cherished by Udell, and is one he has carried with him throughout his life.

Upon his graduation from Carver High School in May of 1965, Udell was drafted into the United States Army, and was sent to Fort Benning in Georgia for basic training. Following that, he was sent to Fort Polk in Louisiana for advanced individual training, where he was trained as an infantryman before being brought to the intelligence unit.

At just 19 years old, he received the news that he was being sent to Vietnam. He and 16 other men were given additional training in an undisclosed tropical location that Udell believed to be the country of Panama, before being sent to Vietnam, where they were ordered to engage with the opposing soldiers behind enemy lines. Throughout his service in Vietnam, Udell

endured many injuries and was a regular visitor to the infirmary, earning a Purple Heart, a Purple Heart with a Cluster, two Bronze Stars, a Silver Star and a Bronze Cluster. He was honorably discharged from the United States Army after completion of his obligation of two years of service to his country.

After his release from duty, Udell returned to Florida, where he attended Miami Dade Community College in 1971. Here he earned a Mortuary Science degree before transferring to the University of Miami, with the intention of becoming a doctor. A year into his doctorate, his plans changed, when his wife became pregnant with their first son. Wanting to stay close to his growing family, Udell returned home and decided to find work in the field that he had a degree in: mortuary.

It was his experience as the director

*"Whatever
you're going
to be in life,
be dedicated
to it."*

Elijah Rhodes

of a funeral home that opened the doors for him in ways he could never imagine. A partnership with a retiring owner of a funeral home in Live Oak gave Udell access to a funeral home for his work. It was customary at the time for funeral home directors to also drive ambulances, so Udell purchased a Navy ambulance to use as his transport. In 1972, segregation was still a common practice in Suwannee County, meaning black funeral home directors and ambulance drivers transported black individuals, and white funeral home directors and ambulance drivers transported white individuals.

One day, Udell was completing a transport, and was sitting in the waiting room to see if his transport would be needed to take a patient to Gainesville. It was while waiting that he noticed a white gentleman in the waiting room of the emergency room cradling a young girl

wrapped in a towel. Udell noticed that the little girl was experiencing massive blood loss, and was losing blood in the rhythm of her heartbeat. Having begun his degree to become a doctor, Udell knew what he was looking at, and gave a sharp warning to the man holding the child.

"Sir, I don't mean to bother you," he had said, "But that little girl is bleeding out. You have to get her seen right now." Panic began to spread across the waiting room as nurses were alerted. The nurses sprung into action and quickly realized the situation was more severe than a little girl with a cut on her leg. The girl had been brought to the emergency room after being struck by a flying object from a lawn mower. The object had cut her femoral artery. Unfortunately, the Suwannee County Hospital was not equipped for such a circumstance, so, after a tourniquet was applied to stop the bleeding, it was determined that the child would need to be transported to Gainesville for treatment.

With all of the white ambulance drivers currently occupied, the gentlemen looked at Udell in desperation and asked if he could transport them to Gainesville in the hopes of saving his granddaughter. Udell quickly answered, "Yes, sir."

Udell used the hospital phone to call the Suwannee County Sheriff at the time, J.M. "Buddy" Phillips, and explained the severity of the situation, hoping to get an official escort. The sheriff initiated arrangements for an escort with surrounding law enforcement agencies, and the little girl was transported to the Gainesville Hospital. There, doctors were able to repair the severed artery and save the young girl's life.

With a grateful heart, the gentlemen shook Udell's hand and told him, "If you ever need anything at all, you come to see me." The gentleman's name was P.C. Crapps, and he happened to be the owner of a local bank in Live Oak. Udell took him at his word and it wasn't long before he walked into Crapps' bank and requested a loan to open up his own funeral home.

While visiting a friend, Pat Paterson, who worked in Live Oak, Udell became aware of a building for sale. The building was located in a downtown area of Live Oak known as "The Hill," that was a familiar hub for black businesses. After buying the whole building, Udell was approached by several neighboring white businesses, who sought to buy out the space. Udell agreed to sell his building, but for a significantly higher sum than what he had paid for it. This allowed Udell to then turn around in 1974 and pay cash for a city

block that stretched from Walker Avenue to Green Street. With the leftover money, he purchased a bulldozer and began a land-clearing business. He worked this alongside his funeral home business on the corner of Walker Ave. and Green Street, where it remains to this day and has been open for business for over 50 years.

Throughout his life, Udell has seen many changes. While some have been good and some have been bad, these days he is enjoying his retirement and is proud of the life that he has made for himself and has provided for his children. Today, his sons, Douglas M. Udell, Jr., and William O. Udell, now operate and run the family business.

Udell reflects on his life, of the events of his youth, and of segregation. He remembers the fateful day when he was just six years old, and Senator-Elect Dr. Leroy Adams had been murdered. His father had been best friends with the husband of Ruby McCollum, the alleged shooter of Dr. Adams. Udell recalls the aftermath of the fateful shooting, when the widow of Dr. Adams made it known to all that would listen that the black community was not to be touched as a fallout of the death of her husband. "If it were not for Mrs. Adams,

standing up and saying that no one was to harm a soul in the black community because of this, this whole town would have been set on fire," reflects Udell. "She is the only thing that kept this town from being set afire."

Udell expressed wishes that the integration of both Hamilton and Suwannee counties had been handled a little differently. "I see the need for it in some parts, but as far as black businesses, integration killed the black businesses," stated Udell. "Before, blacks were forced to shop at black-owned stores, meaning that black money stayed within its community. Then, when integration was implemented, blacks spent their money elsewhere, and the money that once circulated within the black community was being spent in the white communities. This eventually drove out the small black businesses. These were all aspects people did not think about during those times, but the writing was on the wall. Just no one wanted to see it."

Udell grew up attending a segregated school. "It was great for us; I got a great education. Even though we had a grounds keeper and maintenance man at the school, it was the student's responsibility to maintain the grounds of the school and

perform the maintenance. The grounds keeper and maintenance oversaw our work. It taught us responsibility and to care for what is ours. That all changed when schools were integrated."

Today, Udell still lives by his father's way, and always has money. In his retirement, he is having the time of his life on his goat farm in Hamilton County. He looks back on the life he has lived with pride, raising his sons as he was raised by his own father. "If I guide and teach them as I was taught they will be fine," he says. His focus, as his father taught him both by example and through lessons, is to be self-sufficient and not to let the color of someone's skin keep them from doing what they want to do. The lessons of his father, paired with the quote from his school teacher Elijah Rhodes, "Whatever you do in life, be dedicated to it," are how Udell has spent his life. He chose to be self-sufficient, own his own business, provide a life for his children and owes no one anything. Udell can live out the rest of his days knowing that he has honored his father by following in his footsteps, living a prosperous life and standing on his own for his family. ■

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TRADEMARK HOMES OF MONTICELLO:

Where Real Estate & Manufactured Homes Come Together



Story By Heather Ainsley

As spring began to settle in, a new addition to Jefferson County emerged quietly on US-19 South that swiftly earned the attention of the surrounding Monticello community. An empty lot right off the main road that had stood vacant and unused was cleared of overgrown weeds, and it was not long before trailers began to come and go, bringing with them all manner of mobile homes, which seemed to sell almost as soon as they appeared. At long last, a sign was erected, signaling the official arrival of a specialty real estate office, Trademark Homes, a family-owned and operated real estate office dedicated to the buying and selling needs of manufactured homeowners and prospective buyers.

Mark Vollertsen and his wife, Sandy, have been in the mobile home business since the 1980s, originally running a mobile home dealership in Tallahassee for many years on Capital Circle that they were forced to close when the road was expanded from a two-lane road to a four-lane road.

In September of 2006, they

incorporated a company called Advanced Real Estate Sales, which focused on the buying and selling of land, commercial property and residential property. For the last 16 years, they have served Jefferson,

Leon, Madison, Taylor, Wakulla, Thomas, Gadsden and Hamilton Counties, as well as working in surrounding states to provide foreclosure services. After the housing market crashed in 2008, the Vollertsen



family moved back to Tallahassee for work, although they frequently visited friends and family in Monticello. It was during one of these visits that Sandy and Mark noticed an unused lot of land off of US-19 South, and began to brainstorm.

"We were doing a lot of traveling at that time [for work], and there was a lot of back and forth, between here and Alabama, and here and Mississippi, while we were working foreclosures. We had seen this lot just in passing; had noticed it as we visited family out here, and we did a lot of thinking, but the timing just wasn't right," remembers Sandy. "We moved back to Monticello in 2019. Almost as soon as we did, we ended up doing all of that traveling. In March of last year, we quit traveling and by the end of the year, in October, is when things started to fall into place, with Jack starting school. That was when the process started."

In October of 2021, Advanced Real Estate Sales established a subsidiary called Trademark Homes, and began the process of opening up a center on their new lot, located at 1700 S. Jefferson St. The Trademark Homes Center focuses primarily on the buying, selling and trading of new and used manufactured homes. The Trademark Homes Center is an excellent place for interested buyers, sellers and traders to come and enjoy a walk-through experience of available manufactured homes, and speak to a licensed and

experienced real estate agent who can assess their specific needs. Trademark Homes is an independently owned Clayton Dealership. They get the homes from the Clayton factory located in Waycross, Ga., as well as Destiny Home Builders out of Moultrie, Ga., to provide interested buyers with brand new manufactured homes. Additionally, Trademark Homes has resources for the buying and selling of used manufactured homes. They also offer trade-in services to those wishing to upgrade their older home for a newer one.

There can be no denying the need in Jefferson County and the surrounding area for quality, affordable housing options. Like much of the nation this small-town community struggles to provide quality, low-cost housing. The Vollertsen family became familiar with the needs of the county especially, as they had not only served the community for so many years, but also lived in Monticello and been able to see the strain first hand in their community.

"With the shortage of housing, especially here in the last year or so," added Mark, "we felt like we could bring in a quality product and help to fill in that void of lack of housing, and in an affordable way." While the company offers more traditional real estate services, such as those regarding "brick and mortar" buildings, they also specialize in providing for a variety of other real estate needs, such as land-only,

home only, land and home bundles, as well as trade ins or upgrades of a home. They are well-experienced in the manufactured home industry, and are well versed in the more complex aspects of the buying or selling process, like organizing permits, corresponding with builders, financing services, utility hookup, transportation to and from a site and even insurance.

As a family owned and operated company, supporting the community comes at a top priority for the Vollertsen family. The Trademark Homes Center is operated with just three employees, Mark, Sandy and their son, Bradley, all of whom are licensed realtors. They take pride in keeping as much of the buying, selling and installing process local as possible.

"We use top-notch licensed local companies," says Mark, "from septic companies, to well companies, to electricians, to everyday handymen. We want to bring jobs to the community at the same time as bringing quality, affordable housing. We are passionate about bringing opportunities for other people as well as the businesses that make up this community."

Trademark Homes offers a wide scope of manufactured homes, striving to fit the needs and desires of any prospective homebuyer. Their Clayton-brand homes feature modern construction, quality materials and energy-efficient features while still maintaining a price that is affordable, without taking away from the refined





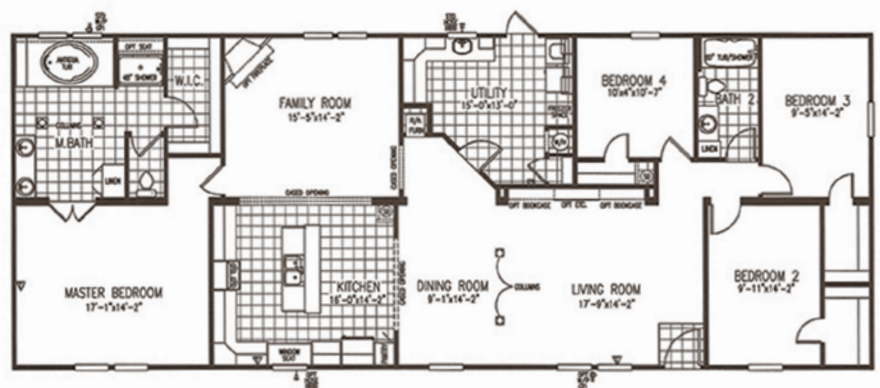
design and configuration of the home. Their Destiny Homes-brand builds are where affordability meets luxury, featuring elegant and unique home details that capture a sense of distinction and refinement. Destiny homes are built to fit the unique lifestyles and budgets of their buyers. Depending on the needs of the client, the Trademark Home Center offers homes anywhere from modest to extravagant, and anything in-between.

While manufactured homes have gotten a reputation in the past for being "cheap" or of poor quality, the same is not accurate for new builds, and many new manufactured home constructions use the same materials as a site-built home does. Where an old manufactured home may have been built with thin walls and are notorious for being difficult to keep comfortable in harsh winter months or hot summer ones, new manufactured homes often have higher quality features, such as thicker walls, vaulted ceilings and insulation. Add features like energy efficient windows and appliances, and modular homes can be highly efficient in today's modern era. Each home is built along an assembly line, similar to the way the automobile industry constructs

vehicles. After each stage of the build, the home undergoes a series of corresponding inspections and permits that correspond to Florida wind zones and building code.

The process of buying a home can be a daunting one, and many prospective home owners may be left feeling overwhelmed

and uncertain as to where to begin. At the Trademark Homes Center, licensed Realtors Mark, Sandy and Bradley are dedicated to utilizing their considerable experience and their extensive connections in the real estate and manufactured home industry to help potential homeowners with the process,



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and get them into their new home. They are highly qualified and strive to make the process as encouraging and stress-free as possible for their clients.


"The most rewarding part of being in this line of work is helping people reach their goal," says Mark. "When a client gets challenged, we fight for them, and help them get where they need to be. The process may seem daunting, but it's worth it. If you have the right team behind you, it's doable. It's the American Dream to become a homeowner, and we enjoy helping it all come together to get people into their new homes."

Although much of their lives revolve around the business, the family enjoys spending time together when they aren't in the office, and frequently enjoy the variety of cuisine and shopping opportunities offered by local restaurants and boutiques. When asked about what some of their hobbies are, Sandy laughed goodnaturedly.

"We spend a lot of time planning family vacations that we never end up taking," she said playfully, to amused agreement from her son and husband. "Well, while a lot of life is centered around work and business, we do enjoy spending time with our family and friends when we can. We also like to spend time at the Wacissa River, or go down to Shell Point."

Whether you are looking for land, property or both, or looking to sell your land, property or both, or are even just looking for options on how to update your old manufactured home for a new one, Trademark Home Center is here to serve you. The Vollertsen family has the tools and connections to sell your home or property for the most possible profit, and are well-versed in the world of manufactured home realty, and everything it encompasses. Trademark Homes is where real estate and manufactured homes come together, with all the tools to make it happen. Let the Vollertsens bring you home. ■





TREASURE HUNTING: A Unique Unexplored

Adventure

Story and Photography by Dawn Perez

Picture the scene: You are heading out to the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico by either the Keaton Beach Canal, the Steinhatchee River or the Econfina River in Taylor County. You're enjoying a fresh salt breeze coming from the Gulf while watching the seagulls fly and the fish jump in the water. Either you are traveling in your own boat or your charter captain is taking you. If you have chosen to travel by charter captain, he will be experienced and knows the waters well since he has done this many times before.

You throw down your anchor and get ready to start searching the waters, waiting in anticipation while you search for living treasures below. You have found proof that they are down there, and now it's time for everyone – children and adults – to put on their gear for an exciting adventure: snorkel, mask, fins and a mesh bag.

You will swim, searching along the grassy waters where the scallops are hidden, sometimes for hours before taking a break. You jump back on the boat for a bit, letting your skin dry in the hot sun. The day progresses, sun growing hotter, so you jump back in the cool Gulf waters to search again for scallops. While exploring the sea grasses, you come across many different crustaceans. You see sea trout and seahorses as well as star fish and turtles. Maybe even a dolphin. Soon you are done, having filled your mesh bag and your bucket to the allowable limit and you are ready to go back and feast on your spoils. But wait, tomorrow is another day, and you will be back to enjoy this treasure hunt once again.

In order to enjoy your spoils, you must clean them before cooking. You can pry open the shell and then remove the meat with a scallop or oyster knife. There are many facilities and marinas that provide cleaning services if you decide you would rather not do it yourself. Scallops can be broiled, fried or stir fried. There are several restaurants in Taylor County that will cook them for you.

Taylor County is the best known place for bay scalloping in this entire region and has the longest undeveloped coastline in the entire state of Florida. Every year, thousands of visitors travel from all over to Taylor County (Steinhatchee, Keaton Beach and Econfina) to capture their share of the riches waiting for them in the shallow pristine waters of this beautiful coastline. All you need to bring is a mesh bag, water shoes, snorkel and mask (and of course your license). In addition to that, you must not forget sunscreen, water for hydration and a cooler with ice for your scallops. That is all you need for your recipe of fun for the whole family. Scallop season this year started on June 15 and runs until Labor Day. For accommodations, the Taylor County area has many options; resorts, condos, cabins, motels, hotels, campgrounds and rental homes. After settling in, some visitors take their own boat and head out with the family or hire a charter captain with years of experience who provides everything needed for the day.

For more information about guides, restaurants, accommodations or marinas or a free visitor guide with information about enjoying scalloping and other activities in Taylor County, you can visit www.TaylorFlorida.com. ■





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Cynthia Shiver: Turning tragedy into triumph

Story by Mickey Starling

Photography courtesy of Cynthia Shiver and Mickey Starling

There is a sense of southern elegance about Mayo resident, Cynthia Shiver. Her accent reminds me of the childhood mentors who lovingly kept me on the straight and narrow. This retired educator remains as busy as ever, working to help others gain a brighter vision for their future, regardless of where their present situation may find them. Obstacles are nothing new for Shiver and neither is overcoming them.

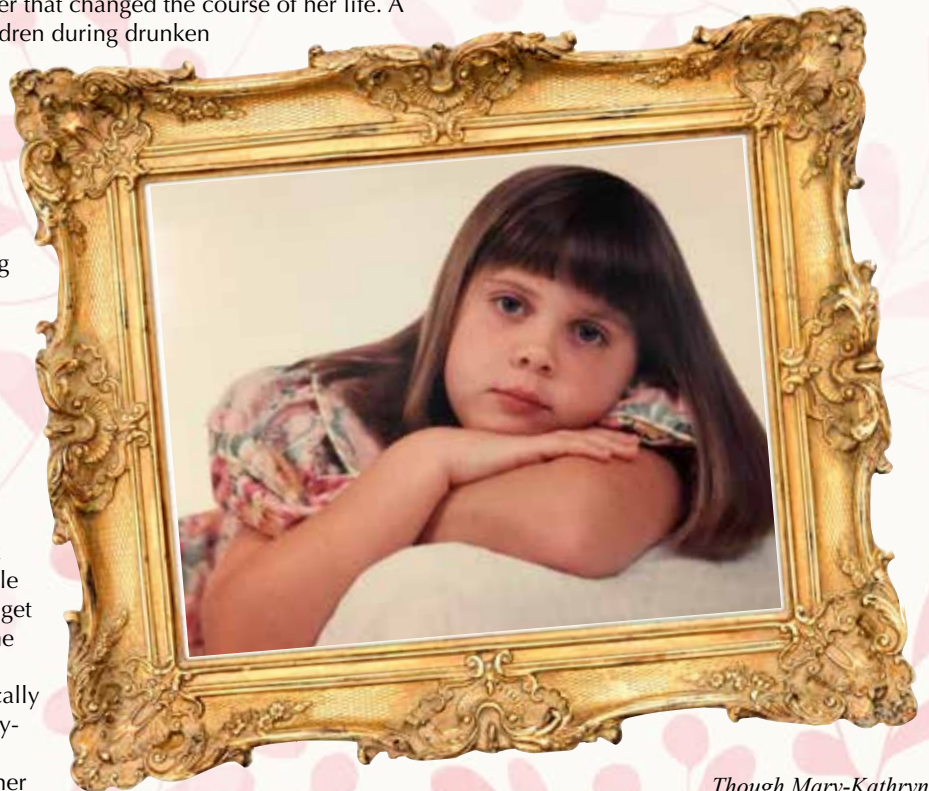
She spent her early years living in a small, crowded apartment in Jacksonville, Fla. At age seven, she saw the effects of abuse in a manner that changed the course of her life. A neighbor, known for beating his wife and children during drunken stupors, had one of many visits from the police. Young Cynthia checked out the commotion, finding the man's wife and children bloody from the assault. As Cynthia heard the woman trying to convince the police that she was okay, a sense of justice welled up within her. She screamed for the police to shoot the man where he lay, sleeping off his most recent evils.

Though the wife was being defended, she most likely feared for her safety after the police left and rebuffed Cynthia's defense in a most unkind manner, saying, "She's nobody. She's just a little white-trash girl. Get that white-trash girl out of here." That title struck Cynthia like a gut punch, but it didn't knock her out. "What she did for me was to guarantee for the rest of my life, I would work to see that underprivileged children and people who are different by other people's standards get kindness and justice," said Cynthia. "It became my mission and my obsession."

Twenty years ago, that mission was tragically reignited when her 12-year-old daughter, Mary-Kathryn, was killed when a mound of sand, weighed down by recent rains, collapsed on her while she was playing on it. Though her life was taken far too soon, Cynthia was determined that her memory would live on for decades to come, and since Mary-Kathryn was an avid reader, books seemed the obvious vehicle for making that happen. The Mary-Kathryn Shiver Book Ministry was soon born, and money for the mission began pouring in from supporters. "I would load a school bus with kids and take them to a bookstore," remembers Cynthia. It didn't take long before this method became impractical because the funds soon ran out.

To date, thousands of books have reached the hands of appreciative Lafayette County students who have been the recipients of this yearly ministry. In the past few months, 574 Mayo kids and 100 migrant children have received brand new, beautiful books. "I don't give away anything that is ugly," said Cynthia, whose current method of purchasing and distributing books is cost-effective, providing many more books for the money. This is made possible with the help of her enthusiastic partner, Sharon Kantor, who now purchases pre-ordered books from Amazon, often while they are on sale.

The primary means for raising funds for purchasing books come from the selling of books



Though Mary-Kathryn Shiver died at the age of 12, her love of reading has inspired decades of young readers because of the thousands of books that have been given away in her honor.

that Cynthia has written, as well as many donations from Sharon's Coo Crew and other friends and family through the year. It isn't hard to get lost in her heart-warming stories, filled with faith and wise anecdotes. She has written two books that are currently available on Amazon: "Still Celebrating" and "Celebrations in the Heart." Purchasing these pleasurable reads will help insure that many more kids will experience the joy of reading.

Every year, forms are sent to elementary teachers in Lafayette County. Parents fill them out with the book titles requested by their children, and Cynthia collects them and forwards them to Kantor for ordering. This dynamic duo always orders extra books so that every pre-K and five year-old child gets a book, even if they didn't order one. Plus, each book has a home-made bookmark and a label inside the front cover dedicated to the Mary-Kathryn Shiver Book Foundation. It wouldn't be stretching the truth to say there are very few kids or young adults in Lafayette County who don't know the name, Mary-Kathryn Shiver, and that's just the way Cynthia wants it. "I want to express my deep appreciation to everyone who has contributed their time and money to help keep my daughter's ministry alive for the last twenty years," said Cynthia. ■



Cynthia Shiver loves reading to children and helping them to love learning.



An advertisement for Tri-County Electric Cooperative. The top half features the text "TRI-COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE" in a serif font, with a stylized lightning bolt graphic behind the word "ELECTRIC". Below this is the text "A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative" and a small logo. The background of the ad is a photograph of a paved road stretching into the distance, lined with utility poles and green fields under a cloudy sky. At the bottom, a blue banner contains the address "2862 West US 90 Madison, Florida 32340", phone numbers "850.973.2285 • 800.999.2285 • Fax 850.973.1209", the website "www.tcec.com", and social media icons for Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest.

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The
**Mysterious,
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Sink*

Story and Photography by Laura Young



When the tannin-dark water of the Aucilla River moves through Florida, it carves a fascinating border between Jefferson County on its western bank and Madison and Taylor counties to the east. As the river meanders toward the Gulf of Mexico, its path is at once beautiful, wild, strange and steeped in history.

Hikers, birders, paddlers, hunters and scholars alike find much to absorb them along the way through forests, fields and settlements. Because of the riverbed's limestone geology, an especially interesting stretch of the river has formed here over thousands of years: the Aucilla Sinks.

Pull your truck into dappled shade where the Florida Trail crosses Goose Pasture Road located south of Lamont, Fla., and short walks in either direction will plunge you immediately into the mysteries of this subtropical and subterranean watery world. A kiosk at this intersection displays a map to orient hikers to how The Florida Trail (FT) follows the river and its sinkholes through part of the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area before it cuts away and over into the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge.

I was thankful to have two guides from the Aucilla Research Institute (ARI) navigating the way on my first hike here: Associate Scholar David Ward and Executive Director Jana Grubbs. Ward's research and recreation have taken him thousands of times into sites of interest in the wilds along the Aucilla River, and nearly every crossroads on our drive down to the access point could spark intriguing stories of people and places, both in modern times and far, far into the distant past.



With walking sticks in hand, we first head north from the kiosk. Birdsong and beams of sunlight cut through the tree canopy and humid air as we pad along the trail. Towering oaks, massive pines and magnificent old cypress trees reach their upper branches toward the open sky while a diverse understory rustles around their trunks. In short order, we step slightly off the trail, brush aside a curtain of palmetto fronds, and there it is. The Aucilla River rounds a bend and comes toward you – so slowly that only the slightest of ripples radiate from a cypress knee rising midway between the limestone banks. Then it simply disappears.

It seems that you are standing on a typical sandy shore, but in reality, the river has come right up to your toes and then, amazingly, continued running, deep under your feet. The limestone, a soft and soluble rock, has given way to an underground channel for the Aucilla. Heading south, the river is up again, down again, as it reemerges briefly in a string of sinkholes – those pools of dark water where the limestone has slowly dissolved upward to the surface.

One of these karst windows spans less than twenty feet toward a yawning cave. At another rise the flow makes a single riverbend then drops away again. Each sink sits rimmed by outcroppings of limestone that rise clifflike above the water's surface to the forest floor. We step through a loop of arm-thick grapevine, stand on the karst rim peering downward at the reflected canopy, and sometimes we find a way down in.

Hikers appreciate the well-maintained path that allows them to explore these marvels. The Florida Trail Association's signature orange blazes mark the way, and teams of volunteers plan regular outings to keep the way clear.

FT Member Currie Leggoe is one of the volunteers who maintains several miles of the trail along the Aucilla.

"Hiking the Sinks at dawn, especially if there's a bit of fog, is a magical experience and feels completely primordial," he says. "I know it's silly, but I sometimes feel like a mastodon might appear. I love the quiet and the dark water and the crunch of leaves underfoot."

Leggoe has not only led recreational hikes here but also takes groups of volunteers on "work hikes" to mow the trail, trim overhanging tree limbs, clear fallen branches, cut out fallen trees and put fresh orange paint on the rectangular blazes.

"Aucilla Sinks is a really beautiful portion of the Florida Trail," he exudes. "I love being out there. Come on out and enjoy it!"

For any hikers planning to make their way along the Aucilla River and Sinks, Leggoe





has a bit of advice: "Prep your clothes to resist ticks, bring bug spray and pack water." Leggoe likes to backpack along the Aucilla, and primitive camping is permitted.

The river water, of course, attracts not only curious humans but lots of wildlife as well, all of it thrilling to see and some of it to be wary of. The Aucilla is part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. Birders have reported seeing or hearing Wood Thrushes, Swainson's Warbler, Kentucky Warbler and Hooded Warblers, all of which come to this area to breed. Colder weather brings the Winter Wren, Blue-headed Vireo and Golden-crowned Kinglet. Sightings in the summer months can include Swallow-tailed Kites and Great Crested and Acadian Flycatchers, flanked by flocks of migratory songbirds in spring and fall. Year-round one can see turkey and a variety of raptors and water birds. Other wildlife that might be spotted in the area include deer, otter, bobcat, bear, raccoon, snake, opossum or alligator. Bring binoculars, but be wise, aware and wary as well.

Eventually, at a place in Taylor County called Nuttall Rise, the series of Aucilla Sinks ends and the river emerges to flow in full view the rest of the way to the Gulf. Nuttall Rise looks like a cul-de-sac made of water, ringed with dwellings and docks. The Aucilla Landing here offers one place to put in a fishing boat or launch a canoe to run the lower section of the river. Above the sinks as well, paddlers can enjoy a state-designated paddling trail the leads right down to that place where the river first disappears for a spell.

With all the natural wonders that the Aucilla River and Sinks offer today, it's perhaps no wonder that layers of history going back decades, centuries and millennia can bring another dimension to one's experience that is always enlightening and sometimes also dark.

Step back a few decades to the 1970s, and the Aucilla Sinks was the murky scene of a murder mystery. One August day, two scuba-diving teens from Greenville went down into a sink used for watering livestock and discovered... a skull with a bullet hole in it. As ARI Board Members George M. Cole and John E. Ladson III recount the tale, the divers reported their find to the Taylor County Sheriff's Department and then assisted in recovering from the sinkhole not one, not two, but four bodies of obviously murdered people. Further investigation revealed that the four victims had been innocent bystanders who blundered into a drug operation originating farther west in the Panhandle. Their pickup truck, in which they had been driven to their own deaths, was found plunged into a different sinkhole nearby. Ultimately, the murderers were



arrested and convicted.

At the southern end of the Sinks back in the 1950s, a fish camp at Nuttall Rise had become a favorite gathering place for an infamous bloc of state senators known as the "Pork Chop Gang." According to the Florida Memory archives, "The Pork Choppers, as they were frequently called, were mostly from rural northern counties, which had become unusually powerful in the 1950s because the legislative districts of the state had not been redrawn to account for the massive growth of urban areas in earlier years." Before Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law was enacted in 1967, many legislative decisions were made at this Aucilla River fish camp, which belonged to Raeburn C. Horne, a three-time state legislator from Madison County.

Then there are stories of pirates. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the remote strip of coast where the Aucilla River mingles into the Gulf of Mexico apparently attracted some well-known pirates, including Blackbeard, Jean Lafitte and Billy Bowlegs. Cole and Ladson's research found various legends indicating that the marshes between the St. Marks and Aucilla rivers were sites for buried pirate loot.

"Even today," they write, "old timers

talk about secret finds and occasionally an old coin or two will be found in the river after an especially severe storm. So, the legends may be true!"

A few centuries earlier than that, the area between the Aucilla and Ochlockonee rivers was home to the Apalachee people, a fierce and wealthy Native American tribe. Spanish explorers began to encounter them beginning in 1528, and later on, in both violent and peaceful ways, Spanish missions and Apalachee settlements blended together. Historical documents indicate that in 1612 when a Spanish bishop came from St. Augustine to visit a town near the Aucilla River, an estimated 35,000 Apalachee people met him. This is more than double the current population of Jefferson County. Evidence of humans inhabiting this area goes back more than 12,000 years.

Across the millennia of prehistoric times, the coastline where the Aucilla meets the Gulf has shifted rather dramatically. At times closer inland, at other times much farther out, the amount of accessible land where the Aucilla River now flows has noticeably expanded and contracted. About 12,000 to 15,000 years ago, the landscape was nothing like the shady, subtropical forest encountered there today. Even so, there still were sinkholes.

While different groups of people have moved in and out of the area, and while different species of animals have lived and gone extinct there, the underlying limestone geology has not changed. In places where today one sees a river, thousands of years ago one saw only a string of sinkholes. With water levels lower, fewer trees grew, yielding a grassier

terrain. The archaeological record shows that this ancient habitat included mastodons that foraged for cypress twigs, grazing mammoths and a now-extinct horse species along with saber-tooth cats and large bears. There also were sloth, giant armadillos, wolves, giant land tortoises, camels and many other now-extinct species.

Like today, the sinks of old served as watering holes for this wildlife, and where water drew drinkers, predators easily found their prey. Paleoindian hunters drove large game like mastodons into sinkholes and felled them with spears. Artifacts from their activity remain in abundance. Much of what we now understand about this time has emerged through the University of Florida's Aucilla River Prehistory Project and ongoing research at ARI. Archaeologists and paleontologists have excavated a vast number of artifacts from a series of rich deposits. Findings have included a mastodon tusk more than seven feet long, an ivory shaft carved with the New World's earliest artwork, a 28,000-year-old gourd seed and human tools such as chert spear points, stone grinders, bone awls and a fishing hook made from a horse toe.

The remains of an entire mastodon were found in the Aucilla River in the 1960s by paleontologist Don Serbousek (1926-2010). A plaster cast of the skeleton, now named "Priscilla," was reassembled earlier this year and unveiled by ARI at its conference at the Monticello Opera House in March. Since then, Priscilla has been the feature of outdoor classrooms in Jefferson County and made an appearance in Monticello's Watermelon Festival Parade. What a sight! It would be hard to find a more interesting example of the past



intersecting with the present.

Knowledge of the past has a powerful way of tangibly enriching our experience of the present, even as our experiences at the same time grow into the past. So it is for those who venture out to the limestone-filtered waters of the Aucilla River and Sinks – whatever they are looking for. It is as Alfred Tennyson in his poem “Ulysses” wrote: “I am a part of all that I have met.” ■



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FORGOTTEN COAST K9:

Changing Lives, Saving Lives



you are not forgotten

Story By Heather Ainsley

Photos Courtesy of Forgotten Coast K9

It all started with a dog. Not just any dog, but a certified K9 with the Madison County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) named Onyx. Onyx's human counterpart, Chris O'Brian, began working for the MCSO in 2010, joining the department's K9 Unit in 2015 and eventually becoming K9 Supervisor. Onyx is credited with several suspect apprehensions, numerous successful tracking pursuits and assisting with the removal of vast amounts of narcotics from the streets of Madison County, Fla. After sustaining injuries in the line of duty, Onyx retired from his position at the sheriff's office, but left a lasting impression on Chris. When Onyx retired, Chris received a promotion to Sergeant and went back to working patrol, but his experience with Onyx never left him.

At the time, Chris had also taken on side work as a dog trainer for Top Tier K9 in 2018 outside of his work at the Sheriff's Office, and at first he specialized in training pets. But his experience as Onyx's partner led him to seek additional certification, as he wanted to learn as much as he could about what it takes to get a dog from average training to top-tier level training. Through Top Tier K9, he sought experience in other areas of dog training outside of the pet world. After the completion of the Top Tier K9's series of dog trainer courses, Chris became a Master Trainer and Instructor and founded Forgotten Coast K9. This led him away from the world of law enforcement and completely into the world of dog training.

Forgotten Coast K9 began initially as a canine training company, not only training dogs but instructing owners on how to train and work with their dogs. While the company was seeing success in their endeavors of working with recreational canine companions, Chris began to see the need for a different direction the company could take. This realization began with a close friend, David Eastabrooks.

David is a retired Army First Sergeant with Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and served in the 3rd Ranger Battalion with the 75th Ranger regiment, and was in Bravo Company serving in Somalia in 1993. Upon his retirement from the military, David suffered heavily with PTSD, a condition that is heartbreakingly common in those who have seen military

combat.

"When I was in the service, I had so much responsibility. I was in charge of 120 soldiers," remembered David, "and then, all of a sudden, I am retired, and literally I go from one day being in charge of 120 soldiers to the next day, I'm in charge of



nothing. I felt like I had no purpose."

Chris and David met during their training at the Law Enforcement Academy, and became good friends through their work. Through their friendship, Chris was able to see, firsthand, the effects of PTSD on David's life.

"One of the problems with PTSD," says Chris, "is that it makes people, when they come home, become flat. It's not always what you'd expect, like a lot of people think of when they think of depression, but it's no emotion at all."

David himself was surprised after speaking to a VA doctor after his retirement about his PTSD. Like so many others, he didn't realize the many forms depression and trauma can take. "I was talking to the doctor, and he asked me, 'Do you feel sad?' and my first thought was, 'Who is this guy? No, I don't feel sad.' But then he said, 'Let me rephrase the question; Do you feel flat?' and immediately I was like, 'Yes!' And it opened up a Pandora's box for me."

PTSD, or Post-traumatic stress disorder,

is a mental health condition that is triggered by a significant event. This can occur as a result of experiencing a traumatic event or from witnessing one, and symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, emotional numbness, detachment from family and friends and trouble adjusting to day to day life, among others. PTSD affects everyone uniquely, and in David's case, the numbness he experienced regularly impacted his daily life. As his friend, Chris would regularly get calls from David's wife, and would go over to try and help him manage his condition.

"I was actually training Rex one day," Chris said, thinking back, "David had been over a couple of times while I was training Rex, so he was familiar with him, but one day his wife called me and wanted me to come and get him. I went there, and we had a drink, and we wound up back at my house. Rex just started climbing all over him, and licking all over him and everything, and you could just see it change his whole demeanor. So I told him, 'you know, you need to just take Rex home,' and he just laughed and said, 'if I take Rex home, Angela will kill me!'"

Chris and David both laughed at the recollection, David admitting that at the time, he and his wife had already had four dogs of their own. But after a lengthy discussion, the friends decided to throw caution to the wind, and David brought Rex home with him without consulting his wife.

"She was not happy!" admits Chris, "But, like, two days later, you couldn't have... you'd have had to shoot her to take Rex back from them." The instant effect that Rex had on David was so significant, he quickly became a permanent member of the Eastabrooks family, and even Angela could not hide her approval.

"It worked out perfectly," says Chris. "We saw how Rex helped David get past a lot of his symptoms, and allowed him to start being 'David' again. Then, we got news of a buddy of his, K.C., whose service dog had died. We were contacted by a group out of Texas to train a new service dog for him, and after I saw the change that that dog, Zander, made in K.C.'s life, I just knew that this is what we need to do. We needed to be doing service dogs."

Seeing such tremendous transformations and impact in his friends' lives solidified the decision Chris had been contemplating, and in 2021, he turned

his Forgotten Coast K9 training company into a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to training and providing certified service dogs to veterans and first responders suffering from PTSD and other service-related concerns. The organization partnered up with the number one dog trainer school in the nation, Top Tier K9, to provide training and education to their clients and their dogs. Puppies are hand-selected from reputable breeders and begin the Top Tier K9 Foundation Dog training at eight weeks old, and upon becoming certified Foundation Dogs, they enter into the Forgotten Coast K9 program and undergo specialized training to meet the specific needs and wants of their new owners.

Forgotten Coast K9 and Top Tier K9

together offer three different programs: Build a Battle Buddy, Buy a Battle Buddy and Emotional Support Dogs. The Battle Buddy theme feeds into the military honor system of "never leave a battle buddy behind."

"With most of the PTSD stuff that we deal with," says Chris, "the person can't relax. They can't go to sleep, they are worried about stuff, they are checking doors, they are checking stuff, and they can't shut off. So they end up overmedicating. They over-drink, they use prescription or non-prescription drugs, they do whatever they can to give themselves those few hours of peace. What a service dog does is it allows them to channel that energy and nervousness into taking care of the dogs, and helps them to reduce their alcohol need, or their drug need."

"There are some guys that can't relax about their perimeters," continued Chris, "Well, these dogs are German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois; these are dogs that protect if need be. So these guys can now go, 'Ok, my buddy's got my back.' And that's why we call them Battle Buddies. Cause you know that you can't leave your buddy behind. So, the person receiving the dog is going to take care of his battle buddy, he can't let him go without. It's a win-win. They know that their Battle Buddy has their back so they can finally relax and get real, restful sleep. And at the same time, it's their responsibility to take care of their dog, so they have to get up, they have to take care of them, they have to do these things because they can't let their battle buddy down."

With the Build a Battle Buddy program, clients participate in a 30-week course, 28 weeks of which is all online. The remaining two weeks they come to Madison, Fla., with housing already paid for. Clients are expected to pay for their own travel from their home to the training facility, along with travel home and food expenses, but the housing is covered by the program. After the 30-week course is completed, clients can choose to apply to attend the Top Tier K9 business bootcamp and advanced certifications programs, which enables them to learn the skills necessary to start and run their own dog training business. Top Tier K9 developed the "Build a Battle Buddy" program to help ensure that veterans and first responders receive an education, have a hand in training their new service dog, and can replicate that training in the future to train their next service dog.

The Buy a Battle Buddy program involves eight weeks of online training followed by two weeks in person at the Madison facility. This program consists of having a service dog delivered directly to a client. These service dogs are matched during the course with the handler to fit their specific needs. During this course the handlers will be trained on the basics of how to handle, care, feed and maintain their new dog along with their own personalized advanced training. Whether a client chooses the "Build a Battle Buddy," or the "Buy a Battle Buddy," they can rest assured that they will not just be given a trained canine and be told, "Good luck."

Because not every veteran or first responder may need a full-blown service dog, Forgotten Coast K9 also offers Emotional Support dogs. Their Emotional Support Dogs for Veterans program provides an emotional support dog to veterans and first responders who still need a trained companion to help them through their daily life. These dogs are trained in high



level obedience, have a solid baseline for advanced training, and are conditioned to handle situations better than an everyday pet.

A true service dog is not cheap, and a single canine that has completed their full training can cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$40,000. Forgotten Coast K9's partnership with Top Tier K9 enables them to limit the out of pocket expense for veterans and first responders to just \$5,000 through these programs. Forgotten Coast K9 also provides fundraising efforts for veterans who are unable to afford a necessary dog, and are heavily dedicated to getting dogs paired with the handlers that need them. As a 501(c)(3) organization, they rely solely on donations to make this possible. They have multiple options for donations.

The first, and easiest way you can donate is with Amazon Smile. These donations come at no cost to you, and are provided by Amazon. By simply shopping on *smile.amazon.com* instead of the regular *amazon.com* site, you can do all of your online shopping as usual, and they will donate 0.5 percent of every eligible purchase you make to the charity of your choice. By selecting Forgotten Coast K9 as your intended charity, they will receive donations every time you make an eligible order. This is a great way to passively help out, even if you are strapped for extra cash.

Additionally, check donations are tax deductible, and can be sent to Forgotten Coast K9 directly, located at 137 SW Shelby Ave. in Madison, Fla., 32340. The organization also accepts donations through CashApp and Venmo and can be

found under the name \$forgottencoastk9 (CashApp) and @forgottencoastk9 (Venmo). They also accept donations through their website, *Forgottencoastk9.org* and on their Facebook page.

Although the past year has been a busy year, Chris and his team at Forgotten Coast K9 are fiercely dedicated to their work, and strive to make the next year even better. Since they began this project, they have been able to successfully place 13 certified and trained service dogs with veterans and first responders in need, and while that is an impressive number, Chris believes it is only the beginning.

"We are averaging about six dog placements a year," says Chris, "but we could do 30 in a year if we had enough donations to tackle funding. Our goal is to get as many dogs to the veterans and first responders that need them as possible, and hopefully impact the number of 22 a day."

Twenty-two a day refers to the rate of veteran suicides that take place in the United States every day. Individuals who retire from the military are vulnerable to not just the effects of PTSD, but also culture shock from exiting the line of duty to return to civilian life, trauma from experiences they have had or have seen while in service, physical setbacks as a direct result of injuries sustained in the service, survivor's guilt, depression and more. These soldiers, who paid the ultimate price to serve their country, often do not come back home and thrive. A lack of available treatment, advocacy and healing resources leads them to feel hopeless, many turning to suicide for relief. While this number is fluid, and the

exact number of veteran deaths vary day to day, Chris and his team at Forgotten Coast K9 believe that even one suicide a day is one too many. This leads them to aim for swift and attentive care when it comes to our veterans and first responders, some of whom wait for years in the system without ever receiving the help they so desperately need.

Chris shared the story of Jim Hooks, a Vietnam veteran who had anxiously awaited to be placed with a service dog for seven years. At the age of 75 years old, Hooks began to fear that he would never be able to get the dog he needed. Jim and Chris met in December of 2021, and they immediately hit it off. They filed the necessary paperwork for the Buy a Battle Buddy program, and got Hooks enlisted in the March class, just 3 months later. His fully trained dog was brought to him personally by Chris in April with specified training to fit Hook's needs.

"Jim is the perfect example of the Buy a Battle Buddy program," Chris stated. "For seven years he was struggling to get a dog, and we had a dog in his hand in four months. What we do with this program, is the veteran still has to go through the whole pet trainer class. That's eight weeks of learning how to become a pet trainer, so he knows everything he needs to know to care for the dog, plus how that dog was trained."

"All of these dogs are Foundation Dogs. The dog is about a year and a half to two years old, has been trained and kept on site down at Top Tier K9. We take Jim's personality and his needs, and we sit down with a note pad and bring out somewhere around 30 dogs. I'll grade each of them on





personality, value and everything, and then we compare notes, look at videos of each dog. We then match the dog's personality with Jim's. We don't believe in just training a dog and giving them to their new handler. We want the veteran to have skin in the game, to be a part of the process."

Chris' experience has shown that if a veteran is invested in the training process, it builds a stronger bond between them and their service dog, develops a clear understanding of the basic responsibilities and requirements of dog ownership, and a familiarity with the training and abilities of the dog. This bond and understanding largely eliminates the risk of a dog being returned. In fact, out of all of the placements Forgotten Coast K9 has completed, not one has yet resulted in a dog being returned.

Not every dog has what it takes to be a full-fledged service dog. Some dogs are unable to complete the foundation training. But Top Tier K9 and Forgotten Coast K9 stand behind their dogs, and know that if one thing doesn't work, there's a better path just waiting to be found. Dogs that fail to become Foundation Dogs often excel at Emotional Support programs, or make excellent family pets.

"What some people don't realize," said Chris, when asked about what he would like people to understand about service dogs, "is that a dog is not a true service dog unless it performs a medical function. There are people that fake a certification, but the dog won't perform a medical function."

Chris says that there is a distinct difference between a service dog and an emotional support dog, and is adamant about the importance of each in the lives of their handlers. But a true service dog must have a medical function, and unknowing parties can be tricked into shelling out thousands of dollars for "service dogs" that lack the training, temperament and ability to fulfill a true service dog role. Chris warns against online "tests" and certifications that claim easy and swift certification of pets. The process to truly train a service dog is extensive and costly, and when buying a service dog, be sure to look into the background of the person or organization that is selling one. Do your research.

"Whether it be through us or through any another charity," says Chris in earnest, "people need to get involved and stop these suicides. The suicides people don't talk about aren't always the veteran suicides, it's also the active duty guys. That could be cops, that could be firefighters, that could be active duty soldiers, sailors and airmen. We would love for it to be us that helps. We would love to be a part of that, but we really just want to urge everyone to get involved somewhere, and help stop this. One a day is too many, but we are still averaging more than 20 a day. We've gotta stop it, and this is the way to do it. Service dogs, counseling, equine therapy, whatever it takes, just get there."

The Forgotten Coast K9 mantra is "Changing Lives, Saving Lives; You are

not Forgotten." Many veterans and first responders feel as if they fall into the cracks of society upon their retirement, and that the country and communities they strived so hard to protect have forgotten them. Chris and his team are dedicated to keeping veterans and first responders at the forefront of mind, and provide them with the tools, aid and comfort to live comfortable, peaceful lives. They have teamed up with partner companies like Top Tier K9, Freedom Jam USA, Inc., American Top Team Valdosta, Ck Knife and Tool, Ground Pounder Coffee, Georgia Beer Co., St. Pete Run Fest, Fresh Start Swim Series and Vengeance Overland to help ensure that our military and first responders are not forgotten and their needs are not dismissed.

Chris says that the hardest part about his work, other than fundraising enough money to keep the programs running, is hearing the stories when his clients open up. These individuals slowly relax while they are with their dogs, which is the goal. But with that ease often comes explanation as to what happened to them.

"It's hard sometimes," admits Chris. "It's hard to hear about why they need a service dog, about what happened to them to affect them so strongly. It can be difficult to hear that and not absorb it and take it on as your burden." It is hearing these stories that emphasizes the critical importance of providing service dogs, and when asked about what the most rewarding part of the process was for him, Chris did not hesitate to respond with, "The second you see the click between the person and their new dog. It gives me chills even just talking about it. There's a transformation that takes place, and you can just see how badly they needed it. Service dogs are necessary. They work."

When talking about Forgotten Coast K9, Chris quoted Mark Twain, who is credited with saying, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born, and the day you figure out why." To this sentiment, Chris adds, "I figured out why."

Anyone wishing to apply for a Forgotten Coast K9 service or emotional support dog, or anyone wishing to help them reach their goals for the upcoming year can reach Chris and the team online at ForgottencoastK9.org. ■



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TWO REGIMES

A Mother's Memoir of Wartime Survival

"Doroha," by Nadia Werbitzky

TWO REGIMES: Greenville find brings tragic history and headlines home

Story by Rick Patrick

All photos and images Courtesy of Mimi Shaw and Kelly Bowen

It's a story that almost defies logic. An old manuscript, along with dozens of original paintings, is found beneath a house and is almost destined for the landfill. Upon further investigation, these rare items turn out to be of immeasurable historical value.

As unlikely as all this seems, that is exactly what happened in the year 2000 when Mimi Shaw, an educator in both Jefferson and Leon Counties, received a call from an acquaintance about a box of materials that was found underneath a house just outside of Greenville. Shaw was told these materials may have had a connection to the Holocaust, in which millions of Jewish people were systematically murdered by Hitler's regime

during World War II. Shaw's father had been a radio operator during the war and had been one of the soldiers who liberated the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp. Since then, Shaw's father was able to write his own memoir "Dig and Dig Deep," by Richard A. Arnold, to document the story of his own survival with six other members of the Acorn Division as they liberated that camp. Shaw, along with friend and artist, Cornelius Barnhart, immediately went to Greenville to investigate and were astonished at what they found. Stored in dirt were over 100 oil paintings. In addition to the artwork, there was a manuscript that had barely survived the elements. This manuscript would turn out to be possibly the most significant find of all.

The manuscript was carefully translated and is now a book, "Two Regimes ... A

Mother's Memoir of Wartime Survival." The book, written by Teodora Verbitskaya, with paintings by Nadia Werbitzky, published in 2012, tells the true story of survival of Teodora and her two daughters, Nadia and Lucy, from the Ukraine, who survived not only the Holocaust, but the Holodomor as well. The Holodomor is taken from the Ukrainian words "holod," meaning hunger, and "moryty," meaning to inflict death, so the basic translation means "death inflicted by starvation." The Holodomor describes the time of Stalin's state-sponsored starvation of the Ukrainian people in 1932 and 1933. Teodora's Christian family witnessed firsthand the brutality of both Stalin and Hitler as literally thousands of their neighbors were first starved, then forced to their deaths at the hands of the Nazis in Soviet Ukraine, in the early 1940s. Teodora and her



A group dedicated to keeping the story of Teodora Verbitskaya and Nadia Werbitzky alive hosted an exhibition of Nadia Werbitzky's paintings for area high school students. The students were able to not only view the paintings, but heard stories of the paintings' history; as well as the timely stories of the Ukrainian people, told through images, words and music. Pictured in the front, from left to right, are: Diane Whitney, musician and playwright, and Mimi Shaw, Two Regimes Co-Owner and visionary. Pictured in the back, from left to right, are: Debra Brigman, vocalist; Marcos Pizaro, keyboard musician; Kelly Bowen, Curator of Two Regimes; Eric Clark, Executive Director of the Foundation for Leon County Schools; Dr. Benjamin Sung, master violinist; Rabbi Michael Shields, President of the Capitol Justice Ministry, and Perry Shaw, Two Regimes Co-owner and on-site facilitator. Not pictured is Kim Gay, Chief of Operations for Goodwill Industries of the Big Bend.

daughters were sent to Germany to work in slave labor camps until liberation by U.S. troops in 1945. Teodora later emigrated to Canada. Her memoir “is the story of three young women’s love, faith, courage, strength, determination, intelligence and sheer will to live in the face of the worst adversity. This true survival experience is an inspiration to everyone, but particularly for girls and women, who must often pick up the pieces during or after war to start life anew. [It] was written to validate the lives of those Ukrainians, Jews, Greeks and others whose lives were lost and whose voices were silenced forever.”

Much of Teodora’s time in the Ukraine was spent in Mariupol. Mariupol was a once beautiful, thriving port city in Southern Ukraine, on the Azov Sea. Now, however, it has been diminished to rubble and a place of death and destruction by invading Russian forces under the rule of Russian dictator Vladimir Putin. Since the time of the Holodomor, the Soviet government tried to silence any accounts of that time in history. Very little is known about Teodora’s life, other than what is shared in her memoir and what was shared by her daughter, Nadia. Teodora died in 1994, at the age of 94.

Teodora’s daughter, Nadia, became a well-known and accomplished artist after studying art at the Art Academy of Dusseldorf, in Germany, after the war. After graduating, she moved to Toronto, where she met her future husband, an American diplomat. Nadia went on to receive accolades for her artwork in Germany, the U.S. and the Middle East through exhibitions, beginning in the early 1960s.

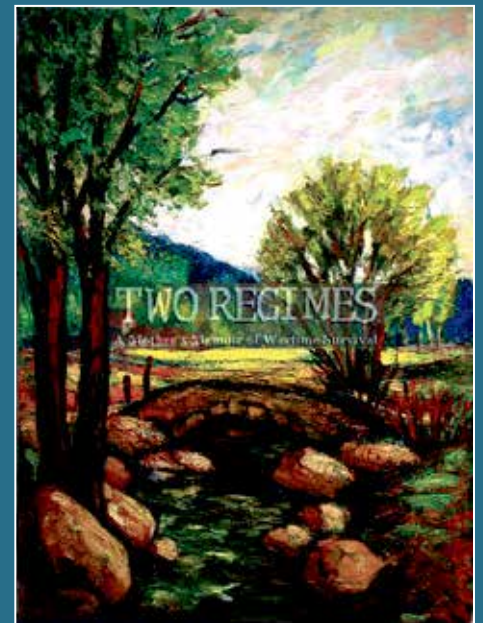
Many of Nadia’s paintings were produced from her memories of the trials she and her family faced in the Ukraine and are used in Teodora’s book. Somehow, Nadia made her way to Greenville where she lived in the house where her paintings and her mother’s manuscript were found. Shaw and fellow collector Kelly Bowen acquired Nadia’s works and have been working to restore the artist’s paintings; an effort that continues to this day. Shaw and Bowen have generously loaned Nadia’s work to numerous exhibitions across Florida, Georgia and in Virginia. Most recently, there has been an exhibition in The Gallery on the 22nd floor of the Capitol, in Tallahassee. The exhibition opened on Friday, April 1, and is set to continue through the end of July. On Wednesday, April 20, a special Media Day was held for members of the media and students from across the region. Students were able to see many of Nadia’s paintings, as well as hear from both Bowen and Shaw about the paintings and Teodora’s story.

There has been an educational film, four years in the making, about Teodora and Nadia and their life under the Stalin and Hitler regimes. The 33-minute long film, directed by Douglas Darlington, of Winding Road Films, is available at no cost to all educational institutions (the film is not available otherwise). Teachers can register for the film by going to www.TwoRegimes.com/Film. A demo of the film can be seen at www.TwoRegimes.com/school-film.

An original musical theatre production entitled “Teodora,” based on the “Two Regimes” story, is currently in rehearsal and will have its premiere in Tallahassee

in February of 2023. Work continues to be done on the restoration of Nadia’s artwork. If anyone would like to contribute to help preserve these historically and artistically important paintings and drawings, would like to order Teodora’s book, or would like more information on any of these projects, please visit www.TwoRegimes.com.

Teodora and Nadia’s story takes place a half a world away and dates back nearly a century. However, the discovery of their paintings and manuscript underneath a house in the small North Florida town of Greenville and the tragic images of the current atrocities facing the Ukrainian people today remind us all that we are all interconnected in some way. ■



“The Bridge,” by Nadia Werbitzky, shows the beauty of the Ukrainian landscape.



“Hell’s Threshold,” is a painting by Nadia Werbitzky that depicts the rounding up of thousands of Ukrainian Jews who were led to their deaths while the Nazis occupied the Ukrainian city of Mariupol during World War II.



“City of Kitezh,” by Nadia Werbitzky, expresses a glimmer of hope in the midst of despair.



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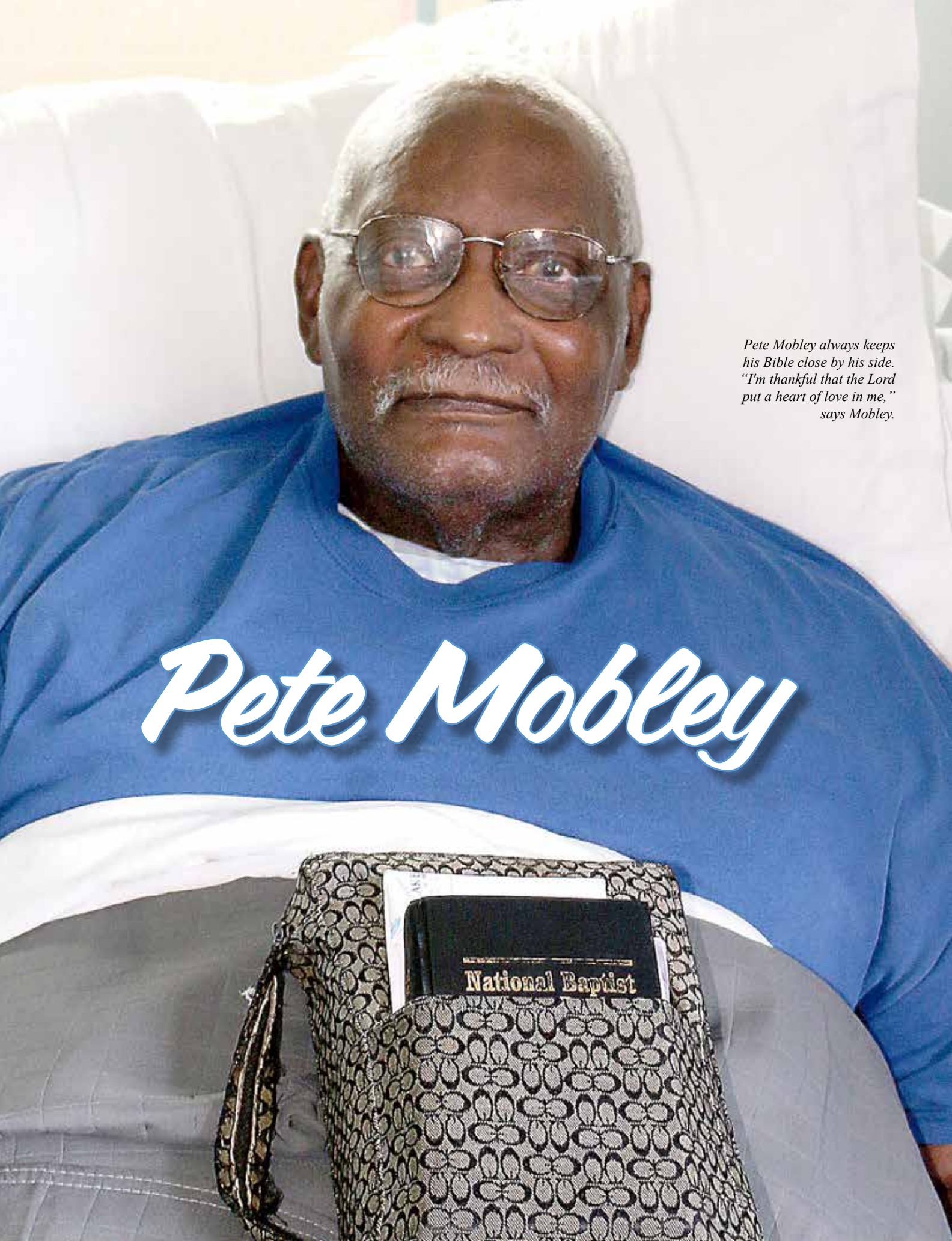
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A photograph of an elderly African American man, Pete Mobley, sitting in a hospital bed. He is wearing glasses and a blue t-shirt. A Bible is resting on his lap, partially covered by a patterned fabric. The Bible's cover is visible, showing the text "National Baptist".

Pete Mobley always keeps his Bible close by his side. "I'm thankful that the Lord put a heart of love in me," says Mobley.

Pete Mobley

LIVING BY THE LAW OF *Love*

Story by Mickey Starling

Photography courtesy of Pete Mobley and Chelsie Holbrook

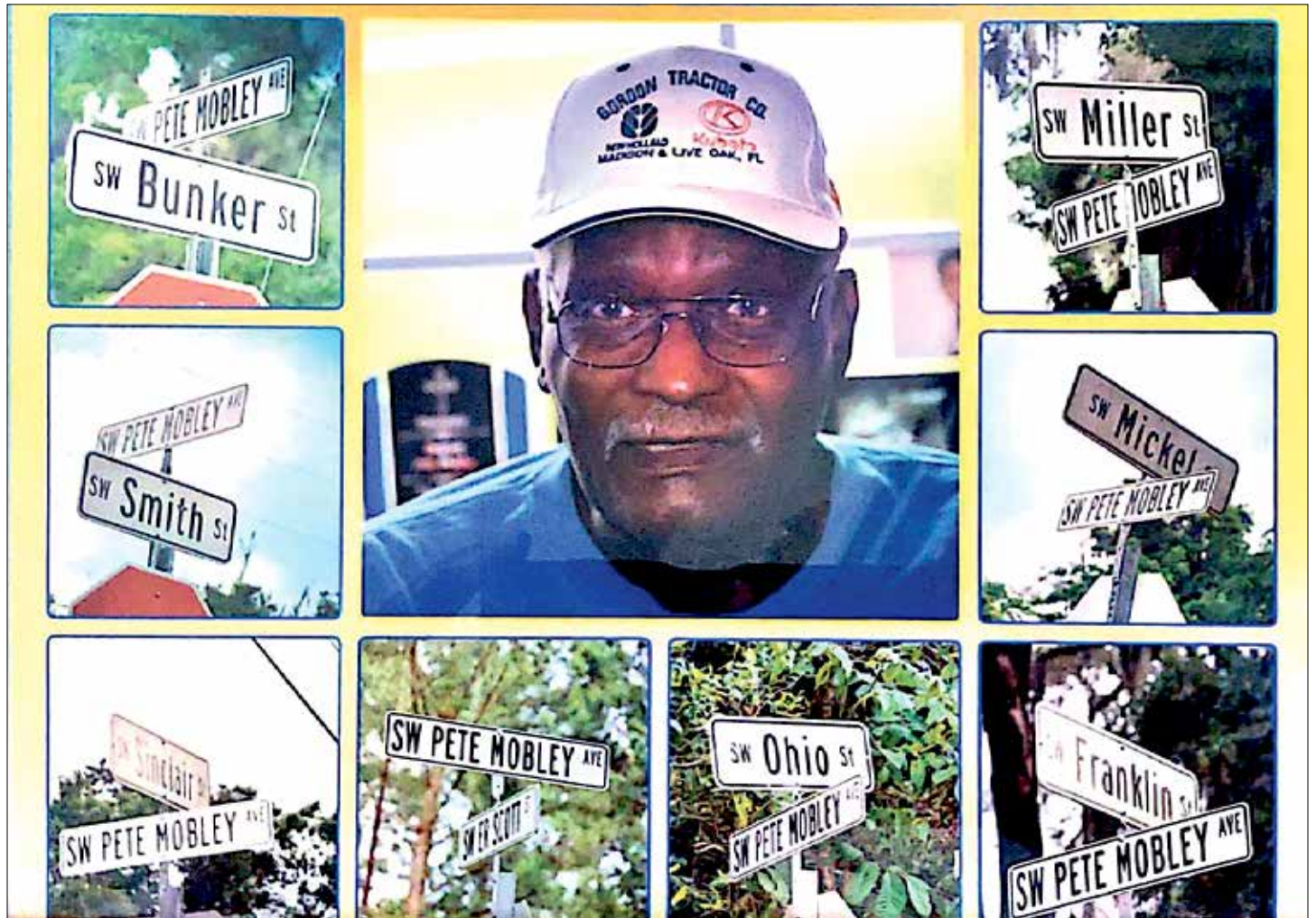
Madison native Pete Mobley grew up valuing hard work. In his day, it wasn't uncommon for a student to leave school in order to enter the workforce, but he may have done it sooner than most. Mobley dropped out of Lime Sink School when he was in the seventh grade and soon began working on a farm in Anthony, Fla. Before age 12, the young Mobley considered himself a full-fledged cowboy, spending many hours herding cattle and becoming a skilled horseman.

A few years later, Mobley began

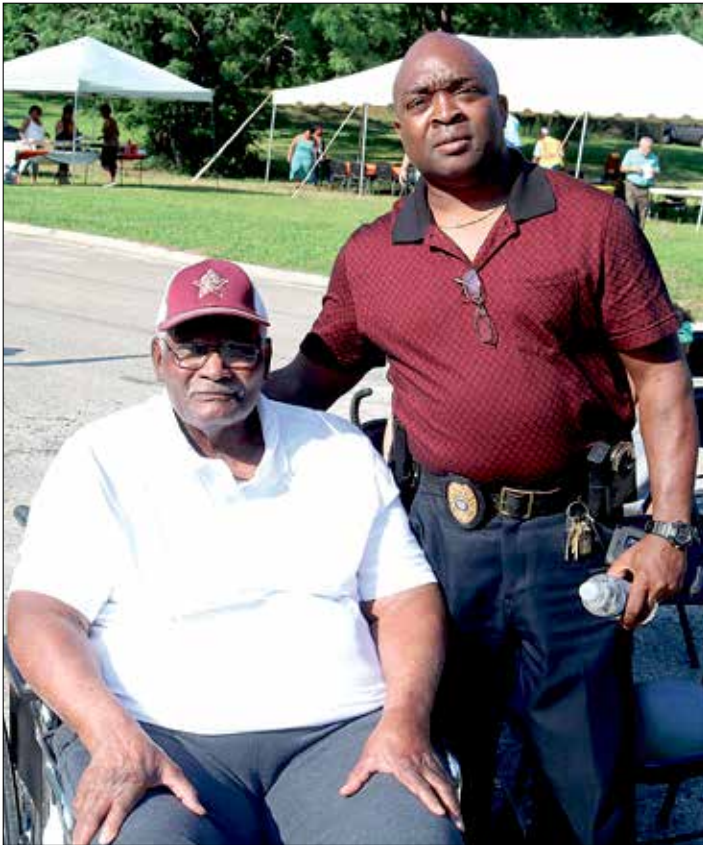
working in the pulpwood industry in Madison. "At this point, I was already 200 pounds of macho man," chuckles Mobley. As he was approaching his 30s, he began taking law enforcement classes and soon found a passion that would fuel his career for the next two decades. "I was doing so well in class that my instructors told me that I was born for this," said Mobley. Law enforcement officials in Madison must have agreed, as Mobley was soon employed by both the Madison County Sheriff's Office and the Madison Police Department. He was the City of Madison's first black police officer.

Mobley didn't just work long shifts with the two organizations. He also served

at the pleasure of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (F.B.I.) and The United States Marshals on several occasions. One of the memories that stand out for Mobley occurred during the integration of schools in the 1960s. He was called to the Madison County Courthouse to help disperse an unruly crowd of about 300 protesters who were unhappy with integration. Mobley addressed the crowd with a simple message: "We are going to do this right and be peaceful about it," said Mobley. "Otherwise, I'm going to load you up on some buses and take you to jail.



Due to his many years of service to the community, Pete Mobley has been given the honor of having a street named after him. [Pete Mobley/Courtesy]



Madison's first black police officer, Pete Mobley (seated), is pictured with current Madison Chief of Police Reggie Alexander. [Rick Patrick/Greene Publishing, Inc.]

But, I also told them that they needed to love each other." His speech was effective, because there were no further incidents during integration.

Love has always been a common theme for Mobley, who always showed kindness to everyone. "Often, when I made an arrest, I would put the offenders in the front seat next to me," said Mobley, who recalls firing his pistol only once during his career. "I had a young man who decided to run away from me once," remembers Mobley.

"He looked back at me with a grin on his face. I pulled my gun and fired a shot in the air, and that was all it took. He turned around and returned to my car, and I took him to jail." Though Mobley was a large man, his tender heart for others was obvious, and he was quick to make friends with everyone. "Many people that I put in jail have come back and thanked me for helping them turn their lives around," said Mobley. "God put a heart of love in me, and I still love everybody, even though

I may not always agree with them."

Mobley is a man of diverse talents and interests. At a young age, he became an accomplished blues guitarist who caught the attention of some famous performers, such as Ray Charles, who once offered to have Mobley join him on tour. "I didn't want to leave home, so I passed on that," said Mobley. The locals had already become familiar with his musical talents, and he often drew big crowds at the gigs he played in Madison and Taylor Counties. He was known to set up at locations near bars that closed before many of their customers wanted to go home, so they would spend hours enjoying Mobley's talents, and he began to be blessed financially, often taking home \$2,000 or more for a single night's performance. He continued playing for about 10 years and was able to purchase a home for his mother and one for himself from his profits.

Besides his love for the guitar, Mobley had always dreamed of flying a plane. One

day, he visited the Valdosta Airport and announced that "I want to fly." The pilot he was speaking to was more than happy to oblige him and they embarked on three busy days of training before Mobley took to the sky. "I flew perfectly, though my mother, who was watching from her porch, thought I was gonna land the plane on her roof. It was just like driving a car to me."

The joy for life still abounds for Mobley, who is now 94 years old. The strenuous labor he endured during his time in the pulpwood industry has taken its toll on his knees, so he is content to spend much of his time watching his big screen TV and enjoying time with his niece, Tracy, who is his caregiver and biggest fan. For the younger generation that is yet to face the many trials Mobley is familiar with, he has this advice: "Put God's love in your heart and mind and you can do great things. The Lord will help you in those tight places and give you the help you need at just the right time." ■



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"KEEP MY FEET IN HIM AND RIDE"

Story by Lee Trawick

Most children are told countless times, "Get off of that" or "Get down from there." These are words nine-year-old Austin McGuffee has never heard. Instead, he hears cheers of, "Ride 'em, cowboy!"

A Jasper, Fla., native and the son of Mike and Morgan McGuffee, Austin will be going into the fourth grade at Jennings First Christian School in August. Some boys play video games, where they can hit the restart button when things don't go right. Austin, on the other hand, lives in a world of eight seconds of total chaos, where there is no reset button. When he tightens his rope, there are no time-outs; there is no white flag for surrender. He can only embrace the idea that you cannot control the chaos, but you can control the grip in the grip.

Rodeo is the oldest sport in America. Men, women, cowboys and cowgirls grow

up loving the smell of a sweaty horse. The only pavement they enjoy is that of the road under their tires as they make their way to the rodeo. They say home is where the heart is; for Austin, home is a dirt arena and the sound of cheers after he makes his ride.

After-all, Austin comes from a long line of cowboys. His grandfather, Sonny Burris, is a seven-time International Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA) Saddle Bronc World Champion. His mother grew up in rodeo, where she competed in barrel racing; his dad grew up competing in the Saddle Bronc event; and his uncle on his mother's side, Matt Waters, was also a bull rider.

"Knowing the toll rodeo has taken on my broken-down body over the years, I tried my hardest to keep him away," Mike said. "But, I knew that would never happen; it's bred in him."

So, even though Austin was not a fan of horses until he was about six-years-old, the rodeo storm was always brewing underneath the surface. That storm erupted when he was at the Florida Gateway Pro Rodeo in Lake City after he climbed on the back of a sheep in the Mutton Bustin' event. While Austin may have crashed and burned, he dusted himself off and knew at that moment that it was just the beginning. That Christmas, he was given his first horse. Shortly after that, he wanted to try riding bulls. His parents loaded him up and carried him to Buddy and Serena Johnson's in Quitman, Ga. There, he mounted his first bull and, while he may have been bucked off, he has always gotten back up.

"Seeing the joy on his face, I knew he was hooked," Mike said. "I don't care if he wins or makes his ride, as long as he has fun and doesn't quit."

At seven-years-old, Austin began competing in the Georgia Florida Youth Rodeo Association (GFYR) and the East Coast Youth Rodeo Association (ECYRA). Neither his mother nor father tries to live through their son; instead, they support him on his journey. Bull riding may be his passion, but he also competes in several other events, such as Goat Tying and Saddle Bronc. While Mike and Morgan gave their son a rodeo name, it did not take long to carve out his own path, having collected accolades, such as: Suwannee River Riding Club Spring Series Junior Bull Riding Champion; Flying G Rodeo PeeWee Bull Riding Champion 2021; J2 Arena Jackpot Junior Bull Riding Champion; East Coast Youth Riding Association (ECYRA) Junior Calf Riding 2022

Champion; ECYRA Average Champion Junior Calf Rider; RideRight Rough Stock 6-10 Mini Bull Extreme Bull Riding Champion; GFYR 2022 Reserve Champion Junior Goat Tier; GFYR 2022 Reserve Champion Junior Mini Bronc; and GFYR 2022 Junior Bull Riding Champion. Perhaps the most significant win Austin is proud of is the 2022 GFYR Finals in Quitman. The Finals consist of a season of 18 rodeos, where he rode 15 of 18 bulls he mounted, earning him the title of 2022 GFYR Bull Riding Champion.

Part of being a cowboy is embracing the responsibility that, no matter how young you are, you always have someone looking up to you. Austin always makes time for his fans and those who just want to ride. When he isn't seen on

the back of a bull, he's seen giving advice to youngsters or helping them get mounted on their ride ahead. Being a cowboy isn't about competing against someone else, but rather competing against yourself. Austin lives by his father's words; it doesn't matter if he wins or makes the ride, but as long as he can tip his hat leaving the arena, knowing he gave it his all and he didn't quit, then he knows that's a ride he can be proud of. People can see Austin gets just as much enjoyment from a good ride by one of his friends as he does from a good ride of his own. When he slides down his rope in the chute on the back of his bull, his daddy is right there with him.

"I'm shaking with excitement, mixed with nerves

*Dear Lord,
I have this feeling
in my heart,
when I slide down
on my Bull to do my part.*

*It taught me
a lot about life
and what it means
to hold on tight.*

*It showed me pain
Respect and all that
is right.*

*Lord forgive me
for taking my life
into my own hands,
Cuz' being
a Bull Rider has been
my life's plan.*

*So please, God,
Don't let this Bull
take my life from me
In happiness and humility
A winner I will ride to be!
Amen.*

(Bull Rider's Prayer)



and adrenaline as he gets ready," Mike said. "Then, to see him out there is a feeling you can't imagine." With a world of excitement and adrenaline churning underneath that little hat, his mother is seen pacing and sometimes climbing the fence with her own anticipation and excitement for her little cowboy.

"It's different," Morgan said. "I'm nervous and scared for him, but when he explodes out the chute, I can't help it; I'll be on top of the fence screaming for him to, 'ride him, son!' No matter the outcome, as long as he's having fun and still wants to do it, we'll be right there with him."

With examples before him, Austin learned at a young age that anything worth going for takes hard work, dedication and sacrifice. With the morals and values instilled in him by his parents, along with a character that is molded into him by the responsibilities of the farm, Austin is poised for a bright future in rodeo. The difference between a good bull rider and a world champion bull rider is that a good bull rider wants to win, while a world champion bull rider doesn't care about the win, but rather the fear of letting himself down by not being prepared or giving it all he had. All bull riders have talent, but when talent

meets the drive for preparation, a world champion is born.

For Austin, he strives to be more than a bull rider. He seeks to be an example for those who look up to him, regardless of age; he strives to be the best cowboy he can be, whether in school, the arena or the farm. Morgan admits that school isn't the easiest thing for her son, but he refuses to let it beat him. She says he once told one of his teachers, "Riding bulls is easier than reading." Nonetheless, he continues to work at it, because he refuses to fail.

By his parents' example, being a cowboy isn't something you do on the weekends. Instead, cowboy'n' is taking on responsibility on the family farm. Austin gets up early and makes sure his goats, horses and bulls are tended to every day, whether it's raining, the weekend or Christmas morning; there are chores to be done and letting someone else do it isn't how he was raised.

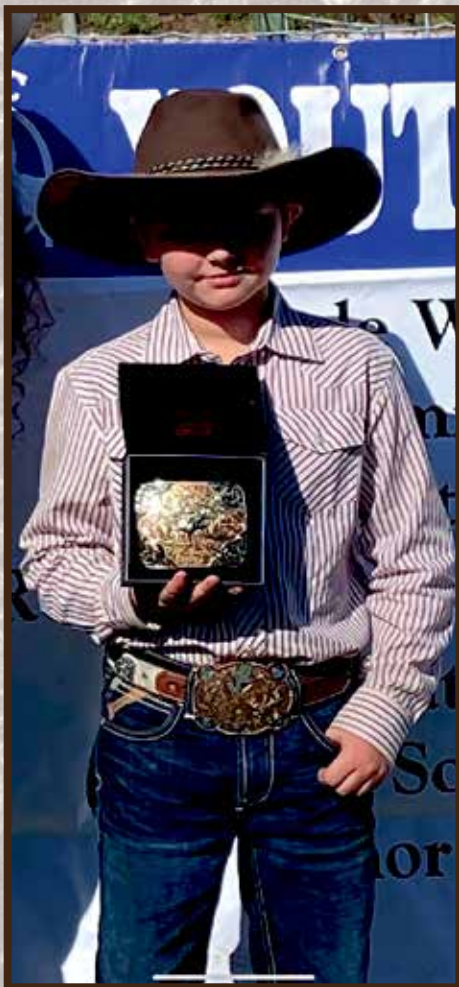
While they are on the road on an average of three weekends a month, Austin makes sure his faith remains at the forefront of his journey. "With us on the road as much as we are, we don't get to attend church perhaps as much as we would like," Morgan said. "But Austin won't let us miss

cowboy church. I'm not an early riser, but he makes sure we are up and go."

With so much excitement, anticipation and adrenaline while waiting for his chance, Austin slows everything down by simply taking a moment and closing his eyes. "Before I get on any bull I ride, I say a prayer that God will help me and watch over me," Austin said. "Keep my feet in him and ride."

His dream is to one day be a world champion, which may be closer than he once thought. On Monday, May 30, Austin received a wild-card entry into the Wrangler Youth Bull Riding Finals in Abilene, Texas. Because of his accomplishments, Austin has earned the right to compete in his first-ever World Championships, which will be held from Wednesday, Aug. 3, through Saturday, Aug. 6.

What Austin loves most about rodeo isn't the glory or the shiny buckles, but rather just being at the rodeos, being with friends and hearing all those who support him cheering him on. At the young age of nine, Austin has set his sights on being a World Champion everyone can look at and say, "he did it the right way." The future looks bright for this bull rider. ■





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The HEAT Is on at Hart Springs

Story and Photography by Dawn Perez

This year we skipped over Spring and jumped head-first into Summer. With temperatures already reaching well past 90 degrees, it's time to cool things off a bit in one of the largest spring-fed swimming areas in the entire state of Florida. I recommend you check out what, in my opinion, is one of the most beautiful, invigorating and picturesque springs in the entire North Florida region, Hart Springs.

This gorgeous park is located on the Gilchrist Blueway Trail and along the Suwannee River. My little family enjoyed a long weekend at this park last year and we loved it so much, we are planning a return visit this summer. The park itself is beautiful, with large oaks providing a canopy over the entire campground, pristine trails and all the amenities needed for an awesome weekend. We took our little travel trailer, and parking was easy. Set up was a breeze, and the park provided each full hook-up site with everything needed. A few secluded cabins and primitive camping spots are also available for those who want an extra outdoorsy adventure. I, on the other hand, prefer to have air conditioning in the summertime, so full hook up for me! The hot showers and bathrooms are easily accessible from all the camping areas.

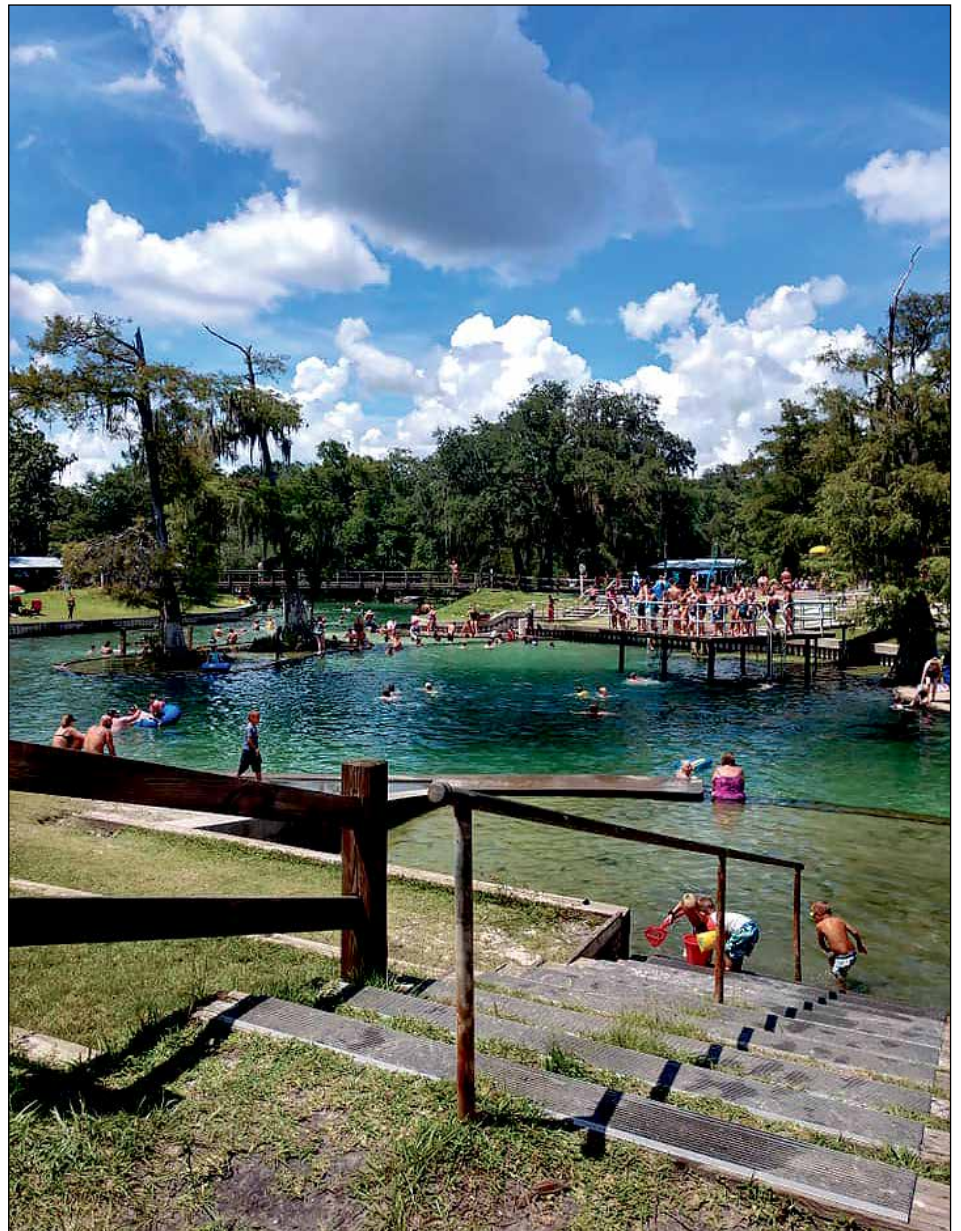
We fell in love with the park immediately and quickly called our family and friends to invite them out to join us for the day at the park. We decided to walk the canopied trail that led us to the springs. It was then that we were taken away into another world, where all you could hear

were the birds chirping and the tree's leaves crackling in the wind. The air cooled as we neared the springs. Then, gently tucked away, was the mesmerizing emerald green and turquoise water which was crystal clear all the way to the bottom. As clear as it was, it was just as cold. It was refreshing to jump in after your skin was warm from the hot sun.

Luckily, the spring-fed area was very large, which easily accommodated the hundreds of swimmers. We spent a better part of the day in the water. What I liked the most is that the park is very family friendly. No alcohol is allowed, and no parties as well, which made it a more relaxing environment. You could sit with your family

and enjoy a nice evening dinner by the fire and just relax. It was so amazing to be able to just shut off the world and enjoy some peace and quiet in this tranquil place.

Families will love this park, located right in the heart of rural North Florida. Prices are reasonable, the staff is friendly and the place is beautifully secluded. For another great weekend away from the hustle and bustle to enjoy getting back to nature, come visit Hart Springs in Gilchrist County. Everyone should try to visit one place a year that they've never been to, so if you've never been here...this is the year to visit Hart Springs. To find out more, just go to hartsprings.com and begin your new adventure today. ■





JOHN BEGGS:

Madison County native John Beggs performs on stage at the Junior World Championship of Old Time Piano Playing, in Oxford, Miss., during this year's Memorial Day Weekend competition.

A young musician championing “old time” music

Story by Rick Patrick
All photos courtesy of Chip Beggs

When asked what style of music he enjoys, John Beggs responds with artists that you may not expect from a 15-year-old teenager. Instead of Post Malone, Bruno Mars or maybe Beyoncé, Beggs responds with George Gershwin, Fats Waller and Benny Goodman. For the past six years, he has been working and practicing “old style piano music,” which is a combination of ragtime, early swing and jazz from the early 1900s. A fan of country music from a very early age, this home-schooled, Madison County native began taking mandolin lessons because he wanted to learn to play the fiddle.

“Every fiddle player I ever met said to learn to play mandolin first,” said Beggs.

After a year of plucking on the mandolin strings, Beggs’ teacher decided to teach him to play the piano.

Being gifted with an incredible ear,

Beggs found that he could play almost anything he wanted, simply by ear without musical notation. A new piano teacher attempted to teach Beggs to play more by musical notation, without much success.

“I did not like that,” said Beggs. “I tried to show her how I could play what I heard better than by playing with music. After about a year, I quit taking lessons from her because my father realized I was spending an hour or two a day playing piano, but I never practiced my lessons. I just wanted to play the songs I was hearing.”

When Beggs was nine, he was introduced to a different style of music that caught his ear. Beggs heard a performance by the noted ragtime and “boogie-woogie” piano player, Bob Milne. Soon after, Beggs’ father, Chip, learned of Milne’s annual “Ragtime Retreat” in Michigan. Beggs was able to attend, and the result was “love at first note.”

“I had a great time there,” recalls Beggs. “It was four days of piano playing fun. Bob also gave me a private lesson.”

Beggs began spending his time perfecting his “old time piano playing” skills. According to the Old Time Piano Playing World Championship and Festival, this style of music can be described as:

“The style of piano playing found primarily in public venues of performance between 1890 and 1939, particularly in bars and piano competitions, consisting of popular songs and instrumentals of that era, including ragtime, traditional jazz, novelty, stride and boogie, but excluding advanced chord progressions more commonly found by 1940 or later in symphonic, modern jazz and be-bop music forms.”

In 2019, Beggs entered the Junior Division of the Old Time Piano Playing World Championship during their annual festival, held in Oxford, Miss., each year. That



John Beggs (center) chats on stage with event emcees, Adam Swanson (left) and Ted Lemen (right) during the Junior World Championship of Old Time Piano Playing, in Oxford, Miss.

year, Beggs placed fifth in the division, which included young musicians from across the nation. Undeterred, Beggs continued to put in the time and work to continue to perfect his craft. That work paid off in 2022, when Beggs won the Junior Division of the Old Time Piano Playing World Championships, held again in Oxford, Miss., over Memorial Day weekend. For this year's competition, Beggs chose the Gershwin tune "Maybe" and "Smashing Thirds" by "Fats" Waller. Beggs emerged as champion from a field of eight talented competitors from across the country. Beggs received a trophy, a gold medallion and a \$500 cash prize for his efforts. A video of Beggs' winning performance can be seen on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQvA__tyKzw.

In addition to "old style" music, Beggs has an interest in antique aircraft and sailboats.

"I get a real kick out of flying radio control airplanes," said Beggs. "I would someday like to be able to fly real airplanes."

Beggs also enjoys time spent with his pets of all kinds, including racoons, cats, a rat and a lizard.

With the advent of the COVID pandemic, a damper was put on performing live for many musicians. That was no exception for Beggs. Like many of his fellow musicians, Beggs made attempts to counteract this by offering his music online. He has also produced some educational videos posted on his website. According to Beggs' father, Chip, Beggs incorporates a bit of musical history with interesting

stories about the artists and composers of the music he is playing. Beggs will even offer to provide relaxing music for your family for dinner or after-dinner enjoyment. He says he

would love the opportunity to perform in a local restaurant. You can also hear samples of his music and order CDs and download individual songs at www.johnbeggs.us. ■





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