

The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

MAY/JUNE 2023

GRANNYKAT'S APIARY SUPPLY *and Bee Learning Center*

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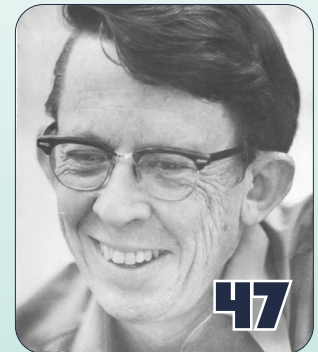
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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

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The Front Porch

Meet Our Staff



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Sittin' on the Porch with...

Joe Rodgers

Story by John Willoughby

With a life dedicated to funeral service, Perry's Joe Rodgers knows a thing or two about helping families through their toughest times. For him, it doesn't stop there.

Shriners across the world have given themselves and their time to the cause of distressed children in the name of Shriners Children's network of hospitals and clinics since its inception in the early 1900s. Joe's life is no exception, given he's worn the obviously notable bejeweled red fez since 1996, now alongside his father and son.

Joe was born in May of 1962, the

son of Eldon and Jane Sadler, and grew up with a family history embedded in freemasonry. His father, a former Property Appraiser of Taylor County and newly formed Shriner, was a member of Perry Masonic Lodge No. 123 and eventually served as Worshipful Master. Joe was raised as a Master Mason in 1990 but was not impressed to join what was then known as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine until his second and youngest child, Chance, was born.

"That's when I said, 'Let me help other kids who are less fortunate,'" he added.

In 1996, Joe donned the red fez.

"Not knowing a whole lot about it at the time – you'd see them on the corners raising money with paper drives and doing charitable things in the community," Joe said of his thoughts on the shrine. "I've got a picture of Beau at the Perry Shrine Club [during an annual October gathering]; there were motorcycle units from Central Florida and Shriners from all over."

Through the years, Joe participated in meetings, rode his three-wheeled red and yellow Krazy Wheels parade unit, but didn't shy away from mentioning his visit to the now-closed Tampa outpatient hospital. He rode two trips to the facility, escorting children and their families for treatment.

"It should be a prerequisite for a Shriner to go to a hospital," Joe noted. "I was impressed with every bit of it."

In early 2022, the facility on the campus of University of South Florida locked its doors while Shriners International remains headquartered in west Tampa.

Joe traded in his jewel-crested fez in 2020 for a Marzuq fez stitched in gold bullion thread – a feature of the international symbol of philanthropy that is typically reserved for the imperial leaders of the Shrine.

"I didn't even want to hold [an office] with Marzuq," he laughed, noting that the late Richard Joy first recruited him to help out at the center in Tallahassee, although he never intended to go as far as he did.

Christmas of 2019 came around and Joe was elected Potentate for the following year by a unanimous vote, but unlike past Potentates, his year as leader was cut quite short by the worldwide



Photograph by Clara Taylor

outbreak of COVID-19. Three of the four major Marzuq parades were canceled in Steinhatchee, Panama City and Hahira, and most of Marzuq's stated membership meetings were virtually held.

He says, "That's just the cards I got dealt in 2020."

It was mentioned that some members of Marzuq wanted Joe to run for re-election as a "redo," but that wasn't in the cards either; however, an end to his service wasn't an option.

Over the last several years, Joe has headed a Skeet Shoot fundraiser for the Perry Crazy Wheels Parade Unit. With the support of numerous sponsors throughout the community of Perry, thousands of funds have been raked in and subsequently gifted to Shriners Children's of Florida. In 2022, Joe's efforts raised a little more than \$8,000 and it's his goal to do a little more each year. While his son Beau participates in the event, Beau has also embarked on his own endeavors with the club's Golf Tournament, which will return in August of 2023.

"Any daddy is proud of their youngins," Joe laughed. "It's just the extra bond that you have as a father and son."

Joe says he finds it hard to convince others to become a Freemason and Shriner, because it's his belief that one has to truly want it.

"If they want it, I'm eager for them to join. It's a good organization. It's opened up a lot of doors, friendships; they're good people, every one of them. You get out what you put in," Joe said, mentioning he still visits neighboring clubs and the main shrine center in Tallahassee, not just for support, but for the camaraderie.

"I'm still trying to raise money, they're still my friends."

Joe Rodgers is a licensed funeral director at Joe P. Burns Funeral Home of Perry, Madison and Mayo. He is married to Melissa. He is the father of Beau and Chance Rodgers, and a new grandfather to Tate.

Supporting the hospitals and clinics



Photograph by John Willoughby

across the world, Marzuq Shrine Center of Tallahassee has been home to more than 300 Shriners in the North Florida area, including Taylor, Lafayette, Leon, Wakulla and Madison residents. Today, there are nearly 200 shrine centers across North America, South America, Europe and Southeast Asia.

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Kathy and Henry Gohlke are the owners of GrannyKat's Apiary and Bee Learning Center.

Without the bees, where would we be?

GRANNYKAT'S APIARY SUPPLY AND BEE LEARNING CENTER

Sponsored Content

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photography by Cody Cruver and Heather Ainsley

Nestled in the outskirts of Monticello, Fla., is a business dedicated to the support and preservation of the world's most precious and beloved pollinators: honey bees! Located at 407 Industrial Park Rd., GrannyKats Apiary and Bee Learning Center is hard at work, offering a variety of beekeeping supplies and a plethora of crucial information about these important little insects. Heading it all is Granny Kat herself, a Monticello woman named Kathy Gohlke, who runs the business with her husband, Henry.

Kathy began this business two years ago with the intention of trying to help save the struggling bee population, and provide much-needed beekeeping supplies and support to the Monticello

area. She and her husband strive to teach people in their community, as well as the surrounding communities, about the significance of the honey bee. They encourage anyone interested to consider beekeeping as a way of raising happy, healthy bees locally.

It's hardly a secret that bees are a crucial part of our global ecosystem. They are responsible for the pollination of thousands of different crop species, making agriculture and farming possible for us. In fact, their contribution to our food supply is so significant, one out of every three bites of food we consume is only possible through the pollination efforts of bees. There are more than 20,000 different species of bees worldwide, and 4,000 of them are native to the United States. Honey bees are considered to be the most popular, and

that's because of one thing: honey!

The consumption of honey dates back about as far as humanity itself does, and evidence of this is seen in countless ancient artistic renderings from across many different countries, including Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia. In ancient civilizations, honey was a prized resource, as it was dense in calories and provided a boost of energy. It was also very easy to digest, and wild honey would have included the presence of bee larva, which would have added protein, fat, vitamins and minerals to the diet of ancient humans. While these days we like to enjoy our honey sans larva, our ancestors were likely to have enjoyed the extra additive. The appeal of having your very own source of honey on tap is a strong one, and this entices many people to consider raising honey bees themselves. While it



may seem like a simple process, there are a lot of factors that go into caring for a colony, and a lot can go wrong.

Kathy believes that education can help set new beekeepers on the road to success with their hives. Although it is to be expected for some hives to be lost, knowing the proper ways to care for, clean up after and tend to your bees can make a big impact on their survival. At the GrannyKat's Bee Learning Center, Kathy hosts beginner beekeeping classes, with the intention of teaching those who are interested in keeping bees the proper way to set up a hive, what dangers to be on the lookout for, and how to care for a colony. Through these classes, beginners get a first-hand look at a real, thriving colony while they learn about the social structures within a hive and how to identify parasites, diseases and other dangers to their hive.

The Learning Center is set up for all ages, and even those who have no intention of owning bees are welcome to come out and learn all about them. The classroom includes several microscopes, where students can view pollen particles and even get a look at various parts of a bee's anatomy while learning about their functions. Additionally, the classroom is home to what they call an observation hive; a real, living colony that thrives in a specially-designed glass frame within the classroom. The bees come and go all day through a vent that leads outside the building, and the hive itself is securely housed within the building. Guests can watch the bees as they return from collecting pollen, raise their young and develop honey. Magnifying glasses are available for anyone wanting to get up close and personal, and many enjoy the challenge of catching a glimpse of the infamous Queen.

The life of a bee is a simple one, but is full of unseen complexities. All worker bees in the hive are female, as the male drones live only to mate with the queen. Workers leave the hive every day in search of flowers, which provide a sweet, sugary liquid called nectar. When a bee reaches deep into a flower to retrieve this nectar, they collect a powder called pollen on the hairs of their legs. The bee will store the nectar she collects in a special sac within her body, and once she returns to the hive, she will regurgitate the nectar from this sac to share with other workers. She will also use this nectar to fill empty wax cells that line the walls of the hive.



The combs of a hive are capped once they are full of honey or eggs. At the GrannyKat's Bee Learning Center Beginner Beekeeping class, students learn all about the process of turning nectar into honey and turning larva into the next generation of bees.

Once a wax cell is full, the bees in the colony take turns fanning the stored nectar with their wings. This evaporates a great deal of the water and slowly brings the liquid to a syrupy consistency. Once the nectar has been dried sufficiently enough to turn it into the sweet syrup we know and love, the bees then create a



beeswax cap for the cell, sealing the honey away safely for later use as a food source. They use the pollen they collect as a primary food source for baby bees, feeding the larva a mixture of nectar and pollen protein.

The intricacies of a balanced hive are fascinating, and not everyone who wishes to raise bees does so for the honey. Owning a colony of these hard-working insects can also provide many responsible beekeepers with a pollinating punch! The average honey bee colony consists of a single queen, a few hundred male drones, and anywhere from 20,000 to 80,000 female worker bees. That's a lot of bees, but why is this important?

When a single bee leaves the hive to look for honey, she

will make several trips back to the hive, depositing nectar and communicating details to the others about potential food sources that she finds. During a single foraging trip, a honey bee will visit an average of 100 flowers, and can make more than 10 trips a day! That means that one single bee can easily visit over 1,000 flowers every day. Multiply that by the sheer number of worker bees in a colony, and the local flowers are bound to get lots of attention!

As a bee journeys from flower to flower, the hairs on her leg will become coated in pollen. This pollen is transferred from one plant to another as the bee is busy foraging for nectar, pollinating the plant and allowing it to reproduce. It is estimated that anywhere from 75 to 95 percent of all flowering plants on Earth depend on pollinators like bees. This

**"SO MUCH OF
OUR FOOD DEPENDS ON
BEES, NOT TO MENTION
THE PRODUCTS THAT COME
DIRECTLY FROM THEM"**

- Kathy Gohlke



means that anyone who has a colony or two of these helpful little pollinators has a tool that many farmers will pay good money to borrow.

In fact, some beekeepers aren't so much interested in harvesting honey from their bees to sell, but instead make money by renting out their colonies to trusted farmers. The bees are transported carefully in their hive to a farm, where they typically live for a minimum of a year, helping to pollinate the crops for the farmer. It is important to note that a beekeeper must only rent out bees to a farmer who does not use pesticides and other insect repellants on their crops, as allowing bees to forage among poisoned plants will result in the death of a colony, which is devastating to a beekeeper.

For those who are content to simply raise bees for their honey, GrannyKat's can offer a wealth of knowledge, tips and assistance with the beginning start-up process, regular hive maintenance, support and even honey processing. They have helped dozens of bee enthusiasts get started with their beekeeping hobby, and Kathy says that while business has been successful, it is hard to believe it has been two years already.

"It has just gone by so fast!" she exclaims, but adds that GrannyKat's has so far seen good response



from the local community.

"In North Florida," says Kathy, "from coast to coast, we have a high number of beekeepers. There are a couple hundred in this area alone, and we even see people come down from Georgia to get beekeeping supplies and receive help maintaining their colony or processing honey. In two years, we have introduced about a million bees to this area – 800,000 in the last year, based on the 80 colonies we have sold, each having about 10,000 bees each."

Kathy reveals that when someone orders a colony, it isn't "by the bee," per say, but rather, by the pound. A colony of bees is sold as three pounds of live bees, which is on average about 10,000 insects. As a colony is raised and well-cared for, the number of bees in the hive will grow.

With this impressive number of bees being raised and cared for, Kathy's mission is in full-swing.

"I started this business because I wanted to 'save the bees,'" she says, "I wanted to help local beekeepers learn how to properly care for their bees, and learn from mistakes that I had made when I first started raising hives. So much of our food depends on bees, not to mention the products that come directly from them: delicious honey, wax, propolis, bee pollen. Bees really do a lot, and they have such short lives."

Indeed the life span of a honey bee is tragically short. While a queen can live for an average of two or three years, a worker bee will live just 60 days. A male drone will enjoy a much shorter life, with the average lifespan lasting around 30 days. Amazingly, this high mortality rate does not cause the entire colony to die. With the death of a generation of bees comes the birth of another. And while the queen of the hive may not have to leave the nest to go forage for food, her Highness is hard at work too!

During the peak breeding season, a healthy, fertile queen will lay more than 2,000 eggs a day. A queen will leave the nest just once in her lifetime, and that is to breed. During her mating flight, she mates with several different drones, storing the sperm in her body. She will use this sperm for the rest of her life, using it as she lays her many eggs. Amazingly, it has been discovered that a queen decides which eggs to fertilize and which ones to leave unfertilized, depending on the needs of the colony.

An unfertilized egg will turn into a male drone bee. A fertilized egg will turn into a female worker bee. So, if a queen adds sperm to an egg, it will produce a female. If she doesn't, she will produce a male.

It has also been discovered that the colony of workers also plays a role in what type of eggs the queen lays. The workers are responsible for building the hive, and a part of the hive includes the wax cells that serve as nurseries for the eggs. All eggs will eventually hatch into larva, and a male larva is larger than a female larva. So by building nursery cells that are smaller, the bees are indicating to the queen that more smaller, female workers are needed in the hive. A queen will only lay an unfertilized egg in a cell that is big enough to accommodate a male larva. Since a male drone does not contribute to the hive, it's up to the workers to communicate to the queen if they can afford to support drones or if the colony needs more workers. The workers communicate to the queen what the colony needs, and she makes it happen.

Bees everywhere are considered still at risk. Human activities such as large-scale land development, industrialized agricultural practices and the steady use of pesticides have contributed to a significant loss of natural bee habitats and food sources. Here's how you can help:



Students in a Beginner Beekeeping class gather around the observation hive. Students are welcome to use a magnifying glass to watch as the bees within the hive go about their daily bee-business, and will learn to spot signs of illness or disease, see combs full of honey in the making and even play witness to a little bee communication. / Photograph by Cody Cruver



Customers of the boutique can browse an extensive selection of products, ranging from cute home décor, clothing, jewelry, kitchen utensils, natural soaps, pollen and, of course, honey!

Plant a bee garden

Bees need both a safe location to build a hive and a plentiful source of food. You can help provide them with these resources by planting a bee-friendly garden. Choose plants that are rich in pollen and nectar, like native flowers, crops, herbs and grasses. If you plant a vegetable or fruit garden, try to refrain from using pesticides and chemicals as pest control. These are lethal to bees, and can serve to attract bees to a food source that will ultimately kill them. If you struggle with pests in your garden, consider adding beneficial insects that can keep pests away, like ladybugs, spiders and praying mantises.



Provide a bee-safe water source

Bees are great fliers, but terrible swimmers, and searching for nectar all day can work up quite a thirst! Many garden water features are enticing, but dangerous for a thirsty bee, as they are often deep and do not provide the insect with a way of escape should they fall in. To create a great bee-safe watering hole, fill a shallow dish or tray with water, then arrange the bottom of the tray with pebbles and small stones. These will give the bee something to stand on as they drink, which can keep them from slipping into the water to their own demise.



Photograph by Cody Cruver



Microscopes in the classroom give students an up-close view of pollen, bee anatomy and more.



Photograph by Cody Cruver

Get involved.

Education is key to protecting anything. The more you learn about your native species of bees, the better you will be prepared to advocate for them. By attending information classes like the one at GrannyKat's Bee Learning Center, you can learn everything you need to know to be a good steward of the bees' crucial habitat. Only by protecting our local bee populations can we hope to improve the plight of bees across the nation. It all starts right in our own backyards.

Beekeeping and bee care go hand in hand, and at GrannyKat's, Kathy and Henry

are dedicated to helping any beekeeper, whether they are amateur or experienced, take the absolute best care of their bees. If the dedicated team at GrannyKat's don't know how to help a client, they will use their vast network of experienced experts to find someone who can.

Anyone who is interested in learning more about bees, or who is interested in becoming a beekeeper themselves, can contact GrannyKat's at (850) 997-1947. And if you just love bees, honey and cute décor, come on out to the center and visit their adorable gift shop, which is full of wonderful bee-themed items, honey, pollen and more!



“We would like that thank everyone who has come out so far and shown us support,” says Kathy. “And also, we’d like to thank everyone who has shared their knowledge and experiences with us. Beekeeping is a fantastic hobby, and preserving the bees is very important. Because, without them, where would be bee?” ■



House District 9 Updates

May 5th, 2023 is the 60th and Final Day of the 2023 Florida Regular Session!

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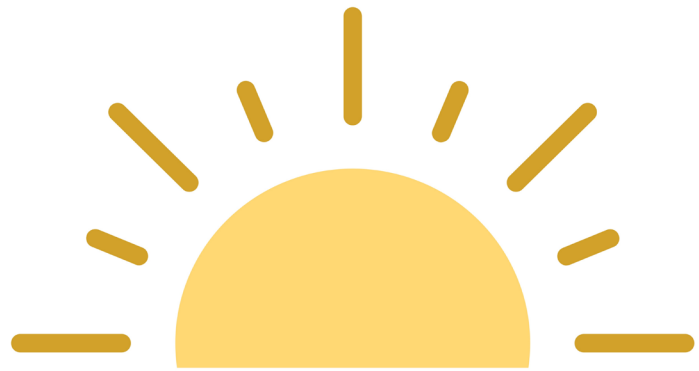
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Katee Knapp

BUCCANEER LEGEND Katee Knapp O'Quinn



Today, Katee Knapp O'Quinn has created a life for her and her family in Branford.



Story by Lee Trawick

Photographs Courtesy

Katee Knapp is better known today as Katee O'Quinn; however, that does not diminish her name around the ball fields of Branford High School. Between the years of 2001-2005, the name Knapp struck fear into any opposing softball team that played the Branford Buccaneers. Katee was a fixture in the Buccaneers lineup for five seasons, as she began her career in the eighth-grade and remained in the starting lineup throughout her high school career. Katee was a middle infielder, where she made a name for herself that would grow far beyond Branford High School. Her older brother had already put the name Knapp on the map as a Buccaneer great on the baseball field. However, Katee never felt the pressure of playing as Robbie Knapp's little sister, as her play and character on and off the field helped create her own way and build her own legacy as a Buccaneer great.

Katee, who grew up in Branford, Fla., always saw the varsity kids in orange and blue as the pinnacle of Branford sports. Therefore, it made sense for her to be anxious and flooded with emotions as she was thrust onto the varsity stage in just the eighth grade.

"The first time I put on a Buccaneers jersey I was nervous," Katee said. "I was in the eighth grade and had been moved up to the varsity. I was not really mature enough yet and I had to grow up fast."

When the schedules are released each season, many players look to see when they will play rival teams or face off against a certain player. For Katee, that was not the case. She always looked forward to getting the season started regardless of who was in the other dugout. While Katee cannot pinpoint a certain school or athlete she enjoyed playing against the most, the same can't be said when discussing her play and presence.

"Katee was something special,"

said Coach Derek Garland of Mayo.

"When she walked onto the field, you knew it. It was not hard to see who she was, even while her team was warming up."

One said about playing against her, "Katee always had a smile on her face, but she always knew who she was and what her presence brought to the field. Though she would never admit it, she enjoying imposing her presence on other teams. Then the way she played the game, you couldn't dislike her. On the field she was always willing to talk to everyone and was always friendly. But she was there to win. She would bring out the best in you, and as a competitor you had to appreciate that about her."

When Katee looks back over her career in the orange and blue, she can't recall one particular moment that stands out as she has too many to narrow down. However, she does recall beating the Suwannee Bulldogs her sophomore season.

"My sophomore year we beat Suwannee and, being a rural 1A high school, that was a pretty big accomplishment," Katee said.

Another moment she cherishes is finally hitting a home run for the Buccaneers.

"I had hit home runs for my travel ball team, but I hadn't hit any during a high school season until my senior year," Katee recalls. "I hit a home run against Bronson."

As Katee looks back over her career at Branford, she hopes the Buccaneers of today understand the importance of a mental game.

"I would say that the mental side of my game was the most underdeveloped aspect of my game as a high school player. It wasn't until I got to college that I understood how helpful routines and having a mental approach was for my game," Katee said. "I also hope that they recognize they are building mental fortitude that is applicable beyond sports. I also would like them to realize that healthy

habits are created at a young age, and sports are such a great way to build strong bodies and minds."

While a Buccaneer, Katee was proud to wear the orange and blue where she went to earn such accolades as the *Gainesville Sun* All-Area Player of the Year honors both her junior and senior years. All this time, she was playing for a different head coach every year. This is why she credits the Buccaneers' success today to the stability the Branford High School has in their athletic department.

As she went into her senior year, Katee was grateful for already having committed to Erskine College in South Carolina. She felt that took a lot of pressure off and she offers this advice to those who wish to play ball after high school: "If you desire to play ball at the next level, there are many colleges of various sizes that can make great homes for athletes. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you have to go to the local university right down the road. If you think you are going to go onto the next level you better love it because it is demanding and a lot like a job."

Katee attended Erskine College from 2006 through 2009, where she continued her dominance at the collegiate level. There, she earned Second Team All-Conference in just her freshman season. She went on to earn First Team All-Conference honors her sophomore, junior and senior seasons. In her senior season alone, she had a batting average of .443, with 14 doubles, 47 runs batted in (RBIs) and a .9023 slugging percentage. These statistics earned her First Team All-Region honors as well as being named to the third Team All-American team in Division II. Then, in 2015 Katee was elected into the Erskine Athletic Hall-of-Fame, in just her first year of eligibility.

Today, Katee resides in Branford with her husband and two children, where she still roots for the orange and blue in Buccaneer nation. ■

What's Happenin'

April 29-June 3

"Terence S. Hughes Paintings" Exhibit at JAG

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

May 5-7

The Diary of Anne Frank

It's the final weekend of this event, a drama staged in the historic Monticello Opera House, drawn from previously unpublished portions of Anne Frank's famous memoirs about her coming of age during World War II. There also will be a 34-banner traveling exhibit in the downstairs hall entitled "Let Me Be Myself." For information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

May 11-13

The Play Goes Wrong

This hilarious comedy presented by Theatre Guild Valdosta takes place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse, 122 N. Ashley St., in downtown Valdosta. For ticket information, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com or call (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

May 13

Second Saturday in Monticello

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

May 13

Diamonds and Denim Dance

Vivid Visions will be hosting this celebration of all mothers. The event begins at 7 p.m. at the Live Oak Church of God, 9828 U.S. 129 S., in Live Oak. For more information, contact Brandy Hood at (386) 364-5957.

May 13

Marvin Goldstein in Concert

Staged in the historic Monticello Opera House, pianist and composer Marvin Goldstein presents a wide ranging concert of musical selections

encompassing jazz, country, Broadway show tunes, patriotic songs and sacred hymns, as well as audience requests - all in service of his mission to connect people across all divides through music and create a greater sense of peace, understanding, and friendship. For information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

May 13-14

Super Hero Weekend at Ragans

Enjoy super hero themed fun at Ragans Family Campground in Madison, plus 15 percent off overnight rates for all military, law enforcement, first responders, educators and nurses - our heroes! For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

May 19, 20, 26, 27

June 2, 3

Mystery at Upton House - Dinner Theater

If you like Downton Abbey you'll love this interactive mystery-comedy, held in the downstairs Perkins Banquet Hall of the Historic Monticello Opera House. Enjoy dinner while you play super-sleuth and try to determine who-dunnit. The best detectives will win prizes! For information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

May 20-21

Ralphie Dares You Weekend at Ragans

Ragans Family Campground in Madison is featuring lots of fun with gross and messy games this weekend, plus their popular Cardboard Boat Race. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

May 26-28

71st Annual Florida Folk Festival

Celebrate Memorial Day Weekend at the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park, along the banks of the Suwannee River. Enjoy food, arts, dance, music, arts, crafts, craft beer and time in nature. Events begin at 9 a.m. Friday and continue through 11 p.m. Sunday. The park is located at 11016 Lillian Saunders Drive, White Springs, Fla. For more information and tickets, visit floridafolkfestival.com.

What's Happenin'

May 27-30

Memorial Day Weekend at Ragans

Ragans Family Campground remembers those who gave their all for our country with fireworks, golf cart/bike/ATV parade and more. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

June 2, 3, 4, 16, 18, 25

The Spongebob Musical

This Peach State Summer Theater performance offers fun for the whole family at Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building, 204 2. Brookwood Dr., Valdosta. For information or tickets, call (229) 259-7770.

June 3-4

Pirate's Weekend at Ragans

For information and reservations, call Ragans Family Campground at (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

June 9

Watermelon Crawl

Downtown Monticello businesses will have extended hours for an evening extravaganza of shopping and dining, in association with the Watermelon Festival. Get your card stamped as you visit participating locations and you'll qualify for a drawing to win \$500! For more information, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

June 9, 10, 17, 24, 30

Mahala

Peach State Summer Theater presents this gospel musical at Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building, 204 2. Brookwood Dr., Valdosta. For information or tickets, call (229) 259-7770.

June 10-September

Summer Member Show at JAG

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

June 10

Madison's Local Market

Browse the wares of local craftsmen, farms, food trucks and more from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Four Freedoms Park, 112 Range St., Madison. For more information, call (850) 973-2788 or visit www.madisonfl.org.

June 10

Second Saturday in Monticello

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

June 10-11

Summer Olympics at Ragans

For information and reservations, call Ragans Family Campground at (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

June 16-17

72nd Annual Watermelon Festival

Downtown Monticello celebrates its agricultural heritage with all sorts of entertainment and activities. Events on Friday evening, June 16, include the Vendor Village, Street Dance, Beer Garden and the kids show "Hot Dogs & Cool Cats." Saturday, June 17, kicks off with the Kiwanis 5K Run & Walk, followed by the Watermelon Parade, Antique Car Show, Platform Events, Platform Events, Watermelon Games, a second showing of the Kids Show and continuation of the Beer Garden and Vendor Village. For more information, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.



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*Evelyn Haynes (Anita's
mom) and Anita in the
Philippines (1985)*

TACKLES AUTISM

Story by Robin Postell

Photographs Courtesy of Anita Whitby-Davis

As the world frets over politics and social media, Madison native Anita Whitby-Davis, founder of the nonprofit Blautism, Inc., just shakes her head.

"We have to adapt. Life happens. If there's one thing that my son Austin has taught us it's that we take our everyday lives and the way we think and process things for granted," Anita says. "But they [those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD] have to overcome so many hurdles because their minds are not wired that way. Where we get aggravated over simple things in our day-to-day life, they have to do that with everything, every single day."

In the words of Austin during a ZOOM interview with his mother two years ago, just learning as a little boy how to "make his face smile," based on the social cues from other people, was a contest of fierce will. Austin said he wouldn't have been able to deal with his differences without the alliance he had with his "Grammie," Anita's late mother, Evelyn R. Haynes.

Inspired by her son, and as a way to honor her mother's passing on November 10, 2017, Anita decided to start Blautism, Inc. as a way to increase access to resources and information regarding ASD, specifically for those in rural African American communities. Blautism, Inc. is entirely self-funded, and Anita and her husband spend time making the rounds as speakers and appealing to policymakers, including Governor and First Lady Ron DeSantis, both of whom have been dedicated to the ASD cause.

"Blautism, Inc. is designed to address the resources, challenges, advocacy, literacy and education of children who are ASD," reads the *Blautism.com* website. "Specifically, Autism has been a very taboo conversation within the African-American community. Culturally, many families have refused to discuss it, for fear of societal pressure. Unfortunately, this has affected, on a large scale, early intervention. Knowing that Autism is partnered with other neurological, physical, emotional and mental diagnoses, we provide presentations, advocacy support,

educational resources and unwavering understanding. Please join us as we share our story of the Blautism Education Journey."

Without the life Anita had lived, traveling around the world with her international educator mother, she might not have had the ability to understand fully what her son needed early on when he first started showing signs of being neurodivergent, referring to those whose brains do not process information the same way as most, who are referred to as neurotypical.

Rural communities historically have not been as accommodating of those with ASD; often children are never diagnosed properly and wind up isolated and unable to develop and function well.

"My husband and I were blessed with Austin, who was the exact opposite of our older son, who was rambunctious – ran, played football, jumped," Anita says. "Since my mother had specialized in children with exceptionalities, she noticed that Austin was quiet and didn't like going outside and playing with other children. She told me



Austin, age nine, smiles from the gazebo at Dorothy B. Owen Park in Tallahassee.



Austin (center) celebrates graduation day in 2021 with his dad, mom and brothers.

she thought he might be autistic when he was about two years old.”

Eve knew the signs all too well from her many years as an educator. Birthed at home in Madison County by her midwife grandmother in 1950 to a large extended family, Eve never attended an integrated school, but rather the Madison County Training School. Upon graduation she enrolled at Florida A&M University, earning a degree in early childhood education. At that time, there were programs hiring minority teachers from the southern U.S. who had attended black schools to work with disabled children overseas.

Eve didn’t hesitate. In 1981, after an amicable divorce from Anita’s engineer father, Eve packed up her only child and they started their globetrotting adventure in the Philippines. During this period of time, Anita grew up happy – cheerleading, playing tennis and excelling in dance as a member of the Manila Ballet Company. Life was good.

At the time, it didn’t occur to her how scared her mother must have been to leave behind her country and family. Anita says her mother taught her that there’s no limit to what a person can do.

“I know she was probably nervous, jumping on planes taking her daughter around the world, but she did it for me,” Anita reflects. “She had grown up in the South at the height of integration, and she didn’t want me to be caught in that upset and anger. She hadn’t believed in forced integration and thought both sides should have been allowed to handle it the way they wanted by coming together. My mother had cropped tobacco to pay for her school clothes, but that didn’t keep her from taking me all over Indonesia and to the top of the Eiffel Tower. She wanted me to have a better life but still remember where I came from – as she did.”

During summers, they would return to Madison to visit family and friends.

In 1990, Anita and her mother returned to Madison, but her mother headed to Germany almost immediately. Anita followed not long afterward.

“I had to go back. I wasn’t accustomed to so much division,” she says. “White people over here, black people over there – I didn’t understand that. I had a pair of jeans from Italy and someone asked me why I dressed and talked like a white girl. I was used to being in a rainbow living in the Philippines, with all kinds of different people, colors and cultures. I didn’t fit in with what a black girl was supposed to act like back in the U.S., which didn’t



Austin with his dad, Kai Davis, Sr.

make any sense to me. My mother tried to explain that they were seeing things from a narrow perspective and that I should be who I was no matter what.”

Both would return to the states soon, and stay. Anita won Miss Madison County in 1994, and began attending Valdosta State University, transferring to FSU where she obtained a certification in Public Management and Project Management. She met her husband of 24 years, Kai Davis, Sr., in Madison. He graduated from Saint Leo University. The couple married in 2000 and got busy having their three sons, Kai Jr., Austin and Iverson.

“With me being an only child, mama just adored her grandchildren,” Anita says. “And being from a rural, tight-knit community, we handle children with disabilities differently. We don’t cripple them. In rural areas, we understand there are differences and normally have extended family.”

Eve believed Austin’s behavior needed to be on point, and she was going to teach him to embrace his giftedness. The two, she knew, had to go hand in hand.

“That’s what we did. Most people didn’t notice anything different about him,” Anita says. “But in first grade he scored straight 5s and was gifted with a very high IQ. We were told how amazing he was and how he could go to all these gifted schools. Then my mother said, ‘He needs to know how to tie his shoes; it’s not just about those numbers.’”

Anita began to realize that rural communities weren’t offering these services and opportunities, and it didn’t sit well with

her.

“There is an assumption about rural America that we aren’t as intelligent and don’t understand things,” Anita says. “I was sitting on a panel once and a woman said, ‘When speaking about services in rural counties, the ecosystem they live in is sometimes different than others, but we may not want to use that term because they need to understand what we’re saying.’”

Anita was galled.

“What you just said could be really insulting to people in rural areas,” Anita piped up. “They’re farmers. You assume they that they don’t know what an ecosystem is? I’ve traveled all over the world, and I can tell you that rural culture is made up of the hardest working, most ethical people you’ll ever meet. What they want to know is that they can trust you.”

Anita learned to respect the pushback.

“All these PhDs think they can come into these communities and tell families how to raise their children,” Anita says. “You walk up on my granny, and she might have a shotgun.”

She laughs. I laugh. But we both have shotgun-toting grannies. We are proud Southerners and both world travelers who chose to come back to our roots and keep them growing.

“My mother was one of the smartest women I’ve ever known,” Anita says. “It might’ve been hard work, but it was important work. She became educated and traveled all over the world. She never forgot where she came from. That’s honestly been the journey throughout Austin’s academic career. We did private pay because you provide for your children. We had a family system – and we never sat down at a table without my mother and my aunt.”

They enrolled him in a private Christian school and, with the assistance of their large family, created a support system that accommodated Austin’s unique needs. Smaller classrooms, with Christian faith, handled Austin’s requirements better than a larger public school with a couple thousand kids.

Austin adored his Grammie, who would hold his hand when he was a little boy while they walked among folks, giving him the strength to understand that he wasn’t wrong, or defective. This stayed with him.

The last five years of Anita’s mother’s life gave them a chance to get to know each other as women. These were such important years, as they gave Anita a chance to realize how much her mother had downplayed her accomplishments. Her

respect for her grew exponentially.

"We'd discuss this with people trying to assist and say, 'You don't know him better than we do,'" Anita reflects. "Two days before my mother died, I was in the house and said, 'I need to go to this meeting and I've never done this without you,'" Anita recounts. "And my mother told me, 'Remember what I taught you. You listen. You're a strong girl.'"

And then Eve was gone from this world, leaving her family to carry on her legacy.

Without her, Austin reeled, as did the rest of the family. She had been the rock and Austin's guiding light.

One day, Anita came home and saw their emotional support dog sitting outside the bedroom door. Austin had tried to commit suicide. He had left a note saying that he couldn't handle how other people didn't understand him. It was too hard, and he just "wanted to go be with Grammie."

The class setting he had been in didn't allow him to leave when the students became hyperactive and loud to "reset" himself. And this led him to feel hopeless.

Anita was devastated, but if there was one thing her mama had taught her it was to never wallow. She couldn't allow herself to escape in pity over her mother's absence or her son's suicide attempt.

So she got active. She made sure that her brilliant son would not fall through the cracks. By the time he was heading into high school, he'd already completed most of his credits, including calculus and trigonometry. Excelling academically, his social barriers would not end him.

Today Austin, 20, is thriving. He is now a freshman at Tallahassee Community College and loves it. The people there understand his differences and allow him to work the way that works best for him. He is also very outspoken about the ASD community and the organizations in place to assist. He feels that the people running them are ill-equipped since they don't have ASD. He wants to be the face for Blautism, and is working on overcoming his difficulties dealing with crowds so he can begin traveling with his parents to speak.

"I want there to be acknowledgment that autistic people should be the ones promoting themselves," Austin says. "They're the ones who should be speaking about their struggles, the ones you should be listening to and supporting. Some of these organizations have people turning it into a disease called 'autism.' But autism isn't a disease. They decided to launch a campaign about an imaginary disease,

spreading old, outdated ideas about what it means to have ASD."

Austin elaborated by saying the voices of those on the spectrum are the most important because they're the only ones who really understand what it means to struggle with such unique issues in the "normal world." He hopes that Blautism can change the way ASD is dealt with, allowing ASD individuals to work one-on-one with others with the same classification.

"So many autistic people going through the things I have been through need help but don't have words to say it," Austin says. "I hope this nonprofit also helps many people achieve a method of equilibrium by learning about people. What could I want more than that? I'm not looking for a miraculous place, just a better place. My Grammie was my first teacher. She was the first one to consistently teach me in a way that I could understand."

Austin says that visiting his grandmother's house opened a door in his life.

"I realized some people I was close

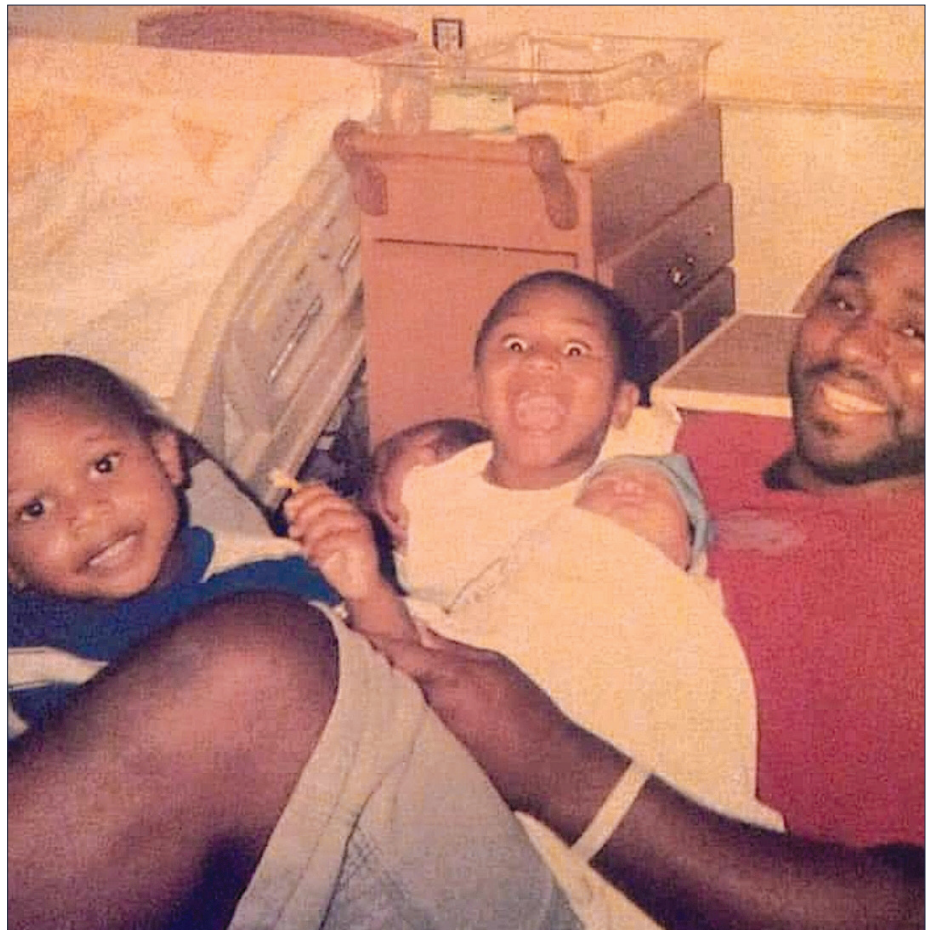
to were actually my friend! I learned how to say no, and yes! And how to emote, to show what I'm feeling, so I can help others show how I'm feeling. Being able to enter a neurotypical world is a gift. I believe autism is one of God's most glorious gifts for me. I can't even describe how it feels."

Anita and Austin both break into tears as he's talking. Mommy's proud.

Anita urges those dealing with similar issues to visit Blautism's website, blautism.com/evesblessings. They're looking for volunteers. Currently, they are working on renovating a home left to Anita by her mother in Madison, which she expects to be done by the end of 2023. This will serve as a headquarters for the nonprofit.

Any help for the Madison renovations would be appreciated. If interested in helping, please go to the website, www.evesblessings.com/contact-information, or call (850) 264-5116.

Anita and her family live in Tallahassee. They are is working with the FSU Center of Research on providing services for ASD in rural communities. ■



Austin's brothers Kai Jr. and Iverson are full of smiles while his dad holds him at birth (2005).



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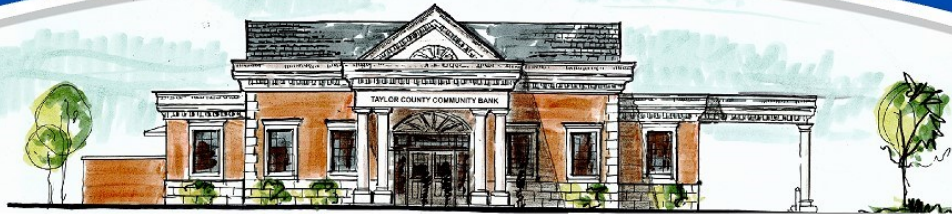
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Sons of Willie and Beulah

Descendants:

An unfolding story of two plantations, two churches and two historic reunions



Willie and Beulah Huggins-Farmer



Daughters of Willie and Beulah

Isham Nelson's descendants in Jefferson County, Fla., include Willie and Beulah Huggins-Farmer; their sons, Alfred Farmer, James Farmer, Joe Farmer (deceased), Richard Farmer Sr. (deceased) and Willie Farmer Jr.; and daughters, Joanne Farmer, Doris Farmer, Beulah Mae Farmer (seated); and (not pictured) Brenda Farmer and Sarah Farmer (deceased) / Photographs Courtesy of Joyce Farmer

Story by Laura Young

We are (all of us) descendants. We come into this world physically linked to one person, our birth mother. From that moment, our knowledge of family lines and lore may gradually grow. For some individuals, the scope of what can be known about ancestors may reach little further. Others may begin to absorb from a young age a wealth of well-documented family history that connects them first to a household and, over time, to a wider clan with bloodlines to a collective past.

As we do the research, most of us experience something in between. We meet grandmothers, a great uncle, and some cousins. Formerly unknown ties reveal themselves—a bit here, a bit there. As we age, our curiosity to fill gaps in this knowledge can spur us to ask questions of our relatives, dig into archives for historical records or even send DNA off for a genealogy report. Tracing family roots can provide a person with a deeper sense of self by knowing about those in past generations. Who were they? Where did they come from? What adversity did they face? What did they dream for and accomplish?

Finding answers to these questions can at times be easy and at other times hindered by events in the family, the society or the wider world. Some answers can be found through persistence, while other lines of inquiry may halt at a dead end, with answers seemingly beyond reach. When knowledge does emerge, it's often the case that it has significance that radiates out to other families, to a distant community, to a span of history.

This has certainly been the case with a group of families in Jefferson County who trace their ancestors to those enslaved at the Casa Bianca plantation in the 1800s and who fairly recently became aware of the connection of their people to those enslaved at James Monroe's Highland, a plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia (see highland.org). The result of this knowledge has been the forging of new lines of communication, new spheres of

belonging and stronger stakes of shared ownership in the telling of American history.

Where can we begin? President James Monroe had been the owner of Highland, and when he sold that plantation, he made a deal with Joseph Mills White, the owner of Casa Bianca plantation, that resulted in four enslaved families being sent there in 1828. It had been thought that the history of these people had been lost, but research that began over the past decade to reexamine the lives of enslaved people at Highland, now a national historic site, revealed their connection to Casa Bianca, including significantly the names of the families involved:

- Dudley and Eve McGuire with their two children
- Toby and Betsy [Sanders] with their seven children
- Jim and Calypso Harris with one child
- Mary Baker

Miranda Burnett and Martin Violette, guides at James Monroe's Highland, furthered the research when they examined a letter that President James Monroe wrote to his friend James Madison in 1828, in which he said, "I have sold my slaves in that county [Albemarle County, Virginia] to Colonel White of Florida who will take them in families to that territory." In September of 2018, Burnett and Violette visited Monticello, Fla., to present their findings to a group consisting primarily of members of the Casa Bianca Missionary Baptist Church. At this meeting they met Joanne Farmer, which led to a contact with her niece Joyce Farmer, and ultimately to the reunion described below.

Burnett has said, "With that letter, my partner Martin and I decided, let's look into who were the families who went to Florida. There wasn't a deed of sale, there wasn't any documentation of the names of the families, and so we started looking, primarily with a database that had been compiled by some previous researchers, extracted all of the enslaved people that Monroe had owned and compared that to the Casa Bianca Plantation list from the



Martin Violette (left) and Miranda Burnett (right) conducted the historical research that identified the four enslaved families that James Monroe had sent from Highland to Casa Bianca plantation in 1828 / Photograph Courtesy

1850s... As Martin and I began looking more into the Casa Bianca records, realizing there was a fantastic opportunity to reconnect the families – the ones that stayed in Virginia with the ones who were forced to come here to Florida – The Take Them in Families project was born."

This passion project is documented at taketheminfamilies.com, and currently includes genealogical information, stories from descendants, resources and ways to connect. The research has indeed served to reconnect these families. One especially significant result of the research was a historic meeting that took place at Casa Bianca M. B. Church in Monticello in October of 2022. Sponsored by a grant from the Caplin Foundation, a delegation of people from Virginia — including members of the Highland Council of Descendant Advisors, members of Middle Oak Baptist Church, researchers and staff of James Monroe's Highland national historic site, and Miranda Burnett of the original research team — traveled to Monticello, not just to deepen their connections to a shared past, but also to forge a path forward for the descendants yet to come.

Jennifer Stacy of the Highland Council of Descendant Advisors opened the event with these words: "The reason we are here at Casa Bianca is our connection... We get to understand it better on this trip, the reuniting of two separated people on a plantation, something that is really unheard of."

Stacy then looked out over the full fellowship hall, acknowledged the many



This compilation of pictures shows the Monroe/Saylor connection to Highland through Edward Ned Monroe including four generations: Edward "Ned" Monroe and Harriett Captain Monroe (great, great grandparents); Thomas Benton Monroe and Lucy Wilson Monroe (great grandparents); Thomas Benton Monroe and Elnita Cobbs Monroe (grandparents); and Lafayette Raymond Saylor and Ada Monroe Saylor (parents) / Photographs displayed by Jennifer Stacy at the October 2022 reunion



“What is it that we as descendants would like to see? It is about making change in this world... wanting to heal our community” – Jennifer Stacy / Photograph by Laura Young, Oct. 18, 2022

elders in the room and continued, “Our generation, we need what’s up here (head) and in here (heart) and what’s in your soul. We need to hear it because it’s going to help us really figure out who we are. It’s a cliché, but you don’t really know where you’re going if you don’t know where you came from because it’s a missing piece.”

Then the stories began to flow. Among those in the room was Joyce Farmer, a native of Jefferson County, 1998 graduate of Jefferson County High School, whose family’s home church is Casa Bianca M. B. Church. She is a descendant of Isham Nelson, who was enslaved at Casa Bianca plantation and married Jane McGuire, one of those who had been sent to Casa Bianca from Highland with her parents, Eve and Dudley McGuire. Now Farmer is a member of the Highland Council of Descendant Advisors, which has been working closely with the staff at Highland in developing new interpretive exhibits at the historic site that will tell a fuller, intertwined story of those who lived there.

A discussion unfolded, as many in the room spoke up about the importance of working as a family, drawing on different family members’ interests and strengths to get at a variety of resources for information on family history. Some might be interested in oral history, it was said. Others might be more interested in filling in the family tree, while others could focus on following the



Joyce Farmer is descended from Isham Nelson, who was enslaved at Casa Bianca plantation and married Jane McGuire, one of those who had been sent to Casa Bianca from Highland with her parents. Now Farmer is involved in the Highland Council of Descendant Advisors as new interpretive exhibits at the historic site are developed to tell a fuller, intertwined story of those who lived there / Photograph by Laura Young, Oct. 18, 2022

land maps, research records in the National Archives or visit the cemeteries. It was pointed out how important it was not just to capture the stories of elders, but also to provide opportunities for the youth to tell of their experiences while they are young and the memories are fresh.

In addition to encouraging families to work together to uncover and record details of their ancestry, those at the meeting also saw a far-reaching value in broader descendant groups working together, beyond family ties, to engage in telling the story of whole communities.

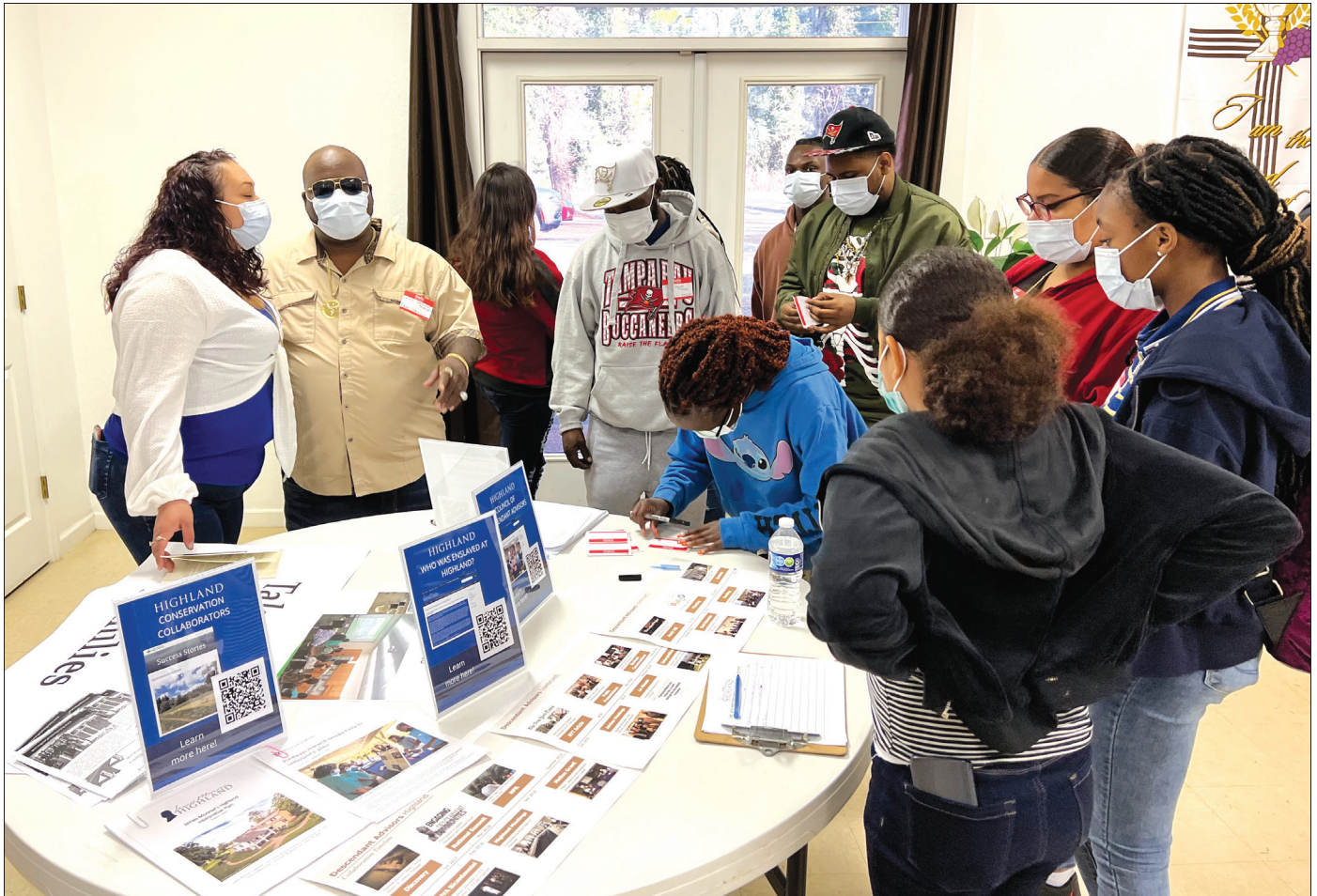
When Sara Bon-Harper, Executive Director of James Monroe’s Highland, addressed the crowd at the reunion meeting, she said, “These stories that we are talking about today are the ones that we are now incorporating into our public interpretation at Highland. These intertwined lives are really what make up the fabric of American history, and we really want to share that. I want to express my gratitude for generosity. Thank you for being willing to open these conversations... Our shared past is not all happy. That is an understatement, but



“Our shared past is not all happy. That is an understatement, but our future is what we can control” – Sara Bon-Harper / Photograph Courtesy of Sara Bon-Harper.

our future is what we can control – our present and our future. That’s what we are thinking about by exploring these histories: we are thinking about the future. Thank you for being willing to be in the conversation. The generosity of Highland’s descendant council is one of the things that I am grateful for on a daily basis... This openness, this willingness to be one on this journey. This willingness to say ‘our past in this country is not always happy but we can control our friendships and our collaborations and make a new and different future.’ This to me is something I am profoundly grateful for. It is essential to Highland and it is essential to me as an individual. Museums are often run by museum professionals like myself who are outside of the communities who are so impacted by that history. So these stories don’t belong to us. This story doesn’t belong to me. They belong to communities. Our descendant community takes part in this council that advises how we explore history, how we interpret it to the public, what language we use, what tone we use, the vocabulary we use and the direction that we take.”

Stacy also expressed a vision of the powerful impact possible when descendant groups work together: “The importance of working at Highland and having the descendants from Florida be a part of things has been rewarding in a way that I cannot begin to articulate... What is it



One table at the October 2022 reunion at Casa Bianca M. B. Church included information about the Highland Council of Descendant Advisors and a sign-up sheet for participating in the ongoing research / Photograph by Laura Young, Oct. 18, 2022

that we as descendants would like to see? It is about making change in this world, whether it's through programs, whether it's through dedicating that land that our ancestors worked on, wanting to heal our community, so it is very important to us to bridge Highland and the community together through our descendant work. We do have shared authority at Highland, and I can't tell you how thankful I am to be working with Sara Bon-Harper, because trust is the biggest piece of this... the one thing that led us through to a place of trust is truth and authenticity. The relationship we have built with Highland is based on that. I know that I am dealing with someone who respects the power of what is going on here and is being led by something bigger than us. This is a moment to give voice to every one of our ancestors. That's what we consider ourselves doing: giving a voice to the voiceless. When they were there at Highland, they didn't have a voice."

Stacy told about the time she brought her mom to Highland for the first time,

driving down its beautiful long driveway lined by beautiful trees. They saw the fields there also, and she recalls her mom saying to her, "I wonder what our people were thinking when they were here?"

"I didn't have to have an explanation," Stacy continued to tell the crowd at the reunion meeting, "because I was having the same thought: that these fields were cleared by our people, that they did that enslaved, and they still persevered. They still persevered. That's why I'm standing here, because of their resilience, because of their determination."

After the formal presentations in that historic October 2022 meeting, the event continued with informal conversations to build relationships, the sharing of contact information for future research and the opportunity to participate in a University of Florida oral history project by being videotaped telling memories and family stories.

Because there were so many incredible outcomes from the meeting at Casa Bianca, another reunion has been

planned. This time, a delegation from Monticello will travel northward to Middle Oak Baptist Church in Virginia. These two churches have figured significantly in revealing the early histories of the African-American communities connected with the Casa Bianca and Highland plantations. Families who had been emancipated from Casa Bianca established Casa Bianca M.B. Church in 1872 on the former plantation land. Middle Oak Baptist Church was established in 1871. Many church members whose families have been at Middle Oak for generations trace their ancestry to slavery at Highland. Support for the October 2022 trip and ongoing activities by the Highland Descendants Council comes from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and William & Mary, Highland's parent organization.

Coinciding with Highland's second annual Descendants Day (see highland.org/event/descendants-day-at-highland-2/), the June gathering will be another opportunity for these two communities to take a look back, and a step forward, together. ■



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FOLKS FLOCK TO THE

Florida Folk Festival

Story by Andrea Thomas

Photographs Courtesy of Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park

It's Memorial Day Weekend and you're thinking of attending an outdoor festival; but what kind will you choose? The choices are many: food, arts, dance, music, arts, crafts, craft beer. Maybe you are leaning toward taking a nature hike or spending time by the river. Savvy Floridians don't choose just one place to go, or one thing to do. They head for the town of White Springs, along the banks of the historic Suwannee River, and do it all in one place.

Every Memorial Day Weekend, the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park hosts the annual Florida Folk Festival, the nationally recognized event that celebrates all things Florida.

Del Suggs of Saltwater Music said, "We often think of America as a 'melting pot' where we all blend together, but I think of the Florida Folk Festival as a 'salad bowl.' All the different cultures come together here, but they retain their



original flavor. Each culture contributes to the whole and adds a completeness that would be missing otherwise. It's those individual flavors that make Florida so unique."

Florida's folk artists have gathered at

the river for decades to celebrate Florida's land, people and diverse cultural heritage. From Irish fiddle tunes and frozen key lime pie to the wide varieties of music and dance brought by immigrants from around the globe, the Florida Folk Festival





celebrates our state's cultural heritage and reflects the lives of generations of Floridians.

Now approaching the 71st year, the Florida Folk Festival features 12 stages of entertainment to surprise and delight audiences. Music lovers may choose from more than 300 performances by fabulous Florida musicians, national recording artists, songwriters and musical genres like folk, blues, gospel, country, Latin, jazz, bluegrass, Caribbean and even zydeco music that will precipitate toe-tapping and bring audiences to their feet. The 2023 performers include John McEuen and the Circle Band, Jim Stafford, Ben Prestage, Billy Dean, The Lubben Brothers, The Lee Boys, Lili Forbes & the Funky 'Taters, Grant Livingston, The Bullard Brothers & Friends, Remedy Tree, Grant Peebles, Shannon Smith, Allen Shadd, Jeanie Fitchen and many more!

This year the Florida Folk Festival will host the Sacred Steel Summit, featuring some of the best steel guitar players from around the country!

Are you a mover or a shaker? Dance the night away at the Festival's Heritage Stage or take a peaceful hike on the Florida Trail following the Suwannee River.

There's no need to hire a babysitter. The Festival is family-friendly by design, and the Children's Area hosts customized, kid-oriented performances, games, crafts



and activities. The park also has a shade covered playground that is perfect for working off the wiggles.

Don't forget to pack an appetite. From

collard greens to Greek gyros, you will be confounded by the variety of vendors highlighting every kind of food under the Florida sun.







Relax and enjoy a great seat at the Amphitheater Stage while you sip local micro-brewery beer, a fresh-squeezed lemonade or a famous root beer float.

Celebrate those who have served our country and celebrate the Sunshine State, Florida, this Memorial Day Weekend at Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park. ■

IF YOU GO

What: 71st Annual Florida Folk Festival

When: 9 a.m. Fri., May 26, through
11 p.m. Sun., May 28, 2023

Where: Stephen Foster Folk Culture
Center State Park
11016 Lillian Saunders Drive
White Springs, FL 32096

Cost: Advance tickets: Adults 1-Day
\$35.00, Adults 3-Day \$70.00,
Children under 6 years of age free,
Children 6 -16 years of age \$5.00
(good all weekend)

Gate tickets: Adults 1-Day \$40.00,
Adults 3-Day \$80.00, Children under 6
years of age free, Children 6 -16 years
of age \$5.00 (good all weekend)

Visit: floridafolkfestival.com



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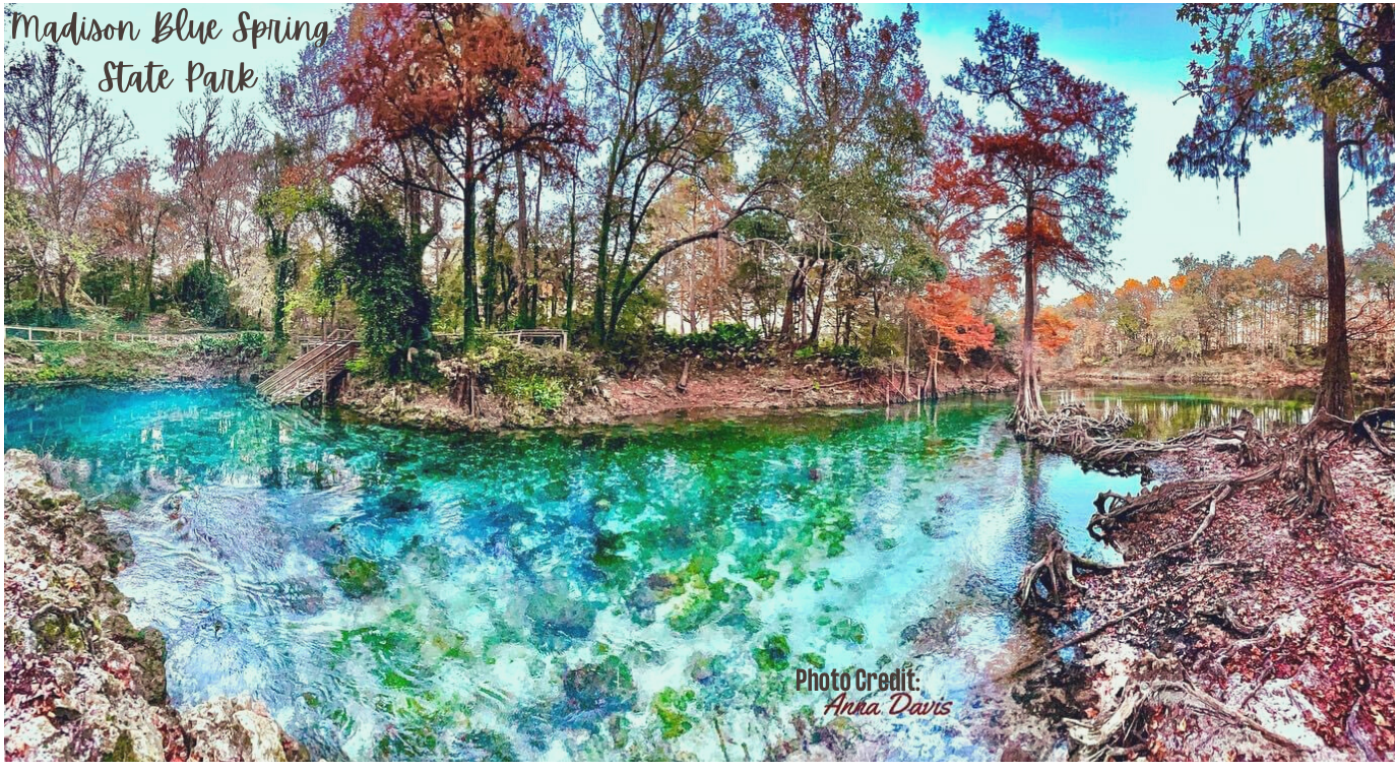


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MIKA ROBINSON

Suwannee High School Legend

Story by Lee Trawick

*Photographs Courtesy of
Mika Robinson*

Mika Robinson grew up like any other small town farm girl. The daughter of Lucy and the late J. B. Sampson, she was born in Tampa, Fla., before her family moved to Suwannee County when she was three years old. From that point on, she fell in love with her family's dairy farm, where she and her six siblings ran and played and she eventually worked through high school.

Today when one thinks of star athletes, they imagine they must have started at a very early age, getting involved in travel ball or club ball of some sort. For Robinson, that was hardly the case. Her time was usually spent with Suwannee 4-H. Reflecting back on her childhood,



she recalls being very active in 4-H and always showing some sort of livestock. She is forever grateful for the opportunities 4-H gave her, including being able to travel to more than 30 states by the time she

graduated from high school.

However, 4-H was not the only source of life lessons she received during childhood. As she pointed out, growing up on a dairy farm, you learn about hard work, dedication, good times and hard times. With the rise and fall of milk prices in the economy, Robinson learned about sacrifice and appreciation for the little things in life. All of these would help mold her for her journey ahead.

Robinson says she was born with a competitive nature.

"Growing up on a farm and in a time where recess meant playing football with the boys on most days definitely contributed to my grit and determination," Robinson said. "I think my desire to compete just came from within. I am thankful that my parents always instilled

a sense of caring though, so I can say that relationships have trumped competition for me.”

Robinson entered Suwannee High School in a very exciting time in the county. The football team was in the midst of its four state championships; therefore, while football was king, sports was a way of life for almost any kid growing up in that time. For Robinson, it was no different, she lettered in four sports: basketball, volleyball, softball and golf. She admits despite her success on the volleyball court, basketball is what she grew up playing.

“Ironically, I was a basketball player first and foremost. Coach Kim Googe Boatright and Coach Cissy Witt convinced me to try volleyball my ninth grade year, and I agreed as a way to stay in shape for basketball,” Robinson said. “By the end of that season, I had fallen in love with the sport.”

When she first arrived on the Bulldogs volleyball court, the program had not had a lot of success; however, she is proud to say, over the course of her high school career she was fortunate to be surrounded by really talented classes of women who helped propel Bulldogs volleyball into a perennial powerhouse. Over her four years, she helped lead the Bulldogs to three consecutive district championships and two regional championships. Not only would she leave her mark on Bulldogs sports, she would forever etch her name in Suwannee High School history by earning the title of Class of 1992 Valedictorian. This feat would impact her life far more than any championship her teams won. Following her illustrious high school career, Robinson was accepted into the prestigious Ivy League school, Harvard University. While she had offers to play volleyball at the next level, she decided to gamble on herself and put her education first.

Harvard University also may have been a little more appealing because of her competitive nature. Perhaps she saw Harvard University as the most challenging opportunity put before her. Although Robinson had had tremendous success on the volleyball court, she did not even know if she was going to make the team at Harvard.

“Ivy League schools do not give out athletic scholarships. I actually went not even sure if I would be able to play. We had tryouts the first week I was on campus, and that's when I made the team,” Robinson said.

Once Robinson completed her collegiate career, she began to work her way up in the coaching ranks. She started out at the club level and high school ranks with the Buchholz Bobcats in Gainesville Fla. There, she led her teams to four straight District titles, an elite eight appearance, and she received *Gainesville Sun* Coach of the Year honors. She then moved into the college ranks in 2005, where she spent time as an assistant coach with Idaho State, where she also earned her Master's Degree before accepting the head coach position at Berry College in Rome, Ga. While there, she collected a record of 169-88, while winning three conference championships and two NCAA tournament appearances. Then in 2016, she accepted position as Head Volleyball Coach at Rollins College, where she remains today. ■



Mika (center) with her husband Clint Robinson, daughter Bryce Robinson and son Clay Robinson.

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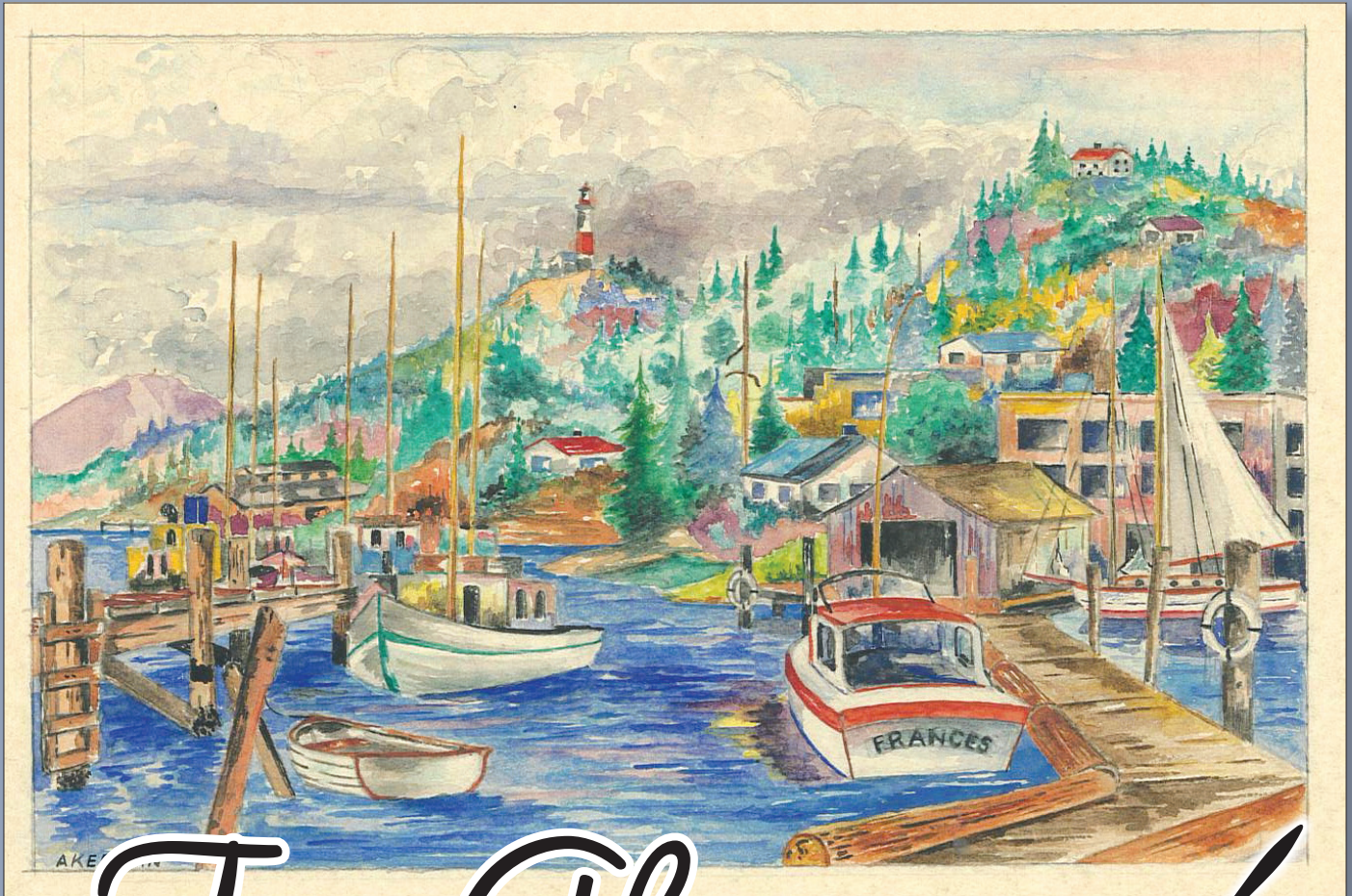
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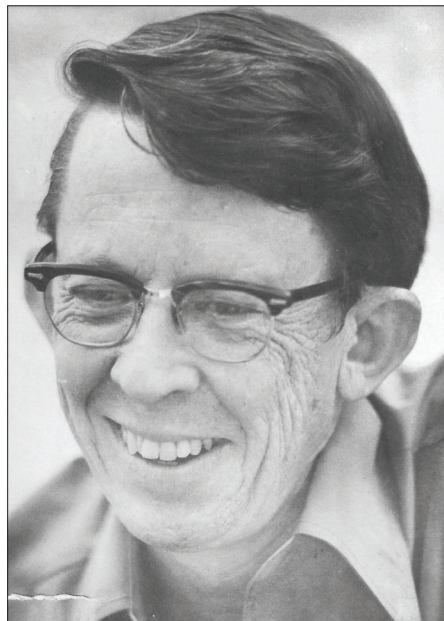
Joe Akerman!

Story by Jessica Webb

Photographs Courtesy of Mark Akerman

If you were a student at North Florida Junior College between 1968 and 2003, chances are you were a student in one of Joe Akerman's history classes. While he is best known for his love of family, students, the Florida Gators and the Florida Cattleman's Association, there is a lot more to learn about this dedicated and gifted man. While he came from a family with a history of legacy, he, too, left his own legacy behind for future generations.

Teaching college history was not Joe's first choice or early passion. He actually was a gifted artist, even though he was a perfectionist and never considered himself to be much of an artist. After college, he attended art school in Paris, France, at the Grande Chaumere in 1956. Upon his return home, he tried to destroy some of the art that he had created because he didn't



feel it was good enough. His mother was able to stop him and save some of his work.

Through the years, he dabbled in drawings and paintings and even created some political cartoons that were published in the local newspaper.

Coming from a long line of educated family, Joe continued the tradition, earning a bachelor's degree in forestry from the University of Florida. He also spent a year at the University of New Mexico, earned a master's degree in teaching from Rollins College, and took graduate-level history courses at Ole Miss and John Hopkins University. His first job was actually with Buckeye, where he cruised timber. When he decided he wanted to pursue teaching, he taught high school science in the central Florida area and eventually found his way to Madison and North Florida Junior College.

Joe had the desire to serve his country and tried to join the Army during the Korean War. However, he had severe

asthma, and the Army turned him down. He found out later that the unit he would have been assigned to had been attacked and most of them were killed in the war. After the Army rejected him, he tried to join the Navy and was turned down again. He was eventually accepted into the Air Force Reserve (it is thought that he probably tried to keep his asthma a secret by now) where he served in Homestead, Fla., for several years. However, he was never assigned to active service.

Joe's heritage is steeped in history. His great-grandfather, Amos Akerman, served as United States Attorney General in 1870 under President Ulysses E. Grant. He, too, was an educator and eventually practiced law. Joe's son, Mark, shared a funny story about Amos' desk in the White House. Almost 100 years after Amos' work in politics, Mrs. Ethel Kennedy tracked down

the former attorney general's desk from his White House years. She had the matching chair and wanted the desk for her son's office when he was attorney general. The desk was then in the possession of Mr. Billy Akerman, Joe's uncle, who had a large law firm in central Florida. Mrs. Kennedy wrote to Billy and stated, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if the desk and chair could be reunited? Would you be so kind to ship the desk back to the White House?" Billy responded in a gentlemanly manner, "It would be wonderful for the desk and chair to be reunited. Would you kindly ship the chair to my office in Orlando?" He never heard from Mrs. Kennedy again, and the desk now resides in the home of Joe's son, Mark.

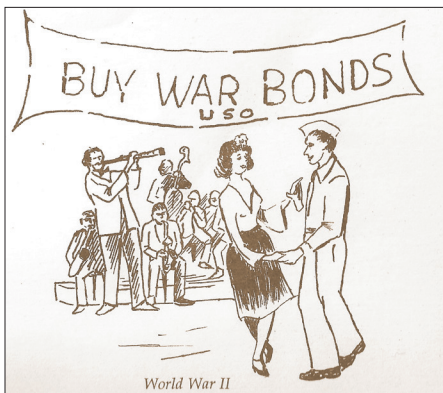
Joe and his bride, Princess, were married in 1958, and it was her family ties to North Florida that led him to this area. When he received his teaching position with the local college in 1965, the couple settled down and made Madison their home. They raised their two children, Mark and Amy, who both went on to have successful careers. Mark, who followed his father's footsteps and went into education, currently serves as principal of James Madison Preparatory High School in Madison.

Once his teaching career got underway, Joe pursued another passion, which was his association with the Florida

Cattlemen and their families. He had always had an interest in the history of the Florida cattle industry and wanted to tell their story. His first book, *Florida Cowman, a History of the Florida Cattle Industry*, was published in 1976 by the Florida Cattleman's Association. In 1982 he wrote *American Brahman* for the American Brahman Association of Houston, Texas. Having researched a man known as the "Cattle King of Florida," he and Mark decided that Jacob Summerlin's story should be told. The father and son duo collaborated on the book *Jacob Summerlin, King of the Crackers*, and it was published by the Florida Historical Society. Their book received the Carlton Tebeau Award for the outstanding history book in 2005.

Joe traveled all over Florida and gave lectures on Florida history and his books, and he wrote numerous articles that were published. In 2004, he was awarded the Dorothy Dodd Award for lifetime achievement by the Florida Historical Society. He was also active in many other organizations, including the Republican State Committeeman for Madison County, Gideons International, charter member of the Cracker Cattle Association, the Florida Cattleman's Association, the Florida Humanities Council, the Florida Historical Society, Madison County Historical Society and founding member of the Treasures of Madison County.

But it was Joe's 38 years of teaching at North Florida Junior College (later North Florida Community College) that had the most profound effect on Madison and surrounding counties. Even 20 years after his retirement and more than 10 years after



World War II



his passing, students in the area still recall the positive impact he had on their lives. Many share their genuine love for him, and one student told the story of how she and her friends would carpool to Live Oak back in the 80s just to take his class when they couldn't get into his Madison section.

Former student Cheri Williams said that "Mr. Akerman was born to teach. I loved his classes and learned so much from him. I shared things he taught me with my students. He taught me life lessons as well. Wonderful, God-loving man."

Karen Williams Brown stated that she "loved his class, and Mr. Akerman was a one-of-a-kind man."

Leah Ragans Basford recalled that "Mr. Akerman was a wonderful teacher and true southern gentleman. He had a way of bringing history to life in his classes. Mr. Akerman's American History class was one of the few classes I sat in the front row by choice! I learned so much from Mr. Akerman and will always remember his quick wit and soft smile. He really cared about his students, and to this day he remains one of my favorite instructors."

"Mr. Akerman was more than a professor for me," Harvey Greene shared. "He was also my den master for Webelos (the bridge between Cub and Boy Scouts)."

Harvey recalls that one of his biggest memories of Joe Akerman was when he (Harvey) wrote an editorial in the local newspaper about the college when they were changing the name from NFJC to NFCC. Harvey felt like it was a waste of taxpayers' money to do so. Joe and one of his colleagues, Russ Stillwell, caught up with Harvey on campus the next day and scolded him for his editorial.

Mr. Akerman's comment to him was, "You don't want the college to advance."

Harvey explained that he felt no one outside the college faculty knew the difference, that to the community a name is a name. Both men sat down with Harvey and took the time to discuss the issue at length and what a name change meant to the college, students, and community.

At the end of their conversation, the elder gentleman stated, "Well, Harvey, thank you. You've taught a couple of old teachers something. You've reminded us that the ivory walls of academia do not

represent the real world."

This conversation with a college instructor and father figure, and the fact that Mr. Akerman listened to and admitted that he learned from a student's views, made a major impression on the young man.

"Mr. Akerman and Mr. Stillwell taught me more about life that day than all of their classes combined," Harvey said.

Many of Joe's colleagues have fond memories of him as well.

"I worked with Joe the whole time he was at NFJC/NFCC," Wanda Hodnett recalls. "He was a true Southern Gentleman. Always had a smile and a twinkle in his eye."

As a colleague and a student, Mary Groover said, "He was the wittiest man I have ever met! I worked with him when he was an instructor for the DUI School, and he was also my instructor for two different classes - American Literature and Marriage and Family!"

Nita Fico, retired nursing instructor, said, "Tom (Nita's husband and former Science instructor) and I were both faculty along with Joe. Unfortunately, I never had him for a class way back when. He was a remarkable fellow! Full of wit, wisdom and love for his students, family, and each other!"

These are just a few testimonials from those who learned from and worked with Joe Akerman in Madison County. Given

the time and research, there are sure to be many, many more. He was a man of integrity and conviction who served his time on earth to teach, learn and better the lives of those he touched. ■





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- JUNE 3** Watermelon Queen Pageants | 10 am & 5 pm
- JUNE 9** Kick-Off Dinner | 5 pm
Bed Race | 6:30 pm
- JUNE 10** Pickle Ball Tournament | 11 am
Watermelon Crawl | 6 pm
- JUNE 15** Women's Club Luncheon & Fashion Show | 12 pm
- JUNE 16** Vendor Village | 4 - 9 pm Street Dance | 7 - 9 pm
Family Entertainment | 6 pm Beer Garden | 7 - 9 pm
Kids Show | 7 pm
- JUNE 17** Kiwanis 5K Run & Walk | 8:15 am Kids Show | 11:30 am
Vendor Village | 9 am - 4 pm Beer Garden | 12 - 4 pm
Watermelon Parade | 10 am Watermelon Games | 1:30 pm
Antique Car Show | 11 am Family Entertainment | 2 pm
Platform Events | 11 am Kids Show | 2 pm
Family Entertainment | 11:30 am

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EXPERIENCE

Serenity Acres Farm

Sponsored Content

Story by Laura Young

Photos Courtesy of Serenity Acres Farm

A rooster crows in the background as Julia Shewchuk sits comfortably on the front porch of the cabin she and her husband Wayne share out in rural Pinetta, northeast of Madison, almost to Florida's border with Georgia. The view overlooks a series of lush pastures where mamma goats and their babies wander contentedly, munching the tender grass and browsing for leaves from low-hanging live oak limbs. A pack of Great Pyrenees guardian dogs protect the livestock while showing their sociable side to the farm's many visitors. Welcome to Serenity Acres!

Serenity Acres is a state-of-the-art goat farm that produces a successful line of goat-milk-based skincare products while also recently developing a focus on farm-based experiences for visitors. The Shewchuks began goat farming in 2008, after setting aside their corporate careers. They started with just three goats and quickly discovered that, well, they really liked goats! Now Julia and Wayne are sharing their affinity for goats by giving a steady flow of personal tours on the farm: homeschool field trips, senior center outings, Girl Scout explorations and excursions for campers, whether they're traveling from just down the road or a town a few hours away.

"It's so breathtaking," says Julia, "to see the expression on their faces when they get to hold a baby goat."

Not surprisingly, interacting with the youngest goats is the main attraction here, but the 60- to 90-minute walking tour of Serenity Acres Farm offers many different ways to enjoy the outdoors while gaining an understanding of how a working goat farm operates.

Visitors first dip their shoe-soles in a disinfectant and then head out to the



Julia and Wayne Shewchuk

pastures, where they learn about what it means to operate a modern-day, family farm. Because Serenity Acres has received the "Animal Welfare Approved" seal from A Greener World, a widely-respected certification organization, visitors learn important information about ethical and sustainable animal husbandry practices. Different pastures separate the milkers, the breeders, the young bucks and the retirees. On a tour, one sees first-hand the results of giving goats access to pasture 24/7, keeping mamma and baby goats together through the weaning stage, providing natural food from hay and grazing on organic pasture. The Shewchuks know their animals well, and check on all of them several times a day.

"You have to think like a goat or they won't thrive," Julia says.

As the tour goes through the different pastures, there are also opportunities to learn about different goat breeds, such as Nubian, Saanen and Dwarf Nigerian. One section of pasture is dedicated to retiree goats, who no longer produce milk or breed but will live out their full life well-cared for and loved at Serenity Acres.

The tour reaches its climax with a visit to the baby goats, who love to be held, cuddled and have their picture taken.

Before the tour concludes, there are

stops to peek inside the dairy, where the goats give their milk, and the soap room, where the goat milk is made into a variety of skin care products. Serenity Acres Farm creates gentle soaps, lotions, creams and body yogurt that come in an enticing array of scents, with various natural additives that can soothe, soften or scrub – whatever your skin needs. These are products that the farm sells at serenitygoats.com through Amazon, on Etsy and in a range of retail stores throughout the country.

From beginning to end, the tour gives a glimpse into a goat's life, which at Serenity Acres Farm is a full life – from being kids, to birthing and producing milk, to enjoying a well-earned retirement.

In addition to tours, Serenity Acres offers classes in soap-making, goat-keeping and yoga. Plus, the farm welcomes RV campers who book a one-night stopover on the property through the Harvest Hosts program, as well as volunteers-in-residence. Volunteer "helpers" sign up through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), a "movement to link visitors with organic farmers, promote a cultural and educational exchange, and build a global community conscious of ecological farming." These volunteers come to the farm to learn about goat husbandry, soap and cheese making and basic homesteading skills such as checking fences, driving the tractor or trimming hooves. The Shewchuks' success with natural, sustainable and ethical farming practices also draws veterinary interns from around the world who come and stay for up to three months, earning college credit while they learn how to run a goat farm.

Since the Shewchuks opened Serenity Acres Farm in 2008, their operation has evolved gradually to its present suite of offerings. Not long ago, Julia and Wayne



spent a good deal of time going to farmers markets to sell dairy products as well as their skin-care line. As interest in farm visits has grown, they have naturally shifted their focus to staying more at

home, engaging people of all ages in the joyful life they've made for themselves among the goats.

As Wayne likes to say, "One of the secrets to a happy life, that we have

learned on Serenity Acres Farm, is to like what you do, who you do it with and what you do it for. It's a great recipe for personal growth and success." ■



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